Heavy Metal Figurations: Civilising Processes and the ‘Controlled De-Controlling’ of Emotions
Gary Sinclair, Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland

This paper examines the Irish heavy metal scene, adapting Elias’s figurational sociology as a resource. Following an extended qualitative study of the different ‘fan’ spaces, I examine the role that ‘control’ (individual and collective) plays in shaping the emotional experience, heavy metal subcultural hierarchies and the distribution of subcultural capital.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1014003/volumes/v10e/E-10

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Heavy Metal Figurations: Civilising Processes and the ‘Controlled de-controlling’ of Emotions
Gary Sinclair, University of Stirling*

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
This paper examines the Irish heavy metal scene. Despite the longevity and cultural relevance of heavy metal subculture on a global scale (see Walser, 1993; Weinstein, 2000; Wallach et al., 2011), it has been noticeably absent as a subject of study in consumer research. This is relevant when we consider the growing emphasis in consumer research, particularly in Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), on the ‘sociocultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption’ (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: 868). Subcultures, or ‘subcultures of consumption’ (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) have been particularly beneficial for researchers who have found that they ‘provide influential meanings and practices that structure consumers’ identities, actions and relationships’ (Kozinets, 2001: 67).

Recently, Maffesoli’s (1996) neo-tribal framework has been adapted to contexts concerning consumer communities, which address some of the problematic aspects of the traditional Birmingham subcultural model, whilst illuminating the fluid, sociable, creative and emancipatory nature of such communities (see Goulding et al., 2002; Goulding et al., 2009). It is argued in this paper, that heavy metal has been overlooked as a context within this framework because it fails to empirically fit within the constraints of the consumer tribe model.

This also reflects some of the broader challenges that CCT has faced. This, for the most part, relates to what is perceived to be an overemphasis on the agentic qualities of consumer communities, at the expense of incorporating broader historical or structural processes to enhance explanations of consumer behaviour. Such a theoretical impasse has been widely acknowledged in cultural studies, in addition to CCT research (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). I argue that Elias’s (2000) figurational sociology can be used to address such an issue and enhance explanations of consumer communities – in this case the Irish heavy metal scene. Elias outlines the specific, but interrelated trajectories of different nations and how certain social processes (e.g. technisation, feudalisation, industrialisation and sportisation) combined with developments in the individual psyche, transform the nature and scope of social relations. This framework is used to generate insights into the ways in which what are taken as forms of agency are produced by and produce agency. I articulate how this perspective, relatively unexploited in previous consumer research, despite its status in the field of sociology, can be incorporated into the broader CCT framework, a relatively new discipline in which the boundaries are still being constructed.

Elias’s focus on civilising processes and the importance of self-restraint and self-steering in social life makes heavy metal a particularly interesting context in which to apply the figurational lens. Heavy metal has been described as ‘uncivilised’, ‘violent’ and ‘immoral’ (see Gore, 1987; King, 1988; Shuker, 2001). This is a consequence of its association with Satanic and transgressive or ‘extreme’ themes (Kahn-Harris, 2007) and the prevalence of aggressive (and at times violent) rituals such as headbanging, crowd-surfing and moshing (Riches, 2011). I position the behaviour of heavy metal fans within the context of broader civilising processes, focusing in particular on the emergence of Irish consumer culture (Dolan, 2009a, 2009b), technisation (Elias and Dunning, 2008) and sportisation processes. I connect the historical positioning of heavy metal subculture with data collected from the Irish heavy metal scene, drawn from over two years of interviews, participant observation of live gigs and observation of specialised fan forums. I address some of the shortcomings of previous figurational research through documenting the practicalities of incorporating the Eliasian methodological approach of a ‘detour via detachment’. This is particularly relevant considering the unusual position I take on as an ‘outsider-participant’, differing from the predominant ‘insider’ accounts that usually emerge from heavy metal subcultural fan spaces.

In opposition to the traditional view of heavy metal rituals as anarchic or chaotic, I explain how such fan practices are controlled through a combination of evolving subcultural codes, the actions of other scene stakeholders (e.g., musicians) and the influence of marketplace resources. This complex figuration allows for the ‘controlled de-controlling’ of emotions (Elias, 2008) to take place, demonstrating how the therapeutic and cathartic qualities of such rituals are heightened through the expression of anger. Additionally, I explain how the controlling nature of the subcultural code varies in different fan spaces (i.e., virtual spaces) and connect the seemingly ‘unrestrained’ or ‘de-civilising’ behaviour of the heavy metal fans in such virtual spaces to the increasingly regulated and rationalised ‘live’ or ‘face-to-face’ scene.

The theme of control is extended further to illustrate how fans are socialised into the subculture, how heavy metal hierarchy is constructed and subcultural capital is distributed throughout the Irish metal community. Although previous post-subcultural and CCT frameworks (e.g., Thornton, 1995; Kates, 2002; Brownlie et al., 2007) have been used as a resource to explain the fluidity and transitory nature of consumer communities, the issue of control (both individual and collective) has been overlooked, particularly in how it relates to the nature of social relationships and the distribution of subcultural capital within the scene. This is where figurational explanations differ; there is more emphasis on how structures of control inform social relationships, and consequently how evolving social codes and widening/narrowing chains of interdependencies inform such structures.

REFERENCES


