

## Popular Music and Post-Millennials

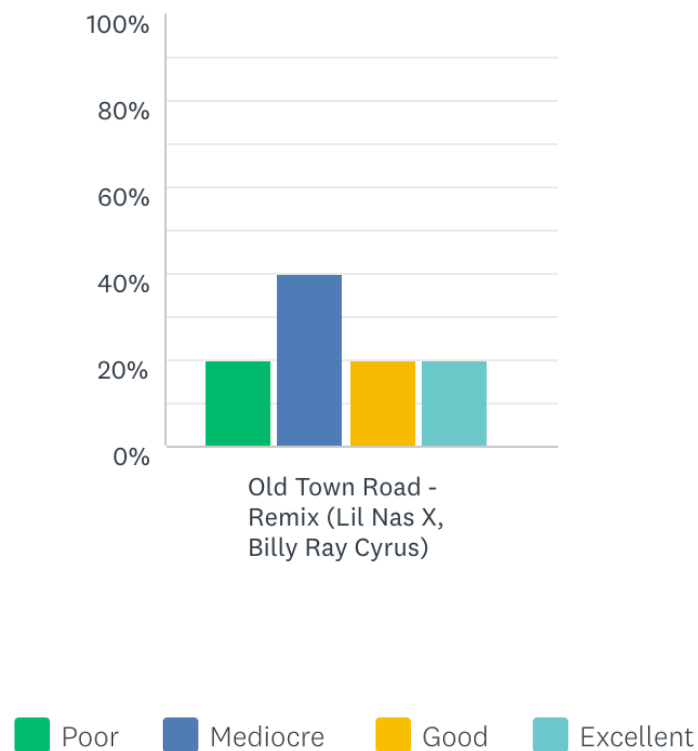
Popular music today operates as a two-way path for communicating meaning amongst post-millennials and college students. As an overwhelming 80% of our Media Theory class subscribe to Spotify, it is clear that listening to popular music is important to our generation of post-millennials and college-age kids. The prominence of popular music in our lives has profound effects on millennial behavior. Simultaneously, however, post-millennials affect how popular music is produced and distributed based off of our tastes and preferences. Ironically enough, though we listen to 75% more music than Baby Boomers (Matthews, 2018), scientific research has proven that popular music has actually lessened in musical quality since the 1960s. Scientific American reports that “After peaking in the 1960s, timbral variety has been in steady decline to the present day ... this implies a homogenization of the overall timbral palette, which could point to less diversity” (Serra et al.). Timbre describes the quality of sound an instrument produces. For instance, a note played by a guitar sounds entirely different than the same note played by a piano, indicating a difference in timbre. In this way, popular music today all sounds the same due to instrumentation becoming increasingly repetitive. Additionally, “the basic pitch vocabulary has remained unchanged—the same notes and chords that were popular in decades past are popular today—but the syntax has become more restricted. Musicians today seem less adventurous in moving from one chord or note to another” (Serra et al.). This means that melodies are also being reproduced by artists, creating a different sort of homogeneity in the way popularized songs sound. Popular music follows a cyclical pattern: on account of songs’ similarity, most popular music is white noise until a “stand-out” song comes along. This stand-out song differentiates itself from others, allowing it the chance to stay at the forefront of public consciousness and resultant popularity for a long time. By the time this recognition teeters out,

however, new music has emulated the style of this song out of hopes for similar fame, and a new cycle of homogeneity is created (Serra et al.). It is important to recognize whether consumers realize this decline in quality and resultant—poorly-written—sameness in popular music today. Researchers have identified that yes, we do realize that popular music is, indeed, bad. Why do we continue to listen to it, then? This question can be answered by analyzing the two-way creation of meaning between post-millennials and popular music. Analysis of class survey responses, in conjunction with outside academic resources, inform this hypothesis that post-millennials are affected by popular music in social and individual capacities and simultaneously affect how this music is created, distributed and used.

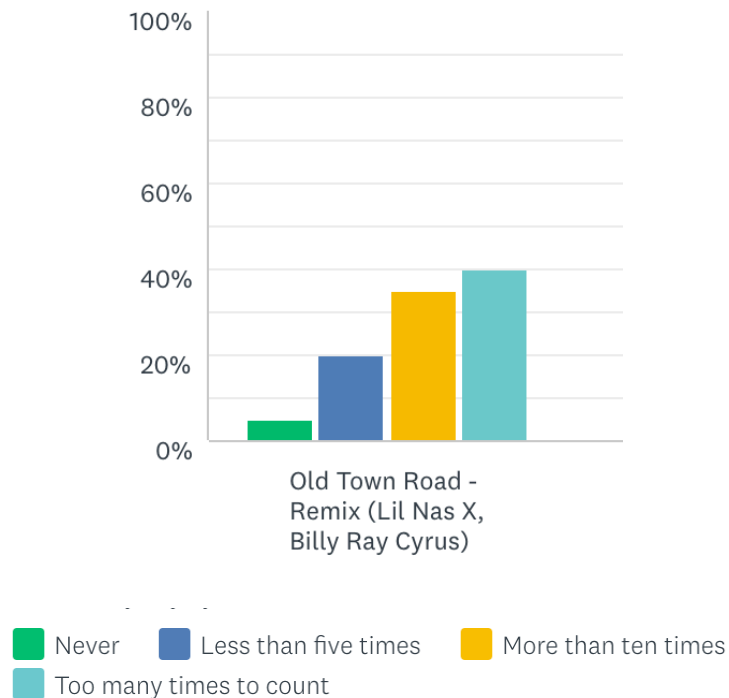
The bonding capabilities which popular music has over our society can be connected to and supported by various theorists discussed in class. The first is Émile Durkheim, who asserted that our modern individualist society, particularly caused by a rise in individualist work, has created a “social anomie” as we become fascinated with our own work and our personal identity. This social anomie is a sense of alienation and a breakdown of community as a result of an absence of social memory and local values (Encyclopaedia Britannica). However, his notion of nonmaterial social facts combats modern society’s absence of local values. He defines nonmaterial social facts as institutions and cultural opportunities which provide us with a collective conscience. As humans are deeply social animals, we search for ways to tie ourselves to others. Popular music can be seen as such a nonmaterial social fact, a cultural institution which allows us to gather and listen to the same product, a song, and live a similar reality for the duration of that song. Regardless of the quality of this music, listening to it serves as a base for social interaction. Survey results inform this conclusion as questions investigated students’ motivations for listening to certain genres of music. This survey asked 20 students about their

listening preferences and assessment of the musical and lyrical quality of the top three Billboard Top 100 songs. When asked “What is your favorite genre of music and why,” students discussed enjoying certain genres because they allow for social interaction with others students. One respondent listens to hip hop/rap because it serves as a “source of connection with [their] friends ... often what is heard at social gatherings and is [a] subject of discussion” (Survey Monkey). One particularly salient finding from this survey is demonstrated in the results below:

Rate the musical/lyrical quality of the following three songs:



How many times have you listened to these three songs:



Although students identify “Old Town Road- Remix” as overwhelmingly mediocre in musical and lyrical quality, 15 out of the 20 participants recognize having listened to the song either “more than ten times” or “too many times to count.” This exemplifies an idea of “ironically-enjoyed music,” or music enjoyed and used for something other than its quality, that which is enjoyed and used in spite of its poor quality. A study on ironically-enjoyed music discusses that “when music was listened to ‘because of’ its negative features, this usually served functions unique to ironic enjoyment of music, for example, ... a role in the management of identity and social relationships” (Van den Tol, A.J.M. and Giner-Sorolla, R., 8). This identity can be thought of as collective, reinforcing the findings of Carey, who discusses the role of communication as a ritual in society, one which people share and participate in, that results in a possession of shared

beliefs. Listening to popular music is a societal ritual which results in, as described by the Chicago School, human fellowship. In this way, as much as we create collective identity in listening to music we actually enjoy, we create collective identity in listening to music ironically. The identity which is created through listening to and laughing at music with others can also be created by worshipping the artists who produce these popular songs. As described by Serazio, every community has a “totem” to worship, which represents the togetherness that people desire. In the case of popular music, this “totem” would be an artist whose music is trending in popularity at a certain time. In this way, both popular music and the artists who create it serve to foster social bonds between listeners. Popular music does not only affect society on a collective level, however. Individually, ironically popular music affects how we feel. For instance, “people [use] ironically-enjoyed music to improve mood through ridicule and laughter” (Van den Tol, A.J.M. and Giner-Sorolla, R., 9). Spotify’s algorithm, as the prominence of Spotify subscriptions among millennials continues to increase, also has an effect on how we individually consume and collectively popularize music. The algorithm seeks to identify a user’s taste in music based off of data on what they frequently listen to, and suggests similar genres and artists in a “Discover Weekly” playlist which is published on their account each week. It is described by a New York Times music critic as “the most sophisticated recommendation engine involving algorithms” (Ratliff). However, this algorithm may create some critical long-term effects on the music industry as it works to predict post-millennials’ music taste. As was discussed earlier, popular music becomes popular partly because it serves as a base for social bonds. If post-millennials are listening to lots of simplistic, popularized music for the sake of conversation topics and social identity, the algorithm will reflect this in their Discover Weekly playlists by continuously giving them similarly simplistic and popularized music every week. This may effect our willingness to

delve into new genres, narrows the ease of our accessibility to these new genres, and may simplify our music taste in the long-run. In this way, Spotify is priming our future for a culture of extremely homogeneous music taste and production, as well as a conformist mentality relating to music.

Post-millennials have the ability to affect popular music just as much as popular music affects them. They have an affect on how music itself is written. Their decreased attention span, for instance, affects the ability and willingness to listen to complex music. Research into the difference between millennials and post-millennials has found that the generation of post-millennials has decreased attention spans as a result of a “wired culture.” Billings and Kowalski note that “this wired environment allows for instant gratification and frustration if answers are not clear immediately. The average Generation Z individual has an 8-second attention span, down from 12 seconds for Millennials” (Shatto, B. and Erwin, K., 1). This lack of ability to focus calls for the production and resultant popularization of simple, to-the-point musical structures. (Serra et al.). Additionally, post-millennials’ use of Spotify greatly affects how music is written. Spotify includes social media capabilities, as a user can link their account to Facebook. This capability allows users to monitor what Facebook friends are listening to and share what they are listening to on your own Facebook page. Being able to share this information encourages others to do the same, causing music and taste to spread within and beyond social networks, thus potentially popularizing the music they listen to. Once this music is popularized, artists see a certain style as being profitable and emulate this style in hopes of popularizing their own music. This starts a chain reaction of the repeated creation of one style of music and rise of a homogeneous music scene. In agreement with the Uses and Gratifications theory of media, post-millennials have the agency to use and popularize different media for a variety of purposes.

They use music as a distraction from various societal ills and as a result, change how lyrics are produced. As described by Barton, “a culture’s favoured song style reflects and reinforces the kind of behavior essential to subsistence efforts and to its central and controlling social institutions” (Barton, 4). For instance, the rise in ironically-enjoyed music as a source of laughter and collective mockery may reflect our society’s need for frivolity and lightheartedness in an ever-more violent and politically volatile world. Whether this function of popular music as a distraction is beneficial to society as a whole is fairly subjective. The Frankfurt School would argue that this is dangerous, as it keeps us passive and subservient to social oppressors. Instead of facing society’s ills through mediums like music, the Frankfurt School would argue that we are consciously running away from it. By popularizing lighthearted music, post-millennials encourage artists to continue to mimic the style due to its perceived profitability. As they neglect to include mention of society’s issues in music as a cultural dialogue, they perpetuate this passive mentality and risk letting these issues worsen. Additionally, while music can serve to bond society subconsciously, post-millennials today also use music to consciously create these bonds. As discussed in class, we can use media and pop culture to create personal relationships, using pop culture topics as common ground to identify with another person. Pop culture, particularly pop music, gives us something to talk about. Post-millennials also affect the economy of the music industry. As post-millennials become increasingly aware of our rapidly-accumulating college debt, they also value frugality. Survey results indicate that college students enjoy Spotify’s subscription service because “it’s cheap” (Survey Monkey). Their growing use of Spotify affects how musicians make money. Although “U.S. listeners are spending more money on music than ever before: over \$20 billion a year ... Of that, artists only take home ... about 12 percent” (Wang, 2018). This is due to the “value leakage” involved in production and

distribution, like the costs of running streaming companies. Today, artists make very little money off of Spotify, approximately about \$0.006 to \$.0084 per stream to be split among holders of the music rights (Forbes.com). As a result, they must turn to other sources of income, like increased performances, higher royalty fees, touring revenues and self-released music. In this way, post-millennial consumption habits have direct effects on the distribution and production of popular music, as well as the economics of the music industry.

Throughout this semester, we have discussed the different roles of the media in our lives. We have delved into various theories which inform how and why the media have power over us and how we exercise power over the media. Popular music today is no exception to those roles in relation to post-millennials and college-aged students. It has been argued that popular music and post-millennials affect each other. Popular music allows for social bonds to be formed amongst post-millennial peers, as it can be called a Durkheimian “nonmaterial social fact” which creates collective conscience within a modern individualistic society. Ironically-enjoyed popular music, as exemplified by survey research on students’ opinions on the quality of “Old Town Road-Remix” in conjunction with the frequency at which they’ve listened to the song, improves our mood. The surge in Spotify’s popularity as a both a social tool and source of music suggestions amongst post-millennials also causes a decline in our access to new and complex music. Us post-millennials also severely affect how the music industry produces and distributes its content. Simplistic music has become more common due to our shortened attention span and use of Spotify as a social tool as a way to distract ourselves from the world’s ills. Our increased use of Spotify also affects how artists make their money, thus in turn affecting the economy of the music industry. In these ways, post-millennials’ relationship with popular music is a symbiotic



one, as popular music affects us in a collective and individual sense while we affect the production and distribution of popular music.

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