LUND UNIVERSITY • CENTRE FOR EAST AND SOUTH-EAST ASIAN STUDIES

“This was the reason I was born”

Contextualizing Issues and Choices of a Japanese Woman Musician

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the Japanese music industry from a liberal feminist perspective, as academic literature rarely discusses Japanese music – especially niche genres like metal. After pinpointing a gap in the literature on the subject, and after outlining issues in the Japanese music industry, this study sheds light on the reasons that lead Japanese women musicians to thrive outside of major Japanese record companies. The direct experience of a Japanese power metal singer, who has worked both in her home country and in Europe, generates the main body of data. Specific aspects such as gender stereotypes, musical genres and language barrier are taken into account as parameters affecting women musicians' choices. The analysis focuses on an in-depth semi-structured interview with the singer, to obtain her insights on these aspects and to inquire on her choices as an independent female musician in Japan.

The aim of this article is to contextualize a specific case within the Japanese music scene, instead of generalizing the experience of a single female musician as applicable to all female musicians. The main findings of this research project highlight issues for further research: economic support for independent artists and the lack of inclusive spaces for female musicians.

Keywords: Japanese metal music, Japanese music industry, Female musicians, Feminist theory, Choice feminism

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1. INTRODUCTION

I have been a fan of metal music for most of my life. My passion for this genre has brought me to write about it and even perform it myself. The amount of artistry and courage required to approach this genre is often underestimated. Even more so as a woman. I remember a phone conversation with an established female metal singer during a promotional interview. We were talking about new albums, tours, songwriting and shooting a video for the upcoming single. Towards the end of the interview I asked a more casual question, as musicians tend to have the funniest antics to share. I was interested in weird questions she had been asked in the past and, among quizzes and fan polls, the singer mentioned one recurring question that stood out as a statement more than a light joke: "How does it feel to be the only woman in a metal band?". This thesis was born as a way to investigate one small aspect of the broad subtext referenced by that question, and to contextualize it in Japan, one of the leading music markets in the world.

Music, in fact, permeates Japan's everyday life, from the jingles signaling the departure of a crowded subway train to the traditional *enka*, one of the most popular genres on karaoke club catalogues. Though vast in forms and purposes, there is one element that is often overlooked in academic research on music: female musicians, and their own experiences. In particular, some female Japanese musicians work outside of the strict record deals proposed by major labels, both within the country and abroad. The reasons behind these women's actions have rarely been investigated in academic literature. This study thus analyzes the position of Japanese women outside of the mainstream music industry through a single-case study of a female Japanese musician who works independently and has experience in the Japanese music scene as well as the European one, and by fitting it into the broader context female musicians operate in, as studied by academic literature.

1.1 Aim Of The Study

The relevance of this study is, first and foremost, to fill a gap in the current literature, where Japanese female musicians are not widely featured. This scarcity of research on Japanese female musicians is tied to a wider scarcity of material on the Japanese music scene, especially the part of the scene that strays from the mainstream business of popular music. It is also, as a study that is rooted in feminist theory and gender studies, a way to give voice to women in the field, by featuring their own words on the matter. In fact, as is demonstrated through the literature review, the question posed by this paper has been rarely touched upon by academics in the past, and it has even more rarely inquired on independent music and *niche* genres such as heavy metal and its subgenres, usually tackling the widely popular fields of J-pop and visual kei instead. Providing a direct account

of a Japanese musician's experience is further intended to give voice to insiders, with parameters that are outlined in detail in chapter 4. The data analysis demonstrates that the account of an insider generates original contributions to scientific research, by highlighting issues that are only observed by being in direct contact with the subject of the research itself.

1.2 Research Questions

The point of departure of this research stems from inquiring on the relationship between female musicians and the Japanese mainstream music industry. As a business that is renowned for strict conditions, often extending its control beyond the artist's creative work and into their personal life, this thesis asks: how do female musicians thrive outside of the Japanese music industry, without relying on major Japanese labels? There are a number of sub-questions that have been taken into account to frame the analysis in a more specific light. These sub-questions mainly involve factors affecting women musicians' choices. How does being a woman affect a musician's career? As a resource for approaching international audiences, how is language – namely, English – used by Japanese musicians? And, considering more specific circumstances that influence women's decisions, does musical genre lead to differences in how female musicians approach their work? These factors are used as core points for the literature review, to examine if and how they are featured in current debates, and for the data collection, to investigate how the interviewee's experience has been impacted by each of them, and with what consequences.

1.3 Research Background

As Code states in her *Encyclopedia*, "The starting point of feminist theory, both then and now, is in women's lives: in their widely diverse experiences and situations" (2000:XIX). This statement is reflected in Bell Hooks's volume, where the author also brings forward another side to the debate, that of men's involvement in the feminist movement (1984). Hooks analyzes the origins of the feminist movement, arguing that the fact that it was originated by women who painted man as a powerful, misogynist oppressor generated a rhetoric of conflict. While equality was still the ultimate goal, the representation of the struggle as an opposition between oppressor and oppressed led to the implication that "the empowerment of women would necessarily be at the expense of men" (Hooks 1984:68). The consequence of this initial approach was that the movement was intended as "women only". At the same time, Hooks recalls that feminism would not acknowledge other factors behind discrimination, such as class and race (*ibid*:69). This position, while still present today, has been contrasted by a renewed discussion on intersectionality, brought forward for instance by the founders of Black Live Matters (Jackson 2016:375).

In recent times, close to liberal notions, feminism has also become a matter of choice. According to liberal feminists, under certain conditions, any choice can be a feminist choice. The rise of "choice feminism" began in the 1990s with third wave feminism, and today it is generating a positive image in the popular understanding of the term (Thwaites 2017:55-56). Research on choice feminism argues that "potentially, every decision a woman makes can be feminist, as long as it is thoughtful and politically conscious" (*ibid*:57). What Thwaites describes in her article can be directly referred to what was previously reported on the earlier stages of the feminist movement, with an opposition between man and women that generated distrust. After all, the term "feminazi" is still widely used in modern debates in non-academic settings. Nonetheless, Hooks brings forward reactionary separatism as a factor behind the marginalization of feminism (1984:73).

According to the theorizations that are expanded upon in chapter 3, choice feminism strives for inclusiveness. This, along with this thesis targeting a research question within Asian Studies, warrants an excursus on how feminist research features in academic literature issues of marginalization. It is particularly necessary to investigate if or how feminist academic literature shares ties with Japan, as a context for research and as a source for scholarly voices.

When it comes to the global research agenda, geography is a marginalizing element, particularly relevant for this study. Wöhrer (2016) accounts for research in gender studies by distinguishing the geographical origin of researchers and publications. In her work, it is immediately evident that most of the academic writing on the subject is produced in European or American institutions, making these the biggest platforms for debate, with the language barriers and the socio-cultural biases that this situation implies. In fact, the current section of this thesis only features one Asian author, for a mere lack of availability in libraries and databases. One chapter in an edited book on feminism that did focus on Japan was nonetheless written by a US researcher, who was recollecting her personal experience (Alexander 2014). This brief investigation on the lack of geographical diversity of the voices in scholarly research supports the suggestion of a liberal, more inclusive theoretical framework for this thesis.

Nonetheless, a closer outlook on feminism in Japan is available in Tomomi Yamaguchi's work, which is the result of extensive fieldwork conducted with the Women's Action Group, a Japanese feminist group (Yamaguchi 2005:50). Yamaguchi put together a timeline – *nenpyō*, a peculiar method for documenting historical events in Japan – of the group's history, which prompted a reflection on recording events pertaining to the Group's activity from a feminist perspective. Yamaguchi mentions one particular instance where the Women's Action Group recorded a case of sexual assault from 1994 in the timeline by describing it as rape, despite other feminist groups at the time discussing the event only as sexual harassment (2005:55). Her account is relevant both as a

recollection of feminist history in Japan, and also as an example of how feminism from peripheral areas finds space in English-speaking academic literature.

Yamaguchi also writes about the challenges she faces as a "Japanese feminist anthropologist studying feminism in Japan" (2007:584). Her discussion touches upon power relations in anthropologic research, which, according to her, is often conducted in specific conditions of power relations between the researcher and the researched, with the former holding higher status than the latter (*ibid.*). Her position as a Japanese anthropologist, studying an environment she has been familiar with from birth, opens up a wide array of opportunities and new points of view.

The bigger picture of contemporary feminist appears as a fragmented, but also introspective one, plagued by internal divisions but also striving to progress and understand itself more clearly through debate and research. For the purpose of this study, a deeper insight needs to be reserved to how feminist academic literature relates to music, first in general, but most importantly to the Asian and the Japanese context.

The arguments raised in this overview of the main trends and debates in feminism are taken into consideration in greater detail throughout the thesis, as part of the literature review, theoretical framework and data analysis. Feminist theory has developed from a fragmented movement to a platform of diverse standpoints. Nevertheless, feminist research still faces challenges. The issue of marginalization faced by Japanese scholars in English-speaking academic research resonates with the marginalization of female Japanese musicians and ties into the scarcity of academic studies about music and women in Japan. This, in turn, emphasizes the relevance of the case study analyzed by this thesis, with a Japanese female heavy metal singer making strong entrepreneurial choices to retain her creative freedom, a case that is supported in this thesis through the language of liberal feminism.

1.4 Research Design

The main focus of the research is on a particular female Japanese heavy metal singer, whose direct verbal account provides the founding body of data to be analyzed. A detailed literature review critically discusses feminist theory and feminist research about music, within the fields of musicology and sociology, to identify trends and debates throughout history, and to examine if and how Japanese music has been featured. It is followed by a brief outline of the background of the Japanese music industry from its early stages to modern day as presented in currently published academic literature, to look at the history and the developments of the field. After determining the current situation of the Japanese music industry, with the gaps that academic research still has not investigated, a theoretical and methodological discussion is included to validate and illustrate the

research process. This thesis then proceeds as a qualitative study with data collected from one semi-structured interview in order to answer the research question in the context of this singer's career, and, based on her account, to relate it to the experience of other Japanese musicians either mentioned by the artist or in academic literature. The interview is examined from a liberal feminist standpoint and according to the factors raised by the sub-questions. The available data is framed within the context of the academic literature reviewed in the first part of the paper.

This thesis does not seek to generalize one musician's account into a shared experience. As a single case study, it has to be framed and understood within its specific context, with the aid of published literature. The methodology employed throughout the paper details how life history research, interviews, and single case studies can contribute to the generation of knowledge. The framework of liberal feminism is employed throughout the research project as a tool for the creation of a new, more inclusive space for women's choices and empowerment. The paper concludes with final remarks that suggest further directions for feminist research on women musicians in Japan, based on the findings that have surfaced from the literature review and the data analysis.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter consists of a critical account of academic literature relevant for the research subject. As a thesis that investigates female musicians from Japan from a liberal feminist viewpoint, it is necessary to generate awareness on how feminist research has dealt with music during the years, and if the currently available literature leaves any gaps that this thesis can fill. Feminist musicology and, in general, feminist studies about music have a history for being influenced by biases on musical genres, which has contributed to the rarity of academic material on popular and niche music styles.

This research project is based on one interview with a female Japanese musician. Consequently, feminist research is critically reviewed to identify if and how it discusses the Japanese context, and from which point of view. In fact, the scarcity of literature on Japan written by Japanese researchers warrants this thesis as a space to give voice to insider experiences on the Japanese music scene. Additionally, a deeper understanding of the economic and social mechanisms that permeate and sustain the Japanese music industry as it is today is a crucial resource. A proper portrayal of the Japanese context, framed within the global picture of the music industry, enables a clearer grasp on the issues raised by the interview itself.

Lastly, with such a defined picture of academic literature on feminism and Japanese music outlined, this overview identifies core gaps and questions to look into during the data analysis.

2.1 Women's Studies: A Feminist Approach To Music

Despite the recent surge in academic literature on popular culture and popular music, popular music (and feminist musicology) was not originally held in much regard by scholars. As Bayton (1992) recollects, feminist research on music was historically more focused on classical music and, according to the author's claims, popular music – intended as both pop and, especially, rock music – was "simply not taken seriously" (1992:53) as a research subject. This implies that most of the academic conferences on music and gender used to feature works predominantly on classical music, and that musicologists with a background as classical musicians often expressed disbelief over the idea of analyzing pop music (*ibid.*). Bayton even goes as far as suggesting that researching pop or rock music in music departments at the time was perceived as "irretrievably deviant" (*ibid.*). Bayton's critique continues to musicologists, who look at the musical score without relating it to the social realm within which it exists (1992:54).

Bayton identifies another issue in the lack of published studies on women in music in the 90s. According to her, most sociologists who write in this particular field are men, who usually played in bands in the past (1992:56). She places this in direct contrast with women sociologist musicians, a

much rarer combination. Her own study was born out of her previous experience as a musician, and, coincidentally, this thesis is also the product of a long-time experience in singing and music journalism. A separate analysis could be built from this combination of experiences in music and research about music, by asking if, for women, having past experiences in music is a source of legitimation in a male-dominated field. Indeed, "the male dominance of the music industry is evident in the packaging and promoting of female popular musicians who are pressured into conventional stereotypes that emphasize their sex appeal and domesticity" (Faupel and Schmutz 2011:27). After all, legitimacy still constitutes a problem even for women who have a successful career in music (*ibid.*:22), without delving into the combination with academic research.

Faupel and Schmutz raise some challenging points on gendered emotions, when it comes to music created by female artists. In their study, they analyze how female artists' emotions are received by reviews on the press in relation to the stereotype that sees women as more emotional and sentimental than their male counterparts, who are instead stoic and intelligent (*ibid.*:29-30). The authors describe it as a factor for authenticity and a risk at the same time, but both sides are originated by stereotypes about female emotionality, which depict women as either better at managing emotions than men, or hysterical – an adjective used in reviews for Janis Joplin, while Patti Smith is described as "schizophrenic" (2011:30). This changes when the content shifts from popular music to other genres, for instance music that does not involve lyrics or hard rock and metal, where lyrics touch upon a wider set of themes. The association of a musician's gender with expectations of themes in their lyrical work is also a source of thoughts about stereotypes in itself.

Feminist studies in music, nevertheless, are still affected by some of the gaps that the current paper is set to explore. McClary's article on musicology and feminism in the 1990s brings to the fore past and new trends in the field, but when she mentions female composers who have been included along their male colleagues only in recent times, she only lists Western artists (1993:400). While it is surely not feasible to mention artists from all countries in a brief list, the primary attention to the Western context raises questions about the issues of intersectionality that have been presented in earlier sections. Throughout her paper, McClary also discusses feminist music criticism, noting that "the earliest instances of feminist criticism in music appeared in Europe" (1993:410), but failing to provide examples from anywhere outside of Europe or America. This absence could also be explained in a more pragmatic perspective, as perhaps research tools and language barriers made it more difficult for other foreign authors and works to emerge. Nonetheless, McClary's work is a paradigmatic study on feminist musicology that has generated further and broader research on the topic.

Despite this, currently available research on the subject does demonstrate that the Japanese music scene was already vibrant and on its way to developing its modern features since the 1920s. Nomura was already trying to overcome the aforementioned language barrier in 1963, giving a survey of the "present situation in musicological studies in Japan for foreign scholars who generally do not understand the Japanese language at all" (1963:47). Nomura gives important information on the history of musicology in Japan, relating it to Japan's long tradition of musicological studies (1963:47). In more contemporary times, universities and the Japanese Musicological Society are also mentioned (*ibid.*). These institutions "promote musicology in Japan by mutual and cooperative activities of scholars who are engaging in musicological studies" (Nomura 1963:48) and demonstrate that, within the country, scholarly activities pertaining to music have been historically widespread, while simultaneously inscribed within the national context.

This evidence suggests that when there is the need to create a bridge in order to give voice to marginalized or less known points of view, such as the Japanese ones, the bridging usually originates from the peripheral side of the gap. At the same time, regardless of geographical concerns, feminist research on music has delved into popular genres, surpassing early preconceptions, but it has approached the field on a superficial level, leaving room for deeper insight on the wildly different sub-contexts observed in the multiple genres within popular music itself. An inclusive, feminist approach can contribute to filling this gap by giving space to diverse voices from peripheral genres and geographical areas.

1.2 General Overview Of The Japanese Music Industry

Japan is often commended by foreign literature, but primarily by foreign press, for being one of the strongest music markets in the world: wherein the global context sees labels constantly struggle to increase ever-descending sales, Japan, as of 2015, is the second largest music market in the world with its $2.6 billion in trade value (US Department of Commerce 2016). The Japanese population is decreasing and, despite hosting a strong market, sales are still slightly decreasing, which led some people involved in the industry, such as music producer Norikazu Yamaguchi, to suggest an expansion to the overseas market (Quantone Music 2016).

However, some of the elements that permitted the continued stability of the Japanese music industry throughout the years do not necessarily exist in the same way in other markets. One of the biggest sources of revenue for the Japanese music industry is CD sales and rentals. CD sales are much higher than in other markets, where streaming and digital downloads have quickly become the preferred format by most audiences. It is fairly recent news that major labels such as Warner Music earn more from streaming services revenue than from digital downloads and from physical

copies, both CDs and vinyl (Cookson 2016). Japan, on the contrary, has laws in place to ensure legal CD rentals and, despite the preoccupation from labels that rentals might affect negatively retail sales (as people can copy the songs from CD to their personal devices), it has been proven that higher rental leads to higher retail sales (Asai 2011). CD sales have not plummeted like in other big markets also due to a number of incentives to buying physical copies that are almost entirely unique to Japan. Physical CD singles are still widespread, along with a number of variant editions of the same product, each with its exclusive bonus content (WIPO 2015). The popularity of idol groups in J-pop is another resource, as "meet&greet" events draw many fans to CD stores so that they can meet the artists and get an autograph on their CDs and merchandise (WIPO 2015).

On the other hand, though, these options are only available to artists who are sponsored by a label that can organize, sponsor and manage such events. Smaller bands, who perform a limited number of live shows and cannot afford to distribute a wide variety of merchandise, cannot rely on these methods to promote sales.

Looking back to the origins of the Japanese music industry, Mitsui's (2004) article on two specific songs sparks a broader analysis of Japanese music in the 1920s, where the first commercial successes of adaptations of Western music prompted the commission of further original recordings and introduced some dynamics which are still relevant to this day. At the time, the Japanese music industry would only reproduce already popular recordings, instead of creating new music (Mitsui 2004:66). Mitsui identifies 1927 as the year that saw a decisive development in the Japanese music industry, with the creation of three Japanese recording companies as joint ventures with overseas enterprises (*ibid.*). The composition and recording of original pieces slowly began around a year and a half after this first innovation, which progressed also through the implementation of elements from Western music and the Japanese adaptations of entire songs originally written in English (Mitsui 2004). The commercial success of these songs "was highly significant in that it is very likely that they prompted the Japanese recording industry into commissioning and recording original material as a major part of their business strategies" (Mitsui 2004:79), as well as leading to a closer connection between the music and the film industry, "something that was to become a defining characteristic of the Japanese music market" (*ibid*:80).

Hosokawa (2005) recounts the history of the Japanese music industry until more recent times, framing his timeline from the point of view of music as part of the entertainment industry, and describing the modern music industry in Japan as a result of the general development of consumerism among the population. Hosokawa also suggests that the "industry" aspect of music had begun developing in Japan since the 17th century through the organization required for staging *kabuki* theatre productions, well before the arrival of foreign influences (2005:300). Bringing the

timeline initiated by Mitsui beyond the 1930s, Hosokawa mentions how the economic depression of the period did not affect the music industry due to the "tie-up" strategy, which would tie different types of media under the same creative work, to offer more products (2005:303). The previously mentioned plethora of merchandise offered to the public to promote J-pop artists is certainly derived from this strategy. According to the author, while the Japanese defeat in the war in 1945 did not affect the music industry, the American presence on Japanese soil created an important workplace for country, jazz and rock musicians, as well as making America "synonymous with advanced novelty and progressiveness, in contrast to a "backward" Japan" (Hosokawa 2005:304-5). The public launch of television in 1953 constitutes another turning point for the Japanese music industry, with the rise of music programs that reinforced the technologized intimacy between the vocalist and the listeners, leading to the modern figure of the idol (Hosokawa 2005:305-6). However, Hosokawa's work on contemporary times is focused on idols and karaoke, leaving out of the frame other genres – rock included – mentioned earlier throughout the chapter.

As the main focus of this single-case study is a heavy metal singer, a closer look to published literature about heavy metal music in Japan is essential. However, as outlined throughout this thesis, Japanese metal music is not a popular research subject. What transpires from this study is that what little is available, is usually related to very specific bands and chronologically scattered.

Academic literature on heavy metal music in Japan is usually centered on levels of appreciations of different music genres by specifically defined audiences. The findings of a survey research conducted by Wells and Tokinoya (1998) indicate that Western heavy metal is one of the least appreciated genres among high school students, along with punk. At the same time, rock music is the most favored one (Wells & Tokinoya 1998:46). the general dislike for heavy metal and punk is motivated by the authors as stereotype-driven (*ibid.*). The study analyzed the surveyed students and discovered that female students preferred classical and country, while male "liked heavy metal, rock, techno, and punk significantly" (*ibid.*). This gender-based divide has to be taken into account on a wider timeline: teenagers who dislike a genre are less likely to pursue it as musicians and as audiences. A more recent study (Brown 2012) investigates music preferences among university students, whom Wells and Tokinoya credited as preferring Western music slightly more than younger teens (1998:45). Brown's research associates music preferences with personality dimensions, and once again found out that metal is among the least liked genres while rock is one of the most appreciated, even for university students (2012:264). The data collected by Brown also shows that there is little difference in preferences between female and male students, except for a few genres such as opera, more appreciated by female students (*ibid.*).

Nonetheless, studies on music preferences are affected by the blurry definitions of genres. Stylistic contamination informs the difficulty of labeling music in precise categories, especially when artists incorporate elements from different genres into one style. On the other hand, it is a phenomenon that brings new points of view in scientific research about music in the Japanese socio-cultural context.

Contamination is in fact especially present in environments of interaction between different cultures, such as the island of Okinawa. The presence of American soldiers on the island drew rock musicians to bars and clubs during the 1960s-70s occupation (Roberson 2011). The town of Koza in particular became a harbor for rock music, and even though the first wave of American-oriented music in bars was played by foreign musicians, in the 1960s Okinawans started picking up electric guitars and drums, "eventually dominating the local music scene" (Roberson 2011:598). Roberson portrays Koza as a "culture contact zone" (*ibid.*), already differing from the high school preferences presented in Wells and Tokinoya's study, who surveyed a number of adolescents across the country in the 1990s.

Presently, heavy metal in Japan, and especially metal played by Japanese bands, is undergoing a stage of re-discovery, especially by foreign audiences. *Kawaii* metal act Babymetal is discussed on The Guardian, and is featured in big metal festivals throughout Europe and the US. In April 2016, the band performed on The Late Show with Stephen Colbert (Ashcraft 2016). X-Japan, a popular speed metal, visual kei Japanese band, has recently distributed their own documentary film as far as the UK. (Chen 2017).

2.3 Finding the Gap

As previously mentioned, the Japanese mainstream music industry remains one of the largest music markets in the world, despite generally declining sales in the sector. However, top-selling artists in Japan are often little known to foreign audiences. Toth (2008) suggests that this might primarily happen due to the language barrier. At the same time, performers who cross the border might gain a big following abroad but not in their home country. Furthermore, the literature on Japan's music industry is often oriented to audiences more than artists. For instance, Asai's overview of the Japanese music industry places a great focus on the distribution of music through the most effective media in the country, television (2008:100). Asai (2008:100-102) also confirms what has already been stated regarding Japan's (almost) leading role in the music market, and supports the notion that the most popular music in the country is either J-pop or traditional music (*enka*). This leaves a gap when it comes to international artists, who are discussed on a smaller scale, but most importantly when it comes to other genres played by Japanese artists. In the case of

Japanese metal music, academic literature does not seem to hold any answers, while – Western – periodicals and online magazines mostly view it under sensationalist lenses (Revolvermag 2014).

Academic research on Japanese music does not stray from the path that has been identified in the aforementioned account. Most researchers who write about music and Japan either focus on classical music, reflecting Bayton's account in the previous section of this paper, or they write about popular music in the form of J-pop and the traditional *enka*. Several examples can be pinpointed in academic literature, with engaging perspectives on gender roles and power relations between female artists and other figures of the industry. One such study analyses image-making in *enka* music from the 1990s, discussing how these images "reinforce gender stereotypes of what it means to be a man or a woman" (Yano 1997:116). A similar approach could hold fruitful results if applied to other genres present in the Japanese music scenes and to other, past or present, timeframes.

There is a specific statement in Yano's article that equates to a breakthrough for feminist analysis of the music industry. Yano, in fact, recalls a quote from a Nippon Columbia Records director according to whom "a singer is "*mawari no tsukutta mono*," something created by those around him/her" (1997:119). Faupel and Schmutz further support the previous quote, articulating that "at recording firms, women are often channeled into work as publicity officers (Faupel, Schmutz 2011:21). This is important for several reasons. Firstly, it is a statement by a Japanese label director, and thus it carries with it the experience the director carries with him from working in a certain context. Secondly, it raises the question of who the people around the artist are. They could be the artist's management, suggesting a fabricated image, but they could be the audience, who also generates assumptions based on how the artist appears to them.

While audience expectations cannot be taken out of the picture with independent music, image control by label and management can definitely be exchanged with greater creative freedom, perhaps to build a fabricated image all the same, but still one derived from the artist's individual decisions. Japanese idol group have been extensively analyzed for the objectification of the artists, who become products where music is accompanied by a wide variety of other goods. The female idol group AKB48 is an extreme example of the merchandising of the artist. Its members are subject to popular vote in order to appear more prominently during their performances (Kiuchi 2017:30). The competitive environment generated by these mechanics creates a pressure around the artists, but also around the audience who is directly responsible for their careers. The focus on fan engagement to maintain sales in Japanese popular music is potentially harmful. AKB48 members have been subject to physical risks due to their close contact with fans (Kiuchi 2017). Physical harm can also lead to psychological harm, and "it is common for Japanese idols to be forbidden to date"

(Kiuchi 2017:40), which symbolizes the imposed restrictions these artists have to accept to be able to make progress in their career.

Indubitably, "these limited opportunities for women are often the result of gender stereotyping, *i.e.*, broad generalizations about women (and men)" (Faupel and Schmutz 2011:21). Faupel and Schmutz's study continues with an analysis of media coverage of musicians in order to highlight discrimination and stereotyped biases that negatively affect female artists, but, once again, their focus is on mainstream music and on the European and American market.

In a country such as Japan, where both female and male idol groups are hugely popular, would a similar research hold different results? On the contrary, if Western media and music critics generally have a gendered, stereotyped and de-legitimizing view of female musicians, wouldn't this endanger what Japanese women musicians who work abroad consider a freer environment? A deeper theoretical discussion of choice feminism is required to properly frame the opposition between the strict, gendered environment of mainstream music and the different ways that women musicians can interact with it – or bypass it altogether – in an empowering manner.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Liberal Feminism, A Matter Of Choice

The music industry brings together issues of body image, representation, sexuality, ethnicity, stereotyping, and ties them to both artistic and economic factors. As debated earlier by Kiuchi, Faupel and Schmutz, women's artistic success in the music industry often comes at the expense of their empowerment. Feminist theory has been discussed from a general perspective in the literature review, but to frame this research project it is necessary to examine the study from an angle that can take into consideration all the nuanced aspects that come into play when women musicians are involved. Liberal feminism, as described by Gerson, is able to encompass these different elements by subscribing "to a worldview that is variegated and dynamic" (2002:794). An outlook on feminism that sees it as a collectivity in loose terms enables a greater range of comprehension of identities and perspectives, which keeps at bay "the problems of essentialism and exclusion that plagued the second wave" (Ferguson 2010:248). While most feminist research on liberalism and choice is rooted in the Western context, a dynamic, inclusive feminism is the starting point for a wider space that draws in voices from different identities, Japan's among others. In light of the issue raised by the previous outline on academic literature as still lacking when it comes to featuring variegated voices, liberal feminism opens a path for progress in the wider contextualization of dynamics of oppression and empowerment.

Having discussed how women musicians working under major labels are often presented to the public through fabricated images (*mawari no tsukutta mono*), and how strict the control over such images is, research has in recent years also delved into how women have come to own their images and shape them as tools for empowerment and self-determination. Yeagle asks: "Can women exert their own agency by choosing which they would like to be?" (2013:3-4). Her analysis of female rap artist Nicki Minaj suggests that Minaj's success as a "powerful female performer" (*ibid.*:5) is the result of her capability of owning the "bad bitch trope" and turning it to her advantage for financial and artistic success, while placing herself "as a positive role model and advocate of female empowerment" (*ibid.*). Despite this being an extreme case, that does not necessarily find direct correspondences in Japanese music or in heavy metal, it closely reflects liberal feminism as a diverse environment, instead of a dualistic one (Gerson 2002:794). Black female rappers have been creating spaces for themselves in a male-dominated genre, often promoting "self-constructed identity and intellectual prowess" (Keyes 2000:256).

In such a quickly evolving environment as the music industry, these artists are bringing on stage "the view that today all choices are feminist" (Ferguson 2010:247). Choice feminism "understands freedom as the capacity to make individual choices, and oppression as the inability to

choose. Consequently, as long as a woman can say that she has chosen to do something, it is considered by choice feminists to be an expression of her liberation" (Ferguson 2010:248). This view implies that women musicians can, for instance, decide to work with labels, despite the drawbacks involved in terms of artistic freedom – and artists like Minaj are showing how women can empower themselves under such circumstances. On the other hand, women can also decide to work independently, and empower themselves outside of the rigid structure of the mainstream music business.

Ferguson recalls how choice feminism sees all women's choices as feminist and as expressions of freedom, but she also warns against interpreting this as a post-feminist scenario where feminism has already achieved all that could be achieved (*ibid.*). Both Ferguson and Gerson claim that a more liberal approach to feminism is partially driven by an opposition to radical feminism. Nicki Minaj has indeed been criticized for writing misogynistic lyrics, for dissing other women as bitches and for generally endorsing rather than rejecting "the manifest chauvinism of mainstream rap culture" (Yeagle 2013:7). Yeagle, however, explains this as a business matter rather than a conceptual one, positing that a censored, less confrontational style would not distinguish her from other female competitors and ultimately succumb to "the broader criticisms that she is not good enough to rap alongside men" (2013:8).

This controversial position – is choice really empowering? – is a core point of the ongoing discussion in feminist research. It is, furthermore, a fitting perspective for this study, where a female artist has both experienced the freedom, and the burdens, of independent music-making, while also facing the challenges of working to emerge from the shadow of the mainstream music industry or becoming a part of it, knowing the restrictions it entails.

3.2 Choosing Liberal Feminism

Presenting liberal feminism as the theoretical foundation for this thesis calls for a critical discussion of liberal feminist theory, to illustrate the reasons that identify choice feminism as a more fitting theoretical approach than other feminist viewpoints. Groenhout (2002) writes in detail about liberal feminism to conceptually legitimize it. Groenhout argues in favor of the individualism promoted by liberal feminism in regards to agency. According to her, "the history of the struggle against women's oppression has shown that women need to be able to make decisions for and about their lives as individuals" (2002:55). Despite the ongoing disagreements among different feminist standpoints, Groenhout suggests that making individual decisions about their own lives "has been a central right in the fight for women's liberation" (*ibid.*).

Liberalism also stands as the only moral framework that illustrates the faults of gender oppression "so clearly, so straightforwardly, or so incontrovertibly" (*ibid.*:56). Following Wollstonecraft's focus on women as rational agents, even the most conservative arguments against women's liberation can be unequivocally countered (*ibid.*). Wollstonecraft, however, does not see women as rational agents in a static way, but as the result of a process that beings from infancy and that culminates in individuality as "a social product rather than a premise" (Gerson 2002:800).

Another argument in favor of choice feminism is provided by Ferguson, who explains choice feminism as a reaction to commonly known critiques against feminism "that disaffect potential allies" (2010:248). Three main criticisms are listed, ranging from feminism being too radical, to feminists being exclusionary and judgmental (*ibid.*). Ferguson's article portrays choice feminism as, essentially, a consequence of feminism seeking to appeal to the widest range of potential allies, even those who seek minimal involvement, or who are misled by the threatening image of feminism commonly portrayed to audiences. Nonetheless, her debate is not divisive, but reconciling: choice feminism, with its attention for individuality and inclusivity, can learn from other feminists to address politics instead of rejecting it, and to exercise judgement instead of being judgmental (Ferguson 2010:251).

Choice feminism is a developing, dynamic theoretical framework. It is debated as both the result of other feminist challenges and debates, and a platform for interaction and inclusion of different opinions within and outside of feminist theory. This fluid representation of choice feminism resonates with the ever-changing picture of the music industry, diverse and dynamic in itself.

3.3 Applying The Theory

Choice feminism informs this thesis as an underlying structure. The essential elements of this theory – inclusiveness and individual agency – are kept into close consideration during the data analysis to determine whether the experiences recounted by the interviewee portray the environment she has worked in as an inclusive one. The importance of agency in this case study is specifically related with gender dynamics, as the interviewee is a woman working in a sector deeply affected by gender stereotypes, from how female artists appear and interact with their fans to which music, and even which instruments, they play. Moreover, agency is a significant issue in the music industry as a business. The interviewee's approach as an independent artist is confronted with her knowledge and involvement with traditional Japanese record companies to understand how agency interacts with her awareness of the field, and how her awareness informs her choices. Lastly, individuality is a fundamental principle for this thesis as a single case study with one interview. Defining individual

choices as relevant decisions that hold meaningful consequences constitutes an additional source of support to the scientific contribution of this study.

These fundamental theoretical aspects are juxtaposed with the data collected during the fieldwork through the methodological and ethical dispositions delineated in the following chapter.

4. METHOD

4.1 A Qualitative Single Case Study

This research project sheds light onto one case study through qualitative methods. A case study "is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (Yin 2002:13). As a single, in-depth study, some clarifications pertaining to ethics and method are required in order to substantiate the results presented in this paper. This study originally began as a series of interviews with Japanese musicians as an investigation into their personal experiences from a feminist perspective, and was then further refined into an analysis of Japanese female independent musicians, with one interview to support findings from other data sources and to highlight issues derived from the interviewee's personal experience. This, combined with the aim of the project of identifying and filling a gap in current academic literature, calls for proper methodological support in order to validate and legitimize the information offered in the findings.

The first argument against a single case study research is that it cannot be generalized. As previously mentioned, the aim of this project is rather to contextualize than generalize. Nonetheless, this issue has been widely discussed by scholars who work with qualitative studies such as Flyvbjerg (2006), who has collected the major misunderstandings on single case study research and confronted them with a new perspective on how these in-depth studies can contribute to scientific knowledge. He contends that "formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas "the force of example" is underestimated" (Flyvbjerg 2006:229) and his considerations on these common misunderstandings provide elements for the further validation of this paper.

Validity in qualitative research is multifaceted. In the current case, the observations made through data collection in different formats have demonstrated correspondences between data from interviews and data from other published academic material, but Yin considers internal validity as only applicable to casual studies (2002:36). On the other hand, external validity, the level of generalization of findings in multiple social settings, "represents a problem for qualitative researchers because of their tendency to employ case studies and small samples" (*ibid.*). This statement is especially relevant for the current study, as it involves a very specific and unique sample. However, Goodwin counters this issue in qualitative research by recalling the way space is defined in research: "relevant spaces are reflexively constituted through the organization of the actions that simultaneously make use of the structure(s) provided by particular places, while articulating and shaping them as meaningful entities appropriate to the activity in progress" (1995:237-238).

The validity of case studies is the core of Flyvbjerg's work:

> "That knowledge cannot be formally generalized does not mean that it cannot enter into the collective process of knowledge accumulation in a given field or in a society. A purely descriptive, phenomenological case study without any attempt to generalize can certainly be of value in this process and has often helped cut a path toward scientific innovation" (2006:227).

Flyvbjerg and Yin redefine external validity beyond the boundaries of generalization. According to them, research can generate knowledge in more ways than the sole generalization of findings. Yin remarks that case studies lead to analytical generalization instead of statistical, implying that "the investigator is striving to generalize a particular set of results to some broader theory" (2002:37). Within the single case design framework envisioned by Yin, this research project falls under the category of representative or typical case. A representative case is meant to "capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday or commonplace situation" (Yin 2002:41), which recalls the aforementioned aim of contextualization for this study. Yin also observes its informative purpose in relation to "the experiences of the average person or institution" (*ibid.*). Flyvbjerg (2006) focuses on the predominance of generalization as the only path for research findings. He both affirms that single case studies can be generalized under certain circumstances – such as being repeated in multiple instances – and that generalization itself "is considerably overrated as the main source of scientific progress" (2006:227).

It has thus been established that a single case study does not require generalized findings to be validated, but that it can create knowledge as an example of a particular context. The subsequent issue to dispel is external reliability, that is, the possibility to replicate a study, in order to contrast any possible errors or biases in the research design. Both Silverman and Yin suggest the same procedure for replicability by underlining the importance of carefully documenting the process and maintaining maximum accessibility to the information on the production of data on the field (Silverman 2004:285). In the case of an interview, this is achieved by keeping records of audio materials and written transcripts (*ibid.*).

The collection of data from multiple sources, such as interviews, academic literature, and published documents (articles from web magazines, government reports) constitutes a form of triangulation (Bryman 2012:392). Triangulation is associated with "greater confidence in findings" (*ibid.*) and, thus, with greater credibility, as it allows the researcher to cross-check their work against multiple methods or multiple data sources.

When participant observation is involved, the implication is that, according to Bryman, "the researcher is immersed in a social setting for some time in order to observe and listen with a view to gaining an appreciation of the culture of a social group" (2012:383). In this case study, a degree of

participant observation is involved, but the immersion that Bryman discussed predates the research purposes of the article and is instead the outcome of previous, unrelated professional experience.

The research conducted for this study involved data from different sources: academic, journalistic, personal observation, interviews. Bryman suggests the use of triangulation when different elements take part in the analysis of a phenomenon: "Triangulation entails using more than one method or source of data in the study of social phenomena" (2012:392). For qualitative research and ethnography in particular, Bryman highlights the importance of triangulation as a method to confront the researcher's observation with interview questions "to determine whether they might have misunderstood what they had seen" (*ibid.*).

The interview participant has been selected with an information-oriented purpose, which is intended "to maximize the utility of information from small samples and single cases. Cases are selected on the basis of expectations about their information content" (Flyvbjerg 2006:230).

Having a single-case study required the interview to be loosely structured according to the timeline interview method, as "in life history research, the intention is to understand how the patterns of different life stories can be related to their wider historical, social, environmental, and political context" (Adriansen 2012:41). The interview questions were shaped to generate a timeline of the points in the interviewee's career that were most relevant to the research project, and they were subsequently accompanied by sub-questions spontaneously born out of the conversation, as well as affected by the necessity of maintaining the participant's anonymity.

The interview was conducted in semi-structured form, with rather open questions. In a semi-structured interview, the questions are usually more general and they leave the interviewer with "some latitude to ask further questions in response to what are seen as significant replies" (Bryman 2012:212). Both choices were intended with the purpose of creating a free space for the interviewee to express their thoughts, and to avoid closed questions, which would have been leading the interviewer more strictly though the conversation. In past interview experiences, this choice has often been an obstacle in gaining trust from the interviewee, as they associated closed questions with a more formal setting and would not inquire deeper into the discussed subject. This is discussed by Silverman in this overview of the interview participant as an active and subjective creator of meaning (2004:145). Silverman's argument on the need to establish "a climate of mutual disclosure" (2004:147) is closely reflected by what I observed during the fieldwork. Mutual disclosure implies that the interviewer must be willing "to share his or her own feelings and deepest thoughts" (*ibid.*) so that the same level of intimacy can be solicited in the respondent. Such a close level of disclosure also warrants some observation on the research practices followed throughout the fieldwork.

4.2 Ethical Considerations

The position of the author in this particular case is quite ambiguous. As a white woman researching Japanese women musicians, the "outsider" dimension is clearly identifiable. However, having years of experience in the field of music both as a singer and as an amateur music journalist is an invaluable source of experience from the "inside", which also enabled a greater degree of access and contacts to interviewees and other people involved in the study. In fact, previous experience in the music industry has also greatly contributed to generating the inspiration for this study, as described in the introduction of this thesis. First-hand contact with gender stereotyping and discrimination as a musician has created a deeper interest for observing these dynamics in the music industry at the academic level.

Furthermore, previous studies of Japanese language and culture were helpful in creating a stronger connection to the Japanese people involved in the research and, at the same time, they provided the tools and knowledge for appropriate social interaction. This ambiguity can be filtered through the etic-emic theory, to understand what each element brings to the study and how the presence of both in this study affect the final result. With emic being an insider approach, and etic being an outsider approach to research and to the observation of a phenomenon, it should be clarified that these are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, "many researchers came to regard emic and etic categories as existing more on a continuum than as a strict dichotomy" (Darling 2016:3). In this research project, both dimensions have, for example, allowed for different levels of access, ensuring the interviewee a certain degree of understanding from the researcher both in the "insider" setting of Japan and music and in the "outsider" setting of Europe and foreignness.

To preserve the privacy of the interviewee, their identity has been rendered anonymous according to the guidelines provided by the Swedish Research Council (2011). The interviewee has been properly informed on the research and on their degree of involvement in order to offer consent. The interviewee has agreed to participate in the project according to the information provided, and has taken part in an interview of approximately one hour. The interview was held in English in the interviewee's office during the fieldwork in Japan, at the beginning of February. I have had the chance to share additional time with the interviewee both before and after the interview, but the information shared during conversations outside of the interview was not originally intended to be included in the study, for evident ethical reasons. However, since some of the issues discussed in such instances were found to be closely related to the literature, additional consent has been sought, and subsequently granted by the participant, to utilize these conversations in the study.

4.3 Data Collection: The Process

The selection of the interviewees was limited due to a number of factors, particularly access and language. I originally decided to hold interviews in English, which generated a broader reflection about language for my research process. The involvement of a translator was considered, but the lack of financial resources to properly support the translator's work led to the choice of seeking interviewees who could speak fluent English. Misunderstandings related to language and culture can compromise the interviewee's trust or the reliability of their information. In addition, a translated rendition of the conversations fails to completely convey the original message, as the passage from a language to another requires some level of adaptation. Even the timing of a translation affects the validity of the research it is involved in, as studied by Santos, Black and Sandelowski (2015). In their work, they also raise awareness on considering the language proficiency level of the translator, categorized through the skills of grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence (2015:136). This restricted the sampling sources, as several Japanese interviewees who had expressed interest in the study could not hold interviews in English. Access to participants was also an issue, as it was difficult to find reliable contacts and, most of all, it was difficult to elicit a response from them. In particular, contacts for Japanese managers and labels were not as easily available as European and American ones, which I had often needed to contact for work. Eventually, the final contacts acquired for the study were the result of personal networking and previous acquaintances who could directly deliver inquiries.

The interview was the result of a rather lengthy process. The interviewee featured in the study was contacted early in the planning process, through a pre-existing work contact in the music journalism field. Further interviewees have been sought all the way until the end of the fieldwork, both in Japan and in Europe, but they were either scrapped as the aim of the study changed, or they did never deliver an answer to the inquiries I sent.

As for the featured interview, advanced language proficiency skills in English from both parties allowed for a great freedom in conversation. Being able to meet the interviewee multiple times during the fieldwork in Japan also created a friendlier environment for the interview itself, as we had already met and spent time together in an informal, friendly setting prior to that. Establishing a positive environment also proved helpful after the fieldwork, when the data analysis process required further information from the participant shared outside of the interview, for which the participant granted additional consent. Having obtained the interviewee's trust throughout our interaction from the beginning of the project held positive results in such unanticipated instances.

5. CASE STUDY

5.1 Data Collection: The Interview

As a semi-structured interview, I prepared a few guidelines which I loosely followed during the interview, moving from an introduction of the interviewee's career and development of musical interests, to experiences in the Japanese and the European scene (see Appendix). I then proceeded to go more in detail with questions about the singer's opinion on women in her field and genre, and the context behind her decision to self-publish her music, followed by more specific questions on language barrier and a number of impromptu sub-questions whenever I thought that a certain topic could provide further information. The interview was overall very conversational and never delved into sensitive subjects.

The interview started with a general inquiry on the interviewee's past and the beginning of her career, delving in particular into the reasons that brought her in contact with metal music from Europe and the USA. The artist answered quoting the popularity of the genre at the end of the 80s, quoting famous European and American bands she would hear on commercials on Japanese TV. Magazines that focused on metal music were also part of her first approach to the genre. The participant did not listen to any foreign music prior to this period.

I followed up by asking if there were similar bands Japan at the time. According to the interviewee, Japanese bands were very different and not specifically playing heavy metal, which was one of the reasons that drew her to the genre, as it was something new. She also added that foreign bands sounded much more professional compared to their Japanese counterparts. The conversation continued with questions on the progression from listener to musician, which was explained as being immediate, despite the participant admitting to not having done music before, but rather feeling that "this was the reason I was born". The singer was surprised by the fact that some popular metal bands came from small countries like Sweden and were not originally from English-speaking countries. Nonetheless, they were able to go around the world. This motivated the interviewee to sing in English, despite her mentioning the fact that she was not aware of ethnic differences at the time.

I further inquired on the racial aspect, which revealed that the participant is aware of the difference between a white European person speaking English and an Asian person: "obviously if I speak English usually they don't expect that I'm from the US or the UK".

The interview continued with a long conversation comparing different aspects of the music industry, and of music making in general, between Japan and Europe. The situation for Japanese bands initially described at the end of the 80s is currently perceived by the participant as having greatly improved. Interest in Japanese bands has grown both domestically and internationally,

which the interviewee exemplified by mentioning requests to play abroad that she personally received and that were specifically motivated by her Japanese nationality. The participant also noted how the rising popularity of Japanese metal bands attracted more female artists to the scene, but she distinguished between women who "just do this kind of music because it sells" and women who genuinely care about the music they do. She further expressed, however, that it is difficult to understand the two attitudes from outside, and that in the end she focuses on her own music.

The conversation shifted to independent releases versus music supported by major labels. The participant is planning an independent release but raised concerns over the stronger support provided by record companies in Japan, tough she admitted that at national level such support is characterized by stricter control over the artist's work. The participant explained that Japanese record companies also have international departments that deal with licensing foreign music into the country, but that in her case the local department would be the one providing support for promotion and distribution. Ultimately, she expressed her preference over independent work, at least for the time being. Independent music-making brought forward the emerging success of crowdfunding efforts, a method which the interviewee is successfully employing, but which generated some issues in relation to her plans for international distribution, as Japanese crowdfunding platforms were firmly operating only on a national level.

As fundraising is being used to sustain upcoming music releases, I asked about the production work behind it, which was mainly conducted in Europe. The participant shared a lot of information about her experience abroad, past and present, and compared it to what she saw when she worked in Japan. She discussed at length the more dynamic workflow among European musicians, while she commented negatively on the overly perfectionist attitude of Japanese musicians, which she explained as a sort of inferiority complex towards Western music. She conveyed similar opinions from musician friends from other genres and stated that she preferred working with European musicians who, despite a seemingly more laid-back attitude, had great attention for quality. Japanese musicians, instead, cared deeply about closely following plans and not recording anything in a different way than what is agreed upon: according to her, this method eventually has a negative effect on the artistic product, as it erases all the opportunities for improvement through constructive criticism. She added that this happens not only in the studio, but also on stage, and after I shared some similar events from personal experience the participant argued that this fear of high quality Western music production is one of the reasons that Japanese bands do not reach international success.

The participant stated that she has profound respect for fellow women in the music scene, as she believed that they fought harder than male musicians to make it. I inquired on the reasons

behind this opinion and she recalled the difficulties she had when she first set out to join a heavy metal band, as women were not accepted. She believes that with the current, broader array of artists in the scene the situation for women has improved, and that women musicians have been using their femininity as their own unique element, in a genre that started out as a male-dominated space. However, she commented that this differs depending on the instrument, as a female drummer in pop music is more accepted than a female drummer in heavy metal.

Lastly, the artist relayed some stories about discussing English lyrics with fellow Japanese artists, who believe that language accuracy in English is not important, an opinion which she strongly disagreed with. Despite wrapping up the interview at this point, the participant and I continued our discussion before I left, bringing out events of discrimination on ethnic grounds by European music critics against her.

5.2 Data Analysis

The data collected through the interview is examined with the parameters set by the research question and sub-questions, but also yields findings on additional elements that still contribute to the aim of this research project of filling a gap in academic literature. The main reference points for the following analysis are the reasons and the mechanisms at play in the artist's work outside of the Japanese mainstream music industry, and, collaterally, how the English language influences musicians' careers in Japan and abroad. As a feminist study, the data analysis inquires in particular on how the interviewee as a woman writing and performing heavy metal music frames her experience and decisions. The analysis further seeks to identify examples of individual female agency, and to contextualize the interview within the academic literature reviewed in the previous sections of this thesis. As a single case study, further validation is sought by analyzing the interview content in order to underline original contributions to scholarly research.

The interview raised some interesting points about the artist's decision to rather work in Europe than Japan. The artist worked both in Japan and abroad and has experience in the independent music scene as well as with labels. The reasons behind her choice to work continuously in Europe stem mainly from a general lack of trust in the Japanese music industry, at different levels. On the one hand, according to her account, labels exert a very tight control on the artist, which she thought might affect her artistic freedom. This is confirmed by academic literature mentioned during the literature review, in particular Kiuchi's article (2017) on the tight control over AKB48 members' music and personal lives. On the other hand, the artist commented that, from her personal experiences in both contexts, she preferred the more laid-back attitude among European musicians to the perfectionist Japanese approach to making and playing music.

It should be noted that the initial approach of the interviewee with heavy metal music stemmed from exposition to male Western artists at the end of the 1980s, as recalled by her own account. The question of role models is significant, as at the time this genre allowed less space for female singers and musicians, compared to the present day, where "female-fronted" has become a genre of its own within metal music, even though it is criticized for its "othering" implications. Robertson's (2011) idea that "culture contact zones" facilitate the proliferation of bands in niche genres can be applied to this historical progression on account of Japan becoming more and more globalized, with the distribution of foreign heavy metal constituting the culture contact zone for Japanese bands to relate to.

The interviewee herself has expressed the feeling that the inclusion of Japanese women in the genre has increased since she began her career. In addition, she mentioned that when she first set out to join a band, all the ads were looking for male vocalists, with descriptions that openly excluded women, to the point that she had to put her own ad and seek musicians to start her own band. While this is a very individual choice, it denotes the artist as a rational agent as described by Groenhout (2002).

At the time, a fellow female musician who joined her group also shared the same difficulties in approaching the heavy metal music scene, as the most popular acts in the genre only had male members. Nowadays, Japanese metal bands with female members are much more popular, which led to a proliferation of groups and, according to the interviewee, to a higher interest in earning opportunities rather than music-making. She expressed the concern that "cute Japanese girl doing metal" is a paradigm that draws more attention than the music being performed, and brought herself as an example, stating that she was often contacted from the USA to play gigs, with interest being shown for her Japanese origins. This newfound interest for metal bands with female members is closely interrelated with the success of Japanese acts like Babymetal, but it also supports the idea that their success is driven by a gendered and ethnically stereotyped image of Japanese women, as Yano (1997), Faupel and Schmutz (2011) argue.

Ethnicity emerged as a relevant factor in the activity of Japanese female musicians also in regards to reception abroad and language. For the former, the artist recalled being pejoratively stereotyped and de-legitimized based on her appearance by European critics, which recalls the poor levels of inclusion of the previously debated center-periphery dichotomy. In a space predominantly populated by voices from the center, integration and acceptance of the voices from the periphery is not a straightforward process. Being an Asian woman in a genre mainly populated by white European men was perhaps related by these critics to the fabricated image of J-pop idols – Yano's *mawari no tsukutta mono* (1997:191), and they expressed a lack of artistic authenticity. The de-

legitimization of women's work in metal on the sole basis of their gender and attractiveness has precedents, for instance with black metal one-woman act Myrkur. The project, led by a Danish female musician, raised concerns among metal fans for allegedly being a marketing stunt by the label releasing her music, and the artist has come to the point of restricting interaction with fans on social networks to avoid death threats and hateful comments (Pasbani 2016), even though – or perhaps because – her work so far has been critically acclaimed in reviews (Saunders 2014).

As for language, the artist recalled being surprised by the fact that her favorite heavy metal and hard rock bands from the 80s and 90s came from small European countries like Sweden or Germany, and that their ability to speak and sing in English brought them the bigger, international audiences that are usually drawn to the dominating US and UK markets. Seeing these examples led her to think that if she could also sing in English, she would be able to reach a wider public. However, she also noted that, while at the beginning of her career, as a teenager, she did not consider ethnicity, these bands with Caucasian members could blend in with other famous UK or US groups, "but obviously if I speak English usually they don't expect that I'm from the US or the UK".

This can be considered both an issue and an advantage in the Western music industry, as ethnic profiling can lead to discrimination, but offering a foreign perspective to a homogenous music scene, as is the case of the participant, can be a resource to emerge and gain popularity. African-American *enka* singer Jero, the first foreign-born artist to perform this genre in Japan, similarly touches upon the theme of alternative image in a popular, culturally rooted music genre (Kiuchi 2009). Furthermore, a more diverse environment, as proposed by choice feminism, can amplify the opportunities for Japanese artists to work abroad and expand their activities.

In the case of Japanese artists, nonetheless, the interviewee commented that language is not necessarily the only element at play, as debated by Toth (2008) in the literature review. The singer revealed that during her active time in the Japanese music scene, almost no one had enough proficiency in the English language to support this idea, and that even popular visual kei acts who toured abroad often used interpreters, suggesting that management and PR support could be responsible for thriving in the European and American markets, too. Despite the overwhelmingly negative influence of labels brought to light by academic research in chapter 2, the singer's knowledge as an insider in the field shows that the resources of record companies can also generate benefits for the musicians. For instance, AKB48 have their own café in Singapore, and regularly travel there to perform for foreign fans (Yano 2017:34).

On the other side of the debate, she also rejected both appearance-based popularity and working with big labels whose main focus is sales: "If this is "in" and the label says "you should

play this because it will sell a lot" I don't do that. I want to do what I want to do, I'm that kind of person". The artist's words once again mirror previously reported concerns by academic literature that big labels tend to build a specific, fashionable image around the artist, restricting their creative freedom. At the same time, labels offer safety over the risk of assault during live appearances (Yano 2017:38-39), which is not an affordable option for independent acts. This statement by the artist is also closely related to Yeagle's work on Nicki Minaj (2013), even though the interviewee positions herself on the opposite side of the spectrum. If Nicki Minaj is a rational agent who owns a trope to her own advantage, the interviewee's agency is in her work to remain outside of the power structure that enables tropes, restrictions, and stereotypes against women.

Despite this, the interviewee explained that most Japanese record companies have a local and an international department, and that while the first is more controlling, the second mostly licenses foreign musicians, so it allows for more creative freedom. She is approaching the release of new music and, even though she is considering online fundraising, she would also think about contacting record companies, especially since local departments have greater opportunities for promotion. Nonetheless, she recounted negative past experiences with labels and stated that fundraising would be better for artists, as "the artists can directly communicate with the audience without having any interference and they can give the music directly to them". The conversation on fundraising exposed further language problems, as most online fundraising platforms are in English and Japanese bands seeking to use them are not able to fully understand how they work unless they can speak good English, which was considered a rarity. Although Japanese platforms are also present, these cater only to a Japanese-speaking audience, generating the opposite problem for artists who seek to expand their reach.

The section of the interview about Japan and Europe constitutes an original contribution that does not find correspondences in academic literature, as the direct account of an insider who worked in both contexts. When I asked her about her experience between Japan and Europe, she pointed out a number of elements that relate to the strict environment that drove her away from the Japanese scene. Japanese bands would strive for perfection both in studio and on stage and anything that did not go according to plan would be considered a failure. The interviewee also suggested that this might be a sort of inferiority complex stemming from the high quality of Western heavy metal recordings, which she found from personal experience does not necessarily transpose on stage. While Japanese bands would worry about playing without mistakes, European bands would allow mistakes and accept them as something to move forward from. The experience with sudden accidents would also prepare them better to handle unexpected situations whenever they presented themselves. The overly critical attitude of Japanese artists, which was related to cultural differences,

was also seen as one of the reasons holding them back from attempting to enter the international market, even more than language issues. This attention to perfection and the subsequent inferiority complex have not been identified in academic literature about music, and might be more difficult to observe from an outsider perspective – once again stressing the relevance of giving voice to insiders. However, it has been theorized that this widespread inferiority complex among Japanese nationals on a general level stems from an instable national identity, "which derives from their sense of immaturity and lack of confidence as a nation state" (Harada 2009:8). Harada states that:

> "Being latecomers to the international arena ruled by the Western powers, Japan and Australia have always been attempting to catch up with the dominant power. They tend to see the world in a structure which has a hierarchy having the West at the summit and have believed that every nation state is developing and advancing in a linear way, from the East to the West" (2009:12).

The fact that the interviewee could report similar instances from fellow Japanese musician friends playing other genres, such as classical music, implies that this attitude is not unique to the heavy metal scene. According to the artist's experience, "the average technique of musicians is just the same. But Japanese musicians tend to have an inferiority complex. They feel intimidated when they imagine to play somewhere outside of Japan". She even received questions from bands who wanted to approach the international market. This might place the interviewee's career as a milestone for Japanese musicians, who seem to be looking for guidance within their community. This raises the question of whether it might be helpful for Japan to provide help in other forms and on a bigger scale. Street (1993) discusses the possibility to investigate feminist struggles by pinpointing them in the music itself. He brings forward McClary's analysis of Madonna's song "Live To Tell", which "contains and expresses an attempt to articulate and realize a particular identity through music" (1993:8). In light of earlier theoretical reflections on agency, songs can be seen as the products of the artist's identity-making process, being active and deeply unique manifestations of the artist's individuality. Studies centered on musical content are a further resource for liberal feminist research on music, which can, for instance, shed more light on the issue of the Japanese inferiority complex on music production and quality.

On the whole, the singer's focus is generally music and artistic quality of the musical product. This clashes with the average approach of academic literature, which mainly investigates business aspects, the perceived image of the artist by the audience or, for example with Nicki Minaj's case, the image projected by the artist herself in the mainstream music scene. In addition to the absence of voices from less popular genres, academic literature also seems to overlook a closer analysis of the artist through music rather than through collateral elements.

Overall, the singer's experience between two very different music markets often resonated with the concerns pointed out by academic research. At the same time, her experience from the very inside of the field also uncovered deeper cultural dichotomies across genres, but also motivated some differences with different approaches to music-making between Europe and Japan. The fact that, despite heavy metal not being a male-dominated field anymore, her experience with gender-based discrimination still finds correspondences in recent times raises concerns over matters of inclusiveness. At the same time, the growing presence of female artists in the genre, expressing art in different ways, is viewed positively, as an achievement over the hardships that have been encountered by fellow women in heavy metal. The singer's individual choices and personal experiences denote a strong drive for agency to preserve artistic freedom. Nonetheless, the singer also recognizes the agency of female musicians who approach music-making in different ways.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Main findings

In a context that combines the hardships of creative work with the hardships of minorities, there is still a long way to be paved by the academic world before more can be understood about the dynamics at play in the music industry. This study has investigated part of the current gap identified in academic literature by examining a specific case within the Japanese music scene. The artist interviewed during the fieldwork has offered a number of elements stemming from her personal experience that delve into the reasons that led her to work outside of Japan. Financial issues and creative independence seem to be the most influential factors, and the lack of space for female musicians also contributed to a more independent and self-driven career. The choice to work independently was motivated by the singer's knowledge of the structure of Japanese record companies: while she acknowledges the presence of less strict international branches, she states that as a domestic release her music would fall under the national branches of record companies, which are much more controlling. Language has emerged as an obstacle for international outreach of Japanese musicians, but the interview has also shown that ethnicity (and thus, discrimination) and an inferiority complex in regards to the West's higher quality production and live performance levels have an impact on Japanese artists' choices to not approach the foreign music market.

Academic literature has some more gaps to fill, first and foremost the one on the Japanese music industry. This study has shown that most material written on the subject derives from journalistic writings or financial reports, private and governmental. Thus, a deeper insight on the social and cultural dynamics that are interfaced within this framework could create a more detailed picture and become an important resource for other researchers in different disciplines, but also for the music market itself, in Japan and internationally. A particular aspect that did not find correspondences in the literature was the inferiority complex of Japanese musicians over European bands. The data analysis showed that it is a phenomenon with deeper socio-cultural roots in national identity and that it prevents Japanese artists from branching out to the foreign music market.

A thoughtful and critical overview of the literature on music that related to Japan and feminist scholarship revealed that while the availability of material has increased throughout the years, there appears to be a divide between the focus of Western scholars, which rarely expands to foreign contexts, and the efforts of scholars of Asian origin to offer knowledge about their countries to the English-speaking academic community. This is further reflected in the music industry itself: unless Japanese artists are able to bridge their music to the Western audience, it is unlikely that they will be actively sought the other way around to the same extent.

6.2 Relevance of the Research Project and Further Directions

The music industry itself can learn some important lessons from research on music: as a business, knowing more about the factors that drive away artists and audiences is a useful resource to plan more effective strategies for sales, talent recruitment and general improvement of conditions that affect all parties involved in the production and consumption of music. The rising interest for independent distribution and options for crowdfunding also demonstrates that artists have different means to thrive outside of the mainstream music industry, but that in the case of Japan these means need proper development and broader availability to increase the chances of a successful campaign. The present situation, with few resources available to Japanese independent musicians, has led artists in the industry to look for guidance in fellow musicians who have relevant experience as independent acts.

Financial support and a more inclusive environment for female musicians are two of the possible directions for further research on the topic. Furthermore, with a liberal feminist approach in mind, the importance of choice can also be a part of the conversation, and a heightened awareness on agency and available opportunities can become a chance for empowerment for Japanese women musicians.

This case study is also a specific instance of a female musician's individual choices and an example of agency outside of record companies, which adds to feminist studies of female empowerment in the music business – that usually investigates it from within. This case study has highlighted the interviewee's interest for purely creative aspects of the business, which opens up a new direction for feminist research to inquire on female artists' agency through their own music. In the dynamic and varied world of music-making, giving voice to insiders at different levels in the industry is a crucial step for developing scientific knowledge in the field.

APPENDIX

Interview Questions Guidelines

- Beginning of singer's career
- Reasons for interest in power metal
- Power metal in Japan
- English as a tool for international success
- Opinion on current Japanese music industry
- Reasons for growing interest in Japanese bands in foreign countries
- Opinion on situation of women in the same field/genre
- Reasons behind long break from the music scene
- Thoughts on self-publishing her own music instead of finding a label
- Crowdfunding as a resource for self-published artists
- Working with European collaborators on self-published new music
- Experience abroad as a live performer
- Importance of English lyrics quality for Japanese bands

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