For Those About to Rock: a New Understanding of Adolescent Music Consumption

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The UK record industry is aware of what music consumers purchase, how they purchase and artist popularity but this does not facilitate an understanding of why music is consumed and what insights this might generate for future demand. This paper seeks to explore and develop the concept of the adolescent music consumer and contributes by using qualitative research to better understand music use and consumption. The findings suggest that adolescents use music to express their identity but the extent of this expression and the consumption of music typically vary depending on the family type in which the adolescent has been raised.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The UK record industry are aware of what music consumers purchase, the way in which consumers purchase (online, music stores) and artist popularity but this does not facilitate an understanding of how or why music is consumed and what insight this might generate for future demand. As consuming is always a complex social phenomenon, especially with regard to adolescents (Benn, 2004), understanding music use and consumption and the impact this period of ‘storm and stress’ has on the ability of organisations to target and communicate effectively with adolescents will be of use to the music industry.

Attracting a target audience has encouraged the UK’s record companies to increase spend on advertising to £128 million in 2004, representing 10.5 per cent of the £1.2 billion industry revenue in the same year. Targeting consumers effectively becomes increasingly important as the pressure to achieve a return on investment becomes more critical in an increasingly competitive environment (BPI, 2005). Age, gender and class are the main criteria for presenting statistics and survey findings across a range of market and consumer data produced by BPI, Mintel, Keynote, IFPI and Euromonitor (2005). However the only data provided by the main statistical reporting organisations that distinguishes between early adolescent age groups (12-14 years) and older adolescents (15-19) is ‘choice of music’, ‘music downloading’, ‘purchasing by outlet’ and ‘music attitude statements’ (Mintel only). All other adolescent consumer data is collapsed into the broader age classification of 12-19 years. This clearly produces a composite and only partial view of the adolescent consumer of popular music and represents a weakness in the industry’s understanding and knowledge of their younger consumers.

This research involved 24 longitudinal in-depth interviews with adolescents to gauge the way in which they chose, used and consumed music relative to their expression of identity and their family environment. That is, twelve adolescents were interviewed and then the same adolescents re-interviewed six months to a year later. Whilst it is possible to consider different age groups of adolescents and provide a ‘longitudinal’ view where variables are consistent (using gender, socio-economic group, level of education, race), the accuracy of this approach is not as reliable as ‘following’ individuals through time. This is particularly true where individuals experience different situations over a period of time (illness, parental divorce, exams, change of friendship groups etc). It is only by asking the same individual to consider their experiences over time (and in this case how it influenced music choice, use and consumption and subsequent expression of identity) that a true reflection of an adolescent’s ‘journey’ can be proffered.

The sampling was purposive where respondents were hand-picked on the basis of their typicality (age, gender and family type). Harvey and Byrd (1998) indicate that early adolescence (12-14 years) is mostly about acquiring information and experience, whilst late adolescence (15-18) is characterised as being a period of identity development in which the information obtained earlier is used to build and consolidate a new identity. The longitudinal interviews also allowed differences between age groups to be identified. These interviews were conducted to understand adolescent music consumption and to explore how this may be influenced by different family and social (peer) environments.

The interview was designed in three phases. Initially, pictures were taken by the adolescents before they arrived so they could be introduced and discussed at the start of the interview. Secondly the interview utilised the ‘draw and write’ (projective) technique, designed to encourage the adolescents to express what music meant to them. Finally when the interviews were finished, the respondents & interviewer were asked to complete a blank card with their thoughts on the interview. In this way, a record was maintained of the interviewer-interviewee perception of what had been discussed and this was taken into account when interpreting the data.

The findings suggest that understanding teenagers’ use and choice of music may allow a more meaningful segmentation of the adolescent consumer. For the record industry, simply recording the family type of the adolescent in market research studies may be one indicator of greater consumption of associated music products (branded goods, concert tickets and clothing). Greater knowledge and understanding of this diverse group of consumers has also illustrated ‘situational consumption’.

Adolescent music consumers are profiled with three suggested ‘segments’ (Chameleon, Experiential and Defender). ‘Chameleons’ (who readily ‘blend in’) are more inclined to listen to music they personally prefer privately whereas ‘Experiential’ music consumers have an eclectic, diverse music taste. ‘Defenders’ are committed to particular artists and are more inclined to illustrate this through consumption and self expression. Marketers and researchers will be interested in the ways in which music consumption appears to be contradictory for adolescents raised in a particular type of family. This research provides in insight as to why this might be the case (bonding, building bridges and conflict avoidance). Marketers and the music industry need to ensure communication approaches reflect this consumption behaviour.

It would also seem plausible that given the eclecticism of the intact adolescents in this sample, the likely innovators and early adopters of new and modified music will be raised in an intact family environment. As the parents of intact adolescents also appear to be more encouraging and supportive of ‘trying on new behaviours’, they too may be targeted as a ‘connector(s)’ to reinforce promotional campaigns or diverse music consumption

References
Going for a Song: A New Understanding of Adolescent Music Consumption