Chapter 6

Navigating Gendered Spaces: Activists' Synergies in Montreal's Electronic Music Scene

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Abstract

Data from international journals show that woman* and other minorities continue to be drastically underrepresented in the music industry worldwide and in the electronic music industry in Europe, Canada, and Quebec. Recent work focusing on the contributions of female electronic music DJs and producers also testify to the intersectional difficulties they face. In this chapter, we examine the strategies they deploy daily to make a career in an overwhelmingly male environment by studying the case of the Montreal electronic music scene. To do so, we use qualitative interviews and observations using the shadowing technique and we deploy a gender-as-social-practice approach, which focuses on how people practice gender in everyday life by considering gender not as a stable state or characteristic of people, but as a dynamic process performed in interactions that produce difference. Our research, which runs from 2021 to 2025, aims to find explanations for the persistent underrepresentation of women* in the electronic music world. More specifically, our results highlight the strategies and coping mechanisms our participants mobilize to negotiate their place and identity in the electronic music industry, paying particular attention to the collective aspect of their mobilization and to their feminist practices, such as creating solidarity networks.

*People who identify as woman.

Keywords: Electronic music industry; feminist activism; gender practices; inequalities; solidarity; underrepresentation

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Introduction

In 2018, Misstress Barbara, an electronic music DJ and producer from Montreal (Quebec, Canada), posted on her Facebook page about how far she had come since her mid-90s debut and mentioned that, throughout her career, she had frequently been told, "You're pretty good, for a girl." This sexist remark illustrates the challenges women* still face in the predominately men-dominated electronic music industry.[1] Farrugia and Olszanowski (2017) and Gadir (2017) present data from international journals indicating that women remain drastically underrepresented in the music industry at large, with specific details on the underrepresentation of women in the electronic music industry being notably scarce. Women electronic music DJs and producers remain underrepresented at festivals and events worldwide (Abtan, 2016; Gadir, 2017; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2015). For example, men comprised 71% of all festival acts between 2017 and 2019 (Female: Pressure, 2020). The inherently technological character of electronic music performance and production has led to this genre of music being a "predominantly male domain" (Parsley, 2022, p. 698). This chapter aims at highlighting the strategies and coping mechanisms our participants deploy to negotiate their place and identity in a mostly men-dominated cultural industry.

Women are also less visible in the professional media and production networks, which tend to focus on men (see, for example, Butler, 2006; Holmes, 2012; Kirn, 2011). In Montreal, the practical importance of this issue is highlighted by the many groups working to address it, such as MTL (Montreal) Women in Music, F*EM, female:pressure, AMPLIFY Digital Arts Initiative, Keychange, and shesaid.so Montreal. In Quebec, in 2016–2017, only 10% of people involved in festival programming overall were women (DIG, 2017). In 2019, women comprised 23% and 30%, respectively, of the artists playing at ILESONIQ and MUTEK electronic music festivals (Female: Pressure, 2020). Meanwhile, roughly equal numbers of women and men graduated with music degrees in 2015 (Statistics Institute of Quebec), and around 50% of singers and musicians in Canada are women (Hills Strategy Research, 2016; Nordicity, 2015). The underrepresentation of women in the Canadian electronic music scene is not unique to that country: In 2019, just under 13% of the musicians booked to appear at European electronic music nightclubs were women (A8M, 2019).

Although there has been an increase in the number of women involved in the electronic music scene since the 2000s (McRobbie, 1994), they remain underrepresented. More recent work focusing on the contributions of women electronic music DJs and producers also demonstrates the intersectional (at the intersection of various identities, such as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, and capacity) difficulties they face (Farrugia & Olszanowski, 2017). Our research, which runs from 2021 to 2025, aims to find explanations for this persistent

[1]*Woman/women: person/people who identify as woman/women. Man/men: person/people who identify as man/men. We acknowledge the fluidity and non-binarity of gender, but we mobilize the categories of "women" and "men" as operatives in this chapter because of their persistence and relevance to the people involved in this research.

underrepresentation and invisibilization. How do we explain this persistent underrepresentation of women in the electronic music world? What are the day-to-day consequences for women DJs and producers? What are the strategies they deploy daily to forge a career in such an environment? This chapter focuses specifically on the latter question and describes the strategies and coping mechanisms our participants mobilize to negotiate their place and identity in a mostly men-dominated cultural industry. We pay particular attention to the collective aspect of their mobilization and to their feminist practices, such as creating networks of solidarity.

Theoretical Approach and Objectives

To examine the underrepresentation of women in the electronic music scene, we mobilize a practice perspective. Organizational theory has undergone a "practice turn" in recent decades and organizational theorists have increasingly turned their attention to understanding organizations by studying the actual practices that take place within them, rather than solely focusing on abstract concepts, formal structures, or idealized models (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Gherardi, 2012; Nicolini, 2009). This practice perspective, which stems from the work of sociologists such as Bourdieu and Schatzki, is also increasingly mobilized in the two theoretical fields that inform our project: entrepreneurship (Champenois et al., 2020; Steyaert, 2007; Thompson et al., 2020) and gender (Aumais, 2017, 2019; Martin, 2006). Thus, we use social practice – a set of activities that are both routine and unpredictable – as our unit of analysis (Nicolini & Monteiro, 2016; Schatzki, 2018; Schatzki et al., 2001).

Adopting a practice perspective means we consider both entrepreneurship and gender-as-social-practices. A gender-as-social-practice approach focuses on how people practice gender in their everyday lives by considering gender not as a stable state or characteristic, but as a dynamic process: A set of words, body postures, gestures, behaviors, and activities performed in interactions that produce difference (Aumais, 2017; Martin, 2006). The term "practice" does not simply refer to a conceptual category that includes everything actors think and do but also encompasses meaning-making, identity formation, and actions, which are situated in specific historical conditions (Nicolini, 2009).

Methodological Approach

We have established the gendered disparities in the Quebec electronic scene; however there is little material about how individuals experience these gender disparities in their daily lives and how these disparities are (re)produced daily. Such data could help us study the mechanisms underlying the underrepresentation and invisibilization of women in Quebec's electronic music industry and the obstacles that explain the persistence of inequities. Without these data, as we have explained, the main emphasis of this research is the daily emergence of social practices within interactions. As Ashcraft (2013) explains, the alignment of certain

embodied social identities with particular occupational identities (the "glass slipper" that fits some feet and not others) is hard to capture. To access these social practices and rich details that normally escape our notice and that of our participants, we use the shadowing technique (Aumais & Germain, 2021; Aumais & Vàsquez, 2023; Czarniawska, 2014; Gill et al., 2014; Vásquez, 2013), an ethnography-inspired qualitative approach that entails closely following participants in their daily activities, which enables us to account for real-world interactions and to contextualize data. We gather participants' testimonies through a combination of unstructured, reflexive interviews (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2010) and observations (shadowing) of the artist or programmer at work, using their equipment, sharing their personal history, and interacting with other artists, stakeholders, and the audience.

Since the project started in 2021, the research team (the authors of this chapter and a master's degree student) has conducted 12 interviews with DJs and other industry actors. We are currently shadowing three participants (two DJs and one venue booker/promoter) during their daily professional activities, such as performing DJ sets, recording sessions, negotiating, attending production meetings, and organizing events. During these shadowing sessions, we take notes of unfolding events, interactions, nonverbal cues, and dialogues. Shadowing also allows many informal discussions with our participants during which they openly share their interpretations of the events we witness. The transcripts, notes, and photographs (when authorized) are then transferred to NVivo.

This (growing) body of material goes through a first round of coding and collective analysis to identify recurring themes. This chapter mainly relies on the material collected between September 2021 and May 2023. We conducted and recorded our formal interviews online via Zoom, while informal conversations with participants took place in person during shadowing sessions. Despite being physically remote, the online interviews felt no less "real" than the later in-person observations and conversations. During these video interviews, we were able to establish a rapport and build connections that facilitated the observations-on-the-move phase of the project. We used pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants in the following quotes.

From Individual Coping Strategies to Activist Synergy

Women continue to be underrepresented and marginalized in men-dominated tech-driven creative cultural industries (Eikhof, 2017) such as the electronic music industry (Parsley, 2022) in which the actors (DJs, programmers, agents, producers, and even audiences) are mostly men. To observe the effects of this underrepresentation context, we asked our participants to share their experiences and perspectives of Quebec's electronic music scene, and we heard their stories, interpretations, and views of the industry. The material we have collected up to this point allows us to report various experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and stigmatization.

Most participants shared their experiences of marginalization, understood here as a form of setting someone aside or pushing them to the margins of a group, which leads to invisibilization (Barel, 1982). For example:

> I think about the organizing side. It's like… we put DJs at the beginning [of the event]. But you know, that's not how the event was presented. I don't think it's really bad will from the organizers… but it gave me the impression that they were going for female DJs to add to the dudes' line-up that [was] going to be the main one. (Zoe)

In this example, Zoe is sharing her reaction to organizers offering her the opportunity to perform at an event before she realized, on arrival, that she was to open for the main (men) musician. Zoe felt she was being sidelined because she is a DJ. Thus, while the electronic music scene does offer visibility for women DJs performing on stage, in this situation, Zoe was invisibilized during her DJ set because playing first means playing to a mostly empty room.

Some participants reported experiences of discrimination. According to Gardner (1996), discrimination is a prejudice related to a lack of approval and acceptance from others. In reported experiences, this discrimination can translate into people experiencing situations in which they feel devalued, for example, because of their gender identity. This is the case in Claudie's reported experience of discrimination:

> You know, I was popular in Spain because I used to play super hard techno, and they are so [intense] out there that they need it [the music] to be really hard to be able to enjoy. But at some point, like everyone else around 2010, we all got a little softer. It was less techno, it was more minimal, electro… and I did the same, you know, when I went to Spain to play… I almost received empty beer bottles in the face… The people… were like… "Come on, let's gooooo!" (mimicking the screaming) … they were acting like animals in front of me saying, "Come on, go ahead!" "Harder, harder, harder!" And I thought to myself, "Damn, you would not do that to a man, eh?" (Claudie)

During one of her Spanish tours, Claudie's audience shouted at her, demanding she play harder rhythms (hard techno), thus implying that her music was not sufficiently techno. Discrimination here translates into Claudie feeling that women DJs were having experiences that were not shared by their men counterparts. Claudie did not feel accepted as being on an equal footing with men DJs and felt her performance skills as a DJ were devalued.

Finally, some participants shared their experiences of stigmatization. This happens when assessments of identities and competencies are based on gender, which can have the effect of devaluing experiences, skills, and expertise (Goffman, 1963). This is the case in Joanie's experience of stigmatization:

> Yeah, it was just this interesting thing, like people kept [saying]… "Oh, you're the hipster rapper." You know, I don't love that label, like you've identified me as THE one in this category means that… maybe [it means] I shouldn't be here. (laughs)… I didn't feel negatively about it. It was more about like, OK, … this is where I am… It's just always challenging if you're in a space where you don't have peers there with you. So, if they were like, "Oh, you're one of the many hipster rappers here," […] But when it's like, "I'm identifying you as THE one and you're an outsider," that feel[s]… I mean, anytime you're excluded, even in a subtle way, it's like, you know that feels a certain way. (Joanie)

At an event designed to showcase her work, Joanie was labeled as a "hipster rapper," which differentiates her from other rappers. By labeling her in this way, the audience member was implying that she is not really a rapper. Joanie felt categorizing her in this manner was a tacit way of excluding her. Stigmatization in this context can thus be viewed as an attempt to exclude women DJs.

These experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and stigmatization often stem from stereotypes and prejudices related to women's relationship with technology, their technical skills, and their musical talent. Such experiences tend to reinforce the dominance of the majority (white men) actors. This is due to a lack of recognition and legitimacy. These effects can be linked to the patriarchal culture embedded in the electronic music scene, which, according to Delvaux (2020), is akin to a boys' club. The following conversation, recorded during an interview with two DJs, Lili and Zoe, highlights this boys' club phenomena:

> *Lili:* It's so much just dudes. It's like really there's a bro culture… in this business… that I'm so excited to like throw myself in there and be like, "Move over…"
>
> *Zoe:* I remember the guy… from behind [saying] like, "Oh yeah, you do it like that," whereas we [women] are like, "Oh yeah, check this out," (laughs)… a bit more uninhibited. There, it's really like an attitude of proving yourself… not proving yourself by the way you talk… It's a way, it's like… you say stuff just to prove that you know something.
>
> *Lili:* Yeah, yeah, it was really… it was like, "Ah, you mix this key here with this key there?" And I had never asked myself about these keys. Yes, it's stupid, but from that moment on, just that comment there, I was like, "I'm going to go do some research on the internet about keys…" (laughs)

During their tour, Lili and Zoe met men DJs who questioned their technical skills to the extent that they wondered if they were mixing properly. They later explained that women* DJs have a different way of discussing their activities with

each other, and they think that men tend to show off their knowledge just to prove themselves. In doing so, however, they create power relationships in which women are seen as less capable than men at producing and creating music.

All these experiences show the effects of the underrepresentation context in the electronic music industry. Sometimes, it is difficult to identify and interpret these effects as situations often raise questions of representativeness, credibility, and prioritization. The situations demonstrate, however, that women artists are treated differently than their men counterparts. In these experiences, we see that the electronic music scene has recently tried to include more women to counterbalance gender-based inequities. Nevertheless, in the experiences described, women continue to be underrepresented and feel their expertise is devalued. They are marginalized, discriminated against, and stigmatized in their daily lives while performing activities that demonstrate their ability to produce, create, and evolve in a men-dominated boy's club environment.

Given the persistent underrepresentation of women in the electronic music scene and the lack of research on the obstacles that explain the persistence of inequities, it seems crucial to better understand the workings of this phenomenon. We now highlight the individual and collective strategies women deploy and how they adapt to navigate this field. Individually, they adjust their behavior to counteract marginalization, such as that exhibited through stereotypical and negative representations of women DJs. Collectively, they develop close relationships and show strong solidarity. For example, organizing women DJ parties, networking, and joining forces when problems arise are ways to unite as a marginalized group.

During our interviews, women DJs often used the term "strategy" to refer to the need to take action from a certain perspective. For example, on the recommendation of her therapist, one of the women DJs mobilizes the notion of strategy when she needs to define goals to pursue her career. Another mobilizes the concept with her agent to establish her branding and place in the music industry. Both women seek to project themselves and carve out a place in the environment in which they operate as women DJs.

Fighting Stereotypes: Avoiding Labels and Changing Names

The women in our study adopt strategies to combat the stereotypical and negative representations of women DJs. Stereotypes tend to reinforce biased representations of them, which can have concrete implications for experiences and practices.

As one participant said, "I have better strategies for navigating complex situations and I am less likely to allow these people to attack my privacy and then interfere with my work," one of these individual strategies was to change her name to avoid discrimination. Claudie, for example, thought of changing her name a male one to be recognized for the music she creates and not for the "women DJ" she embodies. She is still hesitant to do so to promote her music without risking gender-based discrimination:

> (…) I wanted to [use] a guy's name so that my music, from the start, would be heard for itself… and not… for who I am… If it wasn't me, would [it] not be good?… One thing I must confess, I've been thinking about changing my name for a long time. And I think to myself, "Oh, it's going to be a mess because I've made… blunders in my career, but, at the same time, if… I had to do it again, I'd do it the same [way]." I'll give you an example. When I made my albums that were not techno, I decided to release them under [the name] Bob Smith because I had the mentality. I still have it. If you are an artist, you have the right to do what you want, according to the moment, and people must understand, then I will release my albums [as] Bob Smith. (Claudie)

In this example, stereotypical ideas about women are deflected by using a male name that prevents such discrimination.

One participant questioned the appropriateness of mentioning that she is a feminist in her biography. She then described the pros and cons of labeling herself as such:

> I tried to include in my artist bio…, beyond productions that I've done and my artistic journey, [to include] how my feminist approach informs my… in fact, [how] my feminism informs my approach … I did [include it] a little, then, after that, there are places where it is interesting to mention it because I feel that it is directly linked to my art. … You know, I talk about feminism, … even intersectional feminism at times… I'm in the early stages of applying that, but I still have reflexes of inclusion and expanded awareness… and battles to be fought… I open so many doors when I answer your questions… they are such big questions! I tell myself that a feminist tag can prevent me from having certain contracts because it can be frightening to some … who might think, "Hmm, this will not be an easy production" …. I don't know… I'm not sure I've integrated it. (Roxanne)

One individual strategy is to constantly try to detect the psychological profiles of individuals encountered to better understand the situation and to try to anticipate potential problems. During the interviews, a women DJ told us about a problematic situation with a technician who would not set up the machines she needed to do her DJ set. She felt devalued by this technician, who did not take her requests seriously. She adopted strategies so that she could do her job properly and reduce the psychological impact and the marginalization she experienced:

> I think of personalities that are less compatible with mine, [where] the communication, my requests, my needs are [not] taken into account… I could feel that my expectations were [considered] too big, that it didn't make sense… that I was being overprotective of

> my material, etc. Having been around people like that two, three, four times, I now manage to… tell myself, "OK, this is that type of situation…" I [have learned] to detect more quickly the type of person in front of me to try to become less fragile and [more] motivated to express my requests clearly… my needs, to talk to the right people, to tell myself, "OK, I'm going to choose my battles," and … in relation to my personal life, it affects me less … and I want to continue to meet people with complex temperaments. (Roxanne)

Women DJs adopt these individual strategies to protect themselves from adversity and to navigate an environment known to be traditionally masculine. They also develop collective strategies to form a group that comes together to resist marginalizing practices. For example, they organize events where only women DJs are booked, defend themselves in cases of difficulties with men, and share contacts to promote their work. Some women DJs show solidarity by involving each other in collective music projects. One participant works on a collective project called "Feminism for men: A little survival guide."

> I think most of the time, we end up with music that is composed by men who… But no… it's a big statement that isn't clear… But I know that to go and look for women who make music in the music industry, you have to make an effort because they have perhaps less exposure. Uh… I think this group is a gem. The mutual support, there are always people who are like, "Hey, I'm looking for someone to come and make a video, I'm looking for someone to record in the studio, I'm looking for someone…" People suggest women or non-binary people or at least people not associated with… the male gender. Hmmm… and I think these are really concrete gestures… for the advancement of women. (Roxanne)

Another collective strategy is to create a union or association to establish a pricing scale to avoid gender inequity in terms of pay:

> Creating an association [is] like contacting the whole group of women DJs. Let's get the gang together … We'll work together. People want us as women DJs… They want us as a women DJ because it sounds good, because it's fair. But it's also because it shows that they're, like, open to go[ing] into something that is a natural reflex from a men-dominated environment. Well, OK girls, we don't accept gigs under $300 any more… (Roxanne)

In the following example, Anouk decided to use the collective she had launched in order to gain control over her own career to help others:

> I quickly realized that I was being asked to work *for* them and not *with* them. And besides, I saw them collaborating on the same event I'd been offered to work on… But they were men, so they were giving each other opportunities. So I realized very quickly that I had to work much harder so I decided to launch my collective… Then I wanted to generate a kind of local economy, redistribute to the artists. So, I decided to register as a non-for-profit organization and organize live streams, so [I] started inviting artists into my living room… (Anouk)

Discussion: Activists' Synergies in the Montreal Electronic Music Scene

Our investigation enabled us to observe the experiences and to access the sense-making practices of women DJs and producers who operate at the margins of Quebec's electronic music scene. Through their situated experience (Haraway, 1988), we have learned how they experience and interact with the social norms and relational dynamics that support intersectional inequities. They have spoken about experiencing marginalization, discrimination, and stigmatization in their working lives; about the discomfort and pressure they undergo; and about the strategies and coping mechanisms they mobilize to negotiate their place and identity in a mostly men-dominated cultural industry. Our preliminary results also highlight feminist practices, such as establishing networks of solidarity and support. Faced with an organized system that marginalizes, stigmatizes, and underestimates women, we find that our participants mobilize activist strategies. We call them "activists" because all our participants not only try to survive but also strive to change the system. We organize their strategies into four main interrelated categories of social practice:

(1) Creating their own business
Almost all our research participants, after some time in the business, recognize the challenges of being marginalized and feel the need to organize. They have launched their own businesses or not-for-profit organizations. This has empowered them to help not only themselves but also others, which most of them do by organizing events that book women DJs; sharing resources, equipment, and technical knowledge; playing a mentoring role or acting as a role model; and sharing advice and guidance on career progression and navigating obstacles. Taking on leadership roles has empowered them to eventually shape culture, policies, and practices; influence positive change; promote inclusivity; and create opportunities for other women.

(2) Increasing their visibility
Our participants need to increase their visibility in order not only to promote themselves as artists or promoters (e.g., by associating their names with prominent venues or events) but also to advocate for themselves and other

individuals and causes around specific needs, goals, and successes. This in turn enables collective organization and creates an online following, which, ultimately, puts them in an improved position to negotiate better opportunities, promotion, and equal pay, as well as to voice their opinions and ideas. Increasing visibility can help promote storytelling and shared narratives in order to create emotional connections and foster shared understanding. This is often achieved through digital platforms.

(3) Branding
Branding is crucial for all DJs and promoters, regardless of gender, in order to establish a distinct identity, build a fan base, and differentiate themselves. Our participants also identify branding as a way of coping, making a place for themselves, helping others, and contributing to political change. They are concerned about authenticity, breaking stereotypes, and standing out from the crowd. They need to highlight their skills, expertise, and distinctive qualities (in a world that undervalues them), while promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Our participants pay close attention to their use of labels such as "feminist" and sometimes consider changing their names in order to be recognized for their art rather than their gender.

(4) Creating affective circuits of solidarity
Affective circuits of solidarity practices combine concepts from affective and social solidarity. "Affective circuits" refers to experiencing and mobilizing emotions, empathy, and compassion, and a sense of belonging, while "solidarity" refers to a sense of unity, support, and cooperation among individuals or groups. We find that in their public relations (PR) activities, our participants rely a lot on emotional connections that foster and strengthen bonds of solidarity between the various stakeholders (e.g., colleagues and audiences).

We also note that our participants seem to have been shifting relatively quickly from individual coping strategies to collective strategies and solidarity.

Conclusion

This chapter aims to contribute to existing knowledge of the electronic music scene in Quebec by exploring the experiences of women DJs and producers of electronic music. In so doing, we bring out salient issues and challenges and identify the relational dynamics and practices that people deploy in the face of gendered norms. We find that the various strategies our participants deploy – creating their own business, increasing visibility, paying attention to their branding, and creating affective circuits of solidarity – create a synergy in the sense that combining resources, power, and relationships achieves more for everyone involved than would be achieved through pursuing one individual element.

This work helps us to better comprehend the gender norms and preconceptions that still pervade social interactions, and which translate into a subordinate

position for women in the electronic music sector. It also gives us a deeper understanding of the issue of women underrepresentation in this environment. As a result, this research will help current and future marginalized cultural entrepreneurs who actively contribute to the growth of a thriving cultural sector in Montreal, as demonstrated by the success of electronic festivals and events that were developed in the city and then exported, such as Piknic Électronik, Igloofest, and MUTEK.

These findings will eventually lead to recommendations for better representation of DEI so that marginalized groups can thrive socially and economically from their entrepreneurship. This research also advances our understanding of gender-based discrimination in the electronic music scene, which forms part of a larger discussion on the effects of these disparities in similar contexts. On a practical level, it answers the call of various organizations to give more consideration to gender DEI, which entails expanding our knowledge of the daily practices contributing to social, economic, and artistic barriers that account for the enduring underrepresentation of women in this field. By promoting greater visibility and inclusion of women DJs and producers, this work will also contribute to the search for practical applications to (re)establish the technical, artistic, and intellectual contributions of women DJs and producers in electronic music.

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