“AIN’T AFRAID TO DIE”: IMPACT OF THE JAPANESE METAL BAND DIR EN GREY ON ITS AMERICAN FANS

By

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To my sister
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This master's thesis focuses on a popular Japanese metal band, Dir en grey, which had commercial success in America in the early 2000s, and the impact of the band on the mental health and identity formation of its American fans. The study asks in particular how fans decoded (or interpreted) the band’s music, and the mental health impact of the music on fans. Drawing on an intercultural communications perspective, the study used in-depth interviews with 10 fans of Dir en grey to examine the fans’ history and level of engagement with the band, the fans’ mental health history, and the fans’ use of the band’s music to cope with depression or anxiety. The study found that fans generally had a high level of engagement with the band, either through reading lyrics, attending live shows, or engaging with other fans, which led to greater emotional impact from the band’s music. Emotional impact was generally positive, with fans using the band’s music as a coping mechanism for negative events and feelings in their lives. The discussion considers implications for international music and culture consumption.
“It was sad music. But it waved its sadness like a battle flag. It said the universe had done all it could, but you were still alive.”
—Terry Pratchet
*Soul Music*

During every stage of life, music can be an important aspect of identity development. For young children, music can be a way to learn about and become aware of the world. Adolescents can use their favorite bands as a way to establish connections with a peer group. For many older people, music is a powerful form of nostalgia. In general, music lovers often will use this medium as a means of escape or as a way to find and connect with like-minded individuals. Especially among those for whom it has been an important part of their lives, music provides a unique form of release they may be unable to achieve in other ways.

Throughout history, musicians have used their craft to convey feelings of pain, sadness, and torment. Hector Berlioz composed his *Symphonie Fantastique*, which describes the hallucinations of a young musician who overdoses on opium, in the midst of his grief over an unrequited love (Austin, 2016). In the 1990s, singer-songwriter Elliott Smith included abstract descriptions of heroin use and symptoms of depression, two issues he struggled with before he committed suicide, in the lyrics of many of his songs (Sweet Adeline, 2008). By expressing their rawest emotions through their art, musicians are able to move their listeners, who are then able to establish a deep connection with the music and become loyal fans. Metal music, in particular, has a reputation in popular culture for its raw and expressive lyrics, and in more extreme cases for propagating Satanist ideas and encouraging aggressive and violent behavior among its listeners.
Previous research on the effects of metal music indicate that the genre does not always have this effect, and that some listeners even use metal music as a way to cope with anxiety, depression and other mental health issues (Shafron & Karno, 2013; Scheel and Westefeld, 1991; Arnett, 1991b; Miranda and Claes, 2009).

Research has shown that individuals are able to recognize emotions in vocal expressions even if the expression is in a foreign language (Pell et al., 2009). Music and language are closely linked in psychology and cognitive development. Ethnomusicology scholar Steven Brown (2001) has even posited an evolutionary theory suggesting that music and language have the same biological origin. At the same time, very little work has been done on the psychology of foreign language music listening. The popularity of various international acts in America, ranging from Korean pop group Girl’s Generation to Icelandic post-rock group Sigur Rós, shows that music transcends international borders even in a monolinguistic culture. By engaging with a foreign band through its music and fan base, listeners are participating in a fascinating yet little understood facet of international communication.

By focusing on the fan narrative through in-depth interviews with real Dir en grey fans, this study aims to contribute to a growing body of work on the importance of fan studies. Given the popularity of American media products overseas, little work has been done on the impact of international media on fan culture in the U.S., prompting popular culture scholar Darling-Wolf (2005) to call for more analyses which consider “the significance of fan culture on an increasingly global scene” in which intercultural fans
can easily engage via the internet (p. 508). Indeed, by relying on fan narratives as data, this study reveals not only the fan’s unique individual history with music and with Dir en grey, but also how their interactions with other fans either in real life or through computer-mediated communication have contributed to the impact of Dir en grey on their lives. Particularly in the case of fans who have followed a band for multiple years, participants can also provide information on how a musical group’s evolution over time, in addition to the fan’s own maturation, can alter the impact of that band’s music. Fan narratives specifically on intercultural media can also reveal how technology and widespread internet access have made cultural products from all over the globe readily available to anyone, a significant factor in the spread of Japanese popular culture which has made the nation a soft power giant.

The purpose of this study is to contribute a unique perspective to the literature on music effects on mental health by examining this topic through an international lens. The study also aims to a new perspective on the significance of Japanese culture’s influence in America by considering the experience of fans of a Japanese musical phenomenon. This chapter first examines the current state of mental health in Japan and in the United States to provide a context for the following section, which discusses the history and development of the popular Japanese metal band Dir en grey, whose American fans will provide the primary source material for this study. The second chapter reviews the current literature addressing how music listening influences fans’ emotional and behavioral reactions and how music fandom is incorporated into and also driven by a developing sense of identity, specifically in regard to gender. The third chapter reviews the proposed methodology for in-depth interviews with fans, including a
question guide. Chapter Four details the results of the in-depth interviews, grouping fans’ sentiments about the band into themes and subthemes. Chapter Five takes these themes and places them in the larger context of music and mental health, incorporating previously discussed literature and theoretical perspectives.

**Mental Health and International Communication**

Although suicide rates in Japan have been declining for more than a decade, it still sits near the top of the list of countries with the highest rates of suicide, especially in comparison to other developed countries. A 2012 survey by the World Health Organization reported Japan as having the 17th highest suicide rate in the world, while the United States had the 50th highest rate (World Health Organization, 2016). Both historical and modern factors play a part in how the Japanese address issues of mental health and suicide. The traditional Samurai warrior practice of *seppuku*, ritual suicide that enabled a warrior to retain his honor, extended all the way to World War II, when *kamikaze* soldiers took their own lives in order to wage an attack on their enemies. These practices still have reverberations in modern Japanese society, where some may see suicide as a way of dealing with issues that could cause their family to lose face, such as financial troubles or the burden of having to care for an elderly relative (Wingfield-Hayes, 2015). This attitude could have led to the strong correlation between increased suicides and Japan’s 1997 financial crisis, during which suicide rates shot up by 35% as many breadwinners felt they had lost the ability to support their families (Traphagan, 2013). The United States, in contrast, actually saw a decrease in its suicide rate during this time, a trend that continued into the early 2000s (McKeown et al., 2006). Suicide among Americans younger than 20 has risen steadily since the 2000s;
nevertheless, young people have the lowest suicide rate of any age group, according to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (2016).

While suicide is a serious problem in Japanese society, popular media have helped to perpetuate cultural myths regarding suicide and mental health in Japan. The 2001 cult classic *Suicide Club* opens with an infamous scene in which more than 50 schoolgirls throw themselves in front of a train, the first in a series of connected suicides that occur throughout the movie. The 2015 American film *The Forest* featured the Aokigahara forest located near Mt. Fuji, where many Japanese, primarily men, have reportedly gone to commit suicide. This study attempts to present a more nuanced approach to a cultural product’s representation of suicide and self harm, investigating whether Dir en grey’s music, as a cultural product of Japan, reinforces the same extreme representations of suicide and mental health issues in Japanese society, and the impact of these representations on American fans.

**Dir en grey**

Dir en grey formed in 1997 as an independent rock band in Kansai, Japan. They found quick success in the Japanese rock scene, playing several shows and releasing their first EP, titled MISSA, in their first year. Although they describe themselves on their website as a “rock band that warrants no categorization,” the music of Dir en grey is commonly classified as experimental or progressive metal (“Biography - Dir en grey official site,” 2016). The group has made a name for itself in rock and metal scenes across the globe. In terms of popular musical groups, Dir en grey has a relatively small but dedicated fan base, which includes 36,100 followers on Instagram and 66,200 [followers](https://www.instagram.com/dir._en.grey/).
followers on Twitter. The English language Facebook group for their official fan club, 「a knot」, has more than 6,000 likes.

Of Dir en grey’s five members, front man Tooru Nishimura, known by his stage name Kyo, has by far the biggest public presence. Particularly popular with the band’s female fans, Kyo writes the lyrics for all of Dir en grey’s songs and performs all of the vocals. Kyo is best known for his incredible vocal range, which allows him to transition from whispering to screaming to melodic singing multiple times during a single song. Kyo has been hospitalized various times for inflamed vocal cords, resulting in the cancellation of several live shows (“Dir en grey’s vocalist Kyo hospitalized,” 2013). Kyo has participated in various side projects and has published two volumes of his poetry, which incorporates the dark and brooding writing style he also uses in Dir en grey’s lyrics.

The band’s visual and musical style has gone through different iterations. The band’s image is a particularly interesting aspect of this study because it may have implications for fans who have minority gender and sexual identities. Particularly in their early days, the members of Dir en grey dressed in a style known as “visual kei.” Particularly popular among Japanese rock groups in the early 2000s, visual kei is characterized by use of heavy makeup, elaborate costumes, and an overall androgynous aesthetic. In an article on the suicide of Hide, bassist for the incredibly successful visual kei band X Japan, New York Times author Neil Strauss describes the aesthetic of a typical visual kei musician:

For visual kei bands, outrageous, usually androgynous looks – gobs of makeup, hair dyed and sprayed in ways that made Mohawks look conservative, and a small fortune spent on leather and jewelry – were as important as music (or, in
many cases after X [Japan], more important than music). (Strauss, 1998, para. 6).

The key word Strauss uses is “androgynous.” For those who are unfamiliar with the style of the genre, it may even be difficult to determine the gender of some of the musicians. One of the most well-known visual kei musicians, Mana, who was the guitarist for the popular visual kei band Malice Mizer and who owns his own clothing line inspired by gothic Victorian fashion, is particularly well-known for causing gender confusion among those unfamiliar with the visual kei scene. Mana has been quoted in interviews as saying that although he feels that he was born a man and he identifies as a man, he has a woman inside him who “transcends the time” (McLelland, 2000, p. 7).

Similar to glam rock in the West, visual kei-style costumes are inspired by a wide variety of themes, and members of the group often will have elaborate corresponding costumes designed for their latest single or music video. Visual kei lyrics were often about unrequited love, and their music had more of a simplistic pop-rock sound. Josephine Yun, author of _JRock, Inc.: A Concise Report on 40 of the Biggest Rock Acts in Japan_, described the visual kei movement in an interview with BBC’s _The World_ in 2007:

“Visual Kei” literally means “visual style.” It’s a style of dress, there’s a lot of costuming and make up and it’s uniquely Japanese because it goes back to ancient Japan. Men would often wear women’s clothing; I guess if they were here today they would be the underground kind of independent anarchist type people who spend their time in coffee houses thinking radical thoughts for that time. A lot of times “Visual Kei” musicians are mistaken for women, when in fact they are men. It’s not really testosterone driven either, it’s very poetic and effeminate. (Sollee, 2006, para. 4).

Dir en grey truly had its roots in the budding visual kei scene of the 1980s and ‘90s. Kyo cites the front man of BUCK-TICK, a Japanese rock band formed in the 1980s and one of the forerunning bands in the visual kei scene, as one of his inspirations for
starting to explore rock music in middle school. In a 2003 in-depth interview with the Japanese magazine READ, Kyo said:

> At that point I had known about the existence of metal...But when I first saw a BUCK-TICK poster, [Atsushi] Sakurai-san seems like an anime character, doesn’t he? I mean, I liked anime and manga, right. It fit in with that interest. Sakurai-san has a very pretty face and is cool. His hair even stands on end like paan [bang]! It was like “Wow! This person is awesome!” That was the trigger for me to start listening to music. It was like at last my eyes had been opened to bands. (World of Dir en grey, 2013, para. 74)

In the mid-2000s, an increase in Dir en grey’s popularity corresponded with a dramatic change in the band’s image. The 2008 Family Values tour represented its commercial breakthrough in the United States; Dir en grey played as an opener for the popular American rock group Korn in cities all over the country (Neilsten, 2007). Their international tours became more frequent as they performed in concerts and metal music festivals throughout Asia, Europe, and South and North America.

As Dir en grey gained international popularity, its music and style transformed from glam rock to heavy metal. Its music became more fast-paced, raw and aggressive, more resembling progressive metal in style. The lyrics continued to deal with dark subjects and addressed taboo issues in Japanese society, such as depression, self-harm and suicide. Kyo also began to write more of the band’s lyrics in a mixture of Japanese and English, and more songs began to have English titles. Every single song title on Marrow of a Bone, the band’s sixth studio album, released in 2007 in the United States, incorporates English lyrics. The single for this album, *Agitated Screams of Maggots*, is written entirely in English, with the lyrics dealing with themes of rape and violence:

> I’m killing the haughtily fly
I'm gonna slash your wound just like mine.
I can't hear the voices of society anymore.
I don't understand. You're all fine hypocrites.

Shout The Joy

Your song's drenched in blood and it's full of shit.
You can't shoot the silver bullet into me.

Shout The Joy

It's the Black Flag, motherfucker!!

I wanna shout out to all the trash celebrity stars.

I'll rape your daughter on your grave,
I'll rape your daughter on your grave,
I'll rape your daughter on your grave,

I'm gonna slash your wound just like mine.
I can't hear the voices of society anymore.

I Should Die! (Songmeanings, 2016).

Figure 1-1. Kyo performing self harm on stage during a concert.
By deep schismic [CC BY 2.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons
During this period, Kyo began performing self-harm on stage, which included self-mutilation, beating his chest, fish-hooking (inserting the fingers on the inside of the mouth and pulling to tear the tissue), among other self-harm techniques, though the authenticity of these acts has been questioned by fans. He also performed vomiting on stage and has worn full-body makeup resembling burns to add to the shock value of his performances. In the READ interview, Kyo discussed fan reactions to the self-harm:

Kyo: If someone had the kind of experiences I've had, they would understand the reason I scratch my chest, wouldn't they? I get all angry. At a show fans watch and when I don't scratch my chest or when I scratch it and blood doesn't come out there are people who say, "He's cutting corners." It's like, "F*** you, bastards, seriously f*** you." I think things like that a lot too.

Interviewer: Yeah, I guess that's because there are people who think that that is just another part of the show.

Kyo: Yeah. It's like, "Wrong, bastards!" (World of Dir en grey, 2013, para. 131)

A fan-translated interview conducted during a German tour with Dir en grey guitarists Kaoru and Die reveals more about the source of this expression in their newer music:

Astan: Your lyrics are about pain, confusion and orientationlessness [sp]. You don't count these feelings to the positive feelings. I am even more surprised that Japanese make these things content of their lyrics. I always thought that Asians don't express their feelings in an offensive way, especially when they come from one's self.

Kaoru: I think that your opinion is very interesting. I have never thought about it that way. We never tried to be against something, to be negative. Especially not against the Japanese mentality. We like to be honest. What we are doing comes from our hearts.

Die: Pain. We don't think about a certain pain or the pain of certain persons. Pain, in the meaning of depression, everybody knows. You are feeling it as well as I. It's this universal pain in the head and in the heart, not physical. People who listen to our music and who are interested in our lyrics seem to identify with our lyrics and know what we mean.
Astan: Have you experienced controversies in Japan because of the use of these feelings?

Kaoru: Perhaps we haven't become big rockstars because of this. But that doesn't interest us. We're coming from the underground, we're not mainstream. We do what we wanna do. If that's only possible in the underground then we'd like the underground to be our home. It's good like that. (Retrieved from poisoncookie.de/scans/astan_degint.htm, para. 5)

Kaoru expressed a similar sentiment in a solo interview with metal news website Radio Metal after the release of the band's 2015 EP Arche:

Radio Metal: The album deals with the theme of pain. This has been very much a reoccurring theme in your career; can you tell us more about what does it represents to you and how it inspires you?

Kaoru: You know, even when somebody always focuses on what makes them happy and positive, it doesn't mean it helps him to achieve that, so we chose that theme that is very close to everybody. Anger, anguish, sorrow, grief are things that everybody has experienced, and we feel that people can relate more to pain than to something positive. So that's why we chose to use this as a theme to kind of portray or express our music with.

Radio Metal: Do you think that pain should be accepted as part of our life and that without pain, there can't be happiness?

Kaoru: Yes! (Gricourt, 2015, para. 6)

Dir en grey and its dedicated fan base make for an interesting case study, both in terms of media effects and from an ethnomusicology perspective. Throughout the course of Dir en grey’s evolution as a band, they have incorporated elements of visual kei and heavy metal while enjoying popularity across many different Western and Eastern cultures, making the band’s identity as well as the identities of their fans much more ambiguous.

Due to their intercultural appeal and their unique sound, it is difficult to place Dir en grey in the same category as American mainstream metal bands, and indeed, it
seems that they have not received the acceptance and popularity that German and Scandinavian metal bands have enjoyed in the United States (Gricourt, 2015). At the same time, they occupy an interesting place in the Japanese music scene as a band that has achieved international fame and success. Thus, fans’ relationships with the music of Dir en grey speak not only to the emotional impact of metal music on its listeners, but also to the effect of foreign language media on American consumers. In order to determine the extent of this impact, the next chapter focuses on the previous literature regarding the relationships between metal music, mental health, and identity formation (particularly in regard to gender) and also discusses the theoretical foundations for this study.

**Music and identity Formation**

A substantial body of scholarly work already exists addressing the role music plays in identity formation among adolescents, adults and even musicians. Shuker (2002) addresses the “commonly asserted thesis” in regard to youth, music and identity development formed by scholars like Dick Hebdige in the 1970s and ’80s: “(Y)outh subcultures appropriate and innovate musical forms and styles as a basis for their identity, and, in so doing, assert a countercultural politics” (p. 206). Each genre has its own individual patterns and modes of consumption, which give rise to an associated subculture. Given the dramatic change in Dir en grey’s aesthetic and music over time, it may be difficult for casual and even dedicated listeners to position themselves within a specific subculture based on their fandom. If possible, this study will attempt to situate Dir en grey within two specific subcultures (visual kei and heavy metal) in an attempt to
parse out the impact on the fans’ identity. The role of Hebdige’s work in the theoretical basis of this study will be further explored in the Literature Review.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of previous literature on music and mental health that informs this study is divided into two primary arguments that have been asserted by scholars: that a relationship exists between music listening and problem behaviors for certain genres (primarily rock and metal music), and more recent scholarship, which asserts that the correlation between metal music listening and negative behavior is not as strong as previously suggested. This review also contains several other potential factors identified by scholars that could impact this relationship, such as gender. Finally, it outlines the goals of this study based on the gaps in the current literature.

Previous work on music and mental health has revealed a correlation between heavy metal listening and issues with problem behaviors, depression, and anxiety (Mulder et al., 2007; Anderson, Carnagey & Eubanks, 2007; Martin, Clarke, & Pearce, 1993; Arnett, 1991). In their survey of 4,159 Dutch high school students, Mulder et al. (2007) observed that music is a statistically “significant…and substantial” factor related to problem behavior when controlling for potential confounding factors, including demographic characteristics and parent and peer relationships. Among fans who had a strong preference (listened almost exclusively) to “loud Rock music,” there were much higher reports of both internalizing problems (withdrawing) and externalizing problems, or exhibiting aggressive behavior. These results are quite significant from a quantitative standpoint because the researchers were able to control for other factors that have been connected with problem behavior and aggression in youth, such as issues with family or peers; in addition, the study had a large sample size (Mulder et al., 2007).
Anderson, Carnagey and Eubanks (2007) focused specifically on music with violent lyrics in their study, in which they observed the immediate effects of music on college student hostility. One of the several experiments in the study had students complete a word pairing exercise after listening to a rock song with violent lyrics. The results showed that participants who listened to the violent rock song interpreted ambiguous words, such as rock and stick, in a more aggressive way than the control group (Anderson, Carnagey & Eubanks, p. 963). The authors argue that while their experiment only shows short-term effects, past studies have shown that repeated exposure to music with violent lyrics could lead to long-term aggressive behavior (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Huessman & Miller, 1994; in Anderson, Carnagey & Eubanks, p. 969). While the proposed study will not measure immediate media effects, as other research has done, it will seek in part to determine whether fans of Dir en grey have had similar experiences (i.e. music listening increasing hostility) through engaging with foreign language music, and whether the listener must be able to understand the lyrics in order for the music to have this kind of impact.

Martin, Clarke, and Pearce (1993) found a strong link between rock/heavy metal listening and suicidal tendencies, acts of self harm, depression and other problem behaviors in girls. However, as Scheel and Westefeld (1991) point out in their review of the literature on metal music listening and mental health among adolescents, Martin, Clarke and Pearce’s study grouped rock and heavy metal listeners together, and this may result in a lack of proper representation of either group. Mulder et al.’s (2007) study has the same issue, considering rock and heavy metal together in their analysis of the
impact of music listening on problem behaviors, potentially distorting or weakening the relationship between heavy metal and negative mental health impacts.

One study by Arnett (1991a) revealed a correlation between reckless behavior and heavy metal music listening among young listeners. Arnett found that boys who listened to heavy metal music were more likely to have taken illegal drugs, engaged in casual sex, driven while drunk or engaged in other risky behaviors in the past year; however, taking family relationship factors into account eliminated the significance of heavy metal music listening for six of the eight risky behaviors. Heavy metal music listening among girls was still a significant predictor for three of the four reckless behaviors observed among females, even when potential confounding factors were taken into account.

A few studies have produced more ambiguous results, with no clear connection between music listening and mental health or behavioral issues (Scheel & Westefeld, 1991; Shafron & Karno; 2013). In their survey of 121 high school students, Scheel and Westefeld (1991) found that respondents who listened to heavy metal, particularly male listeners, had “less strong reasons for living,” and female heavy metal listeners had more thoughts of suicide. Scheel and Westefeld (1991) described the results as “surprising” considering that their sample consisted mostly of casual fans who were not frequent metal listeners. They argue that heavy metal more likely “attracts, rather than produces” fans with mental health issues, and that personal and family characteristics therefore may be better predictors than music preference for suicidal thoughts and depression.
Taking into account previous research that had analyzed the complex relationships between music, emotional response, and personality, Shafron and Karno (2013) surveyed 551 college students on their music preferences and anger/anxiety levels. They found significantly higher levels of anxiety and depression among the group that listened to heavy metal music, but there was no clear effect on depression or anxiety levels within the heavy metal group when frequency of listening was taken into account. Greater exposure therefore did not necessarily increase depression or anxiety among heavy metal listeners, weakening the possibility of a direct correlation between heavy metal listening and depression (Shafron & Karno, 2013).

Several studies' findings have indicated that depression is more closely linked to social relationships than to music listening, regardless of music genre, and some studies suggest that music listening may have a cathartic rather than harmful effect (Arnett, 1991b; Mulder et al., 2007; Miranda & Claes, 2009; Baker & Brown, 2014). Arnett (1991b), citing the lack of perspective from adolescents themselves in studies on the impact of metal music on teens, conducted a series of interviews with primarily white male adolescent metal fans. He found that for most of the fans he interviewed, heavy metal artists like Ozzy Osbourne and Slayer had a “purgative” effect, ultimately relieving their negative mood and giving them an outlet for their stresses and frustrations. This qualitative study thus offered a different perspective than Arnett’s questionnaire-based study, which identified a link between metal music listening and aggressive behavior (Arnett, 1991a).

As with Mulder et al. (2007), Lacourse, Claes, and Villeneuve (2001) surveyed 275 French-Canadian youth; as with Mulder et al. (2007), their study included
measures for several potential confounding factors relating to problem behavior and music listening, including relationships with family members and psychological characteristics. They found that boys who listened to music for emotional release engaged in less risky behaviors, such as drug use, and had better relationships with their parents (p. 330). Their results also showed that for female metal music listeners, music listening was negatively correlated with suicide risk. Lacourse, Claes, and Villeneuve suggest in their discussion “that listening to music to express uncomfortable emotions could be a rather effective coping mechanism for girls since it reduces the risk for suicidal behaviors” (2007, p. 331).

A survey of 418 Canadian adolescents by Miranda and Claes (2009) aimed to determine how adolescents use their preferred music genre as a way to cope with their problems and how this related to their depression levels. They found that among the female respondents, problem-oriented coping, or minimizing the impact of stress through music, was associated with lower depression levels, implying that music can be used as a cathartic tool for young people experiencing negative emotions. In regard to metal music specifically, they found that female respondents reported higher levels of depression only if they had peer affiliations with more depressed individuals. In addition, they found a near-significant (p = .08) variance in depression levels among female respondents who used metal music for “maladaptive coping methods” (2009, p. 228) such as avoidance or disengagement.

An article by Baker and Brown (2014) compiled and analyzed the previous literature on the connection between “adolescent alienation, self-destructive behaviors, self-harm and suicide” for an in-depth introduction to their own study on heavy metal
lyrics. Through an examination of the previous literature, as well as their own literary analysis of lyrics from popular metal bands, they sought to provide some evidence against the notion that metal music lyrics encourage negative psychological behaviors; instead, they contended, it provides catharsis for young people who may be experiencing depression or anxiety. Baker and Brown (2014) provided a sampling of heavy metal lyrics with themes of perseverance and survival in the face of difficulty and that encouraged coping with negative emotions by creating an expressive piece of art. They note the paucity of “research that is nuanced – speaking to younger heavy metal fans on their own terms, in their own way, and using their own words,” and argue that further academic work on this topic could help to “decrease the stereotyping and stigma associated with the heavy metal music culture” (Baker & Brown, 2014, p. 14-15). While Baker and Brown’s study did not provide empirical evidence disproving the link between metal music and psychological behavior, it provides a foundation for fan-centered research on this topic.

One study sought to determine if a link between metal music listening and depression existed among French fans. Defenders of metal music in this country argue that the effect of metal music is lessened among French listeners because many of the lyrics are in English, so many of the ideas are likely lost on the listener. In addition, members of the metal community in France argue that they can distinguish between fantasy and reality and would not simply imitate or play out a scenario described in the music (Recours et al., 2009). After distributing a survey to 333 metal music fans, the authors compared the fans’ scores on the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS) to those of the general population and found that the levels of anxiety and
depression among metal listeners were about equal to, and in some cases lower than, those in the general population. One weakness of this study is that it did not compare the metal music listeners to fans of other types of music, so it is unclear whether metal music listening actually results in lower levels of anxiety and depression compared to other music genres.

While a substantial body of literature supports a relationship between music listening and problem behaviors for certain genres, more recent work linking heavy metal and mental health effects has suggested that the correlation with problem behaviors and metal music is not as strong as previous studies have shown; more rigorous work is needed on this subject (Recours et al., 2009; Miranda & Claes, 2009; Baker & Brown, 2014). Past studies have provided evidence for both sides of the argument, but few of them reflect the perspective of metal fans themselves. Several studies also have suggested that gender can play an important role in music effects on mental health; girls tend to be more vulnerable to the effects of metal music, warranting further research on metal music effects and gender (Arnett, 1991; Mulder et al., 2007; Lacourse, Claes, & Villeneuve; 2001). This study is intended to contribute to this body of literature by providing a nuanced perspective, as Baker and Brown (2014) suggest, in the fans’ own words. In addition, the study is also designed to provide a new perspective on music effects on mental health by examining this question through a cross-cultural lens.

Theoretical Foundations

This study’s theoretical foundations aim to emphasize the role of the consumer in finding meaning from a cross-cultural product. Both social action theory and Stuart
Hall’s model of encoding and decoding reinforce the idea that viewers are active in their media consumption, rather than passive recipients of the media they consume. This study will examine fans’ reactions to the music of Dir en grey and will attempt to determine how fans actively decode lyrics, music videos, and other relevant content using this framework.

This study draws on social action theory and the encoding/decoding model of communication as the analytical basis for the in-depth interview results. In 1922, sociologist Max Weber originally defined the concept of social action as the way in which people attach specific meanings to human behaviors; it describes how people’s actions are guided, and how their identities are formed, by the behaviors of others (Swatos, 1998). White uses the simple but illustrative example of children on a playground to draw a link between social action theory and identity:

If a playground is observed over a long period, certain clusters of children will emerge repeatedly. Choosing up sides for games partitions children into teams, each child going into a particular one. Any such crowd may repartition anew, or instead may dissolve into casual chasing or chattering. Or, a cluster of children may go about together when they are similar in their own and/or other’s eyes (White, 1992, p. 7)

By observing and responding to each other’s behavior, children on a playground create noticeable social patterns that can impact the formation of each child’s identity in that context.

Communication scholars James Anderson and Timothy Meyer (1998) modified Weber’s original theory and applied its tenets to communication. Their social action theory posits that the meanings in media messages arise from three different sources:

1. The intentions of the producer.

2. The conventions of the content.
3. The interpretations of the receiver.

Of particular interest in this study is how consumption of cross-cultural content complicates this theory because the intentions of the producer may not be understood in the same way when interpreted by receivers operating in a different cultural context (Swatos, 1998).

This study also uses Stuart Hall’s model of encoding and decoding. Similar to social action theory, Hall’s model re-imagines what was at that time the traditional way of viewing media consumption, which he describes as “a circulation circuit or a loop” from the sender to the messenger to the receiver and then back again. In contrast, Hall describes transmission of media (using television as his primary example) as a more complex structure in which the product is imbued with meaning by the producer through codes, and receivers decode these messages through their own frameworks of understanding, informed by their own backgrounds and in some cases by the dominant discourse in their society (Hall, 1980).

![Figure 2-1. Hall’s Model of Encoding and Decoding](By Funkythalia (Own work) [CC BY-SA 4.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0)], via Wikimedia Commons)
As Hall states, “the codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical” (Hall, 1980, p. 131); therefore, the producer’s intended meaning could be defined differently depending on, as social action theory suggests, the interpretations of the receiver.

Dick Hebdige elaborated on the theoretical basis of Hall’s model, specifically in the context of subcultures, in his influential manuscript *Subculture: The meaning of style*. Hebdige (1979) grappled with the style and expression of “the teddy boys and mods and rockers, the skinheads and the punks – who are alternately dismissed, denounced and canonized; treated at different times as threats to public order and as harmless buffoons” (p. 2), and how the style of these groups was decoded by both the dominate and subordinate groups.

In the conclusion of his analysis of punk rock style and performance, Hebdige contrasts the chaotic unpredictability of punk codes with the static uniformity of teddy boys (a British subculture inspired by the male fashion of the Edwardian period):

The relationship between experience, expression and signification is therefore not a constant in subculture. It can form a unity which is either more or less organic, striving towards some ideal coherence, or more or less ruptural, reflecting the experience of breaks and contradictions. Moreover, individual subcultures can be more or less ‘conservative’ or ‘progressive’, integrated into the community, continuous with the values of that community, or extrapolated from it, defining themselves against the parent culture. Finally, these differences are reflected not only in the objects of subcultural style, but in the signifying practices which represent those objects and render them meaningful. (Hebdige, 1979, p. 127)

Throughout the course of their career, Dir en grey have seemed to represent both sides of these juxtapositions: the carefully planned uniformity and feminine energy represented by their visual kei phase, contrasted with the chaotic unpredictability of their
decidedly more masculine rocker phase. How do Dir en grey fans find meaning in the band’s messages, and how do these messages impact their identity development, given these stark contrasts? Moreover, do fans of Dir en grey seem to identify with a particular subculture that would provide them with a context through which to decode these messages?

Dir en grey’s long history and development as a band have come with an ever-evolving identity, which may influence their American fans. McLeod (2013) describes the interplay between gender and hybridity in visual kei, which he describes as “one of the most important forms of Japanese popular music” (p. 309). By juxtaposing what are typically coded as masculine genres of music (heavy metal or punk music) with feminine styles of music (classical and pop) as well as dark feminine visual elements in their dress and makeup, McLeod argues that visual kei bands create a “paradoxical consistency” (p. 313) in both their sound and image, and that this gender fluidity is reflective of Japanese popular culture in general. Indeed, many popular anime and manga (Japanese comics) also contain examples of cross-dressing and gender bending. By asking Dir en grey fans about the development of their own identities, as well as their experiences at Dir en grey concerts in the West, this study will attempt to examine how this type of gender play crosses over into the American metal community.

Krenske and McKay (2000) explored the dynamics of gender in the heavy metal scene through first-person observations at a metal music concert venue. They also conducted interviews with fans at the venue. Not surprisingly, they found that the metal scene is dominated by masculine coding:

HM's [heavy metal's] predominantly young, white, male performers and distinctive signifying practices mark it as an aggressively heterosexist
formation. HM lyrics, artwork, language, bodily practices and dress generally valorise hegemonic masculinity and denigrate women and gay men. For example, ridiculing some HM as ‘soft cock’ frequently occurs when a particular genre is not considered ‘masculine enough’. Much of the imagery of HM is resonant with men’s power, typically articulated through technology, men’s bodies, the voyeuristic male gaze of the sexually objectified female body, or the threat of violence. (Krenske & McKay, 2000, p. 290).

Elements of live metal shows, such as trashing, moshing, and stage diving, were other examples Krenske and McKay provided of behaviors meant to foster male bonding, which tended to exclude female fans from participation. While some of the women did report that participating in the heavy metal scene allowed them to feel liberated and gave them an outlet through which they could escape from real life responsibilities and rebel, Krenske and McKay concluded that “to escape one oppressive scene [the women] merely inserted themselves into another” (2000, p. 302).

The idea of a male-dominated metal scene is important for this particular case study. Although Dir en grey frequently tours in America with other popular Western metal bands, unlike its American counterparts, Dir en grey’s fan base is overwhelmingly female (Evans, 2009). A Houston Press reporter who covered a Dir en grey concert -- an experience he “wasn’t quite prepared for” -- describes the concert attendees as “outrageously passionate” and consisting “primarily of young women” (Smith, 2013, para. 2).

An ethnography compiled by Wallach et al. (2011) contains essays written by various scholars on heavy metal music throughout the world. In the section on gender, both included essays focused on how metal gives fans from two different countries an opportunity to perform masculinity through the music and the scene (Wallach et al., 2011). Indeed, as these essays show, heavy metal’s association with masculinity is not
limited to the West. Asian metal groups, such as China’s wildly popular band Tang Dynasty, have emulated the masculine aesthetic popular among Western metal bands: all of the members are tall, lumbering figures with long dark hair who dress all in black (Wong, 2011, p. 64). Dir en grey’s Kyo, coming in at five feet two inches tall, is a stark contrast to this aesthetic.

In his book on the intersection between metal, gender and power, cultural critic Robert Walser (1993) compares the genre of glam rock, which served as a stylistic inspiration for visual kei, with the more musically complex genre of heavy metal: “glam rock is replete with constructions of masculine power. But within the context of heavy metal, glam metal’s relative lack of virtuosity, complexity, and originality are aural contributors to androgyny” (Walser, 1993, p. 128). Popular glam rock band Poison, for example, had a simplistic but popular musical style typical of other bands in the genre. After the height of their fame, the members of the band decided they wanted respect as musicians, and they changed their makeup application accordingly -- “they have drastically reduced the amount they wear, in pursuit of it” (Walser, p. 128). A comparison between Dir en grey’s aesthetic prior to its increase in popularity in the West and after reveals a similar contrast.
This study will contribute to the current literature on metal music and media effects by focusing on the fans’ experience regarding consumption of music by an international band and the band’s impact on their mental health. By using Dir en grey fans as the focus, this study attempts to address issues such as gender identity and identity formation, the impact of lyrics on media effects, and the impact of music across cultures. Previous studies also have focused primarily on adolescents, who are often highly influenced by their own peer groups in terms of musical tastes and decision making. The proposed study asks whether older fans of metal music are equally as affected by what they listen to, and if they are as likely to use music as a coping tactic.

In light of these issues, and the current gaps in the literature on metal and mental health, this study addresses the following research questions:

R1: How do American fans decode the messages from the music of Dir en grey?

R2: What impact does Dir en grey’s music have on its fans in the context of mental health and identity development?
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

The research conducted for this study focuses on the results of in-depth interviews with fans of Dir en grey’s music. The in-depth interviews aim to answer the study’s research questions, which focus on Dir en grey fans’ perceptions of how the band’s music affects them. As opposed to previous research, which focuses on obtaining larger-scale data with quantitative methods (such as survey results), this study relies on qualitative data from a more specific population as a way to incorporate the fans’ narrative – their history with and relationship with the band – and determine the reasons for the band’s emotional impact on the listener.

By focusing on music effects from a cross-cultural perspective and gathering fan narratives as data, qualitative research methods can reveal nuances in international media consumption that may not be examined through quantitative research. By eliminating, or providing a barrier to, one of the primary means of decoding for music listeners – the lyrics – this study gathers information on how fans decode international music without relying on this aspect of their interpretations of the producer’s intentions. Given that fans of the band may have a high level of engagement with the lyrics, and may understand what the lead singer is saying or the subject matter of the lyrics, the study simultaneously aims to reveal more about how song lyrics can impact the decoding process, and if this process is at all affected by the extra step of searching online for translations of lyrics.

After the study received IRB approval, I posted a call for interviewees to various forums dedicated to fans of the band or to Japanese rock. The recruitment message stated that the study would focus on discussing Dir en grey’s music in the context of
mental health. I used my own personal connections in the Dir en grey fan community to recruit potential interviewees, though this was not my primary method of recruitment so as to avoid selecting too many interviewees from a similar geographic area and sociocultural background, as well as to avoid interviewees with whom I have a close relationship. I included both male and female fans and will attempt to recruit an equal number from both genders.

Participants were recruited for this study primarily through the Internet. I posted the recruitment message to r/direngrey, the subreddit dedicated to discussion of the band. While the recruitment messages did not specifically focus on seeking out interviewees who have a history of mental health issues, I made clear in the recruitment message that the interviews addressed mental health issues. Any interviewees who expressed that they have had a history of attempted suicide or self-harm or who express any current desire to engage in self harm were provided with information and resources after the interview. Finally, as a recruitment incentive, each participant received an Amazon gift card in the amount of $5 upon completion of the interview.

During the interviews, I first asked the interviewees about their history as a fan of Dir en grey, including their current and past level of involvement in the fan community. I asked the participants questions relating to their feelings on the development of Dir en grey as a band. After I asked them questions related to more superficial aspects of their fandom, we discussed their emotional connection to Dir en grey’s music. Finally, I asked them questions regarding any previous or prior issues with depression or anxiety, and the impact (if any) of Dir en grey’s music on these issues (A question guide is included at the end of this chapter). Although the participant was advised prior to the start of the
interview that the questions would only be used as a guide, and that the discussion may move away from the questions, all participants were asked the same questions so it can be more easily determined when saturation is reached.

I recruited approximately 20 individuals and successfully completed 10 interviews. Five of the participants were from my own personal network and five were recruited from the subreddit r/Direngrey. I transcribed each interview manually using the assistance of transcription software Express Scribe. The analysis focuses on determining what happens for these fans during the decoding stage of Hall’s model. Are there any trends in the interpretations of message or meaning of Dir en grey’s music among its fans? How are fans “decoding” their music’s message? I focus in particular on how the decoding process is impacted by listening to music in a foreign language.

The communication theory of identity also informs my analysis of the in-depth interviews. How has listening to Dir en grey impacted the listener’s identity? Has the fan shaped his/her identity in any way to better align with what he or she sees as the values of the Japanese rock or metal fan community or of Dir en grey specifically? Has this identity had any influence on their mental health and how they cope with anxiety or depression? Fans now can easily participate in a community surrounding a media product created outside of their home culture. Applying this theory in the context of cross-cultural media exposure and Dir en grey’s active online fan community also has interesting implications for how identity formation is affected by the multiple opportunities for identity formation that exist online.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to the analytical stage of the study was the lack of prior research specifically on international music and media effects, as well as the
impact of the Japanese rock phenomenon on the United States. Reliable information specifically related to Dir en grey, including translated interviews, was also difficult to come by. At the same time, this was one of my biggest motivations for conducting this research project. Despite Japan's continued influence on American popular media, it is difficult to quantify the impact Japanese popular culture has had on American fans in part because the phenomenon has been largely neglected in academic research. I hope that this research project will contribute to this body of knowledge, as well as offer a new perspective on the effects of media on mental health.

**Cultural Categories**

One recommendation among scholars when conducting qualitative research is the additional of a personal lens to give context to the investigator's familiarity with the topic (Fusch & Ness, 2015). In addition to a literature review, addition of a personal/cultural lens examination, or cultural categories, is important for the investigator to consider their own level of involvement with the topic, and thus work towards eliminating potential interview biases.

I would consider myself an insider with the individuals interviewed for this study. I have considered myself a fan of the band since I first heard their music at age 14, and I have been active on various online communities dedicated to Japanese music and culture fandom, particularly through Reddit in recent years, the website through which most of the participants were recruited. In addition, some of the participants were recruited from my own personal network.

I have never been clinically diagnosed with depression or anxiety, nor have I experienced what I would consider any tragic life events, other than the passing of older
family members. I have experienced emotions that I would describe as depression or anxiety, and have used music (including the music of Dir en grey and other heavy metal) as a coping mechanism to deal with these emotions, with what I would describe as positive results.

I have been an active fan of Dir en grey for about 12 years and I have seen the band perform live. So my level of familiarity with the subject matter and the surrounding community, as well as the potential emotional impact of the band’s music, is high.

**Interview Details**

A total of ten participants were interviewed for this study. The length of the interviews ranged from thirty to ninety minutes. Three interviews were conducted in person, while the rest took place either over the phone or via Skype. Online recruitment was completed entirely through the discussion website Reddit, specifically through the subforum dedicated to the band, r/direngrey. The response received through the subreddit from a post created by the author requesting interview participants was adequate to reach the target number for recruitment. In order to provide a more diverse sample by selecting participants from more than one source, a number of participants were recruited through the author’s personal network. Participants were recruited until saturation was reached, indicated by repetition of similar ideas and themes in the interviews.

Participants are identified by descriptive titles in the results and discussion sections to provide context to their responses and to provide participants with anonymity. The titles reflect the participant’s relationship with the band and highlights one the most significant themes that arose during his or her interview.
Following the completion of the interviews and analysis, a member check was conducted to augment the validity of the study. One participant reviewed the results and confirmed the study results and analysis aligned with their own interpretation and experience.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

Three main themes arose during the analysis process: Engagement with the Band, Community Building, and Emotional Impact. The first two themes aligned most closely with the first research question: How do fans decode the music of Dir en grey? The first main theme, Engagement with the Band, included six subthemes: Passion for Music, Discovering Dir en grey, Unpredictability of Music, Engagement with Lyrics, Taboo Topics in Lyrics, and Thoughts on Aesthetic. Participants who touched on these themes in their discussion provided details about what the music of Dir en grey meant to them through their personal interpretations of elements surrounding the band.

The second theme identified was Community Building, which included five subthemes: Involvement in Online Communities, Interest in Japanese Culture, “Weirdness” as Appeal, Gender Identity, and Longevity. Through creating a sense of community surrounding their interest in the band, fans were able to situate the meanings they ascribed to Dir en grey’s music and style within a larger context.

The third theme to emerge in the analysis was Emotional Impact, which included nine subthemes: Music as an Outlet, Live Performances, Kyo’s Vocals, Association with Life Events, Issues with Depression/Anxiety, Impact on Other Fans, Self-Harm Reactions, Motivation, and Negative Impacts. This theme related most closely to the second research question: What impact does Dir en grey’s music have on their fans in the context of mental health and identity development? The participants who addressed these themes discussed how they related the music of Dir en grey significant negative (or positive) events in their lives.

While the first two main themes relate more closely to the first research question,
and the second theme relates closely to the second research question, there was also a great deal of overlap of the various themes and sub-themes between the two research questions.

**Engagement with the Band**

Several participants mentioned the discovery of and engagement with Dir en grey during a discussion of their music preferences and addressed the band’s role in changes in their taste in music over time. The participants were generally passionate about music and put a significant amount of time and effort into discovering new music, engaging with music, and participating in fan culture. Dir en grey appealed to participants due to the many complex aspects of the band they could spend time exploring and making sense of, such as the foreign language lyrics and the differences in musical styles between albums.

**Passion for Music**

The participants all had invested time and thought into their music tastes and actively sought out music to listen to. The Traveler, a devoted fan who has visited Japan several times to see the band live, described her process of actively listening to music by picking out each individual instrument as she listened to a song. Two participants, referred to as the Researcher and the Escapist, both discussed how listening to bands like Dir en grey inspired them to start their own musical pursuits. The Music Collector said he had amassed thousands of songs for his music collection through his Google Play subscription and was always adding more. One participant, called the Survivor, remembered the exact moment she first experienced an emotional impact from listening to music:
So I did not realize music was a thing until I was 12. I remember the moment. The first time I heard music, it sounds silly, but I remember it so intensely, it was my first memory of hearing music at 12 years old, which sounds stupid, but it is. And I was watching VH1 late at night and they would only play music video. And it was Matchbox 20’s “Unwell,” and I remember watching the video like, I just had a moment. And since then I’ve really liked music.

All of the participants had had an initial exposure to rock and/or metal music before they heard Dir en grey. Six of the participants actively listened to other Western and/or Japanese rock and metal music before they had discovered Dir en grey, while several of those participants attribute Dir en grey to exposing them to more “extreme” facets of this genre. The Analyst mentioned that he still hasn’t “found a metal band that I enjoy as much as Dir en grey, but I definitely listened to more of the extreme forms of music afterwards.” Whether they had been exposed to similar bands prior to exposure to Dir en grey, this exposure had an impact on participants’ music tastes or the way they consumed other music.

**Discovering Dir en grey**

All of the participants were able to recall how they found out about Dir en grey, with some of the participants remembering the exact moment that they first saw or heard the band. One common theme that emerged regarding discovering Dir en grey was the idea that no other musical group seemed comparable to Dir en grey. Six of the participants had been introduced to Dir en grey through two of their more popular (and controversial) songs, “OBSCURE” and “saku,” known among fans of Dir en grey for having violent and gory music videos that were featured on American television in the 2000s, such as the Headbanger’s Ball program on MTV.
The Joker, a fan of the band for several years whose sense of humor emerged even during discussion of serious topics, described seeing Dir en grey for the first time on television:

I remember the first moment I heard them…I think it was 2007, just 2007, and it was Headbanger’s Ball, on MTV2 or something, and they were doing the number one music video of the year, and it was “saku,” and in my head, I saw the video, and I immediately was like, “What. Is. That.” And I was never really exposed to music outside of the U.S., except for Spanish music ‘cause I’m Spanish, but I never thought that was anywhere else. And then Dir en grey blew my fucking brain, you know?

Initial exposure to Dir en grey and their extreme style engaged participants' sense of curiosity about new and unique music and caused them to look into the band further, whether the music was immediately appealing to them or not.

All of the participants had been a fan of Dir en grey for at least four years, some for much longer. The participants took pride in the length of their fandom, which they attributed in part to finding something new to enjoy in each one of the band’s new albums (This aspect will be discussed further in *Unpredictability of Music.*) The Joker offered this observation:

Then again, I don’t feel as much of a connection to a band unless I like them as a whole, like their whole discography. I probably wouldn’t feel this way about Dir en grey if I only liked two of their albums. I need to be invested into the band to feel an emotional connection to them…You can be a casual Dir en grey listener, I don’t know how awesome that would be.

Having engaged with the band over a long period of time, participants were also able to relate the band’s transformation over time to their own lives and relationships – for instance, longer-term fans were able to relate the band’s transformation to their own growth from adolescence to young adulthood (see *Thoughts on Aesthetic*). Being a fan for multiple years also fostered a strong sense of loyalty to the band.
**Unpredictability of Music**

Participants engaged in active listening to Dir en grey’s music as part of the decoding process. Their initial discovery of Dir en grey led to another realization that appealed to their desire for unique music: it was not formulaic, and the music style changed from album to album. Participants described the variations in music from album to album and/or the unpredictability of music as a reason they were motivated to further engage with and decode the music of Dir en grey.

The Music Collector said:

The complexity of Dir en grey and the uniqueness of it all [got to me]...I can say after listening to all their albums they’re all very different. You can definitely see the stylistic changes between each one as the timeline progresses. All the tracks on the first album are very different from all the tracks on the last album...there’s just such a wide range.

The Analyst described the first time she heard Dir en grey and how strongly it contrasted with the music that usually appealed to her ear: technically precise classical music and Broadway soundtracks. To her surprise, Kyo’s decidedly imprecise vocal style and the aggressive music drew her in:

Well I mean, it started off with the unpredictability, and I couldn’t really get a read on them from one song, so I just kept going...there’s two aspects of it, one thing that Dir en grey really helped me with was, I started questioning my preconceptions about the whole thing? Just because, I didn’t go into looking up Dir en grey expecting to like it. At all. I was just like, weirdo Japanese dudes. Metal. Ok. I’m just gonna go in and Google that, and go on my merry way, ‘cause I don’t like metal. Metal’s not something I’d ever like. And then, taking a step back and kind of looking and going like...so where did I come to the conclusion that I wouldn’t like metal? WHY do I not like metal, I suppose? Or why do I think I don’t like metal. So there was that, and I Think that’s part of the reason why no matter what they do I think they’ll still hold a very special place in my heart ‘cause that was the first time I sat down and asked what about it I liked and why did I think I wasn’t going to like it, and why was this weird to me?
For the participants who actively sought out weird or unusual music to add to their collection, Dir en grey fit well with their tastes. Even fans who did not regularly listen to unusual music were able to find an album or an era of Dir en grey’s that suited their current tastes, and they credited the band with opening their minds to different kinds of music.

**Engagement with Lyrics**

Many of the participants discussed being involved in Japanese language learning, in some cases as a direct result of their interest in Dir en grey and other Japanese music. Three of the participants were actively studying Japanese and preparing to travel to Japan in the future. None of the participants were fluent enough that they were able to understand the lyrics without looking up the English translations. In addition, several participants discussed how they were unable to understand Kyo when he sung in English either due to his accent or his dramatic, often garbled vocal style. This language barrier affected the participant’s relationship with the music. In most cases, the participants said they were able to disconnect from the lyrics and just pay attention to what the music evokes for them. The Escapist, who cited Dir en grey as his “escape” when he encountered difficult times in his life, said:

> I guess there are songs that if you share it in a different language, you can hear the sadness in someone’s voice or the way the music sounds is so emotional that it makes me wanna cry. I do get some of that even if I don’t understand the language. And I’m not musically inclined, so I think that even if you don’t understand the language, there is something that draws out your emotions. And I feel like Dir en grey did some of that for me.

The Memory Keeper, who enjoyed recalling the years when she first started listening to Dir en grey and the bonds it helped her form with her friends, talked about how listening to music in a foreign language helped her avoid judgment from her peers:
There was a time in my life where I was very shy, in middle school and high school. The one thing for me was that I liked listening to their music in Japanese, and me being an American and other people not knowing what they were saying, I felt like I could listen to it without people judging so much…

As later results show, however, most of the participants embraced the notion that their peers might see the music they listened to as weird or unusual. Even participants who actively engaged with the lyrics still were able to find their own meaning in the music. Fan’s knowledge of the English meaning of the Japanese words didn’t necessarily limit their own personal interpretation.

Rather than paying attention to the intentions of the producer, the participants often chose to focus on their own (often emotionally charged) interpretations when listening to Dir en grey.

The Traveler described how she felt this aligned with the intentions of the producer (in reference to lead singer Kyo):

I can’t recall anything specifically, because it got to a point to where everything was in a way relatable, I feel like how he writes…and he has said this, I think, he kind of wants you to impose your own meaning on something, and don’t try to figure out what he’s trying to say, but let that take you on a journey, and wherever that journey takes you is the interpretation he wants you to have. And I did that a lot, and I remember pouring over lyrics, and kind of just listening, and then kind of just letting that settle into myself.

Foreign language lyrics presented a clear barrier between the encoding and decoding process, even for participants who had looked at translations of Kyo’s lyrics, or had even attempted their own translations. When first discovering a Dir en grey song or album, participants were able to listen to the music first and assign their own interpretations before engaging with the lyrics. Most participants, however, preferred to assign their own meaning to the music rather than focusing on the lyrics.

Taboo Topics in Lyrics
Participants discussed a variety of controversial topics they had encountered in Kyo’s lyrics: self harm, suicide, rape, incest, and sexual violence. Participants offered two perspectives about the taboo topics in Kyo’s lyrics: they either contributed to the unusual aspects of the band that they found appealing (see Weirdness as Appeal) or they gave the participant a safe space in which to explore controversial topics they felt they couldn’t discuss with their parents or their peers.

The Music Collector said:

I do like the lyrics, I do think even though they’re kind of bizarre and maybe not family friendly at times, I feel like that makes it interesting. That adds something new to the music. ‘Cause you can take a look at…a lot of the bands that I listen to have some interesting lyrics. But then there’s interesting and there’s REALLY interesting. That’s a bad explanation. I guess what I’m trying to say is that it all kind of varies, and I feel like the whole complexity and uniqueness really is pretty awesome in my opinion.

Three of the participants cited some of the more controversial lyrical content as a way to safely explore these topics. The Researcher, a longtime fan of Dir en grey who enjoyed adding to his extensive knowledge on the band, said Kyo “was not the first, and he will not be the last” artist to explore taboo topics, but especially when he was younger, he enjoyed that the band was addressing topics he did not normally hear discussed by his peers.

The Traveler also commented on taboo lyrics in Dir en grey’s music, particularly some of the more sexual themes:

Gosh. The more shocking ones, I felt like…it was in a way a safe way to explore boundaries? Even with the language barrier as it was translated, fan translations, of course they take liberties, but when they started doing more official things too, it was a way to really explore those things with myself, and not have any sort of judgment... It was a safe and kind of controlled way to explore those sorts of themes and other things within myself and with peers..
Similar to Unpredictability of Music or the violent/gory themes in the band’s music videos, the inclusion of Taboo Topics in Lyrics was another element that drew fans to the Dir en grey’s music. Especially for long-term fans, reading the taboo lyrics at a young age gave them an opportunity to deal with and make sense of those topics on their own terms.

**Thoughts on Aesthetic**

Dir en grey’s “look” -- their costumes, music videos, and general aesthetic -- clearly was an element that caused the band to stand out among other bands participants listened to. While two fans expressed that they did not like the gory, violent or extreme imagery in many of Dir en grey's videos, the rest of the participants were generally positive about Dir en grey's extreme stylistic decisions. Similar to the shocking lyrics, participants cited their look as something that made Dir en grey stand out to them or increased their interest in the band. The Analyst said:

So I think that fairly early on the shock value of the whole cross dressing thing really caught my attention…mostly because I think it’s also just extremely different, obviously they used to be a little more extreme in the whole visual department with the cross dressing and the more BDSM-esque leather and latex, and the belts...so many belts...so it just generally lends an air of, a it’s really attention grabbing and b) it’s…I’m trying not to say the word exotic but it’s definitely more exotic. This is something you don’t usually see and it’s something that…so when you see you have to ask why, why would they be wearing this?

Most of the participants accepted the transition in the band’s look as a natural process resulting from their development and maturation as a band, not unlike the changes in the participants’ own identities as they grew and matured. The Outsider said:

I think it’s...when you think about fashion in any sense, it's progressive, it’s ever-changing its dynamic. I think as a band they have all changed individually, I think the feel of the band has changed, the sound of the music has changed, and I
think the fashion just follows that. That is a physical projection of something internal within all of them. And that’s what’s so amazing about a band that’s been together for so long, that you can change, but change together, but you can say that about a relationship. You change, but you change together. And I think that can be said for anybody. I definitely don’t dress the same as I did, though visual kei did impact me in my fashion choices.

The Analyst discussed how the change in the band’s look could have helped Dir en grey fit the mold of a more traditionally Western heavy metal band so as to have more success with an international audience, something that might be difficult “when people think you’re weird.”

Despite the band’s dramatic change in musical or aesthetic style, which brought them from one country’s subculture to another, none of the participants mentioned this transition as something that interfered with their enjoyment of the band (though three participants mentioned specifically that they preferred to listen to the band’s older albums).

**Community Building**

Participants discussed how engaging with Dir en grey and other fans of the band online or at concerts or conventions affected how they consumed and interpreted music and lyrics, as well as the effect of this sense of community on their identity formation. Thus, both research questions – how fans decode music and the impact on their mental health and identity formation – are considered in this section.

**Involvement in Online Communities**

Eight of the participants described discovering Dir en grey through the Internet, including online fan communities on blogging platforms such LiveJournal, web forums, emerging file sharing platforms in the early 2000s, and even MMORPG (Mass Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game) communities. All of the participants described the
Internet as one of the primary ways they were able to maintain their interest in the band (either by downloading or streaming their music, watching music videos, or connecting with other fans). The Escapist said she initially discovered Dir en grey through her involvement in online communities dedicated to Japanese culture and visual kei.

I can't particularly remember the lyrics specifically off the top of my head right now, but I remember some songs more than others, or I've thought "Wow, that's really deep." My high school self thought, "This kind of speaks to me," in a way. And I guess it had a lot to do with me and high school in general where I had...kind of a hard time making friends. A lot of my interactions with people were online, which is how I got into the visual kei kind of world. Everyone was super supportive and really nice about listening to the music, and like a blogging community that would share different songs, or like a song of the week, or something they were really into. I guess that was something that I really enjoyed about that community.

The Analyst described how finding Dir en grey through a community surrounding an online game popular in the 2000s.

When I was in early high school, I was part of Gaia Online...and so I started getting more involved in COG, the browser-based MMO that they did, and I was part of a clan, so we did a lot of talking and that was probably the first time that I interacted properly with people online...So I just remember there was one time, this was in '09, I actually remember the exact day sadly enough, but it's May 29th. And I was just talking with my clan leader about random shit and he mentioned that his favorite band was Dir en grey and it was like...alright. And someone else mentioned, is that like a cross dressing metal band? And I was like...the FUCK? (laughs) I was like, alright...(laughs) let's take a look.

Participants engaged heavily with Dir en grey's music, lyrics, videos and fan culture via the Internet. Two participants who discovered Dir en grey via a broadcast of a music video on television and one participant who heard of Dir en grey through “word of mouth” noted that they were able to get more information on the band through the Internet. Several of the fans discovered Dir en grey during the early days of the Internet, which posed some unique difficulties. The Traveler and the Survivor described the difficulties of searching for new music with dial up internet, and the Survivor recalled
once waiting almost thirty minutes for a music video from one of her favorite Japanese artists to load.

For young adults who grew up in the early 2000s, the Internet was an extremely important element of exploring their interests and hobbies – particularly for adolescents who were interested in Japanese music, due to the dearth of Japanese music CDs available in the United States at this time. This medium provided an invaluable way for individuals to discover music from a completely different culture and connect with others who shared their interests.

**Interest in Japanese Culture**

Seven of the participants had had an interest in Japanese popular culture (anime, manga, fashion, and video games) before they heard Dir en grey. Six of those participants had a specific interest in other Japanese popular music groups before they heard Dir en grey’s music.

Participants also mentioned their appreciation of Japanese culture in Dir en grey’s music, and how the band incorporates elements of a different culture into their music and live performances. As the Researcher stated: “Part of the appeal of Dir en grey for me was that they’re not from where I’m from.” The Traveler talked about the differences she observed between Japanese and American live performances:

So in Japan, it’s a cohesive movement...I don’t wanna say it’s choreographed, but it kind of feels like that in a way...so for instance...you sing the chorus, Kyo asks you by moving his mic away, sing the chorus with me. Or he’ll even scream more, more like he wants you in on that, whereas here [in America] that doesn’t happen...in the states, as we are Americans and we are very much individuals, we do whatever the fuck we want whenever we want, and we scream things, like they were screaming “Play ‘Ain’t Afraid to Die’!” in Chicago and I was over here like, “they’re not going to play ‘Ain’t Afraid to Die’ and I don’t know if they even wanna think about that song ‘cause it’s from 2001!” and so on and so forth. But it’s actually, I feel like, how someone might stereotype Japan as being a
collective society where everyone does the same thing, but it feels good to be a part of something bigger than yourself.

The Escapist recounted learning more about Japanese culture through Kyo’s lyrics:

I learned a lot from reading their lyrics and how they say the music industry is super oppressive in Japan, so it’s a big deal when they can go on their own record company, and they don’t have to work with a company that wants them to sound like every other carbon copy band that’s out there.

Dir en grey’s country of origin plays an important role in community and identity formation among its American fans. Fans who already had an interest in Japanese culture were drawn to Dir en grey because it came from a culture they already found interesting. Participants not only thought of Dir en grey as a band whose music they enjoyed, but also an opportunity to learn more about Japanese culture. For many participants who sought out unique media to consume, Japanese popular culture was the right “fit.”

“Weirdness” as Appeal

Several of the participants also noted that the fact that others perceived Dir en grey as “weird” or “crazy” was a point of pride or appeal. Three participants said their friends and families didn’t understand their love for the band, but the interviewees agreed that the fan community created a sense of camaraderie around this perception. As The Outsider noted:

I mean we would meet people at conventions, or [through] LiveJournal, and become friends because of that sort of sense of camaraderie that we were weird. Even as teenagers we had urges to do things that would get strange looks, or, we have these strange urges, and society would tell you, “No no, suppress that or don’t do that,” but in this sort of community it was almost glorified in a sense. Like no, you should be as weird as you feel like being. You should be who you want to be, don’t suppress those urges.
And I think that’s something that I am thankful that I didn’t suppress those urges to be weird when I was younger. It’s hard because of this band, and because of the community, and the friends I’ve made because of it, it gave me tough skin at a younger age, and it taught me to be exactly who I am because no matter how “normal” you may seem or act people are always gonna make fun of you no matter what.

Dir en grey’s “weirdness” sometimes created conflicts between fans and their friends, but that conflict did not diminish the fans’ appreciation for the band’s unique look and performances. The Music Collector said some of his friends reacted negatively when he introduced them to Dir en grey’s music:

I have definitely talked to different people about it. I’ve shared it with multiple people. Whenever people say they’re looking for something weird, I say I know exactly what you need. And some people say, that was really weird. And I’ve had people that didn’t talk to me for a while [after showing them]. They just weren’t ready, I guess.

One consistent sentiment among participants who discussed ideas of Community Building was a desire to find media that reflected what they saw as their own unique personalities. Rather than shunning their identity, participants were able to embrace this aspect of their personalities through the Dir en grey’s music and the fan community.

**Gender Identity**

Aside from two participants, the participant’s own gender identity did not seem to play a significant role in Dir en grey fandom. Male participants in particular described the band’s more feminine aspects in a neutral or positive manner (one male participant described Shinya, known among fans as the most feminine member of the band, as his favorite “cause he’s just so goddamn adorable”).

Two participants talked about how the band’s early androgynous look forced them to confront issues of gender before gender identity became a widely discussed
issue in American society. The Traveler discussed at length how Dir en grey’s look related to issues of gender identity and even masculinity in the metal scene:

I’ve never questioned my gender identity...but I have questioned, what does it mean to be a man?...So I felt like that was a good introduction into, you know, you don’t have to fit into certain roles. I think a lot of it came from, a lot of the fans back then really liked to be different. So you had this Japanese band doing something very differently, and those were a lot of the Hot Topic crowd. That’s kind of why you got into them...but so many of us were female that I felt like for a lot of us, them dressing like women, maybe more so than gender identity, would be that we did not feel threatened by them. Like, it may have been a sort of sex issue. Like a sexism issue.

She went on to describe the atmosphere at other metal shows she had attended and how this differed from the atmosphere in the Dir en grey fan community. She also mentioned the reactions of fans like her, who had been active fans of Dir en grey during their transition from visual kei to a more traditional metal style.

Like if you go to these metal shows, men are gonna kinda talk down to you a little bit, any metal show I’ve ever been to all the guys were really nice, like they’d make sure you wouldn’t get trashed in a pit, it wasn’t anything like that. But at the same time you’d have the people who were like, do you really like metal? Who are you here with? That kind of discussion and you get really tired of it...but Dir en grey was kind of our community, and then when that broke up, it was kind of like oh, they’re just becoming like all the other guys...it was like oh, you’re too much of an American band now, and looking back, I think a lot of the people I spoke with at least [who expressed that were] young women, adolescents who didn’t have great relationships with men.

... The androgyny part is pretty interesting because I don’t think there was much talk about gender so much when I was in high school. It was "a guy" and "a girl" kind of thing, where I came and where I talked to people in real-life. So, when it came to visual kei, and seeing people looking androgynous, I would look at pictures of certain people online...or I would have difficulties trying to figure out if it was a guy or a girl. And then I’d think "Oh, that’s pretty cool." So, that concept was pretty cool to me and to the community that I was in.

Generally, however, participants who commented on the band’s look noted that their visual kei style was simply another unique aspect of the band.

Longevity
Three participants mentioned being impressed by the band’s longevity and how they believe this shows the band members’ deep commitment to the music. The music collector said:

I think one of the other things that kinda stuck with me is that it’s been 20 years that they’ve been a band and they haven’t had one lineup change. ‘Cause if you look at all the other popular bands that have been around for 20 years you’re gonna see that. And I think that’s incredible and shows a deep meaning for the band, that they all share that common goal. They’ve done side projects and stuff but they’ve all come back and they never ditched the project which I think is really huge. If they’re all still emotionally invested after 12 albums or something like that, that’s huge. I do like the longevity.

The majority of the participants did not simply listen to Dir en grey’s music: they researched the lyrics and their English translations, and in some cases started learning Japanese so they could interpret the lyrics on their own. They discussed the music with other fans via online communities and met other fans in real life at conventions and concerts. They built a sense of community around a musical group that often shocked their friends and family. This sense of community had a significant impact not only on how participants decoded Dir en grey’s music, but how the band contributed to their identity formation, particularly for fans who had first heard Dir en grey during their adolescence.

**Emotional Impact**

Four of the participants specifically mentioned the emotional impact of the music as a reason for the band’s appeal. The Survivor said Dir en grey’s more aggressive sounds provided her with an emotional outlet:

I think what appeals to me the most is that I do find them cathartic. Because there always seems to be some kind of emotion to it. It’s not just like a pop song where it just is music, it feels like emotion. You feel something or it makes my mind wander…and so Dir en grey when I first found them, it was pure catharsis, even the VULGAR albums, and Withering which has the most screaming stuff,
like “saku,” I love those songs because I was so, I was angry, and I had bad emotions. And it was like he was screaming for me, as silly as it sounds, but I was mad, I would put on my headphones and listen to him scream, and it was like I didn’t have to scream. I could breathe. He was angry for me.

Participants gave varying responses to the question about whether music preferences changed with their mood or what was going on in the participant’s life. No consistent themes emerged from this question, though a majority of the respondents did indicate that their mood does affect which music they prefer to listen to. As The Joker stated:

If someone has anxiety or depression, ‘cause I know a couple people that do, but they’re not as intense as I am, and I’m not saying that I’m an intense person, but the music I listen to represents my intensity, and if I need something that will make me feel empowered, Dir en grey has it. If I need to sit back and just feel a song, they have it. If I feel happy, they have it. And if they can do that for someone else who has the time to give it a shot, ‘cause it’s Japanese, you don’t know what they’re saying initially, but if you give them a shot then yeah, they can do something for people. Because it’s…like, all their music is so different. Every album is something different. And I feel like no matter what you’re going through there’s something they’ve written that’ll help.

Participants also discussed several more specific aspects of the band that contributed to the emotional impact of Dir en grey music and music video consumption, such as Kyo’s vocals, live performances, and the association the participants held with the music and events in their own life.

**Music as an Outlet**

Participants described using the music of Dir en grey as outlet when they needed to get “pumped up” or felt angry, or when they needed comfort. The Joker mentioned one song in particular song that evoked a certain kind of energy for him:

And especially the original Tsumi to Batsu…it’s a terrible song ‘cause it’s about like molesting a kid, or killing a sex offender, one of those two, I can’t remember. But the remake is so damn good, and I feel like especially now I have a kid, so
it’s like you do something to him and I’ll just put this on while I kill you. That’s how I feel.

The Survivor said:

If I am really still frustrated and angry, I’ll put on “saku” or “VULGAR” or Withering to Death, anything that feels more fast paced or metal.. ‘cause it’s still cathartic. I just turn it up really loud, go for a drive, he’s yelling and I don’t have to. And it’s beautiful. I’m like, thank you for yelling for me! It makes me feel better. I think some people who listen to loud angry music, it gets them more worked up, but it normally makes me feel better. As long as the emotion is being expressed I don’t necessarily have to be expressing it.

Given the wide variety of music Dir en grey has produced, participants discussed being able to find a song that suited their every mood, and they were able to use those songs as an outlet for whatever emotions they were feeling.

Live Performances

Live shows stood out as an important aspect of the participants’ fandom and a contributor to the emotional impact the band produced in them. Nine of ten participants had seen Dir en grey live, with some traveling across state lines, across the country, and in one participant’s case to Japan various times to see them perform. Live shows also contributed to the emotional impact participants received from the music (see Emotional Impact). Seven of the participants talked about their experience as having a major positive impact on them, helping them feel closer to the band, their music, and the fan community. The Joker responded:

I wanted to feel good - I needed something to make me feel better about my situation at the time, and I found that Dir en grey… I love them, I literally do… it was an incredible experience seeing them live, and I felt like everything was just OK, I felt like everything was great when I saw them live because of the music..
The Outsider also described the unique experience of seeing Dir en grey live, made more novel by what he felt was the infrequency of their American tours compared to the number of live shows in Japan.

Anyone who’s a huge fan of the band will tell you that seeing them live is an experience like no other. I don’t know what it is about seeing them, and they’re right...just seeing that they’re just sort of real, and not something that’s in your head or in your computer screen, it’s malleable, you can touch it, it’s right there in front of you. The people around you love the music just as much as you do, there’s that sense of camaraderie and belonging, but it’s also like, oh my god, the people I’ve been obsessed with for a year and a half are right here.

And the passion that they put into their music, I mean night after night, you have to have passion in your music to put on a good show night after night... If they come again, here or New York, I’ll probably go to both. It’s just, they might not come around, you know, so it’s just like one of those things where we’re not really gonna take that risk, ‘cause they’re from Japan you know - They probably don’t make as much here as they do there, so if they come we’re gonna go.

All of the participants who had seen Dir en grey live discussed live performances as having a significant positive emotional impact, which in most cases was more than the impact they felt from listening to a recording of the band. Reasons for this impact included feeling as if they were a part of the fan community, the buildup of excitement from waiting for the show to start, the emotion or passion the band expressed during the performance (in particular from Kyo), and the disappointment when the show ended. In addition, participants described their anticipation of seeing Dir en grey again when they could. The memory keeper talked about how she would go with a friend to see Dir en grey the next time she had the chance, even though she’s not familiar with their newest releases. Three participants mentioned memorabilia they had kept from live performances, including drummer Shinya’s drumsticks, a guitar pick, and a signed T-shirt, that they received as a result of attending the live performance.
Live performances were an important aspect of the participant’s engagement with Dir en grey. The participants’ discussions about their experiences at live shows touched on multiple themes, including helping the participant feel like a part of the fan community (see Community Building), and adding tangibility to a band they had previously only seen online. Participants could listen to recordings of certain songs after the show and think about the live performance, adding a layer of nostalgia to that track.

**Kyo's Vocals**

Several participants specifically identified Kyo’s vocals as a reason for the band’s appeal and as a way that the band added another emotional layer to the music. Separate from the lyrics, the vocals alone appealed to the listener's emotions. The Joker described the specific emotional impact of Kyo’s singing:

> I feel like when Kyo is singing, he means it all. There’s other bands that I’m like yeah, this speaks to me, but there’s very little bands where I’m like yo, this is on my emotional level that I feel for Dir en grey. I can maybe name like two other bands and even then I’m like eh, maybe your one album will do it for me. All of Dir en grey, there is something there for me.

The Visual Kei Enthusiast, whose love for the Japanese subculture extended far beyond Dir en grey, responded:

> I think what usually got me back to listening to these songs was the way the vocals sounded. Some songs, I feel, have a feeling of layer of frustration or sadness, to an extent, a little bit of anger. Things where I felt like, I don't wanna sound cheesy and deep, where the music just kinda got me, and I could understand what they were saying.

Despite often being unable to understand the lyrics, participants said they nonetheless experienced emotional responses to the music due to Kyo’s unusually dramatic vocal style. In addition, multiple participants cited the strength of Kyo’s vocals as a reason the band stood out from others.
Association with Life Events

Participants strongly associated specific songs or albums with significant events in their lives and in some cases used that song or album as a way to cope with that life event. Five of the participants mentioned associating an album with a painful time in their life. The Joker said:

So, their first...the live show, UROBOROS, ‘with the proof in the name of living,’ the US release, that one just brings me back to when I was unemployed and I was wicked depressed 'cause nothing was working for me, and that album front and back I listened to, and it brings me back to that time where I just felt like nothing was going to get better for the longest time, and it makes me appreciate life as it is now, but if there’s an album I could cut out it would be that one, because I don’t like feeling this, even though it got me through so much, and I feel indebted to that live album...what I meant is if I could erase an album from their discography it would be that one. Because it reminds me of such a bad time but at the same time I feel like I need to listen to it from time to time.

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that listening to Dir en grey reminded them of “ugly,” sad or tragic parts of life. The Traveler said:

My mom passed away in 2006, I wanna say four months before MARROW OF A BONE came out? And when MARROW came out, that was kind of...where I went to. That was...and I rode on to that, and even if I didn’t understand, the guitars would speak to me or the bass or the drums and it just all kind of became an envelope of my feelings and I get...sometimes I could just close the album jacket and just say, I'm done, but I mean obviously it doesn’t help all the time. I had that little bit of an outlet at that point, so.

Yeah. And I remember looking back, reading the lyrics and just pouring over them, and having these sorts of emotions and I don’t wanna say avoiding the emotions I had about my mother passing away, but I was able to channel them in a different manner that wasn’t always as destructive, if that makes any sort of sense.

The Joker noted that one song in particular reminded him of his difficult relationship with his family:

Another track off of Withering to Death would be Merciless Cult. It’s such a simple concept...one of the parts is just, Kyo is just, there is no love here. That’s how I kind of feel about my family. I’m easily the black sheep of the family, and I
try not to be, especially now that I have a son, and I’m trying to be more involved for his sake, I easily still feel that, and there’s just some aspects of that, that I just don’t feel the love here. And so, that’s why it gets me ‘cause they’re all so religious, and I feel they think that their religion is going to get them into heaven but they’re still such pieces of shit towards some things, and it speaks to me on that level...I’m just like, you guys are just assholes and I don’t feel any love here. But you guys are my family.

Participants also associated some Dir en grey music with the happier parts of their lives, despite the mood of the music and the topics addressed in the lyrics. The Escapist said:

So it was cool that from 14 to 15 I liked the crazier, heavier stuff and once I got into the crazier stuff like DUM SPIRO SPERO, and it was so death metal so it’s all cool, but at that time I also really liked going back to their early early stuff, just listening to “GARDEN” and “missa” and “MR. NEWSMAN,” [the EP] six ugly, hearing that is just so good. It’s just such a different taste, ’cause that brings really happy feelings listening to their earlier visual kei stuff. You feel almost a feeling of bliss, and it just reminds me of really really nice times, so it’s just...back when I was a kid and I didn’t have to worry about goals and adulthood.

The Memory Keeper said:

It’s usually when I’m with people that remind me of them that I start to listen to them more because it’s more of a nostalgic thing...[I’m reminded of] school, high school, concerts with friends I don’t really talk to anymore. It was a time when I was really depressed, it was the first time I started making really good friends, too. So, it was a bit of both happiness and sadness. When I listen to some of their older songs, it reminds me of middle school, and Withering to Death. It reminds me a bit of a happier time.

While there was a stronger association with feelings of happiness or nostalgia for fans who listened to the band’s visual kei-era music, versus an association with painful or tragic life events with the more aggressive metal music of the 2000s and beyond, participants described the music as a tool for coping with or making sense of difficult events in their life, or in the case of long-term fans, for reminding them of when they first discovered the band.

**Issues with Depression/Anxiety**
Participants who said they had a history with depression or anxiety were asked if their music choices changed when they were feeling especially anxious or down. They were also asked to discuss what impact, if any, they felt Dir en grey’s music had on their moods or on feelings of depression or anxiety.

Every participant described experiencing issues with depression or anxiety, with five participants saying they had received a clinical diagnosis for one or both. Three participants currently or in the past described having had to take medications or receive clinical treatment for their depression and/or anxiety. A majority of the participants described how they used music as a tool to cope with these feelings, or as the Researcher described his use of music, “as a way to keep my moods in check.”

A participant called the Survivor described the impact of growing up in an abusive household on her mental health, and the role Dir en grey played for her during this time:

For me, I grew up with a very alcoholic, very abusive mother...when I was 3 or 4 she would legit try to kill me. Suffocate me with a pillow, beat me to death, she tried to kill me...my mother’s response to everything is anger. She’s like, anger is your best shield and your best sword. But I don’t really believe that. I’m not an angry person. And so growing up when she would have those responses, where she’d be so angry, and so venomous, and so mean, and she would do things just to scare you and hurt you, like she would laugh at me just to be cruel..I was just so mad ‘cause I couldn’t retaliate, didn’t really have a father, so I knew I was dependent on her to survive at that stage of my life. I needed her to live and had nowhere else to go.

So I started listening to Dir en grey and I really heard someone scream and yell and be angry, and...‘cause when he screams sometimes it trails off like she screams, and he runs out of breath... and I liked that. And I couldn’t do that, I couldn’t lash out or physically hurt her or express my anger ‘cause I knew I had no footing to do that. So when I listened to Dir en grey and specifically “saku” and songs where he would scream, it meant a lot to me to hear that. There were times I was so angry ‘cause she would just do the meanest, dumbest things.
But yeah, growing up I really needed it. It was really important to my sanity. And I credit having Dir en grey in my life at that time for the release ‘cause otherwise I didn’t have anything; I literally could not do anything.

The Analyst, a longtime fan who had closely examined both the music of Dir en grey and her reasons for enjoying it, also described using the music of Dir en grey as an outlet for the frustration she experienced as a result of her anxiety:

So I have both depression and anxiety. That was never something that I really thought about until I hit college until I actually went and talked to a therapist and got diagnosed. Both lines of thought have pretty much always been a part of my life, but I didn’t realize as such until I actually went and talked to someone about it, but I think that’s part of the reason why I found the lyrics so interesting, was just because I always liked sad songs before, but it was like... a lot of anxiety I feel like is not just being sad or feeling anxious, it’s feeling frustration, and it’s like, why can’t I do this? What the hell? This shouldn’t be hard, but I can’t.

And so I think [Dir en grey’s music] was like the first outlet I had, I suppose, for frustration. Yeah. So. In terms of depression it was like, there’s a lot of ... given how angry and sad they are most of the time, for some reason the optimistic songs always come back to me, I suppose. It’s just like, here are all these negative emotions, but at the end there’s still positivity in all of it... I mean, it “helps me” is a very strong term, but it definitely makes me feel better, at least, so yeah.

Participants described depression and anxiety having had a significant influence on their lives, and Dir en grey was among one of the more important bands that these participants used to help them cope with feelings of depression and anxiety. When the participants felt they had nowhere else to turn, the band provided a safe space in which they could channel their negative emotions.

**Impact on Other Fans**

Most participants declined to comment on how Dir en grey’s music might impact other fans who had experience with feelings of depression or anxiety. Others, however, said they knew other fans who had found either catharsis or a sense of belonging or
both through the band. The Outsider, who first found Dir en grey in high school at a time when she felt like she didn’t fit in with the rest of her peers, responded:

Oh yeah. I feel like…the people that I had met because of Dir en grey, they were battling the same anxiety and depression, and again I think those people that I met gravitated towards them because of that belonging, and it gave them an outlet… there was only a couple cons [I met people at], there were tons of people online…

Interviewer: So you’ve seen with other fans too it’s had a more positive effect on any issues they’ve had?
The Outsider: I do. And it’s kind of sad too to think back on how my dad felt about it…he’d be like, are those women? Why are they men dressing as women? And I would just say, you don’t understand it, you don’t understand it. And I think that’s something a lot of fans resonate with…you don’t understand what they’re doing. You don’t understand what I’m going through inside.

Self-Harm Reactions

All of the participants were aware of the self-harm Kyo performs on stage, either having seen it in online videos or at a live show or having discussed it with other fans on a forum. The negative reactions from participants mostly focused on the participant either worrying about Kyo hurting himself or being reminded of friends who had also self-harmed. The Traveler said:

It always kind of hurt me to see him doing that, whether it was just in a photo, and I can’t recall if I ever saw him do it live, and I did go through a phase of self harm, I’ve had various…how to say it…I have a history of mental illness in my family, and I had some stints… but when he did it, it made me think back to when I did it, and how I felt, and I just.. a lot of people say like, Kyo wouldn’t do that for show, that’s how he feels, and I’m like, I don’t want him to feel that way. I just want it to be a part of a show, a part of an act, than to have someone go through that. So whenever I saw that I was like mehh…I think he was still fishhooking? In his mouth? I think he had for the most part stopped…yeah…the fishhooking was…intense. And, the scratching…’cause sometimes I’ll actually notice that he will touch his neck and I’ll be like, do you want to scratch, or is that just a neck touch? I just don’t know. But, yeah, I never liked it. And it never made me feel good about the situation, like I said I wanted to protect him from that as a 16 year old girl would and like, please stop, not because it makes me uncomfortable but because I don’t want you to be in pain.
More positive or accepting reactions focused on how the participant could either relate to what Kyo was feeling or how they believed it helped Kyo express his emotions through his performance. The Escapist said:

I could relate to it, you know, being a teenager. You could see that the guy was clearly in pain, and he was trying to share that pain, even if it was for shock value. He was expressing what he is trying to express through the song, I feel like, which is pain, which is whatever the case may be, but since I didn’t see any of it.. it’s funny that you bring it up ‘cause I had never thought about it, ‘cause it was such a drastic change from the Kyo I had seen footage of to the Kyo I had seen live. It was like he was trying to express himself through the music rather than the shock value or the production.

The Survivor related her own experience with self-harm to seeing Kyo’s actions. She also described her positive reaction to his self-harm, describing it as “metal,” meaning hardcore or brutal:

I know why I like when he does it ‘cause it feels like he’s genuinely frustrated, and I feel like when he’s singing he’s still feeling the emotion of what he was writing, and that’s just his agitation coming out. And so it just makes it feel more passionate? I honestly don’t mind blood and shit, I didn’t like it when he would throw up on stage, or fake throw up, ‘cause that would freak me out ‘cause I don’t like vomit. But the blood I never really minded ‘cause it didn’t feel violent. It didn’t feel violent at all. It also felt cathartic, not for me but for him. It’s not like, “Oh, that makes me feel better.” It made me think, “Oh, I think he feels better!” ‘Cause he does it so frantically, he would interrupt songs to really go at himself until it was like, oh man. He needs this moment right now more than he wants to sing this song.

I was way past my stage of the self harm, and so when he did them they felt more like.. I guess like a catharsis that I felt for myself, but it seemed also very intricately tied to what he was singing, and also being on stage. Like, just having his moment of, OK, I’m angry, this is an angry thing, I’m feeling something and then doing it. And I think part of it also.. just to be outrageous and outlandish. But I didn’t really connect the two. For me it wasn’t a cry for help. It was more of just.. he made it seem normal for him. It wasn’t unhealthy when he did it for some reason. He’s on stage, it ties with the song, it didn’t feel… bad? I didn’t connect the two in my head.

It’s got that same kind of catharsis of watching him do it. It’s kind of like when you watch something embarrassing and you feel embarrassed? It’s kind of like that. I can kinda relate to the release that I think he’s having. But then when I saw it I
didn’t feel concerned, like oh no, I’m worried about him, I was more like, that’s metal! That’s so metal! I really did.

None of the participants explicitly stated that seeing Kyo perform self harm on stage encouraged them to do the same thing to themselves. Both participants who described their own self harm were no longer harming themselves by the time they had seen footage of Kyo performing these actions on stage. The participants who described Kyo’s self harm in a positive way said that seeing him perform those actions gave them a sense of catharsis without having to engage in self harm themselves.

**Motivation**

Five participants specifically mentioned using Dir en grey as motivation to get through negative situations they had experienced in their lives, whether it was homelessness, feeling excluded at school, the death of a family member, or an abusive situation at home. The Traveler talked about how earning money to travel to Japan for live shows gave her motivation to attend college after her mother passed away.

They kind of gave me a purpose when I didn’t have one. ‘Cause I originally didn’t really want to go to college. When my mom was still alive, it was just expected of me, and then when she died, that was kind of just like...she was in the hospital, on her deathbed, and it sounds really dramatic, but yeah, we were just chatting and she was like, “You’re gonna do this and this, take your graduation photo with these pearls,” and yadda yadda, and “when you go to college, et cetera et cetera.” And I felt like, before I didn’t really care to go to college and at that point I had to go to college. It felt like her last wish...for me, [seeing Dir en grey live] became a very big life purpose. I meet people, I get to have new experiences because of them, and I don’t feel like I’m giving them all the credit.

The Escapist responded:

Dir en grey always made me feel better, just ‘cause...since I’ve dealt with tragedies in the past, their music was always there to help me. It’s something I could always rely on and just keep listening to...It was like one of my favorite quotes ever, from [the lead singer for the deathcore band Suicide Silence] Mitch Lucker right before he died: ‘Music will get you through anything, I promise, just keep listening, it gets better.’
Similar to the Issues with Depression and Anxiety subtheme, Dir en grey was a significant coping mechanism for participants when they were going through a tough time in their lives. Some participants even discussed how the dark lyrics gave their own situations perspective, while others talked about how the melancholy or angry music reflected their own feelings. In both cases, most participants described feeling more in control of their situation after listening to Dir en grey.

**Negative Impacts**

Mentions of potential negative impacts of the music of Dir en grey were few, but three participants discussed either using the music as an unhealthy coping mechanism for a bad situation in their lives, or observing this same behavior among friends.

Two participants mentioned they had friends who were fans of the band that they were concerned about because of potential self harm influence or an unhealthy dependency on the band. One particular case, a friend of the Traveler whose Dir en grey fandom had become an unhealthy obsession, addresses the potential negative repercussions of using music as a coping mechanism for mental health issues. Given the limited information available regarding the friend’s mental health history, it is difficult to determine whether any of this individual’s interactions with music had the potential to be unhealthy.

Four participants mentioned being unable to listen to a particular album, or having the desire not to listen that an album for a period of time, due to the negative life event associations accompanying that album. The Researcher mentioned associating an album with a difficult time in his adolescence:
You’re 15 years old, trying to find your way out of childhood still even, you’re sort of just having a tough time at home…definitely more of a recluse, which is definitely gonna be the case with most fans of theirs.. so it was difficult stuff, but I look at that now, it’s so far in the past that it doesn’t matter anymore, and you know, you work through it and that’s that. You take the good things from that time too, and things like this album are sort of stuck with me in a way that.. there’s a lot of pain and negative imagery and all sorts of things packed into the album and it would be sort of easy for me to kind of just condemn it along with my past self, who I’m not such a big fan of now, but I’m not gonna do that ‘cause it’s a hell of an album. And it would be a shame to just ignore how good I think it is just because it came into my life at a bad time. That would be sort of…impolite to a band that I liked a lot, so I’m not gonna do that.

Among the four fans for whom particular Dir en Grey music had negative associations, none of them stopped listening to the band during this period, and their sentiments were similar to what the Researcher expressed: they felt loyal to the band wanted to continue to listen to and engage with the music.

Three main subthemes emerged in the results which addressed the two research questions: Engagement with the Band and Community Building, which primarily addressed how fans decoded the music of Dir en Grey, and Emotional Impact, which primarily addressed the impact of Dir en Grey on the fans’ mental health and identity formation. Despite participants’ feelings of depression or anxiety, or separation from their peers, Dir en Grey provided a means through which they could connect with the “weird” part of themselves – the desire to engage with a culture different from their own, or consider taboo topics that they did not feel comfortable discussing with their peers – and with other fans who had similar feelings. This feeling of connectedness led to a much greater positive emotional impact from music listening.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

Three major themes emerged in the process of answering the research questions of how fans decoded the music of Dir en grey and what impact the music had on fans’ mental health and identity formation. The level of dedication among the fans interviewed for this study was high. Despite the amount of time they spent reading lyrics, watching music videos and discussing the meanings of the songs with other fans, participants were still able to find their own meaning in the music of Dir en grey. Participants also cited feeling “weird” or different from their peers as a reason they were attracted to Japanese culture and the music of Dir en grey, which contributed to the participants’ identity formation as adolescents and young adults. Finally, fans discussed how attending emotionally charged live performances, as well as specific elements of the music, such as Kyo’s dramatic vocals, led to a greater emotional impact from the music.

Fan Dedication and Implications for Results

All of the participants had been fans of Dir en grey for at least four years at the time they were interviewed, all but two participants had been to a live performance, and all expressed the desire to attend future live performances. While not all of the participants could recall names of particular songs they wanted to discuss, all of the participants could name specific albums without looking up the name online first. All of the participants were able to name specific members of the band, and when asked, were able to name and discuss their favorite member. Clearly, the level of time and emotional investment in the band was above average among all participants. In general, the participants would not be considered casual fans of the band. Especially for long-
term fans, given the difficulty of obtaining Japanese-language media in the early 2000s, and the extremely niche space that the band occupies in the alternative music scene even today, this level of commitment would not be unusual among other active fans of Dir en grey.

According to setlist.fm, a website that aggregates data on live performances for musical groups, Dir en grey has had 764 tour dates in Japan and 152 in the United States (the second largest number of dates by country after Japan) since they started touring in 1997 (Setlist.fm, 2017). The first tour dates they have listed for the United States are in 2006, when they visited 33 U.S. venues for the Family Values tour, headlined by Korn. Given that the band has invested far more energy in touring its home country than in any other location, the fact that eight of the ten fans recruited for this study had attended at least one live performance further demonstrates the high level of dedication among the fans in this community. One participant had seen Dir en grey live 19 times at the time of the interview and planned to travel to Japan to see them again later that month. The fans’ level of dedication, while it may be typical among Dir en grey fans, may not be typical among other fans of alternative music, so caution is needed in extrapolating these results to fans of other alternative music genres such as heavy metal.

Decoding and Foreign Language Music

Participants engaged in active listening of Dir en grey’s music as part of the decoding process. They were familiar with the differences in musical style during different eras of the band, describing the variations in music style from album to album as appealing rather than confusing. They also discussed either reading lyrics
translations online, or in some cases, even using their Japanese language skills to translate the lyrics themselves, or pick out certain words and phrases they were familiar with. Despite many participants’ level of familiarity with the lyrics, the themes of each album, and the intentions of the producer (mainly in reference to Kyo, who writes all of the lyrics for Dir en grey’s music), fans still described being able to find their own meaning in Dir en grey’s music, usually by relating certain songs or albums to events in their own lives. These responses have significant implications for one of the primary aims of this study, which was to pay particular attention to consumption of cross-cultural content and how this consumption could complicate the theory of encoding and decoding, because the intentions of the producer may not be understood in the same way when interpreted by receivers operating in a different cultural context (Swatos, 1998).

The responses from all of the participants were rich in information about how they decoded the music of Dir en grey and were consistent with the idea that receivers are active media consumers; thus the intentions of producer may not match with the interpretations of the receiver. Especially during discussions about Dir en grey’s lyrics, a common theme was the nature of the lyrical content. Even participants who actively read translations of the lyrics or who were familiar with the subject matter of the songs discussed imparting their own emotions onto the meaning of the song. In the process of decoding Dir en grey’s music and Kyo’s lyrics, fans largely relied on their own emotions because they were not as focused on the intentions of the producer during the listening process; thus, to some extent, the fact that the lyrics were expressed in a foreign
language (or a second language for participants who were studying Japanese) in some ways made the experience of the music that much more personal.

**Identity Formation and Embracing the “Weird”**

Another underlying theme across all interviews was the sense of community fans developed from listening to and engaging with the music of Dir en grey, either through communication with other fans on the Internet or through attending live performances. Community building through this engagement with Dir en grey and other fans also played a role in fans’ identity formation. Participants said Dir en grey’s music gave them the courage to be themselves, a means through which to express themselves or to deal with their emotions. Listening to Dir en grey provided a sense of community, in that by listening to Dir en grey and engaging in the fan community, they were a part of something different, which was comforting because they themselves felt different. This sense of community often was spurred by a mutual interest in Japanese culture as well as in Dir en grey – participants provided examples of community building such as meeting fans at anime conventions, traveling to Japan, and joining the anime club at school. As social action theory describes, these and other behaviors formed patterns that allowed the participants to feel a part of a larger group – whether they felt more connected to other heavy metal fans or other Japanese music fans.

In addition, fans who mostly enjoyed listening to metal music prior to discovering Dir en grey were not deterred by the band’s visual kei look, and fans of visual kei were drawn to the member’s unique sense of style, coupled with what they felt was more original music compared to what was produced by other visual kei bands. Similar sentiments also arose when participants discussed how the unusualness of Dir en
grey’s look and music also served as a draw for them. All of these themes indicate that breaking from the mainstream was a common desire among all participants. “Weird,” “unique,” “different,” “shock value” and other descriptors were all used as positive ways to describe Dir en grey and other music the participants listened to. These results are especially of interest in terms of identity formation for fans of alternative music such as visual kei or heavy metal. Arnett’s (1991b) in-depth interviews with male heavy metal fans reinforce the idea that adolescents who feel excluded from the mainstream are drawn to extreme or particularly unusual media, such as heavy metal, as a way of seeming to reject the mainstream, rather than being rejected by it. As Arnett notes:

The popularity of heavy metal music among adolescents is, among other things, a symptom of this alienation. But even though the lyrics are despairing and the music is angry, listening to it does not ‘cause them to despair and in fact dissolves their anger. Ultimately there is something consoling in the bond they feel to others through the music, even if that bond is based on shared alienation. (Arnett, 1991b, p. 96)

The results of both this study and Arnett’s (1991b) study align with the main tenants of social action theory, with aggressive music listening acting as one of the behaviors that allowed individuals alienated from mainstream society to feel connected to a larger group. These results also emphasize the importance of considering the fans’ narrative (in other words, their history of engagement with a musical group or genre as well as their relationship with the band or genre) in evaluating the impact of that music on those fans.

Ideas of gender and resistance to hegemonic ideas regarding sexuality and gender also played a role in the band’s impact on the fans. All ten participants cited having some interest in Japanese culture prior to discovering Dir en grey. Forms of Japanese culture that have gained popularity in the United States, such as anime and
manga, are known for playing with ideas of gender and sexuality. Gender bending is a common theme in anime and manga, such as the popular series *Ranma ½*, in which the main character is cursed to turn into a girl when he is splashed with cold water. As McLeod (2013) argues, visual kei occupies its own space in terms of how it portrays ideas of gender through its play with space and time (referencing the Baroque elements that many visual kei bands, such as Malice Mizer, incorporated into their imagery) as well as male and female: “The combination of stereotypically masculine coded sounds (heavy metal or punk) and feminine (classical and pop) creates a hybridized cross-performance of gender both musically and visually” (p. 313). Participants overall expressed their admiration for the visual kei style, with two mentioning in particular how they modeled their own fashion choices around this style. Exposure to this subculture seems to have made participants, male and female alike, more comfortable with ideas of gender, sexuality and expression existing outside of the dominant ideology.

Overall, participants expressed feeling different from their peers in terms of both their personal selves and their taste in media. The music of Dir en grey resonated strongly with each participant, and the fan community surrounding the band gave them a place to plug in even when they felt they didn’t belong among their peers. It also strengthened their connection to other aspects of Japanese popular culture with which many of them also engaged.

In considering Hebdige’s work on subcultures, the level of participant engagement with Dir en grey fan culture over the Internet, as well as with fellow fans at anime conventions or in social groups, has implications for community building through music as well as emotional impact. In his chapter on subculture as international
communication, Hebdige (1979) discusses the concept of *bricolage*, which he describes as 'radical aesthetic practices': subcultures making sense of the surrounding world by combining two ideas that make no sense together, or making chaos out of order through style, such as a punk making a tailored jacket from a Union jack flag (p. 105). Dir en grey added their own *bricolage* to the heavy metal subculture in the United States through their distinctive “otherness”: combining lyrics from two different languages, excreting body fluids on audience members during live performances, and continuing to perform femininity through long hair and makeup while achieving commercial success in a decidedly masculine music genre. This aesthetic and attitude appeals to fans who feel they do not fit into a mold, even among others who consider themselves mold-breakers, such as metal fans or fans of Japanese culture. The Dir en grey fans interviewed for this study proudly consider themselves a subculture within a subculture.

**Dir en grey as Catharsis and Emotional Relief**

The time participants spent engaging with the band affected how they decoded the messages of Dir en grey’s music. Participants overall expressed that they had a deep and meaningful relationship with music, including the music of Dir en grey. The participants described actively listening to the music to pick out each individual instrument, being inspired to begin their own musical pursuits, including starting their own bands, and viewing the discovery and sharing of new music with friends as a favorite hobby. Because of this level of commitment to music, they were likely to experience a greater positive emotional impact from music listening. While not all of the participants in this study expressed a preference for metal music, a majority of the participants listened to either Japanese or Western rock on a regular basis (including
Dir en grey and bands similar to Dir en grey, and other Western metal, hardcore or “screamo” bands). Participants discussed how Dir en grey’s more aggressive music and Kyo’s performance of self-harm provided them with catharsis for their own negative emotions, which will be discussed further. These results provide a stark contrast to the results of Mulder et al.’s (2007) quantitative study, which found that fans who had a strong preference for “loud Rock music” more often exhibited internalizing problems (withdrawing) and externalizing problems (aggressive behavior).

Participants discussed how intentionally listening Dir en grey when they were feeling sad allowed them to feel a sense of relief of afterwards. The sentiments shared by the participants aligned closely with the results from Arnett’s study (1991b), which found that heavy metal had a “purging” effect for white male adolescents. There may be a biological reason for this reaction. Recent research on the psychology of music listening suggests that even listening to sad music can elicit a positive response from the listener. A study by Huron (2011) suggests that this could be a result of a hormone prolactin, which is released in response to emotional pain and causes feelings of gratification and relaxation in the listener. Thus, listeners with higher levels of this hormone are more likely to experience a positive response from “sad” music. Participants who experienced relief from listening to the music of Dir en grey described a sort of feedback loop in which they were more likely to turn to the music of Dir en grey when they felt frustrated or down - because of the positive results they had received from the music in the past, as well as the positive sense of nostalgia the music gave them.
While all of the participants discussed the positive results they experienced from listening to Dir en grey, certain outlier cases ought to be addressed in the context of previous literature on music and mental health. Through the interview process, several participants discussed how they had at one point experienced negative emotions as a result of listening to Dir en grey because it reminded them of a painful time in their life. Similar to Shafron and Karno’s (2013) findings on levels of anxiety and depression and metal music listening in college students, listening to Dir en grey did have lead to negative feelings in several participants due to the associations they had with the music. Nevertheless, participants never cited Dir en grey as a direct cause of their depression or anxiety. Previous survey-based studies on the connection between metal music and mental health may fail to take into account what this study and similar studies reveal: the cause of negative feelings or aggressive behavior may stem from life events or other extraneous circumstances which a fan uses metal music listening in order to cope with.

The discussion about self harm perceptions also reinforced the idea of Dir en grey’s music, or any other music that deals with themes of suicide and self harm, serving as an emotional outlet for participants rather than as a primer for unhealthy behavior. As Lacourse, Claes, and Villeneuve suggest in their discussion of emotional impacts of music on adolescent girls: “Listening to music to express uncomfortable emotions could be a rather effective coping mechanism for girls since it reduces the risk for suicidal behaviors” (2007, p. 331). This theme and others were consistent with both men and women. Notably, three of the four men and five of the six women who were interviewed specifically described how Dir en grey’s music helped them cope with
negative emotions or negative experiences in their lives. Thus, unlike several of the studies in the literature review, which distinguished results by the participant’s gender, the results of this study imply that alternative or metal music serving as a catharsis is equally likely for both genders.

In a My Global Mind interview, Dir en grey guitarist Die described the band’s intentions in dealing with painful topics in their music:

MGM: Do you see it as a bit of a mission to make this topic which everyone tries to avoid, more visible to the public and to change the way society thinks?

Die: We don’t have any intention or mission to change society. We just want to let people know that pain is a part of life that everyone has to face. We want to raise awareness. What’s important is how to think about it. People have those ideas in their head that if they always live happily without recognizing the pain within themselves, then that will have a certain outcome. Our intention is to say that there will always be pain of some sort, so don’t look away, just face it. Just have that idea that pain is there all the time. But that doesn’t mean that we want to change society or that society should change something. (Zurek, 2015).

Die’s sentiments are very similar to what the participants experienced by engaging with the music of Dir en grey. By acknowledging their negative feelings through the music of Dir en grey, participants were able to deal with these feelings in a more sophisticated way. By using the music as a purgative tool, participants were, in many cases, able to avoid engaging in unhealthy ways of dealing with feelings of anxiety or depression, such as self-harm or aggressive behavior.

Studying cross-cultural music effects from this perspective could have significant implications for the field of music psychology, and other studies like Huron’s (2011). Studies on cross-cultural differences in music affect, such as a foundational study by Gregory and Varney (1996), show that significant differences in affective response between individuals from different cultures do exist, and these results have been
reinforced by later studies like Lee and Hu’s (2014), which found differences in music mood perception from American, Korean and Chinese individuals. However, a study such as this one, focusing on long-term effects and the individual’s relationship with a particular music genre or group, reveals that emotional response to music can act as a cross-cultural unifier.

**Limitations and Future Research**

One potential limitation to this study is the recruitment source. Due to an overwhelming response from the r/direngrey subforum on Reddit, I was able to recruit an adequate number of participants without posting recruitment messages on any other sources. Participants were recruited in the order they responded to the Reddit post in order to prevent selection bias. The fans recruited from Reddit were active listeners of the band and tended to invest more energy into engaging with the band than the participants recruited from the author’s personal network, which may have led to an imbalance between perspectives from serious and casual fans. This recruitment method could have led to potential self-selection bias, in which fans who are active on a forum dedicated to a band were more willing to participate in a study where they could share their (largely positive) thoughts on one of their favorite bands. In the future, researchers conducting similar studies should consider using multiple recruitment sources but selecting fewer participants from each; this could increase the potential diversity of participants and responses.

Although ten participants were adequate to reach saturation, recruiting and interviewing additional fans could have produced stronger reinforcement for the results of the study. In addition, author bias also presents potential limitations. Being a fan of
the band indicates a strong positive bias, though it also provided the background knowledge to ask more effective questions to the participants and to determine relevant themes from the participant’s responses. The cultural categories section has been included in order to limit author bias and present the reader with the author’s experience related to the topic.

**Implications**

This study focused on examining the impact of a band on its fans outside of an artificial setting. Rather than conducting an experiment to measure short-term effects, real fans’ stories were the primary focus. Measuring media effects on more casual fans or short-term effects of individuals who have never heard the band, such as the Anderson, Carnagey and Eubanks study did (2007), could yield different results. In future studies on mental health impacts with similar musical genres, however, examining the fan narrative as well as placing greater emphasis on the fans’ history of engagement with those genres is strongly recommended to create a more practically valuable analysis. As this study shows, fan relationships with certain bands or genres can have a large impact on how a fan decodes messages in music.

There were several intersections in this study, including music listening and identity development, cross-cultural music listening, fandom studies, each of which could justify its own individual study. While much work already has been done on the history of Japanese popular culture in the United States and its societal impact, future work on the emotional impact of Japanese popular culture on American fans from a media effects perspective is recommended.

In considering the implications of the results of this study, it is important not to put
forward a straw man argument to address previous studies on this topic. Fans of Dir en grey tended to experience positive emotional impacts from their music; otherwise, they would not consider themselves fans of the band or continue to listen to their music. What this study aimed to shed light on are the specific reasons why an individual would experience positive emotional impact from listening to Dir en grey's music. Despite the positive impact the band has had on this study's participants, the study's contribution to the current body of literature is more nuanced than a simple "yes" or "no" answer to the question about whether metal music has positive versus negative impacts on mental health. Rather, the findings here suggest that future researchers should explore listeners' relationships with music when addressing the topic of music and emotional impact.

As predicted, the band's cross-cultural origins had a significant influence on fans' engagement, sense of community, and sense of emotional impact. Given the uniqueness of Dir en grey as a case study, the results of this research may have greater implications for the impact of Japanese culture's popularity than for the impact of metal music on American adolescents. The cultural barriers to engaging with the band meant Dir en grey fans had to put forth greater effort in order to maintain their fandom. Participants who were not pre-disposed to metal music listening, but who already enjoyed some Japanese bands or Japanese media, were more willing to listen to Dir en grey because they already felt connected to the community and culture associated with the band.
CHAPTER 6  
CONCLUSION

Sure, scary visuals and violent music are the quintet’s stock in trade, but their mission...is self-expression, not engagement, and their mega-talented singer Kyo is an agent of dread not via pithy, cartoonish slogans about mankind’s similarities to excrement, but with his mind-boggling range and serenely psychopathic imagery...As you’ll read, it seems to have not occurred to them to make it easy on fans. And so fans win. (DF, Metal Sucks, 2011, para. 2).

As the introduction to this 2011 interview with American metal music blog Metal Sucks suggests, Dir en grey has received a mixed, but generally favorable reception among metal fans in the United States. While the band members' talents are undeniable for this reporter, the more grotesque elements of Dir en grey’s music and videos are considered extreme even by fans of traditional Western metal. To be considered unusual even by those who have rejected the mainstream situates this study’s participants in an unusual place: as mentioned earlier, Dir en grey fans are part of a subculture within a subculture. Dir en grey, like the country the band originates from, is a study in contrasts. From one album to the next, Dir en grey’s music, lyrics and aesthetic exhibit both feminine and masculine elements, provide images of beauty and serenity, of both violence and gore; Kyo’s vocals can hit perfect high notes, then fall back down to demonic growls on the same track.

While these contrasts do make the listening (or watching) experience more complex for the band’s fans, the benefits for this study’s participants were numerous, and they welcomed the challenge of engaging with Dir en grey. They found a band in which they could channel their passion for engaging with music: by pouring over lyrics, comparing the quality of the fan translations to the official versions; by navigating a Japanese-language website in order to join the official fan club; by trying to figure out
how they were going to make it to the next U.S. tour date. And for their efforts, they were generously rewarded: they found a community that understood why they wanted to attend a concert where you might end up with the lead singer's bodily fluids on you at the end of the night, or why they enjoyed reading lyrics that dealt with topics considered unspeakable in polite company. They found music that spoke to them when they were sad or angry and felt powerless to control their current situation. The music stuck with them, and they proved to be loyal fans throughout not only their own life journey, but through the band's journey to commercial success.

Though Dir en grey is a unique case study in the context of alternative/metal music, or even international music, its impact on its fans may not be. Other individuals who feel rejected by society may have their own outlets for expressing their frustration, anger, or feelings of alienation. If an experience like music listening allows these individuals to channel this frustration in a healthy way, this behavior ought to be encouraged rather than stigmatized. Particularly for such a highly personal experience, individual factors in music listening and the reasons for emotional responses to certain songs or albums may reveal more about music's impact than what quantitative measures can show.
APPENDIX
QUESTION GUIDE

1. Tell me about the types of music you like to listen to. How has your taste in music changed over time? If there are bands you used to like a lot but now don’t listen to, what changed your mind about their music? What bands are your favorites now and why? How do your music preferences change depending on your mood or what's going on in your life?

2. When did you first become a fan of Dir en grey? How did you find out about them? Are there any other metal bands you enjoy listening to? Visual kei/Japanese rock bands?

3. Are you able to speak Japanese? Do you understand Kyo’s lyrics? Have you read translations of his lyrics online? What do you think about his lyrics/how do they make you feel?

4. What about Dir en grey appeals to you? Who is your favorite member of the band? Why is he your favorite member?

5. How does Dir en grey’s “look” appeal to you? What changes in their look have you noticed during the time you’ve been a fan? How do you feel about the changes in their “look” over time (from visual kei/androgyny to dark and masculine)?

6. When do you especially enjoy listening to Dir en grey? When does their music have the biggest impact on you?

7. What aspects of your own life are you reminded of when you listen to Dir en grey’s lyrics or music?

8. Have you seen Dir en grey perform live? What was that experience like? Were you aware that Kyo performed self-harm on stage? How does that make you feel?

9. Have you ever experienced issues with depression or anxiety? How do your music choices change when you’re feeling especially anxious or down? What impact, if any, does Dir en grey’s music have on your moods or on feelings of depression or anxiety?

10. How do you think the music of Dir en grey affects other fans?
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Katherine is a candidate for the Master of Arts in Mass Communication with a focus on international/intercultural communications. She is a cum laude graduate of Davidson College in North Carolina. At the University of Florida, she is employed as an undergraduate academic adviser for the College of Journalism’s Professional Advising and Teaching Hub and has taken advanced coursework in international and intercultural communications, advertising, health communications, big data journalism and law of mass communications.

Katherine has studied Mandarin for six years and has advanced proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking the language. She has been passionate about East Asian cultures and languages since she was 13 years old, and first heard the music of Dir en grey when she was 14. In her free time she enjoys cycling, running, yoga, cooking, and practicing the double bass. She also enjoys traveling and experiencing new cultures, and has lived in Taiwan and Beijing. She is originally from Tampa, Florida.