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The Power of the Fan base: How Mass Media's Framing Theory Portrays the Heavy Metal Fan base

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The Power of the Fan base: How Mass Media's Framing Theory Portrays the Heavy Metal Fan base

ABSTRACT. Mass media has been a constant presence in our society. Through discussion of politics and subject matter that affects everyday life, mass media has given us information that has the power to sway public opinion. However, with that power comes consequences that at times would be dismissed by the media, but harmful to groups of people. A perfect example of those consequences branched from a series of accusations made about the heavy metal fan base. In the past few decades, metal heads have had fingers pointed in their direction in the midst of crises across the United States. What is the reason for this? Why is a genre of music, or rather the group of people who enjoy that genre, in the wrong?

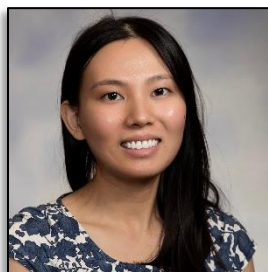
Violence, sex, drug abuse seems to weave into lyrics within heavy metal music, leading a sense of rebellion that attracts millions of fans. Thousands gather for concerts every year, head banging and jumping around in mosh pits to what most would consider senseless screaming, and for those who do not consider themselves fans, their judgement of this fan base can be a bit clouded. In this project, I researched how mass media can affect the judgement calls of the public about the heavy metal fan base.

EMILY HAMMOND'S project began in my Communications Senior Seminar class in 2019. She picked the topic of how heavy metal fans are portrayed in the media because it is something that she is truly passionate about.



Emily is a heavy metal fan, so researching these stigmas that media shows to the public about a genre of music that she enjoys was both enjoyable and appalling all at once. Emily decided that this project would be one that she would dive deep into from the start. Before she knew it, it was finished, and she couldn't be more proud of the outcome. Emily believes that her favorite part about this research project would be coding the articles to provide evidence towards her hypothesis. Being able to find answers through those articles was a great experience and gave her great insight on her topic. In the future, Emily plans to work in marketing, which can require a large amount of research, and this project gave her the tools she needs to pursue a career. This project also taught her that there will be some bumps along the way in research, so it is okay to go back, review over your work, and take the time to think about what the next steps should be, even if those steps are not exactly part of your previous plans. If Emily had to give advice to other students about research, she would say that they need to pick a subject that they are passionate about, like she did. It helps immensely with keeping interest in their projects, and the end results would prove to be

satisfying for them. In Emily's free time, she loves to listen to music, write and read, as well as travel.



SHUANG LIU HUNDLEY has been an assistant professor of Mass Media and Digital Studies at USC Upstate since Fall 2018. She earned her doctorate in communication from Washington State University. Her research is focused on learning about how media, especially new media technologies, improve health and how such information is processed and understood. Her research has been published in *Health Communication*, *Journal of Health Communication*, and *Computers in Human Behavior*. Emily Hammond's paper was originally her Senior Seminar project in Communication. She was passionate about this topic and worked very

hard on her project for months. I am glad the paper is accepted at USC Upstate Student Research Journal and the findings will be shared with a variety of audiences.

1. Introduction

Heavy metal surfaced as its own rock genre in the mid-1960s, branching from the era of psychedelic rock and eventually dividing into subgenres such as glam metal, progressive metal, and many others. Over the course of 50 years, fans of all ages join a rebellion of its own kind, supporting artists such as Black Sabbath, Deep Purple, and Metallica. Since then, many bands have been inspired by the fathers of metal, and to this day, millions listen to metal on an everyday basis. However, metal has not been widely accepted in mass media.

Time and time again, metal music has been blamed for gun violence in America by the news media. Mass media contributes to the stereotypes of metal bands exploiting their attention to pressure audiences to support anarchy. Metal bands have also been subjected to criticisms of religious communities, tagged as Satanists who push out toxic messages to young listeners in their fan base. These trials that metal bands face raises a question that especially needs an answer in today's society; How are fans affected by the messages and stereotypical claims that metal bands are given by mass media?

Marilyn Manson is a progressive rock singer who dabbled in controversies throughout his musical career. His gruesome aesthetic and odd perspectives of society have drawn in many as well as driven many away. However, his career took on the hardest controversy of the Columbine High School Shooting. In 1999, two teenage boys, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, were dressed in Marilyn Manson tee shirts and trench coats when they shot and killed twelve students and a teacher and injured 20 others. They turned their guns on themselves after the shooting spree.

Because of the Marilyn Manson shirts that Klebold and Harris apparently wore, Marilyn Manson claimed that he was vilified [1]. Because of these acts of violence, hard-working musicians in the metal genre are suffering, as mass media is displaying them as influencers of violence. It is crucial that this study covers the effects that these cases have on the music industry and how musicians communicate with fans despite violent crimes that they are distantly connected to. Therefore, through qualitative research, I set out to answer the primary research question, "how are fans affected by the frames and stereotypical claims that metal bands are given by mass media?".

2. Literature Review

Heavy metal is notorious for using graphic and violent content, at times for shock value as well as for symbolic meaning. Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, and LeVine define controversy as a subject that creates a frame that values claim over fact [2]. This implies that controversy is subjective, or it can even be another frame used by the media. Heavy metal is a controversial culture to be a part of due to bands' choice marketing, and that could make heavy metal bands moving targets for public ridicule [3].

Fried points out that stereotypes in the heavy metal community impacts criminal investigations through prejudice involving the treatment of an individual, as well as their environment [3]. Since there had been claims made about this community, heavy metal fans are subjected to ridicule and prejudice from societal authorities, as well as followers under the authorities.

So, what was the sociological reasoning why critics and journalists of the mass media depicted heavy metal to be linked to such violence? Straw argues that critics who had not been able to connect with metal fans had been shown with the dilemma of responding negatively to rock music [4]. Critics had done a great job of releasing negative reviews about heavy metal, which further implies that these critics are upholding their own agenda based on their own dislike of the genre.

The framing theory focuses on the meaning behind a certain field that the media investigates and formulates to prove a certain agenda, leaving it up to the audience to decide how to use the information that the media sends out. Therefore, it is a driving motivation for heavy metal to continue on, which means that messages shared by the media are accepted or denied by choice. This theory applies to this topic because, despite the many accusations that heavy metal bands have been given any fans have chosen to support their musical idols and are subjected to the accusations as much as bands are.

Media has been pushing forward with stories that have linked stereotypes to the heavy metal fan base [5]. Some of these court cases include school and public shootings across the United States. The constant coverage over shootings, and the constant push to relay political messages to the public, have influenced audiences to decide on the topic and act if they need to. One theory that the media relies on is an adaptation of the agenda-setting theory called the framing theory. Frames, created by journalists to highlight different aspects of news, can influence audiences' decisions on certain topics, leading to the reason that it is adapted from the agenda-setting theory in the first place. Binder also states that journalists use frameworks to organize events to create patterns to help their audience decide on any actions that need to be taken [6].

In an argument about the censorship of Heavy Metal brought about by the PRMC (Parents Resource Music Center), the generation gap frame was used at the Senate hearing. Generation gaps within media are very familiar, drawing attention to the themes of rebellion that are relayed in heavy metal music. Binder continued by stating that this argument was put in the corruption frame. The corruption frame puts certain behaviors, such as explicit lyrics, suicidal tendencies, and sexual innuendos have a negative effect on juvenile behavior [7]. However, it was also noted that the frames have no connection to any negative teen behavior [7].

A popular case where metal was blamed for influencing violence was the Columbine mass shooting in 1999. Since the shooting had taken place, articles focused on school shootings surfaced, creating a sense of panic [8]. Paris also observes that school shooting articles bounced up to 152 articles just in the New York Times over the course of 1999 [7]. According to Leavy and Maloney, three newspapers, The New York Times and two local papers that covered the Red Lake Indian Reservation School Shooting and the Columbine High School Shooting, Marilyn Manson, as well as heavy metal as a genre, was accused of influencing the mass shooters [9]. Goth culture was also under attack by these newspapers, as the journalists who were involved with these stories used framing to portray generalized stereotypes that Goth culture supports violence; however, Goth culture is diverse with different styles and interests [8].

Manson wrote an article for Rolling Stone magazine regarding the accusations of his music influencing the mass shooters of Columbine high school, claiming that reporters have discovered that Harris and Klebold were in fact not his fans [10]. What is haunting about this is that instead of questioning the correlation between social causes and school violence, the media immediately accused Manson of instigating gun violence, leading to the cancelation of a show that year [9]. This also led to a decline in Manson's music career, although his career was not completely destroyed by the accusations against him. It had been obvious that the heavy metal fan base is portrayed to be a group of outsiders [11]. The accusations of heavy metal's hand in gun violence were focused on how the group is usually associated with reckless and violent behavior against authorities and their peers. [11].

A 2016 study concluded that although young adults who listened to certain genres of music, such as rap, heavy metal, and alternative, had been loosely linked to substance abuse and violence. However, it is difficult to link music to aggression and substance abuse [12]. Sinclair points out that emotion, violence, and aggression in live heavy metal events do not represent the loss of civilization and control but represent a development of a high level of self-restraint and control [13].

In regards to the media's misinterpretation of the heavy metal fan base, it could be possible that, rather than processing the messages that media releases, the framing theory could possibly

have uneven effects among audiences. Vreese claims that framing is about the understanding of the audiences' previous knowledge of affairs [14]. It was found that media frames were moderated by variables, such as requesting a rationale and the probability of success in the risky option. Frames need to be formulated to focus on the approach that they need to influence the audience and to factor whether that approach can be successful or not.

3. Methods

Leavy and Maloney stated in their article that "Technologies of print culture, such as the printing press, allowed for the creation of 'records' of current events that could be reproduced and disseminated to the masses" [7]. Media portrays a reality through the framing theory that gives audiences the opportunity to believe whatever and however they want about the messages that they spread. However, the portrayal of these messages is subjectively highlighted by different social aspects.

In my research, the main focus was the heavy metal audience. So, since critics and the general media point their accusing fingers at the music genre and its audience, surely in some way the heavy metal fan base has been impacted by the negative perception of this subculture. However, what would that impact be?

These sub-questions branch off the primary research question, and had to also be answered through the study's content analysis:

1. How are fan bases, as well as band members, affected by these accusations?
2. How are these stereotypes in mass media used for persuasion against metal bands?

In the investigation of mass media's steel grip on the generalization of heavy metal fans, the expectation was to uncover the stories that expand on the stereotypes that the heavy metal fan base deal with, as well as how effective those stereotypes are. Over 50 news reports from national news outlets, newspapers, and social media over the course of the twenty-year stretch between 1999 and 2019 were sampled for the content analysis. Each of these reports covered the Columbine High School Shooting, as this shooting had made headlines for many years after the tragedy.

The reason the content analysis is focused on news reports of the Columbine High School Shooting is because it is the most often referred to in social media regarding gun violence and control. Another reason is that this event also sparked the debate on the dangers of the heavy metal fan base and the censorship of music in general. The end goal for this content analysis was to find as many reports as possible that used terms such as "Columbine High School" "heavy metal", "gun violence", "fans", and "mass shootings".

Next, through analysis of each news report, and application of the framing theory to both individual media frames within every report that had been published in those twenty years, and to the collection of media frame traits that have surfaced within news reports in that period, categories were applied to each of these articles, each category classifying texts within these articles. The content analysis would serve the purpose of discussing the relativity between these reports as well as to correlate the use of language between the reports about heavy metal bands.

In my research, I developed and applied three codes. I decided that by using the codes stereotypes, social class, and heavy metal to yield the results that I need to answer my research questions. The codes were developed based on common language themes that I believed would be in these articles, as during my research I found that these themes appeared often. For example, stereotypical language, such as generalizing a group by appearances or traits, were naturally put in the stereotypes code. I decided to match my codes with colors on a chart since some of the articles can not only have one code, but other codes can be intertwined into the message of the articles as well, leading to the open opportunity that media could imply multiple

messages within news reports. In the appendix, there is a list of articles that were coded during my research.

3.1 Stereotypes

As discussed, I had found that the media portrays the heavy metal fan base through stereotypical behaviors, such as attire, generalized thinking, and actions that were commonly related but possibly over-exaggerated in previous media. This code indicated that in the articles that I had selected, media outlets that had covered the Columbine shooting had used stereotypical language to describe the killers. Stereotypical language included attire, actions, and phrases that correlate to the generalization of members within the heavy metal fan base.

3.2 Social Class

I noticed in my study that it was mentioned before that Klebold and Harris had been subjected to bullying, thus causing a tragic reaction from the two boys. This code was used to decipher through the language that the media used to describe how their social lives were, whether they included that they were part of any group or if they were truly alone.

3.3 References to Heavy Metal

Finally, this code is used to show that there were references to heavy metal, whether those references are positive or negative. The code includes phrases about musicians within the genre and the correlation between the music genre and the Columbine shooting. Since heavy metal had repeatedly been a scapegoat to violent events over the past few decades, I wanted to include this code for the sake of answering research questions in my study.

3.4 No Categories Applies

In some of these articles, there was the possibility that rather than focusing on the killers, journalists could have just been covering the recovery of the victims, the school itself, or other aspects that the codes could not be applied too. Therefore, I made a category specifically for these purposes.

4. Findings

After applying these codes, I noticed that journalists had included the term "Trenchcoat Mafia". The term seemed to be a continuous trend. Continuing to investigate further into the culture of the "Trenchcoat Mafia", I found that it was a hate culture that revolved around homicidal tendencies towards minorities and popular culture. Adorned with trench coats and dark clothing, this "mafia" had become the focus of the Columbine shootings, as it had been assumed that Klebold and Harris had been devout members of the Trenchcoat Mafia.

This led to an important discovery about the media's link between the Columbine shooting and the accusations between the heavy metal. Out of the fifty articles within my analysis, 40% of them made references to heavy metal. Also, 50% of these articles used stereotypical language regarding the Trenchcoat Mafia. In total, 26% of the articles used both stereotypical language about this hate culture and references to heavy metal, specifically revolving around the accusations against Marilyn Manson.

Social class was also a common code, but it ranked at 26% of the articles, although there were times that heavy metal and stereotypes were referred to within articles containing social class references. Finally, none of the categories applied to 20% of the articles, which was higher than I expected.

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The results of this study proved my hypothesis that, because of stereotypical claims that were negatively correlated between the Trenchcoat Mafia and the heavy metal fan base, media had been portraying heavy metal as a scapegoat for gun violence. This Trenchcoat mafia had been used as a stereotype on its own to portray those that are in the fan base, and the language that was used within the articles negatively referred to the heavy metal genre and to its musicians, such as Marilyn Manson.

The Trenchcoat mafia had been grouped into stereotypical appearance, such as obviously wearing a trenchcoat, dark clothes, and combat boots. According to Denver Post, the Trenchcoat Mafia was closely associated with interests in the “occult, mutilation, shock-rocker Marilyn Manson and Adolf Hitler” (See Appendix News Report #4).

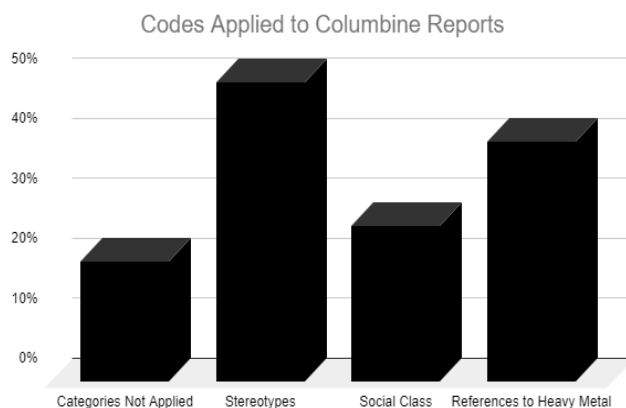


Figure 1. Results of content analysis coding applied to Columbine news reports

Figure 1 shows the results of the percentage of the language used in the content analysis. Each category is applied to the articles, some overlapping with others, and some having themes of all three categories. After creating Figure 1, I calculated the number of themes overlapping compared to the singular use of a category or no categories applied at all (See Figure 2).

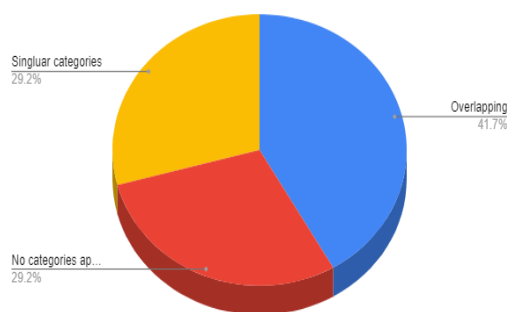


Figure 2. Comparison of themes used in content analysis

As a result, over 40% of the articles used in the content analysis had overlapping themes, 29% applied a singular category, and 29% had none of the categories used in the content analysis applied. The most categories used together were references to heavy metal and stereotypes, as the references to the heavy metal subculture heavily relied on stereotypical behaviors in many of these articles. For example, Inside Edition discussed Marilyn Manson’s response to being

accused of influencing the Columbine High School shooting, the response stating, "I remember hearing the initial reports from Littleton, that Harris and Klebold were wearing makeup and were dressed like Marilyn Manson, whom they obviously must worship since they were dressed in black" (See News Report #27).

On another occasion, The New York Times interviewed students from Columbine about their social lives before Columbine and the events that took place about Columbine. One student addressed stereotypes as well as social class, talking about a friend who "wears heavy metal band T-shirts, black shorts no matter what the weather, and a black hat, and he has long hair. And friends who normally just come up to me and talk to me and are so nice to me -- when I'm around him, they give me looks" (See Appendix News Report #7).

Based on these observations, the quotes used in these articles defined media's use in narrative and stereotypical language to push the frame that the heavy metal fan base is a dangerous subculture. This proves that news media can impact the perception of subcultures, such as the heavy metal subculture. Stereotypical language used throughout these articles were not used to boost up the public image of your typical Slipknot or Metallica fan, but it was formulated into a consciously degrading frame to push blame for violence in mass media on someone else. It is just up to the audience to decide whether or not they believe these stereotypes, and whose side they are really on.

5. Discussion

Limitations in this study include the psychological conditions of Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris before the Columbine shootings. That was another aspect that gives the opportunity for another study about how media portrayed mental illness in regards to the Columbine shooting, but I was unable to incorporate it into the focus of my study because the study was more focused in on the social aspect of the accusations of heavy metal subcultures rather than the psychological aspect of Harris and Klebold at the time of the shooting. However, it is a good option for future research to include this category into the content analysis, as heavy metal had been accused of inflicting those with mental illness in the past.

Race could have been another category used during the content analysis, as Klebold and Harris were described as Nazis. It had been reported that one of their victims was an African American named Isaiah Shoals. Multiple news reports claimed that Klebold and Harris referred to him by a racial slur before he was shot. Because race was included in some of the articles, that could be included in further research.

Other limitations also can be how the media has portrayed the blame on heavy metal in reference to other shootings in the United States since Columbine, and whether there were any differences in those reports. Also, because Columbine was a case that led to a twenty-year span of news reports, there could not possibly be access to every article that had been released since 1999. The content analysis was only able to hold a sample of 50 articles, meaning that results could change as more news reports can be uncovered and have the categories applied. There was more room to expand on research, as applying more articles could have turned around the entire experiment.

Finally, because of subjectivity and variation of effect, interviews or surveys cannot express just how deeply the heavy metal fan base is impacted. As discussed, frames created by the media are shared with the audience to decide on, whether these frames actually take influence or not. Therefore, it cannot be exactly solidified that the entire heavy metal fan base can be affected by the media's negativity towards the subculture.

Because of this, the limitation is that there is not an actual way to prove from members within this fan base that it is under attack by the media, because many might see media as harming the

image of heavy metal bands and fans on different scales. On a generalization level, there is proof, but individuals make the choice of whether stereotypical language can take effect into their perceptions of what the heavy metal subculture is or not.

6. Conclusion

In this study, the overall hypothesis was to set out to discover how media use selective frames to portray the heavy metal fan base. The lesson learned through previous research is that language used in news articles and reports can impact the opinions of individuals within mass media's audience. The findings of this study demonstrated that the frames presented by the media tend to be negative against the heavy metal fan base.

Through the language used in journalism when mentioning the music genre and its fan base, media had been negatively affecting the image of fans and musicians alike. Musicians are subject to ridicule by media giants, and because of the actions that they take publicly, such as controversies, the media can have a hand in affecting music careers, such as Marilyn Manson's career after the Columbine High school Shooting. Because of the history of controversy that heavy metal has dealt with, the media uses that history to structure frames that connect what audiences already know and how it can be applied to current world news, leaving it up to the audience to interpret the messages themselves.

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