

Multiple Selves And The Relevance Of The Familial Context

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Abstract

Adolescence is a period that allows for experimentation of new behaviours and the temporary adoption of different selves. Indeed, a number of researchers have questioned the notion of a single identity and proposed a more flexible and temporary construct (Hall 1996). If the way in which individuals express themselves is intrinsically linked to the concept of identity and sense of self, understanding how identities are formed and how this may influence consumption has significant implications for marketing. This paper considers if the concept of multiple selves is evident through adolescent music consumption and what, if any, variables facilitate in understanding the adolescent and their sense of “self”. These initial exploratory findings suggest that the adolescents in this sample raised in blended and single parent families have a greater number of “selves” and invest more resources to belong to social groups.

Key Words

Adolescence, Identity, Symbolism, Family type

Introduction

Adolescence includes developing independence, a sexual identity, recognition of “self” and a place in society (Carter, Bennetts and Carter, 2003) and during this period young people have their first opportunity to conceptualise themselves. Adolescents can be characterised mainly as active agents particularly with regard to subcultural activity and identity formation who consciously shape and choose their own destinies (Wyn & White, 2000). It is this period that allows for experimentation of new behaviours and the temporary adoption of different selves, partly in an effort to locate themselves and also in response to the lack of responsibility and the uncertainty of their future role in society. They are ‘questioning themselves internally as to what they are and wish to be seen as, working toward integration of past experiences, present performances, and future expectancies, attaining a somewhat coherent, somewhat permanent answer to the question “Who am I?”’ (Campbell 1969, p.822).

Identity

However identity is not a stable entity. It has been broadly accepted [For example see: Derrida 1972, Mead 1972, Denzin 1989, Kondo 1990, Hall 1996] that identity is a process as opposed to a “thing” and as such describes a state of being or becoming. According to Negus and Velazquez (2002), ‘we must move away from the obvious markers of identity towards those that are more complexly coded and less easily decoded’ (p.144). These authors also argue for an approach to the study of music and cultural identities that moves beyond the notion of identity as an inevitable and predictable conclusion or outcome. It could, however, be a starting point from which

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to begin a search for a greater understanding of socialisation through popular music consumption, which is the focus of this research.

Underpinning the conceptual framework of this research is the notion of agency and the assumption that it is possible for an individual (in this case the adolescent respondents) to ascribe a degree of agency (or control), particularly during the process of becoming or being. This corresponds with Cornwell and Drennan's (2004) definition of 'elective identity', namely, 'the sense of self that is developed by choice and change' (p.114). That is, identity is derived from an individual's ability to 'self-fashion' from their social environment and attain and discard their chosen identity at will.

Having More than One Identity

What has been argued so far is that identity formulation is a process that is not static, but evolves over time as the individual passes through or is influenced by different social structures. It could be suggested therefore that if the individual is engaged in more than one social structure that bears some influence on the individual, be it family, school, friendship groups or a sub-cultural social group, more than one identity may be formulated. A number of researchers have questioned the notion of a single identity and proposed a more flexible and temporary construct (Hall 1996).

Mead's contribution (1972) supports the perspective adopted in this study by theorizing that our personal sense of self or our personal identity is inherently social, and as outlined above, multiple. That is, through our social relationships and the way in which these relationships reflect identities, we are able to construct our identity or sense of self. Belk (1988) states that 'our possessions are a major contributor to and a reflection of our identities' (p.139) and 'the major sources of information about the "language" of expressive consumption are media, family, schools and peers' (Belk et al, 1982, p.4). Possessions as well as social relationships associated with music consumption then may facilitate an understanding of adolescents and their identity (s) formation.

Semiology and the Individual's Symbolic World

How individuals express themselves, through possessions and the communication of these 'semiotics' is intrinsically linked to the concept of identity and sense of self. Expression of who we are can be performed through talking (language), dressing in a particular way (using symbols) adopting certain products or brands (expressive consumption) and socialising with particular people, as behaviour and practices also carry a symbolic function. Language or discourse can be seen as a medium through which, as well as the context within which, the fundamental processes of identity are forged (Tietze, Cohen and Musson, 2003). These processes are reinforced through the adoption and use of brands to communicate self-concept to others, referred to by Chaplin and John (2005) as 'self-brand connections'.

Symbolic interactionism stresses that relationships with other people play a large part in forming the 'self' or 'selves', and offers a theoretical basis for conceptualising this socially oriented self and its relationship with product conspicuousness (Charon, 2001). The concept of symbolic interactionism is based on the premise that individuals interact with society and important reference groups to determine how behaviour should be structured. These social interactions are ongoing; people act in

response to the behaviour of others, taking others' behaviour into account as they act (Charon, 2001). Much of the interaction that takes place is done through the use of symbols and is based upon the assumption that the receiver understands the "code" which the sender is using to transmit their message (Bhat & Reddy, 1998). Shared knowledge and shared attitudes can therefore ensure that the message has been successfully sent, and consumption symbols are very important as a means of communicating with others in the world.

Words, language, symbols and brands then are chosen to help define and communicate identity and are essentially polysemic, that is, they carry different meanings depending on, among other things, the context within which they are used and the individual's interpretation of their meaning. If meanings attached to cultural text are generated and agreed between particular social and cultural contexts, they can be adopted or "invested in" (Hall, 1996) as a way of belonging to a cultural or social group. Equally, given that symbols have meanings or associations that reflect the shared values and beliefs of the social context from which they have been derived, they can be used to communicate to others (and to the self) as a means of constituting identity (s).

Music Consumption as a Semiotic in Identity Formation

One factor influencing sense of self is the change in family structure and family type. Given that adolescents from all family types are searching for individual identity(s) at this time, what remains unclear is the effect family type has upon the force and nature (velocity) by which adolescents move away from their family culture. As result of an increasingly alienating society, Cushman (1990) cites the demise of community and loss of traditional family networks as key factors in generating feelings of emptiness and loss. Consequently this has led to the fragmentation of self, identity confusion and the search for identity or meaningful self (Kellner, 1992, Wiley 1994, Gabriel & Lang 1995). Through the search for meaningful self, it could be suggested that symbolic products and other objects could be sought by the individual to provide that meaning.

Research Questions

- By exploring the concept of multiple selves as potentially revealed through adolescent music consumption is it possible to facilitate a greater understanding of identity formation?
- As a result of contextualizing the social environment in which the adolescent is raised is it possible to generate greater insight into the factors that may influence the adolescent and their sense of "self"?
- Is it possible to ascertain any links between the number of "selves", the personal outlay in cultural or social groups, and the resulting level of investment in symbols (clothing, music, language etc.)?

Method

The potentially sensitive and complex role of music with regard to both self-identity and interpersonal relationships coupled with the research challenges specific to the population of interest (teenagers) suggested a qualitative research approach would yield greater insight than a questionnaire-based study. The main thrust of this research involved 24 in-depth interviews, evenly split between respondents from all three family types (intact, blended and single families), with pre-tasking that required the participants to consider a week before the interviews what was important in their lives

and where possible photo these things/people or associated material (throwaway cameras provided by the researchers) (see Nancarrow et al. 2001). Photos were brought to the interviews and served as ice-breakers and a way of building rapport quickly with the respondents.

The draw and write technique was also employed during the interviews to facilitate expressions of an internal view of music. A web page was also designed specifically for the teenagers to put up their thoughts about the research and music. This was on-line for a month after the interviews had been conducted.

The following section summarises the key findings of this research. The concept of “self” amongst all mid to late adolescents in relation to music consumption is explored followed by a greater consideration of multiple selves relative to music consumption and family type.

The Meaning of Music

The respondents, regardless of age, gender or family structure appeared to be in agreement about what music represented for them as adolescents:

“I think it’s because it helps them see their own personality I guess, the music that they’re listening to they can say I like this music and that’s how I am.” Boy 16

It seemed however that the respondents raised in blended and single parent families placed more significance on music for a greater number of reasons. Whilst respondents raised in intact families acknowledged music could enhance their mood, could make other people happy (i.e. one respondent said music was personally satisfying because he was able to satisfy someone else’s music needs) and could be used in some way to express identity, it seemed music was important but was less critical to their existence than for those raised in blended and single parent families. Interviewees raised in intact families tended to be more philosophical about music and identified it as transitory. The suggestion was that music could make an individual more powerful or give them an “edge” and this is supported by Holt (1998).

Conversely, those respondents living in blended and single parent families seemed to have much more of an emotional attachment to music and this was not gender specific. Although music was recognised as being a mood enhancer, the significance of lyrics and the way in which the respondents could relate to the lyrics appeared to be much more important. For example, an artist’s experience could be seen to match the experience of the respondent (being bullied) or music was used to cope with a problem. For some respondents raised in blended and single parent families music could help them relive happier times and was used to recall nostalgic moments. The strength of the connection to a particular music genre or artist was also evident, with one respondent believing “...you’re not a proper fan if you just like the music, you’ve got to like them as well” (Girl 15).

Further to this respondents raised in blended and single parent families suggested music “shows other people who I am”. That is, whilst respondents raised in intact families acknowledged music could be used to express identity, interviewees raised in blended or single parent families placed greater importance on music as a way of developing a character or expressing individuality. It may be that there is a greater

search for a meaningful self or selves (Wiley, 1994; Kellner 1992; Gabriel and Lang, 1995) for those raised in blended or single parent families and this supports findings on the way in which these respondents have a connection to their parents. These adolescents also invested in their “identity” to a greater extent and clothing, concert tickets, posters and associated “fan” material was consumed to a much greater extent by those raised in single parent and blended family environments.

Type of Music

Whilst boys like to source music no-one else has heard of, they also appear to have a more eclectic taste. Boys raised in intact families are most diverse in the range of music they listen to (although are more judgmental of others’ tastes). Girls raised in blended families are far more likely to listen to pop music whilst girls raised in single parent families are likely to consume stereotypically negative music as described by Tarrant, North & Hargreaves (2001). Those adolescents raised in intact families appear to have more confidence in adopting an identity (identities) and have fewer “selves”. As such, the diversity of their music choice illustrates the lack of complexity in their family structure i.e. music choice is allowed to expand as the need for a grounded identity becomes less imperative.

Friendship Groups

The interviewees were also asked to express the way in which music was chosen and consumed within friendship groups. Younger respondents appeared to have the same music tastes as their friends and spoke of sharing music and introducing music to one another. This may be because “intentional communication” (Hebdige, 1979) is too great a risk for younger teenagers and that friendship groups or “belonging” as discussed by Frith (1996) is more important for this age group. Older respondents were more aware of different genres. Females appeared to have a narrower range of tastes as did their female friends – again belonging appears to be equal, if not more important than, taste. Some respondents raised in intact families used music, within friendship groups, to differentiate their friendship groups from others. It seemed to be used to illustrate difference but also, perhaps, power or authority.

Implications for Marketing

This research illustrates that the concept of multiple selves is evident through adolescent music consumption although a greater number of “selves” is apparent for those being raised in blended or single parent families. Adolescents raised in blended or single parent families also placed a greater importance on music as a way of developing a character or expressing individuality. This was also reflected in the “investment” made by these adolescents in terms of clothing, concert tickets and associated “fan” material. This has implications for marketing as it is widely recognised that the types of families and households in the West are increasingly disparate, reflecting changes in relationship development and closure (for UK see Social Trends, 2003). There has been a well-documented decline in the “traditional” or “intact” family household (Haskey, 1998)² and consequently, stepfamilies (or blended families as described by Brown & Mann, 1990) formed as a result of individuals re-marrying or co-habiting with new partners are more prevalent than single parent households. 8% of the total number of families in the UK is now

² Lone-parent households with dependent children doubled from 3% to 6% (from 1971-1991) (Social Trends, 2003) with the latter figure remaining constant for 2002

“blended”. As such, the potential for growing the music market (and associated products) appears to be probable given a depth of understanding about these adolescents.

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