ISSN 2250-7116
13.1 (abril, 2025 - septiembre, 2025): [135-158]
doi: 10.34096/oidopensante.v13n1.13644

Revisiting Women and the Electric Guitar: Why the Research Needs to be Updated and Expanded

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Recibido: agosto 2024
Aceptado: noviembre 2024

Abstract

This article investigates the state of the research on women and the electric guitar and argues that there is a strong need for further research in this area. Existing scholarship primarily focuses on factors that inhibit women from playing the electric guitar, is mostly centered on offline/pre-Internet women and guitar relations and tends to link the electric guitar with masculinity and male sexuality and characterize it as a male-dominated practice. This means that the reasons why women do play the electric guitar are not given much attention, the Internet's impact on women's guitar practice is largely omitted, and other ways of approaching the relationship between gender and the electric guitar are given minimal consideration. I argue that all of these aspects are vital for better understanding women and the electric guitar, and for advancing the cause of gender equality in music and are therefore in urgent need of further research.

Keywords: Electric guitar, women, internet, gender, music industries, inequality

Revisitando as mulheres e a guitarra elétrica: alguns argumentos para a atualização e ampliação da pesquisa

Resumo

Este artigo investiga o estado da pesquisa sobre as mulheres e a guitarra elétrica e argumenta sobre a necessidade de mais pesquisas nesta área. Os estudos existentes concentram-se principalmente na análise dos fatores que inibem as mulheres de tocar guitarra elétrica, focam-se principalmente nas mulheres off-line/pré-Internet e nas relações com guitarra, e tendem a vincular a guitarra

ISSN 2250-7116
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elétrica à masculinidade e à sexualidade masculina e caracterizando-a como uma prática dominada pelos homens. Isto significa que as razões pelas quais as mulheres tocam guitarra eléctrica não recebem muita atenção, o impacto da Internet na prática da guitarra pelas mulheres é largamente omitido, e outras formas de abordar a relação entre o género e a guitarra eléctrica recebem pouca consideração. Defendo que todos estes aspectos são vitais para uma melhor compreensão das mulheres e da guitarra eléctrica, e para o avanço da causa da igualdade de género na música e, portanto, necessitam urgentemente de mais investigação.

Palabras-chave: guitarra elétrica, mulheres, internet, gênero, indústrias musicais, desigualdade

Revisando las mujeres y la guitarra eléctrica: por qué es necesario actualizar y ampliar la investigación

Resumen

Este artículo aborda el estado de la investigación sobre las mujeres y la guitarra eléctrica y sostiene que existe una gran necesidad de realizar más investigaciones sobre el tema. Los estudios existentes se centran principalmente en los factores que inhiben a las mujeres a tocar la guitarra eléctrica y en las relaciones entre las mujeres y la guitarra *offline* o antes de la aparición de Internet. Asimismo, tienden a vincular la guitarra eléctrica con la masculinidad y la sexualidad masculina y a caracterizarla como una práctica dominada por los hombres. Esto significa que no se presta mucha atención a las razones por las que las mujeres tocan la guitarra eléctrica, se omite en gran medida el impacto de Internet en la práctica femenina de la guitarra y se da mínima consideración a otras formas de abordar la relación entre el género y el instrumento. Sostengo que todos estos aspectos son vitales para comprender mejor el tema, y para promover la causa de la igualdad de género en la música y, por lo tanto, son necesarias con urgencia más investigaciones.

Palabras clave: guitarra eléctrica, mujeres, internet, género, industrias musicales, desigualdad

Introduction

The electric guitar has long been associated with men, and women's relationship with the instrument is largely invisible and minimally understood. However, women have been playing the electric guitar throughout the history of rock music and continue to have an important role. This article

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ISSN 2250-7116
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investigates the state of the research on women and the electric guitar and argues that there is a strong need for further research in this area.

This article is a contribution to the wider and ongoing discussion on the issue of gender inequality in music, which has been a topic of significant scholarly interest and has become subject to greater scrutiny within the music industries[1]. As Catherine Strong and Sarah Raine (2018) pointed out in IASPM@Journal's special issue on Gender Politics in the Music Industry, women in music are marginalized through "lack of access to spaces associated with music; sexist attitudes, including assumptions that they cannot use instruments or technology; [and] the existence of a 'boys club' that makes it hard for women to access information and networks" (Clawson, 1999). The challenges that women electric guitarists face are consistent with the experiences of women occupying roles in other sectors. In this way, research on women electric guitarists can provide deeper insights into how gender inequality functions in music and generate more knowledge and awareness about particular sources and causes that, in turn, may have the potential to effect change. Further, it can elucidate how women become electric guitarists even in the face of oppression, and therefore make an important contribution to finding solutions to gender inequality and to enabling women.

My review of the literature included scholarship primarily from the fields of popular music studies, media and communication studies, and gender studies; it consisted of academic books, journal articles, and Master's and PhD theses. I was focused more closely on studies that addressed the topic of the electric guitar concerning women, the issue of gender, and the instrument's social and cultural meaning than on research related to its technical specifications, history, and development. My aim was to ascertain the current understanding of women's relationship with the electric guitar in general, how it has been approached, and the ways scholars have characterized women's experiences and practices. I sought to uncover how others have written about or researched the factors that contribute to women becoming electric guitarists, the ways they learn their instruments and build careers, and the nature of their everyday involvement in the related music industries and institutions. My exploration of the literature also involved locating how scholars have researched and written about the specifically gendered aspects of electric guitar performance

[1] See reports from the UK Parliament Committee Misogyny in Music: https://committees.parliament.uk/event/14556/formal-meeting-oral-evidence-session and the UK Music 2022 Survey to Boost Diversity and Inclusion in UK Music Industry: https://www.ukmusic.org/equality-diversity/uk-music-diversity-report-2022.

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and practice. In particular, how the instrument is gendered and its effects, the central figures in its history, and the factors that shape and define the gendered facets of the instrument. This approach was important because of the consistent, albeit minority, role women have had in the history of electric guitar and rock music more generally. Additionally, I was interested in exploring research regarding the impact of the Internet and online spaces on women's relationship with the guitar. This included aspects such as online resources for learning, community building, performance, and promotion, as well as the potential of online activity to circumvent or reproduce offline inequalities.

The review of the literature revealed three major themes in the scholarship that justify the need for more extensive research in this area. Each of these points will be elaborated upon in the following three sections. The first is that the literature primarily focuses on the reasons why women do not play the electric guitar, or the factors that inhibit them from doing so. The second is that the existing research is centered mostly on offline/pre-Internet women and guitar relations. The third theme is that the literature tends to link the electric guitar with masculinity and male sexuality and characterize it as a male-dominated practice. This means that the reasons why women do play the electric guitar are not given much attention, the impact of the Internet on women's guitar practice is largely omitted, and other ways of approaching the understanding of the relationship between gender and the electric guitar are given minimal consideration. I argue that all three of these aspects are vital for our better understanding of women and the electric guitar and for advancing the cause of gender equality in music, and are therefore in urgent need of further research.

Part 1: Why Women Don't Play the Electric Guitar

The existent scholarship specific to women and the electric guitar is small, yet it offers substantial insights into women's experiences and the varied issues that shape them. Scholars examine the gendered dynamics of the electric guitar and rock culture more broadly (Fourie, 2020), illuminate the musical and cultural histories of women electric guitarists (Matabane, 2014), explore the likelihood of all-female metal bands achieving the same level of success as their male counterparts (Kelly, 2009), and position air guitar performance as a space to query the disruption and reinforcement of constructions of masculinity and femininity (Laurin, 2006). In particular, the literature makes a strong case that argues convincingly about the social factors that negatively affect women electric guitarists, and a key theme

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is demonstrating the factors that inhibit women from becoming electric guitarists (Bayton, 1997; Kelly, 2009; Bourdage, 2010).

Within this narrow body of literature, two key works are most relevant. The first, and arguably the "foundational" study about women and the electric guitar, was written by Mavis Bayton in 1997. Bayton's central question is focused on –what she perceives as– an absence of "great" women electric guitarists. She argues that there are so few women playing the instrument because of a variety of social factors that inhibit them from doing so and pursuing an associated career. Her insights counter pre-existing explanations that women did not become electric guitarists due to the physical design of the instrument (see Bourdage 2010, p. 2). The latter has been cited as an issue for some musicians and later developments within the guitar industry regarding design seem to support and justify such claims (Crespo, 2010; Vesey, 2020). Bayton states that the electric guitar is designed for and is seen as an extension of the male body, but ultimately clarifies that social factors are more influential in deterring women than guitar design (1997, pp. 43-44).

Bayton's research shows that there are a significant number of social factors that deter women from playing electric guitar. One aspect is the expectation around the maintenance of traditional gender roles, femininity, and their effects. For example, the historical coding of the electric guitar as male and masculine, and some of the associated practical requirements for playing the instrument, such as the need to maintain short fingernails, run into conflict with expectations of femininity (Bayton, 1997, p. 39). Furthermore, pressures and expectations around dating and heterosexual coupling socialize and prepare women for the role of fan rather than musician (Bayton, 1997, p. 40). These factors are further complicated by motherhood, which can inhibit career development due to associated responsibilities and demands placed on women's time (Bayton, 1997, p. 48).

Another factor is that the traditionally informal modes of learning the electric guitar –of which playing in a band is an important component– are often disadvantageous to girls. This is due to how adolescent boys tend to exclude girls, which inhibits access to the informal and communal forms of learning, usually via band membership, that is a common formative component in skill acquisition in popular music. These exclusionary practices are connected to the more generalized masculine association with both the electric guitar and technology (Bayton, 1997, p. 40). Because both are seen as men's domain, girls and women do not gain the same confidence and competence with technology. Bayton also cites a relative absence of

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role models for women as another barrier, which results in a lack of inspiration and self-identification (1997, p. 39).

While these factors suggest barriers to entry, Bayton (1997) also demonstrates how challenges continue to confront women who do play the electric guitar. Their experiences are marked by further barriers in the form of the surrounding institutions and industries. Guitar shops, in particular, are spaces where women are often ignored, treated poorly, not taken seriously, and feel uncomfortable (Bayton, 1997, pp. 41-42). This is due to guitar shops being largely male-dominated and masculinist in their culture. There is, however, some evidence that efforts are being made to create a more positive experience for women in these spaces (see Herbst and Menze, 2021, p. 69). Thus, based on Bayton's work, it can be said that the conventions and informal practices meant to encourage and support electric guitarists apply most effectively to men while failing to properly support women.

Understanding these social factors is essential to recognizing how women are excluded from musical practices and the music industries through both formal and informal channels. They are identifiable sources of problematic practices and socially imposed expectations and stereotypes. In other words, they become starting points to effect change.

While Bayton clearly outlines why women do not play the electric guitar, if social factors are such effective deterrents, her study ultimately begs the question as to why and how those women who do succeed as electric guitarists were able to do so and have successfully navigated their lives and careers despite them. A primary focus on these inhibiting factors raises questions as to why and how those women who are electric guitarists occupy those roles and does not explain the reasons for their motivation and success or give insights into their experiences. In addition, her article –and perhaps overall research question– is limited by her emphasis on and equation of being a "great" player with lead guitar. All of the examples she provides of "great" male guitarists are those known for their virtuosity or stage presence. This language invokes the recurrent perspective that music history is a story of great men. The reproduction of the notion of "greatness" and its gendered component is problematic and potentially another factor that can be inhibiting. Rather than exclusively defining greatness by virtuosity and stage presence, a range of skills, sounds and performance styles and techniques. The criteria for who is a "guitar hero" could more regularly include "someone who is widely imitated, and someone whose very life seems to define the instrument in a

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new way" (Millard and McSwain, 2004, p. 143). Perhaps rethinking what constitutes "greatness" in terms of electric guitar performance –and who can be considered great– would offer new and more expansive insights.

The second key article was published by Monique Bourdage in 2010. She delves into similar notions that the "cultural and technological engineering of the electric guitar has been historically constructed to exclude women" (Bourdage, 2010, p.12). Bourdage supports and further substantiates Bayton's claims about the social factors inhibiting women from playing the electric guitar by highlighting the limited number of role models, difficulty accessing educational resources, and the masculinization of technology, and connects these barriers to broader social phenomena. She argues that the factors that inhibit women from playing the electric guitar are the same as those that obstruct access and success in other male-dominated fields.

Bourdage observes that women are further marginalized in how they are grouped on the basis of gender. She notes that such collective identification obscures the fact that women have more in common with other musicians in their respective genres than they have in common with each other (Bourdage, 2010, p. 6). In doing so, she draws attention to notions of music-making and rebellion as gender-specific and gender-exclusive. For example, Lilith Fair, seen as an expression of women's music-making, ultimately reproduced traditional gender roles and reinforced notions of women musicians as exceptional (Bourdage, 2010, p. 7). Related to this, Bourdage addresses the question of the physical design of the instrument, building on Bayton, by highlighting then-recent attempts on the part of guitar manufacturers, such as Daisy Rock, to create guitars for women. The author observes how these guitars, by featuring colors, designs, and shapes typically coded as feminine, drew on gender stereotypes and reinforced differences (Bourdage, 2010, p. 11).

Bourdage does some work in addressing the question of why women do play the electric guitar. She highlights the development of rock camps for girls, that functioned to encourage and enable participation. However, this represents an insufficient understanding as it is an example of one particular resource, limited by access and availability based on location. Some additional factors and resources may likely enable and motivate women to pursue this instrument.

The need for further research in this area is substantiated by findings in related existent literature, particularly studies on instrument choice and music technology. As these examples will demonstrate, similar to the

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scholarship on women and the electric guitar, the research on instrument choice and music technology also foregrounds women as the minority and excluded group of practitioners based on diverse social factors.

Scholars argue that deeply ingrained gendered associations, function as predictors of musical instrument choice and observe that these viewpoints originate in early childhood (Herbst and Menze, 2021, p. 63). Instruments such as the flute, harp, clarinet, violin, and voice are seen as "female", and therefore most appropriate for girls. Suitable male instruments include the electric guitar, bass guitar, drums, and trombone (Herbst and Menze, 2021, p. 63; Clawson, 1999; Hallam *et al*., 2008). Instruments are gendered according to musical features, such as pitch or sound quality, physical demands, and design (Herbst and Menze, 2021, p. 64; Hallam *et al*., 2008). This suggests that girls may begin to perceive the electric guitar as an unsuitable instrument from childhood. Further, research shows that the gendering of instruments is reinforced in the education system, and children and adolescents continue to make stereotypical instrument choices (Herbst and Menze, 2021, p. 64). However, research indicates that some young women musicians learn traditionally male-associated instruments later in their education (Hallam *et al*., 2008). These scholars argue that overcoming stereotypes "seems possible with developing identity through maturation, role models, emancipation from parental influences and changing musical preferences" (Herbst and Menze, 2021, p. 64). In this way, while primary and secondary socialization can be influential factors in instrument choice, they are not the sole determinants.

Further evidence in the music education sector supports how the socialization of music technologies affects participation by girls and women. The gear and amplification associated with electric guitar practice means that music technology is a relevant consideration in this field of study. Research demonstrates that women are the minority among music technology students. While women are the majority of the overall student population (fifty-five percent), they represent a small percentage in music technology courses, which are ninety percent male (Born and Devine, 2015, p.147). What is striking is that this gender imbalance is specifically seen in higher education. In contrast, between the ages of six and sixteen, girls comprise nearly fifty percent of music technology students. The falling numbers are likely tied to stereotypical associations about gender and technology, which is reflected in women's lower interest and lack of confidence (Born and Devine, 2015, p.147). This pattern can be connected to musical instruments, such as the electric guitar, that require amplification and a variety of gear (Born and Devine, 2015, p. 147; Herbst and Menze, 2021, p.

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66). These findings suggest that girls do experience a sense of confidence and competence about technology during their early lives but are later convinced otherwise.

Additional studies confirm that girls and women are also a minority in formal guitar instruction courses. A study showed that within the U.K., U.S., and Australia, 36.5 % of guitar students are female, though the overall gender imbalance is less pronounced in the private education sector (Lee, 2020, p. 11). However, the ratio of female students increased when paired with female instructors, who stated that forty-five percent of their students were female (Lee, 2020, p. 11). Research in Canada also showed major disparities, with men "heavily" outnumbering women in guitar classes, averaging between sixty to eighty percent with some classes being exclusively male (Haley, 2007, p. 50 cited in Lee, 2020). Despite these numbers, two guitar instructors from Lee's study (2020, p. 14) observed that "the persistence and achievements of female students was possibly higher", which indicates that women remain motivated within this context. His research also points to societal influences and a relative lack of influential female figures as key factors influencing the gender imbalance.

These studies show consistent patterns across different, yet related, higher education courses. Further exploration is needed to understand the reasons why women do engage with traditionally masculine-associated instruments, and choose to pursue a path that involves music technologies about which they are supposed to lack confidence.

Another limitation of the emphasis on factors that function as barriers and deterrents, and on the marginalization and exclusion of women and girls, is that they do not offer any insights that work to normalize, take seriously, or advance knowledge of women's experience in these roles. It also overlooks any understanding of the pleasure and enjoyment women derive from playing the electric guitar. These oversights have the potential for real-world impact and effects and are particularly relevant given recent developments in the guitar market. Research has shown that women musicians, in particular, are undervalued and seen as "less relevant as consumers" (Herbst and Menze, 2021, p. 19). They are regarded as such due to being perceived as "relatively inexperienced in the use of music technology" (Herbst and Menze, 2021, p. 19), which is consistent with arguments put forth by both Bayton (1997) and Bourdage (2010). Such perspectives are particularly problematic, given recent claims that the number of women electric guitarists is on the rise and that guitar manufacturers may be slowly changing their marketing campaigns accordingly.

ISSN 2250-7116
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Industry research conducted by Brainyard showed that forty-nine percent of Internet searches on guitar-related topics in 2017 were made by women (Herbst and Menze, 2021, p. 67). This figure clearly demonstrates their interest and was described as significant enough evidence to potentially or eventually redirect the industry's perception of women guitarists as a "viable and equivalent market" (Herbst and Menze, 2021, pp. 67-68). Perhaps as a response, a 2018 Fender study suggested that women comprised fifty percent of new customers. The study was questionable, however, as it was said to be conducted with a "brand strategy and innovation consultancy" and the specificities of the survey are not readily available (Herbst and Menze, 2021, p. 67). Following this, while the figure is unlikely to be accurate, it highlighted Fender's move to expand its consumer base by focusing on women musicians (Herbst and Menze, 2021, p. 67). Whether there is actually an increase, or one as large as has been suggested, in women electric guitarists, their practice and experiences have much to contribute. Understanding women's experiences comes with the potential to legitimize them as electric guitarists, challenge the perception that they are incompetent with technology, and show that they need to be seen as equally relevant and valued as musicians and therefore consumers of electric guitars.

Finally, the consistent historical presence of women as electric guitarists needs to be explained. Understanding the factors that have led to the exclusion of women and therefore the maintenance of electric guitar practice as male-dominated is important and generates greater knowledge about the marginalization of women in the music industries and sexism more broadly. However, this approach does not account for how women overcame the barriers that have been identified and their motivations in doing so. In some ways, the existent literature reproduces the "exceptional" nature of women as electric guitarists by focusing on the difficulties associated with their participation. In some instances, the topic of "gender" –usually equated with "women"– is separated from broader discussions in books and edited collections on the guitar and related musical practices. This type of segregation resembles the strategy and discourse of "Women in Rock" in the music press and creates the opportunity for that research to be overlooked or bypassed entirely for those who are uninterested. The impact of it being ignored by those who are "uninterested" is to reinforce exceptionalism, and those people fail to learn why they might be part of the problem. Men, too, need to be part of making the electric guitar world more appealing, welcoming, and sustaining for women.

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Such knowledge is important due to, in part, the electric guitar's widespread popularity. The electric guitar has been referred to as the instrument most synonymous with popular music (Evans and Evans, 1977, p. 13; Everett, 2003, p. 331). It is "ubiquitous" and it is "virtually impossible to pass through a day without hearing the sound of the instrument" (McSwain, 1995, p. 21). Widely considered to be "the most popular instrument in the world," the electric guitar has "outstripped all other musical instruments in sales" since the mid-20th century (Evans and Evans, 1977, p. 13; Everett, 2003, p. 331; McSwain, 1995, p. 21; see also Waksman, 2001, p. 2). The electric guitar's popularity means a narrative that leaves out women's participation, experiences, and motivations fail to account for the totality of the instrument's reach, as well as the diverse types of engagement that shape its understanding.

Part 2: Understanding the Role of the Internet in Women's Electric Guitar Practice

In addition to the ways in which the existent scholarship largely focuses on the factors that inhibit women from becoming electric guitarists, these studies also either pre-date or do not account for the role of the Internet in women's electric guitar practice and how it may have changed over time. This gap is significant due to the possibility of the affordances of the Internet, online spaces, and digital culture, to play a role in women's musical practices and in informing their participation and relationship with the electric guitar.

It is important to clarify that the Internet has not been completely overlooked concerning women and the electric guitar. The small amount of attention given to this subject illuminates the significance of the web and suggests the potential for further valuable insights to be discovered through more extensive research. One of the areas in which research has been conducted is guitar design and marketing. In a Master's thesis, Amanda Crespo (2010, p. 3) observed that "the Internet plays a vital and irreplaceable role in the dissemination of information" about what she refers to as "girl guitars." Importantly, she identified how the Internet can be a resource for women musicians in a variety of ways and highlighted early examples of the characteristics and significance of online spaces. Crespo's research shows that the website for Daisy Rock "girl guitars" was, of course, a sales and marketing tool, but it also functioned as a resource for self-identification and community building. The website featured videos of performances by women guitarists and had several interactive

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components that included ways for visitors to make connections with the company and other instrumentalists, and to share stories and post reviews about Daisy Rock guitars. The site also directed users to interact elsewhere online via the Daisy Rock Twitter account, YouTube channel, Facebook, and MySpace (Crespo, 2010, pp. 72-73). Similarly, Crespo details how Fender once designed a website specifically for female guitarists to meet, share pictures, and read journals written by other women guitarists, though it closed in early 2008 (2010, p. 62). Her findings indicate that guitar companies recognized the potential, and arguably the importance, of the Internet early on for creating spaces for women.

Crespo also observed through her research that the Internet is a site for "the transmission of guitar skills and techniques" (2010, pp. 103-104). She located "numerous" websites featuring lessons, noticed that YouTube had "hundreds of videos on the subject," and highlighted that the Gibson and Fender websites each featured links to web-based lessons (Crespo, 2010, pp. 103-104). The significance of this, as she pinpointed, is that "anyone who has access to a computer can learn to play" (Crespo, 2010, pp. 103-104). Regarding the existent scholarly literature, this represents a means through which girls and women can bypass the problems associated with peer-based, informal –and often male-dominated– ways of learning in favour of self-teaching. Further, because of the ability to connect with other like-minded people, the notion of peer-based learning can be seen differently, a notion that is comprised of other women and instrumentalists with similar goals and experiences. Though their research was narrowly centered on a case study of one male guitarist, Ruismaki, Juvonen, and Lehtonen observe that "Internet learning can also be seen as a part of learning through social media where peer learning is part of the learning process" (2012, p. 382). Lee substantiates these findings. His research indicates that "countless online communities have emerged to support various guitar related interests", including file-sharing websites where "guitarists upload, download and share transcriptions of songs" and in social media spaces (2020, p. 4). In turn, "online technologies have reconfigured assumed notions of community" (Bigham, 2013, p. 6 in Lee, 2020). Crespo noted that these new options mean that girls and women "have more access to guitar skills and technique than ever before" (2010, pp. 103-104). More recent research on the Internet and music education further substantiates these claims:

> The widespread popularity of video-centered social media like YouTube, Vimeo, and DailyMotion is fostering new ways of teaching and learning music online. These media allow producers of educational

ISSN 2250-7116
doi: 10.34096/oidopensante.v13n1.13644

> content to reach, interact with, and respond to a global audience of interested viewers [...] The seamless integration of instructional content, branding, and references to the authors' personal lives and worldviews generates a unique teaching and learning environment that challenges traditional understandings of music education (Marone and Rodriguez, 2019, p. 1).

While this research shows many opportunities created by the Internet and online spaces, it also illuminates how the latter reproduce the marginal status of women as electric guitarists and can work to exclude them from dominant spaces. Crespo (2010, p. 75) describes how "girl guitar" manufacturers depended on the Internet for marketing and sales and stated that most Daisy Rock guitars were purchased online rather than in retail outlets. Further, Daisy Rock exclusively sent their press kits to female-centric magazines rather than "traditional" music publications (Crespo, 2010, pp. 75-76). She also had difficulty finding print, radio, or television advertisements for guitars marketed to girls and women, and she noted that they seemed to depend on alternate means, such as their website and product endorsements (Crespo, 2010, p. 76). At the same time, the marketing of girl guitars almost exclusively to women and in women-centric outlets suggests that the more traditional outlets, such as the music press or guitar press, were not viewed as suitable spaces, presumably because their readership is predominantly male. These factors imply that women's electric guitar practice is assisted or made possible by avoiding or bypassing the institutions and practices of the music industries that are supposed to function as resources. And while this affords them new opportunities in welcoming spaces, it does not erase existing problems. They continue to be separated from the dominant guitar culture while the underlying issues remain. It says something that if there has indeed been an increase in the number of women electric guitar players, it was made possible not by the institutions that support and enable rock music, but by those that allow people to avoid the latter. This further confirms that the barriers are found in the social aspects of music –or, more specifically, in the biases carried and reproduced by individuals and within institutions of the music industries.

As a brief side note, it is interesting that this type of information has been found in an MA thesis and that this work has not been further advanced through PhD projects and beyond. Crespo's thesis is one among several other MA and PhD theses that address aspects of women and guitars (e.g., Turrill, 2006; Matabane, 2014; Fourie, 2020) that have largely gone unpublished and have, as far as I know, been mostly undeveloped beyond the

ISSN 2250-7116
doi: 10.34096/oidopensante.v13n1.13644

original work. It raises questions about why and how this type of research has not been more visible or the subject of exploration. This shows that important work is being done on these topics but suggests that it is not being further developed due to insufficient channels and networks of support in academia.

Returning to the topic of the web, research has shown the male-dominated composition of online guitar communities. Lee's study (2020, p. 11) revealed that within the Guitarists Worldwide Facebook community, a sample of participants indicated that 15.9% identified as women, and within the Guitar Players on Facebook community 9.1% were female. However, there is a lack of research on guitar communities exclusively for women. In this way, the continued separation of women from dominant modes of dissemination and inclusion found in Crespo's work highlights the need for understanding the Internet's potential to reproduce the same inequalities found offline. The possibility of the Internet was once thought to be a "female-centred alternative to cultural dominance of men in regards to technological agency" (Luckman, 1999, p. 37) and that using online spaces functions as a way for women to overcome traditional barriers, claim their own spaces, advance themselves and acquire power (Consalvo, 2002). Regarding the kinds of barriers and challenges confronting women electric guitarists, "online participation might serve as a possibility to circumvent these gender dynamics" (Berkers and Schaap, 2015, p. 1). Within the existent literature, studies show that women working as digital musicians have "acquired appropriate skills and knowledge to create user-generated content" including music videos and cover songs (Choi, 2017, p. 475). They can utilize social media to showcase these skills and "can appeal to others by demonstrating their digital competency" (Choi, 2017, p. 481). At the same time, the once-utopian view of the Internet has been displaced by evidence that online spaces can be hostile spaces for women. Research on heavy metal has indicated that gender inequalities are reproduced online in the form of women being "routinely evaluated on the basis of their gender" (Berkers and Schaap, 2015, p. 10). Further, the extent to which sexism and trolling (see Choi, 2017) feature in these resources and online spaces remains to be investigated, as is whether the larger topic of gender is a more or less visible issue in these spaces and how it affects women musicians' presence and practices.

The Internet has also been seen as a space of safety and opportunities for women and other minorities due to the option of anonymity. As Plant stated "You can go on-line and be anyone. You can go on-line and be no one at all […] Such deregulated possibilities have star appeal for women –and

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all those who've struggled within the straitjacket of identity" (1995, p. 28). In some cases, anonymity is possible and may be an asset for women guitar players. Watching videos of other guitarists or using pre-recorded instructional videos does not require any disclosure of identity. Yet, beyond that, women electric guitarists rely on visibility for fans and followers and for the ability to market themselves and showcase their skills (see Berkers and Schaap, 2015). In this way, anonymity is not necessarily among the options that women have when using the Internet to explore and enhance their musical practices.

Further research on the Internet and online spaces comes with great potential to reveal new insights into women's electric guitar practice, to understand the factors that motivate and enable them to play and learn their instruments, and to provide a more in-depth understanding of the ways in which women overcome barriers and manage a traditionally male-dominated field.

Part 3: Re-Thinking Male Domination, Masculinity and the Electric Guitar

The existent literature shows that the electric guitar is strongly associated with masculinity, is gendered "male," and the most prominent, historicized and expected figures in its history are men. To illustrate, Kearney (2017, p. xv) notes that electric guitars are "commonly affiliated with masculinity, regardless of the performer's gender identity." Hochman-Ruiz (2016, p. 96) observes that the "small scholarly output is univocal in regarding the instrument as masculine or as performing a masculinity that implicates sex, gender, and sexuality." Even an early two-page spread in *Life* magazine in 1966 assumed that electric guitarists were male, which was evident by the use of masculine pronouns to describe the teenagers purchasing and playing them (Waksman, 2001, pp. 2-3). In this way, the electric guitar is a means through which rock music culture becomes a "gendered communit[y] of practice" (Born and Devine, 2015, p. 149). It is also "used to invest the body of the performer with meaning, to confer upon it a unique identity whose authentic, natural appearance works to conceal its reliance upon artifice and technology" (Waksman, 2001, p. 5).

It is ironic that the electric guitar's male dominance and masculine association are so pervasive in a culture of music that is supposed to be a "compelling site for the subversion of social norms" (Kearney, 2017, p. xv). While rock culture has often been a space in which gender roles have been

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challenged, contested, and resisted (Auslander, 2004; Cohen, 2001), the guitar "may be an instrument for reinforcing the gender/sexuality status quo" (McSwain, 1995, p. 35). The question that remains, and it is implicit in the existent scholarship, is how to reconcile the male-dominated, masculine association of the electric guitar and its performance with the fact that women have always played the instrument. It can be argued that the electric guitar may have historically been and continues to be male-dominated and associated with masculinity, but it is not an exclusive domain of men.

This point is demonstrated by works that focus on women in popular music. These accounts, such as those by Lucy O'Brien (2002) and Gillian Gaar (1992), among others, illuminate women's consistent presence and longevity as electric guitarists, and situate them as important and influential figures in the instrument's history. From Memphis Minnie's performance on more than 200 recordings between 1930 and 1960, Sister Rosetta Tharpe playing to an audience of 20,000 in 1951, to the dedicated following of Lita Ford's and Joan Jett's "raucous guitar rock" in the seventies, and onwards (O'Brien, 2002, p. 17, pp. 85-86, pp. 121-122). These accounts show the difficulty in locating an era of popular music during which there have not been iconic, influential, and successful women electric guitarists. These books do draw attention to the exceptional place of women in this role. However, the efforts to highlight women's experiences and expand the narrative show that being exceptional or unusual is not a quality that should be dismissed or undermined as a novelty but one that signals significance and raises questions. In other words, they demonstrate that those considered exceptional are important components of the electric guitar's history and that their inclusion generates knowledge and insights that shape this history. By detailing and recognizing the contributions of women as electric guitarists, such works create a more complete historical narrative, one that destabilizes the male-dominated construct around the instrument.

The masculine association and male gendering of the electric guitar is often seen as having a determining and definitive effect on who plays the instrument. These factors are evident in how boys choose the instrument as a result of its male gendering and in perspectives that view women electric guitarists as trying or needing to perform or behave like "one of the boys" (Bourdage, 2010; Clawson, 1999; Hallam *et al*., 2008; Herbst and Menze, 2021) to be taken seriously. Another component to overcoming barriers relates to the manner in which the electric guitar has been researched, thought about, and written about. In this way, perhaps the

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guitar's entrenched male dominance and masculinity have also limited the kinds of questions that have been asked about it.

The notion of "guitar culture" put forth by Bennett and Dawe (2001, p. 1) is defined as "the guitar makers, guitar players and audiences who imbue guitar music and the instrument itself with a range of values and meanings through which it assumes its place as a cultural icon." Following this, the ability of various individuals occupying diverse roles to shape and influence the instrument's meaning and significance suggests that there is much room to expand, explore, and nuance the understanding of the electric guitar. Is it possible to move away from these ideas as a starting point and think about what the electric guitar means when it is played by many different types of bodies? Is it possible that the electric guitar is chosen by musicians based on multiple and specific reasons –which may or may not be connected to gender or ideas of masculinity and femininity– and is imbued with meaning by its practitioners?

Scholars have done some work in problematizing these long-standing notions through research on, for example, guitars designed for women's bodies (Vesey, 2020) and by re-thinking the notion of the guitar as a "technophallus" (see Waksman, 2001). Using a queer, posthuman approach, Megan Rogerson-Berry (2020, p. 5) reframes the latter as "technodildo", that enables anyone to "use the electric guitar as a genderless device and bend its performative identity to any gender or sexual identities they so choose." The concept, working against the masculine association of phallus, is based on the idea that the dildo "subverts notions of the penis as a symbol of male privilege because it shows it to be a construction that in reality is unnecessary" (Leibetseder, 2012, p. 174). The dildo is an object that can be utilized without being tied to specific bodies or gendered connotations. Rather than reproduce masculine sexuality, it "exposes the artifice of white male potency and sexual display by mocking the overt displays of power and masculinity that go hand in hand with the notion of guitar god or guitar hero" (Rogerson-Berry, 2020, p. 5). These studies show the potential of thinking about the relationship between gender and the electric guitar to be expanded and nuanced through diverse perspectives. Further research is needed to potentially generate different ways of thinking about this pervasive aspect of the electric guitar and its performance. A more expansive vocabulary about gender and the electric guitar can work toward normalizing women in this role.

With these questions in mind, I follow the perspective that "gender" is a "social system" that ascribes meaning to all bodies and is not analogous to

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"women" (Kearney, 2017, p. xvi, p. xx). While I have used the latter term throughout this article, any study that aims to advance an understanding of gender concerning the electric guitar must also account for diversity. The existent literature often, but not exclusively, represents a normative, heterosexist, binary view of gender and associated roles and expectations, and at times implicitly assumes a desire to adhere to them by women electric guitarists. For example, pressures to maintain femininity are among the social factors that scholars argue inhibit women from becoming electric guitarists. While this may be true for many women, such a view positions normative understandings of femininity as taken for granted without considering that some women may reject such expectations or express their gender differently. Revisiting, updating, and advancing research on women and the electric guitar also means including the experiences of non-binary, gender non-conforming, and transgender individuals as well as people of diverse sexual orientations.

A central component to the longevity and continuity of male domination, the electric guitar's masculine association, and women's marginalization that is identified in the literature is hegemonic masculinity. According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity is the "configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees [...] the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (2005, p. 77). It is the "pattern of practice" that includes actions and role expectations that allow men's dominance over women to continue (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). It "embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). In this way, hegemonic masculinity forms the basis for women being excluded and undermined as electric guitarists.

One of the most visible elements of hegemonic masculinity is rank and authority through "culture, institutions, and persuasion" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832) which is evident in the favorable treatment and representation of male electric guitarists by the media, music industries, and music history. In contrast, the ways in which women electric guitarists have been undervalued through representation and historically side-lined suggest a much more limited rank and authority in relation to the institutions and culture of rock music. This is particularly evident in the discourse of "women in rock" (Gaar, 1992; Bourdage, 2010) and in the

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manner in which the gender of women electric guitarists is habitually positioned at the forefront of their professional identities. As Kearney notes:

> […] perhaps no better evidence demonstrates patriarchy in the public sphere than women successful in historically male-dominated fields being referred to first by their gender and second by their job title […] Such job titles are rarely qualified by the adjective "man," since the male domination of these positions remains the norm and is therefore understood as "natural" (2017, p. 35; see also Berkers and Schaap, 2015).

Women working in other sectors of the music industry experience similar occupational categorization, such as "female sound engineers." Women effectively challenge the male dominance of electric guitar practice while their significance is undermined by various institutions and practices. The history of the electric guitar and its maintenance, rock journalism, and discourse function as "technologies of gender" that collectively operate like "tools" to "produce power relations" (Kearney, 2017, p. 37; De Lauretis, 1987; Leonard, 2017; Vesey, 2020).

Another of the aspects of the electric guitar, and rock culture more generally, that clearly showcases how hegemonic masculinity operates is in the archetypes of electric guitarists who have come to define the instrument's technique and onstage performance style. These guitarists are known for performance styles that are suggestive of male sexual expression and highlight virtuosic playing styles, which have been deemed "cock rock" by some (Frith and McRobbie, 1990; see also Waksman, 2001). What is significant about this, however, is that this specific masculine association of the electric guitar derives from a very limited number of highly visible and influential rock guitarists, and an "incredibly small number of real male innovators" (Strohm, 2004, p. 199). In this way, they represent an ideal that has been reproduced over time. Consistently, Connell (2005, p. 79) notes that few men actually meet the standard put forth by hegemonic masculinity. Despite this, the ideal is normative and beneficial to men (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). However, within the rock genre, there are many styles, techniques, and expressions associated with guitar-based music (Bennett and Dawe, 2001, p. 3). Following this, men who do not demonstrate a "strong version of masculine dominance" yet still benefit from patriarchy are said to show a "complicit masculinity" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). In this way, such dominance has also been upheld by male musicians who convey a variety of masculinities and utilize guitar performance techniques that differ significantly

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doi: 10.34096/oidopensante.v13n1.13644

from hegemonic ideals. As Waksman notes about the electric guitar, the "varieties of masculinity that have taken shape" around it are important to understanding its male bias and are the result of a "convergence of race, gender, and sexuality" (2001, p. 5).

The embeddedness of hegemonic masculinity within rock and guitar culture, and the manner in which it shapes women's experience, is reflected in the existent literature. It is evident in the issues and barriers women encounter in becoming electric guitarists, sustained by the gendering of instruments, and rendered visible in analyses of guitar performance. Further research would reveal whether –or the extent to which– changes are taking place. A perceived increase in the number of women electric guitarists, along with evidence of "gradual progress" in the form of audiences paying more attention to women musicians' music and careers (Choi, 2017, p. 476), could indicate greater acceptance of women in this role. It is unclear whether discourses are shifting, institutions are adapting their practices, and male dominance is being destabilized, or if patriarchal power relations are merely being re-negotiated to retain dominance.

Conclusion

This article has discussed and justified reasons for the importance of updating and expanding the research on women and the electric guitar. It has identified three major themes that form the basis for more extensive research: the primary focus on the reasons why women do not play the electric guitar, the emphasis on offline practices, and the male-dominated and masculine association of the instrument. In response, the article has shown that further research into why and how women become electric guitarists, the role of the Internet in their practice, and diverse approaches to understanding gender and the electric guitar would create a more complete understanding of women's relationship with this instrument.

The analysis presented in this article is evidence of both, the current limitations in this area of research and the depth and richness of this topic. It also illuminates oversights in the ways in which the history of the electric guitar and rock, and popular music more generally, have been told. The significance of conducting further research in this area goes well beyond the interests of academics and the scholarly literature. Advancing knowledge and generating greater awareness of women's musical practice has the potential to impact the music and guitar industries, as well as the everyday lives of aspiring guitarists. Additional research in this area would

ISSN 2250-7116
doi: 10.34096/oidopensante.v13n1.13644

make a useful contribution to the wider discussion on gender inequality in the music and guitar industries. It would also function as a resource for identifying new ways to encourage women electric guitarists and to develop potential solutions for organizations, such as rock camps and guitar manufacturers, to further connect with, support, and enable women.

In closing, in drawing attention to the existent scholarship, one of the aims of conducting further research is also to strengthen recognition and cultivate interest in women and the electric guitar as an object of study within popular music studies and beyond. It is hoped that the body of literature that is currently described as "limited" and "small" will one day be seen as "emerging" and "developing."

Acknowledgements

This research is funded by Marie Skłodowska-Curie/UK Research and Innovation.

ISSN 2250-7116
doi: 10.34096/oidopensante.v13n1.13644

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Biografía / Biografia / Biography

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