**Public Versus Private Preferences for Music Genres**

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**Abstract**

This study aims to target the difference in student's public music preferences versus private. Students of a mid-sized high school close to Vancouver were asked to answer both privately, with a survey, and publicly, with a brief interview, the same question regarding their favorite music genres. With the results showing drastic differences, the most notably different genre in regard to the setting was country music, suggesting that public perception plays a key role in people's self expression.

**Background**

Popular music often contains various genres, with the most often encountered on the radio and cellphone playlists to be: Hip Hop, Pop, Rock, Alternative rock, Country, Blues, Classical, R&B, and Folk.. The present study surrounds the changes in opinion that teenagers publicly and privately express about music.

In the teenage world, peer pressure often forces a more narrow range of choices in music, clothing, and style of speech. For example, most teenagers in Canada want an iPhone because it is the most popular brand. With clothing choices, people tend to dress within a spectrum of typical choices. Styles of speech are constrained to the cultural norms of the setting. As a minor example, over the past few years, the phrase "Sus" (meaning suspicious) entered teenage speech, with its usage ramping up at alarming paces among the teenage sphere.

With music choices, the popularity of music genres is often in conjunction with the geographical region and the listener's age. Prioritizing social status, most steer away from unconventional or unpopular music. Social expectations also play a huge role; for example, in a conservative region, it would not be the popular choice to blast drill-rap.

The present study will focus on the contrast between the private and public expression of listened music genres in adolescents, doing so with surveys and interviews. It should be noted that I am an international student in the school, but based on what I've seen and heard, my predictions are that the most popular music genres will be Rap, Pop, Alternative Rock, and Country.

## Review of Literature

In a research study conducted in 2021, Tian, Alei and Rule examined whether the physical appearance of an individual could predict their music preference, and if that could help guide social interactions between people with a similar physical appearance. Structuring their research in the three separate studies, the first study asked people to guess the musical preferences of a person based on their physiognomy. The conclusion was that isolated bodies, heads, hair, faces, eyes, and mouths were the body parts that revealed the most information about someone's music preferences. The second study explored the connection between apparent behavioral characteristics and music preferences based on five visual cues: attractiveness, dominance, energy, style, and neatness. It revealed that people discern others' music preferences based on perception of their attributes. The third and final study was dedicated to the psychology behind socialization based on assumptions of similar music preference. The researchers  estimated that people were more likely to socialize with people who appeared to like upbeat and complex music, despite their own music preferences. In sum, music preferences can be detected by physical appearance, in turn, also affecting social interactions.

In 2011, Rentfrow, Goldberg and Levitin delineated musical preferences into a five factor model. A Mellow factor (smooth and relaxing styles), an Urban factor (rhythmic and percussive music, eg., rap, funk), a Sophisticated factor (mostly classical, operatic music, and jazz), an Intense factor (loud and energetic music), and a Camperstral factor (rootsy music eg., country). Their thesis was that an individual's music preference is influenced by psychological factors. They conducted four studies with the last one generating sets of music-specific and psychological attributes on which people should be judged. Forty participants were asked to rate 146 musical excerpts–the same ones used in the first two studies. Their task was to judge some excerpts using a 9-point scale from extremely

uncharacteristic to extremely characteristic. Without any external jurisdiction on how they rated each piece, the study revealed that each of the five music factors have different and unique attributes; therefore, the preferences of music styles are influenced both by social connotation and by particular auditory features of music.

In 2018, Merlander, Florida, Rentfrow and Potter studied how geographic differences can affect music preferences. The hypothesis was that geographical location reflected the preferences, attitudes, and predispositions for culture. The authors surveyed 120,000 people in 95 major metropolitan areas across the United States. Further, they analyzed the music preferences associated with the economic, demographic, and psychological variables across every metro region. Subsequently, they categorized music in five groups so as to reduce the number of variables: mellow (romantic, sad, slow), unpretentious (relaxing, unaggressive, acoustic…), sophisticated (inspiring, complex, dynamic…), intense (distorted, loud, aggressive) and contemporary (percussive, electric); this method of classification was established as the varimax rotation. The results confirmed the hypothesis–there were links between political stance and economic situation and the music taste in Americans.
All three studies suggest that people's physical appearance, political environment, social connotation, and music preferences are linked. This relationship also hints at the societal pressure that would correlate to publicly revealing music preferences, and the comfort or true enjoyment in privacy.
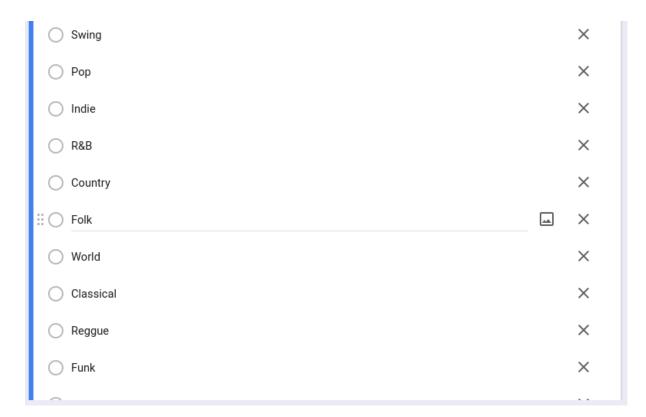
**Methods**

I conducted my study at a mid-sized high school near the Lower Mainland of Vacouver, BC, Canada. The town is situated on a peninsula, with two population centers and semi-rural areas. The population is largely of European background, with a smaller percentage of Indian and Asian backgrounds. Many of the students in the school come from a non-traditional background in terms of lifestyle and gender orientation. The participants ranged in age from

13 to 18. Data was gathered using two surveys (one anonymous, one public) that asked the same question: "What music genres do you listen to the most?"

The anonymous data was gathered via Google Forms. The intention behind the anonymity was to increase the likelihood that the answers were honest. Additionally, the survey was multiple choice and open to add additional generes, ensuring users had complete control on their choices.

The survey was also translated into a QR code, printed on paper sheets, and attached throughout the school, so more students could scan and complete it. Furthermore, in order to assure the response of as many students as possible, the survey was presented in all classrooms with every class receiving a paper until submissions exceeded 180 responses.

- ○ Swing ✕
- ○ Pop ✕
- ○ Indie ✕
- ○ R&B ✕
- ○ Country ✕
- ○ Folk 🖼 ✕
- ○ World ✕
- ○ Classical ✕
- ○ Reggue ✕
- ○ Funk ✕

- ○ Reggue ✕
- ○ Funk ✕
- ○ Ska ✕
- ○ Electronic ✕
- ○ Anime ✕
- ○ J-Pop ✕
- ○ K-Pop ✕
- ○ Soundtrack ✕
- ○ Easy Listening ✕
- ○ Experimental ✕
- ○ Other… ✕

The second survey was done face to face with the author. Students were asked if they wanted to participate. If open, they would receive a printed survey, and the author would register the results on a seperate sheet of paper. All the data from both face to face and anonymous surveys was gathered into a table and graph, to be later compared.
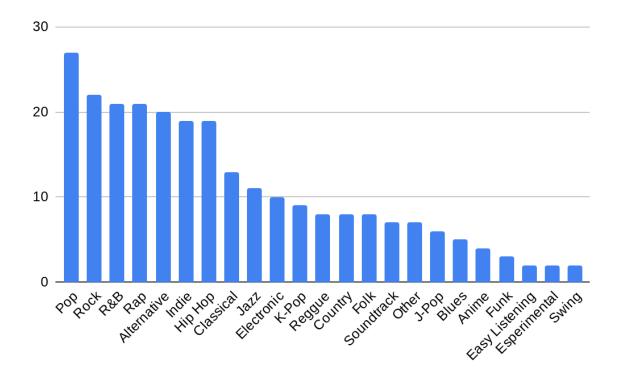
**Data**

Private Survey (178 respondents)



**Table 1.**

| Genre | Result |
| --- | --- |
| Pop | 103 |
| Rock | 86 |
| Alternative | 64 |
| R&B | 59 |
| Indie | 58 |
| Country | 39 |
| Rap | 34 |
| Jazz | 33 |
| Soundtrack | 32 |
| Electronic | 31 |
| Classical | 31 |
| Easy Listening | 24 |
| Blues | 23 |
| K-Pop | 23 |
| Reggue | 22 |
| Funk | 20 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Experimental | 19 |
| Anime | 18 |
| J-Pop | 17 |
| Other | 15 |
| Swing | 13 |
| Folk | 11 |
| Hip Hop | 11 |
| Metal | 9 |
| World | 8 |
| Ska | 6 |
| Punk | 3 |

Public Survey (56 respondents)



**Table 2.**

| Genre | Results |
| --- | --- |
| Pop | 27 |
| Rock | 22 |
| R&B | 21 |
| Rap | 21 |
| Alternative | 20 |
| Indie | 19 |
| Hip Hop | 19 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Classical | 13 |
| Jazz | 11 |
| Electronic | 10 |
| K-Pop | 9 |
| Reggue | 8 |
| Country | 8 |
| Folk | 8 |
| Soundtrack | 7 |
| Other | 7 |
| J-Pop | 6 |
| Blues | 5 |
| Anime | 4 |
| Funk | 3 |
| Easy Listening | 2 |
| Esperimental | 2 |
| Swing | 2 |

**Discussion**

The first data collection is from the private survey, and the second is from the public one. From the first table, the genres most appreciated are Pop, Rock, Alternative, and R&B. The second table shares similar results with the most popular genres being Pop, Rock, R&B, and Rap. Although small, the differences in music preferences hints at a deeper connotation. If we take the case of country music, it is the sixth most popular genre, whereas it is the 14th in the public survey. One possible reason is that some of the people who enjoy listening to country music tend not to disclose this information in public, in order not to be associated with it or its listeners. Another genre that presented differences in popularity between the two surveys was Hip Hop. In the private survey it was the 23rd most popular genre, however in the public one, it was the 7th. Peer pressure and the popularity of Hip Hop might have played a role here. Certain types of music are often associated with politics and geographical regions. For example, country is associated with the southern United States, which tends to be very conservative and traditional; Hip Hop, contrarily, is associated with urban centers on both coasts of the United States.

Future research on this topic includes gathering information in a much more diverse cultural setting, with a more detailed description of the examined subjects. In order to not cause confusion in the participants, it would be more efficient to give brief examples of all the genres listed. This study's limitations are that the only main information about the participants was that they were Elphinstone Secondary students, and their ages ranged from 13 to 18.

**Conclusion**

The result of this research suggests that there are discrepancies between the private and public expression of favorite music genres among teenagers. The most emblematic example is the country music genre. This study has proven that people feel obligated to

respect certain social expectations in regard to the music they listen to. Besides country music, the prediction made in the background section was respected: the most listened music genres were rap, pop, and alternative rock.

## References

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