

Psychic disjunctures in Denmark: Danish female musicians' anxieties as a labour of believability

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Abstract

A recent survey (n=986) by this research team as part of a project entitled 'When Music Speaks' found that female, career-oriented musicians in Denmark were an at-risk group for clinically significant anxiety. This article draws on semi-structured interviews with eight female respondents to this survey to explore potential psychosocial causes. We undertake thematic analysis within a theoretical architecture of 'believability', and in doing so acknowledge the need to believe something which, in the economy of believability, may appear *unbelievable*: high rates of anxiety among female musicians in a country famed for high levels of subjective wellbeing and apparent gender equality. As a possible explanation, we highlight *psychic disjunctures* experienced by interviewees; disjunctures between an imaginary of Denmark rooted in egalitarian social democracy committed publicly to principles of innovation, gender equality and social cohesion, contrasted with the anxious lived experience of the women we spoke to (which they wanted others to believe), being one of musical conservatism, restrictive cultural norms and loneliness. This article contributes towards sociologically-oriented and theoretically-underpinned literature into musicians' mental health, global scholarship on the occupational psychosocial lives of female musicians, and cultural, political and anthropological work on Danish society.

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Introduction

Studies have highlighted the prevalence of mental health conditions among musicians compared to the general public. Data from the United States reveals ‘Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports and Media’ workers (which includes musicians) had the highest female rate of occupational suicide in 2012, 2015 and 2021, and in the United Kingdom suicide incidences are 69 percent higher among women musicians, actors and entertainers relative to women in the general population (Musgrave and Lamis, 2025). Women musicians are also at particular risk for anxiety (Kenny et al., 2012; Vaag et al., 2016). A recent survey of Danish musicians (n = 986) found women who adopted a career-orientation towards music-making were particularly at risk for clinically significant anxiety compared to those who made music for other reasons (e.g. leisure or a hobby), suggesting the occupation itself might engender vulnerabilities (Musgrave et al., 2025) (see also Loveday et al., 2023).

Studies centralising musicians’ working lives highlight occupational stressors which might, at least partly, explain data such as these. Research on gender inequalities in the music industry has revealed a heteronormative, male-dominated occupational landscape typified by bullying and sexual violence (Jones and Manoussaki, 2022), sexist attitudes within spaces of technical music production (Smith et al., 2024; Wolfe, 2019), and challenges faced by women accessing spaces of power (Smith et al., 2025). In Denmark, Ringsager and Wallevik (2024) elucidate the affective disorientation experienced by women and non-binary musicians within a heavily male-dominated Danish music industry. Adopting an infrastructural perspective, they reveal women in Danish music grappling with gendered, conservative and patriarchal ‘unwritten rules’ engendering isolation, loneliness and invisibility. Holst et al. (2012) likewise found female Danish orchestral musicians (n = 441) had higher levels of occupational stress than male orchestra members. Taken alongside research into ‘subtle’ forms of sexism in the creative industries (e.g. Gill, 2014), these findings reveal possible psychosocial explanations for anxiety in this population, and our research herein should be understood as situated within, and responding to, this scholarship.

Informed by sociological perspectives on anxiety (e.g. Davies, 2025) which complement and interrogate psychological/psychiatric epistemologies, this qualitative study analyses semi-structured interviews with eight female musicians living and working in Denmark who had responded to our earlier survey as part of the ‘When Music Speaks’ project. We explore how they emotionally experience building their artistic careers and interpret interviewees’ insights within the theoretical concept of *believability* (Banet-Weiser and Higgins, 2023), examining how characteristics of Danish society, typified by paradoxes, offers an insightful lens through which to understand how working as a musician in Denmark emotionally impacts this workforce. Our findings reveal contradictions between rhetoric and reality – between how Danish society (re)presents itself and how it is psychically inhabited. We theorise the socio-political granularity of what we call *psychic disjunctures*: incongruities between an ‘imaginary of Denmark’ (Andersen et al.,

1997) rooted in egalitarian social democracy committed publicly to principles of innovation, gender equality, and cohesion, contrasted with the anxious lived experience of the women we spoke to (which they wanted others to believe) being one of musical conservatism, restrictive cultural norms and loneliness.

This article contributes towards three areas of scholarship. First, research into the incidence and causes of mental ill-health among musicians, notably sociologically-oriented, theoretically-underpinned literature (e.g. Gross and Musgrave, 2020; Musgrave, 2023; Musgrave et al., 2024; Scharff, 2016; Vachet, 2024). Second, scholarship interrogating the occupational lives of female musicians (e.g. Berkers et al., 2019; Gross, 2022; Strong and Raine, 2019), notably those from Denmark (Sarlvit et al., 2022; Sarlvit-Danielsen, 2020) and Scandinavia (Onsrud et al., 2021). Finally, we contribute towards cultural, political and anthropological work on Danish and Scandinavian society which has likewise explored paradoxes in this region (e.g. Jenkins, 2012; Kantola, 2021; Stainforth, 2009).

Research context

The labour of believability

In the UK Parliament Women and Equalities Committee's (2024) 'Misogyny in Music' report, a well-documented challenge facing women was their struggle to speak out about their working lives, for example reporting abuse, and that 'victims who report behaviour struggle to be *believed*' (p.4, emphasis added). Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) conceptualise 'believability' as a resource unevenly distributed throughout society, not unlike Bourdieusian capital, which is therefore both relational and provisional, existing within an economy of believability. They suggest 'post truth' narratives alongside the #MeToo movement in wider society – and seen likewise in the music industry (Baker et al., 2019) – has informed new debates about sexual violence against women and endemic misogyny. Using celebrity legal case-studies, starting with (Johnny) *Depp v. (Amber) Heard*, they illustrate how opposing narratives, for example, visibility and a subsequent misogynistic pushback, play out not only in court but across global social media such that 'truthful speech is not something women do, but rather, something women earn. Believability is a commodity to be worked for' (p.29): this is the *labour* of believability. An economy of believability gives currency to hegemonic structures which plays out across all domains of women's lives. Indeed, the music industry – typified as it is by sexual harassment and abuse (McCarry et al., 2023) – is no different (see Hill et al., 2025). The work women must do to be believed is more complex because women are, in the first instance, subjects who are doubted (Crenshaw, 1992). This is key vis-à-vis women working in public-facing positions such as the media industries. The intersections of #MeToo and social media increases the visibility of musicians, actresses and celebrities (i.e. self-promotional labour; Duffy and Pooley, 2019) engendering vulnerability to sexual abuse and other forms of discrimination, shifting the power balance in the economy of believability.

In interrogating anxiety, Davies (2025: 7) notes the role of 'the "sociological imagination" in helping to interpret how and why distress manifests as it does, [and] where and

when it does'. We conceptually begin from the premise that the anxieties revealed in our earlier survey data, which we qualitatively interrogate herein, should be analysed within a theoretical architecture which acknowledges the need to believe something which, in the economy of believability, may appear *unbelievable*: high rates of anxiety among female musicians¹ in a country famed for high levels of subjective wellbeing and apparent gender equality – Denmark.

Danish paradoxes

On the one hand, Denmark is ranked as the second 'happiest country in the world' (Helliwell et al., 2023), and the Scandinavian region is presented as embodying values such as co-operation, consensus, solidarity, democracy, freedom, social cohesion and gender equality (Cassinger et al., 2020). Denmark is a country 'nationally and internationally heralded . . . for its "state feminism" expressed through institutionalized gender equality' (Leine et al., 2020), for example, generous maternity leave, heavily subsidised childcare, and high levels of female labour market participation. On the other hand, this reputation arguably masks a bleaker picture of wellbeing in the region (Andreasson and Birkjær, 2018).

Features of Danish society have been highlighted for their impact on women, notably 'The Nordic Paradox' (Gracia and Merlo, 2016) whereby Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) towards women is endemic in a region famed for gender-progressive politics. While this paradox has been much debated (Permanyer and Gomez-Casillas, 2020), Leine et al. (2020) cite the European Agency for Fundamental Human Rights which ranked Denmark as the country with the highest level of male physical violence, sexual assault, harassment and stalking of women (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 2014). Kantola (2021: 212) outlines other gender paradoxes impacting the Nordic region (including Denmark), for example, 'gender-segregated labour markets, gender pay gaps, and masculine domination in politics'. Further Danish paradoxes include 'the contradiction between the imagery of Danish society as almost uniquely pacific, civil, tolerant and inclusive, with the remarkable recent success of xenophobic discourses and parties' (Stainforth, 2009: 84–85). Likewise, Jenkins' (2012) ethnographic work presents Danish identity as being typified by the negotiation of (socio-cultural) paradoxes, particularly the idea of Danish unity in a country rich in diverse understandings of *local* Danishness.

We might think of these paradoxes, drawing on terminology provided by Jarvis (2012), as *disjunctures*: incongruities between how a society is thought of and represented and how it is experienced by specific groups from within. In the context of such apparent psychic disjunctures in Denmark we suggest believability is key as an analytical prism to understand the affective experiences of Danish female musicians inhabiting these incongruities. Believability has, to date, primarily been developed and articulated in relation to sexual violence; herein, we extend this to encompass other forms of gendered discrimination experienced by women, and which speak to the ways that power under neoliberalism operates psychically. Our approach chimes with Ehrstein et al. (2020) in interrogating 'neoliberalism not just as a political or economic phenomenon, but as embedded in everyday living, in our subjectivity and our feelings'. We therefore

also situate the aims and ambitions of this article within literature which interrogates the affective life of neoliberalism, particularly for women (e.g. Favaro, 2017; Kanai, 2019) – and more specifically women musicians as emblems of ‘entrepreneurial subjectivity’ (Scharff, 2016) i.e. work which explores how the quotidian impacts of neoliberal governance (Littler, 2018) are emotionally experienced. Thus, our questions are: what are the emotional experiences of female musicians living and working in Denmark today, and how can we use the frameworks provided by (a) the economy of believability, rooted in (b) analytically exploring socio-political disjunctures and their gendered impacts, to (c) better make sense of their affective lived experiences and the observably high levels of anxiety among this population?

Method

Our earlier survey (n = 986) of Danish musicians revealed that gender significantly predicted higher levels of anxiety and depression (measured using the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale, HADS), and lower levels of wellbeing (measured using Cantril’s self-anchoring scale) (Musgrave et al., 2025). Female musicians under forty who viewed music-making as their main career were the most at risk for clinically significant anxiety compared to all other groups. In response, this article draws on semi-structured interviews with eight female survey respondents selected in order to represent a range of musical genres, ages, HADS-A anxiety scores, HADS-D depression scores and subjective wellbeing scores, all living and working as musicians in Denmark.

Survey respondents who answered ‘No’ to the question ‘Do you consider music to be your main career’ were excluded (given the impact of answering ‘Yes’ to this question on wellbeing outcomes), as were those who answered ‘Yes’ to the question ‘Are you currently undergoing any form of medical treatment for a mental health condition (e.g. medication, hospitalisation)’ for ethical reasons. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Westminster on March 28th, 2023 (ETH2223-1337). Five interviews were undertaken in English in Copenhagen in August 2023, and three took place online in August and September 2023. Our areas of focus were: how music creators psychologically experienced building their careers, the challenges they faced in terms of their mental health, and their desires for mental health support. This article represents analysis of the female-identifying interviewees drawn from a wider body of interviews undertaken for this project which encompassed seventeen interviews in total: eight female musicians, eight males, and one who identified as gender non-binary. We have been able to therefore isolate gender-specific experiences owing to this wider qualitative data set.

As seen in Table 1 below, seven of the eight interviewees scored abnormal for levels of anxiety when screened using HADS, reflecting the prevalence of anxiety among the wider survey population of musicians from which they were drawn. As such, the starting point for interviews was an acknowledgement that these musicians are anxious, and we wanted to try and examine possible explanations through a sociological lens wherein we epistemologically conceptualised anxiety in social constructionist terms as per Davies (2025: 4) as encompassing ‘a range of subjective, ethical and affective experiences’, and as ‘located in society and institutions (as opposed to individuals)’.

Table 1. Interviewees.

Participant Number	Gender	Age	HADS-A	HADS-D	Cantril Wellbeing	Genre
1	Female	>50	Moderate	Moderate	Struggling	Film music; Indie rock
2	Female	25–29	Mild	Normal	Thriving	Ambient; Improvised music; Indie; Jazz; Classical; Pop
3	Female	41–50	Mild	Normal	Thriving	Electronica; Indie; Pop
4	Female	30–35	Moderate	Normal	Thriving	Electronica; Pop
5	Female	36–40	Normal	Normal	Struggling	Rock
6	Female	30–35	Moderate	Normal	Struggling	Funk; Jazz; Pop; R&B; Soul
7	Female	30–35	Moderate	Mild	Struggling	Ambient; Film music; Folk; Improvised music; Indie; Pop; Rock; Soul; Other
8	Female	25–29	Mild	Normal	Struggling	Hip Hop & Rap; Pop; R&B; Soul

In order to do this, interviews were analysed via deductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This was theoretically guided by our dual framework of ‘believability’ and ‘disjunctures’; deductively examining instances where interviewees expressed socio-political incongruities and their affective impacts, and believing them. At a more granular level of analysis, our coding approach sought to identify expressions which suggested anxiety. Following Wetherell’s (2012) theory of affective practices, we conceptualise anxiety not as a discrete, singular emotion but as a patterned constellation of embodied, relational and discursive states that may, at least in part, materialise in various expressions of feeling and clusters of affective states such as frustration, exhaustion, sadness, irritability and emotional overwhelm. This approach is consistent with empirical qualitative studies revealing that individuals experiencing anxiety rarely describe it solely through explicit labels such as ‘I feel anxious’ but instead articulate it discursively through, for example, metaphors of pressure, compressed space, heaviness and entrapment, or through related emotional states such as frustration, fatigue or sadness (Talbot et al., 2023; Woodgate et al., 2021). Recent feminist work by Timler (2023) demonstrates that anxiety in women in precarious or high-pressure conditions – as per the music industry – often manifests through affective chains in which fear, frustration, exhaustion and sadness form linked repertoires, whereby anxiety is understood as a sequence, not a single feeling named as such. Based on this literature, we coded negative emotions expressed by interviewees as potential manifestations of anxiety within a broader affective repertoire shaped by gendered labour conditions in the music sector. It is important to acknowledge the limitations and complexities of our methodological approach which should not be understood as reducing or subsuming all negative emotional experiences to one diagnostic label, but as understanding anxiety as complex, multifaceted, and, from our theoretical position, structurally determined (at least in part). Thus, our conclusions

should be understood as both tentative and interpretive. Finally, our analysis draws on not only what was said, but *how* it was communicated – the verbal and non-verbal ways in which interviewees expressed themselves – analysing in a broad, holistic manner to better understand the deeper motivations, feelings and frustrations they were so powerfully expressing.

Interviews were undertaken by a collaborative research team of one woman, one man and two female translators. The interviews were thus conducted as largely women-led sessions and at times appeared to operate in a quasi-cathartic manner. There were moments of emotional overwhelm as interviewees recounted their experiences. It seemed apparent that this setting allowed the women to be open in the presence of another woman who they felt understood (and had lived in) their world having worked in the music industry for over thirty years. Central to our methodological approach was the role of *listening* deeply and carefully (Back, 2007). As per Lavee and Itzchakov (2021), listening as a core qualitative dimension has been under-examined despite its importance in facilitating ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973). The centrality of attentiveness methodologically chimes with our analytical interest in ‘believability’, in that effective listening is understood as being based on validation (Kim and Kim, 2013), that is, ‘conveying acceptance of the speakers’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviour’ (Lavee and Itzchakov (2021: 622). On the one hand, our sample size is modest. However, Hennink and Kaiser (2022) suggest saturation point for qualitative research generally occurs between nine and seventeen interviews, particularly where study populations are relatively homogeneous and objectives narrowly defined. Our alertness to validation through deep listening, alongside our sample being drawn from a pre-defined survey population with relatively narrow objectives, are important reasons that saturation was reached by the eighth interview.

Findings

Interviewees included students in conservatoires, young up-and-coming acts struggling to get by, long-established musicians well-known within their subcultural niche, and nationally/internationally renowned music creators. Three dominant themes emerged in our analysis, each relating to different spheres of activity in their artistic lives rooted in what we refer to as *psychic disjunctures* which acted as sources of anxiety: ‘innovation vs conservatism’, ‘entrepreneurialism vs modesty’ and ‘cohesion vs loneliness’.

Disjuncture 1: innovation versus conservatism

Denmark is a very small country. And so it kind of feels like there’s not that much room for a broad spectrum. (P7)

The first psychic disjuncture concerned the affective experience of inhabiting a society which publicly espouses virtues of innovation, but which appeared, interviewees felt, to counterintuitively engender artistic conservatism whereby, as per Woodgate et al. (2021), we interpret these feelings of restriction as sources of anxiety. The Danish national website under ‘Innovation and Design’ reads, proudly: ‘From the time they are

children, Danes are told to question conventional wisdom – and encouraged to come up with something better. That makes innovation and entrepreneurship a natural part of the Danish DNA' (Denmark.DK, n.d.b). Likewise, Denmark topped the recent 'European Innovation Scoreboard' (European Commission, 2024), which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Denmark (n.d.) heralded as 'underscor[ing] Denmark's commitment to fostering innovation and creativity across various sectors'. Indeed, 'The Danish Model' has been described as a tripartite focus on '*innovation*, growth and social cohesion' (Lundvall, 2002, emphasis added).

However, the experiences of the female musicians we spoke to were often not that of innovativeness; on the contrary, it was a disjuncture with this public sentiment. Their experiences were, more often, feelings of artistic limitations and creative restrictions. The small size of Denmark meant – our interviewees thought – the Danish music industry lacked the audiences and investment to support small, niche and diverse musical scenes. Interviewees articulated a political economy of the Danish music industry wherein the size of the country homogenised musical production such that Danish artistic output was often tailored towards a safe, middle-ground audience where greater returns could (theoretically) be secured. One interviewee captured this as deep frustration: 'The problem in Denmark is you need to go into like the middle – the mainstream middle – because otherwise you're not going to be able to survive'; a middle-ground which was 'over-populated, not interesting, and not representing society' (P1). This perception of a narrow cultural landscape with little space for experimentation, appeared entirely at odds with public declarations about Denmark, and was echoed by many interviewees:

The industry is so small in Denmark that when it comes to whatever 'the business' or 'the industry' would like to focus on, it has to be very easy to sell . . . [This] influences how I guess a lot of musician's work: if the dream is to have a breakthrough, you also have to kind of sound in a specific way. (P7)

Six interviewees referred to the importance of radio, that is, the central role they felt it played in breaking, establishing and solidifying their career (see Have et al., 2018 for more), but also their perception of the powerful broadcasters as exclusionary and risk averse. Danish radio is highly concentrated and is 'to a large extent, dominated by DR [the national broadcaster] channels', scoring highly on the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (a measure of marketplace concentration) (Henten et al., 2024: 10). Data from the Collection Management Organisations in Scandinavia recently revealed that radio continues to be the primary method of new music discovery in Denmark: 30 percent of Danish listeners first hear music on the radio, compared to 25 percent in Finland, 19 percent in Norway and 18 percent Sweden (Living Consumer Intelligence, 2024: 10). Within this landscape there was a feeling (fairly or not) among interviewees that musicians had to conform to the conservative expectations of dominant players, and that they were therefore trapped:

There's a glass ceiling . . . In Denmark . . . [when] you're not in the mainstream, you stay on the left of the field. (P3)

While this perceived artistic narrowing impacts both men and women working in Denmark, it had specific impacts on women rooted in what we might think of as an anxious perception of ‘narrowing’. The first narrowing concerned ageism. While ageism is experienced by women working in music around the world (Gardner, 2019), for Danish musicians, reliant as they are on a small number of powerful broadcasters, this meant that women who were further along in their career, but not on the top of the charts or included in existing playlists on the radio and/or on the live circuit, felt themselves to be passed over in favour of ‘new’ – which is code for ‘younger’ – talent. This focus on new artists meant older interviewees felt they disappeared from the airwaves. As one told us, with a tone of notable frustration and even exhaustion: ‘They wouldn’t play my music on the radio, and it was absolutely because of the material, because it was, like, a grown woman putting out music, and there was not a space for that . . . We don’t see females in music above the age of like 34, or even 27’ (P1). This manifested for some interviewees as clear anxiousness around the narrowing of time, whereby interviewees felt they had a restrictive window of possibilities both in terms of the music they could make, and the time they had to ‘make it’. The final form of gendered narrowing concerned interviewees’ appearance. As one interviewee told us, in a tone of both exasperation and anger: ‘If you’re a woman, you have to look a certain way. You have to *be* a certain way . . . I’m 41 now. You have to look 20 all your life!’ (P5). This final feature of female musicians’ lives is not unique to Denmark, certainly, but taken together interviewees did not experience a creative, innovative Denmark, but a restrictive, narrow Denmark, within which they were understandably anxious about what building an artistic career could be in such a small territory, with perceived narrow possibilities.

Disjuncture 2: entrepreneurialism versus modesty

In Denmark you cannot speak as if you’re great . . . [and] you have to talk yourself down. So how can you sell yourself? (P2)

The second anxiety-inducing psychic disjuncture concerned a paradox in inhabiting the entrepreneurial, self-promotional music business within the culture of Danish society. Musicians have long been understood as entrepreneurial agents (e.g. Coulson, 2012) even when many contest such terminology (Haynes and Marshall, 2017). Interviewees behaved, on the one hand, as model music entrepreneurs engaged in self-promotion, brand-building and career-development. Interviewees regularly referred to themselves passionately as ‘strong’, emblematic of neoliberal ‘confidence culture’ (Gill and Orgad, 2022). At the same time, they expressed confusion and disappointment at this economically reductionist position which left them overwhelmed and exhausted. Participant 3 referred to them entrepreneurially establishing their own record label as ‘the house they built’; they discussed this in a determined voice. Even when they were upset at the challenges they faced, their desire to be autonomous and seen as self-reliant was palpable. Four of the eight interviewees had used music industry coaches to manage the challenge of ‘always working in an environment where actually people are relying on you and at the same time you’re carrying so much’ (P3). This often came with huge emotional burdens. Participant 6 told us: ‘I have done everything all by myself and it has been

exhausting . . . I'm just exhausted'. She started the interview sounding confident, but as she talked about what she had been doing and what she wanted to do, she sounded more and more frustrated, outlining the impact of anxiety on her body which had led to her passing out at times. She had recently turned 30 and felt she just wanted to be acknowledged: 'It feels like screaming underwater sometimes, like: hello? Is anybody there? Is anybody listening to me?' (P6). This suffocating image, and its interpretation by us as anxiety, aligns with Woodgate et al.'s (2021: 6) work on the lived experience of anxiety which was communicated in metaphors wherein 'different participants described their experiences of living with anxiety as being similar to "drowning"'.

These emotional weights of musical entrepreneurship are shared by musicians globally (Gross and Musgrave, 2020). However, the particularly *Danish* psychic disjuncture experienced by interviewees was: what does a winner-takes-all entrepreneurship economy – like music – look like in a country known as possessing The Law of Jante (or Janteloven); a "code of modesty" (Cappelen and Dahlberg, 2018) rooted in egalitarianism and a disavowal of pronouncements of personal success and individualism? Janteloven, emanating from the ten laws² in the fictional Danish town of Jante in a novel of 1933 (*En Flyktning Krysser Sitt Spor [A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks]*), is today used throughout Scandinavia as "a sociological term that is used to describe an aversion to individual-minded behaviour" (Ahlness, 2014: 548). For Başak (2021) this manifests in "suspicion against successful individuals in the society" (p. 161). Janteloven is associated with many positive traits, for example, interestingly for Başak, "gender equality" (p. 166), but conversely has been suggested to be "harmful for innovation and creativity" (p. 168), a barrier to Danish entrepreneurship (Klyver and Bager, 2012), and undermining cultural diversity (Avant and Knutsen, 1993). The Danish National Report of the *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor* (Hancock and Bager, 2001: 21) suggested that Janteloven acted to "suppress entrepreneurial motivation".

These potentially negative impacts of Janteloven were felt by interviewees who suggested this culture meant women in Denmark were 'afraid to be themselves . . . and cannot dream big' (P5). She further explained, in a tone of clear frustration at the way her choices had not been supported in Danish society, and resentment at the judgement of others (with resentment being empirically a predictor of anxiety; Aggar et al., 2011): 'People are actually afraid in Denmark of being themselves . . . You have to wear the same clothes. You have to live in similar houses. You have to have three kids, you know. Everything is just so in boxes . . . You have to be a certain way to be accepted in this community and this society' (P5). This inevitably changes how musicians assess their own abilities, and encourages anxious self-doubt: how can you convince others to *pay* you for your work, if you feel you cannot champion yourself? Interviewees felt under pressure to conform to social norms, which several described as Danish conservatism. They spoke of how this culture conflicted with the social media and music business demand for self-promotion and self-aggrandisement. When Participant 3 explained their challenges with having to sell themselves to promoters, they found it hard to speak: 'I actually stopped booking shows because I think it's the . . . Yeah . . . I think it's a . . . I think it's really uncomfortable to get into, you know? Like, to book a show into a venue and then kind of sell yourself'. Scharff (2015) has suggested female classical musicians are less comfortable with the demands of self-promotion than men, and in Denmark it

seems this uncomfortableness was exacerbated due to the specific socio-cultural landscape, engendering anxiousness.

Disjuncture 3: cohesion versus loneliness

The model of Denmark should be the model for the world . . . but I'm very alarmed by the state of the Danish music industry. (P1)

The final psychic disjuncture concerned an incongruity between the society promised by Scandinavian social democracy – fair, collective, and rooted in ‘social cohesion’ (Lundvall, 2002) – and the reality of musical labour for women – unequal, individual and experienced as lonely. Interviewees outlined how it felt to emotionally inhabit the paradox of Danish society espousing tenets of equality and togetherness, and their lived experience being one of inequality and isolation; to acknowledge a degree of Danish privilege, but operating within a cultural economy in which they felt systematically disadvantaged, and the challenges of communicating that disadvantage (and having it *believed*) in a society which insisted they were privileged.

The European Institute for Gender Equality (2024) ranks Denmark as second place in the European Union (EU) on its ‘Gender Equality Index’, a place it has occupied since 2010, with one of the smallest gender pay gaps and gender gaps in employment in the EU. The Gender Inequality Index published by the United Nations ranks Denmark as 10th in the world (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2020). The Danish national website under ‘Gender and Equality’ proudly states: ‘gender equality is a cornerstone of the Danish welfare state’ (Denmark.DK, n.d.a). Interviewees understood that in Denmark things are often much better than in other developed parts of the world, and indeed felt that Denmark ought to be better, and was perfectly placed to *be better*. As one interviewee phrased this; Denmark has ‘all the luxury’ and ‘should be the best of the best’ as they ‘have everything in place’ in terms of music industry infrastructure, and this made the challenges interviewees faced all the more difficult (P1). This paradox was experienced as acknowledging participants’ privilege as Danes (see Lapiņa, 2023), and that the music industry in Denmark had a normative injunction to be the best, but the impossible and almost *unbelievable* reality, that it doesn’t *feel* like the best.

I’m a woman. And that’s a big problem actually, in Denmark . . . In Denmark, you’ve got to fight if you’re a woman. (P5)

Six of the eight interviewees felt they had to negotiate these challenges alone, thus expressing their paradoxical sense of loneliness in a society of solidarity, chiming with other work on Danish female musicians (Marstal, 2023; Ringsager and Wallevik, 2024). We interpret interviewees’ use of the term ‘loneliness’ specifically, that is, not lacking social contact, but having to share the singular burden of producing musical work meaning that they alone assume this responsibility and must shoulder it, for example: ‘Loneliness . . . Having to do everything yourself . . . I think I sent, like, twenty emails trying to sell my music, and I just felt completely empty by the end of the day, because it was this constant, like, trying to convince someone that you’re great’ (P2). This

expression of loneliness (which is empirically a strong predictor of anxiety; Heinrich and Gullone, 2006) potentially reflects something specific about Denmark and, perhaps, the characteristics of Scandinavian social democratic welfare (Swank, 2000) i.e. that wider society *should* care, and that there *should* be systems of social support to not render individuals so isolated. There was an expectation that their lives as musicians *should* be better, particularly in a society of social welfare like Denmark, and indeed the most requested form of mental health intervention mentioned by seven of the eight interviewees was greater support and recognition from the Danish government.

Discussion

What does it mean to fear that what you say, or what you have experienced, won't be believed? What does it take for the anxieties our interviewees expressed, rooted in subtle yet profoundly impactful psychic disjunctures, to be believed? What we heard in our interviews was that these women were *not* believed; indeed, anecdotally we were both struck during our time in Denmark by the often ferocious pushback against new gender-based initiatives in the Danish music industry by men on social media platforms who appeared to reject ideas of gendered discrimination in Denmark. As Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023: 5) acknowledge, the digitally-mediated economy of believability necessitates both “believable” evidence and the performance of “believable” subjecthood: what evidence is deemed ‘admissible’ in Danish society where the all-consuming anxieties of women musicians – their experiential knowledge – is rejected, and where feeling privileged can act as a silencing mechanism?

The production of music and the status of musicians as artists relies on constant mediation where intersecting power hierarchies are gendered, and women as subjects (and their songs as objects) are sifted through an economy of believability. Yet, in our interviews, finally, they could let their guard down and be believed, i.e. that this Danish ‘utopia’ (Whitmere, 2022) of social solidarity, ‘state feminism’ (Leine et al., 2020) and apparent gender equality (Cassinger et al., 2020), could be experienced as one of systematic exclusion, inequality, and loneliness. As other researchers have shown, Danish women (and Scandinavian women more broadly) must psychically and emotionally inhabit societal contradictions and paradoxes – notably the political messaging of gender equality existing within a society with high levels of intimate partner violence (Gracia and Merlo, 2016; Humbert et al., 2021; Kantola, 2021) – and the creative industries too are spaces where sexism occurs in a domain of purported egalitarianism (Bennett, 2018; Gill, 2014); our research reveals the affective experiences of these psychic disjunctures for Danish female musicians, and their ultimate manifestations in anxiety.

For Scharff (2016: 115), the entrepreneurial subjectivity of female musicians was conceptualised as depoliticising, whereby ‘patterns of discrimination often remain unspeakable so as not to puncture neoliberal mythologies of individual achievement’. However, in our research, interviewees were aware and clearly able to call out structural inequalities; they spoke of this as a tension they lived with – as unfair, problematic, but not a surprise. As per other studies of Danish female musicians (Marstal, 2023; Ringsager and Wallevik, 2024; Sarlvit-Danielsen, 2020; Sarlvit et al., 2022) they were aware of the inequalities within the sector and attuned to their emotional states. The knowing, in some

ways, however, made it worse; it feeds their hope and aspirations which are embattled and forces them to confront the impossibility of this inequity. It is – to draw on the language of Dean (2009) – the *fantasy* of equality, which is a source of anxiety.

These women's anxieties, rooted at least in part in the psychic disjunctures revealed herein, contain within them feelings of loss and disappointment; the thing they thought would be realised in Denmark (if nowhere else), that is, gender equality, increasingly seemed further away. They voiced frustration and sadness at their seeming inability to realise this socially democratic 'good life' that Denmark is renowned for, which young adults in Denmark have likewise suggested exists 'in theory' but not in practice (Andersen et al., 2021). Indeed, initiatives dedicated towards advancing gender equality in the creative industries over the previous fifty years have, suggests Edmond (2023: 428), been 'enduring and durable . . . [A] sense of movement without progress'. The frustration for our interviewees was that perhaps Denmark – this country famed for innovation (Lundvall, 2002), gender equality (Başak, 2021: 166; UNDP, 2020), and social solidarity (Christiansen and Petersen, 2001) – might be different. The exhausting, unbelievable reality, was that this Promised Land for musicians (as per Whitmere, 2022) was *not* different. Instead, we see playing out in these musician's lives the paradoxes of Danish society seen by other scholars in this region (Jenkins, 2012; Kantola, 2021: 212; Stainforth, 2009: 84–85), and which might, at least partially, explain the high levels of anxiety among these musicians.

Conclusion

This article has adopted a sociological prism of analysis to qualitatively explore why Danish, female, career-oriented survey respondents manifested higher rates of anxiety than all other musician respondent groups in earlier research (Musgrave et al., 2025). As such, our two studies as part of the 'When Music Speaks' project – one quantitative, which captured anxiety using a screening tool and a psychological/psychiatric epistemology to understand prevalence, and this second qualitative study which explored affective repertoires to try and infer possible structural determinants of anxiety using a sociological/constructivist epistemology – should be understood as complimentary, co-existing research papers which, taken together, offer a rich, interdisciplinary picture of contemporary anxiety in the Danish music industry. The three psychic disjunctures revealed via thematic analysis – (1) living in a country espousing creative innovation but experiencing it as musical conservatism, (2) needing to behave entrepreneurially in a country which culturally rejects individualism and (3) a national rhetoric of solidarity being psychologically inhabited as loneliness – highlight the psychosocial, affective consequences of inhabiting such contradictions, and the anxious frustration of wanting to be believed. We wanted simply to listen to them, and believe them when they spoke. In doing so, we offer a perspective on anxiety beyond clinical prescriptions which instead situates these feelings within a socio-political economy of anxiousness.

It is important to acknowledge that our analysis is highly interpretive and does not claim to offer a clinical prescription for interviewees' anxieties. Likewise, this analysis represents one possible facet of anxiety which, in the broader sense, is likely driven by complex biological, psychological and social factors (Engel, 1980). Half of our

interviewees scored ‘clinically significant’ (Hansson et al., 2009: 284) for anxiety as per HADS-A, and thus the experiences of psychic disjunctures might represent one possible explanation alongside the other challenges faced by women both in their professional and personal lives which engender elevated levels of anxiety compared to men (see Pigott, 2003). Additionally, we did not interview anyone who was experiencing a mental health crisis, for example, scoring ‘severe’ for either anxiety or depression; thus, those experiencing acute distress are not captured in this analysis. Finally, while diverse on various metrics and achieving saturation, Danish General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) law did not allow us to collect data on interviewees’ ethnicities, limiting the extent to which we can reflect on the applicability of these disjunctures across other domains of identity among musicians in Denmark.

We might synthesise our insights by reflecting on one of the most famous examples of Danish female distress: Ophelia’s death in *Hamlet*. Driven to despair by either the death of her father or Hamlet’s rejection, or both, her suicide by drowning is a literary representation of female ‘madness’ (Camden, 1964). However, some suggest Ophelia’s insanity should not be understood as ‘the conventional mad woman’ (Ronk, 1994: 21), but instead as an understandable response to the socio-political inequalities of the Denmark of her time; that is, that her distress is psychosocial, and even rational. As Lewis et al. (2025: 2) reflect:

Perhaps we should see Ophelia’s personal response as deeply connected to the political world in which she lives. Certainly, we know from the other characters that there is something rotten in Denmark – injustice, inequality, corruption, vice, toxic sexism. Perhaps these social problems will best help us understand Ophelia.

While Marcellus famously states in *Hamlet* ‘something is rotten in the state of Denmark’, so we have explored that the anxieties experienced by Danish female musicians might be understood as psychic responses to disjunctures in the (emotional) state of Denmark.

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Ethical considerations

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Notes

1. In our earlier survey (Musgrave et al., 2025) the mean score among female musician respondents for anxiety (measuring using the Hospital Anxiety and Depression scale) was 9.83 (categorised as ‘abnormal’, mild), compared to 6.65 for men (categorised as ‘normal’). Among women under 40 who saw making music as their main career, anxiety was 11.35 (clinically significant, moderate), compared to 9.24 (‘abnormal’ mild) among men under 40 who likewise saw music as their main career. The lowest levels of anxiety were observed among men over 40 who did *not* see music as their main career (5.00 – ‘normal’).
2. The Law of Jante (from Sander Mose, 1999 [1933]). (1) You shall not believe you are anything. (2) You shall not believe you are as much as us. (3) You shall not believe you are wiser than us. (4) You shall not imagine you are better than us. (5) You shall not believe you know more than us. (6) You shall not believe you are more than us. (7) You shall not believe you are good for anything. (8) You shall not laugh at us. (9) You shall not believe anyone cares about you. (10) You shall not believe you can teach us anything.

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