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## **Inside the net: Women composers' use of online communities of practice to build and support their careers**

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Article title : Inside the net: How women composers use online communities of practice to build and support their careers

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**Abstract**

**Purpose:** The article examines how female composers use online communities of practice to negotiate the traditionally masculine space of music while operating outside its hierarchical structures.

**Methodology:** We used a mixed methods approach, consisting of 225 survey responses and 27 semi-structured in-depth interviews with female composers and adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach and situated the findings in the concept of communities of practice.

**Findings:** The findings reveal that the online environment can present a supportive space for female composers. It provides a safe place where women can connect with others; where

female composers find support, feedback and mentorship; how they use this to increase their visibility and develop career agency through learning and knowledge acquisition. This offers an alternative approach to career development for practising female creative workers, and provides them with a tool that can be used to circumvent some of the enduring challenges that they would normally face.

**Originality:** The findings suggest that online communities of practice can have positive spin-offs **for the career development of women in a male-dominated sub-sector of** the creative industries.

**Keywords:** women composers, gender, communities of practice, creative industries, career development

**Article classification:** Research paper

## Introduction

Music composition is a highly gendered occupation. From the earliest times to the present day, gender has played a role in inflecting the collective discourse of music history with a narrative that has extolled the masterworks of male composers while making invisible or incidental to that history the music of women. Yet, amidst this dominant discourse, female composers have figured, sometimes prominently (Pendle, 2010).

Gender has thus played a role in constructing a duality in which two distinct histories are traced: a dominant (male) history; and a counter (female) history, the latter emerging from research that had unearthed women's music in the 1970s. However, despite the existence of female composers, their contributions have tended to be excluded from the received standard repertoire of performed musical works. This, we argue, is a phenomenon that continues in the present day (Browning, 2016). We also suggest that it is against this backdrop that female composers have found it necessary to develop strategies for navigating the male-dominated profession of music composition.

Composers have faced challenges throughout the history of music and their resilience and ability to adapt to their circumstances have informed the decisions they have made about their careers. Leslie and Catungal (2012), however, claim that "certain creative occupations reproduce masculinist workplace cultures and are therefore potentially harmful spaces for women" (p. 118). Given that Western art music history is characterized by an all-pervasive masculine narrative, we argue that composition is one such occupation.

This study adopted a mixed methods design. Mixed methods makes the overall study strength larger than either qualitative or quantitative research by providing strengths that offset the weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative research (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Adopting a sequential design with two phases: phase 1 consisted of 225 surveys and phase 2 involved 27 in-depth interviews. The survey allowed us to identify the online environment was a way to overcome challenges related to learning and networking and this was followed up by semi-structured in-depth interviews to further examine Communities of Practice (CoP) as a tool to navigate this male-dominated space by helping them to develop their careers. Our methodological approach helped us to study the prevalence of themes and simultaneously gather rich insights in the lived experiences of women composers. We posted the following research question: *How can online Communities of Practice help women composers build and support their careers?*

Our contribution is twofold. First, we outline *how* online CoPs help women composers develop their careers by distinguishing four different ways of using CoPs in overcoming

challenges. Second, we contribute to theory by showing that CoPs, coupled with individual agency, **are helpful for career development in male-dominated sectors.**

## Literature Review

### *Challenges for female composers*

The legacy of music as a predominantly male tradition has given rise to and perpetuated the gender stereotype that women do not “measure up” to the high aesthetic standards of their male counterparts. This, in turn, as Samuel (1994) points out, has led to “a cultural antipathy towards the concept of the female creative artist” (p. xiv). This attitudinal antipathy has fed into the statistical representation of female composers which, as noted by Parsons and Ravenscroft (2016), shows that they are a significant minority, comprising only approximately 20 per cent of the world’s composers (p. 4).

Women perceive that they face different challenges to men (Conor *et al.*, 2015). Such challenges include, among others, interference with caring responsibilities (Banks and Milestone, 2011), sexual harassment (Hennekam and Bennett, 2017a) and marginalization through the active denial of their expertise by male workers (Banks and Milestone, 2011). The present study focused on two specific challenges: learning opportunities and male-dominated networks.

The first challenge concerns learning opportunities that arise from questioning and from making mistakes. Allowance for mistakes arguably improves one’s performance (Gully *et al.*, 2002) as well as one’s learning and self-efficacy (Lorenzet *et al.*, 2005). Self-efficacy – the belief in one’s ability to complete a specific task or reach a goal successfully – is developed enactively (by doing), vicariously (by watching), and through encouragement by others (Bandura, 1977). Being allowed to make mistakes as one learns implies that one receives feedback (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996), which gives individuals an opportunity to see the consequences of their mistakes, learn corrective strategies, and take corrective steps (Karl *et al.*, 1993).

It is possible that many female composers attribute their mistakes to their own limitations, rather than to the fact that they have not been offered a place to learn through trial-and-error, leading to frustration and reduced self-efficacy (Gist and Mitchell, 1992). Low self-efficacy, in turn, negatively impacts performance (Bandura and Locke, 2003).

Networking and socialisation have also proven to be difficult for women in the creative workforce (Wittel, 2001): hence the second challenge concerns male-dominated

networks. Networks provide exposure to people in positional power, increase market visibility, and enable workers to leverage a place within the network of decision makers. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2008) have argued that men in the creative industries have more decision-making power as they are overrepresented in such positions. Moreover, informal networks emerge as central to initiating, developing and maintaining work. Such networks or “cliques” (Manning and Sydow, 2007) are known for their potential to be both discriminatory and exclusionary (O’Brien, 2014). Within the performing arts, previous studies in acting (Dean, 2008) emphasize that “shared stereotypes” directly influence “the performer’s access to work” (p. 173). Moreover, workers obtain work through connections and other subjective criteria (Thanki and Jeffreys, 2007). Given that networking is a key strategy for career progression, the difficulty women have in participating in networks creates significant limitations for women in the creative workforce.

#### *Theoretical framework: Communities of Practice*

Communities of practice can be defined as groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger, 2011). In this study, we adopted a CoP lens grounded in anthropological and social theory to understand how women composers acquire knowledge and skills and develop their careers, and how they respond to inequalities in the creative industries (Swan and Fox, 2010).

CoPs seek to develop members’ capabilities and to build and exchange knowledge (Wenger *et al.*, 2002), and they typically have three characteristics. Firstly, collective learning takes place in a shared domain: in this case, composition. In this study, the composers were all female, thus an additional shared domain concerned the impact of gender on their careers. Secondly, CoP members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other and share information and opportunities. Also, they build relationships that enable them to learn from one another. In our study this included circumventing male-dominated networks that were perceived to be exclusionary (Christopherson, 2011). Members of a CoP do not necessarily work together on a daily basis (Wenger, 2011), which was the case for the female composers in this study. Although they mainly worked alone, the composers engaged in discussions online to share their thoughts and to exchange experiences and ideas. The third characteristic of a CoP is that members are also practitioners (Wenger, 2011). As a result, they share many experiences, stories and ways of addressing recurring issues. This shared repertoire of stories and case studies becomes a common knowledge base on which members can draw when

facing new situations. Passion, commitment and identification with the group binds the members together for as long as the need persists (Wenger *et al.*, 2002).

Given the ongoing challenges faced by women in the creative industries (Gill, 2014), the present study aimed to understand how female composers circumvent and resist the exclusive nature of the male-dominated networks. Drawing on CoP theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991), the findings show how female composers use online CoPs to connect, network and engage in shared learning.

## Methods

### *Sample*

This paper reports from an international study of female composers conducted in 2016 and 2017. The study involved 225 online surveys followed with 27 semi-structured in-depth personal interviews. For the survey, respondents were recruited through social media and by contacting conservatoires, educational institutions, and music- and composition-related associations and networks. It can, therefore, be considered a convenience sample. Using snowball sampling, each respondent was asked to send the survey to other female composers or to identify organizations which could be interested. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked whether they would be willing to share their story in a face-to-face, telephone or Skype discussion. Twenty-eight respondents indicated their willingness to do so, and 27 respondents participated in the interview phase. It is important to acknowledge a self-selection bias here as we do not know how individuals who agreed to participate differed from those who refused the invitation. However, the sample included both individuals with and without CoPs as the use of CoPs was not a selection criterium to be considered for inclusion in the interview phase. Demographic information is provided at Table 1.

[Please place Table 1 near here]

### *Design*

This study adopted a mixed methods design as its methodology includes both qualitative and quantitative research elements. Its central premise is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Triangulation, referring to combining multiple theories, methods observers, and empirical materials to produce a more



accurate, comprehensive and objective representation of the object of study, has been used (Silverman, 2015). There are different ways to triangulate data. In this study, we have used a sequential exploratory approach, referring to a design in which the researcher seeks to elaborate on or expand on the findings of one method with another method (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Our research had two phases.

Phase 1 consisted of an online study of mainly open-ended questions designed to elicit in-depth responses. The main survey was organised as three independent but inter-related surveys, which were distributed two months apart. The surveys were designed to elicit data on aspects of women composers' careers and addressed five broad themes: education and training; career trajectories; the impact of gender on career; how work is obtained or created; and the role of collaboration. Questions of interest in this study include "How frequently do you use each of the following online networking tools for your composing business" (facebook, LinkedIn, own website etc) or "How often do you use the following networking/marketing strategies" (conferences/peer groups, professional associations etc). All responses were collected, regardless whether all three parts of the main survey were completed. All respondents were presented with the aim of the study and signed an informed consent form in which participants' anonymity was assured. Content analysis was used to analyse the findings. The survey responses revealed that the online environment was a way to overcome challenges related to learning and networking. Intrigued by this unexpected finding, we decided to follow-up with a qualitative study in order to find out more about this. The information from the survey was therefore used to inform the second phase of our study. We built on our survey data to refine and further develop our insights on the use of CoPs for career development. The survey data related to CoPs are also presented in the findings and discussion section, together with the data obtained from the interviews.

The second phase consisted of 27 semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted face-to-face when possible and by telephone or Skype for those conducted over a long distance. Most interviews lasted for between one and one-and-a-half hours and were held in English, Dutch or French, depending on the preference of the interviewees. All interviews were fully transcribed and translated into English. Our survey findings informed our interview guide and an interview question designed to prompt discussion about whether and how female composers use the online environment in navigating their careers was included. We asked: *Do you use the internet and social media for your work? If so, what for? Please explain.*

## *Analysis*

In phase one, the surveys, consisting of both open and closed questions, were analysed using content analysis (Stemler, 2001) with the help of NVivo software. This analytical approach was chosen in order to capture the prevalence of the themes while also allowing the lived experiences of the participants to emerge from the findings. The prevalence of the themes was determined by the use of frequency counting (Wilkinson, 2011).

In phase 2 we conducted and analyzed the in-depth interviews. As we were interested in the lived experiences of female composers of Western Art music and how they made sense of their personal and social worlds (Smith and Osborn, 2008), we employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This approach depends on the participants' abilities to formulate their thoughts, feelings and ideas so that an interpretation of such experiences can be conducted. Moreover, it depends on the ability of the researcher to "reflect and analyse" (Brocki and Wearden, 2006, p. 88) as they have an active role in the sense-making process. The interpretation of the data can, therefore, be considered a two-stage process or a double hermeneutic, in which participants first makes sense of their world and then the researchers make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world (Smith and Osborn, 2008).

The analysis was inductive in nature and strongly rooted in the data (Mann and Abraham, 2006). We undertook several inter-related steps in line with Smith and Osborn's (2008) guidelines. Firstly, all transcripts and notes comprising more than 1,000 pages were read carefully by two authors in order to become familiar with them. The second reading created a "detailed interpretative analysis of themes" (Brocki and Wearden, 2006, p. 89), actively trying to make sense of what was being said. Not all transcripts were equally rich and some transcripts generated more themes than others. **The relevant survey data were included at this stage.**

The data was then coded. An initial codebook was established by the authors after everyone had independently coded the first three interviews. This codebook was then progressively modified as the codes identified in earlier cases were tested in the later ones using a process of analytic induction. Two of the authors coded all 27 transcripts **as well as the survey data**. The iterative process moved towards the identification of broader themes. The last step involved creating aggregating theoretical dimensions and building relationships among the themes identified. Our interest lay in the subjective experiences of participating female composers, and this method of data gave voice to the women whose lives reflected this reality and whose concerns must remain at the fore (Grbich, 2007).

## Findings and discussion

The findings of this study suggest how female composers might use the online environment to build and support their careers. Our participants used the online environment as a network, where they could find other women who would be difficult to access using more traditional networking methods. They described the online environment as a “safe space,” where they could control the aspects that were important to them and feel comfortable about sharing work, receiving assistance and helping others. This aligns with the concept of CoP (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger *et al.*, 2002), which allows adults to learn through everyday social practices rather than focusing on environments that are intentionally designed to support learning (Gray, 2004). Reflecting on the challenges outlined in the background to this paper, the online CoP provided a worthwhile alternative to career learning and development. In line with Gray (2004), motivations to participate in online CoP included opportunities to learn new skills and work practices, a way to build a social and professional network of other female composers and a means to reduce the isolation that some felt was inherent to the process of composing.

Participating composers confirmed the presence of several challenges outlined earlier, including gendered networks (true for 53% of the participants) and networked-based recruitment; participants reported that many of these challenges were gendered. Additional challenges included not being taken seriously due to their gender, experiencing difficulties when self-promoting, not having access to the same networking opportunities as men, having to deal with stereotypes, discrimination, sexism and/or (sexual) harassment, and balancing a professional career with caring responsibilities.

Despite experiencing acceptance and a level of success, I still feel like there can be a pocket of the classical community that is dismissive (to varying levels - consciously patronising, or subconsciously through small comments, etc.) of the work of composing women. My experience has included coming to terms with this attitude and how to respond. Currently my response is to treat it like any backward-thinking attitude, as not worthy of debate or cliques. (Survey respondent 37, Australian, 29 years)

These challenges have been well-documented in the literature on work and gender. This article employs the theoretical construct of communities of practice to examine how women respond to such challenges.

This section is organized into four themes, each of which addresses a different challenge. Firstly, we discuss how the online environment provides a safe place where women can connect with other women, overcoming isolation and finding like-minded individuals with whom they are able to share their experiences. Secondly, we explain how the online environment becomes a place where female composers find support, feedback and mentorship that they struggle to find in the physical world. Thirdly, we illustrate how women use the online environment to create marketing platforms through which they can increase visibility and engage in promotion on their own terms. Finally, we detail how female composers use the online environment to act independently and to develop career agency through new learning and knowledge acquisition.

#### *A safe place where other women can be found*

Participants highlighted the solitary nature of their composition work and, therefore, the difficulty of connecting with colleagues. The sense of isolation was compounded by the fact that there are relatively few female composers, that there is more likely to be a larger geographical distance between them, and that they reported a larger number of caring responsibilities which made it difficult to attend after-hours networking opportunities. Together, these factors made it difficult to have regular physical contact with other composers. The internet, which has extended the reach of human interaction beyond the geographical limitations of traditional communities, provided new opportunities for female composers to get in touch with other female composers, especially on women-only groups, combating feelings of isolation and being able to share experiences they may not usually talk about face-to-face.

CoPs can be big or small, local or global, face-to-face and/or online (Wenger, 2011). The female composers created connections across organizational, stylistic and geographic boundaries through the use of online CoPs in the form of special interest groups, forums or social media. The ways in which these communities were experienced is elucidated below.

I've gradually grown to get some connections on Facebook, where there are several women composer groups. That is the way that I've met women in other [geographic] States and so on. (Interviewee 16, Australian, 54 years)

It's so important and so rewarding that there is this space where you know you can go to post articles about composing or articles about female composers. (Interviewee 7, Australian, 35 years)

I have to say that I feel as a woman, completely outnumbered when I look at the [composition] feeds and the names and it's completely dominated by men. So, it is very nice to have those networks where it's just women. (Interviewee 12, Australian, 56 years)

However, groups that included both men and women were also appreciated as it made them feel more respected and validated as a composer.

The ones that aren't just limited to women composers made me feel very validated actually as a composer. Because I have had an opportunity to put what I do and what I think up there, I feel that I'm being respected. (Interviewee 12, Australian, 56 years).

The online space was described as a safe place in which women could express themselves and where the domination of males was absent. This was linked with the important role of an online moderator. Previous research (Harasim *et al.*, 1995) has shed light on the different roles of moderators in formal online learning, which Berge and Collins (2000) list as simultaneously the technical trouble-shooter, educator, chairperson, facilitator and community organizer. However, we know less about the functions of moderators in online communities of practice that are both voluntary and informal in nature.

In line with Berge and Collins' (2000) research on e-moderators and Gray's (2004) study of informal learning within an online community of practice, we found that online moderators were critical to both the evolution of composers' communities of practice and the cultivation of their sense of community. Rather than moderating the exchange of information or asking questions, the moderator helped to create a community of practice where knowledge was constructed through shared learning.

In our study, the moderator was understood as someone who facilitates learning by exploring issues that are important to the community and by bringing discussions to a deeper level. The moderator was also someone who was able to understand the composers' practice and the likely challenges and opportunities encountered by members. As seen below, participants emphasized the important role of the moderator in ensuring that members' behavior was appropriate (Gray, 2004), particularly within broader networks.

I feel it is a safe place. I mean, there have been times I've been burnt a little bit, but again, if

you've got a good moderator who's not allowing any sexist comments — because there was one interaction that I had with some film composer in the States where he got a little bit out of hand really and was being quite sexist really, and horrible. But that was quickly dealt with. I think it was just noticed. I didn't even need to say anything: it was just noticed and dealt with. (Interviewee 12, Australian, 56 years)

Having that space there, and it's a safe space, I can't really think of any examples of trolling within that group because it's like a closed group; whereas in people's general feeds, they might be hijacked by "Why do you artists expect support anyway? I pay my taxes for infrastructure", or whatever. I think that's why it's so important, because even if you do have face-to-face contact with people, there's not always the space to have that running commentary. (Interviewee 7, Australian, 35 years)

I feel like social media has really created amazing opportunities to create visibility around gender issues, as well as network, follow and work with like-minded people. Despite this, there is that sector of the online community (eg music tech forums) where the attitude towards women is a turn-off, and I just don't even bother to engage, as much fun as the tech talk would be. (Survey respondent 37, Australian, 29 years)

The above comments illustrate that many of the women found the online space a valued networking place that enabled them to meet, follow and hold discussions with like-minded composers. It was also a safe, moderated place to voice opinions and share information.

The importance of trust, particularly within the sceptical online environment, can be seen in the quote below. Trust relates to the second aspect of Wenger *et al.*'s (2002) CoP theory, also emerged as a critical element of each composer's CoP. Trust underpinned both the building of relationships and members' engagement in shared learning, which often involves the disclosure of weaknesses or failures.

It's all about trust. You only participate and visit those websites if you feel you can trust the people, when you feel that this is where you belong and where you can build relationships with other composers that are just like you. (Interviewee 3, Dutch, 51 years)

### *Support, feedback and mentorship in an online environment*

Some participants highlighted lack of support from other female composers and explained that this had hindered their career development and decreased their confidence. The online

space was described as a way to surpass existing networks and look more broadly to find and provide support and feedback.

There's support from each other online. I see when people are sharing my work on their wall on Facebook, a lot more often they are women. So, yeah, there is that sort of help.  
(Interviewee 18, Canadian, 34 years)

Although it was also mentioned that “there is not enough of us to create an active support network” (Respondent 57, Australian, 31 years).

Communities of practice such as the social media groups for female composers were employed to develop members' compositional practice through a variety of activities such as problem solving, seeking experience, requesting information, discussing ideas with others and through observation of more experienced composers. It was a space where women were allowed to learn and make mistakes, something they felt they could not do in “real life”. This was articulated in the following comments, the second of which articulates a common perception that women needed to be above criticism or “perfect” in order to avoid criticism based on gender.

Really good, honest criticism and then good positive suggestions about what you might do differently or what reference you might go to, what you might listen to. Or, “Have a think. Have you thought about doing it this way?” or whatever - [that] has been incredibly useful actually.  
(Interviewee 12, Australian, 56 years)

Men are allowed to make mistakes and learn from them, women have to be perfect from scratch.  
(Survey respondent 18, German, 46 years)

Participants mentioned that the online space provided them with a substitute for “real-life” mentors. Indeed, 70% of the participants in the study mentioned that they had had a mentor for their composition practice and that this sometimes was entirely online. Most composers identified mentors who were teachers, tutors or supervisors, and other composers. The mentors provided support, encouragement, inspiration and guidance to other women, and helped to open up their worlds by making them explore new ideas and try different approaches. Mentors also assisted with the acquisition of new technical knowledge and skills,

helped composers to meet the “right people” to advance their careers, and provided critical feedback.

I have mentorship these days through a Facebook group — so it is not one particular person. But it is possible to ask all manner of questions, and to post scores. The feedback is invaluable as is looking at the help others get. I also have recently joined an orchestration on-line master class. I also occasionally get scores critiqued by a master orchestrator for the purposes of learning more about my craft. (Survey respondent 2, Australian, 56 years)

I think social media can provide women with a support system of people that they can look at: role models, and they say, “Oh, that person is not so different than I am”. (Interviewee 28, American, 49 years)

#### *A different kind of networking: sharing visibility and promotion*

As mentioned earlier, networking has been identified as a significant challenge for female composers. The results of our survey and interviews demonstrate that women find in the online space an opportunity to attain visibility: to get their work out into the public domain without having to rely on perhaps hard-to-access networks. **Here, they refer to broader online promotional activities, but then highlight the synergy between for example youtube, free internet services and CoPs.**

I struggle with networking sometimes, but promoting myself online is different because I’m hidden behind a screen in some senses, so it’s easier to be more forthcoming about what you’re good at. (Interviewee 13, English, 23 years)

I think the world is so different now with the internet, being able to have a worldwide reach. (Interviewee 17, American, 54 years)

Having recordings available. In addition to being able to send them to interested performers, they are on YouTube and have already attracted several unexpected performances in major venues. (Interviewee 9, American, 87 years)

**Internet has been a great help. It’s this mix of youtube, having it all online and facebook groups to give it an extra boost that really helps to get known nowadays (Interviewee 2, Dutch, 75 years)**



The sharing of best practices and the creation of a shared repertoire within an online CoP clearly helped female composers to push against the gendered boundaries and to experience an increased number of possibilities and opportunities. Participants used the online space to circumvent the “old boys” network, and they created their own networks where they could provide opportunities to other female composers. As one participant concluded, “Online social media is a great equalizer” (Interviewee 16, Australian, 54 years).

The organic, spontaneous and informal nature of CoPs makes them fairly resistant to supervision and interference (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). Therefore, even if male composers may perceive such communities as a threat, it is difficult to stop female composers using them to their own advantage. A final feature of the networking dimension concerns the significant number of participants who reported using free internet services to release and sell recordings of their work.

In the late ‘80s, I started going to play at cafés and bars, seeking gigs, and I still to this day can roll in quite a number of gigs per year as an acoustic folk singer-songwriter within a larger network that I have. And it’s partly maintained through Facebook. (Interviewee 16, Australian, 54 years)

Usually, people already know of my work and they want to find out a bit more about the services I provide, and maybe a quote. It all happens online, it all happens by email - both the commissioned stuff and the copying work. (Interviewee 7, Australian, 35 years)

### *Independent learning online*

Both organizations and individual workers show an increasing interest in the potential of online communities of practice to enable individual workers to share knowledge and engage in ongoing workplace learning and professional development (Gray, 2004). The female composers in our study encountered what one Dutch interviewee (aged 37 years) described as “a barrier to learning”, and they recognized the unique value of communities of practice in increasing opportunities to learn. Indeed, participants noted that when interacting face-to-face their questions often remained unanswered, hindering their ability to learn. The women stressed that this practice was in strong contradiction with men, whose mistakes and questions were experienced in a more positive way and which provided opportunities to develop their craft. Some of these comments came from composers working in technology and electronic music, which are highly gendered.

It is very difficult in this genre to ask for help, to actually learn, because men tend to not explain things to you. You are supposed to know everything if you dare as a woman to come to an electronic studio, or you are not taken very seriously. (Survey respondent 20, German, 40 years)

A CoP can be viewed as a social learning system (Wenger, 2010), and peer-to-peer learning is typical of such communities (Gray, 2004). Participants highlighted that online learning helped them to learn independently without having to rely on formal channels of learning or the support of institutions. Again, technology and electronic music came to the fore.

The macho attitude towards knowledge of software is very irritating. The women I've spoken to in my field say that they've mostly learned programs intuitively, or by tinkering. Using these programs as a tool rather than a means to show knowledge is how many of us have learned, and the need to prove this knowledge is aggravating. (Survey respondent 6, Finnish, 26 years)

Working in electronic music, web-based forms and machinima [films made from virtual reality platforms] gives women a way to circumvent the old and young boys' networks and styles of communication. I see a great surge of excellent and creative work by women who are working mostly solo in these areas. (Survey respondent 8, Canadian, 48 years)

CoPs have multiple levels and types of participation, and the interplay between experienced members and newcomers was an important dimension of passing on knowledge as well as facilitating the creation of new knowledge and insights (Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2011). This emerged clearly from the findings, where less established composers relied on more senior colleagues for insights and advice.

I enjoy certain forums and social media as I feel I make a difference there. New, young composers are still learning the ropes and often ask questions that I asked myself, too, when I was younger. Sharing my personal experiences with them maybe helps them to go further and develop themselves, allowing female composers to become more established. (Interviewee 2, Dutch, 75 years)

It is important to acknowledge that CoPs do not **necessarily/only** lead to positive outcomes. For example, some participants reported that it actually increased competition: "the competition is deadly, so I get no support outside of my friendship group" (Survey respondent

27, Australian, 43 years). Others mentioned that “nothing can replace face-to-face interaction and socialization, making the online environment interesting but by no means enough to overcome the structural inequalities” (Interviewee 1, Dutch, 44 years). Finally, conflict and exclusion was reported in the online space too: “I once got blocked, because another woman didn’t like me, I think. I felt rejected and excluded. I thought this was a space for us, where there would be solidarity (Interviewee 4, Dutch, 36 years).

Below, the practical and theoretical implications are discussed and the limitations are outlined. Finally, we provide some suggestions to take this line of inquiry further and enhance our understanding of the usefulness of CoPs in overcoming the challenges women composers encounter.

### *Practical and theoretical implications*

The findings hold some implications for organizations and individual composers. Hennekam and Bennett (2017b) studied common challenges for workers in the creative industries and highlighted the precarious nature of work in these industries. The present study shows how CoPs **can be used as** an individual approach to overcoming perceived **career** barriers. We argue that CoPs can be a helpful tool as learning opportunities, mentorship, support and advice are all positively related to career development.

Wittel (2001) is one of several scholars to argue that female creative workers encounter more difficulties when they attempt to network. While this challenge is well-documented (Christopherson, 2011; Manning and Sydow, 2007), less is known about the ways in which women attempt to overcome such challenges. The first implication is that the online space and, more specifically online communities of practice, can underpin alternative approaches to career development for female composers. These online spaces offer a place for women to develop, learn and extend their careers by participating with like-minded others whilst still maintaining more traditional networks if so desired. Such online communities of practice provide a safe environment in which women can build and maintain their own professional networks, without having to rely on male-dominated networks.

The second implication refers to perceived barriers to learning as a result of which female composers felt their skills development was being denied. Online communities of practice provided women with an alternative platform in which to promote and learn make mistakes and ask questions. As such, the CoP was often used to generate developmental opportunities through mentorship, referral or peer learning. The online space appears to

overcome the discriminatory and exclusionary environments experienced by many female composers in more traditional study and creative workplace situations. Of note, composers described the online environment as a place where mistakes had a lesser impact on confidence and career progression and where there were opportunities to learn in a safe and supportive network.

Yet, from a feminist perspective, how effective at improving women's representation are the segregated online communities of practice? Do they really serve a worthwhile purpose, or do they perpetuate division? Writing about feminist spirituality and gender, Murphy (2014) suggests that feminist, online women-only spaces should not be exclusively the domain of women but that they should embrace the whole spectrum of diversity, including men who are committed to feminist agendas. She also argues that the binary concept of gender "that underlies women-only spaces creates a difficult choice for those people whose gender identity does not fit into one of two categories" (p. 39). For Murphy, "all-genders" spaces would solve this problem.

Related to this issue, the concept of a "woman-only" space also implies the dichotomy between male and female in which the term "male" is valorised and that of "female" is devalued. As Grosz (1989) writes, "dichotomies are inherently non-reversible, non-reciprocal hierarchies, and thus describe systems of domination" (p. xvi). Women-only online communities of practice could thus end up being sidelined by those spaces in which important decisions about the broadcasting, commissioning and performance of music are made. While online communities of practice are valuable for female composers and other groups of practitioners who are geographically dispersed or otherwise isolated, Wenger (2011, p. 48) stresses "the danger of a pure web-based presence for a community is its timelessness. It is always possible to participate, but by the same token, there is never a special occasion to participate". We contend that these online communities of practice should be supplemented by other opportunities to learn, connect and share best practices, preferably in a blended (online and offline) format. This implication extends to arts organizations and to higher education providers, who could encourage students to participate in communities of practice during their studies and could facilitate access to learning opportunities for graduates.

While online communities of practice provide a range of advantages, they are not without shortcomings. Wenger (2011) and Wenger *et al.* (2002), for example, have articulated distinct challenges related to a CoP's visibility and presence, size, affiliation, priorities, and cultural differences. In order to reap the benefits of online communities of practice, members need to take into account and deal with social, cultural and, in some cases, organizational

issues that may result (Wenger, 2011). Unfortunately, the present study was unable to examine differences between open versus closed CoPs, moderated versus unmoderated ones and differences in number of memberships and posts per months for example.

We also make a theoretical contribution. Previous research has shown the value of CoPs in the creative industries, especially in project-work (Bettioli and Sedita, 2011). Moreover, research has stressed to include the role of power and (in)equality when studying CoPs (Fox, 2000) and it has been argued that creative worker's power and legitimacy can grow as a result of getting their work known and being well-regarded by their peers (McLeod *et al.*, 2011). Building on this work, we show how women can overcome challenges in terms of their career development (Bond and Lockee, 2018).

#### *Limitations and suggestions for future research*

This study used a mixed-methods approach to obtain a deeper understanding of the ways in which female composers navigate their careers. Every study has limitations and we outline these below.

Firstly, the use of a convenience sample implies that the sample is not representative. While participating composers came from many different countries, certain parts of the world such as Africa and South America are absent or strongly under-represented. We do not claim that our findings can be generalized; rather, the results provide interesting building blocks and merit further investigation in the future.

Secondly, the sample consisted of only female composers in Western Art music, and most of them created acoustic music. It is important to acknowledge the difficulties faced by other groups, such as LGBTQIA+ minorities. Including other minorities is, therefore, an important avenue for future research as well as the intersection of multiple disadvantaged social groups. Indeed, some of the challenges and use of CoPs employed to overcome them might also hold true for other minority groups. Similarly, extending our study to female creative workers in other sub-sectors would help our understanding of the usefulness of the online space in overcoming gendered challenges.

In addition, the use of CoPs was brought up spontaneously by the participants. As a consequence, the participants who mentioned this mainly reported positive experiences. However, we cannot conclude that CoPs also bring challenges, such as conflict. Similarly, some CoPs are likely to be more useful than others and it might be more beneficial for some women but not for others. Future research should explore for whom and under which conditions CoPs are useful **for career development**.

Finally, it would be interesting to discover whether the safety experienced in the online environment translated into learning and career opportunities that are equally significant as those discovered in other environments. The study revealed information about the ways in which women work online, but much less about the real impact of this in the longer term. This would be an interesting dimension for further study.

### **Concluding comments**

The article highlights the importance of online CoPs as a means by which female composers circumvent male-dominated spaces. They were perceived as unique opportunities to connect with other women in the field, to find support, feedback and mentorship, and to engage in shared learning. The findings expose an alternative space for career development amongst female creative workers and provide information that might be used to circumvent some of the enduring challenges within creative industries.

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Table 1: Demographics

	Survey sample	Interview sample (% and count)
Country	Europe 27%	Europe 51.9% (14)
	North America 31%	North America 22.2% (6)
	Oceania 27%	Oceania 25.9% (7)
	Africa, Asia and South America 3%	
	Not specified 18%	