

Youth Heavy Metal Bands in Morocco: Resistance and the Struggle for Change

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Abstract

In Morocco, Metal is a controversial genre of youth music that has usually been misinterpreted, marginalized and stigmatized by many individuals due to its transgressive sound, lyrical contents and visual codes. In this regard, the purpose of this paper is to explore the specific lyrical themes of Moroccan Metal bands concerning elements of symbolic transgression and musical activism. It also aims to the main motivations that push these bands to produce and sustain their musical discourse taking into account the conservative nature of the Moroccan context. Using both content analysis and semi-structured interviews, the paper concluded that despite the severe cultural challenges that surround their socio-cultural condition, the artistic participation of Moroccan Metal bands has not just allowed them to gain support from their subculture but also made them impose themselves as leaders of culture of courage. By tracing the Moroccan Metal bands' artistic engagement and commitments, this paper will bring to light the cultural sociology and multi-dimensional nature of Metal narratives in Morocco and the challenges that shape its existence. It also provides an interesting account for students and academics concerned with cultural minorities, literature and

arts-related topics about the nature of content produced by this minority as a reference.

Keywords: Metal music, Metal bands, Moroccan youth music, activism, transgression, Moroccan Youth Heavy Metal: Between Transgression and Musical Activism

Introduction

As the world is becoming more and more interconnected and globalized, its cultures are following suit in that evolution. One particular cultural element that has been unconditionally shared and exchanged amongst Earth's civilizations is music. Being a universal language, music has different types and influences. Some of these types are mainly entertaining in their objectives and therefore easily understood and digested. Some other genres, however, have proven to be controversial, given their richness and uniqueness in terms of their sound and content. The best example in this regard is Metal, which is still classified as a stigmatized and marginalized genre of music because of its countercultural themes, politically charged topics and transgressive sound and content (Hjlem et al. 2012). So to speak, Metal's references to depression, nihilism, alienation, drug use, sex, violence, suicide and devilry make it appear and sound transgressive and abusive to the standards of acceptable musical practices (as cited in Ballard, Bazzini, and Dodson 1999, 9). Kahn-Harris (2007) argues that extreme Metal bands transgress the boundaries of acceptable music, acceptable discourses, and acceptable practice. Weinstein (2000) extends the debate by arguing that Metal music is stigmatized because of shallow readings and misinterpretation of its content.

Interestingly enough, despite these critics, Metal music has proven its merit as a platform of musical activism where artists and fans express their resistance and rebellious attitudes against cultural hegemony, oppression, corruption, and injustice. For example, Rafalovich and Schneider (2005) describe Metal music as an expression of protest against greater cultural practices as well as a way of resisting hegemonic discourses. Weinstein (2000) adds that Metal music talks about oppression, injustice, resistance, rebellion, and death. Following the same line of argument, Jonathon et al. (1990) affirm that Heavy Metal is the cultural field of oppressed adolescents.

Within this controversy, famous Moroccan Metal bands like Suicide Machine, Thrillology, Alcantagram, Sakadoya and Kawn have become more culturally engaged by delivering sophisticated musical contents that reflect their political awareness, subjective experiences and philosophical attitudes to intellectually and culturally inspire their respective audiences. Despite the artistic engagement of these Metal bands, Yassine Bourial, the founder of the

Moroccan Metal community's social media groups, points out that Moroccan society still considers Metal music as noise and perceives it as a work of the devil (cited in Bouazzaoui 2015). In this regard, given the lack if not the absence of literature on the specificities of Moroccan Metal music, this paper attempts to fill that gap by exploring the contemporary dynamics of Moroccan Metal subculture. In other words, this paper explores the specific lyrical themes of Moroccan Metal bands about elements of symbolic transgression and musical activism. The paper aims also to identify the main motivations that push these bands to produce and sustain their musical discourse taking into account the conservative nature of the Moroccan context. By doing this, the study – in addition to filling the gap within the literature – offers original insights to researchers, public relations practitioners and other stakeholders about this controversial trend in Morocco as far as popular culture is concerned.

Literature review

Heavy Metal—or simply Metal—is a musical genre that developed in the late '60s and early '70s; it is considered to be one of the most popular types of music among white adolescents that appeals specifically to working-class youth (Jonathon, Epstein, David, Pratto, 1990). Metal music emerged from the roots of Classic Rock and Blues music in the United States and the United Kingdom. In the early 80s, an “extreme” subgenre of Heavy Metal evolved with the name of “*Thrash Metal*” (Hjelm, Kahn- Harris, and Levine 2012). Later on in the mid-90s and the early 2000s, Metal music witnessed a huge diversity concerning its subgenres such as the example “*Nu Metal*” which made it universal (Hjelm et al. 2012). The contemporary Metal scene has witnessed the emergence of modern subgenres of Metal music, most notably “*Djent*” (Thomson 2011).

In this paper, the aim is not to trace the timeline of the development of Metal music as it may appear, but the purpose is to explore the specific nature and attitudes of Moroccan Metal music and its relation to transgression and musical activism. Before getting to this end, the first literature review subsection takes charge of shedding light on the international specificities of Metal music in terms of symbolic transgression, musical diversity and activism respectively. The second subsection discusses the specific situation of the Moroccan Metal community mainly its history, cultural representations, and institutional infrastructure.

Global Metal Music: between transgression and musical activism ***Metal and musical transgression***

In the early 80s, an extreme subgenre of Metal evolved under the name of “*Thrash Metal*”; it was spearheaded by the likes of *Anthrax*, *Megadeth*,

Metallica, and *Slayer*. These bands inspired a series of extreme subgenres that are known for their transgressive sound and content among which are “*Death Metal*”, “*Black Metal*”, “*Doom Metal*” and “*Grindcore*” (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, and Levine 2012). The transgressive aspect of extreme Metal is a feature that gives the whole genre its artistic and authentic identity. Hjelm et al. (2012) define transgression in Metal culture as "the practice of boundary crossing, symbolically and/or practically, the practice of questioning and breaking taboos, the practice of questioning established values" (17). This fact makes Metal music an unconventional platform of artistic expression that transgresses the boundaries of traditional music in terms of sound and content. For example, besides the aggressive its aggressive sound, Metal deals with a wide range of sensitive themes that target issues of depression, retribution and alienation, drug use, sex, violence, suicide and Satanism (as cited in Ballard, Bazzini, and Dodson, 1999, 2).

Globally, extreme Metal has always been regarded as radical music since it usually concerns itself with themes that denounce social values as well as human existential conditions (Hjelm et al. 2012). Therefore, Metal as a Western product, is explained by Weinstein (2000) as a “shameless attack on the central values of Western civilization” (3). The notion of Extreme Metal is elaborated by the work of Schaap and Berkers (2014) as a "cluster of Metal subgenres characterized by sonic, verbal, and visual transgression." Extreme Metal subgenres usually make use of fast tempos, aggressive beats and low-register guitar riffs accompanied by low or high-pitch vocal screaming and growling techniques. Additionally, Metal artists use growling, which is uttering a deep guttural sound of anger, to communicate issues related to death, manslaughter, wars and extreme violence (Hjelm et al. 2012).

As far as Satanism is concerned, Farley (2009) argues that “song lyrics often have Satanic or dark supernatural themes. Album covers are resplendent with demons or depict medieval encounters with mythical or magical figures” (73). Farley maintains that these themes have attracted media attention and led to a series of court cases against bands and record companies during the 80s (73). On the other side however, Weinstein (2000) points out that the devilry in Metal music is not a religious statement, but a form of rejection of the current theology; it’s a criticism of the conservative society (260). Hecker (2005) confirms Weinstein's claim, arguing that Satanism has always shaped Metal music as it stands for individual freedoms - a revolution against social restrictions and established morals rather than showing sympathy for satanic ideologies. As a result, the devilry connotations remain offensive just to those who resist cultural and moral change in society (59).

Metal and musical hybridity

The mid-90s and the early 2000s witnessed a series of successful attempts that rendered Metal music more accessible to mainstream audiences. For example, different less extreme Metal subgenres emerged, a fact which has made Metal universal. However, this would not have happened without a cluster of best-selling and trend-setting acts like *Linkin Park*, *Deftones*, *Slipknot*, and *Papa Roach* (Hjelm et al. 2012). Examples of these hybrid Metal subgenres include *Nu Metal*; *Alternative Metal*; *Symphonic Metal*; *Power Metal*; *Djent Metal*; *Progressive Metal* and *Industrial Metal*, to mention but a few. Unlike extreme Metal, these genres provide an accessible experience to the average audience in terms of sound structure and thematic content by incorporating clean vocals, female operatic singing, Rap verses, melodic solos and electronic beats.

An article written by the pen of Jedicke (2020) to DW journal entitled “How Heavy Metal Became Mainstream,” discusses the gradual development of Metal music from a highly transgressive genre associated with glorifying violence, drugs, and satanism to becoming more and more diverse, playful, and mainstream to the point of being used by companies for advertising purposes. The article also elaborates on the diversity of Modern Metal and captures it as a space of freedom and comfort used by individuals who hold a statement against political practices and mainstream culture in general. In this regard, the researcher and journalist Jörg Scheller brings into scope the phenomenon of Tanzanian, Iranian, and Indonesian All-female bands” who, according to him, use the Metal platform to empower themselves, express their cultural discomfort and make themselves heard and connected to the world (as cited in Jedicke 2020).

Unlike the focus on pure transgression, the examples above highlight the flexibility and inclusiveness of Metal music as a platform used by artists and fans alike to express their individuality and musical preferences. In the same vein, Jörg Scheller sheds light on the political aspect of Metal with his “female-bands” example. From this angle, the following paragraphs will elaborate more on that aspect, namely Metal and musical activism.

Metal and musical activism

The political dimension of Metal music has been responsible for creating a sophisticated subculture with an interesting sense of cultural resistance and activism¹. Hjelm et al (2012), Levine (2008), Rafalovich and Schneider (2005), and Weinstein (2000) support the idea that Metal music is stigmatized and marginalized because of its political discourses and counter-hegemonic attitudes that may stand for human rights, challenge mainstream

¹ It is a word which combines both art and activism. It is referred to as Social Activism as well.

ideologies and help listeners to develop their political awareness. Indeed, artists use the power of music to provide a social commentary and inspire others for social and intellectual change. Factual examples that shed light on the international content of Metal could be seen in the Dutch Metal band *Epica* with their politically-charged music such as the 2005 album "*We will take you with us.*" The album holds severe criticism over Islamic religious fundamentalists and terrorism around the world. Another example is the case of *Rage Against the Machine* and their song "*Killing in the Name*" which is an explicit rebellion against authority and police brutality in the US (Tan 2019). Additionally, Metal music targets issues of racism such as the works of *Anthrax's* "*Indians*"; *Testament's* "*Trail of Tears*"; abortion and drug-addicted infants such as *Death's* songs "*Living Monstrosity*" and "*Altering the Future*" (Weinstein 1991; Purcell 2003; Walser 1993; Arnett 1996). Still, the best example worth mentioning in this regard is the case of *System of a Down*, an American band with Armenian origins, and their cause of using their music to spread awareness about the "Armenian genocide."² Thanks to the contribution of the band's musical activism, the President of the United States Joe Biden has officially recognized the Armenian Genocide (Kreps 2021).

In his research, Arnett (1991) points out that the lyrical content of Heavy Metal is filled with socially aware messages. For example, unlike popular mainstream music, the contribution of Metal in developing youth's political awareness is well illustrated with the example of Walser when the music video of Megadeth's 1986 album "Peace Sells...But Who's Buying?" featured a young Metal fan watching Metal videos on television. The kid is interrupted by his father who asks "What is the garbage you are watching? I want to watch the news." The teenager responds, "This is the news" (Walser 1993, 19). Weinstein (1991) shares the same point highlighting a series of sophisticated messages and sociopolitical stances that shape the content of British bands, such as songs that target and denounce greedy televangelists "*Be Quick or Be Dead*"; the horrors of the genocide of Native Americans "*Run to the Hills.*".

In light of the current political tension of the Russo-Ukrainian War where the president of Russia Vladimir Putin has officially threatened the world with the possibility of opting for nuclear action (Sabbagh 2022), classic Metal songs are still showing their relevance to the contemporary world such as *Iron Maiden* and their works about the danger of nuclear weapons and war with the examples of "*2 Minutes To Midnight*"; "*The Trooper*", and *Black Sabbath's* antiwar song "*War Pigs*" (Bashe 1985, 40). Additionally, Metal

² In 1915, the Turkish Unionist Government was behind an organized ethnic cleansing campaign against Armenians of Anatolian origin. these events are considered by Turkey as an act of war, but for Armenians, they were genocide that should be recognized at a higher institutional level

music involves its audiences to develop their sense of responsibility for the environment and the fate of endangered species such as the works *Ozzy Osbourne's "Revelation - Mother Earth"*; *Metallica's "Blackened,"* and; *Testament's "Greenhouse Effect."* *Megadeth's "Countdown to Extinction."*

Indeed, the examples highlighted above showcase the flexibility of international Metal and its relation to transgression, diversity and musical activism. Such richness represents Metal as a sophisticated music that seems to aspire for intellectual and social change. After reviewing, and grasping the multi-dimensional nature of Metal music, the following subsection of the literature tracks the birth, the representations, as well as the infrastructure of Moroccan Metal artists and their subculture.

Moroccan Metal subculture: between stigmatization and marginalization *The birth of a stigmatized community*

Twenty-five centuries ago, Plato said, "Any musical innovation is full of danger to the whole state, and ought to be prohibited" (as cited in Jowett 2008, 93). Accordingly, Morocco has a long history of suspicion and crackdown on some types of critical youth-appealing music. The oldest case was the political tension between local authorities and the 1970 old-school Moroccan Folk-rock band *Nass el Ghiwane* which were labelled as '*The Rolling Stones*' of Morocco for their protest songs, sceptical attitudes and brave social commentary about the status quo. (Cumming 2013; Trott 2018). This fact made them celebrated and embraced by the left during the difficult moments of the political history of Morocco³. However, the band was countered by different acts of repression (Schaefer 2012). In modern days, Moroccan Rappers such as Mouad Belghouat known as "*Al-Haqed*" (the sullen one) got arrested by Moroccan authorities on 29 March 2012 during the Arab Spring turmoil⁴ because he used his music to spread political awareness, promote protest and denounce police corruption in Morocco (Brouwer and Bartels 2014). This sort of musical activism has made Moroccan authorities more paranoid of any new form of music that may contain sophisticated social commentary, spark protests or social instability.

Metal culture has become universal and not limited to white adolescents (Levine 2008). This started in the mid-70s with the emergence of

³ The reference here is to the 'Years of Lead' that characterized Moroccan political history during the 70s. The term is used by opponents of the rule of the former King Hassan II to describe a period of his rule (from the 60s to the beginning of the 80s). This period of Moroccan political history was marked by state violence against dissidents and democracy activists

⁴ A series of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions spread across much of the Arab world in the early 2010s. It began in response to oppressive regimes and a low standard of living, starting with protests in Tunisia.

the Punk movement in the UK. The movement aimed to revolt against social norms, defend human individuality, criticize conformism and stand against authoritarianism and corporatism. Thanks to the movement's direct influence in terms of music, esthetics and content, Metal culture has invaded the world (Trott, 2018). The Middle East and North Africa did not escape this influence because of the widespread of satellite dishes and the increase in migration, especially in the late 1980s (Hjelm et al. 2012). However, because of the conservative nature of this region, this type of music was welcomed with scepticism. Hjelm et al. (2012) conclude that "today it is the Muslim world where Heavy Metal faces the most persistent censorship, political repression, and societal stigmatization" (10).

As far as the birth of the Moroccan Metal community is concerned, it is widely agreed that the year 1996 was the real birth of Metal music in Casablanca, a city known for its pioneer bands (Trott 2018). According to one of Moroccan Metalhead pioneers Amine Hamma, Moroccan adolescents were introduced to Metal music during the early 90s thanks to television, tapes and CDs exchange (cited in Guibert 2006). Hamma maintains that due to the impact of Metal music on their awareness, young Moroccan Metal enthusiasts were portrayed as the new rebels who wanted to be "anti-everything" (cited in Guibert 2006). To elaborate and understand more, we interviewed Mohamed Eddaoudi, a veteran Metal artist who was artistically active with Hamma during the late 90s and early 2000s in Casablanca, he narrates:

(...) Moroccan Metal scene started with *Immortal Spirit* in 1996; the band only relied on their pocket and materials to organize local concerts (...) The universities were the cradle of cultural activities (...) Many bands appeared and disappeared, but few are remembered (...) We formed *The Nightmare* in 1998 and released an album. Other local bands expanded the genre of *Necros*, *Tarabora*, *Iron Cross*, and *Despotism*. Other bands appeared in Rabat city, but they didn't have the means to organize their concerts until the early 2000s

In 2003, a group of Moroccan Metal fans and artists were arrested while some of them were sentenced to jail for being accused as "devil worshippers." The incident created a huge controversial debate within Moroccan society, and most notably resulted in the release of the famous Moroccan movie entitled "*Les Anges de Satan*" [Satan's Angels], by the film director Ahmed Boulane in 2007. Amine Hamma as cited in Guibert (2006) elaborates more on the events of March 6, 2003, narrating that the Casablanca court sentenced the 14 Metal musicians to terms ranging from 1 month to 1 year in prison for their "acts that could shake the faith of Muslims"; Hamma continues that the Moroccan prosecutor defined Moroccan Metal subculture

as a “Satanist propaganda” that is “perpetrated by the Israeli secret services to destabilize Muslim countries”. Furthermore, Hamma adds a striking incident: “When we were judged, we had to recite the ‘Chahada’ [declaration of faith] in front of the judge to prove our belief in God” (as cited in Guibert 2006). Also, Eddaoudi fondly recalls that event, when he says:

We know the guys (...) There was nothing like Satanism. The guys sing about serious problems...It was a “Hamla” [a police campaign hunting Metalheads], it was weird you know, Metalheads wearing black shirts of their favourite bands, they [Metalheads] were also hunted by Egyptian police at that time (...) The guys used to meet in a coffee called Egyptian [in Casablanca]. They were peaceful. They just like music. The place where the guys got arrested is D'Iris district in Casablanca

Eddaoudi and Hammi’s narration goes hand in hand with Levine’s (2008) book chapter “*When the music is banned, the real Satanism will begin*” where he defines the Moroccan incident of 2003 as an absurd crime motivated by hegemonic purposes to repress Moroccan youth who started developing some political awareness. As a Moroccan Metal artist, Amine Hamma argues that Moroccan bands used Metal music as a platform to provide a meaningful social commentary about the “third world” conditions (as cited Guibert 2006).

Indeed, conservative societies were facing such a form of expression with a wide range of ideological and repressive apparatuses. For example, in 1997 in Egypt, authorities arrested Metal music enthusiasts accusing them of Satanic practices. This attack on Metal culture was escalated by media hype and the approval of Egyptian ministry representatives and major religious institutions (Hecker 2012). Similarly, authorities in Iran, a state ruled by the Islamic Republic Party, forced Metalheads to cut their long hair while their T-shirts, records, goodies and all kinds of Metal-related products were confiscated because of accusations of "Satanism" (Levine 2008, 5). Such relatively recent repressive reactions in the Islamic world remind us of the old-school reactions in the U.S. during the 80s when parents used to burn Heavy Metal records, claiming that they were an evil product (Hjelm et al. 2012). A possible explanation for such similarity is the argument of Jörg Scheller, a Metal studies researcher, who states that it is normal that “countercultural movements” such as Metal gradually become part of mainstream music but certainly not hailed by fundamentalist theocracies (cited in Jedicke 2020). Scheller adds that in the present times, Western democracies have successfully normalized and commodified Metal, unlike conservative states where Metal is still underground, and stigmatized (cited in Jedicke 2020).

Going back to the situation of the Moroccan Metal community and its artists, it is worth noting that despite the Moroccan king's support for the

L'Boulevard festival as will be discussed in the subsequent subsection, Metal subculture has not been welcomed by some media institutions and authorities. For instance, from 2012 to 2020, Moroccan newspapers' publications related to *Alousboue Sahafi*, *Akhbaron*, *Noonpresse*, *Souss24*, *Almaghrib Today*, and *Hespress* ran sensational photos and essays that represent Moroccan Metal as a noise, meaningless music filled with radical activities such as drug abuse, Satan-worshipping, animal slaughtering and deviant sexual behaviour. Also, the ex-Moroccan governing Islamist party PJD (Justice and Development Party) has called the *L'Boulevard* event "a menace to Morocco's identity" (Langendonck 2010). To fight back, "the Islamist party engaged in a campaign of promoting what they called '*al fan annazif*' [clean art] as a way to promote cultural expression in line with Islamic precepts" (Almeida 2017, 8).

The infrastructure of a marginalized community

Despite its cultural challenges, the Metal community's efforts paid off and led them to establish *L'boulevard* [The Avenue] in 1999 as an annual music festival that takes place in the economic capital city of Casablanca. Recently, the festival has started attracting hundreds of thousands of enthusiasts of urban music mainly *Rap/Hip-hop*, *Rock/Metal*, and *Fusion* where Moroccan bands compete in a contest called *Tremplin* [Springboard] (Hou 2019). In the frame of cultural diplomacy, *L'boulevard* also invites international bands to perform as a way to promote a modern image of Morocco. In 2009, the festival's management received a \$250,000 donation from King Mohamed VI⁵ to build a professional recording studio to aid the up-and-coming underground artists (Langendonck 2010). Interestingly, even with this royal support, the Metal scene is still marginalized and not recognized by local officials as a form of art, a fact which makes Metal concerts difficult or even impossible to organise. The majority if not all Moroccan Metal bands interviewed for this study admit and confirm this fact. Mohamed Iliass Horaira, the vocalist of *Suicide Machine*, states, "When we say it's a Metal concert, officials hesitate and usually reject (...) It's not music for them." Similarly, *Thrillology* band criticized the budget of the Moroccan Ministry of Culture when Wassim Ahenjir, says, "The low budget does not

⁵ Indeed, the Moroccan King has played an active role in promoting music expression to foster a more liberal environment in Morocco. With a particular focus on the youth, his efforts aim to create a platform where cultural minorities can freely express their identity and political views through arts and music, without facing judgment from mainstream ideological frameworks. While some may view this as a political manoeuvre, it is worth noting that the king's support for the youth also highlights a contrast between his governance style and that of his father, signalling a shift in approach and a commitment to promoting inclusivity and freedom of expression.

help the Minister of Culture to support the bands, but there are associations that try to help such as *L'boulevard*, *L'uzine*, *Concert Maroc*, otherwise, you depend on the pocket." Additionally, Mouhssin Sag Ine, the lead vocalist and songwriter of *Alcantagram* and *I Make Noise* bands, states:

(...)We have a rich history in this place [Making reference to the long career of his band that started in 2006] look at festivals like *Wacken or Hellfest*, but here? Still 'roasting ants' [A Moroccan expression that indicates failure in achieving something]. We don't have places to play Metal, except a few like '*L'bouletek*' and '*L'uzine*' and '*Nitak takafi*' [cultural centres that offer musicians to play music in Casablanca and Meknes], and this is just because Metal is the music of atheists, drug addicts [talking with an ironic vocal tone]

The self-explanatory narrative of Moroccan Metal artists exposes the infrastructural challenges that face their community as they attribute these challenges to the unconventional esthetics and sound of Metal. Burial argues that Moroccan society describes Metal music as meaningless noise and devil's work (as cited in Bouazzaoui 2015). This view of Metal subculture goes hand in hand with Joseph Ouechen, a passionate photographer interested in Moroccan subcultures, who portrays Metalhead enthusiasts as "a small group of young Moroccans who defy social norms with the music they listen to, their haircuts and their clothing choices" (as cited in Kaabi 2019). To sum up, based on the multiple scholarly attitudes, the narratives of Metal enthusiasts and the factual incidents elaborated above, one could beg the following questions: Is Moroccan Metal music meaningless? Is it a transgressive platform that advocates for social instability and self-harm? Or, does it communicate an intelligently meaningful discourse that is often overshadowed by stereotypes and pre-judgments? Answers to these questions and a few others will be explored after revealing the methodology adopted.

Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to explore and identify the main themes that shape Moroccan Metal music about issues of transgression and musical activism. Also, the purpose is to identify the specific motivations that push Moroccan Metal artists to produce and sustain their musical discourse as active producers of Metal culture taking into account the conservative Moroccan context. The study enquires the following questions: (i) What are the dominant themes that shape the songs of Moroccan Metal bands? (ii) How are Moroccan Metal songs associated with transgression and musical activism? (iii) What are the motivations that push Moroccan Metal bands to produce and sustain this type of music? In clear terms, the focus is on the lyrical content of famous Moroccan Metal bands and their interviewed

narratives. Specifically, with genuine consideration of the underground nature of the Moroccan Metal community and its mainstream limitations as a whole, the paper focuses on the case of Suicide Machine, Thrillogy, Kawn, Alcantagram, and Sakadoya as the most prominent Metal bands in Morocco. The choice of the sample bands is traced to the fact they have been able to assert their existence in terms of discography, popularity, live shows, fan base, and local and regional awards. In other words, the choice of the five bands is based on a rationale that makes use of the following data:

- Suicide Machine is a band from Casablanca which was founded in 2012. It is regarded by its community as one of the most well-known *Extreme Death Melodic* Metal bands with a Facebook fan base of 4,896 followers (as of April 2022). The band was announced as the winner of *the L'Boulevard* Festival in 2015 in Casablanca, took third place in *the Tremplin Jendouba* Festival in 2015 in Tunisia, and won the second prize in the Moroccan Metal Community contest in 2017. For further details about the band, check their Facebook: <https://bit.ly/3vdOxTy>; Bandcamp: <https://bit.ly/3vc15ut> and YouTube: <https://bit.ly/36LLkB6>
- Thrillogy is a Thrash Metal band from Fez which was announced as the first prize winner of the *Concert-Maroc.com* contest and won the 2017 edition of *the L'Boulevard* festival. The band is regarded as a Moroccan *Thrash Metal* force in Morocco with a Facebook fan base of nearly 4000 followers (as of April 2022). The band shared the scene with the international band *Septicflesh* during the Boulevard Show 2018 in Casablanca. For further details about the band, check their Facebook: <https://bit.ly/3OyPw8j>; Instagram: <https://bit.ly/36HgFET> and YouTube: <https://bit.ly/3kdsSEk>
- Kawn is a Moroccan *Progressive Metal* band which was introduced to the scene with a self-titled album "KAWN" (2019). It has been acclaimed by the Moroccan press and covered by the Moroccan Channel *2M TV*. The band won the *L'boulevard* competition of 2018 in Casablanca and shared the stage with the international Metal band *Septicflesh*. It has been praised by Moroccan Metal audiences and international artists for its hybrid approach of mixing Metal with Arabic elements in terms of melody and language. The band also featured the Finnish singer of the international Metal band *Adagio*-Christian Palin in one of their songs. For further details check the band's Instagram : <https://bit.ly/3OB9Fuk>; Bandcamp : <https://bit.ly/37ELuut> ; Youtube1 :<https://bit.ly/3v9unde> ; Youtube2: <https://bit.ly/3vET687> and Youtube3: <https://bit.ly/3Mv76bg>
- Alcantaram came about in 2006 in Meknes and has been active since

2010; they perform *Extreme Death Metal*, which is an extreme subgenre that's known for its technical brutality and aggressive low-pitched growl vocals. Alcantagram was nominated to participate in *the L'Boulevard* contest in 2013 and 2018 and was regarded by the veterans of the scene as one of the pioneers of the "extreme underground scene" in Morocco with faithful sound and presentation. For further details about the band, check their Facebook: <https://bit.ly/3vaH0Ve> and YouTube: <https://bit.ly/3vdA3D7>

- Sakadoya is a *Melodic Death Metal* band which was established in Settat in 2007 as an influential band within the Moroccan Metal scene. The band's name has a special place in the perception of the Moroccan Metal community because of their innovative production that initiated the modern sound of Moroccan Metal music back in 2009. The band has a solid number of followers on Facebook that surpasses 5000 (as of April 2022). With regard to the sound of Sakadoya, the band was the first Metal band to be invited to perform during the *Mawazine* show in 2009, which is a very famous mainstream festival in Morocco. The band took a hiatus during the last few years and has returned with new energy to resume the making of their new upcoming album in 2021. For further details, check the band's Spotify: <https://spoti.fi/3Mjuo42>; Facebook: <https://bit.ly/3k4tUTn> and Instagram: <https://bit.ly/39f22tw>

To analyze the lyrical content of the bands introduced above, the techniques used by Rafalovich and Schneider (2005) in their study entitled "*Song Lyrics in Contemporary Metal Music as Counter-Hegemonic Discourse*" have been adopted. The two scholars studied the lyrical content of Metal recordings of American and European bands. The study was based on an exhaustive content analysis of booklets from over two hundred Metal recordings. Booklets were analyzed according to an interpretive approach to explore the lyrical contents' main themes and areas of concern. Analysis of the data began with open coding, where data were categorized indiscriminately, followed by a closed coding procedure in which data were examined for specific themes after preliminary categories had been established.

The lyrical texts of songs of albums produced by the five Moroccan Metal bands include: "Evolution" (2015) and "Soldiers of Ignorance" (2019) by Thrillogy; "Open Gore"(2010) and "Domination Reborn" (2014) by Alcantagram; "Beat" (2002), and "My Dark Castle" (2014) By Suicide Machine; "Back to the Age of Slaves" (2009) by Sakadoya; "KAWN" (2019) by Kawn. All of the songs under study are written in English, except for Kawn who mixes the Moroccan variety and Standard Arabic language with English

in some of their songs. Using the interpretative approach used by Rafalovich and Schneider in their study, the lyrical content of the five bands is analyzed using content analysis of open coding and closed coding. The categories discovered are categorized as stand-alone themes. These themes are analyzed, interpreted and explained in the light of the bands' interviewed motivations and interpretations.

To learn about the motivations that push Moroccan artists to produce and sustain their music, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with the members of the five bands. The objective is to have additional insights, and further data on the bands' philosophies, personal interpretations and political attitudes about their songs. The ultimate purpose of discography analysis and interviews is to explore the relationship between the specific areas of concern that shape the bands' discography and their subjective experience about elements of symbolic transgression and musical activism. The semi-structured interviews included thirteen open-ended questions that revolved around uncovering the messages behind songs, the motivation behind writing songs, the controversy of Metal music in Morocco and the band's personal experience as a subculture about the conservative Moroccan context. Each band was first contacted through its official Facebook page. An initial Facebook message provided the bands with details on the study and offered the possibility to contribute in relevant information to this paper. Each of the five bands agreed, and therefore, an initial mutual consent was obtained. The initial data collection procedure was designed for real-life face-to-face in-depth interviews. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with members from Alcantagram, Kawn, Suicide Machine and Thrillogy during different local concerts. However, due to the unavailability of Sakadoya's members to arrange a real-world interview, an audio semi-structural interview on Skype was chosen and decided upon. The interview questions were structured in a way that engaged the interviewees to reveal their political attitudes and epistemological stances. Some of the data revealed in these interviews were used in the literature review section to elaborate more on the infrastructure of the Metal community in Morocco.

Due to the absence of studies that track the exact birth and development of Moroccan Metal music, the paper makes use of an additional interview with an important figure of the underground Moroccan Metal scene named Mohammed Eddaoudi⁶. The interview data are included in the

⁶ Mohammed Eddaoudi is a veteran Metal artist in his late forties and the founder of one of the earliest underground Moroccan Metal bands "*The Nightmare*." Eddaoudi is a professional guitar player specializing in both *Progressive* and *Death Metal*. He participates in different Metal events. For example, in 2022 a Moroccan Metal Web radio station called "MAJMAR" invited Eddaoudi to share his experience about the birth of the Moroccan Metal community

literature review section to provide an authentic and comprehensive view of the different intricacies of the Moroccan Metal subculture. Eddaoudi was first contacted via Facebook Messenger and then requested to join the WhatsApp application for a voluntary interview. To note, all interviews have been conducted by the first author of the paper⁷ in the frame of his master's degree research on underground music and youth activism in Morocco.

For the sake of providing comprehensive findings to the reader, all Arabic phrases used by Kawn in their sample songs are translated into English and listed in the appendix. Later on, the interviews have been transcribed and then coded using ATLAS.ti software which is a powerful tool for qualitative data analysis. It also provides the possibility to create codes, classify them into themes, and move across interviews and codes more efficiently to compare responses. This process helps to uncover and categorize the underlying ideologies and stances embedded in the interviewees' stories with regard to their lyrical content and the scholarly framework presented in the literature review section.

Findings and discussion

Based on the use of two methods of data collection - the lyrical texts of Moroccan Metal artists and semi-structured interviews, this section reveals and discusses the relationship between the dominant themes that shape the bands' discography and their motivations concerning elements of symbolic transgression and musical activism.

The dominant themes of Moroccan Metal bands' discography

The analysis of data collected from the lyrical texts of the five bands has revealed that all the songs were originally written and sung in the English language except for the Kawn band which widened their artistic scope by mixing Moroccan Arabic, Standard Arabic and English in some of their songs. The revealed themes in this study tend to reinforce the bands' wider narrative except for Kawn's band which sometimes diverts from the other bands in terms of sound and content. For example, some of their songs tackle different issues such as environment, eg, 'Cosmic Entropy', culture, 'The Traveler *Ibn Battuta*', drama, and 'The Theater of Hearts' to mention but a few. The results have also shown that Moroccan Metal bands are faced with linguistic barriers taking into account the Arabo-francophone sociolinguistic situation in

and other related issues. Facebook profile: <https://bit.ly/39de3Q1> ; MAJMAR WEB RADIO: <https://bit.ly/3ONC3tp>

⁷ Said El Harrami - the first author of the paper- conducted interviews in the frame of his 2019 MA dissertation entitled: The Controversial Discourse of Heavy Metal Music: Between Transgression and Activism at the School of Arts and Humanities affiliated with Moulay Ismail University of Meknes in Morocco.

Morocco. This fact renders the fan base of these bands to be very limited in number in comparison to other mainstream musical styles. The study also reveals three interconnected major themes that draw the foundation of Moroccan Metal discography, mainly resistance and lamentation of the human condition; psychological disturbance and human violence; anti-extremism, solidarity and co-existence.

Resistance and lamentation of the human condition

The theme of “resistance and lamentation of the human condition” is strongly presented in the discography narrative of the Moroccan bands equally. Resistance targets different issues related to human freedom, social injustice, institutional hegemony, state manipulation, predatory capitalism and systematic indoctrination. On the one hand, the lyrical content analyzed for Sakadoya (‘*Back to the Age of Slaves*’ & ‘*Dismal Moments*’ in Appendix 1 - songs 1 & 2) and Thrilllogy (‘*Soldiers of Ignorance*’ & ‘*Humanator*’ in Appendix 1 - songs 3 & 4) tends to be more straightforward and politically engaged as a sophisticated social commentary supported by attitudes of symbolic protest and resistance. On the other hand, the examples of Alcantagram (‘*Endless Memories*’ in Appendix 1 - song 5) and Kawn (‘*Rebirth*’ in Appendix 1 - song 6) tend to express independence and resistance poetically. As a case in point, Sakadoya’s words imply an urgent discussion that revolves around criticizing authoritarian agendas and state hegemony, while raising concerns about the lack of freedom as well as the economic chaos of the modern world. Lines such as *we should react* may suggest the band’s call for raising awareness about sensitive political issues.

Thrilllogy songs with their straightforward messages seem to target the transgressive nature of human beings in general and the cruel reality some societies may experience in particular. Types of such cruelty include the absence of freedom over one’s thoughts and life choices, and the oppression as well as the subliminal brainwashing executed by the powerful over the weak in particular. Furthermore, Thrilllogy’s songs heavily criticize the potential greedy and destructive nature of the human race and the desire to engage in wars thanks to expressions like *beware of the human attack* that goes hand in hand with *we should react* stated in Sakadoya’s song. These statements could be interpreted as if the bands tend to push their audiences to engage in a political debate that concerns the contemporary human condition. Thrilllogy lines also hold criticisms regarding institutional manipulation. For example, the lines of the song “*Soldiers of Ignorance*” may suggest the band’s statements about manipulative elections and the broken promises of authorities to elevate the social conditions in Morocco or other places.

As far as the issue of freedom is concerned, the discography of the bands conveys interesting statements such as the example of Sakadoya’s line

dehumanisation is the new freedom, and Thrillology's line *no freedom of speech, no freedom of thoughts, all lost and gone*, which in turn put emphasis on the concept of freedom as a core trait of humankind and how it has been taken away or voluntarily handed to the potential oppressive forces either through the use of an ideological state apparatus or a repressive one. Also, the music of Alcantagram and Kawn suggests an equally profound desire for freedom by escaping the unfair part of reality. For example, lines like *I wanna fake my death and start over, somewhere where I can write without getting confused* by Alcantagram, and *I won't change, pardon me, why do you hinder my progression? S'héit min kedbat amri* by Kawn revolves around concepts of escapism and revival which go beyond the area of idiosyncratic and individual freedom-searching into a social issue that may be represented in the prevalent confrontation between oppression and justice.

Psychological disturbance and human violence

The literature review reveals that Metal music is a controversial genre by definition due to its transgressive sound and content. With this in mind, the findings show that the theme of “psychological disturbance and human violence” is heavily presented within the content of the five Moroccan Metal bands. To elaborate, on the one hand, the music as well as the lyrical content of Alcantagram (*'Desire To Deceive'* in Appendix 2 - Song 1), Thrillology (*'Red Landscape'* in Appendix 2 - song 2) and most songs of Suicide Machine are more fast-paced and chaotic with a predominant use of aggressive sound and violent language with expressions like *Slaughtering, Torture, lust for blood*. Arnett (1996) describes the feeling of being in a Metal concert as the feeling of being on a battlefield (as cited in Kegan 2015, 2). On the other hand, Kawn's (*'From Ashes To Heaven'* in Appendix 2 - song 3) and Sakadoya's songs relatively tend to appear less violent in terms of sound and lyrics. For example, *Progressive Metal/Rock* music as adopted by Kawn is internationally known for its melodic sound, odd time signatures and less aggressive wording choice. However, Kawn has a bunch of unusually dark songs that target hot-button issues such as suicide and psychological instability with excessive use of metaphorical connotations that indicate deep sorrow and alienation with words like *cold - alone -rise to meet my eternity-* following models of the Swedish band *Opeth*, and the American band *Riverside*. In the same vein, Alcantagram's song (*'A Perfect Revolution'* in Appendix 2 - song 4) may suggest suicidal tendencies and psychological disturbance with straightforward expressions like *Can I kill that part of me without killing myself?* The title of the song may also indicate a “*Revolution*” against the self and its psychological limitations to handle specific situations. The findings also show that the transgressive aspect of these bands' thematic content has no references to issues related to atheism, agnosticism, drugs, Satanism, delivery

or Pagan occults. However, the bands tend to emphasize transgressive attitudes that target issues such as mental illness, social alienation, suicidal and criminal tendencies, manslaughter, wars and violent human behaviour.

The bands' songs may sound technically violent and transgressive at first glance; however, such transgression does not seem to attack the central values of Moroccan society mainly its religion though it criticizes the extreme aspect of it. Speaking of Metal and religion, Amine Hama argues that most Moroccan Metal artists tend to avoid being associated with *Black Metal* as an extreme subgenre of Metal because of the stigma associated with it since it extremely fetishizes Satanic occults as its core rhetoric (as cited in Guibert 2006). Such avoidance projects the complex religious identity of Moroccan youth as being eclectic when it comes to the transgressive elements of extreme Metal. Indeed, thanks to the lack of comprehensive knowledge about the complexity of Metal music, conservative attitudes tend to confuse *Black Metal* and other subgenres simply because of their sound and visual commonalities like black T-shirts and transgressive stickers. Additionally, *Black Metal* is known for its subversive discourses that abuse religious ideologies such as the permanent antagonism between *Black Metal* and the dominance of Christianity in Western societies (Rafalovich and Schneider 2005). Based on these findings, one could safely conclude that the transgressive dimension of Moroccan Metal music as a theatric horror tends to metaphorically expose Metal audiences to explore the dark and aggressive facet of humanity while being distant from other provocative themes that may suggest alternative religiosity, promote Satanism or tackle drug addiction.

Anti-extremism, solidarity and co-existence

The literature review reveals that Metal music is known for its transgressive themes and sociopolitical commentary that may potentially challenge or contradict mainstream conventions and values. Therefore, Metal content could be represented by conservative forces as a discourse of deviance. With enough regard to the particularities of Moroccan Metal music, the lyrical content of the five bands surprisingly reveals a third interesting theme that implicitly and explicitly embodies strong messages that advocate anti-extremism, solidarity and co-existence. Such a theme exposes some exclusive areas of interest that shape the intellectual faculty of the bands. Such messages are more present, especially in the musical discourse of Sakadoya and Kawn. Examples of Sakadoya's song ('*Let Us Pray*' Appendix 3 - song 1), Suicide Machine's song ('*New As Old*' Appendix 3 - song 2) and Kawn's songs ('*New Breath*' and '*Rebirth*' Appendix 3 - song 3 & 4) reflect interesting messages of denouncing radicalism and division. Kawn's band tend to go even further by rebelling against the traditional musical structure of Metal as a way to promote messages of solidarity and hybridity. For example, the band

incorporates multiple languages mainly Moroccan Arabic, Standard Arabic and English in addition to oriental and Andalusian musical scales such as “*Malhoun*”⁸ next to the sonic elements of Heavy Metal structure. Also, the example of Kawn’s song “*New Breath*” takes the form of a motivational anthem that may describe life's struggles with an attempt to empower listeners to resist challenges using values of solidarity and overcoming differences as exemplified by these lines: *If we stand all as one, we will never fall, Together we reach the sun and Come join me in my Kawn*. Kawn’s messages go hand in hand with Sakadoya’s song “*Let's Pray*” with lines such as *Extend your hand, I'll give you mine And peace can save us all*. In this sense, Garratt (2020) mentions the power of musical activism “as a way of modelling the world we want to see.” Furthermore, the ambivalent approach adopted by Kawn in the making of their music invites Bhabha’s (1994) interpretation of cultural hybridity as a model of communication. To clarify, Kawn's hybridity approach could be perceived as an act of conciliating two dissonant musical expressions; one is perceived as exotic and transgressive (Metal) and the other as conventional and sacred “Malhoun.” With this in mind, Moroccan Metal music can truly exceed its transgressive role to become a platform of activism and creativity.

Suicide Machine, as a band interested in *Death Melodic Metal*, tends to use their music to denounce fundamentalism and religious extremism and raise awareness about such issues. Their title “*New As Old*” may depict the stagnant and non-progressive state of being of the extreme Muslim fundamentalists because they refuse to adapt to the new world while being stuck in the “old” preaching. This fact hinders potential discourses of co-existence and solidarity within the same society. For example, the band’s lines would possibly suggest a description of someone with false pride and blind belief whereas, the lines *When our hearts bleed our minds are controlled and our souls are sold* may indicate the example of the miserable circumstances that make individuals controlled, hypnotized and easily swayed by terrorist forces. The bands’ concern about extremism could be also explained by the growing acts of terrorism in the Middle East and North Africa region such as the examples of *ISIS* in Iraq and Syria, *Boko-Haram* in Cameroun, and the *Somalian Al-Chabbab* among others. The lines *new as old* and *Al'jihad is our destiny* may also imply the fundamentalists’ desire to eliminate and eradicate the “infidel other” as their ultimate yet sacred purpose in life. The satirical tone that shapes Suicide Machine's songs also indicates a call for co-existence as a major implicit theme that should be grasped depending on a critical reading of their messages.

⁸ Traditional music originated in Morocco as a kind of urban sung poetry that sometimes contains religious chanting.

In short, all identified themes are intensively interrelated in the sense that each theme is explicitly or implicitly connected to the other in terms of potential concerns, attitudes and desires. The first and third themes reflect the bands' sense of musical activism, resistance, rebellion, and desire for a better world characterized by peace, psychological stability, freedom, justice and solidarity. The second theme sheds light on the transgressive elements embodied in the bands' music such as the dark aspect of humanity, violence and psychological disturbance. However, transgression in this case doesn't seem to affect central values of Moroccan society like religion though ethnocentrism and religious fundamentalism are heavily criticized. Even though Metal is a controversial platform by definition, the exposed themes also reveal the interesting level of political awareness and musical activism communicated through the bands' artistry, a fact that portrays the weight of Moroccan Metal music as a meaningful discourse that targets interesting issues which goes against the conservative assumptions that represent this music as mere noise and "Satan's work" (as cited in Bouazzaoui 2015).

The motivations of the five Moroccan Metal bands

To develop a greater understanding of the five Moroccan bands' specific motivations that stimulate them to produce and sustain their musical discourse, this subsection is devoted to revealing, discussing, and connecting the bands' subjective experiences, and motivations with the discography's themes elaborated above. The aim is to explore the Moroccan bands' areas of concern about transgression, musical activism, and the conservative Moroccan context.

Voicing one's opinion, and raising awareness

Motivation is a crucial element in understanding the musical discourse of Moroccan Metal bands as it justifies the reason for their existence. All of the interviewed bands equally shared their interest and passion for making Metal music, arguing that it is their only way to voice their attitudes, entertain themselves and spread awareness. The bands' interviews reveal a set of statements that seem to positively reinforce and contextualize the lyrical theme "resistance and lamentation of the human condition" elaborated in the previous subsection above.

To begin with, Hicham Hamzi, the drummer and conceptualizer of the band Sakadoya, offers a very important interpretation of his band's music, stating that: "(...) Look! We're living in a world filled with hypocrisy; everyone lies to you to achieve something. I don't claim the truth (...) I say what I feel (...)." Sakadoya also mentions that the local Moroccan authorities reinforce ignorance by insulting Moroccan intelligence and practising the process of "*Istihmar*", [the act of dumbing down the masses for political

reasons] as if the Moroccan society is still living in the dark ages. [Referencing his band's album "Back to the Age of Slaves"] The band maintain that issues related to worldwide systematic manipulation have been an inspiratory concept behind the making of their music. The band also report that addressing hot-button issues like the situation of the labour system is something nearly absent from Moroccan mainstream music and media narratives. Hamzi also says:

(...) They say Metal is 'Sda' rass' [disturbing noise that causes headache] because they don't know (...) I've never heard any Chaabi [common folkloric music in Morocco] or a Rai song talking about the slavery Moroccan employees suffer from. These things will not be talked about by 'Chikha Trax' [a famous folkloric female singer and dancer in Morocco] (...) Even Moroccan media don't usually address these problems as they are (...) I know people who work for 12 hours a day only to earn '2 Riyals' [a very low sum of money] (...) Isn't it a new form of slavery? (...) At least we have discovered the trick [developed awareness] (...)

In their interview, like Sakadoya, Thrilllogy argues that playing Metal is their only way to communicate their sophisticated thoughts without censorship. They claim that articulating their concerns does contribute to the awareness of their respective community. For example, Wassim, the band's founder, guitarist and vocalist, states:

(...) Thrash [an extreme subgenre of Metal that the band plays] is known for its honesty. I can't beautify reality and dance to you [moves his belly like dancing sarcastically] (...) Metal is like a smack on the face (...) As I told you it [Metal] doesn't lie to you, it teaches you how to think

Wassim adds that the kinds of topics they target are

The problems that someone may experience; could be sociological, workplace, or political. We try to make our lyrics metaphorical, not always, (...), but the reader should feel that there is an impact that makes him identify with the song (...)

Souhail Ahenjir, the lead guitarist and brother of Wassim Ahenjir says: "(...) I can't return from work and play Pop music [the band laughs sarcastically] because it doesn't help me release all the accumulated stress that I acquire through the day." Mohamed-Amin Benabdelmoumen, the founder and keyboardist of Kawn, has his take on his band's content arguing that it is all about revolting against the things that hold people from being

themselves or from reaching their aspirations. According to him, such obstacles can be many issues. He reports:

We talk about many things (...) Financial problems, home environment, familial situations or people's hypocrisy (...) It depends (...) Sometimes things happen in your life or happen to someone you know and it inspires you to write songs, (...) It's not always about politics (...) You need good lyrics that match the performance (...) You can't play a high-level performance with words like 'You a stupid hoe you a, you a stupid hoe' [Mocking a song produced by the international Pop-star Nicki Minaj] (laughs) (...)

Kawn also argues that the primary motivation behind their music is “to reignite energy in them [their audiences]” and to “refine the image of Metal music in Morocco.” The band’s drummer and percussionist Salah Eddine Kida adds: “(...) We want people old and young to enjoy Metal music (...) We have plans to integrate 'Gnawa' [a body of Moroccan and sub-Saharan African Islamic religious songs and rhythms] and Tamazight [Amazigh language spoken in Morocco].” The band expresses their musical activism by "presenting the Moroccan Metal scene and Moroccan identity to the rest of the world." They also explain the symbolic significance of their album artwork which portrays an old man wearing Djellaba [a traditional Moroccan dress] looking at a Moroccan traditional gate inscribed with mosaic and surrounded by stars and galaxies.

Suicide Machine argues that their band try to target many important issues to inspire their audiences. For example, Mohamed Ilias Horaira, the band’s co-founder, vocalist and lyricist, says:

(...) We also talk about other topics like criticizing the global system: its politics, economics and social (...) We also talk about human’s most extreme yet profound sentiments and emotions (...) Metal is very complex in terms of its topics (..) For us, it's a tool of communication to speak our minds and the minds of people like us (...) It's not easy to compose a Metal song because it requires doing research

Based on the bands' words, the diversity of Metal topics and the passion for Metal music are unquestionable due to the sophistication of its sound and the sincerity of its messages. Metal is also used by the bands to demonstrate their motivation to voice their political resistance, concerns and intellectualism about the world they live in. Indeed, the civil rights activist and iconic black African American singer Nina Simone states “An artist’s duty as far as I’m concerned is to reflect the times” (cited in Nevins 2021). The bands

also equally claim that Metal helps them spread awareness amongst young Moroccans while offering authentic and honest pictures about reality without losing touch with their community which is labeled by Suicide Machine as a "non-superficial community." Moreover, the bands repeatedly state their motivation is to use Metal as a safe underground yet entertaining space to express their dissatisfaction without being censored or judged by mainstream attitudes.

As for the aforementioned authenticity of Metal music, the bands tend to confirm their attempt to address issues that are nearly absent from mainstream music. Interestingly, Walser (1993) reports that typically Metal fans feel "paranoid" when they are exposed to mainstream music because, according to them, the songs are full of lies and fabrications about the world (159). Bearing in mind music and activism, Nancy Fraser and the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas suggest that political engagement is as much a matter of speech acts as physical ones (as cited in Street et al. 2007). In other words, Moroccan Metal songs seem to convey social commentary that may somehow promote political engagement, and civic activism or at least stimulate critical thinking, a fact that may consequently impact the social conduct, and identity politics of individuals or groups alike. Hess (2018) argues that artists do not only use music as a means of identity formation, but also as a site to engage in, express, and formulate identity politics. Similarly, Leung and Kier (2008) conducted empirical research entitled "Music Preferences and Civic Activism in Young People" on adolescents; the results show that Heavy Metal audiences were among the highest concerning civic activism.

Concerning the effects of music on social behaviour, Hip-hop songs have proven their merit to become protest songs throughout history (Cannon 2020). However, even though Moroccan Metal artists tend to use their songs to denounce different forms of oppression and injustice that shape the developing world (Guibert 2006), not every song becomes a protest song. In other words, protest songs require mainstream access along with an exclusive association with an identified social cause or movement (Guerra and Turner 2021). A great example is the song "Rais Le Bled" where the young Tunisian rapper "El General"—real name Hamada Ben Amor—criticized President Zine al-Abidine for the poor socio-political conditions that shaped Tunisia at the time which made the song to be taken by the public as a form of social anthem that actively influenced The Arab spring revolutions (Gana 2012).

In brief, the struggle of Moroccan Metal bands to raise political awareness is faced with difficult circumstances that surround their scene. This includes (1) their small size as a community of Metal music in Morocco, (2) the stigmatization assigned to them by conservative forces (3) the linguistic barriers as most of the songs are sung in English. Added to this is Metal's

transgressive sound which is not favored by mainstream standards. As a result, Metal songs not only fail to inspire larger audiences as the case with Moroccan Rap music, but also remain unable to transcend its underground social commentary role to become inclusive and impactfully protestive.

Releasing negative energy and asserting one's-identity

The five bands assert that their dedication to this type of music is a question of identity since Metal according to them is "circulating in their blood." They also state that they have no intention to quit performing despite how misunderstood this music is in their context. Additionally, the bands affirm that transgression in their songs is a key to releasing negative energy, expressing frustration and coping with sociological and psychological challenges. Such statements seem to resonate and contextualize the previously revealed and discussed theme - "psychological disturbance and human violence" about the bands' discography.

The content analysis adopted in this study captures the bands' verbal expressions and notions that portray Metal as a "lifestyle." To elaborate, Suicide Machine's drummer Ahmad Hamza Chahbouni explains that:

When I go to record, I show my father the video; he watches it with me, and he feels happy to watch even if he doesn't know what it is about (...) He [the father] has reached the state of realizing that I don't just play music, but I do something that is my passion; something that justifies my existence on this planet

His band's member, the vocalist and lyricist, Mohamed Ilias Horaira adds:

(...) We have a cultural problem in our society that is producing stereotypes and pre-judgments. They say we are drifting away from religion, but for us, we've felt this music (...) It's a part of us (...) It [Metal music] lets us express problems better (...) regardless of all these rumours and stuff, they will not stop us from doing what we like and encouraging others to do what they like

Thrillogy argues that Metal music for them is a "lifestyle" that helps them release negative energy and assert their identity. Souhail Ahenjir, the lead guitarist and brother of Wassim Ahenjir narrates, "We are young, we have a lot of energy and we always look for ways to release this energy (..) Metal is one or maybe the ideal genre for you to express and get rid of all your problems." Regarding the sincerity of Metal music, the bass player of Alcantagram band, adds:

We haven't searched for Metal, Metal searched for us (the band laughs). You cannot understand this music if you are not made

for it (...) When I compose a riff [technical term refers to the repeated chord progression in music] I feel better, (...)

In the same vein, Sakadoya's drummer, affirms the following: "You need to talk about some problems (...); otherwise, you will explode, you understand me (...)." Similarly, Kawn mentions on many different occasions that producing *Progressive Metal* music makes them intellectually relevant and psychologically at ease because for them "music is a therapy." The founder and keyboardist of the band Mohamed-Amin Benabdelmoumen explains:

(...) I always do rehearsals because the songs we play require focus and concentration so you can master all the odd time signatures [a technical word that indicates a sudden shift in song structure] (...), Playing this music is entertaining; it's like a therapy (...)

In their interview, Alcantagram points out that playing the extreme converts their anger and problems into something positive. They add that playing Metal is "a matter of personal taste" that "should not be judged" in their opinion. Furthermore, Alcantagram's writing process is motivated by its attempt to uncover the dark cult of human beings and issues related to psychological disturbance that are considered taboo topics in their society. They also mention the power of growling instead of singing and its impact on their psyche. For example, Mouhssin Sag Ine, the lead vocalist and songwriter of the band reveals that "(...) You cannot be yourself in this country, and they ask you why you growl? If I don't growl, I will choke you (laughs) (...)."

As a way of digesting the transgressive aspect of Metal music, it is very important to consider the experience of Metal enthusiasts both artists and fans, and the effectiveness of sonic and thematic transgression in their music as a tool for releasing negative energy, reflecting psychological hardship, and asserting symbolic power. In this sense, transgression is approached as a platform for psychological healing. In his book, "The History of Sexuality," Foucault argues that discovering what's deeply hidden from individuals is an equally important function of modern psychiatric practice to finding what someone conceals in their psyche (Foucault 1976). Rafalovich and Schneider (2005) oppose Foucault's assertion, arguing that the transgressive references to psychological chaos (such as suicide, alienation and excessive aggression found in Metal music inherently rebels against the idea that advocates establishing a relationship between the self and something external, be it another person or an organized therapeutic apparatus. This claim is corroborated by Jonathon et al (1990) who dismiss the need and validity of seeking consolation from other parties affirming that the psychological pain

portrayed in various Metal songs is strictly individual and idiosyncratic, and thus requires solutions suiting only that particular individual. Baker and Brown (2016) conducted a literary-lyrical analysis of Metal songs, the results showed that transgressive songs that could be interpreted as a negative influence can induce feelings of relief and comfort in the listeners which as a result makes Metalheads able to bear negative emotions and cope with sudden breakdowns easily. Additionally, speaking of Metal and individual empowerment, Mouhssin Sag Ine, the vocalist and lyricist of Alcantagram, who is also known for his interviews about Metal with different media platforms such as Morocco World News, implicitly reveals in his narratives how the act of "growling" can be interpreted as an act of empowerment that gives the growler a generous sense of intensity and exclusivity through releasing and sharing repressed anger.

Almeida (2017) elaborates on both verbal and symbolic transgression used by Moroccan artists such as the case of the Moroccan Rapper Chaht Man who uses the swearword 'Fuck You' in his artwork as an expression of rebellion and protest. She also mentions the example of Don Bigg, with his 2006 album Mgharba Tal Mout (Moroccans till Death) which represents a symbolic revolution using swearwords and street Darija to denounce the sociopolitical conditions in Morocco. Boum and Ben-Layashi go further by categorizing Moroccan rappers as "new rebels" (Boum 2013, 174), "revolutionaries and 'anarchists' hip-hop youngsters" (Ben-Layashi 2013, 151). Going back to the auditory, verbal and visual transgression used by Moroccan Metal artists, it is obvious that both underground Metal and Rap share common elements as far as verbal and symbolic transgression is concerned. For example, swearing words and growling could be both put in the same category as a musically unconventional way to express dissatisfaction with the sociopolitical conditions of a given society. The distinctive dress codes of both Metal and underground Rap communities also represent a transgressive yet symbolic statement against the dominant identity politics.

Drawing from Moroccan Metal artists' motivation about transgression, one could conclude that the bands use this controversial genre to actively promote values of the culture of courage, individuality, difference and freedom of choice in a conservative setting. The bands also practice their musical activism by raising awareness about "taboo" issues such as psychological disturbance, suicide, dark imagery and violence that are disregarded in mainstream music. Metal for this community occupies the role of a safe space where fans and artists practice symbolic power with the use of provocative language, visuals, sounds and content since other mainstream styles according to the bands are limited in terms of expression and creativity.

Finally, such a style is used by bands and audiences alike to release negative energy and cope with reality twists.

Promoting co-existence and denouncing cultural hegemony

For the five Moroccan Metal bands, being involved as an artist of Metal music is not an easy task as it comes with its challenges. According to them, this genre is shaped by misrepresentations, negative stereotypes and pre-judgments. In this regard, denouncing hegemony and promoting co-existence stands as a motivational cause that reinforces their musical discourse previously elaborated with the theme of anti-extremism, solidarity and co-existence.

On the one hand, Sakadoya expresses that advocating messages of co-existence in their music allows them to target different sorts of ideology-based conflicts to "represent the open-minded Moroccan." Hicham, elaborates that: "(...) In the USA some things happened like when some people trait Arabs or Muslims as terrorists and illiterate (...) We are not living in Sahara and travelling with camels (laughs) (...)." Interestingly, the band also mention the situation of the Jewish community in Morocco arguing that some of their songs including "*Let's Pray*" talk about issues of difference, ethnocentrism, disunity and division. Accordingly, the example of "*Let's Pray*" addresses the generalized depiction of the Jewish community by some Moroccans as profane thanks to the influence of the Palestinian issue which is highly politicized. The band continue that over-generalization is dangerous as it motivates creating extreme tendencies and dichotomy in societies. On the other hand, Kawn's band explain that their music may encourage other artists to be more open-minded about Metal music by "trying new things." The discography of the band seems to communicate such values as they associate different styles and languages in Metal structure to positively impact negative attitudes about Metal. As the drummer of the band Salah Din Kida explains, "We want people to understand Metal", Mohamed-Amin Benabdelmoumen, the founder, and keyboardist of the band also adds "Myrath did it before us" [referring to the international Tunisian band that incorporates Arabic language and oriental scales in Metal music]. However, despite the musical activism of Kawn to familiarize Metal, dogmatic Metal fans especially underground/extreme fanatics tend to show sceptical attitudes towards such adjustments that seem to endanger the authenticity of Metal as the band argues.

Suicide Machine band point out that "Metal music does what the Moroccan educational system could not do." Mohamed Horaira, argues: "You should not force other people to be like you, dress like you or think like you (...) You know, we studied in 'Zham' [a metaphor that indicates poor education] Metal is our school (...)" About the problem of co-existence, Mouhssin Sag Ine of Alcantagram, reveals the following:

We've reached this stage of "*l'kalakh*" [Moroccan term for utter stupidity] when sometimes people like your family judge you because of the fictional zombie painted in your black T-shirt. I rent an apartment; I'm living by myself just to avoid judgments when I record my growls (...)

Suicide Machine band add that the previous generation [Millennials] tend to be more judgmental and less open-minded in comparison to the current generation. The latter according to the band is doing fine somehow due to the advent of the internet and the improvements that have shaped the Moroccan educational system during the last years. The band also argue that besides the fact that Metal is a "lifestyle" for them, it is also their best choice to resist oppression and ignorance. Globally, for the time being, extreme attitudes against Metal are losing ground as the world is becoming more globalized. Hjelm et al. (2012) go in the same vein adding that both governments and mainstream Islamic movements in Morocco, Egypt and even Saudi Arabia have become more tolerant toward Metal culture because they realized the importance of not alienating the "new generation" (11–12). Joseph Ouechen, a passionate photographer interested in Moroccan subcultures, elaborates on the Moroccan situation adding "A few years ago, I couldn't even wear skinny jeans without people looking at me weirdly." He maintains that with *L'boulevard*, people have started getting familiar with Metal culture (as cited Kaabi 2019). This happens in times when Metal bands are still getting banned worldwide such as the example of Behemoth in Russia, Lamb of God in Malaysia, and many more. Some bans could last for years even (Divita 2018).

As a way of using transgressive music to denounce extremism, Alcantagram mention that some of their songs such as "*Dehumanization*" and "*Perfect Revolution*" are violently provocative songs because they were inspired by some tragic incidents such as the one that happened to the two female Scandinavian tourists in Morocco in 2018⁹. They explain that some of the violent lyrics in their songs deliberately depict the twisted psychological aspect of the murderers who cold-heartedly committed their crimes under the influence of a certain belief. For instance, Hatim Saghdani, the bass player of Alcantagram, reveals that:

(...) You need to correctly interpret the words (...) We are not the killers; we describe the mentality of the killers (...) I see many hateful comments on Facebook coming from some people, believe me, bro, it's too extreme (...) I play the extreme [Death Metal] and I see people moshing [A style of Metal dancing in which participants push or slam into each other

⁹ In 2018 three Islamic State group supporters murdered two Scandinavian hikers in Morocco. Check this link for details: <https://bbc.in/3ylQVJC>

aggressively] around me like what you see in a mental hospital (laughs), I cannot even kill a fly (laughs)

The band also express their constant fear of being subjected to an act of terrorism in their concerts. For example, Mouhssin, narrates:

During the Tremplin competition in Casablanca, I'm talking about this last edition in 2018, I and my friend left the 'RUC Stadium' [the concerts' venue] to go buy some cigarettes just around the area. Suddenly, some people started throwing stones at us and yelling 'Wa zwaml!!' [Homo-sexuals] We didn't do anything to them (...). They stoned us this time, next time, I don't know, they will bomb us maybe '*Fham Tsetta*' [a Moroccan proverb used to express lack of rationality]

Suicide Machine's members also chime in on the phenomenon aforementioned by Alcantagram arguing that being a Metalhead in Morocco may cause you to be insulted or be given uncomfortable stares by random people. The band add that these incidents motivate them to address issues of ethnocentrism and musically voice their opinion. The lead vocalist and lyricist of Suicide Machine, Mohamed Ilias Horaira elaborates that he was subjected to different kinds of harassment in the streets of Casablanca on many occasions in the past indicating that the situation has recently changed for the better. He narrates that:

(...) At '*Lma'arif*' [One of the city's most Westernized areas, with a busy shopping district] some thugs with knives surrounded our way thinking that we were Satanists, atheists, homosexuals you know, it's all included in Metal (...) Sometimes people spit at you because you are wearing a chain or piercing (...) One day I was going near the Mosque of the neighbourhood when a group of Muslim brotherhood started preaching me. Someone took it to another level by putting his hand on me and started reciting '*Ayatul Kursi*' [a Quranic verse] as if I'm possessed [the whole band laughs sarcastically]¹⁰. So, I've convinced myself that music is in my mind, heart and ears; I've stopped wearing Metal clothes outside the context of concerts. I will wear what I want when I'm in another country, but I'll always talk about the stuff that bothers us (...)

¹⁰ One important interpretation of such an act is the fact in the Islamic part of the Moroccan culture, some individuals who suffer from mental illnesses or follow alternative lifestyles may be perceived as "Mskoun," or having "Mas mina Chaitan" believed to be possessed by Jinn. This belief is rooted in the idea that Jinn was created before humans and can inhabit human beings. More about this topic is documented by Abdel Haleem in his 2004 book entitled *The Qur'an*, published in Oxford by Oxford University Press.

Thrillology band also share their experience of discrimination stating that the worst thing that happened to them was when someone cut off the power supply during their *Thrash Metal* show in 2015 at Fez City. Salah Din Kida, the drummer of Kawn band, adds that his band were humiliated when someone from the audience started publically uttering “Satan worshipers” during their 2018 *L’ Boulevard* show. Similarly, Ali Drab, the guitarist of Suicide Machine and the oldest as well as the most experienced member of all the five bands, criticizes some Moroccan media outlets, such as some local Youtube channels, Chouf TV and Hespress arguing that they deliberately tarnish the reputation of the Moroccan Metal subculture to make material profit. He also strikes up an interesting event that happened in 2015 he says, “(...) I was shocked when the marriage of our friend Amine was rejected because of Satanism accusations (...) More will happen as long as some people look at us this way.” Such incidents, according to Ali Drab, tend to generally reinforce the inner suffering of the Metal community within Moroccan society.

To discuss the bands’ motivations for making their music, it is worth mentioning Sakadoya’s concern with the Jewish community and how it is generalized and misrepresented by some Muslim Moroccans. The narratives regarding this matter may reflect their great sense of musical activism that targets issues that are commonly absent from other mainstream music styles. The contribution of Moroccan bands towards raising cultural awareness about the dominant misrepresentation of the other reminds us of the complex discourse of Orientalism discussed by Edward Said that implies the old-school problematic Western depictions of the Orient as barbaric, exotic, and lustful population (Said 1985). Such a discourse could repeat itself in modern days, because of the stereotypical depictions attributed to the Moroccan Jew and Metal community as the bands reveal. Sakadoya’s position towards the different other goes hand in hand with Mendes-Flohr (2013) who argues that tolerance is the ability to both accept and celebrate the different other as a manifestation of a higher acceptance level. In addition to their messages of solidarity, the musical hybridity adopted by Kawn embodies a brave attempt to transcend Metal limitations in terms of language and sound so that mainstream audiences could finally embrace Metal culture as a meaningful platform of art and hybridity. Such a multicultural perspective has already been communicated by Moroccan women photographers mainly Lala Essayd, Leila Alaoui, and Ytto Barrada, and their artistic efforts to project an inclusive Morocco through their camera lenses (Nachit 2016). Going back to music, at a certain point in time, Rappers in Morocco were portrayed as symbols of Western imperialism due to their imitation of Western Rappers. However, such perception has changed because Rap music, as an example, has successfully proven its flexibility and relevance by incorporating authentic

elements such as the Moroccan language to appeal to the general audiences (Almeida 2017).

As far as the issue of Metal music and ethnocentrism is concerned, the provocative depictions of the extreme religious mentality embodied in Suicide Machine songs like the case of “*Old as New*”, which is already discussed in the previous section, seem to resonate with the serious challenges that shape Metal community in terms of personal freedom and privacy. For example, In addition to the event of 2003 mentioned in the review of the literature when Metalheads were arrested and jailed by Moroccan authorities because of Satanic accusations, the narrative of Ali Drab reminds us of a relatively recent questionable act performed by Moroccan authorities that exposed itself in 2015 at Agadir's court when Amine Khairi, a Metal enthusiast, was denied the legal request to marry his female German partner due to the accusations of "Satanism" (Jabran 2015). Such extreme reactions tend to limit individual freedoms in Moroccan society given the fact that the Metal community is represented by conservative attitudes as a threat to the Muslim “Ummah” as if Metal music competes with Islam. To strike back, Moroccan bands seem to artistically communicate their alternative discourse about religious extremism through their songs as Mohamed Ilias Horaira argues when he says: “We try to differently re-narrate the content of religion according to our imagination.” Put differently, Moroccan Metal bands are artistically engaged in denouncing issues related to ethnocentrism. For example, after the terrorist attacks¹¹ executed by the Islamic radicals on 16 May 2003 in Casablanca, the people behind the Moroccan annual festival, L'Boulevard, immediately responded by organizing a “Metal against terrorism” concert (Langendonck 2010).

All in all, Moroccan Metal bands are artistically and narratively involved in resisting acts that aim to restrict the freedom of Moroccan individuals in the name of ideologies by impeding progressive voices with the excuse of “threatening the national identity” (Langendonck 2010). The five bands have shown equal concern about the extreme views assigned to their community in particular and to the others in general. As a reaction, they use their music as a weapon to counterattack or satirically represent and criticize different forms of cultural hegemony, human violence, and political manipulation to inspire their small community to develop some sense of political awareness. However, careful observation of the bands’ narratives especially Mohamed Ilias Horaira’s shows that despite the critical content of Moroccan Metal songs as a discourse of resistance, some Metal artists and fans tend to adopt submissive attitudes to avoid cultural tension since they are forced to comply with their societal norms, practices and identity politics in a way or another.

¹¹ The 2003 Casablanca bombings were a series of suicide bombings on May 16, 2003, in Casablanca, Morocco. The attacks were the deadliest terrorist attacks in the country's history. Check this link for details: <https://nyti.ms/386dOX2>

Conclusion

The paper is set to explore the multi-dimensional discourses of Moroccan Metal music. The focus is on the lyrical content and the subjective experience of five Moroccan Metal bands with the ultimate objective of identifying and understanding their general views, motivations, political discourses, philosophies and sense of musical activism. The paper has used both content analysis and semi-structured interviews to achieve its objectives. Generally, Moroccan Metal songs convey a meaningful discourse that takes counter-hegemonic attitudes with the primary purpose of engaging the listener in a political, philosophical and psychological debate on human actions. However, due to the limitations of Moroccan Metal music in terms of cultural representations, sound and language use, this form of art is doomed to be buried underneath with little to no chance of climbing the mainstream musical ladder as Rap music does. Additionally, Metal music fails to influence the mainstream public in terms of social action and intellectual behaviour because of its unpopularity. Moreover, according to Moroccan Metal bands, this music exceeds its traditional role as it is actively becoming a matter of identity to them. The findings of this study also expose the struggle of Moroccan Metal bands and how they are subjected to different acts of violence, social harassment, and discrimination. The exposed incidents that portray different institutional and social attacks on Metal bands in Morocco may reflect the lack of a deeper understanding of Metal music, its visual culture and its sophisticated discourses. As a result, despite the Moroccan bands' narratives that seem to convey optimistic attitudes toward their culture as being gradually accepted in comparison to the past, Metal artists and fans may consciously or unconsciously submit to the dominant social norms to avoid tension despite the critical content of Metal music as a discourse of individual empowerment, resistance and culture of courage. Based on such perspectives, one could argue that Metal music for Moroccan Metal bands is not necessarily a countercultural form of expression that seeks to encourage radical reactions or destroy central values of Moroccan society, it is rather a flexible platform used by contemporary Moroccan artists and the youth to voice their concerns as a form of musical activism and provide interesting social commentary. Metal music seems to assist the Moroccan bands in releasing their negative energy and expressing their existential frustration in a framework of influencing their respective communities without being censored or judged.

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