Does it really matter? Young people and popular music

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Introduction

Despite the debates surrounding media audiences, it seems that little work within popular music studies has engaged directly with those who consume, listen to and use popular music as part of their everyday lives. The purpose of this paper is therefore to examine issues relating to popular music audiences through an analysis of my own research which has involved conducting unstructured group discussions with teenagers at a comprehensive school in East Sussex, South England, during the Summer term of 1999. These young people articulated the significance of popular music in their lives in terms of its usefulness within the context of their daily routines, rather than as a meaningful source for identity investment.

Previous studies have attempted to investigate everyday engagements with music, including Frith’s (1978, 1983) survey of Keighley teenagers in 1972 which, although old, is still relevant and useful today and will be considered later in relation to my own research. In addition, Finnegan (1989) and Cohen (1991) have carried out extensive ethnographic studies into music practices in Milton Keynes and Liverpool, respectively. They have both concentrated on music-making (and its connection to music consumption), but their work is important in illuminating the complex and contradictory ways in which music is integrated into the lived realities of people’s everyday existence. Roe (1998) and Roe and von Feilitzen (1992) have conducted quantitative research into young people’s use of music, but their survey methods do not provide an insight into young people’s experiences and perspectives, largely because the listeners’ own accounts of their experiences and perspectives are absent.

An interesting account of music in everyday life can be found in Crafts, Cavacchi and Keil (1993). This collection of interviews, conducted in the US with people of all ages, reveals the complexity and range of people’s engagement with music, and allows some insight into the myriad ways in which music is woven into the fabric of everyday life. However, the presentation of interviews without analysis or comment, which is described as a conscious decision to go against the ‘reflexives’ (Ibid., p. xxii), conceals the way in which the book has nevertheless been shaped and constructed by the selection and editing process. Also, Keil’s assertion that, regarding music tastes, ‘[e]ach person is unique. Like your fingerprints, your signature, your voice …’ (Ibid., p. 2), seems perhaps to be too individualistic. It ignores the ways in which musical practices are also social, and the complex ways in which social positionings and discursive frameworks shape how people experience, engage with and talk about music.

In general, then, there is a need for qualitative empirical research in popular
music studies which takes account of listeners' own experiences and perspectives with regard to popular music. From an ethnomethodological perspective, it is important that people's own accounts of their lives are taken seriously, and from a feminist perspective I feel that it is only respectful to ask people about their engagements with popular culture rather than simply making assumptions or developing theories without contacting the people being discussed. These views have influenced my decision to undertake empirical research which would enable me to talk to young people about their engagement with popular music.

Methodology: popular music and everyday life

Research into media audiences within cultural studies has tended to focus on television viewing (Ang 1985; Morley 1980, 1986, 1992) and women's magazines (McRobbie 1991; Hermes 1995) rather than on popular music. However, it is the work of Morley, and especially what I will call the 'postmodern feminism' of Ang and Hermes' work, that has influenced my approach to this research. All of these researchers emphasise the importance of the everydailyness of media consumption, the way that the products and texts of popular culture are embedded in daily life and are experienced within the context of many other activities. Ang refers to this epistemological position as 'radical contextualism' (Ang 1996, p. 69). These writers consequently feel that an ethnographic approach to research methods is most appropriate for investigating people's engagement with the media. Morley's study, The Nationwide Audience (1980), which involved in-depth interviews with television viewers, represents an important moment in this concern with ethnography.

While my reliance upon discussion group interviews held at a school does not meet Cohen's ethnographic criteria, because she regards such research methods as removing people from '... their usual social, spacial and temporal context ...' so that their '... discourse is consequently disconnected from their day-to-day activities, relationships and experiences ...' (Cohen 1993, p. 127), I believe that asking young people about their relationships with popular music will provide more insight than simply theorising from my own experiences. Indeed, Morley argues (here with regard to television viewers) that:

... the interview ... remains a fundamentally more appropriate way to attempt to understand what audiences do when they watch television than for the analyst simply to stay at home and imagine the possible implications of how other people might watch television. (Morley 1992, p. 180)

The school that my respondents attended is a mixed comprehensive school in a generally middle-class, suburban area. The school is surrounded by houses, and Brighton, the nearest town for entertainment such as cinemas, concerts and clubs, is a twenty-minute bus-ride from the school. The young people I talked to were all part of a sociology GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) class, they were all around fifteen years old, and the interviews took place during their sociology lessons in a room adjacent to their classroom.

Three discussions with small groups all took place on different days. Group A consisted of three girls and two boys, Group B of four girls, and group C of three girls and one boy. The uneven gender balance of the groups was unfortunate and in some way reflected the sociology class from which the groups came, in which only eight out of the twenty-six students were boys. Two of the students, one in Group A and one in
Group B, were of Bengali origin, and the rest were all white and English. All of the discussions were taped and transcribed. The research was intended to be exploratory, and I was hoping that the discussions would be as unstructured and as conversational as possible in order to allow the students themselves to define their content. To begin the discussions, I explained that I was interested in what they thought and how they felt about popular music, and in what ways it was a part of their lives. If nobody started the discussion spontaneously, I asked the question, 'Is music important in your life?', followed by, 'In what ways is it important?'. I decided to conduct group discussions with young people because I felt that a group would be the best medium for this kind of unstructured conversation, and that I would hopefully have minimum input once the discussion got under way. I hoped that the teenagers would get ideas from, debate with and respond to each other.

After the group discussions I held brief 'feedback chats' individually with each member of the discussion groups and asked them how they felt about being interviewed in a group, and whether they would have preferred to have been interviewed alone. I also gave them each the opportunity to tell me anything they might have been reluctant to say in the group, or that they had thought of since the discussions, but nobody had anything to add. I feel that the comments made by the participants support my use of group discussions, because they all said they found the group environment more comfortable than a one-on-one interview and useful for generating ideas. I would like to emphasise that this was a small study, based on the discussions of thirteen teenagers at one particular school. As such, I am aware that the knowledge produced through this research is partial and positioned and cannot be used to deduce universal truths about teenagers in general.

Youth, fans and subcultures: where are the 'ordinary' kids?

Before discussing the research findings, I would like to explain my notion of 'ordinary' music listeners as opposed to fans and subcultures. In using the term 'ordinary' in opposition to fans or members of subcultures, I am aware that I am setting up a false dichotomy which echoes the familiar distinction between passive and active media consumers. It is not that fans and members of subculture are abnormal or extraordinary, nor that a person is either one or the other, a fan or a non-fan. Rather, I would argue that people move in and out of subcultures and in and out of fandom, and that popular music is integrated into everyday life where its significance shifts according to different situations.

I have adopted the term 'ordinary' because subcultural theory and work on fans tend to oppose fans and subcultures to the 'ordinary'. For Fiske, the fan is set against the 'normal' audience member and is seen as an '...excessive reader' who differs from the "ordinary" one in degree rather than kind' (Fiske 1992, p. 46). Similarly, Grossberg (1992) distinguishes between the fan and the 'consumer' and does not consider the latter in his theory of 'affect', whilst subcultural theory tends to position the subculture in opposition to a homogeneous 'mainstream'. All of these terms, along with my 'ordinary kids' are, and should be seen as, discursive constructs which act to position people, rather than as real social positions.

Both 'fan' and 'subculture' are problematic terms, but they remain useful if we adapt them so that 'fan' can be used to describe particular instances of engagement rather than a type of person (which implies the existence of a non-fan), and 'subculture' can refer to a certain kind of activity instead of a cohesive social group.
(which allows a simplistic positioning of people as being either inside or outside the group).

My point is that most studies of young people focus on visible and identifiable instances of fandom or music-cultural activity, and this leads to an imbalance in accounts of young people’s engagement with music. In attempting to study ‘ordinary’ young people I am not looking at these obvious and visible examples, but rather at a ‘random’ and ‘invisible’ group of young people in the form of a school class, and in doing so I am discursively constructing the participants in my study as ‘ordinary’. There is, of course, no reason why any of the participants in the study should not be engaged in some kind of fandom or subcultural activity.

Youth

The attraction of academics to the study of young people has resulted in the construction of various labels with certain connotations. Frith (1983) makes a distinction between ‘teenagers’, a term used in 1950s academia in relation to mainly working-class young people, and ‘youth’, a popular term in the 1960s which was used in connection with the idea of ‘youth culture’ and ‘counterculture’. Both terms came to signify rebellion and trouble. As Valentine, Skelton and Chambers note:

Academic interest in teenagers was born within criminology ... [t]hus, the research into youth groups was marked by a preoccupation with delinquency and associated with the study of other so-called ‘condemned’ and ‘powerless’ groups in society such as the working class, migrants and the criminal. (Valentine et al. 1998, p. 10)

Teenagers still suffer from being perceived and labelled as potentially deviant. I have therefore tried to use the term ‘young people’ in order to avoid any negative associations with deviance and trouble. I also use the term ‘teenagers’ in a more straightforward sense to refer to people in their teens. I feel that it is valid to distinguish young people because age is a social category with associated social restrictions and freedoms. My research has also been informed by a general suggestion, and indeed a common-sense assumption, that young people have a special relationship with popular music (see Frith 1978, 1983; Lull 1992).

Subcultures

In the 1970s, at the Birmingham Centre for Culture and Communication Studies, studies of youth became studies of youth subcultures in which young people were described as semiotic rebels, resisting dominant ideology from a position of (working class) subordination (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979). These notions of resistance and rebellion suggested a further notion of ‘delinquency’, with young people perceived as dissenters, struggling against a moral order. Such orthodox subcultural theory has been criticised from many angles (McRobbie 1991; Thornton 1995). Clarke (1990, p. 84) criticises subcultural theory for being elitist and constructing a ‘... dichotomy between subcultures and an undifferentiated “general public”’. Like Thornton, who also problematises the notion of a homogeneous and denigrated ‘mainstream’, Clarke is concerned about the way that subcultural theory dismisses those which it sets up as being outside of subcultures for being straight and reactionary, thus revealing a contempt for mass culture that can be traced back to the Frankfurt School and Adorno’s passive pop consumer. This disregard of those engagements that young people have with popular music which are not vis-
ible to academia because they do not involve spectacular subcultural activity and are therefore associated with the notion of a passive mainstream, influenced my decision to talk to 'ordinary' teenagers about how pop music related to their everyday lives. In addition, subcultural theory does not offer an adequate account of music. Although music is regarded as central to subcultures, it is not clear exactly how it is important and in what concrete ways it fits into subcultural life.

**Fans**

In a similar way, popular cultural studies have tended to focus on the experiences of music fans, which, it could be argued, only inform us about one rather particular way of engaging with popular music. Frith refers to '... cultural studies’ recent interest in self-declared fans, people who are certainly well organised enough to express their views ... but whose terms of judgement are, for just that reason, likely to be a bit peculiar ... ' (Frith 1996, p. 48).

Again, I would question this idea of the ‘fan’ as a particular type of person rather than a certain kind of engagement with popular culture. I would argue that the world is not divided into fans and non-fans, but rather that people engage with music in different ways at different times.

In Lewis’s collection of work on fandom (1992), Grossberg argues that fandom is a particular ‘sensibility’ or relationship between a person and a cultural form, and that a fan’s relation to cultural texts operates in the domain of ‘affect’. He describes ‘affect’ as a ‘feeling of life’ and suggests that affect:

... operates within and, at the same time, produces maps which direct our investments in and into the world; these maps tell us where and how we can become absorbed ... as potential locations for our self-identifications, and with what intensities. This ‘absorption’ or investment constructs the places and events which are, or can become, significant to us. They are the places at which we can construct our own identity as something to be invested in, as something that matters. (Grossberg 1992, p. 57)

Fans, according to Grossberg, make investments in certain songs, genres and artists which are important to their construction of self identity. He continues by saying that ‘... popular culture becomes a crucial ground on which he or she can construct mattering maps. Within these mattering maps, investments are enabled which empower individuals in a variety of ways.’ (Ibid., p. 59) But what of those instances in which people do not make such investments in popular culture? What of those moments when it doesn’t matter?

‘It doesn’t really matter’ and ‘I don’t really care’: the fallacy of meaningfulness

Hermes (1995) has criticized the focus on fans in cultural research, arguing that in attempting to support the idea of active audiences, the meaningfulness of engagements with popular culture becomes distorted and media consumption is often seen to be more meaningful than perhaps it should be. She argues that

... current research and theorizing appear overburdened by their attention to fans and to the reading and watching experiences that people are enthusiastic about, to the detriment of theorizing the mundaneness of everyday media use. (Hermes 1995, pp. 15-16)

Hermes argues that this over-attention to particular meaningful instances of media
consumption leads to 'the fallacy of meaningfulness', which she defines as '... the unwarranted assumption that all use of popular media is significant' (Ibid., p. 16).

I have adopted Hermes' idea in relation to my study because I found that the young people I talked to did not seem to be as passionate or excited about popular music as I had expected them to be. I should admit here that I had been expecting to find some enthusiastic teenagers who defined themselves, to some extent, through the music they chose to listen to. However, when I asked them if music was important in their lives, they all replied that it was, but, interestingly, they framed its significance in terms of its practical use in their daily routines rather than in terms of identification or self-construction.

Sometimes, when talking about music they would finish with 'but it doesn't really matter' (Jahada), or 'and I don't really care' (Laura), which I interpreted to mean that they were discussing music because I had asked them about it rather than because it was important to them. They seemed to be suggesting that their use of popular music should not be seen as significant.²

They also suggested that popular music was not any more important to them than other popular media such as television:

Christina: OK, so would you say that pop music, or music, is a, a big part of your life?

Laura: Depends.

Christina: Depends on what?

Laura: Well, I don't know, it depends on the certain type of people you're talking to. It would be to me but I've got friends that it's not that much of a big thing.

Christina: Right.

Laura: Some people are more interested in TV.³

Some of the young people I talked to did feel that television was more important to them ('Just, music's all right but it's all like the same isn't it?' – Jahada), and a few liked both music and television '... sort of about the same really' (Shelley).

This suggests that, for some young people, popular music just isn't all that significant or special in relation to other media, and also that perhaps it is not easy or advisable to attempt to separate music out from the tangle of other media that combine with each other in various ways. For example, the young people in this study talked about music in relation to films, adverts, computer games, music videos and music television programmes.

I want to suggest that, in a postmodern media culture, young people's engagement with popular music may be changing. Music may be perceived as just one part of the mediascape that colours their lives and may have become less significant in terms of identity construction or as a site for emotional investment. Or it may be that music is still important in these terms but that my respondents did not feel comfortable acknowledging this. This could be due to embarrassment at admitting to an emotional connection to music in front of their peers, or perhaps they downplayed the importance of music in their lives because they did not wish to be viewed as having been in any way duped by the processes of the music industry. Indeed, I will be considering ways in which these teenagers' critical and sophisticated knowledge of the workings of the media and of popular culture might influence their engagement with popular music and affect the ways in which they perceive it, talk about it and evaluate it.
Young people and popular music: an analysis

The charts

Firstly, for these young people, musical knowledge is organised around ‘the charts’ or the UK Top 40 singles chart. That is, the majority of the music they listened to was in the charts, and those who considered some of their tastes to be outside of the charts still used the charts as a point of reference, and still listened to chart music as well. I don’t mean to suggest that the charts are to be perceived as monolithic or homogeneous (see Thornton 1995); chart music includes many different genres, from hip hop to indie, from pop to jungle. Chart music is not, therefore, a particular type of music. However, I would argue that in terms of production, promotion and access, chart music does make sense as a category. As a vehicle of the music industry, it shapes the way that these teenagers understand and think about popular music.

The young people I talked to heard new music mainly from the radio, and to a lesser extent from friends. The radio programmes they listened to tended to be on local stations and based mainly on chart music and new releases. Parker, in his analysis of the charts as ‘[o]ne of the formations which helps to shape the meaning of modern pop music . . .’ (Parker 1991, p. 205), claims that two of the most important features of the charts as a structure are youth and newness. He writes that The teenager is the “mass subject” position created by the Top 40 . . .’ (Ibid., p. 212), and it would appear that the teenagers that I talked to did position themselves and their music knowledge in relation to the charts. Parker goes on to describe the constant movement of the charts, saying:

The charts are a process that moves from one state of certainty to another. The latest trends are presented as being the high point of popular music, but this stasis is entirely ephemeral since it is continually replaced by the next development. The parade marches on. (Ibid., p. 212).

This focus on change and newness was certainly characteristic of the tastes of the young people in my study and it featured in the way that they talked about buying music, which they generally didn’t do very often because their changing tastes meant that they got bored with songs quite quickly. Consequently, they felt that buying CDs was a waste of money and preferred to tape the songs they liked from the radio or from friends, borrow from friends or persuade family members to make a purchase which they would then ‘steal’.

Laura: Yeah, it’s not, it’s not worth the money I don’t personally think.
Louise: No.
Laura: Like, you can buy an album and it can be like fourteen, fifteen quid and then you get home and you’re thinking ‘yeah, yeah, this is going to be really good’. and, and . . .
Louise: (mumbles in background)
Laura: . . . and you get about five, six songs out of ten that you like and then, I consider that personally a waste of money, and then you get bored of, after a while you get bored of each song and it ends up with only one song you can even be bothered to listen to. And so it’s just a waste of fifteen quid. It’s not really worth it.

* * *
Shelley: Yeah, 'cause my opinion changes a lot so there's not really much point in spending money and then you change your mind, like, two weeks later.

Jon: It's just, like, when the new stuff comes out and you like that one a lot, 'cause you can't keep buying it.

Alexis: It depends on how much you play it really. If you play it over and over and over again then, yeah, you'll get bored of it . . .

Jon: That's the main reason why I listen to the radio, 'cause they play all different songs. And, like, you get a mixture.

Alexis: And you don't have to buy them.

Jon: Yeah.

These young people's preferences do not appear to be static, but rather their ever-changing tastes seem to correspond to the movements of the pop charts, and the Top 40's emphasis on newness can be seen in their claims that they 'get bored' with music after a while. This also relates to the way in which they labelled music as either 'new' or 'old', although the boundaries for these classifications seemed extremely vague. 'Old' music seemed to refer to the music that their parents listened to, which included REM, Tamla Motown and Eric Clapton. Their tendency not to buy many music products is an indication of their financial status as school-attending teenagers, but it also opens up interesting questions about the nature of consumption itself. It would appear that music consumption, for these young people, very rarely includes the actual purchase of a product. Consumption, then, should be seen as a term which covers multiple activities and engagements with cultural texts which may only occasionally involve buying a product.

Media awareness

Another significant aspect of these teenagers' engagement with popular music is their critical understanding of the workings of the media and popular culture. This 'media awareness' is characterised by a sophisticated knowledge of the nature of the pop music industry, an understanding of the press, a perception of pop stars which recognises the constructedness of an image, and a general cynicism towards commercialism. I want to suggest that this 'media awareness' might help to explain why these young people seem reluctant to invest their identities in music, or, at least, reluctant to admit to doing so. Firstly, these teenagers were generally aware of and cynical about pop processes and media constructs.

Alison: [Re: 'Boy Bands'] 'Cause they're not real, they're just like five people they think you fancy, they get a list and you have to have, like, y'know, its the same for every boy band, you have the sweet blond one who's the main lead singer, you have the kind of ugly kind of dark tall one . . .

Amy: (laughter)

Alison: . . . he kind of does all the bits over the top and then the rest are just meant to stand there and dance.

Amy: In the background, do the oohs and aahs, stuff like that.
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Alison: Yeah, and just every boy band is exactly the same, they’re all just structured to sell.

* * *

Shelley: Well, it’s a bit of a bad time to become a boy band ’cause, y’know, a boy band is a boy band, you can’t really become that different.

* * *

Alexis: [Re: ex-Spice Girl Geri Halliwell] Her video, it’s, like, all, y’know, good but then, sort of, y’know, you see a bit of the old Geri where she sort of pulls up her top and shows her stomach and that’s where it ends where you can just see her getting in the swimming pool . . . Yeah, I just think that shows the old Geri, and the rest of the video’s like, y’know, new Geri.

Catherine: I do think her, her contraception thing that she’s doing is really, um, cheesy and she’s just doing it to prove that she’s not, um, going, gonna be going round dressed in no clothes, so . . .

* * *

Luke: Like Boyzone [a boy band from Ireland], they cover most of their songs don’t they?

Aftab: And they go to Number One.

Luke: Yeah, it’s not hard to do. You just find a song you like and copy it.

Amy: Yeah, but when they talk about it they say that they’ve sampled it, something like that or . . .

Luke: But they haven’t really . . .

Amy: No, and . . .

Luke: . . . just stuck a different bassline on it.

Amy: Yeah, exactly, and they say ‘oh we just really like that song so we thought we’d just add, um, we’d do it in a Boyzone way. But they just sing it.

These young people were also wary of the hype and advertising associated with certain pop groups and displayed a perceptive understanding of the workings of the press.

Luke: [Re: the British rock band Oasis] I just like, they’re not scared to just say anything to the press, are they?

Alison: Yeah.

Luke: Most people are like, not do anything, they just say it.

Alison: Yeah, most people, like, they try to conform to what . . .


Alison: . . . like, society wants them to be for their children . . .

Amy: Just smile for the camera and . . .

Alison: Yeah, and put it on, but then have your own opinions, but then Oasis don’t keep their opinions to themselves, if they’re asked a question then they’ll tell them what they honestly think, they won’t be ‘oh must keep everybody happy’ . . .

[. . .]

Amy: I mean, it must be so easy, they’re always, they’re constantly, the press are always there, trying to pick out what he, what someone does wrong or inter-
fering with his marriage or whatever, and it just must be so annoying, and he obviously can’t tolerate it . . .

* * *

Laura: [Re: suggestions in the press that pregnant members of the Spice Girls were, as role models, having a negative influence on young fans] It’s just people like, it’s just people like, I don’t know who they are but they just want people to blame for problems that are going on in society and things like that. And, like, pregnancy, it’s got nothing to do with the Spice Girls.

* * *

Catherine: [Re: Stephen from Boyzone and the tabloid press’ stories about his homosexuality] ‘Cause he hadn’t had any, like, stories in the newspaper and normally they get one on everybody . . .

These comments reveal an understanding of pop music and media processes, an awareness of image construction and a level of cynicism which perhaps influences the ways in which these young people engage with popular music. It should be noted here, however, that the young people in my study are all GCSE sociology students who are therefore likely to be encouraged to think critically about social processes. Without comparison with another group of teenagers who are not studying sociology, it is difficult to assess a general level of critical awareness. The comments about boy bands and Oasis also reveal, conversely, an adherence to an established and orthodox rock vs pop discourse which perceives pop music to be commercial and therefore lacking in value, whilst attributing qualities of truth, sincerity and authenticity to rock music. The teenagers’ dismissal of boy bands as artificial and their praise of a rock band’s honesty reveal that, despite a level of insight into the constructedness and manipulation of image within the media industries, the discursive framework which informs their evaluations is that of a well-rehearsed rock ideology (Frith 1983). The source of this kind of cultural knowledge is complex, and I would argue that these pop vs rock assumptions are deeply entrenched in everyday knowledge about popular music in ways that make them seem ‘common sense’. The sixth-formers in Frith’s study (1978) were making the same distinctions in 1972, and the same arguments are repeated time and again in the music press. Although I would argue that these young people display a level of media awareness which might affect their engagements with popular music, those who do reveal instances of fandom seem to revert to these rock notions of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ so that Lauren Hill is not perceived to have a constructed image – ‘it’s just her’ (Amy) – and Robbie Williams is praised for ‘being himself’.

Music and identity

Since at least the 1950s it has been evident that music plays a central role in the process of identity construction of young people. (Roe 1996, p. 86)

Much has been written about music as an important element of identity construction, as a site for the investment of identities and as something people identify with. In addition, it has been claimed that teenagers in particular use music to build identities based on difference, especially when distancing themselves from their parents. As illustrated below, the young people in this study appear to challenge these ideas in their explicit rejection of suggestions that they might identify with or be
influenced by certain artists or musics. It may be that they do use music in this way, and some of the quotes above indicate that this might be happening, but what is interesting is that they were extremely reluctant to admit to it. Whether they do or not, it is their dismissive attitude towards music as a source of identification that I feel is significant, and I would suggest that this attitude can be seen as a consequence of the media awareness displayed by these teenagers and discussed in the previous section.

Firstly, Lull has suggested that ‘Many listeners identify strongly with specific types of music and demonstrate their loyalties accordingly’ (Lull 1992, p. 20), and it could be argued that if young people are finding popular music important in their identity construction, they would, perhaps, express an affinity with one particular type of music over another. The young people I talked to did have preferences, but they were also keen to accept other types of music and to display a distinct open-mindedness towards all genres of music (excepting, perhaps, opera and classical music).

* * *

**Luke:**  Probably listen to any music really . . .

**Laura:**  I’d say that people had a favourite type of music, but they don’t like just one sort.

**Pauline:**  I like a mixture, I don’t really have a favourite type. I just like the song.

**Jon:**  I normally change, [ . . .] I like a group and I keep liking them but then I’ll go on to another one.

**Alexis:**  I don’t think it’s, um, like, y’know, ‘your’ band, you just feel, y’know, well, ‘I like that’ [laughs] sort of thing. I dunno.

**Alison:**  Um, I like all different kinds of music. You can’t say ‘I like one type of music’, you’ll hear it and you’ll think ‘oh I like that’. Like, um, while I was staying with my friend, her friends, her older brother’s friends, were playing lots of indie and kind of jungle, and I wasn’t really into that but some of it’s really, really funny and good and I like it. But then if you asked me, like, two weeks ago, ‘do you like indie?’, I’d say ‘well, I don’t really know, I don’t really listen to it’, but it is good. It is music that you do listen to, you just don’t realise it’s classed as indie when you’re listening to it ‘cause you don’t go ‘hang on, what kind of music is this?’.

**Christina:**  Right.

**Amy:**  I think it’s difficult to put music into, like, categories. Some of it you can, like dance . . . well, I don’t really know what kind of categories of music I like.

**Alison:**  Well, I don’t think you sit and you think about what category it is . . .

**Amy:**  No . . .

**Alison:**  . . . just whether you like it or not.

**Amy:**  . . . whether you think they’re a good band or not.
This rejection of the notion of liking a particular kind of music exclusively might suggest that these young people perhaps do not identify strongly with any particular type of music. The last exchange also displays, I think, a quite sophisticated understanding of the constructedness of genres.

However, this refusal to categorise their preferences could also be viewed as a denial of the social construction of taste, as demonstrated by some of Frith's teenagers. The sixth-formers in his study were keen to emphasise the individuality of their music tastes, saying, 'I like what I like, not what I'm told or influenced to like . . .' (quoted in Frith 1978, p. 40), whilst also seeming to identify and make investments in the music that they listened to. It could be argued that the teenagers in my study are articulating a similar belief in their tastes as individual, and that this does not necessarily indicate a lack of identification with their music. Yet Frith's teenagers used labels to describe both themselves and others, however fluidly they placed themselves in relation to these labels, in a way that the young people I talked to did not. His school kids were organised into peer groups which were defined in part through youth cultures. They referred to their own group and to other groups as 'mods', 'skins', 'hippies' and 'hairies'. This type of identification was missing from the discussions in my research and my respondents displayed no sense of group identity, however shifting or playful. They did not appear to attempt to distinguish between themselves and others by the use of youth cultural labels or taste in music. The differentiations they made were between their own lack of identification with music and those, often younger, people who were seen to be naively influenced by pop stars. Their distinctions were not between different youth cultural groups (mods vs skins), but between perceived levels of identification with music and the associated media awareness that this implies.

Frith found that the group identifications expressed in his study differed with age, with younger teenagers being the most involved in youth groups. It may be that the distinctions made in my study along the lines of age are an expression of something similar.

The teenagers that I talked to explicitly dismissed, and seemed anxious to deny, any suggestion that they might identify with or be influenced by popular music or artists, but they claimed that other people, particularly younger people, might be influenced. The implication was that they themselves could somehow see through the whole pop process and were too sophisticated in their media knowledge to be so naive as to be influenced by, or to identify with, something as manufactured and unimportant as pop music. Firstly, they insisted that they could like music without relating to it or identifying with it, and that songs couldn't teach them anything.

Amy: [Re: Rap music] You can still listen to it, even if it has not relevance to your own life, it's still like, I dunno, like . . .

Luke: Yeah, 'cause loads of people like Tupac, but no-one, like, does drive-bys here do they?

Christina: Yeah.


* * *

Catherine: I can't say pop stars dress too nice, y'know. They don't really influence me.

* * *
Laura: So you can learn, you can learn things that aren't important. Some, like some things may, you may think are quite interesting but not really important. Like, you can't really, it's not something that you sit down, listening to a song, 'wow I never knew that before!', y'know what I mean? 'I'm never gonna forget that!' sort of thing.

The Spice Girls were a group that all of the discussion groups had a lot to say about, but they were generally disliked and the suggestion that their 'Girl Power' slogan may have influenced girls was emphatically rejected.

Laura: They do think they invented it. Know what I mean? They are the beginners of girl power. Like they're the only reason a girl will stand up to their boyfri-end or their husband, and stuff like that. It's got nothing to do with it. People stand up to who they want to stand up to, and who they feel they can. Not just 'cause the Spice Girls stick their fingers out and go 'Girl Power'.

Catherine: It's horrible. I dunno, um, the thing is, I mean, them saying it is not going to make women go and do things that men normally do.

These comments serve to generally downplay the importance of popular music in terms of identity. Only one girl said that she might identify with the lyrics of a song if it reminded her of something that had happened in her life, but she was keen to make the distinction between the lyrics and the person singing. Another girl suggested that she might be influenced 'subconsciously' but was again keen to emphasise that she wouldn't know she was doing it.

As suggested earlier, it was common for my respondents to dismiss the idea that they identified with music or artists, and refer to this as something that other people did, especially younger people. They admitted to being influenced by pop music when they were younger, implying that this happened before they understood the workings of popular culture.

Amy: [Re: Spice Girls] Little girls that can look up to them, and, sort of, we, sort of, don't look up to, 'cause we know what it's all about with the Spice Girls [. . .]

Laura: I've got a mate that's like 20 years old, and he listens to hip hop. And because he listens to hip hop he thinks, like, um, people, like he wants to be someone from the hood, and he wants to be all that. [. . .] It's almost as if they pretend to themselves that they're black. Know what I mean? They're like that, they, they walk in a certain way and things like that . . .

These distinctions are tied up with notions of media awareness and sophistication, implying that identifying with music reveals a level of ignorance or naivety.

Another idea that the young people in my study appeared to challenge is the claim that teenagers use music to articulate an identity that distinguishes them from their parents. Drawing again on notions of the teenager as rebel, Lull claims that, 'Generally, young people use music to resist authority at all levels . . . A fundamental adolescent use of music is the 'need' to declare independence from parents . . .' (Lull 1992, p. 27) This particular use of music did not, however, appear to apply to the teenagers that I talked to. In fact, they often liked the same music as their parents, did not feel that their parents' opinions were an issue, and did not seem to wish to appear rebellious.
Amy: I wouldn't purposely go out and say 'yeah, that will really annoy my mum, I think I'll buy that' 'cause that's really rebellious . . .

[. . .]


Amy: No.

Luke: . . . she don't like all the music you buy 'cause you don't like all the music she buys . . .

* * *

Laura: I've got, um, I've got music that, er, my dad and mum used to listen to when I was little. And, and now I like it.

[. . .]

Jahada: Yeah, but, um, like my parents, 'cause, like, I'm from Bangladesh they listen to Bengali music now. First I was like, 'cause I was brought up in this country, and I was like 'what the hell are they going on about?', but then you get used to it so . . . It's quite good actually.

* * *

Pauline: Oh, I like some of the music of my mum and dad, and they like some of the new music as well.

These comments illustrate that the young people in this study do not appear to use popular music to rebel against parents or resist authority. Again, the age of these teenagers (fifteen) might be a factor here as some of their comments suggest that they hadn't previously liked their parents’ music. The idea that popular music expresses teenage rebellion is often tied to notions of working-class youth cultures, and it may be that the middle class use described by my respondents differs from that of other groups.

Everyday routine use

Popular music consumption should be perceived in terms of a variety of engagements which are embedded in everyday life and accompanied by other activities. Hermes claims that:

The significance of everyday media use has to be sought mainly in the routines it sustains, the experience of which may, for example, be reassuring, an unnameable pleasure rather than a liberating event. (Hermes 1995, p. 148)

I would suggest that the young people's discussions in this study support such a view. Rather than discussing the importance of popular music within a framework of emotional investment or identification, or describing music as meaningful, these young people found music to be significant in terms of its routine practical uses relating to rather meaningless and mundane engagements.

Lull (1992) and Roe and von Feilitzen (1992) have noted various ways in which music is used by young people, some of which were articulated by the teenagers in this study. The latter, for example, talked about music's usefulness in changing or enhancing their mood.

Luke: Well, if you're listening to R 'n' B and stuff, you're just laid back and listening to it. But if you're listening to heavy metal or something it might put you in a bit of a violent mood.
In addition, all of the teenagers in my study discussed their use of music to organise and mark their daily routine. Music appears to accompany the repetitive tasks undertaken every day, from getting out of bed and preparing for school to working on their homework and getting ready for bed.

Louise: When I get dressed in the morning.
Laura: Yeah, I do that as well.
Louise: And I have soothing music to help me get to sleep [laughs].

Jon: ... when I come home from school I might listen to it. And, like after dinner, and I normally listen to, er, about one hour to try and fall asleep.

Alison: ... in the morning when I get up I stick the radio on and potter around and do whatever and I go home and if I'm going to do homework or if I'm going to sit in my room, I won't sit there in silence to do it, I'll have music on.

It is interesting that nearly all of the teenagers listen to the radio as part of their routine, rather than to any particular music they might have selected themselves as a soundtrack to their day. It appears that 'if the noise is right, any noise will do; music is the context rather than the focus of leisure' (Frith 1983, p. 216). Although the instances of listening to pop music on the radio described by the teenagers are not necessarily instances of leisure – doing their homework, getting ready for school – music does seem to mark out periods of time in which young people are outside of the compulsory requirements of school.

These young people also described their use of music as a way of relieving boredom and passing the time. It seems important to them that they avoid periods of silence.

Shelley: Um, I like sort of R 'n' B and soul and that 'cause, um, 'cause I mainly listen to it, y'know, just in the background not sort of sitting there listening really carefully, just something if I'm just sitting there thinking, just so it's not silent, 'cause I hate it being silent.

Alexis: I listened to my walkman last week when I was on work experience because it was so boring. It was just so boring I had to do something, my walkman saved my life.

Pauline: I think music is quite important to us ...
Laura: ... I can't stand silence ... I can't stand it, it does my head in, I hate it ...

These young people also found music useful in terms of social interaction, both in terms of talking about music and in music's ability to fill awkward silences.

Laura: 'Cause you know a lot, I mean there's pop stars and stuff, you know everything about their life. Which I think is out of order in a way, 'cause they, they need their privacy, but it's good. 'Cause then it's got something, you've got something to talk about with music. Not just, like on TV, it's just like, like TV programmes 'oh yeah, did you see what happened in Eastenders last night', it's just like that. I think.

Christina: Something to talk about?
Louise: Mmmm.
Jahada: Mmmm.
Louise: Can you imagine if they didn't do all that?
Laura: Yeah.
Laura: We just wouldn't talk about anything.
Laura: We would, but ...
Jahada: It's a bit of gossip as well.

* * *

Alexis: If you listen to it when you're with someone you don't know very well and you're trying to get to know them it sort of helps out what to say ...

[...]

Catherine: Everybody has an opinion on music, so it's obvious that you're going to have, be able to have one conversation at least.

[...]

Alexis: It's just, I'm just saying that, y'know, if you're getting to know someone and there's an awkward silence, it's easier to have an awkward silence whilst there's music on than in silence.

* * *

Laura: And you have to make conversation and it gets really difficult, whereas if you've got music on you can just ...

Louise: You can sing along to it as well.
Laura: ... sit and listen to it.

These rather mundane and everyday engagements with popular music are not meaningful in terms of resistance or empowerment, but are rather more useful as ways of structuring a daily routine and perhaps marking out personal time. Music is useful to these teenagers as a way of easing an awkward social situation or simply relieving boredom and silence. Popular music consumption should be understood in ways which take account of these everyday, mundane and insignificant engagements.

Social characteristics and popular music: class, gender, race and age

Many studies have attempted to link popular media consumption to social characteristics such as gender (e.g. McRobbie, 1991; Roe 1998) and class (e.g. subcultural theory), but Lewis (1992) warns that any correspondence between musical prefer-
ence and class is problematic and variable. Finnegan (1989) echoes this caution. In her ethnographic study of musical activity in the English town of Milton Keynes, she could find no simplistic patterns along the lines of gender or class. Reviewing Finnegan's book, Frith writes that Finnegan 'shows how difficult it is empirically to draw straight lines between social characteristics and musical activity' (Frith 1991, p. 200). Ang (1996) also emphasises the complexity of relationships between media consumption and social categories, pointing out firstly that a category such as 'gender' cannot be perceived as relating to a homogeneous and straightforward shared experience. Class, gender, race, age, and other social classifications are not fixed but ever-shifting categories. Different categories converge and are privileged at different times and in different situations.

I would, however, tentatively like to consider below the ways in which age as a social category might play a significant part in the popular music consumption of the young people in this study. (I want to emphasise here that I am using age as a social category, rather than invoking 'adolescence' as a psycho-biological state of changing hormones and physical development.) I would situate these young people socially in terms of their routines around school and home, their economic dependence on parents and their subsequent lack of freedom and independence. Of course, this is a generalisation and not all teenagers fit this description. However, the young people in my study were all at school and living with their parents.

**Teenage space**

McRobbie (1991, p. 14) has written that '[g]irls negotiate a different leisure space and different personal spaces from those inhabited by boys', arguing that girls may have less freedom than boys in terms of restricted access to 'the street'. This was written in relation to working-class girls in 1977, but this restriction to the home appears to apply to both the girls and the boys in my own study. The school that I visited is situated in a suburban middle-class area which offers little entertainment outside of the home for young people of either gender. The young people in my study had little money to spend and were too young for pubs and clubs. Both boys and girls talked about the importance of their 'room' and about the time they spent in that room accompanied by music, and I would suggest that the restrictions and routines of being a teenager have an effect on music consumption. Music seemed to be a way of claiming space, in bedrooms and in friends' houses, as well as marking periods of personal time.

**Jon:** I only do it in my room. I don't listen to it any other, anywhere else.

McNamee (1998) has argued that male youth cultures have moved from the street into the home with the rise of computer games. I would suggest that 'the street' has a mythological status through its positioning within a dichotomy that contrasts it to 'the home'. The connotations of the street in opposition to the home, as invoked in subcultural theory, are that of an exciting and slightly dangerous place. The streets of the town where my respondents live, in comparison, are lined with trees and nice houses. Neither girls nor boys mentioned hanging about on the street, and the only non-domestic space that was discussed in relation to music was the car, driven by older friends with music turned up loud – a transitory space in which girls are both thrilled and embarrassed.

**Laura:** . . . it [the car] has to look good, and have, like, a jamming stereo, it doesn't
have to be that good inside. It’s just so when they drive past people they all think ‘oh, I wish I was in that car’.

Louise: When you’re actually in the car you’re like ‘oh God, ‘cause everyone looks at you, when you’re driving past, and you think ‘oh God’.

What I am trying to contest is the notion, which work on youth cultures can sometimes invoke, that domestic space is safe and female, while the street is dangerous and male. I would suggest that the young people in my study have limited access to spaces which they can control, and that the domestic space of the bedroom is significant to both males and females. Music is used in this space, perhaps as a way of marking it and controlling it. I would argue that perhaps the routine uses of popular music as articulated by these young people related to their social position as teenagers and to their daily school routine and their lack of independent space.

Conclusion

I have suggested that we should be wary of overemphasising the significance of music in its everyday encounters. Theories of consumption have always been centrally concerned with meaning (Where does it lie? Is it contested?). I have suggested that popular culture often doesn’t have to mean anything but can be handy to pass the time, to fill a silence or to entertain in rather banal ways. I would argue that popular music is sometimes meaningful, in certain instances, but not always. I have argued that popular music consumption, like other media consumption, should be understood in terms of its everydayness, the ways in which it is woven into everyday life and is often insignificant and mundane. This approach is wary of the ‘fallacy of meaningfulness’ in which media use is perceived to be more significant and meaningful than it perhaps should be. The young people in this study framed the importance of popular music in their lives in terms of routine use rather than emotional investment or identity construction.

I would also like to suggest that the level of media awareness displayed by these young people has an impact on the ways in which they engage with popular music. However, this was a small study, based on the discussions of thirteen teenagers at one school. As such, the knowledge produced is partial and positioned and cannot be used to deduce universal truths about teenagers in general. The critical approach to the media demonstrated by these teenagers may be a result of their sociology lessons, or it may be that a historical shift has taken place, that postmodern media are far more ubiquitous and self-knowing than they were and that young people have become much more aware and sophisticated in their engagements with them. This shift may have changed the ways in which music can be meaningful (in the moments when it is) and it may have changed the ways in which young people can engage meaningfully with popular music. Further empirical research is required to understand young people’s attitudes, feelings and everyday uses of popular music and to investigate its meanings.

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Endnotes

1. The dialogue transcript was analysed by roughly following the guidelines set out by Taylor and Bogdan (1998) and based on the ‘grounded theory’ approach recommended by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Taylor and Bogdan argue that research should be used to develop theory rather than test it, and that theory should be generated from the data itself which should be approached without prior assumptions.

2. This could also be interpreted as a teenage reluctance to reveal an interest in anything, but I prefer not to assume their personalities but rather to listen to what they actually say.

3. A note about the editing of quotations: an ellipsis in brackets – […] – indicates that I have left out some of the dialogue at that point, while one with no brackets – . . . – indicates either an unfinished sentence or an interruption after which the sentence continues. I have tried to reproduce the dialogue, with all its false starts and colloquialisms, as realistically as possible in order to adequately represent the teenagers.

4. Although the term is often used to refer to a certain type of pop music.

5. The term ‘use’ is to refer to a practical utilisation of music in everyday life. I do not wish to invoke the ideas of the ‘uses and gratifications’ approach, revolving as it does around an individualistic notion of psychological ‘needs’ (see Blumer and Katz 1974). Instead, I am referring to the rather mundane ways in which music is a part of people’s everyday lives.

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