Social Media, Gender, and Cancel Culture in The Punk Scene

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ABSTRACT

SOCIAL MEDIA, GENDER, AND CANCEL CULTURE IN THE PUNK SCENE

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This thesis intends to examine the technological, political, and social dynamics surrounding the cancelation of musicians within the punk scene, specifically, modern Bay Area punk band, SWMRS. The technological dynamics involve the internet, networked publics, and digital politics. The social dynamics are not separate from sociality facilitated by social media and the networks they create. The politics of this context involves gender and the struggle over women’s agency to fight against sexual abuse and the social injustice it perpetuates. Because this thesis is interested in these issues within the context of popular music, it draws on the work on music scenes. This thesis examines the disruption caused in the punk scene when notable figures within it fail to maintain the personas they perpetuate.

22-year-old Joey Armstrong entered a romantic relationship with 16-year-old Lydia Night, frontwoman of the Regrettes. Night suffered sexual coercion, manipulation, and emotional abuse at the hands of Armstrong, and SWMRS enabled it. The #MeToo movement and cancel culture have served as the conduit both for Lydia Night to come forward with her story, but to dismantle SWMRS platform, to prevent them from harming others.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: SWMRS AND LYDIA NIGHT

Joey Armstrong, son of Green Day front man Billie Joe Armstrong, had been one of my long-time favorite musicians. Joey Armstrong was the drummer for the modern Bay Area punk band, SWMRS, who was incrementally gaining more attention. I attended numerous concerts of theirs in small, grimy venues to show support for them. The band perpetuated a very supportive environment for their fans and the attendees of their shows. In fact, a large part of their image was based on the members’ activism in social justice. SWMRS merchandise profits were often donated to charitable organizations, including the Black Lives Matter movement. Despite the safe and progressive environment that SWMRS promoted, their actions behind closed doors unfortunately did not match.

In early 2017, Armstrong reached out to Lydia Night via Instagram as he expressed an interest in her band, The Regrettes. Although Night found it odd that Armstrong only contacted and followed her as opposed to the rest of the band, she felt she would be cheating herself and her band by not jumping on the opportunity. Since SWMRS was a highly respected member of the punk scene, the prospect of being included in a tour of theirs was a life and career changing chance. Night was only 16 at the time, and Armstrong was 22 (Neale, 2022). The relationship between the two progressed into a romantic relationship, where Night contends, she suffered emotional and sexual abuse at the hands of Armstrong. Following a slew of sexual abuse allegations that were arising in the punk scene, SWMRS posted a public statement that
denounced this behavior. The now deleted statement reinforced unity and equality for all and doubled down on the narrative that at SWMRS shows are safe and welcoming. Shortly after SWMRS posted their statement on Twitter, Lydia Night came forward with a statement of her own. The statement detailed her traumatic experience with Armstrong. “Because of our age difference, Joey would continually ask me to keep our relationship as hidden as possible and I did” (Night, 2020). Night felt compelled to share her experience with Armstrong as the statement that SWMRS released was ingenuine. “Yesterday, my abuser Joey Armstrong and his band SWMRS released an unbelievably hypocritical statement on social media that has pushed me to publicly share my story. This band’s delusional positioning of themselves as woke feminists is not only triggering for me as a victim but is complete bullshit and needs to be called out” (Night, 2020).

Once the news broke about SWMRS the subject of “canceled” musicians seemed to loom the punk scene on Twitter. A Google spreadsheet began to circulate, recounting bands with problematic members and their status as musicians/bands (e.g.: “Still touring”, “Disbanded”). SWMRS was one of many bands in the scene to be added to this document. The spreadsheet was alarming to me, as there were several bands on it that I had still listened to regularly. However, I’d never heard of any controversy surrounding the names. As an active participant in the punk and alternative scene, learning of abuse allegations that have transpired whilst I was actively endorsing and supporting the music was disheartening. I am not alone in removing artists from my respective streaming platform upon learning that they have done something heinous. I was devastated to remove SWMRS’ music from my Apple Music library as they had been held to a high regard just as Green Day has been for many years. I attended the “Berkeley’s on Fire” Tour
in Chicago in 2019, the tour that the Regrettes and SWMRS ventured upon together. I had no clue what was occurring behind closed doors during this tour. Akin to myself, Twitter users within the punk and alternative scene expressed their disdain for Joey Armstrong.

This research speaks to those who have trouble separating the art from the artist whilst navigating the trouble that arises when the musician’s actions behind the scenes and through musical context conflict with their image and message. It can be observed that separating the art from the artist within the modern rock and punk scene is often more difficult than any other form of media. For instance, film directors who have cemented their work amongst the “classics” have often transcended cultural criticism. It is certainly easier to consume popular culture that was created by a figure whose face is absent from the content. However, musicians are the face of their craft and their brand. Musicians attribute most of their success to the music scenes that built them up and offered their prolonged support.

This thesis will address several facets of music scenes, gender, cancel culture, and affective publics. I will investigate the disruption in the punk scene that is caused once conflict ensues, specifically, sexual misconduct. Once conflict arises within the music scene, fans take to social media to express their disdain and collective condemning of the alleged abuser. The circumstances regarding SWMRS and Lydia Knight have nuances that set them apart from others. However, this study will illustrate the agency and democratic power that digital fandoms hold; a power that has been curated and perpetuated by social media platforms. It is important to make sense of this phenomenon, as it is an increasing and prevailing issue in the digital world.

In Chapter 2, I will review the existing literature regarding music tastes. This basis is pertinent to highlighting the draw that audiences have to music, and therefore, musical
communities. I will further examine the elements of the rock and punk genres that listeners are drawn to. I argue that musical composition is just one of the facets in creating and maintaining a fanbase. Fanbases and audience reflect the set of values that are perpetuated by the genres. The foundational values that were held by the creators of rock and punk are maintained by their contributors. Those contributors are both the musicians who create the music and the audiences they attract.

After setting the basis for music tastes, I will review the existing literature on music scenes (both physical and virtual) and digital fandoms. The musical communities created by musicians and fandoms can be traced back to their music tastes and perpetuated by the scenes they create organically. I argue that music scenes are largely responsible for the prolonged success of the musicians and bands within them. Similarly, music scenes are also responsible for a musician’s reputation in that they police their behaviors. Music scenes make collective decisions to reprimand a musician that does not adequately perpetuate the values that the genres maintain. By examining the historical roots of the punk genre, I will further elaborate on the ways the punk scene actively works to maintain those values.

I will address the gender and power dynamics that have prevailed in the punk scene. I argue that social media have contributed to music scenes as audiences have created a more democratic space that has been perpetuated by these platforms. The #MeToo movement and “Cancel Culture” have granted agency and power to the formerly powerless. Social media have inadvertently cultivated a platform for audiences to hold their idols accountable for problematic behavior. In contrast, social media have afforded users the platform to show support to victims on a large scale.
In Chapter 3, I will establish my methodology for examining the research questions that arise from the review of literature. In Chapter 4, I will present all necessary data to properly address these questions. I will analyze the sentiments publicized by members of the punk scene to garner an understanding of their affective and emotional responses. This thesis is primarily interested in defining music scenes, social media’s contribution to them, and the ways that the punk scene has been impacted by the “SWMRS Incident”.

Upon presenting and analyzing the necessary data for answering the research questions, this thesis will conclude in Chapter 5 by discussing the implications of the SWMRS controversy. The SWMRS controversy is one of many controversies that have arisen in the punk scene, and by analyzing all its functions and contributors, it will garner an understanding for the larger issues. SWMRS are a prime example of a band that had all of the assets necessary for glimmering success with the support of the punk scene, yet their story does not end as such. This thesis will conclude by drawing attention to the ways the SWMRS controversy is not an isolated incident and the necessary reform that the punk scene needs to prevent further abuse of power.
CHAPTER 2

MUSICAL SCENES, GENDER, CANCEL CULTURE, AFFECTIVE PUBLIC

Music Matters

To better understand what draws music listeners to music scenes and the cultural values that are upheld by music fans, one must first recognize what pulls them to music in the first place. Music is one of the most influential and thought-provoking forms of media, and one cannot become a part of a music scene without first recognizing music that they find pleasurable, rewarding, and entertaining. New media scholars have offered insight into the cultural significance of popular music, as well as its ubiquitous presence in the marketplace of ideas. I will begin this section by outlining music creation and music appreciation, as to provide the foundation for how music listeners are drawn to punk, specifically.

Gasser (2019) states, “I have always been prone to want to see the bigger picture, the story behind the story, the history that gives rise to the present reality” (p. 11). Byrne (2017) states that “context largely determines what is written, painted, sculpted, sung, or performed” (p. 13). In other words, music creation is done with the intended audience at the forefront in specific social and cultural milieus. David Hesmondhalgh (2013) asserts that music often feels intensely and emotionally linked to the private self (p. 1). In addition, he contends that music is often the basis of collective, public experiences (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p. 2). Whether this is through live performances or private consumption, music unites people by the bond created by shared resonance. The emotional responses that are invoked by hearing a song are amplified as we
observe others experiencing the same emotions. Music triggers strong emotional and affective responses in people as they seek and discover deeper meaning within the strings of text and rhythms. (Bennett and Peterson, 2004; Hesmondhalgh, 2013).

Schäfer and Sedlmeier (2010) address the factors that have an impact on music preference as follows: cognitive factors such as communication and self-reflection, music’s ability to express, induce, and change emotion, musical affect, and music’s link to personal identity, music preferences, music characteristics, and music’s influence. Schäfer and Sedlmeier (2010) found that, “it appears that all the functions of music identified above are important predictors for music preference. This indicates that the use of music is a very important aspect of music listening and cannot be neglected when constructing a model of music preference” (p. 279). Additionally, they found that some factors are more important to some subjects than to others. For example, adolescents find that music shapes their identity expression. Musical affect caused by listeners’ favorite music was significant for the development of music preference (Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Schäfer and Sedlmeier, 2010).

Nolan Gasser (2019) discusses the elements of music that attracts listeners: “Musical taste is the full mix of musical and cultural dimensions—from the macro level of genre, style, and era to the micro level of distinct musicological attributes—that at any given moment and in any particular configuration correspond to an individual’s liking and appreciation” (p. 37). This definition of musical tastes asserts that music fans not only enjoy music at face value, but music fans also adhere their cultural identity and sense of self to their musical tastes. This supports the notion that collective enjoyment of music draws listeners together and contributes to a musical scene (Byrne, 2017; Hodgkinson, 2013; Straw, 1991). Songs that match our musical taste inspire
a level of appreciation that triggers deeper emotional connection and admiration (Gasser, 2019). This contributes to the notion that musical scenes are built on relatability to one another and the sense of community amongst like-minded music listeners.

Frith (1996) defines homology as the assumption that musical forms are an expression and representation of a social groups’ values. Homology is presumed to be present in genres such as punk and heavy metal, as the genres tend to bleed into social identity, style, etc. However, Frith (1996) questions the idea of homology in one sense. Frith (1996) asserts that identity is mobile, a process not a thing, a becoming not a being. Frith (1996) elaborates, “It is not that social groups agree on values which are then expressed in their cultural activities (the assumption of the homology models) but that they only get to know themselves as groups (as a particular organization of individual and social interests, of sameness and difference) through cultural activity, through aesthetic judgement. Making music isn't a way of expressing ideas; it is a way of living them” (p. 111).

Music is similar to identity in that it is both performance and a story, describing the social in the individual and vice versa. Social groups get to know each other as groups and through aesthetic judgment. Thus, it is not that social identities are based on values expressed through music. It’s the other way around; social groups are formed based on shared musical activities. Additionally, performers give listeners their perspective on the world and listeners make sense of it. Thus, the use of music as the aesthetic process allows us to discover ourselves by forging our identities to others. Amidst this, we “are drawn, haphazardly, into emotional alliances with the performers and with the performers’ other fans” (Frith, 1996. p. 121). Identity is ultimately a sense of ritual, and music is a large part of this ritual. Therefore, as Hesmondhalgh (2013)
contends, “Musical affect emphasizes its value in enriching people’s lives, and in particular how people might live their lives together” (p. 12). The value that audiences hold in their musical tastes and their musical identities reflect that of the musicians who provide it for them.

Music can be observed and understood in many ways, but I will use Byrne (2017), Hesmondhalgh (2013), and Gasser’s (2019) approaches to music creation and music appreciation as the basis for understanding punk music fans. Every music listener is unique, however, for the purpose of this research, I will be primarily focused on punk and punk subgenres. SWMRS emerged from a very supportive punk scene who was highly responsible for their success. It is important to analyze their audiences’ collective attitudes and identities, as it contextualizes the strong emotional responses linked to SWMRS cancelation, which will be expanded upon later.

Regarding rock music in particular, Gasser (2019) asserts that it is fueled by authenticity and originality and perpetuates the “I don’t give a shit if you like me or not!” attitude (p. 1052). Rock music attaches itself to the rebellious and reckless teens who embraced their power and manic fury. As he argues, “Playing simple, hard-driving songs in an old, beat-up garage. This ‘ur-rock’ ushered forth a fresh mantra about disturbance, race, sex, and new youthful power” (Glasser, 2019, p. 552). This argument is the backbone of the image on which SWMRS built their identity. These aspects of what draws listeners to punk and rock are important in understanding the values that have prevailed from Green Day to SWMRS.

Hesmondhalgh (2013) discusses sex and rock and roll, stating that they are both linked to rebellion and transgression (p. 57). It is argued that punk holds the same core principles of rock and roll, but punk incorporates greater emphasis on rebellion and sexual politics. Early depictions of punk relied heavily on the “telling it like it is” attitude, and at times rejected the
hippie sensitivity and feminist agendas (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p. 63). Although punk aimed to reject a lot of the outdated attitudes within rock, much of punk was still misogynist. This style of music was androgynous and perpetuated unfiltered emotion. These unfiltered emotions show themselves not only in the lyrics, but through punk musicians’ behavior in the public and private domains.

**Local and Translocal Musical Scenes**

Collective enjoyment for music perpetuates community and togetherness (Frith, 1996; Gasser, 2019; Hesmondhalgh, 2013). Music listeners will unify in audiences of concert halls and online forums to extend support for their favorite musicians. Alternatively, music reflects the inner identities and outward expression (Gasser, 2019; Shäfer and Sedlmeier, 2010). Musical scenes take form in both the physical and virtual spaces and are perpetuated by the active participants, whether the participants are the music creators or those singing their melodies back to them. Participation in music scenes take music listening a step further than casual listening. Those engaged in musical scenes yearn for a deeper connection with the creators of the music that fuels morning coffee, long drives, and restless nights. There is something intimate between musician and listener, as musicians provide the soundtrack of our lives. Musicians recognize that their music would see no stage if it weren’t for their respective scene’s support. In this section, I investigate musical scenes as they take place in physical spaces. Specifically, I will discuss musical scenes within the punk and alternative genres.

Musical scenes began taking notable form in the mid 1960’s due to the emergence of subcultures and the increasing association between style and acts of triumph or rebellion.
(Hebdige, 1981, pp. 2-3). While the definition for subculture is widely disputed, Hebdige (1981) argues that style can be observed as the most prominent facet. As an outward expression of the private identity, the construction of one’s style is reflected through objects that hold symbolic and idyllic significance (Hebdige, 1981). Music and style became the vessel through which oppressed identities could express disdain for the oppressor. “The bonds which link white youth cultures to the black urban working class have long been recognized by commentators on the American popular music scene” (Hebdige, 1981, p. 46). In historical contexts, jazz and rock and roll were the primary outlet for expressing rebellion, sorrow, and triumph. For the voices of the oppressed to be heard by the masses, it had to be through music. These musical forms expressed and represented the values held by the oppressed, captured by Frith’s (1996) definition of homology.

The musical scene is an environment that perpetuates unity or commonalities through music and its facilitation of expressiveness (Straw, 1991). Straw (1991) elaborates, “Here, the articulatory force of specific musical practices has often displaced the integrity of cultural communities as the guarantee of music’s meaningfulness, but one may still find a privileging of the geographically local as guarantee of the historical continuity of musical styles” (p. 369). In studying popular music, it is also important to study the communities that emerge from within. Straw (1991) continues, “They invite an attention to the distinctive logics of change and forms of valorization characteristic of different musical practices, as these are disseminated through their respective cultural communities and institutional sites” (p. 369). The cultural and societal practices and norms that accompany each genre often evolves as time passes, and the rock genres are not an exception to this. The boundaries that genre and musical form create between people
often contribute to gender, class, and racial norms. Straw (1991) expands on this by asserting “The drawing and enforcing of boundaries between musical forms, the marking of racial, class-based and gender differences, and the maintenance of lines of communication between dispersed cultural communities are all central to the elaboration of musical meaning and value” (p. 372).

Music is one of the powerful forces that ties people together and creates social identities, akin to the bonds created from various forms of media.

In addition to creating social identity building, Straw (1991) also discusses the fulfillment derived from music. “The sense of purpose articulated within a musical community normally depends on an affective link between two terms: contemporary musical practices, on the one hand, and the musical heritage which is seen to render this contemporary activity appropriate to a given context” (Straw, 1991, p. 373). Straw’s (1991) description of a music scene asserts that those involved bond through not only their appreciation for the music, but for the relevance the contexts have to their own lives. Building “musical alliances” and “drawing musical boundaries” take place organically and thus create scenes (Straw, 1991). Of course, one must enjoy the musical stylings of a genre to listen to it. However, the expressions of emotion traced through the lyrics and composition speak to audiences in a manner that is deeper than the surface. A song that is written in sorrow can resonate with audiences as it applies to their own lives. Music listeners build idealized perceptions of their favorite musicians through the lyrics they project. It is in this way that musicians and composers establish their relatability with audiences, by drawing attention to their commonalities. People take pride in, and will often act in defense of, the music they feel aligns with their identity, as attacks on the scene are viewed as attacks on the self.
To conceptualize the punk scene is often difficult as there is no unchanging, static musical form that could be defined as such. However, Griffin (2012) defines the term “scene” as the “collective identity, ideology, and activity at different scales, including both the locally specific context as well as the broader international subculture of DIY punk” (p. 67). While the true definition of punk is elusive, it is generally accepted that the subculture aims to reject oppressive and exclusive aspects of the mainstream, often relating to the government or other capitalistic hierarchies. David Byrne (2017) addresses “that special moment when a creative flowering seems to issue forth from a social nexus—a clump of galleries, a neighborhood, or a bar that doubles as a music club” (p. 326). There is no set of rules that uphold or reinforce music scenes, they appear and arise organically (Byrne, 2017). Whilst not dependent on inspiration and creativity in totality, it does assist and encourage a community.

Byrne (2017) reiterates that there should be spaces for musicians and artists to congregate and share their own material; these spaces inadvertently become music scenes. The support of one another is imperative to the morale and success of the scene. The scene must also be unique in nature, providing a sense of alienation from the prevailing music scene (Byrne, 2017). To successfully emerge as an individual scene, there must be an alternative offered that other scenes cannot provide. Eventually, music participants will discover that they don’t feel quite right anywhere else. Byrne (2017) also addresses the social aspects of the music scene, which are imperative to this study. There must be social transparency, “diva” behavior is not tolerated, and those who feel “holier than thou” have no place in an accepting scene (Byrne, 2017, pp. 688-689). Most importantly, scenes are more successful if there is unity and collective agreement to “ignore the band when necessary” (Byrne, 2017, p. 680). This speaks to the unifying bond held
by music scenes, that no band, no matter how glorious, is exempt from being ostracized due to problematic behavior. For this reason, it is even more devastating when a beloved musician disrupts the persona they have painted to the public.

**Virtual Music Scenes with the Support of Social Media**

While music scenes originated in physical spaces, I will argue that social media contribute to virtual music scenes through their use of recommendations, or algorithms. Stefania Milan (2015) identifies the function of algorithms on social media as follows: “These algorithms profile users on the basis of their behavior and select, rank, and personalize content according to user data” (p. 3). I will use Milan’s (2015) contextualization of the algorithm to aide in the understanding of the social media mechanism in place. Algorithms are integrated into social media platforms, streaming platforms, and even web browsers. Algorithms guide users to personalized content that adheres to their interest. In the era of personalized media, the integration of algorithms on social media platforms contribute to both creating and disrupting music scenes. By recommending topics and other users with similar interests, users are encouraged and enticed to engage. From what is known about music scenes, cancel culture, and music streaming services use of the algorithm, one may observe a direct relationship between artist cancelation and the disruption of a music scene. The algorithm can work to both garner support for an artist or completely remove them from view. As music has increasingly moved to the ease of access given by digital consumption, it is important to consider the power the algorithm has over the artist and their community. However, for this research, I will only be focusing on the algorithmic functions that are motivated by user action on social media platforms.
Personalized media have dissolved the mass and moved society into the direction of individual media consumers (Mobasher, 2007; Eriksson et al. 2019; Prey, 2018). As technology has progressed, it has personalized entertainment to every consumer to adhere to distinct tastes and predilections. Data that is aggregated and stored will profile and categorize users to promote content that they are likely to interact with. However, “the individual is not so much revealed as constructed by his or her data” (Prey, 2018). People are complex and everchanging, and one’s digital dossier is not conducive of their collective identity. Moreover, “recommendation services are committing the cardinal sin of reification: reifying both the subject and the object of media consumption” (Prey, 2018). In other words, while it is true that all internet activity is forever, subjects and contexts are not absolute.

Although social networks have increasingly aimed to personalize content for users, this individualization has led to increased social discourse. Scholars have observed that social media have become “curators of public discourse” (Gillespie, 2010, p. 347), “producers of sociality” (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 57), and they therefore “shape collective action” (Milan, 2015, p. 1). The social media posts made by both SWMRS and Lydia Knight in the summer of 2020 garnered instant virality amongst the community, resulting in a wider audience. Aside from SWMRS’s established popularity in the punk scene, the group has familial ties to the esteemed punk-rock band Green Day. Therefore, since recommendation systems work to highlight relevant content, any active member of the modern punk/rock scene is likely aware of the SWMRS and Lydia Knight incident. Social media are not only the platform for which public discourse may occur, rather, they also act as a curator by recommending topics relevant to users (Gillespie, 2010).
James Hodgkinson (2004) asserts that “the virtual scene of post-rock is discursively created in music fanzines” (p. 221). Hodgkinson (2004) discusses the origination of “post-rock” and where virtual music scenes have been conceived through shared discourses and mutual post-rock influences online. This scene is described by Hodgkinson (2004) as “translocal”, local variations of a global form as it spreads across cities such as Chicago and Detroit but culminated together through shared music labels and festivals. “The concept of scene is approached then as one created through discourse, where shared use of language about music serves itself to construct a musical community (collaboration made possible by a sense of musical community only arising once the virtual scene of post-rock had been discursively constructed)” (Hodgkinson, 2004, p. 221). Hodgkinson (2004) further describes those involved in the post-rock scene as those who are enthusiastic about music but have grown out of the mainstream music scene. Social media platforms allow virtual music scenes to thrive through discourse and creative discussion.

Paul Booth (2016) remarks that “In traditional parlance, a fan is a person who invests time and energy into thinking about, or interacting with, a media text: in other words, one who is enraptured by a particular media object” (p. 19). Fans are a significant part of music scenes, as they devote their resources to the media that they find fascinating. Fans are largely responsible for the directions that media creators take and the decisions they make. “Fans make explicit what we all do implicitly: That is, we actively read and engage with media texts on a daily basis. … in the digital age, fans are an exemplar of a change in media studies itself” (Booth, 2016, p. 20). Booth (2016) contends that in studying new media, the “digital fandom” is a tangible enactment of such. Fans are creators that contribute to their favorite objects of media through technological means. Booth (2016) posits further that “The work that fans put into creating fan fiction, fan
blogs, fan videos, fan wikis, or other fan works reveals the ludic nature of digital technology and communication” (p. 20). This is to illustrate just how seriously the fans of popular media take their admiration, deriving “playful pleasure” from their contributions (Booth, 2016). It is fun to interact with likeminded individuals, to exchange work related to their favorite media, etc.

De Certeau (2011) demonstrates that studying fans illuminates the fan affect elicited by productive consumption. Jenkins (2013) identifies the three types of fans, “Zappers, Casuals, and Loyals”. Zappers are fans who do not exert any effort or dedication to any piece of media in particular, as they tend to skip through channels aimlessly. Casuals, however, are fans who enjoy specific media elements, but will not go out of their way to seek it out. This research is primarily concerned with “Loyal” fans, those who are devout to their media interests, carving out time in their lives specifically intended to commit to said media. In the context of music scenes, loyal fans are primarily concerned with the behaviors and content produced by the musicians they’re enamored by. Their identities become reflections of the music they enjoy, and technology works as a mediator and curator for perpetuating these reflections. Fans, digital fandoms, and musical communities create and invoke change in the music industry. Fandoms, as they occur in the digital space, contribute to the decisions that musicians make and the marketing tactics they employ.

**Gender Bias in the Punk Scene**

Despite the genre’s incessant rejection of a patriarchal society, there are still gender biases that are glaringly present (Griffin, 2012; Schilt, 2004; Van Bergen, 2019). Women are usually in
the minority of the audience at punk shows and were even rarer to be seen performing in the bands (Griffin, 2012; Schilt, 2004). As men hold the predominant voice in this scene, they have the position to determine the discourse in punk. White men control the narrative, and this unfortunately contributes to the gender imbalance that is hiding women’s voices in this scene. (Griffin, 2012; Schilt, 2004). Women are often assumed to be the ‘girlfriends’ rather than active participants, and therefore promoters feel no urgency to cater to them. Joey Armstrong and SWMRS perpetuated this narrative through their pursuance of The Regrettes and in their silence as Lydia Night was abused. Similarly, bands within the punk scene will often contradict themselves as their image portrays a group that condemn sexism, racism, and homophobia, yet they will introduce their misogynistic ex-girlfriend pieces using vulgar and offensive verbiage. (Griffin, 2012).

Conversely, the “Riot Grrrl” scene is a subculture within the punk genre that not only reinforces feminism through their music, but through their moral constructs. Bikini Kill, a notable feminist punk quartet from Olympia, Washington created the “revolution girl-style now” and perpetuated it through their music and zines (Schilt, 2004, p. 115). Riot Grrrl promotes independent music communities who encouraged women and girls to assert themselves and be a part of a greater cultural production. As it gained traction, Riot Grrrl became translocal as discussions of music and politics began to travel across the US, Canada, and the UK. Translocal scenes emerge as they expand across the country from what once began as a smaller, local scene (Schilt, 2004, p. 116). Emerging from DIY punk, feminist politics, and the overall dissatisfaction with the misogyny present in the punk scene, Riot Grrrl aims to dissolve flawed gender dynamics within the punk scene. Ordinarily, DIY (‘Do It Yourself’) punk lyrics stem from a place of
girlfriend resentment and toxic masculinity. Bikini Kill and similar predominantly female bands challenge the contentment of women by both empowering women and asserting their independence. Unlike SWMRS, every norm that DIY punk had set in place, the Riot Grrrl scene aimed to break. Bikini Kill debunked the “unapproachable rock star” trope and allowed their audience to feel that they were truly welcomed (Schilt, 2004).

**#MeToo, Cancel Culture, and the Affective Public**

Within the modern punk scenes, band members accused of sexual misconduct have plagued the community as they contradict the feminist and “for the people” personas they have perpetuated. Moreover, the disclosure of their misconduct or accusations against them can be disseminated more rapidly than ever as they go viral. When a notable musician does something problematic or offensive, there is public forum for their respective scenes to comment and speculate. Additionally, the #MeToo movement has given a platform to victims of these heinous acts. The musicians themselves have a platform of their own to address controversies. As soon as Lydia Night published her statement regarding Joey Armstrong, the punk scene rallied behind Night as they collectively condemned SWMRS and Armstrong. This episode could be examined in relations to “cancel culture” and the #MeToo movement. It can also be examined in relation to affective publics, which are outlined by Papacharissi (2014) as “networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment” (p. 125).

“Canceling” is as an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one’s attention from someone or something whose values, (in)action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time, and money (Clark, 2020). The relative terms,
blacklisting and boycotting, do not truly capture the essence and nature of the scope of being effectively canceled. There are power dynamics present within “cancel culture” wherein there is a drastic shift from empowered to disempowered. This shift occurs when a once powerful individual is stripped from their status as the public’s perception of them rapidly changes. What Clark (2020) defines as “chaotic deliberation” ensues as a notable figure is undergoing “cancelation”. However, Clark (2020) argues that not every critique can be perfectly articulated and polite, nor should it be, as the urgency and weight of oppression require immediate attention.

The problem with cancel culture lies not with the powerless who are delivering critique, but with the institutional leaders who offer panicked damage control and neglect to consider reform (Clark, 2020). Those who call on the canceled for change and reconciliation are met with public relations teams who are well equipped to deal with catastrophe. Clark argues further that “Elite public figures fall victim to their own worst fears: a realization that the social capital they’ve worked so hard for is hyperinflated currency in the attention economy” (Clark, 2020). The outcome of cancel culture was never meant to be mindless deplatforming, rather, holding public figures accountable for their actions and reforming the systems that allowed them to inflict harm to begin with.

The powerful force that social media have become has allowed individuals little to no limitations in their access to one another and the rest of the internet (Velasco, 2020). Social media have perpetuated a digital persona that drives a divide between online and real life. Velasco (2020) labels cancel culture as a way the public polices misbehavior through social media. Within the virtual collective consciousness, thoughts and beliefs are merged on social media. Similarly thinking individuals fall into what is akin to an echo chamber, as it becomes
difficult to challenge opposing opinions. What the public views as scandalous is constantly evolving, making it difficult to assess what will result in approval or condemnation. Celebrities inherit a larger-than-life persona, allowing them to feel limitless and ever powerful. Velasco (2020) contends that cancel culture is complicated as not everyone is in agreement about who should be canceled. “On one hand, it is one of the highest displays of democratization of discourse. On the other hand, it is also a force for censoriousness and an intolerance for ideas that run contrary to the dominant acceptable social norms” (Velasco, 2020). Additionally, Velasco contends that cancel culture is akin to public humiliation in that humanity has devised creative and gruesome ways to shame an individual. He asserts further that everyone has something they could be canceled for and would therefore be the subject of cancel culture. However, it must be emphasized the significant difference between those who are subject to cancelation due to controversial discussion versus those who are canceled due to heinous and/or abusive acts inflicted on others.

Martina Thiele (2021) makes the argument that political correctness and cancel culture coincide as behavior and language that used to be socially acceptable are now rejected. Thiele (2021) further addresses privilege and power as the social discourse surrounding cancel culture focuses on these concepts. There is a power imbalance in that some have larger voices than others, some have larger platforms and have greater resources. Moreover, younger voices no longer depend on the old, white man as a mentor in how they speak. “It serves as a smoke screen for the enduring privilege of the powerful to decide where publicity, art, culture, assembly, and free speech are possible” (Thiele, 2021). The liberation that arises from this unity perpetuates an environment where there is safety in numbers.
It is important to understand who is truly suffering from exclusion and intolerance and who has the ability to fight back. Democratic participation is crucial in cancel culture as the unheard become heard and supported by others. Thiele (2021) argues that political correctness and cancel culture being viewed as the main threats to journalism and freedom of expression distract from the real power relations that result in diverse public discourse. Those who complain about intolerance, cancel culture, and political correctness are fearing for their own power and entitlement. In a culture that has previously allowed the offensive and intolerable to flourish, the oppressed have finally been given a platform to take the power back. The #MeToo movement in particular has given voices to those previously voiceless. What facilitates cancel culture is affective publics, viewed as “public displays of affect as political statements” (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 7). The rapid dissemination of messages on social media that forms digital publics entail “affective intensity” and their implications for “digital politics and networked publics” (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 7).

Twitter is one of the many social media platforms that act as a social space wherein victims have a platform for sharing their story and garnering support, particularly since the beginning of the #MeToo movement. The #MeToo movement reflects the relationship between online platforms and the disclosure of sexual victimization (Bogen et al, 2019). Victims take to social media to access more specific resources, tailored to their situations (Bogen, et al, 2019). Additionally, victims may have distrust towards the systems that are meant to bring the accused to justice or the ones who are mean to provide formal support (Bogen et al. 2019). Twitter is a platform that facilitates community formation and activism: “Mass disclosures of violence against women via social media platforms are described as a tool for political protest, as well as a
method for communicating and interrogating the epidemic of violence against women” (Bogen et al, 2019, p 1). Sexual assault and statutory rape accusations have become a pitiful and shameful staple of the punk scene. Victims share their stories on platforms such as Twitter and Instagram for numerous reasons, but primarily to raise awareness to the growing number of victims, just as Lydia Night has demonstrated through her own.

In the case of Joey Armstrong and Lydia Night, Night stated that she did not want to “cancel SWMRS”, rather, that she wished to raise awareness about her experience with the band and encourage others to speak out. Night’s statement created a social media discourse that led to SWMRS’s exile. The momentum that was garnered from the #MeToo movement provided more support for Night. The progressive and feminist image that SWMRS had worked to maintain, as well as the advocacy for victims of sexual assault victims within the punk scene, were dismantled. SWMRS, as they endorsed and enabled Armstrong’s behavior behind closed doors, preached that their concerts were safe spaces for all. The hypocrisy, as well as the power dynamic that Armstrong had over Night as his band was giving hers an opportunity to tour the country, further illustrates the problematic cycle of abuse.

Music plays a huge role in the formation of personal identity. Music invokes connection with one another, whilst provoking a deeper connection with oneself. By defining identity in terms of genre and music tastes, it grants the unity that scenes enable. Music scenes are a relatively recent phenomenon that can occur in both the physical and digital spaces. With every community comes a set of standard practices to which the contributors adhere. The rebellious and carefree nature of the punk scene provides a safe haven. However, no scene is without its flaws, and the punk scene has harbored its fair share of them. The gender and power dynamics that prevail in
everyday life show themselves in any community, the punk scene included. The punk scene still suffers from implicit and explicit gender and racial biases, and hegemonic masculinity is a great hinderance. Nonetheless, with the rise of the #MeToo movement and cancel culture, there is a powerful conduit through which the community can enact social justice.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Methodology

This thesis intends to examine the technological, political, and social dynamics surrounding SWMRS’s demise. The technological dynamics involve the internet, networked publics, and digital politics. The social dynamics are not separate from sociality facilitated by social media and the networks they create. The politics of this context involves gender and the struggle over women’s agency to fight against sexual abuse and the social injustice it perpetuates. Because this thesis is interested in these issues within the context of popular music, it draws on the work on music scenes.

Research Questions

Based on these considerations, the following research questions are formulated:

**RQ1:** What are virtual music scenes?

**RQ2:** How does social media contribute to them?

**RQ3:** How are musical scenes affected by accusations of sexual misconduct?

**RQ4:** What are the prevailing social media discourses regarding SWMRS’s controversy?

**RQ5:** What are the gender and power dynamics in the punk scene in relation to SWMRS’s accusation of sexual misconduct?
The primary method for this research is an ethnographic study of the punk scene as notable figures within it disrupt the values they uphold. Bernard (2006) defines an ethnographic study as “a method of social research in which the researcher immerses themselves in the subjects’ social setting to perceive things as they really are in order to recount and interpret their observations in a manner that will help their readers understand what it is like to be a part of the setting studied” (p. 24). I have been a part of this scene over the last decade and can draw from my own experiences to study the issues this project raises. I was an active member of the punk scene at the time of SWMRS’ rise to peak notoriety, as well as a witness to their subsequent cancelation. I attended the 2019 “Berkeley’s on Fire” tour, which featured Lydia Night’s band, the Regrettes as the opener. I was unaware of the abuse she was facing at the hands of Joey Armstrong behind closed doors. However, I witnessed and participated in the social media discourse surrounding SWMRS as Night released her statement. I also witnessed first-hand the emotional turmoil that the Regrettes and SWMRS audiences alike experienced as they navigated the jarring allegations.

This thesis is not only concerned with the real-life ramifications of SWMRS’ cancelation, but the social media frenzy that solidified those ramifications. I will use Bernard’s (2006) aforementioned conceptualization of ethnography, as well as Born and Haworth’s (2017) conceptualization of a digital ethnography. Born and Haworth (2017) assert that a digital ethnography holds two meanings, “the ethnographic study of digital cultures, but it can also refer to the development and application of digital methodologies to enhance ethnographic research” (p. 70). I have been fully immersed in the punk scene for the past decade, and I have been both a participant and an observer. I have gone to numerous punk shows, recorded acoustic covers of my favorite punk songs, and I have participated in the online discourse. By using components of
both ethnography and digital ethnography, I can draw from my personal experiences as a participant and observer in both the physical and digital realms.

Additional methodological resources include digital fandom analysis, as outlined by Booth (2016). Using Booth’s (2016) conceptualizations of digital fandoms, the web commons, and the Digi-gratis economy, I will analyze the ways that the punk scene has been able to flourish and prosper through social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. Fans are able to interact with musicians and their respective audiences across the world in a way that was never before accessible using the Web Commons. Using these platforms, I continue to be involved with the punk scene. Digital fandom analysis will aide in the analysis of the punk scene and the prevailing discourses regarding SWMRS’s controversy. I will draw from digital archives as well as my experience as both a participant and an observer of the online crisis that was SWMRS’ cancelation.

Paul Booth (2016) has concluded that digital fandoms can best be analyzed by investigating not only the digital fandoms, but also the Web Commons and the Digi-Gratis economy. Booth (2016) takes the word “commons” from Lessig’s (2009) “creative commons”. By using the word “commons”, it is suggested that anyone can contribute to or be a part of a music scene, free of charge. To be a part of the Web Commons is to assert a digital presence in an online community, one meant for curating discourse and creativity. Booth (2016) contends, “The web is a unique entity that straddles the commons property/pool divide. On the one hand, the web is open and free. Anyone can use it and there are few rules to follow… On the other hand, there are a great many socially constructed and culturally supported norms for online communication that make the web seem more like common property” (p. 31). By analyzing the
digital fandom’s reactions to the SWMRS controversy, this method will outline the socially
constructed norms that they disrupted.

Booth (2016) elaborates, “The Digi-gratis economy offers a way of thinking about how
fandom and industry intersect in ever more complex ways. It has become a tradition of fan
studies to posit fandom as part of a ‘gift economy,’ strongly contrasting this to the capitalist
economy of big media” (p. 34). The Digi-gratis economy relates to the give and take relationship
that media creators and fans have. In the context of SWMRS and their digital fandom, SWMRS
relied on their supportive fanbase to keep their positive reputation alive. SWMRS gave fanbases
encouraging messages, music, and lively entertainment; and the fandom repaid them with their
purchasing of tickets, merchandise, and their own SWMRS inspired content. The content created
by the digital fandom garnered more attention to SWMRS and contributed to their longevity.
With the withdrawal of this positive attention in exchange for negative attention, SWMRS’
reputation changed accordingly. By causing a disruption in the punk scene by engaging in sexual
misconduct, the punk scene no longer contributes to their end of the transaction. As I mentioned
in Chapter 2, social media curate social discourse through structural and algorithmic means. The
Web Commons acts as the conduit for fans to participate in virtual music scenes and contribute
to this discourse.

The public statement that Night posted triggered immediate backlash against Armstrong,
SWMRS, and their associates. In the subsequent days, Armstrong published a haphazard
statement of his own, garnering further uproar on social media condemning the band. By
analyzing the response to the statements published by Night, Armstrong, and SWMRS, it will
create an understanding for the ways that sexual misconduct in the punk scene disrupts the social
and moral standard within the community. Many of the public statements made by SWMRS have been deleted from their original platform. Internet archives have been utilized in order to gain access to these statements. It should be noted that, when SWMRS published any public statements, they disabled comments on the post. This prevented commentary and discourse from occurring at the source. Much of the social commentary occurred through indirect tweets aimed at SWMRS. Utilizing the internet archive as well as Twitter’s “Advanced Search” function, I have accessed tweets containing the key words “SWMRS”, “Joey”, “Armstrong”, “The Regrettes”, and “Lydia” from 2017 to 2022. I have selected tweets in this date range to establish the drastic shift in sentiment expressed by SWMRS’s audience, before and after the allegations were brought to attention. I selected tweets from 2020 that accurately summarize the sentiments expressed by the punk scene. In addition, I selected tweets from 2022 that accurately portray the sentiments of the punk scene once SWMRS attempted to return to music.
CHAPTER 4

CANCELLING SWMRS: AN ANALYSIS OF SWMRS, MUSIC SCENES, AND AFFECTIVE PUBLICS

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, this research aims to answer the following questions: What are music scenes? How does social media contribute to them? How are musical scenes affected by accusations of sexual misconduct? What are the prevailing social media discourses regarding SWMRS’s controversy? What are the gender and power dynamics in the punk scene in relations to SWMRS’s accusation of sexual misconduct? Using Booth’s (2016) multi-faceted definition of digital fandom analysis, my experience in the punk scene, as well as accessing internet archives, I aim to answer these questions.

Music Scenes

In this section, I will answer my first research question that aims to define music scenes drawing from my own experience in the punk scene and the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Music scenes are composed of two basic entities, the music creators, and the music listeners. Music scenes have historically granted voices to the oppressed as they banded together to express their feelings of rebellion, sorrow, and triumph. Since the emergence of subcultures, music and style have provided a means to express these social identities. While some argue that music is created by established social groups to reflect their core values, others argue that it is the
music that creates and unifies these social groups. I offer that music scenes today incorporate elements of both perspectives.

Music scenes take form in both physical and virtual spaces, gathering like-minded individuals who share the same interests and values. Music scenes began and were facilitated in public spaces, as music fans of similar tastes gathered in bars, concert halls, etc. Appreciation and/or admiration for a band or genre inadvertently unites like-minded individuals in these public spaces. Genre and musical form are the conduit for expressing and encompassing inner thoughts and emotions. For example, the punk genre is known for its brazen presence in the musical community, as it is known to directly address injustice through its criticisms of the government, the patriarchy, and corporate regime. These strong beliefs are a result of the hardships experienced because of these oppressive structures. Relatability provides validation that the hardships experienced in an individual’s life have been experienced by others as well. Personal struggle tends to feel alienating, but relief can be found in sharing these struggles with others. The expressiveness of music invites others to interpret the contexts as it adheres to their own lives. Physical music scenes are the result of social groups with shared hardships who have organically created bonds.

Translocal music scenes are music scenes that unify music creators and listeners who are geographically distant. Musical events such as concerts and festivals unite musicians and their audiences who reside all over the world. In my experience in the punk scene, I have often encountered fellow punk fans who traveled from near and far to experience a musical event in my city. Similarly, I have traveled to other states to experience a tour that would not be making a stop in my own. Some members of the punk scene will go as far as to follow touring bands
across the country, sacrificing much of their time and resources. This speaks to the level of passion and dedication that music scenes perpetuate. SWMRS relied on loyal fans such as these to perpetuate their positive reputation.

Virtual music scenes are an extension of the core principles of the physical and translocal scenes. Music scenes have incorporated the affordances granted by communication technology to expand their reach. Virtual music scenes began on basic online forums and chat rooms that have progressively evolved as social media platforms gained traction. Physical and translocal scenes share commonalities in that they ultimately unify in the same public space. The fundamentals for what create music scenes are still present in virtual spaces, but they eliminate this need for physical proximity to form musical bonds. Social media has made great contributions to music scenes, which I will address in later text.

In addition to forming musical alliances, music scenes contribute to social identity building. All music scenes facilitate social identities by their means of providing individuals with a sense of belonging to a social group. Regardless of the modality for which the music scene takes place, a sense of belonging is derived from participation in something larger than the individual. Music tastes are one of many sizeable reflections of one’s likeness. However, just like snowflakes, no two musical tastes are exactly alike. Two individuals who may share the exact same music library still have entirely different frames of reference and personal connections to each song. For instance, “No One Like You” by the Scorpions elicits a nostalgic response for both my mother and me, but the nostalgia we experience is reminiscent of a completely different time. For her, it brings her back to 1982, a time where she sung in rock bands and donned spiked boots. For me, it brings me back to 2001, a time where I was stealing my mother’s CDs and
playing them on my Walkman CD player. Although the song means something different to each of us, we still share the bond that is created by joyfully reliving our experiences together. The affective and emotional responses that music brings out of the creators and listeners drive them closer to one another. Thus, it introduces the prevalence of musical fandoms, who play a significant role in music scenes.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, fandoms are communities of individuals who share immense interest in a specific piece of media, whether that is a television show or a rock band. Fandoms are not only supporters of these elements of media, but they also act as curators. In addition to being loyal fans, fandoms are also artists in their own regard. Just as musicians write about their muses, music acts as the muse for fan’s creation. When I was 12 years old, I handwrote every lyric to every Green Day song in existence. I recorded their music onto cassette tapes on my mother’s boombox and choreographed dances to those songs. Similarly, my mother used to cut out images in magazines of Led Zeppelin, creating collages that would be hung all over her room. Music awakens and inspires the creativity and artistry in its listeners. Through social media, fans can share and exchange their creations with the community. Fans create fan fiction, fan zines, visual art, and even offer their own musical interpretations of their favorite songs. Tribute bands dedicate their entire musical repertoire to their interpretations of their beloved artists’ music. The possibilities for fan creativity are endless as, arguably, everyone is a fan of something.

Aside from the collaborative art that is inspired by music, fans also act as influencers. Fan involvement in music scenes has a large influence on the decisions that musicians and their teams make. While musicians and labels have agency to incorporate feedback, audiences are a
critical force for a successful artist. For example, a band who has released two different sounding albums may observe that the fandom has a more favorable opinion of one than the other. This may influence the band to gravitate to the sound that earned them the most money. Fans make active decisions on who they wish to dedicate their time and money to, and this is true of any music scene. Every bit of success achieved by a musician can be attributed to their audience and the music scene they started from. Social media has allowed for musicians to receive feedback instantly, feedback that is tailored to specific concerns rather than monitoring album sales. In the next section, I will elaborate further on social media’s contribution to music scenes.

Social Media’s Contribution

I previously discussed the function of music scenes as they take form through various modalities. In this section I will address my second research question by assessing the contributions that social media have made to music scenes. Through social media, fans can contribute to their respective music scenes in a way that was not previously possible. The punk scene is not unique in their utilization of social media, as they are one of the many music scenes that have prevailed on the platforms. Social media provides increased opportunities for interaction through the various functions of each individual platform. In addition, fans are encouraged by social media platforms, through their use of algorithms, to engage in discourse. Social media have allowed music scenes to flourish and thrive beyond gatherings in public, allowing ease of access to musical communities. Due to the tremendous number of people who use social media, the potential to achieve virality is heightened, which can have both positive and negative consequences. In addition, social media’s tendency to drive a wedge between digital
and real life can come as troubling. I will later contextualize these implications for music scenes, as they impact both the physical and digital musical spaces.

Before social media, music scenes entailed different dynamics in physical spaces or other mediated forms. However, such spaces were limited as far as musician and fan interaction are concerned. When limited to physical spaces, musicians with larger audiences are hindered in their ability to communicate directly with audiences, let alone individual fans. Musicians and their fans need one another, as musicians need audiences and audiences need music. However, while audiences can supplement the absence of one band with a similar alternative, musicians owe their careers to their fans. Social media have provided a means for musicians of various popularity to interact with their fan bases. The various functions of individual social media platforms afford musicians to interact with their fans in a number of ways. On Twitter, I have observed musicians asking for their fans for input on which of their songs they would like to hear on tour. Instagram is commonly used to share photos and videos of live performances, merchandise, etc. TikTok provides short form video clips which commonly feature popular music, introducing audiences to songs they may not have otherwise encountered. Cameo is a platform in which one can buy a personalized video from a notable media figure.

Of the social media platforms that I have mentioned, there are numerous others who provide similar affordances to their users. One of the common affordances that Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook offer are the ability to live stream. In the peak of the Coronavirus pandemic, musicians would commonly host “Instagram Live Sessions” wherein they could provide live music to audiences who could watch from their smartphones. This is a significant contribution to music scenes as it gives audiences free experiences from the comfort of their homes.
Another commonality in each social media platform is the presence of recommendation systems for optimized experiences, or algorithms. Algorithms guide users to personalized content that adheres to their interest. It is in this way that social media platforms are curators of social discourse. Social media platforms encourage freedom of expression, encouraging users to share their private thoughts and occurrences. However, freedom of expression allows social media platforms to maintain a “hands off” policy regarding public discourse. Although there are attempts to minimize abusive behavior through their community guidelines, they cannot be held liable for the free speech of their users, even if that speech is offensive or malicious. However, it must be noted that this is subject to change depending on the Supreme Court ruling in Gonzalez v Google (Gonzalez v Google LLC). Nonetheless, users have the opportunity to make their voices heard, leaving room for bullying, harassment, and so on. The ramifications this has on music scenes are significant, as notable musicians have often admitted to not reading the discourse in the interest of protecting their livelihoods.

On social media one holds the ability to portray themselves however they would like. The way one chooses to manage their social media persona is the way the public will perceive them, introducing the careful process for which users choose their words, their best photos, etc. One advantage of this is that one may detach themselves from their present reality, allowing a form of escape. Conversely, digital personas have potential to disrupt music scenes in that fans create idealized perceptions of their favorite musicians through the way they portray themselves online. The moral code that musicians abide by are reflected in the audiences they attract. For example, SWMRS would often portray to their audiences that they are a feminist, forward thinking band. Punk fans who embraced such messages gravitated towards them. SWMRS fans therefore held
them to that standard, leaving greater ramifications for the disruption of that perception. The
digital fandom is not only outraged in the problematic behavior, but they felt deceived by their
contradictory actions.

This is where affordances of social media and the reactions of fans and audiences have
opened a space for the concept of “cancel culture”, an emergence that is associated with social
media. “Cancelation” of a celebrity or otherwise notable figure occurs when they engage in
problematic behavior. Once the public is made aware of this behavior, and they work to either
demand accountability or dismantle their reputation, depending on the circumstances. The
democratic nature of virtual music scenes and other online communities facilitate collective
action. Digital fandoms assume a responsibility to hold their idols accountable when they engage
in wrongdoing. Before social media, musicians could escape consequences for highly
problematic behavior more frequently. In extreme cases, victims of their abuse had to hope that
local authorities would take them seriously, as they had limited means to share their story. Now
that social media have provided public platforms, victims of abuse do not have to suffer in
silence necessarily.

The potential for social media backlash and cancelation influences the decisions that
musicians make. It is for this reason that fans have greater involvement in virtual music scenes
than when they were limited to physical scenes. However, a drastic increase in community
engagement does not always come in the form of negative attention. Social media gives potential
for music to go viral, garnering an influx of positive attention. This can introduce new audiences
to music that they may not have otherwise discovered on their own. Specifically, TikTok has
been largely responsible for the sudden drastic increase in popularity of bands such as Bad
Omens, Loveless, and Sleep Token. These are all examples of bands that I have personally discovered through TikTok’s recommendations of content that relate to my interests.

In summation, social media has contributed to music scenes in several ways, allowing them to prevail beyond the gatherings in the public space. While there are both advantages and disadvantages to social media, it has nonetheless changed the way music scenes function. Fans and musicians can interact with one another, fans with other fans, and musicians with other musicians. Digital personas perpetuated by musicians that contradict their actions leave potential for cancelation. However, the potential for reaching new audiences is a motivator for musicians to engage on social media.

**Disruptions in a Music Scene**

In the previous sections, I detailed the significance of the values that members of the punk scene uphold, as well as the contributions to music scenes that social media has made. In this section, I address my third research question as I assess the impact of sexual misconduct allegations on musical scenes. I will explore the zero-tolerance policy that the punk scene maintains for those who engage in sexual misconduct. I will highlight the ways in which the punk scene demands accountability from their former idols. Using a collection of tweets that summarize the shared attitudes of the punk scene, I will identify the affective and emotional responses to the SWMRS allegations. Based on these responses, I will assess the ways in which they adhere to cancel culture. Further to my previous comments, the #MeToo movement empowered victims of sexual assault and afforded a platform to said victims. It is within this
context that Lydia Night’s statement and the subsequent cancelation of SWMRS serves as an enactment of democratic action and agency.

Prior to July of 2020, SWMRS were well on their way to holding a dominant position in the punk scene. Following the release of their fourth album, “Berkeley’s on Fire” in February 2019, SWMRS set out on the “Berkeley’s on Fire Tour”. The North American tour took place from March 28th, 2019, until May 3rd, 2019. This tour was supplemented by opening acts Beach Goons and the Regrettes, the latter of which Lydia Night serves as lead vocalist. In Chapter 1, I detailed manner for which SWMRS, primarily Joey Armstrong, approached their recruitment of the Regrettes. Private Instagram direct messages were exchanged between Armstrong and Night, resulting in Night agreeing on behalf of the Regrettes to join the tour as openers.

In the days leading up to Night’s statement, SWMRS published a lengthy note to multiple social media platforms. The since deleted declaration served to publicly condemn those in the music industry who abuse their power to coerce and sexually assault minors. Specifically, the post was directed at other bands in the scene who had previously faced condemnation for their predatory behaviors. The brazen and aggressive tone exemplified in the passages resonated strongly with the fandom. As a former SWMRS loyalist, I recall the satisfaction I derived as I read each word. To me and many others, this post served as an affirmation that our support was aimed in the right direction. Of the numerous public statements that pertain to the case examined in this thesis, this one is virtually untraceable. While the post serves as important background information, the attention quickly shifted from what would soon serve as a hypocritical statement. The following day, Night published a detailed recollection of her personal experience
with Armstrong (see Figure 1). Night’s social media post had a significant impact on the punk scene, me included.
Over the past few weeks, I’ve read a lot of heartbreaking, disturbing and inspiring stories of abuse in the music industry that were brought to light by some very brave womxn. Yesterday, my abuser Joey Armstrong and his band SWMRS released an unbelievably hypocritical statement on social media that has pushed me to publicly share my story. This band’s delusional positioning of themselves as woke feminists is not only triggering for me as a victim, but is complete bullshit and needs to be called out. I’ve spent over a year processing and reflecting on my experience to try to find the right way to go about it. I was in a relationship with Joey that started when I was 16 and ended right before my 18th birthday. For so long I viewed it just as being toxic and not something valid enough to share but now I know that what I actually experienced was emotional abuse and sexual coercion by someone in a position of power over me. It’s important to me that Joey and his entire band are held accountable to fully understand that even though they may view themselves as “good guys” they are continuing to perpetuate the exact toxic culture they are trying to call out.

In May of 2017 Joey followed me on Instagram and DM’d me saying that SWMRS would be sending us some offers for a few tours that year. I told him I was a big fan and was excited. I noticed that I was the only member of the band he followed but I didn’t think much of it. I was very publicly 16 at the time and he was 22. I was especially excited about the tour because I viewed SWMRS as being vocal feminists and having a message that I thought aligned with mine. On our first tour together in Europe, Joey held my hand under a pillow. Secret hand holding became a thing and it was exciting. Here was this older guy in a band I loved showing me his attention. One night he invited me to his bunk. I snuck over and he was waiting shirtless in his underwear. We kissed for the first time and then he told me to leave so we weren’t caught by my dad who was sleeping in a bunk between ours. The next time I snuck over, he dry humped me abruptly until he came. He moved much faster sexually than I was used to but I didn’t question it because he was older and I liked him. Everyone in his band, crew, family and his manager knew that we were seeing each other. Because of our age difference, Joey would continually ask me to keep our relationship as hidden as possible and I did. I am extremely close with both of
my parents but I was pressured to lie to them and didn’t even tell my best friend or therapist what was going on. This created an isolating mindset where I constantly felt alone.

We had multiple conversations where he would say something along the lines of “I want to move at your pace” and “I don’t want to have sex until you’re 18” but then would act in a completely contradicting way, pressuring me into sexual situations. The irony in this is that Joey was well aware that I was not a virgin and these “rules” that he created would consistently remind me of his position of power. He was essentially my boss and it had nothing to do with my feelings or what I was ready for. Everytime we took a step sexually it was because he wanted to and made it clear by either putting my hand on his crotch, shaming me for saying I wasn’t comfortable, gaslighting me or ignoring me when I didn’t give my consent.

Our relationship went on for about a year. Due to Joey constantly saying things like “we just have to get through this year” and telling me his fantasies of our life together in 20 years, I stuck around under the impression that things would change once I turned 18. Everytime we saw each other, he made sure to put us in a situation where he could get sexual satisfaction. When we were on a public beach, in the freezing cold on a sidewalk, or other places with people around, he would pressure me to get him off. When my dad and I flew to Mexico to meet up with Joey to see a show, Joey wanted me to stay with him and shamed me when I told him my dad wasn’t okay with it. This made me feel embarrassed because of my age which led to me lying to my dad by promising I would have my own room. That convinced him to let me stay one night at their hotel. When I got there, I found out we’d be sharing a room with his friend. This didn’t stop Joey from pressuring me into giving him a handjob in the shared bedroom. This behavior progressed into him pressuring me into giving him oral sex once he changed his original definition of what was okay sexually. He would ask if I was around to facetime when he was about to shower and wanted to see if I would shower too. If I said no but I’d still love to talk he would say he was busy but to let him know if I decide to shower. The times I did agree to
shower on facetime, he would pressure me into showing my body which I always said I didn't want to do. When I did give in, he would start masturbating without warning.

There was one time I decided to have a conversation with him about how the relationship was unfair, unhealthy and one sided. He seemed like he understood but my relief was short lived. He said he wanted to drive around my neighborhood before dropping me off. Knowing what that would lead to, I made up that I needed to be home soon. That being dismissed, I agreed to kiss for a sec in the backseat but after a minute or two of him pressuring me for more I told him I needed to go and tried to get out of the car. He laughed as he forcibly pulled me back onto his lap. Now afraid, I aggressively got out of the car, into the front seat and made him take me home.

Two months before my 18th birthday, he flew me to New York to spend a few days together. Right before the trip, he told me he was there to rehearse so I would be seeing him almost only in his bed at night. One of these nights, he changed the “rules” he had prefaced our entire relationship on. He now said “let’s not pay much attention to any exact time frame.” This conversation was really eye opening. His timeline and promise of a “real” relationship was the thing that strung me along but once we got closer to the thing he would call the finish line, it was apparent it was bullshit all along. I knew I was done and chose to end it.

During the seven months before our previously booked next tour with SWMRS, I had a lot of time to reflect and unpack. I slowly started to open up to those around me including my parents who had no clue what was really going on. The more I processed my trauma, the more horrified I became at the thought of touring with them but wanted to honor our commitment. This tour immediately was different from our past tours with them. We were treated like strangers from a band I had previously considered to be some of my closest friends. It felt like SWMRS and their team were doing anything they could to exert power and punish me. The same power that Joey had over me since that first DM informing me of the tours(jobs) he was offering me. From the beginning, he would constantly make “jokes” about how we would have to follow his rules on tour because he

Figure 1: (Continued) Lydia Night’s public statement. (Continued on following page)
was the headliner. That professional power dynamic had made its way into all aspects of our relationship.

After just finishing up a six week tour, I completely blew out my voice during the first show. I spent some time crying in the venue’s bathroom before pulling myself together to meet up with fans in silence so as to not further flare up my nodules. I went to an ENT, who gave me a steroid shot to get through one more show and his opinion was that vocal rest was the only way to heal. I got through the show and we left the next day so I could heal physically and emotionally.

Five weeks later, someone shared a video of me singing one song with my boyfriend’s band with a caption making a joke about my vocal rest being fake. As the cyberbullying began from some SWMRS fans, Max Becker liked the tweet pushing it to a much greater level. As rumours began to spread about my band and I, I felt powerless and triggered all over again. Nobody in SWMRS did anything to stop what was happening online. They had known the whole time about Joey and I’s inappropriate relationship and based on yesterday’s social media post still don’t understand how they’re perpetuating the exact behavior they claim so vocally to be against. To quote their ridiculous statement, “It is antithetical to our core values as musicians to use this power for anything other than music.” Joey and his band’s lack of self awareness continue to remain seemingly inescapable. To this day, I still keep trying to find the right way to heal and get some real closure.

It took me years to finally understand that I am a victim of abuse. When I started becoming sexual in my current relationship, there were multiple times where I felt extremely triggered and would cry in bed not knowing how to explain it. I’m still remembering traumatic events from Joey and I’s relationship 3 years later. It hit me hard and took a major toll on my self esteem. Last December, I tried to start the healing process by confronting Joey. Even though he interrupted me throughout the conversation, he seemed to somewhat take in what I was telling him and apologized. In the last few weeks I have had what I thought were two constructive conversations with Cole Becker where I
told him all the traumatic details of my relationship with Joey in hopes of coming up with a solution other than this statement. He seemed very empathetic at the time which made yesterday’s SWMRS post all the more shocking and cold hearted. He dropped a handwritten apology letter from Joey by my house almost a week ago which was nice but didn’t address any of the abuse, my age, his position of power, or anything sexual at all. After yesterday’s social media post, Joey texted me to follow up on the letter which was a completely transparent attempt at feeling out what I was gonna do knowing the pure hypocrisy their statement held.

Again, I want to thank all of the womxn who have come forward to share their stories. Your bravery is the thing that has comforted me and given me the courage to release this. I truly hope many womxn can see themselves in my story because I know how hard it is to feel valid in something that’s so nuanced and exists in a space that’s not black and white. Joey is only one out of soo many people who don’t realize that their power dynamic makes any romantic relationship abusive and inappropriate by nature. You can have feelings for someone and be in a technically consensual relationship and still be a victim of abuse and coercion. The deep seeded toxic norms of men need to be called out for exactly what they are. My goal here isn’t to “cancel” anyone but to further the conversation on the intricacies of power abuse, grooming and manipulation that not only exists in the music industry, but in so many other industries. I recognize that my privilege as a white woman with a platform amplifies this statement. I want the womxn who aren’t in my position to know that I stand with you and hope this can provide some comfort no matter how you choose to tell or not tell your story. You are valid.

Figure 1: (Continued) Lydia Night’s public statement.
On July 20th, 2020, I was sitting with my best friend in her bedroom as we hid from the humid dog days of summer. I recall opening Instagram on my phone and a wall of text met my gaze. Being privy to the cultural significance of online statements and apologies, I immediately grabbed my glasses to accurately assess the damage. However, the post did not read as I initially anticipated. My stomach tied into knots as I scrolled through the text-based statement to discover that the subject of cancelation was the drummer of my then favorite punk band, Joey Armstrong. I experienced a great bout of denial and grief as I processed the devastating information, especially as SWMRS’s “anti-groomer, anti-abuser” musings from the previous day were still at the forefront of my mind. Armstrong was not only outed as a predator, but his bandmates and other associates were complicit, directly contradicting their progressive public personas.

In Figure 1, Lydia Night begins her statement by calling attention to the hypocritical words posted by the SWMRS band page. This is followed by her chronological account of her relationship with Armstrong from 2017 until 2020. Night explains her traumatic experiences in detail, from illustrating Armstrong’s position of power to addressing those who were aware of her situation and remained complicit. Before the public was made aware of the abuse, Max Becker, vocalist and guitarist for SWMRS, contributed to the incitement of online harassment that was hurled at Night. Becker was certainly cognizant of the implications of his actions, as he had previously implied that he took pleasure from fans looking at his “liked” tweets. Becker was also cognizant of the abuse Night suffered at the hands of Armstrong, the same form of abuse that he publicly condemned.

In addition to explaining Armstrong’s manipulative and abusive behaviors, Night draws attention to the problematic age gap. Night was under the age of 18, the age consent, for the
entirety of their intimate “relationship”. Due to this, Night could not legally consent to any sexual contact, a detail Armstrong would often disregard. The position of power that Armstrong had over Night spans across all aspects of their relationship. This power dynamic was present in both their working and personal relationships, intensified by the familial ties to the highly influential Green Day. Night felt immense pressure to appease Armstrong, a mentality that victims of abuse often experience.

Immediately after releasing her statement to the public, the support for Night from the digital fandom flooded the comment section, as can be observed in Figure 2. The original post accumulated roughly 215,000 “likes” and nearly 8,000 comments, the vast majority of which displayed empathy and love for Night. The instantaneous reactions from the punk scene as they learned of the news is an example of an affective public. These reactions presented themselves concurrently as support for Night and disdain for Armstrong. This signifies the momentum derived from the #MeToo movement, accompanied by a greater cancel culture. The digital fandom who began as a positive force for both SWMRS and the Regrettes became the digital fandom who would enact their democratic agency in their demands for collective accountability and the subsequent cancelation of SWMRS.
Figure 2: Instagram comments showing support for Lydia Night.
Using Twitter’s “advanced search” function, I was able to search for tweets mentioning SWMRS during the year 2020. The top results for my search can be observed in Figure 3 and include a tweet that I shared on my own Twitter account at the time. Following Night’s statement (Figure 1), SWMRS attempted to take immediate action in managing the backlash. At first, they mass reported any comments on their social media platforms that demanded accountability, cursed them out, etc. Soon after, they disabled the “comment” function on all their Instagram photos, disabled the “reply” function on their recent tweets, and hastily deleted their contradictory statement from the day prior. However, as reflected in Figure 2, these efforts were proven ineffective. “SWMRS”, “Joey Armstrong”, “the Regrettes”, and “Lydia Night” quickly became a trending topic on Twitter, drawing attention from a wider audience to the discourse. The collective expressions of anger, sadness, and disappointment felt by the greater punk scene completely flooded my Twitter feed. My affective and emotional response to Night’s traumatic experience mirrored the majority of those who expressed themselves within the punk scene on this topic.

Figure 2 and Figure 3 demonstrate a clear juxtaposition in sentiment. One could arguably distinguish the dichotomy at a mere glance. While Armstrong and his associates were met with the justifiable fury of the punk scene, Night welcomed a plethora of empathetic well wishes. However, on July 21st, 2020, the day after Night published her statement, Armstrong published a public apology on the SWMRS Instagram page. This apology has since been removed from the platform, nevertheless, it has been immortalized by screen captures.
Figure 3: Tweets denouncing Joey Armstrong and supporting Lydia Night. (Continued on following page)
Figure 3: (Continued) Tweets denouncing Joey Armstrong and supporting Lydia Night.
Armstrong’s now deleted Instagram apology (Figure 4) came as jarring to the digital fandom for several reasons. At first glance, one can observe the lack of significant substance. In comparison to the statement posted by Night, this response shows a clear lack of effort, which is the bare minimum in an effective apology. In addition, SWMRS was widely recognized for their powerful lyricism, asserting their capability to produce written work that resonated with audiences. This apology shows no indication of the contrition necessary to warrant forgiveness. Moreover, Armstrong neglects to address any of the highly problematic behavior that required explanation. For instance, Night was a minor during their entire relationship, and Armstrong’s apology insinuates that they were just an ordinary couple that was unable to last because of Armstrong’s selfish tendencies. This is categorically false, as Armstrong also neglects to address the emotional and sexual abuse inflicted on Night. Armstrong minimizes the accusations made at his expense by omitting the real issues. Night published a five-page statement detailing the extensive trauma she experienced at the behest of Armstrong, just for it to be reduced to “I didn’t treat her the way she deserved to be treated”.

“While I don’t agree with some of the things she said about me, it is important that she be allowed to say them and that she be supported for speaking out”. The verbiage for which Armstrong grants Night permission to speak out is patronizing. It also acts as an attempt to double down on the progressive persona that was amplified to audiences. The savior mentality that was present in SWMRS’s condemnation of abuse in the music industry shows itself in this apology. SWMRS attempted to pander to their audience in both their lyricism and social media presence through progressive buzz words. The attempt at incorporating those buzzwords in his apology has considerably failed, as fans had removed their rose-colored glasses.
Hey everyone,

I want to address Lydia’s Instagram post about our relationship. While I don’t agree with some of the things she said about me, it’s important that she be allowed to say them and that she be supported for speaking out. I respect her immensely and fully accept that I failed her as a partner. I was selfish and I didn’t treat her the way she deserves to have been treated both during our relationship and in the two years since we broke up. I have apologized to her privately and I hope she can forgive me, if and when she is ready to do so. I own my mistakes and will work hard to regain the trust that I lost.

- Joey
In my third research question, I pondered the impact that accusations of sexual misconduct have on a music scene. Based on the data analyzed, I conclude that musical scenes collectively experience intense emotions linked to problematic behavior enacted by their respective idolized figures. The impact this has had on the punk scene was considerable, as the “SWMRS incident” is still spoken about and not remembered fondly. The punk scene experiences a great deal of shame and disappointment to have contributed to a scene that once uplifted a sexual predator. As I previously mentioned, fans inherit much of their personal identity from music, and social identities from music scenes. Music scenes reflect an individual’s beliefs and values, and being a part of a scene that harbors sexual predators can discourage the inclination to participate.

**Prevailing Social Media Discourse**

In the previous section, I presented evidence to illustrate the democratic action and agency enacted to achieve accountability when notable figures disrupt the status quo of the punk scene. In this section, I will address the prevailing social media discourse surrounding SWMRS since July 20th, 2020. Despite the initial backlash, the punk scene continues to demonstrate their active disdain for SWMRS and Joey Armstrong. After their cancelation, every member of SWMRS disappeared from social media platforms. The main SWMRS profiles had been likewise abandoned, leaving only content dating prior to the controversy’s eruption. In their absence, prevailing social media discourses reflect continued active disdain for SWMRS. The discourses have significantly increased as of 2022, however, as SWMRS announced their return. This attempt at returning to the public eye has reinvigorated the anger that the punk scene felt towards SWMRS.
From 2017 until the summer of 2020, SWMRS was at their peak in popularity. Night published her statement detailing her story and experience with Armstrong and SWMRS in July of 2020. Since Night posted her statement, SWMRS has remained “canceled” by the punk scene. This speaks to the real consequences faced by canceled bands. However, in the fall of 2022, SWMRS announced their return to the punk scene, a return that would not include former drummer, Joey Armstrong, and former bassist, Sebastian Mueller. This announcement was accompanied by a video apology, for which has received immense backlash. I will highlight several notable quotes from the apology to contextualize the discourses that prevailed following the apology.

Figure 5 depicts a re-upload of the apology titled, “An Open Letter to All of Our Fans” that remaining SWMRS members, Max (left) and Cole Becker (right), published in October 2022. The original video has since been removed, following the backlash. In the apology, Max refers to the 2019 traumatic car crash that he was in, a statement that Lydia Night would later describe as “using a near death experience to gain sympathy votes”. Cole Becker goes on to address the allegations directly, stating “In July 2020, my friend, and the drummer of SWMRS, Joey Armstrong, was accused of emotional abuse and sexual coercion by somebody that he had dated years before. They were not the same age when they dated; he was 22, she was 17. But nonetheless, the accusations came as a shock to me.”
Figure 5: SWMRS’ apology: “An Open Letter to All of Our Fans”.
This statement directly acknowledges the age differential between Armstrong and Night, but it neglects to mention the nearly two-year spanning relationship. Lydia Night was not 17 for longer than a year, regardless of the narrative the Becker brothers are painting. Nonetheless, they make direct acknowledgement to Night’s age being lower than 18, an age that no 22-year-old should be romantically involved with. Cole Becker continues,

I was also confused because they never had sex, and yet many people began to refer to him as a rapist, and to us as rape apologists. There was no accusation of sexual assault, and yet [Night’s] statement was written to make it appear that Joey was a sexual predator. Maybe he wasn’t a good boyfriend, but he is not a sexual predator. Maybe they shouldn’t have dated, but they did.

The attempt to discredit Night’s statement is an interesting one, as SWMRS built their platform on supporting victims, feminism, and the #MeToo Movement. While Armstrong attempted to maintain that persona and narrative in his apology, the Becker brothers drop the act altogether. Night’s statement makes several mentions in her statement of the sexual encounters she had with Armstrong, stating that she only relented to appease Armstrong and not cause any rifts. The Beckers invalidating and denying Night’s experiences with Armstrong are implicitly blaming the victim. Not only are they blaming Night for her traumatic experience with him, but they blame her for their tarnished reputation. Again, this is contradictory to the personas they previously maintained in the public eye. This apology merely served as proof that they never truly held those values close to them, engaging in a performative activism.

The punk scene responded to this apology in a variety of ways, from creating video essays on Youtube (Figure 6), to posting rage fueled tweets on Twitter (Figure 7). Fortunately for Armstrong, his apology is no longer regarded as the worst apology of all time. However,
every original member of SWMRS has been effectively barred from the punk scene. The sentiments expressed by the punk scene communicate a similar outrage to the sentiments expressed in July 2020. The raw and unfiltered emotions that are translated to tweets (Figure 3) serve as an example of the affective public. Oppression and injustice show themselves in numerous ways, and as previously stated, people will often act in defense of the beliefs that they hold close to them. In this case, the punk scene expressed through their social media outrage that it does not support sexual predators, and most importantly, believes victims.

Figure 6: YouTube commentary videos regarding SWMRS’ apology.
The prevailing discourses beyond SWMRS cancelation were not limited to just music fans, however, as Lydia Night also took notice of the band’s apology and their return to making music. In a video posted to Instagram (Figure 8), Night responds to the Beckers’ apology, exuding indisputable anger. In the brief video, she says:
Figure 8: Lydia Night’s Instagram video response to SWMRS’ apology.
This is the last time that I ever want to speak on this. How dare you? Honestly, how fucking dare you sit there and not only use your brother’s near-death experience as a way to gain sympathy votes before going into victim-blaming and gaslighting me once again? How dare you lie about the fact that I was actually 16? There was statutory rape, he had me give him oral sex as a minor. That is sex. Whatever people call him, I don’t have control over that. I don’t have control over if you feel ‘canceled’ or not by the situation. All I have control over is me speaking my truth and trying to heal from the traumatic experience that I had as a minor with your bandmate and best friend. If you don’t want to take any accountability, that’s fine, but I’m done talking about it. I’m fucking done. Go make your fucking music, I don’t give a shit. Just please fuck off. Fuck off and stop fucking gaslighting me. Fuck you.

Night’s unfiltered, and frankly justified, response to the irresponsible apology by SWMRS captures a sentiment that fuels what becomes the affective public. The sentiment expressed by Night and the greater punk scene compared to the sentiment expressed by SWMRS asserts a drastic dichotomy. The resentment for sexual predators in the punk scene is unequivocal. In fact, in my search for tweets and other commentary, it became clear that the conflicting perspectives were posted only by anonymous accounts. Upon inspection, the anonymous accounts appear that they were created for the purpose of posting inflammatory remarks as a means of getting attention by whatever means necessary. Regardless, for every negative comment or tweet directed at Night, it was surpassed by a significant margin by the authentic users who voiced their support.

The prevailing discourses surrounding SWMRS’s controversy have shown that SWMRS has been effectively canceled; shunned by the scene that once supported them. The ramifications of cancelation are significant. Despite the discourse occurring primarily on social media platforms, the impact of the cancelation was faced by real people in their real lives. SWMRS is no longer considered a respected member of the punk scene by any stretch of the imagination.
The SWMRS controversy proves that even for a band with familial ties to a prolific band in punk, sexual predators are not safe from being canceled.

**Gender and Power Dynamics**

In the previous section, I outlined the prevailing social media discourses regarding SWMRS’s controversy. The controversy surrounding SWMRS is reflective of the greater virtual punk scene and their response to sexual misconduct. However, the gender dynamics in the rock and punk scenes are not much different in the present day than they were when rock began. The modality for which these gender dynamics occur and the speculation on social media are the key distinguishing factors. As I previously mentioned, women are in the minority in the punk scene. The scene is predominantly controlled by white male voices, a phenomenon I have witnessed for most of my life. The hegemony present in punk and the music industry as a whole present a higher standard to which women are held. Gender plays into punk through the power struggle. The original members of SWMRS are not minorities, they have not faced any oppression, and they have certainly not faced any hinderances in their journey to stardom. Nepotism is also a large contributing factor to their success and, at the very least, their opportunities can be largely attributed to Billie Joe Armstrong’s success.

The gender and power dynamics in the punk scene have shown themselves through every bit of the SWMRS controversy. These gender and power dynamics began the moment Armstrong decided to send a message to Night. Armstrong was clearly aware of the influence and position of power he had. At SWMRS shows, Armstrong was the only member of the band who very rarely came out to interact with fans after the show. Green Day fans would often attend
SWMRS shows due to his relation to Billie Joe Armstrong, and this attracted a lot of attention to him. I am not insinuating that Armstrong is wrong in his unwillingness to be swarmed, rather, I am putting his influence into perspective. Being the son of the Green Day front man exposed Armstrong to the public eye since he was born, far before he was playing in his own band. When Armstrong chose to alienate Night from her bandmates by singling her out and communicating only to her, Night felt a pressure to respond. As Night mentioned in her statement (Figure 1), she was “very publicly 16” at the time of Armstrong’s messages. As a 22-year-old the son of a celebrity, Armstrong knew exactly what he was doing.

The gender and power dynamics were also blatant in the sexual pressures Armstrong placed on Night. I have established that Armstrong was cognizant of his position of power, and his manipulative tactics to sexually coerce Night reflect his continued abuse of this power. In the near two-year span of the relationship, Armstrong took extensive precaution to prevent it from being publicized. These precautions came across to Night as a means of protecting her, but he was only concerned with his own public perception. Armstrong was successfully able to evade responsibility for his wrongdoings for the entirety of their relationship and in the time after they broke up. In her statement (Figure 1), Night states that she did not realize she was a victim until years later. Even if she were to have realized the abuse she was experiencing at the time, it is uncertain what would have transpired. Night was significantly outnumbered by men in more powerful positions than herself, and she did not yet have the platform necessary for gaining necessary traction.

SWMRS, prior to their controversy, addressed the plague on the punk scene that sexual misconduct and abuse of minors is. While all the things they said were true, it was hypocritical
as they were aware of their own contribution. The stigma surrounding sexual abuse and assault accusations has prevailed despite the momentum from the #MeToo Movement. However, the #MeToo movement provided the courage that allowed Night to come forward with her story. It is uncertain if Night would have come forward if not for the victims who came forward before her. Night encourages other victims to come forward in her statement while acknowledging her own privilege as a white woman with a platform. This illuminates the unequal treatment of victims without similar privilege.

By pandering to their audience, SWMRS was able to create a relatable, heartwarming narrative that carried them through their entire career. They entered the punk scene with enough knowledge on exactly what they wanted to hear. Their anti-fascist, anti-capitalistic, anti-oppression “beliefs” that they communicated to their audiences are the basic principles that punk was supposed to have been established on. However, as I pointed out in Chapter 2, much of punk was still misogynist. While they may have genuinely believed in the other issues they drew attention to, SWMRS actions exemplified their blatant disregard for women behind closed doors. SWMRS concerts were meant to be a safe space and were widely advertised as such. Billie Joe Armstrong would famously put a halt to Green Day concerts to call out unwanted contact faced by audience members, cursing out the bullies. SWMRS mimicked these tactics, and even created zines to be distributed at shows that propelled this narrative.

Figure 9 depicts images of the fan zines that were distributed on the Chicago date of the “Berkeley’s on Fire” tour. I received one of them at this show, but I have since thrown it away amidst the controversy. The first page of the zine explicitly states the expectation of fans to create a safe environment for one another. However, the most chilling from the first page is
“Abusers of all kinds - you should leave now, or you will be subject to severe punishment”. The second page, however, shifts the tone completely. It begins with an inexplicable anecdote about a “birds and the bees” conversation that teenage Cole Becker had with his parents that, if true, is rather jarring. This anecdote is followed by step-by-step instructions on “How to eat pussy like a champ”, a section preceded by a disclaimer that it was co-written by someone “with female parts”.
Figure 9: SWMRS’ Chicago tour date fan zine. (Continued on following page)
I don’t think I ever outright told my parents that I had become sexually active. When I had been dating the same girl for a year and a half though, they made the correct assumption that we had in fact been making the sex thing in one form or another. I will never forget what they told me, because it has become so important to my understanding of sex as an act of parity, and ultimately inspired me to start writing about “feminism for boiz”

“Just make sure she gets off too”, my mom said.
“Hey, you know sex is a two way street I hope, right?” Said my Dad.
“You guys should really start eating girls out.” Said uncle Billie to my friends and me.

WAIT-- Did they mean to tell me that sex wasn’t inherently pleasurable for both parties???

“Shit”, I thought to myself. It was one thing to say “I am gonna eat her out so hard”-- and that cavalier attitude will certainly work for a while. Female oral sex is so often tabooified in swaths of high school boys that often just the attempt sets you many steps ahead from your teenage contemporaries. But it is a much more nuanced act, that takes practice and an understanding of what your partner likes and what turns them on, and a basic understanding of the biology of the vulva. With the help of my friend Deellan (who has female parts), I have composed a list of things to mind when going down on someone with female parts.
At the time, I did not pay much attention to the contents of the zine, as I was primarily concerned with the performance I was about to witness. In retrospect, this zine is quite frankly disturbing. The acknowledgement of abusers not being welcome at their show when they were harboring one among them is yet another astonishingly hypocritical statement. The page containing instructions for sexual activity contains “adult” language, but the verbiage insinuates it is meant for teens with no sexual experience. The zine portrays the importance of asking for consent at “every point of the way”. However, Armstrong never asked for consent, nor could he have legally obtained it from a 16-year-old child. This speaks volumes for the confidence SWMRS had that they would not be exposed for their abuse and compliance; a further indication of the power they knew they had.

The toxic gender and power dynamics in the punk scene come to culminate in abusive episodes far too frequently. Unfortunately, no one is aware of the abuse suffered behind closed doors until the damage has been done and a statement is publicized. This leaves the responsibility to the victim, who must publicize their experiences to be taken seriously. SWMRS told audiences who they were in their questionable zines and arrogant behavior on social media. However, the rose-colored glasses through which fans view their idols can shield these discrepancies from view. In retrospect, I noticed the peculiar manner to which they conducted themselves on social media, but I was too loyal of a fan to notice. They incited bullying, patronized their audiences, and carried themselves as if they assumed a legendary position in the punk scene without earning it. For example, I can recall instances where Max Becker would post condescending remarks about Greta Van Fleet, a band that rose to popularity due to their similarities to Led Zeppelin. Greta Van Fleet rose from humble beginnings, hailing from a small
town in Michigan. It bothered me that Becker would post something so passive aggressive about a band of similar notoriety, especially when they experienced more trials and tribulations to get to where they are. As a fan of Greta Van Fleet, the remarks certainly bothered me, but I’d brush them off as I believed that everyone is entitled to their own opinion. The SWMRS controversy is not only exemplar of the flaws in the punk scene, but it encapsulates how loyal fans are able to see beyond their better judgment. When an artist or band has a generally good reputation, turning a blind eye to problematic behavior is common. In hindsight, however, with the rose-colored glasses removed, there is a clear flaw in how audiences hold their idols accountable.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

This thesis examined music scenes as they perpetuate shared values and ideals derived from musical contexts, as well as creating social identities. In addition, this research assessed how fandoms have migrated to social media and cultivated a democratic culture wherein they hold their idols accountable. The rapid dissemination of information on social media cultivates unfiltered discussion. I have concluded that music scenes are a nuanced form of community that can be best described by the musical genre and the values attached to them. Music performance is a form of collaborative art that comes with moral and ethical standards. Fans who align themselves to a digital fandom inherit a partisan identity that is socially constructed by the musicians they support. Music fans create personas out of the idealized perceptions of behavior that the scenes help to perpetuate.

The “SWMRS incident” illuminates a greater issue in the power imbalances that result in manipulation, coercion, and abuse of the less powerful. SWMRS deceived audiences by perpetuating socially acceptable narratives. Their performative activism on social media and at their shows asserts their awareness of the values maintained by the punk scene. SWMRS took very progressive stances on feminism and racial discrimination. For instance, in the Summer of 2020, SWMRS donated a portion of ticket and merchandise sales to the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as prisoners who were being held for nonviolent crimes. Actions like these
created the narrative that by being a fan of SWMRS, one directly contributes to important causes.

The SWMRS controversy addresses the larger issue within popular culture. Social media have created a conduit for audiences to account for everything a notable figure does. The private life of a celebrity is no longer elusive, as it is broadcast to the masses. There are social media accounts dedicated to following and tracking the whereabouts of celebrities, which diminishes a celebrities’ privacy and security. Celebrities are human beings like the rest of us, but they are held on a pedestal by their fanbases. Therefore, there is a new level of responsibility that comes with being in the public eye. Before social media, there wasn’t a way to keep tabs on celebrities in the manner that we do today. Paparazzi, magazine covers, and other news media outlets were the primary source of disseminating celebrity gossip. Social media allow for rapid dissemination of messages. Therefore, with such easy access to information, audiences can hold celebrities accountable for their actions. This is important in the way we navigate cancel culture and the democratic agency held by fanbases. I addressed the ways the punk scene maintains their shared values through collective action and democratic agency on social media as they hold the disruptors accountable. These disruptors of music scenes reflect poorly on the rest of the members, provoking shame, disappointment, and grief. Problematic behavior in the age of social media is immortalized forever, contributing to the cancelation and exile from a scene.

There is still much work to do in dismantling the oppressive system that works against victims of sexual abuse. This thesis merely scratches the surface in unpacking the prevailing misogyny in not only the punk scene but harbored by the figures in powerful positions. Future research may address the broader issue of misogyny in the punk scene, providing an overview of
the repetitive nature of these incidents. The “pop punk apology” is common practice in the rock, punk, and pop punk scenes as musicians are frequently disrupting the scene and issuing public apologies. The punk scene has been plagued by bandmember misconduct, and the remedy remains uncertain. Abusers hide in plain sight, and they are rarely brought to justice. The work that the #MeToo movement has done to give platforms to victims is admirable. Unfortunately, victims are abused and until there is reform, there will be no peace.

The SWMRS controversy is not an isolated occurrence, as many notable figures have disrupted their public personas by engaging in problematic behavior. However, musicians are not the only notable figures who have disappointed their audiences by acting as such. Audiences are left to grapple with the abrasions between the work and the creator of the work. Upon researching the SWMRS controversy and all its facets, I can conclude that separating the art from the artist is quite difficult. Today, when I hear SWMRS’ music, I feel a sense of guilt and grief. The joy and excitement that I used to feel when a SWMRS song came on has completely dissipated. It is painful to listen to a band that has not only done something unredeemable, but tricked their audiences into believing they stood for something they didn’t.

I assert that Green Day paved the way for SWMRS as they defied the odds to achieve notoriety. Green Day has faced controversy for the left-leaning political statements they present in their music and rejected all criticisms, doubling down on their beliefs. The punk scene that has kept Green Day alive is the same punk scene that celebrated and uplifted SWMRS. Green Day’s formation in 1985 and their subsequent rise to fame occurred in an era before social media. As I have established, social media are currently a large contributor to garnering success for a musician. SWMRS is a product of nepotism and had every opportunity to succeed in the punk
They had all the best mentors, access to instruments, money, power, and are white men. They were given the opportunity to use their platform and impact to write their own story, creating an identity for themselves that was separate from Green Day. I speculate that Armstrong’s feelings of being overshadowed by his father and the pressures of living up to high standards created a need to feel powerful to those weaker than him. Unfortunately, Lydia Night was the victim of this power imbalance. This thesis demonstrated that even with a sturdy foundation, the structure can still collapse if mismanaged and abused.
REFERENCES


