

**Heavy metal figurations: Music consumption, subcultural control and civilising processes**

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**Abstract**

Drawing from Eliasian figurational theory and data obtained in Ireland during a three-year participant-observation of both the live and online spaces of the scene, we argue that control, both individual and social, plays a vital part in shaping heavy metal figurations. We focus on the role of the subcultural code in integrating participants into the scene, enabling the enactment of cathartic rituals and its importance in signifying hierarchy and the distribution of subcultural capital. In particular, we place emphasis on bodily forms of control and emotional self-steering and we consider how the management of aggression in heavy metal subculture is indicative of wider civilising processes. Such findings are considered within the context of previous consumer culture theory research that has called for studies that incorporate broader socio-historical perspectives.

**Key words**

Consumer culture theory, figural sociology, music consumption, emotion, subcultural capital, consumer tribes, control.

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## **Introduction**

This paper, using Norbert Elias's (2000) figurational lens, posits alternative theoretical explanations of modern consumer communities, placing greater emphasis on the significance of control, and how control, both individual and social, informs the nature of heavy metal figurations – and similarly that of other contemporary social groups. A figuration is a term used here to depict a web of interdependencies – ‘a structure of mutually orientated and dependent people’ (Elias, 2000: 482). Academic research concerning heavy metal subculture has until recently been dominated by debates considering the integrity of heavy metal, its place in a ‘civilised’ society. The emphasis on the ‘civility’ of such a controversial and apparently ‘aggressive’, ‘violent’ and ‘chaotic’ subculture is what makes discussion of Eliasian (2000) theories regarding processes of civilising in this context so interesting. In short, we argue that heavy metal figurations are highly complex; their development, identities, hierarchies (subcultural capital) and emotional processes are greatly dependent on both individual and social controls that are the product of civilising processes. Such ‘controls’ highlight the significance of so-called ‘negative’ emotions and the persistent desire for a strong, consistent group ethic and sense of belonging that perhaps, ironically, is a product of increasing fluidity in other spheres of life. The emphasis on civilising processes as a means of explaining the management of aggression in consumer communities

represents an alternative approach to previous research which has had a tendency to overlook the importance of broader socio-historical processes.

Despite the high recognition of Norbert Elias in sociology, a discipline that consumer culture researchers have relied heavily upon, figurational sociology has attracted surprisingly little attention in consumer research, particularly in consumer culture theory (CCT) and consumer communities' contexts. However, it must be acknowledged that there have been some studies, mostly from the discipline of sociology itself, that have drawn from Eliasian theory in consumption contexts (see Dolan, 2002, Dolan, 2009; Binkley, 2009; Mennell, 1987, 1996). Although consumer research for similar genres such as goth (Goulding and Saren, 2007, 2009) and the post punk/alternative rock band New Model Army (O' Reilly and Doherty, 2006) is helpful for constructing explanations on heavy metal subculture, the fact still remains that such genres are distinctive as the fans in this study place great emphasis on the differences in identity between being a punk, a rocker and a 'metal head'. These genres differ considerably in terms of in terms of the tempo of the music, the lyrical content and the subtleties of the subcultural style.

Thus the paper is structured as follows. Following a brief introduction to previous research concerning heavy metal, we will provide greater detail on the Eliasian approach both in theory and in methodological application. In discussion, we will outline some of the key findings that emerged from participant observation of the heavy

metal scene from a figurational perspective, and consider their wider implications for research regarding subcultures and consumer communities.

### **Entering the moshpit: Introducing metal**

Heavy metal subculture has developed rapidly from its origins in 1960s/1970s Birmingham, England (Bennett, 2001) into a subculture with global significance (Wallach et al., 2011) in musicological terms (see Berger, 1999; Walser, 1992) and culturally and politically (see Kahn-Harris, 2007; Waksman, 2009; Weinstein, 2000, 2011). Heavy metal is also beginning to be viewed as an object of academic inquiry in its own right with organisations such as the International Society for Metal Studies developing journals and hosting conferences that focus exclusively on the genre.

Bennett (2001) traces metal's musical foundation to the blues and the subsequent rock music that evolved from the influence of such blues artists as Robert Johnson (e.g. Led Zeppelin). Although bands such as Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple and in particular Black Sabbath are credited with influencing the development of the scene aesthetically (e.g. long hair, tight trousers, make-up), musically (i.e. the incorporation of fast and powerful rhythms) and discursively (e.g. the flirtation with themes and mythologies concerning the occult and satanism), they and many of their fans still do not identify themselves as 'heavy metal'. This is indicative of the difficulty that is inherent in drawing boundaries

within popular music, particularly for a genre as contentious and complex as heavy metal (Weinstein, 2011).

Heavy metal music tends to be falsely stereotyped and homogenised in the media or by those who have no involvement or knowledge of the subculture, frequently mixing it up with goth subculture for instance (Weinstein, 2000). The reality is that heavy metal has gone through many different periods of popularity (e.g. early 1980s) and involves numerous different subgenres (e.g. death, thrash, doom and nu-metal) that have amalgamated with other genres of music (e.g. rap, grunge, funk and punk) that incorporate varying themes and stylistic identities. Wallach et al. (2011) document the increasing global appeal of the genre with large fan bases developing in South America and Asia in particular. Originally, the scene developed in traditional strongholds of Great Britain and North America as scene members lengthened social ties through the sharing of fanzines, tape-trading, specialised pirate radio stations and the touring of both small and big bands. This, in addition to metal's increasing presence on radio and music television, and Ireland's proximity to Great Britain, accounts for its growing presence in Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s. The figuration of the scene has lengthened as a result of the increasing digitalisation of the music industry and the growing speed of internet search engines which have expanded the global presence of heavy metal, incorporating 'less' developed countries (Weinstein, 2011). Hjelm et al. (2011: 14) argue that despite the differences in each country and each subgenre, the battle for legitimacy and

criticisms of genres such as ‘Nu-metal’ and ‘Grindcore’, the overall heavy metal genre is united<sup>1</sup> by a ‘relatively stable canon of artists – Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, Black Sabbath and Slayer being particularly revered – and a core of themes and preoccupations that are pursued across metal sub-genres’. The theme that unites the subgenres is that of transgression. This is particularly evident in the sound of the music which contrasts notably with other genres in for example speed, melody and harmony. However, this also refers to the need to challenge boundaries of taste, whether it concerns the devil, the occult, violence or sex. This is particularly the case in more ‘extreme’ forms of heavy metal (Kahn-Harris, 2007).

It is the transgressive nature of the scene, its experimentation with controversial themes, its reputation for anarchic, fast and extreme sounds, and fan rituals (e.g. moshing, crowd-surfing, and headbanging) that are frequently aggressive and sometimes dangerously violent, that whilst attracting a global audience has also caught the attention of moral guardians and consequently academics. Chastagner (1999), Weinstein (2000) and Wright (2000) have documented the outrage that has surrounded the music genres of heavy metal and rap and in particular the role that the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) has played in blaming such music for corrupting the youth of America during the 1980s and early 1990s. This was supplemented by academic research that

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the differences between each subgenre within the scene, we distinguished all fans and bands that identified with ‘metal’ in anyway under the umbrella term of ‘heavy metal’ for the purposes of this research.

considers the danger of the music (e.g. Lacourse et al., 2001; McFerran et al., 2013; Scheel and Westefeld, 1999). The controversy and public scrutiny regarding heavy metal decreased significantly in the following years, partly because of changing music trends and its declining popularity in the 1990s, and also as a result of the fragmentation of the scene into a series of subgenres and increasingly extreme and experimental scenes that retreated into the ‘underground’ and resisted ‘mainstream’ or commercially successful heavy metal music. This is ironic considering that extreme metal subgenres are far more controversial and aggravating to the supposed norms of mainstream society than previous more chastised incarnations of heavy metal.

In summary, it is this focus, encapsulated from previous heavy metal academic research, on the supposed ‘tasteless’, ‘dangerous’ and ‘uncivilised’ nature of the genre that makes it such an appropriate context in which to examine Elias’s figurational lens and his ideas concerning emotional control and excitement in a ‘civilised’ society.

### **Figurational sociology and civilising processes**

The tenets of figurational sociology are built on Norbert Elias’s (2000[1939]) seminal work entitled *The Civilizing Process*. Elias provides a socio-historical analysis of the developments in Western civilisation since the Middle Ages, connecting transformations in the individual psyche (charted via historical analysis of manners and etiquette books) with developments in the broader social structure (e.g. state formation,



functional specialisation). Elias's main argument is that through increasing relative equalisation between social classes and widening figurations of social interdependencies, we have developed a more even, restrained and consistent code of conduct in social situations. Developments in codes of etiquette and manners, and an increasing internalisation of feelings of shame, are related to greater social constraints towards self-regulation. In short, in conditions in which society becomes increasingly integrated (in the sense that functional specialisation requires the co-ordination of such diverse functions), we are likely to be subject to advancing, complex social codes in which the individual psyche becomes more amenable to emotional self-control. Elias describes such conditions as indicative of processes of civilising. Such processes do not occur in a straight line. Interdependencies can reduce over time and certain transformations in social structures combined with changes to the individual psyche can create low levels of mutual identification and lead to de-civilising processes (Mennell, 1990).

However, Elias (and his followers) has on the whole presented a picture of modern society which argues that individuals have developed more all-round, even self-restraint, and that there is evidence of distinct civilising trends in western society.

However, such concepts have been challenged. Duerr<sup>2</sup> argues that shame regarding certain bodily practices did not emerge in recent centuries in Europe, that shame is

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<sup>2</sup> Duerr examines *The Civilizing Process* in a five-volume series *Der Mythos vom Zivilisationsprozess: Nacktheit und Scham*, thus far only published in German.

universal (Mennell and Goudsblom, 1997). Mennell and Goudsblom argue that Elias was focusing on the changing balance between social and self-controls on conduct, and changing forms and intensities of emotions according to the degree of social density and complexity. There has also been the frequently put forward assertion that we are living in an increasingly violent society, despite the facts that suggest otherwise (Mennell, 1998: 246–250). Elias (2008a) also replied to Duerr, on the basis that Duerr misinterprets his use of civilisation in a theoretical sense, which for Elias implies neither progress nor linearity. Clearly a subculture such as heavy metal could be identified as indicative of an increasingly violent and aggressive society, as symptomatic of looser forms of societal control. Heavy metal raises questions about the increasingly differentiated modes of behaviour within our consumer culture and the nature of the social groups that take shape within it.

Figurational sociologists have been misconstrued as overly concerned with social structure, portraying individuals as possessing limited autonomy (see Jary and Horne, 1987). This is a result of the emphasis that Elias places on broad historical transformations, and potentially because of the lack of figurational studies that involve personal interviews or other methods of data collection that place the individuals' experiences at the centre of analysis – although this has altered somewhat recently (see Atkinson, 2006). The question that Elias asks is how social change occurs without the direct intention of individuals. However, he is not suggesting that we have no influence;

he argues that the interlinking of individual relations in the context of complex interdependencies, combined with our biological and cultural inheritance, shapes each individual habitus.

### *Figurational sociology and CCT*

The figurational approach differs from contemporary consumer culture accounts where the agency of the consumer is awarded priority, sometimes at the expense of acknowledging the importance of broader processes (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). It is an exaggeration to suggest that contemporary consumer culture accounts tactfully avoid frameworks that favour broader social and cultural lenses. For example, Bourdieusian (e.g. Holt, 1998) and Foucauldian (e.g. Shankar et al., 2006; Thompson, 2004) perspectives have been increasingly used to develop explanations for a variety of consumer contexts in recent years and both share some similarities with Eliasian theory. Decreasing violence, self-control (both social and individual), the body and power relations are also prominent themes in Foucault's work for example. Because of such similarities, it is perhaps important that we identify the differences between the two theorists. Dolan (2010) argues that the key distinction is the greater import that Foucault awards to conceptions of space at the expense of the temporal dimension, with explanations that are based more on analyses of 'abrupt' change. Elias, on the other hand, places greater emphasis on the relationship between spaces and the long-term dynamics of structural change. This, Dolan maintains, has implications for how both

construct notions of subjectivity, social control and habitus. Of course the significance placed on time and space is relative rather than absolute. Elias too addresses the construction of particular spaces like the royal court in France, but this is an outcome of changing interdependencies, and associated power relations, between various competing noble families in the territory that became France. People develop different relations to their selves and others as interdependencies develop, and these intensify in certain spaces, but this happens over time, and the key to understanding new forms of habitus is the contradiction between old and new social expectations and prohibitions.

Foucauldians tend to examine the history of subjectivity in its own right, without the need to connect it to changes in other social relations to any significant extent. Indeed Rose (1996), a leading follower of Foucault, prioritises space over time. This specifically contrasts with Foucault's genealogical approach with Elias's historical sociological perspective. Elias argues that social formations emerge from earlier formations, in conditional rather than deterministic ways. But there is continuity, not in the sense that social structures and properties remain the same, but that the changing social interdependencies, tensions and power balances constitute successive formations over time. Changing images of self are connected to dynamic networks of social relations for Elias, whereas for Foucault, such transformations are linked to specific spaces and discourses. While both Elias and Foucault identify processes of self-surveillance in the context of observation by others, Foucault is again quite direct with

his analysis of social constraint, depicting its construction from a more discursive and intentional perspective in specific spaces such as prisons. Elias understands control within a more processual and interdependent framework, that places more emphasis on the relationship between people in multiple spaces performing diverse functions (Dolan, 2010). For example, in *The Quest for Excitement* Elias and Dunning (2008) highlight how spaces have been constructed for sport and leisure as a consequence of emotional needs that have developed due to routinised work spaces.

Additionally, Bowen et al. (2012) identifies an overlap in terms of both Bourdieu's and Elias's focus on habitus, power/capital and the figuration/field. As Bowen et al. note, both theorists follow a resolutely relational and processual form of thinking. However, Bowen et al. see more similarities than is perhaps warranted. They contend that Elias's concept of figuration and Bourdieu's concept of field are more or less interchangeable. But the latter tends to designate a field of practice, such that there are fields of art, music, sport, law, education, economics, and so on. The orders of any field are delineated by practices, whereas the borders of any figuration are delineated by the extent of the interdependencies between people, irrespective of the practices or tasks in which they are currently engaged. While Elias did recognise the relative autonomy of certain fields of practice, like sport, and did refer to a match between opposing teams as a figuration, such a figuration is part of larger figurations, and it is indeed these larger figurations that give rise to new needs that eventually lead to the formation of lower-

level figurations. So there are figurations within figurations at various levels of integration (in the technical sense; such multiple levels produce tensions and contradictions). The main difference between the two is the importance that Elias attributes to self-regulation and bodily control. Some of Bourdieu's ideas related to capital and in particular the inverted lens of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995) has been used to explore post-subcultural contexts and consumer communities. However, adaption of Bourdieu's work has surfaced in contexts that prioritise more 'consumer-centric' or individualised explanations. This represents a general shift that has taken place in subcultural research.

*Post-subcultural aesthetic: Emergence of consumer communities*

The subcultural concept has undergone much iteration from its original use in early twentieth-century psychologically-orientated studies to describe criminality or the deviance of young people (Blackman, 2005), to its widespread evolution and application under many different CCT guises (e.g. subcultures of consumption, brand communities and consumer tribes) that have been used to explain a variety of contexts that have no relation to its original focus as a lens to explain criminology, deviancy (Martin, 2009) and political resistance (Hall and Jefferson, 1976).

The evolution of the subcultural concept is of course best known for its CCCS (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies) incarnation. Although this school provided

frameworks that facilitated fascinating politically-orientated analyses that framed subcultural consumption and 'style' as resistance to dominant cultural and political institutions, its influence has waned in recent years as its emphasis on social structure and class divisions has somehow come to be viewed by postmodern researchers as a barrier to understanding contemporary groupings (see Bennett, 1999). Consequently post-subcultural and consumer communities' perspectives emerged from such criticisms and other possible 'fairer' critiques relating to its rigidity, ignorance of female perspectives and lack of emphasis on 'subcultural voices' in method.

Central to this emergence, particularly from a CCT perspective, is the use of Maffesoli's (1996) ideas concerning the loss of community, decline of modern institutions and the consequent development of fluid emotional communities that are built on sociality rather than political or economic structures. This perspective has been particularly valuable in locating the emergence of 'rave' or 'club' cultures and the transient nature of the emotions and social connections experienced in such subcultural or 'tribal' spaces (Bennett, 1999; Goulding et al., 2002). The appropriation of Maffesolian theory from contexts regarding music and more traditional subcultural contexts to consumer communities or consumer tribes (Cova et al., 2007) is indicative of the growing prominence in CCT research on the 'sociocultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption' (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: 868). This emphasis is also reflected in other forms of consumer communities such as brand

communities (Muniz Jr. and O'Guinn, 2001) and subcultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) which place greater importance on how consumers form relationships and construct identity through shared use of products/services rather than 'define themselves according to sociological constructs' (Schouten and McAlexander 1995: 59).

The question is how such a framework can be used to illuminate our understanding of heavy metal fans. Hodkinson (2004: 141) argues that whilst post-subcultural concepts such as consumer tribes seem to exemplify modern cultural patterns there is a 'danger either of misrepresenting or excluding from analysis any collectivities whose empirical reality fails to fit the picture'. For example, consumer researchers have been critiqued for developing weak theoretical connections between consumer tribes and Maffesoli's source material, which, in fact, has no mention of consumer tribes at all (O'Reilly, 2012). O'Reilly claims that consumer researchers place too much emphasis on the impermanence of consumer tribes. Additionally, they have failed to discuss any of Maffesoli's core ideas at length (with the exception of Goulding et al., 2002) or develop relevant contributions to the theoretical construct following their empirical studies. In suggesting areas in which consumer research could build on its connections with Maffesolian theory, O'Reilly (2012: 345) recommends an exploration of political ideologies and structural influences. This refers to a broader critique of CCT and by association research regarding post-subcultural consumer communities.



The ongoing debate regarding CCT's emphasis (see Arnould and Thompson, 2005, 2007; Thompson et al., 2013) or lack of emphasis (see Askeggard and Linnet, 2011) on structural and socio-historical processes does not need to be reiterated again. What we have established however, from reviewing the literature on figurational sociology and contemporary consumer communities, is that it provides an opportunity to develop alternative explanations of consumer culture (in this case music subcultures) that can draw from socio-historical constructs, contributing further to the increasing dialogue within CCT that has developed as a result of the growing influence of key social theorists such as Foucault and Bourdieu. Additionally, the previous cursory use of Elias's work in CCT contexts (see Canniford and Shankar, 2007; Canniford and Karababa, 2012; Goulding et al., 2009; Üstüner and Thompson, 2012) can be addressed by providing more detail on the figurational socio-historical construction of themes concerning space, emotional control, and excitement. In the following sections we will outline the method from which we drew from aspects of figurational theory to aid in the interpretation of data collected from participant-observation of the heavy metal subculture that forms the context of this paper.

## **Methods**

Traditionally, long-term historical analyses have played the most important role in shaping figurational research methodologies. For example, Elias (2000) analysed several manners and etiquette books, written as early as the thirteenth century, as a basis

for demonstrating transformations in the individual psyche in Western Europe. His most famous examples involve identifying changes in etiquette concerning the introduction of cutlery at the dinner table and aspects of shame that began to be associated with spitting, defecating and sleeping patterns. It is perhaps the lack of research focusing on individual experiences and lack of details or guidelines regarding Eliasian methodological processes (Baur and Ernst, 2011), that have led to the framework being overlooked in consumer culture contexts concerning subcultures or tribes. It is only recently that figurationalists have begun to connect such sources of figurational theory with primary data collected in the field (e.g. Atkinson, 2006; Liston, 2007). We take this approach, using aspects of previous figurational theories developed (e.g. Wouters, 2007 on processes of informalisation and Elias and Dunning on sportisation) as a context in which to interpret data that was collected from the field. This then helps us to situate our figurational structure within a more traditional CCT analysis, demonstrating the strengths of both approaches.

The data was collected from in-depth interviews from 15 heavy metal fans, a three year participant-observation of live heavy metal gigs and the observation of Irish heavy metal internet forums. Participant observation involved the attendance of a variety of different gigs that incorporated diverse number of subgenres of heavy metal and consequently took place in both small 'underground' venues and larger arenas. It emerged during the research process that a significant proportion of the scene's

interactions occurred online; consequently, we triangulated data collected at live events with data attained from the observation of the heavy metal website 'MetalIreland.com'. A large number of interviewees had indicated that they interacted with other fans on the forums of this website.

Purposive sampling was used for selecting interviewees and the sites for participant observation (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). All candidates' names have been changed to protect their identity. Respondents were selected on the simple criteria that they considered themselves fans of heavy metal – many of the fans were also involved in the production side of heavy metal subculture either as musicians, promoters or fanzine/ fan website administrators. The respondents varied considerably in terms of social class, education, profession and preferences regarding subgenres of heavy metal. There were similarities in terms of age (most respondents between the ages of 18–25) and gender (12 males) which reflect both the fact that initial respondents were sourced from the authors' institution and the fact that metal in Ireland and the UK is typically dominated by males. The characteristics of these samples were also replicated in the live shows attended, although there tended to be older fans and a more even gender split at larger venues where more well-known bands played. One aspect of the sample that united all the fans interviewed was their commitment to heavy metal and its incorporation into their everyday lives, whether this was through adopting heavy metal style in appearance, spending considerable time talking about, producing and sharing

subcultural materials or simply attending gigs and engaging in heavy metal rituals.

Although all of the fans shared such commitment to heavy metal, their status and identity within the subculture, as well as the quality and characteristics of the subculture itself was dependent on control (both social and individual). This will now be discussed in more detail.

### **Subcultural control: Findings and discussion**

The major theme discussed here is control – it is used as an analytic lens from a figurational perspective to understand the socialisation and integration of heavy metal fans, the role of the subcultural code and the cathartic significance of the heavy metal rituals. Further, the role of control (both social and individual) will be considered in the context of how the subcultural hierarchy is constructed and subcultural capital is distributed within the scene. The analysis of the heavy metal figuration is separated into the following sections. First we will look at the significance of anger and aggression in the heavy metal scene, linking the fans need for emotional excitement to broader processes of civilising and routinisation. Following an analysis of how important rituals are controlled as a consequence of complex subcultural codes, we will explore how displays of individual control and restraint in subcultural practice are also crucial for attaining status and an important sense of heavy metal identity.

### *Heavy metal therapy: the quest for excitement*

After much neglect, emotions have become increasingly central in examination of consumer contexts. The centrality of anger and aggression in heavy metal subculture provides us with an opportunity to explore a broader spectrum of emotions in framing communal consumption experiences. Anger in the metal scene is mostly associated with the live performance rituals where fans aggressively dance and ‘mosh’ together – this will be discussed in greater detail later in this section. However, it is also evident in almost every other facet of the scene from the names of bands (e.g. ‘Hatebreed’), to song titles and lyrics (e.g. ‘Destroy Everything’). It is also the visual signals and the aesthetics that communicate the anger that is inherent in the scene. The fans wear T-shirts and jackets with words printed on them such as ‘no fucking slaves’ and ‘fuck you’. They wear morbid black colours and sport piercings and tattoos that symbolise the anti-establishment ethic of the scene. It is this portrayal of heavy metal at such a surface level that leads to it attracting controversy because of the potential dangers of it (see King, 1988; Lacourse et al., 2001), and at times ridicule because of how serious it seems to take itself (This is Spinal Tap, 1984). However, it is also the case that many of the participants became attached to the scene because of family problems, emotional difficulties and a sense of alienation. The anger and the aggression in the heavy metal scene are of great therapeutic use to the fans. Gordon describes how he uses the music to deal with anger and pressure:

You know [I was] always getting in trouble at school and it was sort of me against the world rebellion thing and I first started getting into music when my brother bought Nirvana's<sup>3</sup> Nevermind and before that I used to listen to whatever was on the radio or whatever like that and I didn't really give a shit about music before that but when he bought me or played Nirvana for me I was like this is pretty cool and you know the whole fucking mosh pit thing, make you go so mental and unleash the aggression that the daily world will put on you as a kid and hell still to this day the daily world puts a lot of pressure on me and I have to go out and blow out a lot of steam which I unleash at a mosh pit or at a gig headbanging and [roars]. (Gordon, DI, male, 23, unemployed)

Robert uses it in a similar fashion:

It [metal music] tells you not to worry about it [problems in life] just like you are going to fucking do it anyway, you are going to get over it... it is not like where it [the band] is going to whine... why me kind of stuff, it is just like don't fucking worry about it get your head up and start again. (Mark, DI, male, 19, student)

The figurationalist Cas Wouters (2007) argues that there has been an emancipation of emotions in that there is an increasing tolerance of foul language and public emotional displays, and this seems to be evident in heavy metal subculture. Sam (DI) reports using the music to get himself angry whilst doing weights in the gym. Michael (DI) explains how he sometimes uses the noise of heavy metal to distract him from negative

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<sup>3</sup> We are aware that Nirvana is not by definition Heavy Metal but this respondent was just using this particular album as an example of how he generally uses heavy metal music emotionally.

emotions. June (DI) felt a connection with heavy metal artists who also experienced elements of rejection and depression. The focus on angry emotions within heavy metal is particularly illuminating. For example, Ciara (DI) describes how engaging with the angry aesthetics of the scene heightens the cathartic effect of the music, demonstrating the positive use of anger in the subculture:

I would listen to Machine Head if I am angry cause that is such angry music, it sort of vents it and that would actually calm me down I would find. Recently or in the last year or whatever I would have found that like if I would be frustrated or whatever and I put on something really loud. (Ciara, DI, female, 19, student)

Elias and Dunning (2008) argue that the increasing routinisation of our industrialised society (a product of civilising processes) has created a greater need for leisure and emotional excitement, hence the development or 'sportisation' of previously violent and anarchic games (e.g. football and rugby) into highly structured and organised sports that offer an outlet for feeding an emotionally starved society, a product of the increasing social constraint towards self-restraint. Strangely, figurationalists have overlooked the relationship between music consumption and emotional catharsis, with the exception of Elias's (1993) biography of Mozart, which is more of an account of the changing role of the 'artist' within the context of broader social changes. Hence within this theoretical framework, we argue that the heavy metal fans are using the subculture to experience emotional excitement and catharsis, similar to the sport and leisure contexts that Elias

and Dunning focus on. Additionally, we argue that the import of anger and ‘negative’ emotions in subcultural participation heighten such excitement and experiences of catharsis in this context.

Central to this understanding is the concept of mimesis, in that the emotional experiences of the heavy metal fans replicate dangerous or exciting feelings. The music serves as a fantasy function which can counteract against the emotions they experience in their everyday non-leisure lives. The fans are in other words looking to experience a sense of the ‘primitive’ (Canniford and Karababa, 2012), a sense of anarchy and freedom. However, in order for the fans to experience such emotions, there has to be an element of control. We argue that the high level of control that is evident in the management of aggression within the heavy metal figuration is indicative of broader civilising processes. In the next section of this analysis the role of ‘control’ in facilitating the fantasy function of anger, aggression and excitement will be discussed in the context of data concerning the live scene and the enactment of heavy metal rituals.

#### *Heavy metal rituals: Controlled chaos*

The energy that the opening number brought to the crowd was so visible. The anticipation waiting for the band to come on stage could be heard verbally when they literally asked for the band. The small sound of silence that greeted the descent into darkness which signalled the bands arrival was quickly followed up with a ferocious collective roar which made the hairs at the back of my neck stand up ... I looked down



at the pit which had formed into a circle. There was a gap in between the circle that the fans took it in turn to run into and shoulder other fans... It was at this time that the singer shouted into the microphone "I want to see more of them fucking circle pits Dublin". The band then broke into an extended version of the chorus and I could see people crowd surfing. One man in particular was moving across the top of the crowd quickly and as he was passed into the front of the pit one of the bouncers reached in and batted him down with his hands before he got over the barrier that separated the stage and the pit... (Field notes, 28 February 2010, Machine Head, The Olympia, Dublin City Centre)

'Moshing' was the most common ritual experienced during the fieldwork. This occurs when fans jump into each other aggressively, typically during the breakdown of a fast paced heavy metal song as the first author found to his cost.

I was out on the dance floor when a particularly heavy song began. As the boy about eighteen, nineteen began to scream the opening lines everybody created a circle where people took it in turns to bump into each other. As a result of this I got an elbow in the face, but this didn't stop such behaviour as other people who got hit or pushed to the ground immediately jumped back into action smiling as they pushed into each other at a pace dictated by the music. (Field notes, 4 December 2009)

Such rituals are intrinsically tied to heavy metal, typifying the excitement, aggression and sometimes violent nature of the subculture that we indicate in the above extract. The participants all share war stories regarding injuries (e.g. broken bones, hearing

problems) they have received attending concerts, with Bill (interview) for example, unfortunate enough to have attended two separate events where fans died as a result of crushing. However, in the main, such incidents are extremely rare. Elias and Dunning (2008) place emphasis on the advancement of rules, regulation and commercial influence in facilitating 'controlled' environments for leisure activities. Goulding et al. (2009) makes brief reference to this, describing the marketplace influence of the security, DJs and promoters in developing a controlled environment in which 'clubbers' could 'lose' control. Similar findings are reported here in the case of the heavy metal scene. We paid particular attention to the role that security and the size/layout of the venue had on the fan experience. The bigger the gig/event was the more likely that fans would complain about marketplace factors diminishing their experiences. This was put down to high ticket prices, greater levels of seating as opposed to standing room in more contemporary venues, inexperienced fans who only attend large shows, the more prominent regulations regarding alcohol and rituals and in particular the increasing presence and interference of bouncers. They recalled many instances where moshing was interrupted or bouncers got too 'heavy-handed' with them. The participants believe that the bouncers at the larger events do not understand the rituals. Consequently, such bouncers possess less subcultural capital than other participants in the marketplace because of the diminishing effect of their interference on the heavy metal experience. Thomas (DI) argues that 'it is bad training on behalf of the security not realising it

[moshing] is part of the show'. In other words, they are expected to turn a blind eye to heavy metal rituals as they do in the smaller gigs – a 'knowing wink' as Goulding et al. (2009: 759) describe it:

The moshing is getting more aggressive than I previously noticed for this particular song as I see one person punching another in the shoulder and then throwing his shoulder up in the air. The man he punched spears him (runs into his chest head first) and lifts him over his shoulder ... the bouncers do nothing except when someone is crowd surfing and comes close to the barrier. In fact, the bouncer ... is banging his feet against the floor and clapping after each song. He, like the other bouncers, never turns around to watch the stage. (Fieldnotes, 28 February 2010)

It is the controlling influence of the subcultural code amongst heavy metal fans in conjunction with the relative impact (to varying degrees) of the marketplace controls that create spaces in which fans can express anger, display aggression and physicality in a figuration which allows for a 'controlled de-controlling of emotions' (Elias, 2008b: 27) to take place. Using an Eliasian approach, we perceive such marketplace actions in the context of the interdependencies that exist within the heavy metal figuration. The marketplace influencers that are identified here, and the producers and promoters of heavy metal music, are not in control by virtue of their positions, but only contingently in terms of the power ratio within the network of interdependencies that includes fans. If owners become more dependent on fans, as they can in some of the smaller venues,

then they are no longer in control and there is more emphasis on the fans to maintain control. In this analysis we will place more emphasis on the subcultural code and how the enactment of unique heavy metal rituals in heavy metal subcultural spaces is more representative of the deep complexity of the social codes embedded within the scene and the high level of social control and self-restraint that is needed to allow for the creation of spectacles that produce such high levels of emotional emancipation.

### *Code of the moshpit*

It is mental kind of describing it [mashing] you just run at each other, kind of shouldering each other, kind of pushing each other. It is almost like playing Gaelic [Irish form of football] or rugby or football sort of but generally you don't punch, you don't elbow, you don't go out to hit anyone... you are kind of going crazy but you are not trying to hurt... (Michael, interview, male, 19)

Collins (2009) argues that codes of behaviour make it easier for individuals to overcome the natural human fear of violence and aggression. In this case, heavy metal fans subscribe to a set of unique 'unwritten' rules (although they are written frequently in internet forums) that allow for the safe enactment of the aggressive rituals (see also O'Reilly and Doherty, 2006). For example, the participants describe a number of different details of the etiquette which include rules against spitting, punching, using elbows or trying to hurt anyone in any way. The main rule which every fan acknowledged was that if anybody falls over they have to be picked up straight away.

M: someone falls over you pick them up, you don't do anything stupid. It is almost like there are unwritten rules to it... You are jumping into each other and stuff but you are not kicking people throwing fists or anything like that (Mark, DI, male, 19, student)

Mark also describes how if someone breaks the rules and throws a punch the other metal fans will get together and throw this person out of the mosh pit or punish him with physical violence.

I: What if someone breaks these rules what happens?

M: Normally get fucked out, the lads will just grab you and throw you out. If they throw digs they will throw digs back at you. You will find out your place after that.

Other participants report similar instances of self-policing when the code is broken or the experience is interfered with. This reinforces the comradeship and solidarity of the subculture.

We have a brotherhood code you know. You can have the craic but make sure you are safe you know, so if someone falls over we will help them up and if we see someone is in a serious amount of trouble we will help them. (Gordon, male, 23, unemployed)

The etiquette extends to protecting and respecting the decisions of fans who do not want to take part in rituals which is often the case in bigger events where the code of the moshpit often becomes diluted because of a large number of fans who attend that are

not familiar with the etiquette that seasoned fans have internalised from regular participation at smaller events.

when I was in Marlay Park [a large park used for big concerts] it was a big enough circle, lads running around pushing each other and there is people there who don't want to mosh, you know wives and husbands and stuff and sometimes I would stand in front of them to try and take the brunt of other people, you know people don't enjoy it and are there just to watch the show and sometimes, not a barrier but just to stop people hitting them (John, DI, 18, student)

Unlike Collins (2009), we stress the importance of habitus in terms of the internalisation of the code as a form of second nature. In other words, the code is not completely tied to the specific social situation conducive to its enactment. It is linked to broader processes of socialisation and integration within the scene where fans learn about the subcultural codes from older fans. Such processes of integration lead to the challenging and evolution of rituals in the context of subcultural status games and hierarchical claims. Here, demonstration of control is not just paramount to ensuring the safe enactment of the rituals but crucial for displaying knowledge and at times transgressing subcultural norms for the purpose of subcultural capital. Kahn-Harris (2007: 44) maintains that the 'emphasis on control also manifests itself in an avoidance of the pit'. Gordon laughs at fans who do not know when the appropriate time to mosh is:

These Polish ‘meatheads’, as I like to call them, were at this black doom metal gig and you know that is not music to mosh to and anyway they are there playing really slow, depressing but good metal music and then they are there going [roars] and just the two of them and they kept bumping into people and I was there going... just looking at them going, fuck off like. (Gordon, DI, male, 23)

As indicated, heavy metal subculture and in particular the live event rituals, rather than signifying chaos and uncivilised disorder, instead demonstrate qualities of control both on the part of the consumers and the producers within the subculture. Although diminishing standards in etiquette and manners appear to contradict the central components of Elias’s theory and seem to be indicative of some sort of de-civilising process, this is not the case (Mennell, 1990). Wouters (2007) argues that the relaxation of standards in fact calls for an increase in one’s self control in what is referred to as the process of informalisation. Wouters maintains that the growing influence of the lower classes in the twentieth century has led to their looser and more informal manners being incorporated throughout society. Kilminster (2008) has examined counter-culture behaviour and argues that subcultures that have emerged in recent times have sought to differentiate themselves as the interdependencies between social classes increased. Consequently, subcultures such as mods, punks and heavy metal developed and distinguished themselves through seemingly unusual modes of behaviour, music, style and consumption patterns. These alternative, experimental and counter-cultural modes

of behaviour do not represent the loss of self-control, but in fact call for individuals to develop a more differentiated and flexible self-restraint in a social structure characterised by complex webs of social interdependencies. The figuration of the scene requires the restraint of an individual's emotions and the incorporation and adaptation of a social code that is continuously evolving. Through demonstrating knowledge of heavy metal rituals and control in enactment, fans can gain respect within the community and accumulate subcultural capital. Kahn-Harris (2007: 43) refers to this as 'bodily transgression'. Although previous consumer culture research has connected knowledge and the fluidity of codes and rituals to concepts such as subcultural capital and hierarchy, there has been a lack of emphasis on control. We argue that the management of aggression in this figuration is indicative of wider civilising processes.

#### *Translating scene expectations into subcultural capital*

Controlling one's body and emotions in the heat of the mosh pit is just one aspect of the complex subcultural code. There are also a number of scene expectations that the respondents incorporate into their fandom which are conducive to subcultural capital. The fans are socialised into the scene typically through the media and other fans that introduce them to popular and commercially successful heavy metal bands (e.g. Metallica, Slayer and Megadeth). These bands serve as an introduction to more 'extreme' types of metal and there is a general expectation within the subculture that to



be a true metal fan you must be knowledgeable about these bands. Sam describes literally training himself to appreciate the music:

I didn't like the music initially. It used to give me a headache. Two tracks [and] I would get a headache. I could not bring myself to listen to heavy metal for extended periods of time. I really had to train myself, I will be honest. Initially I would train myself to like what I was claiming to like, but that training did work and I think it was for the better. I am glad that now that is perhaps the only music I can really listen to. I have trained myself to understand the complexity that is in the music. It's just too complex; it's not like a simple tune like 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star'. (Sam, interview, male, 31)

As more and more fans learn about the scene via new forms of media technology and processes of technisation (Elias, 2008c), chains of interdependencies lengthen within the heavy metal figuration and the language, visuals, rituals and different forms of music are ingrained in the scene, becoming acceptable modes of behaviour and expectations that fans aspire to. Consequently, fans look to differentiate themselves from an increasingly integrated heavy metal scene. They attain subcultural capital from affiliating themselves with and displaying knowledge of more obscure or extreme forms of heavy metal, consequently transgressing the scene further (Kahn-Harris, 2007) and creating new modes of behaviour which again require an advanced means of flexibility on the part of the individual (Wouters, 2007):

I think it is interesting cause with music, especially listening to Metallica, Megadeth, it gets really boring, and it is the same stuff over and over again. When you are fifteen

you hear it for the first time, you think it is the most amazing thing in the world and you grow up you think it is kind of the same thing... [referring to extreme metal] but with the concepts and the stuff like that, it is not just about listening to guitar or singing. It is about listening to the vocals and how everything comes together and the ideas behind it gets you thinking. All that sort of stuff makes it interesting. You are able to read into it, you are able to listen to it a few different times, look for things, so it makes it accessible to me for one thing and also makes it interesting cause every time you listen to it you find something new and you can then discuss it with people as well. (Mark, DI, male, 19, student)

Although demonstrating a distinct knowledge of heavy metal does not translate to cultural capital outside the constraints of the heavy metal scene because of the ridicule it attracts, the fans still distinguish themselves from others through demonstrating an almost elite understanding and unique relationship with the music.

There are too many things going on at the same time so you need to have a very fine ear to work out what this person is trying to say, what this music is trying to do. And it would take a bit of training. It's like trying to listen to very complex English classical, not everyone likes, and you need to have a certain ear for it. (Sam, DI, male, 31)

Elias (1991) observes how we use symbols to orientate ourselves and identify our relationship with the world. The importance of understanding such 'symbols' within the heavy metal subculture is evident in something as complex as how the fans ironically mock 'poseurs' or 'headbangers' for taking the scene too seriously, for example,

expressing interest in some of the satanic themes of the music. It is also evident in something as simple as actually accessing and consuming the music. For example, the fans in this study highlight the disparity between the ways in which they consume the traditional heavy metal scene and the more 'underground' scene with Mark (DI, male, 19, student) arguing that he only illegally downloads music from the 'bigger' metal bands, emphasising that he supports local bands by buying their albums. Gordon and Neil (DI) also describe buying T-shirts and merchandise to make up for the loss of earnings that their favourite bands encounter, with Neil actually going to the trouble of paying his favourite band in person for downloading all their albums illegally. This is a story that he tells on three separate occasions in the field and in interview, where he walked up to the singer of the band and gave him money for all their music he had illegally downloaded.

Consequently, it seems that developing a high level of self-steering is conducive to status and subcultural capital within the heavy metal subculture. Although Bowen et al. (2012) argue that the similarities between Bourdieu and Elias (their shared affinity for concepts concerning habitus, power/capital and figuration/field) have been overlooked, one of the crucial differences, according to Bowen et al., is the fact that Bourdieu undervalued the significance of self-regulation and bodily control in his analysis of how 'capital' is distributed, particularly in his work on sport and leisure. Elias however saw that 'in sports as well as in many other fields, emotional-bodily self-control tends to

operate as the most fundamental power resource and as a prerequisite to the sedimentation of all kinds of abilities and forms of knowledge' (Bowen et al., 2012: 84). Of course, acknowledging the role of capital and status is nothing new in consumer research, particularly studies that focus on the intricacies of consumer communities or tribes, many of them drawing from Bourdieu and Thornton for instance (see Holt, 1998; Kates, 2002). What makes using the figurational context in this regard unique is how it allows us to understand how the demarcations of the heavy metal figuration are developed, how they evolve within the constructs of the emotional (the quest for excitement) and identification (the quest for subcultural capital) requirements of its participants, and what this tells us about the nature of control (individual and social) in facilitating status in such communities.

### **Concluding remarks**

Figurational sociology is used in this paper as a theoretical framework to provide insights into heavy metal subculture and broader studies of consumer communities. In particular, we focused on control as an analytic lens in which to illuminate heavy metal subcultural behaviour. The fans are attracted to the heavy metal scene because of the spaces it provides (both individual and social) for fans to develop and release emotional tension. The emphasis on anger and aggression as themes within heavy metal facilitates a particularly enjoyable cathartic experience that helps fans to deal with problems they

may encounter in their everyday lives – a product of broader civilising processes (Elias and Dunning, 2008). Although it is the seemingly chaotic and emancipatory aspects of the subculture (particularly the rituals) that attract the fans, and have also led to much controversy and criticism, such activity is subject to control, both from marketplace controls (see Goulding et al. 2009) and subcultural codes (the ‘unwritten rules’). In short, this research differs from previous subculture/consumer communities’ research in that it theorises such control within wider figurations and consequently we explain the management of aggression in such contexts as an indicator of civilising processes.

In addition to demonstrating the significance of the subcultural codes for facilitating the ‘controlled de-controlling of emotions’, we established the importance of self-steering in shaping subcultural socialisation, hierarchy, identity and status within heavy metal figurations. Such control is evident in the development and advancement of complex social codes, a product of increasing integration within the scene and broadening subcultural expectations that result from status games. This shows that such forms of behaviour are not ‘chaotic’ or ‘uncivilised’ as heavy metal is so commonly accused of being, but an example of how informal modes of behaviour can be actually demonstrative of advanced forms of subcultural control that are connected to wider social and historical processes. Such findings and emphasis on the socio-historical manifestations of control and power can contribute to contemporary ‘post-subcultural’

accounts of consumer communities and the broader CCT framework – which is still in its relative infancy (Thompson et al., 2013).

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