Keeping It in the Family: How Teenagers Use Music to Bond, Build Bridges and Seek Autonomy

Peter Nuttall, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK
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ABSTRACT
This paper seeks to explore teenage use and consumption of music within families and to develop the concepts of ‘connection’ and autonomy seeking within families relative to popular music consumption. Social trends indicate that the composition of the family will continue to change and, as such, this research will also examine the impact of changing family structures on music use and consumption. This research involved 24 in-depth interviews with both early and late adolescents. The findings from this research sample suggest connection (bonding and building bridges) through music is most relevant for teenagers raised in step parent families. Evidence of affinity or autonomy seeking behaviour may also be ascribed to family type.

INTRODUCTION
The significance of popular music and the importance of it to people’s everyday lives has received little attention among the marketing and consumer research academy (Holbrook, 1986; Holbrook and Schindler, 1989; Lacher & Mizerski, 1994) although researchers have more recently examined the role music has played in satisfying particular emotional needs (strategies for coping), social needs (belonging and identity) and developmental needs (the socialisation ‘journey’) of adolescents [See Arnett, 1995b; Larson et al, 1989; Larson and Kubey, 1983; Lull, 1987, 1992; Rubin 1994].

To further understand adolescent music consumption and the way in which music facilitates or impedes teenage familial relationships, an exploration of music consumption within the context of this social environment will enhance our comprehension of music consumption. As Shankar (2000:28) posits, “to fully understand consumption, researchers need to move beyond the purchasing of products as the focus of investigation and consider what people do with the products they purchase. Popular music consumption is an excellent example of when the experience of using the product (as opposed to the act of purchasing the product) is fundamentally important to our understanding of popular music consumption in general”. If the experience of using music is important, the ways in which music can be used in a variety of teenage familial relationship situations and how and why this varies will contribute to knowledge in this area.

SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND MUSIC CONSUMPTION
De Nora (2000), in her sociological research on music in everyday life, suggests that in order to fully understand how music is used and understood by others the investigator ought to consider how music ‘actually comes to work in specific situations and moments of appropriation’ (pg.31). That is, the force or significance of music is dependent on situational circumstance and human-music interaction. It would appear that by generating an insight into the teenage situational music consumption within families and the varying levels (force) of the influence of music, a deeper understanding of consumption and the use of music can be realised. However, it is also clear that researchers cannot decide what music means to others and it is important to identify for the respondents how and in what ways music works in specific social situations (Cohen, 1993; Bennett, 2002).

Frith (1996) argues that music can articulate a sense of social meaning and as such can be inclusive or exclusive. Music, however, has principally been discussed with reference to it being inclusive or the way in which it facilitates belonging, solidarity and consensus (Negus and Velazquez, 2002). Further to this DeNora (2000:109) suggests that music can be used to connect: “Music can be used to organise disparate individuals such that their actions may appear to be mutually oriented, co-ordinated, entrained and aligned”. Yet the use of music is equally applicable in situations of autonomy seeking and ambivalence. How might teenagers consume and use music to facilitate or impede their familial relationships? What is the role of music within these changing structures and how might teenage consumption and use of music vary in different familial types and situations? Indeed, there is a growing necessity to consider differences between family constitution (intacts, stepfamilies and single parent families) [See for example: Falci, 2006] and this research is pertinent given that social trends indicate that the composition of the family will continue to change.

In 2005, Ekström highlighted that while marketers, social policy makers and consumer advocates had historically taken an interest in family consumption, the focus tended to be on decision-making within families. A call for research that required “rethinking both the concept of the family and consumption in a family context” supports the very essence of considering teenage music use and consumption within familial relationships and against a backdrop of changing family structures. Further to this, Ekström poses the question “To what extent does consumption connect or disconnect families?” (p493). This research specifically considers connection and disconnection relative to adolescent music consumption.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS
During adolescence the teenager remains connected to important family members but seeks to redefine these relationships in relation to his or her increasing sense of a unique and competent self (Burns and Dunlop, 2002; Youniss and Smollar, 1985). Normal adolescent development is marked by an interactive exchange in which both parents and adolescents seek a balance between conflict and alliance (Jory et al, 1996) or autonomy and regulation. Indeed, the quest for autonomy as illustrated by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981:118) is a fundamental part of adolescence: “...for the teenager mastery over the inner states...is paramount. One must become ‘captain of one’s soul’ – this is often accomplished by becoming ‘cool’ which is the easiest way of showing one’s self control or independence [autonomy] of outside forces”. Music is one way in which this can be achieved.

In addition, the ‘day-to-day’ window on everyday lives within families (car journeys, watching TV together, listening to and the role of music) may afford a greater opportunity to explore not just points of conflict but ways in which parents bond/interact with adolescents and vice versa. It could be that adolescents display coping strategies through music in an effort to maintain the equilibrium and that ‘connecting’ may be akin to affinity seeking which is defined as “the different ways young people get their parents to feel positive about them” (Flint, 1992, p418).
MUSIC GENRES AND FAMILIES

Schwartz and Fouts (2003) report that eclectic music tastes are more usual for teenagers who have less difficulty negotiating their adolescence. That is, they have fewer family problems, better peer relationships and do not experience significant issues regarding self-concept. Several authors [See Hansen and Hansen, 1991, Bleich and Zillman, 1991, Arnett 1995a] have noted how the consumption of different genres of music by teenagers is influenced by the felt state of conflict with parents and/or restrictive conditions of their teenage lives. What these studies have not attended to is the role that music plays in facilitating or impeding relationships with parents and siblings and if consumption of specific music genres are related to specific family relationships and familial structures. It may be that when individuals journey through adolescence or experience change (e.g. family disruption) ‘the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal or social change’ (Giddens, 1991:33) and a number of possible selves may emerge (See: Goffman, 1963).

THIS STUDY

Adolescent use and consumption of music is explored here within the context of the family. The research is designed to consider if and how music facilitates connection or disconnection within families. Further to this, teenage music consumption in a variety of family structures and types (single parent, blended and traditional) is examined to explore if there is any association between music consumption and family type.

METHOD

Given the exploratory nature of this study and the complexity and sensitive nature of the phenomena (family life) in question, in-depth interviews appeared to be the most appropriate method to address the issues raised. The main thrust of 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 environment. That is, twelve adolescents were interviewed and then the same adolescents re-interviewed six months to a year later. Music vouchers (£15) were used thank the respondents for their involvement in the study.

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 teenagers were shown a diagram that included words such as exams, illness, new friends etc. during their second (longitudinal) interview to help them identify anything that had happened to them over the previous 6-12 months that may have influenced their music consumption. The sampling was purposive where respondents were handpicked on the basis of their typicality (age, gender and family type). See Table 1.

DESIGN

The interview was designed in three phases. Initially, photographs were taken by the adolescents before they arrived at the interview so they could be presented and discussed as an opening to the start of the dialogue. This was to look at what they valued most in their personal life and to contextualise their responses and also how this may change over time. This was repeated for the second interview. 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.

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Finally the extent to which music is used to seek autonomy will be
explored (disconnecting). A discussion will follow to consider if a window on ‘day-to-day’ behaviour can contribute to our understanding of consumption within families.

**CHOOSING & USING MUSIC**

To establish the extent to which music was shared within the family, the teenagers were asked if they ever listened to music as a family and how that made them feel. While all respondents did listen (if somewhat infrequently) to music as a family, the respondents raised in intact families were more vocal in their dissent: “I’ve tried to listen to it [parents’ music] with them but I just don’t get that feeling I get from other types of music.” (Initial interview: Male, 16). This was true of both early and late adolescents in intact families.

Although consuming music as a whole family was rare, it seemed that trips in the car were the most regular and perhaps the most obvious opportunity for families to listen to music together. It was adolescents raised in intact families who most frequently commented on music consumption in the car and, in some cases, made disparaging remarks about their parents’ tastes in music. However, adolescents also had strategies for ensuring that the choice of music in the car would be to their liking. This quote (See B/1: Intact 2: Table 2) is from a late adolescent who was more likely to have consolidated his identity (Harvey and Byrd, 1998) and was keen to illustrate the way he managed music consumption. He was planning a trip to France in the car with his family and had made up a number of cassettes with a mix of music on them.

Some teenagers raised within intact families however, admitted to borrowing some of their parents CDs (both during early and late adolescence)—perhaps reflecting a more eclectic taste. This further supports the work of Schwartz and Fouts (2003).

Those raised in intact families also appeared to encourage eclectic music taste among younger family members. This may be because they were encouraged to have a diverse music taste themselves (Tarrant et al, 2000) and were in turn socialising younger siblings. This was particularly true of late adolescents.

Respondents raised in blended or single parent families certainly seemed more accommodating in their music consumption within the family. Many of the respondents acknowledged they perhaps had different tastes than other family members but were quick to provide excuses (ie generation gap etc). They often appeared to yield to the tastes of other family members (siblings) or simply used music as a way of maintaining and developing familial relationships. For teenagers raised in single parent families, music appeared to be a very significant part of the family culture, transcending generations in both early and late adolescence (See B/8: Single 2: Table 2).

The issue raised here is the way in which parents may simply pass on their taste in music and that stereotypically negative music consumption by adolescents may not reflect their felt state of confidence or self-worth (See Tarrant et al, 2000). Indeed, it would seem, at least in this case, that the music consumption in this single parent household was an inherent strand of the familial culture.

Finally, position within the family appeared to relate to acceptable types of music consumed by family members. While one late adolescent respondent discusses her younger brother, she is adamant he cannot like the same band as her (Placebo) and clearly disassociates herself from his other music tastes (Busted)—See A/6: Single 1: Table 2. This suggests that in some cases, the adolescent perceives that it is better to listen to the music their parents listen to as opposed to being seen to like the music their younger siblings prefer—perhaps to illustrate a consolidated identity. Of course, the extent to which teenagers engage in consumption of music with other family members may be attributable to the ‘connection’ or relationship they have with their parents or siblings. The following section explores the way in which the adolescents in this research project had a ‘connection’ to maintain or develop within the family and how this affects music consumption.

**CONNECTING**

The concept of connecting is considered by the authors to be a gesture or behaviour that is displayed by the teenage respondent that suggests the teenager is attempting to bond with a family member or maintain a position within the family as part of the family culture. The issues covered in this section therefore reflect this concept and bonding, affinity seeking behaviour and building bridges are considered here.

When considering the respondents’ level of bonding with family members during the initial phase of interviewing, it seemed apparent that females, early adolescents and those raised in single parent or blended families, appeared most likely to attempt to bond with family members and/or seemed to place more importance on the family than their peers raised in intact families.

Reviewing the longitudinal data suggests both early and late male and female adolescents raised in single parent and blended families are more likely to place a greater level of importance on family members and the relationship they have with their parent/s even if that parent no longer resides in the family home. Whilst the sample was small, this pattern was evident in this data. Using ways in which to bond or seek approval from a parent/s appeared to be notable for those raised in blended and single parent families (See B/4: Blended 2: Table 3). Interestingly, this quote supports the assertion by Youniss and Smollar (1985) that fathers are more judgemental. Even though this father lived outside of the family home and although this male adolescent appeared to be an active negotiator (Jory et al, 1996) there was an obvious need to justify or support decisions that had been made.

Even in single parent families where the communication approaches seemed particularly poor, there still seemed a desire to be convergent, whether this materialised or not (See A/4: Single 1: Table 3).

Bonding closely with family members certainly seemed more characteristic of teenagers raised in single parent and blended families. As Solomon (2002) suggests, it may be that because
‘openness’ or democracy with a family is always undermined by a struggle for control, that convergence for teenagers raised in single or blended families was a strategy for maintaining or developing an element of control in their relationships. Autonomy seeking behaviour as posited by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) may be less important in these family environments and autonomy seeking behaviour may be replaced by affinity seeking behaviour.

Music was also used to make a ‘bond’ more special where new family members had come into the existing family environment.

There were however, a similar number of examples where music was used as a barrier that allowed the adolescents to seek autonomy from the family confines (more obvious but not confined to early adolescents). Specifically the issues raised by the respondents in relation to autonomy seeking were: the role of conflict, the struggle for control, that convergence for teenagers raised in single parent and blended families did not necessarily display lower levels of self-esteem in this instance as their strategies appear to have been solution-oriented.

It is known that adolescents’ gender and self-esteem may affect their coping styles (Mullis and Chapman, 2000). Indeed Moos (1990) reported that adolescents with low self-esteem rely on emotion-based strategies (ventilation of feelings) in coping, whereas adolescents with high self-esteem relied on strategies directed at problem solving. This research suggests that those raised in single parent and blended families did not necessarily display lower levels of self-esteem in this instance as their strategies appear to have been solution-oriented.

What these findings also seem to indicate are that teenagers raised in blended and single parent families appear to have a greater number of identities. That is, Goffman (1963) describes individuals as having a number of ‘selves’ and it would seem that the teenagers recognised their parents, in particular, would not welcome. Interestingly, girlfriends of adolescents’ fathers living outside of the family home also featured as a source of (different) music or appealing music tastes (See B/4: Blended 2: Table 3). (Coping) strategies then were employed to express autonomy. That is, for these respondents, the intensity of autonomy seeking from the family was no greater (force) or quicker (time) than that of the interviewees raised in intact families, but there was evidence of a different strategy in order to express this autonomy from the family.

TABLE 2
Choosing & Using Music

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case No./ Family Type/ Interview</th>
<th>Choosing Music</th>
<th>Case No./ Family Type/ Interview</th>
<th>Using Music</th>
<th>Case No./ Family Type/ Interview</th>
<th>Socialising other family members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B/1 Intact 2</td>
<td>&quot;Well I’ll have to make enough tapes to not get boring and I expect my parents will probably have a choice between each tape that will be made by me anyway. In France [on holiday] they’ll think they have control but it will be like voting in China.&quot;</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>A/3 Blended 1</td>
<td>&quot;I listen to the type of music my mum listens to. If I didn’t then I reckon that would be something that my mum didn’t have in common with me…our relationship would be a little bit more down because we talk about [music] a lot.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>A/4 Single 1</td>
<td>&quot;I try to influence my little brother [taste in music] he started listening to Red Hot Chili Peppers the other weekend, I think that’s more just because I do it so he wants to do it as well, like copying.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A/5 Intact 1</td>
<td>&quot;They like different types of music that I’m not so fond of– you’ve just got to feel sorry for them, they obviously have no taste.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>B/8 Single 2</td>
<td>&quot;I was kind of brought up on it because my mum liked Nirvana and stuff and when they were out [I listened to it] and I was just brought up listening to it and then as I got older I liked it more and more and developed my interest in it.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>A/6 Single 1</td>
<td>&quot;He doesn’t really listen to music but he pretends to like Placebo, or he has got the Placebo CD but I don't think he really listens to it. He likes Busted which is nothing to do with me.”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

DISCONNECTING

When considering the data from the respondents raised in intact families, it was evident that this sample of teenagers was less concerned with appearing to seek autonomy from the rest of the family particularly in late adolescence. This may have been because they were encouraged to be more eclectic in their music tastes (as indicated by Schwartz and Fouts, 2003) or may have been because they were less fearful of conflict and felt able to seek autonomy as illustrated by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981).

The respondents raised in blended or single parent families largely appeared also to have different music tastes from their immediate family (parents/siblings) but were clearly using an additional family layer (uncles/aunts) to source music that they recognised their parents, in particular, would not welcome. Interestingly, girlfriends of adolescents’ fathers living outside of the family home also featured as a source of (different) music or appealing music tastes (See B/4: Blended 2: Table 3).
extreme. That is, it appeared that they needed to know that escaping the family confines was ‘normal’ and asked their parent/s about their own ‘disconnection’ experiences (See B/4: Blended 1: Table 3). This may have simply been curiosity or the mark of normal adolescent identity characterised by a balance between conflict and alliance (Jory et al., 1996) but the necessity for social stroking was regularly raised within this category of respondents as an issue and therefore would seem to reflect a consistent pattern although this needs further exploration.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This research sought to explore and develop an understanding of music consumption within families and illustrated that music plays a significant role in connecting families whilst allowing some (early) adolescents the opportunity to use music as a barrier to connection. The key themes that emerged from the findings were connection and disconnection. Each of these themes illustrated that there is merit in further exploring the role of family type relative to popular music consumption. Whilst this sample was limited, the data was rich and it was evident that there was an emerging pattern relative to family type and the role of music although clearly these cases cannot be generalized.

Teens raised in intact or traditional families appeared to display an eclectic approach to music and early adolescents could be readable dismissive of their parents’ music. Late adolescents raised in blended households in this sample were more inclined to use music to build bridges with new family members and also retain a link with family who no longer lived in the same household. There was evidence of intergenerational fandom and also illustrations of coping mechanisms. The extra ‘layer’ of family (e.g. father’s girlfriend) utilized by teenagers raised in blended and single parent families raises the notion of kinship and a wider sense of community where previous studies have focused on materialism and individualism.

Possibly the most important aspect of this research is the notion that it is possible to learn about influences on family consumption from the everyday behaviour of adolescents and their families. For example, the apparent reticence of late teens raised in blended households to engage in conflict relative to music consumption may translate into more compliant behaviour in other consumption situations. The concept of those raised in blended households illustrating a greater number of ‘selves’ also supports and develops the study of Rindfleisch et al. (1996) which suggests that children raised in disrupted families are more materialistic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case No./Family Type/Interview</th>
<th>Choosing Music</th>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td>B/4 Blended 2</td>
<td>“I’d probably show my dad the picture of my guitar because he’d like to know what I’m doing and I’m interested in that. My dad was one of the people I had to try and convince that I was going to be committed to it. I mean he knows now that I am committed… and I think it would be nice for him to know that I’m really serious about it and I want to carry on.”</td>
<td>“I think it’s because I like my friends and I want them to come across well because I want to help mum see what great people they are.”</td>
<td>“It’s none of their business really is it [what my parents think of what I do]. Obviously if they say to me, I don’t want you to listen to that, then it’s going to make me listen to [music] it more, so I’ll end up doing it anyway…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A/4 Single 1</td>
<td>“My mum likes Kenny Rogers and Michael Bolton and I suppose it’s not that bad.”</td>
<td>“I think when they were younger things were different and as they’ve grown up they’ve forgotten about the music they used to like so I asked them, did you like the Monkees and they’d say oh I can’t remember and it was like… they probably did, they probably had posters all over their walls.”</td>
<td>Interviewer: “So they might want their parents to be fashionable? “They might say, after they’re picking them up, please for one night just play this music and don’t do what you usually do please.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>A/7 Blended 1</td>
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TABLE 3

Examples of Bonding, Affinity Seeking & Disconnecting
possibly to maintain a greater number of selves. As future research ought to explore the extent to which the building and maintenance of social relationships are key factors in understanding brand choice (Auty & Elliott, 2001), this initial exploratory study may provide some insight into family life and its relationship with consumption.

Examples of late adolescent brothers socializing their younger siblings (intrigenerational learning) may also apply to other consumption situations and may be relevant for both practitioners developing communication campaigns and policy makers considering key opinion leaders who may be influential in facilitating campaigns associated with specific behavioural concerns (e.g. underage drinking, smoking, unhealthy food choice).

In the future it would be interesting to explore how long the blended or single parent families had been such, especially if the teenager had been part of an intact family to begin with and whether this makes any difference in their needs expressed through music. Conversely, exploring how parents use music (affiliation versus autonomy seeking needs) may also add to the body of knowledge in this area. Given the continuing change in the West with regard to family structure, the findings of this research may be indicative of the changing nature of consumption. Although this research has not taken into account other salient factors that may affect consumption (peers, media, school) it contributes by considering connection, disconnection within families to contribute to an understanding of popular music consumption.

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