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Music preferences and civic activism of young people

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This study examines the relationship between music preferences and civic activism among 182 participants aged 14–24 years. Our analyses show that participants who regularly listened to certain music genres such as classical, opera, musicals, new age, easy listening, house, world music, heavy metal, punk, and ska were significantly more likely to be engaged in civic activism than those who preferred other music genres. Previous literature had shown that political expression was associated with certain music genres, but our analysis provides empirical evidence that music genres associated with political expression are related to actual participation in civic activities, not just ideology. Discussion revolved around the importance of clustering music genres and music as part of youths' lifestyles in the context of civic activism.

Keywords: music; politics; leisure

Introduction

Music is an important part of life for most youths. According to Mickel and Mickel (2002 as cited in Brown 2006), the number of hours that teenagers spend listening to music is almost as large as the number they spend in school over the years. The importance of music for some adolescents is portrayed by Arnett (1991, p. 92):

It is not just a musical preference to them, but an intense avocation that shapes their view of the world, their spending habits, their moods, their friendships, their notion of who and what is admirable, and their hopes for what they might become.

Ross (1994, p. 3) agreed: '... the level of attention and meaning invested in music by youth is still unmatched by almost any other organized activity in society, including religion'. Adolescents form their identity through the selection of different music genres (Hansen and Hansen 1991, North and Hargreaves 1999, Forney 2005). Although young people have their favourite music styles, their choices are fluid and transient in nature (Bennett 1999c, 2000), implying that an individual's experience and values can change over time.

Music serves a variety of functions for young people. Roberts and Christenson (2001, p. 398) suggest that:

... music can relieve tension; provide escape or distraction from problems; relieve loneliness; fill the time when there is nothing much to do; ease the drudgery of repetitive, menial tasks and chores; fill uncomfortable silence; provide topics of conversation; make parties more lively; teach new vocabulary; articulate political attitudes; and perform many other uses for listener (Christenson and Roberts, 1998).

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It may serve as a form of 'spiritual healing' (Hutson 2000). Other research suggests that young people often use music as a form of shared cultural experience to express their artistic, social, and political values (Frith 1992, Bennett 2000). Popular music has been used by young people to express discontent about social and political reality established by the mainstream society (for example, Asma 1997, Eyerman and Jamison 1998, Birgit and Kruger 1998, Street 2000, Steinberg 2004, Trapp 2005). It is this last area that forms the basis for this paper. We will explore the link between music preferences and civic activism of young people.

Music genres as a means of protest

Many musical styles, from opera to punk, have been used to form political identities as well as to support various political and social causes. Rejai and Phillips (2001), for example, argued that music has been used throughout history to express all kinds of political views such as democracy, anarchism, and racism. Youniss *et al.* proposed that youth use music as a means to express 'themes of freedom or other political content' (2002, p. 137). Music genres such as hip-hop, rap, heavy metal, and punk have been widely discussed in the literature as ways for young people to express their social and political thoughts. This section will discuss the ways in which individual music genres have been used to express dissent in society.

Hip-hop and rap

Hip-hop and rap were created by poor urban blacks around the 1970s to express their dissatisfaction about poverty and limited opportunities in life (Rose 1994, Maxwell 1997, Trapp 2005, Taylor and Taylor 2007). Bennett (1999a, 1999b) pointed out that hip-hop and rap have been used to express concerns about local issues such as racism, police harassment, people's rights, unemployment, and opposition to skinheads in England and Germany. After being popularized by the media since the 1980s, the majority of rap and hip-hop consumers are White youths in both England and the US (Stapleton 1998, Bennett 1999b, 2000, Diamond *et al.* 2006). Sullivan (2003), using a sample of mid-western American teenagers, found that while most young African Americans paid attention to both the political themes and nice beat in rap music, most White American youth appeared to only care for its aesthetically pleasing sound. At the same time, businesses have caught on to the popularity of hip-hop and rap music and use them as marketing opportunities to promote fashion consciousness in a culture based on consumption, thus allowing suburban White youths to acquire the ghetto fashion and style without experiencing poor living conditions (Maxwell 1997, Stapleton 1998, Cutler 1999, Taylor and Taylor 2004, Riley 2005). A stream of literature also exists that categorizes hip-hop and rap as related to negative youth behaviour such as stealing, fighting, smoking tobacco, and using drugs (for example, Schwartz and Fouts 2003, Miranda and Claes 2004, Weisskirch and Murphy 2004, Diamond *et al.* 2006). However, it may also be argued that such rebellious behaviour can be considered a form of resistance against social reality.

Rock and heavy metal

A broadly defined and extensively discussed music genre consists of rock-and-roll or rock music. There are many subcategories within rock-and-roll, such as punk rock, alternative rock, contemporary rock, and oldies. The different kinds of rock music are sometimes

categorized as rock/pop (for example, Pearson and Dollinger 2004, Mulder *et al.* 2007). Rock music is considered a form of cultural expression that is both aesthetic and political (Frith 1992). Eyerman and Jamison (1998, p. 141), for example, described rock music as a sign of 'revolutionary quest for liberation'.

Two music genres related to rock-and-roll that have been discussed separately are punk rock and heavy metal. Punk rock and the punk culture have been characterized by an anti-establishment and rebellious attitude (for example, Hansen and Hansen 1991, Moore 2007). Observing the punk scene in Northern Ireland, McLoone (2004) described punk music as a means for young people to express their dissatisfaction with their political and social realities. Shank (1994) argued that a main feature of the punk rock groups in Austin, Texas was to rebel against the traditional Texan identity that emphasizes masculinity and male superiority. Punk rock and the punk culture are therefore generally associated with revolt against mainstream political attitudes.

Heavy metal is another music genre that has been discussed in relation to rock-and-roll. Heavy metal music, like punk rock, hip-hop and rap, has been described as a political reaction to the dominant values in western societies (Macklin 2005, Rafalovich and Schnieder 2005). Arnett found 14–20 year olds listened to lyrics of heavy metal songs for their messages of 'social consciousness' (1991, p. 81). Hansen and Hansen (1991) used a sample of American college students and found that heavy metal listeners were violent and antisocial. Research elsewhere showed that youngsters who listened to heavy metal music were more likely than non-listeners to engage in rebellious and risky behaviour such as stealing, fighting, smoking tobacco, using drugs, and cutting school (for example, Klein *et al.* 1993, Roberts *et al.* 1998, Weisskirch and Murphy 2004). Like punk music, heavy metal implies a political attitude that is anti-authority.

Rave music: techno, trance, and house

Techno, trance, and house music are played at rave parties and nightclubs where all kinds of musical styles are mixed together (Redhead 1993, Bennett 1999c, Wilson 2002, 2006, Mulder *et al.* 2007). Although much of the literature regards rave music mainly as an escape mechanism, some authors find possible political meaning to it. For example, in addition to the hedonistic attitude of German ravers and their need to escape harsh day to day realities, Birgit and Kruger (1998) also noticed a potential political message of friendship and peace. Based on interviews and observations on rave parties in Canada, Wilson (2002, 2006) reported that ravers had a philosophy of seeking pleasure through music to uphold values related to 'peace, love, unity, and respect' (aka the 'PLUR' ideal). Rietveld (1993) pointed out the anti-consumerism attitude of British ravers while acknowledging their desire to relax and escape from daily routines by attending all-night dance parties to indulge in a dream of hope and happiness. In sum, the extent of political involvement among ravers is unclear.

Classical, opera and musicals

Classical music, according to Rejai and Phillips, 'embodies such distinctly political-sociological concepts as class, status, power, mass movements, revolution, liberation, experimentation, organization, and the like' (2001, p. 177). Arblaster explained how composers of classical music and operas from 1820 to 1950, through developing a sense of national identity with the audience, helped to shape 'the entire culture and politics of the modern world' (2002, p. 272). Bokina (1997 as cited in Rejai 2002) described operas as

motivated by all kinds of political thoughts in their creation. DeLeon, analysing lyrics and content, concluded that musicals offered a 'comprehensive tableaux of social and political ideas' (2005, p. 114). This implies that political messages are embedded in classical music, operas, and musicals that may be related to a sense of civic activism.

Blues, jazz, and folk

Blues, jazz, and folk are other forms of music with political roots. Blues and jazz were created by Black Americans with political motivation in the early 1900s to express discontent about the values established by the mainstream culture (Asma 1997, Denning 1997, Street 2000, Lott 2001). One of the major purposes of a book written by McKay was to discuss 'the adoption of jazz in Great Britain by those who used it as a vehicle for social activism and political change' (*Circular Breathing: The Cultural Politics of Jazz in Britain* 2005 cited in Rawlins 2006, p. 101). Asma explained that the 'blues culture challenges and critiques the mainstream culture and its ethics' (1997, p. 9) and blues music is a means for 'identity affirmation in a world without political freedom' (1997, p. 15). Using the *Anthology of American Folk Music* (a set of US recordings from the 1920s and 1930s) as an example, Street explained that the American folk tunes contained in the set 'are about political issues or [which] are intended to generate a political message' (2000, p. 306).

Country music

Country music originated from the southern USA in the 1920s to represent the rural and the working-class way of life (Abramson 2002). Country music has been affiliated with patriotism and tends to uphold conventional family values (Abramson 2002, Mann 2008). However, Van Sickle (2005) found only 6% of number one country songs from 1960 to 2000 referred to political or ideological issues, implying that country music is not likely to be related to civic activism.

Young people and civic activism

Civic participation among youth has become a general concern as there is evidence that the current generation of young people is less likely to pay attention to news and discuss politics much less frequently than earlier generations (Putnam 2000, Twenge 2006). Voter participation among 18–24 year olds also experienced a sharp decline in the past 30 years or so in the western world (Youniss *et al.* 2002, Adsett 2003, Bynner *et al.* 2003, Gauthier 2003). Recent research from Australia, Canada, and the USA, however, argues that the current generation of young people may have chosen forms of political participation different from traditional voting in federal elections, such as signing a petition, boycotting a product, or participating in demonstrations (Gauthier 2003, Vromen 2003, Ellis 2004). These alternative methods will be explored in the current paper.

If music has been used as a mechanism for youth to express social and political thoughts or to promote civic activism as suggested by the literature reviewed above, the question then arises as to whether certain music styles have stronger relations to young people's civic activism than others. Music genres that have been used as mechanisms to express political and/or social thoughts include punk rock, heavy metal, classical, opera, musicals, blues, jazz, and folk music, so we hypothesize that young people who regularly listen to these genres will engage in the most civic activity. Hip-hop and rap music have political messages, but also emphasize materialism and fashion consciousness. Thus we

expect that involvement in civic activism will be weak among youth who are partial to hip-hop and rap. The literature is unclear as to whether the emphasis of rave music is on seeking pleasure or on social values. Thus we do not expect strong involvement in civic activism among youth who are fond of rave music (techno, trance, and house music). Since few country music songs are associated with political values, we do not expect any involvement in civic activism among youth who prefer country music.

There are many other types of music that young people like to listen to, but there is little information about these in the academic literature. Thus the relationship between civic activism and these musical genres remains exploratory. The remainder of this paper will examine the relationship between music genres and civic activism based on the hypotheses described above.

Method

Participants

182 participants aged 14–24 years from Calgary, Alberta, Canada were recruited; 90 females and 92 males. 101 participants were in the 14–17 years age group, 39 were in the 18–19 years age group, and 42 were aged 20–24.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from various locations in Calgary, including a large public park during the Canada Day festival, a downtown bus station, a skateboard park, and places where Stampede events (annual large outdoor family activities held every July) took place. Each participant provided informed consent before proceeding with the survey, which took about 20–25 minutes to complete.

Questionnaire measures

Participants were asked questions on a broad range of issues including demographic characteristics, perception of parenting styles, participation in community activities, attitudes towards spending and saving money, music preferences, and relations with friends. The main goal of this study concerns the relationship between engagement in civic activism and music preferences, but questions on demographic characteristics, parenting styles, and friendship will also be used to formulate control variables.

Non-organized volunteer activities

Questions were taken from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children & Youth (2005) and the General Social Survey on Social Engagement in Canada (General Social Survey 2004). Ten items related to non-organized volunteer activities were rated on a scale of one to four (one signified the participant never engaged in the activity; four indicated the participant partook in the activity four or more times per week). Sample items include 'activities at school', 'providing transportation or running errands', and 'teaching, tutoring, coaching or giving practical advice'. Scores could range from 10 to 40.

Civic activism

These questions asked about behaviours that aim to make changes in society. Participants checked off each of the nine items in which they had participated over the past 12 months. Sample items include 'searched for information on a political issue', 'volunteered for a political party', and 'expressed your views on an issue by contacting a newspaper or a politician'. Scores could range from zero to nine on this part of the questionnaire.

Associations and groups

Participants checked each of the five items they had been involved in over the past year. Among the activities were 'a sports or recreation organization', 'a cultural, education or hobby organization', and 'a religious-affiliated group'. Scores on this section could range from zero to five.

Music preferences

Participants were asked to indicate all music genres they listened to on a regular basis. This reflected the potential diverse music preferences of the participants, as suggested by the literature (for example, Bennett 1999c), and allowed participants the flexibility to define music genres according to their own perception.¹ Thirty-two music genres were chosen for the survey, based on recent literature (for example, Pampel 2006, Mulder *et al.* 2007). See Table 1 for the complete list. Participants were also asked to write down any other music genres they listened to regularly to ensure that we did not omit any important music type. The basic demographic information about the participants included their sex and age.

Parental authority questionnaire

This scale has 30 items per parent asking about warmth, permissiveness, and punishment (Buri 1991). Answers are based on a five-point scale. Participants answered the questionnaire separately for mother and for father. Thus, each participant received a score for permissiveness, authoritativeness, and authoritarianism for each parent. Buri reported that the test-retest reliability for the six scales ranged from 0.77 to 0.92. Internal consistency scores ranged from 0.74 to 0.87. For the present sample, Cronbach's alpha reached 0.81 (0.68 for mothers and 0.66 for fathers). Sample questions include 'My parent felt that in a well-run home the children should have their way in the family as often as the parents did', 'Even if the children didn't agree with him/her, my parent felt that it was for our own good if we were forced to conform to what he/she thought was right', and 'My parent has always encouraged verbal give-and-take whenever I have felt that family rules and restrictions were unreasonable'.

Perceived social support – friends

This 20-item scale allowed one of three answers: 'yes', 'no', or 'don't know' (Procidano and Heller 1983). Procidano and Heller reported an internal consistency of 0.88 and a test-retest reliability of 0.83. For the present sample, Cronbach's alpha reached 0.73. A higher score indicated greater support from friends. Sample questions include 'My friends give me the moral support I need' and 'Most other people are closer to their friends than I am'.

Table 1. Coefficients from Varimax rotated principal factor analysis on music genres^a.

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7	Factor 8
Alternative						0.602		
Alternative country								0.825
Big band	0.427			0.512				
Bluegrass	0.623							
Blues	0.755							
Classical				0.748				
Contemporary rock						0.672		
Country								0.738
Dance		0.532						
Easy listening					0.625			
Electronic		0.727						
Folk	0.718							
Gospel								0.483
Heavy metal							0.741	
Hip hop			0.804					
House		0.487			0.475			
Industrial		0.407						
Jazz	0.713							
Musicals				0.680				
New age					0.702			
Oldies						0.536		
Opera				0.680				
Pop			0.556					
R&B			0.785					
Rap			0.745					
Reggae								
Punk						0.458	0.640	
Ska							0.587	
Techno		0.759						
Trance		0.722						
World				0.508	0.461			

^aOnly coefficients >0.40 are shown; coefficients >0.60 in bold.

Results

Descriptive statistics

For non-organized volunteer activities, the raw scores from the 10 items were added for each participant such that individual scores could range from 10 to 40. The sample average is 20.09 (sd = 5.02). At least one participant scored throughout the range from 10 to 32, one participant scored 34 points, and two participants scored 37 points. Since this variable is scored in ordered categories, the appropriate regression method is ordered probit. However, ordered probit analysis is not usable here, as there are missing values between the possible scores of 32 and 40.

For participation in civic activism, the average participation level is 2.30 out of nine (sd = 2.07). Almost 25% of individuals indicated no participation in civic activism at all. (In comparison, only one third of all non-retired 19–64-year-old Canadians engaged in similar activities (Keown 2007), which may suggest that young people are more active than

are adults.) Most of the remaining individuals participated in one to four of the activities from the list. Only 11.5% of individuals participated in five or more activities. There is at least one participant for each possible score from zero to nine.

With regard to involvement in associations, the average participation level is 1.98 out of five ($sd = 1.27$). Thirteen per cent of participants indicated no participation in any association or group. The majority of individuals (53.8%) belonged to one or two groups. There was at least one participant for each possible score from zero to five. However, the overall model's goodness of fit from ordered probit regression is found to be statistically non-significant ($\chi^2 = 23.87$, degrees of freedom = 17), implying that the results obtained from this model may be unreliable.

With regard to music genres, the top five most frequently chosen music genres were pop (63.2%), hip-hop (61%), punk (51.6%), techno (51.1%), and alternative (49.5%).

Music genre groupings

A Varimax rotated principal components analysis (PCA) was used for data reduction of music genres. The rationale behind PCA is that items in the data that measure the same underlying characteristics will covary with each other (McDermeit *et al.* 2000). Among the initial 32 music genres included in the survey, children's music was eliminated from further analysis because less than 5% of participants (eight out of 182) selected this music genre as listened to regularly. None of the music genres from the open-ended responses was listed by more than 5% of respondents. Only music genre factors with eigenvalues of at least one from the PCA will be used in further analysis. Eight factors were identified, which contribute to 59.5% of the variance. A summary of the statistics from the PCA is presented in Table 1.

The following eight factors were generated in this study. They are described below along with their predicted relationships with civic participation:

- Factor 1 includes blues, jazz, and folk that are expected to be related to high engagement in civic activities. Other music genres included in this factor are bluegrass and big band.
- Factor 2 contains the genres of techno, trance, electronic, dance, house, and industrial that have been described in the literature as rave music, so this factor is expected to have no statistically significant relationship with civic activities.
- Factor 3 includes rap, hip-hop, rhythm and blues (R&B), and pop. Their relationships with civic activities are not clear.
- Factor 4 includes classical, opera, and musicals that are expected to be related to a high level of engagement in civic activities. Other genres included in this factor are big band and world.
- Factor 5 contains the genres of new age, easy listening, house, and world music that have received either limited or no discussion in the literature. Their relationships with civic activities remain exploratory.
- The rock genres of alternative, contemporary, and oldies loaded on Factor 6. These genres have not been extensively discussed in the literature, so their relationships with civic activities remain exploratory. The other genre included in this factor is punk, which is hypothesized to be positively related to engagement in civic activities.
- Factor 7 includes two rock genres, heavy metal and punk, which are expected to be positively related to civic activities. The other genre included in this factor is ska.

- Factor 8 consists of country and gospel, of which the former is expected to have no statistically significant relationship with civic activities, while the latter receives limited discussion in the literature and remains exploratory.

Relationship between music preferences and civic activities

This section examines the relationship between music preferences and civic activities using regression analysis. The dependent variables used are the three measures of community activities (non-organized volunteer activities, civic activism, and involvement in associations). Since all the dependent variables are recorded in ordered categories, the regression method chosen is ordered probit. Due to the inappropriateness of using ordered probit with dependent variables that have missing cells (non-organized volunteering) or when the overall model's goodness of fit is non-significant (belonging to associations), regression analysis is performed only on civic activism. The remainder of the discussion in this section will focus on civic activism as the dependent variable.

Civic activism is a nine-category variable that captures the extent to which an individual engaged in activities over the past year such as boycotting a product, attending a public meeting, or participating in a demonstration. The level of civic engagement can range from none (value of dependent variable = zero) to participation in all nine types of activities listed on the survey (value of dependent variable = nine). The independent variables include the eight music genre factors generated from the last section. Other variables such as sex, age, parenting styles and friendship are also included in the regression analysis as control variables.

The overall goodness of fit of the regression model measured by the chi-squared statistic is 34.76 and is significant at the 99% confidence level. Factor 4 (classical, musical, opera, big band, and world music) and Factor 7 (heavy metal, punk, and ska) have significant positive relationships with civic activism at the 99% confidence level. Factor 1 (blues, jazz, folk, big band, and bluegrass) has a marginal positive relationship with civic activism at the 90% confidence level. Factor 3 (hip-hop, rap, R&B, and pop) has a significant negative relationship with civic activism at the 95% confidence level. Factor 2 (techno, trance, electronic, dance, house, and industrial) and Factor 8 (country, alternative country, and gospel music) have no significant relationship with civic activism. Of the remaining exploratory factors, Factor 5 (new age, easy listening, house, and world) has a significant positive relationship with civic activism at the 99% confidence level, while Factor 6 (contemporary rock, alternative, oldies, punk) has no significant relationship with civic activism. The coefficients for all the control variables including sex, age, parenting styles, and friendship were found to be statistically non-significant.

Threshold variables indicate whether there exist meaningful differences among the various categories of the dependent variables (i.e. the level of civic activism). All the threshold variables are found to be statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. This means that separating the level of civic activism (the dependent variable) into nine categories is useful, as collapsing the dependent variable into fewer categories may cause loss of potentially important information. The results from the statistical analysis are summarized in Table 2.

To summarize, Factors 4, 5, and 7 showed the strongest positive relationships with civic activism. Music genres included here are classical, opera, musicals, world music (Factor 4), new age, easy listening, house, and world music (Factor 5), and heavy metal, punk, and ska (Factor 7). Factor 1 (blues, jazz, folk, bluegrass and big band) has a marginally significant positive relationship with civic activism. Hip-hop, rap, R&B, and pop music (Factor 3) are

Table 2. Relationship between music genres and civic activism^a.

Variable	Coefficients (<i>t</i> -statistics)
Factor 1 (blues ...)	0.1474 (1.77)*
Factor 2 (techno ...)	-0.0238 (-0.30)
Factor 3 (hip-hop ...)	-0.1817 (-2.22)**
Factor 4 (classical ...)	0.2222 (2.81)***
Factor 5 (new age ...)	0.2265 (2.65)***
Factor 6 (contemporary rock ...)	0.0477 (0.56)
Factor 7 (heavy metal ...)	0.2283 (2.79)***
Factor 8 (alternative country ...)	0.0227 (0.28)
Threshold 1	0.5332 (7.11)***
Threshold 2	1.0083 (11.46)***
Threshold 3	1.5655 (15.12)***
Threshold 4	2.0547 (16.48)***
Threshold 5	2.2593 (16.46)***
Threshold 6	2.6859 (15.42)***
Threshold 7	3.0241 (13.60)***
Threshold 8	3.3542 (11.18)***
Value of log-likelihood function	-336.23
Chi-squared statistics	34.76***
Number of observations	182

^aCoefficients and *t*-statistics of the control variables (age, sex, parenting styles, and friendship) were included in the regression analysis but are not shown here. ***Significant at the 99% confidence level (two-tailed test), **significant at the 95% confidence level (two-tailed test), and *significant at the 90% confidence level (two-tailed test).

significantly negatively associated with activism. The remaining factors (Factors 2, 6, and 8) show no relationship with activism – these are techno, trance, electronic, dance, house, and industrial (Factor 2), alternative rock, contemporary rock, oldies, and punk rock (Factor 6), and country, alternative country, and gospel music (Factor 8).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between music preferences and civic participation among young people. Our analysis identified eight music genre factors, of which four had significant relationships with civic activism.

Our first hypothesis was that participants who regularly listen to punk rock, heavy metal, classical, opera, musicals, blues, jazz, and folk music would engage in the most civic activity. Punk rock was included in two factors (Factor 6 and Factor 7). Factor 7 was significantly related to civic activity but Factor 6 was not, so this finding may not be robust. Heavy metal was included in Factor 7, supporting the hypothesis. Classical music, operas, and musicals were included in Factor 4, which did show a significant relationship with participation in civic activities. Blues, jazz, and folk music were part of Factor 1. However, Factor 1 was only marginally significant, so, while showing a trend consistent with our hypothesis, we cannot be totally confident about this finding.

Overall, we find qualified support for our first hypothesis. This suggests that young people who are attracted to music genres that are associated with ideological or political issues are interested enough in these issues to take action. There are a number of other music genres that loaded on these factors that have not been discussed in the literature

regarding their political focus. Future research may want to explore political messages behind ska, bluegrass, and big band (big band music loaded on both Factors 1 and 4).

Our second hypothesis was that involvement in civic activism would not be as strong among youth who regularly listen to hip-hop and rap as among those who prefer the genres listed above. Hip-hop and rap loaded on Factor 3, along with R&B and pop music. Somewhat contrary to our hypothesis, results indicated that participants who favoured these types of music were very *unlikely* to engage in civic activism. While the historical development of hip-hop and rap was associated with protest (for example, Mulder *et al.* 2007), these music genres have also been used to promote materialism and to sell all kinds of goods and services (for example, Taylor and Taylor, 2004, Riley 2005). It may be that the drive for materialism outweighs the initial political messages associated with these music genres, as hip-hop and rap music are now associated with a fashion-conscious culture – especially among white suburban North American teens, who made up the majority of our participants (Maxwell 1997, Cutler 1999, Taylor and Taylor 2004, Riley 2005).

An alternative explanation for our findings that these listeners are not getting involved in trying to change society may be that music preferences reflect underlying personality differences. Rentfrow and Gosling (2003) suggested that hip-hop, rap, and R&B listeners scored highly on the trait of agreeableness, which potentially may be an underlying personality trait that drives lower levels of civic activism. Further research would be necessary to test this.

Another possible underlying feature not explored in this paper is that of sensation-seeking. Several studies have indicated that certain genres – for example, heavy metal, punk, ska, and reggae (Weisskirch and Murphy 2004), and rap and heavy metal (Arnett 1995) – are associated with the appeal of high sensations. While high sensation-seeking has been reported to be related to risk-taking (Robert *et al.* 1988) and anti-authority attitudes (Mulder *et al.* 2007), the possibility exists that sensation-seekers may be motivated to be active in changing the community. If future research finds that listeners of hip-hop, rap, R&B and pop music are low in sensation-seeking, this may help explain our findings.

The third hypothesis of this paper was that involvement in civic activism would be weak among youth who regularly listen to rave music (techno, trance, and house music). These genres all loaded onto Factor 2, although house music also loaded onto Factor 5. Factor 2 showed no significant relationship with civic activism, although Factor 5 did. This lends further support to the notion that youth who enjoy music for its aesthetic value rather than for its political meaning are not particularly involved in activism, but neither are they opposed to such activities. Other music styles loading on Factor 2 that also showed no association with civic activism are electronic, dance, and industrial music.

Our final prediction was that involvement in civic activism would not be strong among youth who regularly listen to country music. Consistent with our prediction, country music loaded on Factor 8, which had no relationship with civic activism. Also loading on this factor were alternative country and gospel music.

Implications

This project discovered links between music preferences and young people's civic activism. Prior to this, the literature had shown that political ideas were associated with certain music genres, but no work had examined whether actual political behaviours were related to specific music genres. Our analysis provides empirical evidence that music genres associated with political expression are related to civic activities in practice.

An additional contribution of our study is the clustering of the various music genres into groups. Many studies in the past chose to focus on specific music genres. For example, some studies discussed hip-hop and rap (for example, Taylor and Taylor 2004) while others examined classical music and opera (for example, Rejai and Phillips 2001). Most used no more than 12–18 genres, and some admitted to using an outdated list of music styles (Pearson and Dollinger 2004). A strength of our study is the much more comprehensive list of genres.

Our factor analysis identified clusters of music genres consistent with the music genre clusters identified by factor analysis in previous research, providing support for discussing certain music genres as a group. For example, a ‘rock’ factor (similar to Factor 6) was found by Pearson and Dollinger (2004) as well as by Mulder *et al.* (2007). Pearson and Dollinger identified a ‘classical music’ factor, consistent with our Factor 4, as well as a factor that included jazz, folk, and soul, comparable with Factor 1. Additionally, Mulder *et al.* found a ‘pop-dance’ factor that is very similar to Factor 2. In the past, rap, hip-hop, and heavy metal listeners have been grouped together in the same category (for example, Pampel 2006). Our analysis suggests that there are important differences between rap/hip-hop and heavy metal listeners that have not been fully recognized by the literature. This is a direction for future research.

Our results also suggest that, despite concern over young people’s apathy regarding politics (for example, Putnam 2000, Twenge 2006), some groups of youth may actually be very active. Regarding such involvement, Wallace (2003, p. 243) asked, ‘Do young people represent an homogeneous group or are there different tendencies within youth?’ Our research suggests one answer to this question. Youth who listen to music with political themes may be attracted to these types of music because they fit with their values, beliefs, and lifestyles. Thus, civic activism may be part of their identity (Youniss *et al.* 2001, Bynner *et al.* 2003). North and Hargreaves (2007a, b, c) conducted a series of studies that found relationships between music preferences and lifestyles, including the political leanings of adult listeners. Previous research (for example, Zaff and Michelsen 2002) found that adolescents who engage in civic activities also tend to be involved in school activities, to graduate from high school, to hold positive civic attitudes, and to be less likely to get pregnant, cause a pregnancy, or abuse drugs than their non-active peers. Whether this is true of youth who like punk rock, heavy metal, classical, opera, musicals, blues, jazz, and folk music remains a question for future research.

In contrast to youth who listen to music with political themes, those who enjoy hip-hop, rap, R&B, and pop music are very unlikely to engage in civic activities. Given that pop and hip-hop were two of the most popular types of music in this sample, this may be the case for a large number of young people. Evidence exists that hip-hop and rap no longer contain messages of dissent, thus our findings may fit with these listeners’ lifestyles. Taylor and Taylor (2004, p. 251) emphasized the commercialized aspect of hip-hop while describing the music as part of a lifestyle:

Hip-hop is no longer limited to rap music and break dancing; today it represents a multi-billion dollar industry that influences everything from automotive design and fashion to prime time television programming, collegiate and professional sports, mass media marketing, and Madison Avenue advertising. Today hip-hop is for many a way of life, a culture that is intricately woven into every aspect of their daily lives.

Similarly, Alridge and Stewart (2005, p. 190) stated:

Hip Hop has encompassed not just a musical genre, but also a style of dress, dialect and language, way of looking at the world, and an aesthetic that reflects the sensibilities of a large population of youth born between 1965 and 1984.

We must add the caveat that our sample did not contain many poor urban Blacks for whom this music may have different meanings. (This reflects the population of the city – the 2001 census revealed that a little over 1.5% of the population identified as Black; Statistics Canada 2007.)

Limitations

Our data lacked some demographic information about our participants, such as ethnicity, socio-economic status and family income. Future research that includes different demographic groups (e.g. poor urban Blacks) would be valuable.

It is unfortunate that results from our factor analysis were not totally ‘clean’. In other words, four genres loaded onto more than one factor. While this may be an indication of the fluidity of music preferences, a larger sample may be needed to establish whether these factors are robust.

One potential limitation of our study is the lack of information about preferences for specific bands. Although we decided to do this because a specific artist or band may not always be a good representation of a certain music genre, it is also possible that participants may have interpreted the labels of the music genres in different ways. For example, ‘punk’ may mean popular punk music (that has high media exposure) to some, but hardcore underground punk (that has limited or no media exposure) to others. The method used in this study allowed participants the flexibility to define music genres according to their own perceptions and to choose as many music genres as they liked. Such an approach is consistent with the literature that suggests young people’s music choices are fluid and transient (Bennett 2000). Future studies may wish to examine which subgenres or specific bands are associated with civic activism.

Our methodology limited us to numerical conclusions. We were unable to conduct in-depth interviews or to be participant observers. However, by providing a comparison of behavioural differences associated with liking different music genres, evidence from this study can serve as a complement to other studies that use qualitative research methods to gain a richer picture.

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Note

1. This study uses music genres as broadly defined without references to specific bands/artists or subgenres to allow as much flexibility in music preferences as possible. Findings from this study can complement evidence from ethnographic studies that focus on specific bands/artists or subgenres.

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