

Teenagers' music taste is determined by their desire to conform

Murad Ahmed, *The Times*, March 29, 2010

A glimpse inside the teenage mind has revealed how adolescent insecurity can dictate the pop charts. Brain scans have shown that teenagers' music choices have less to do with whether they like what they are hearing and more about the horror of failing to conform with their peers.

The study — conducted on teenagers listening to songs on social networking sites such as MySpace — suggests that they will change their minds about music once they realise that the tracks are popular with other people their age.

If their musical preferences do not match those of others, their brains recoil with terror.

"We wanted to know, for example with Amazon.com, when you see a four or five-star rating of something, does that make you like it more?" said Gregory Berns, Chair of Neuroeconomics at Emory University in the US, whose findings were published recently in the journal *NeuroImage*.

Youngsters aged 12 to 17 were played a track and asked to rate how much they liked it. After an interval, they were asked to rate it again — after some had seen a popularity rating based on how many times the track had been downloaded.

Without knowledge on whether others liked a song, ratings changed 12 per cent of the time. When they found out that a tune was a hit, however, the subjects changed their ratings 22 per cent of the time, and more than three quarters switched in the direction of the song's popularity rating. The first time that they heard a song, brain scans revealed, regions associated with reward and pleasure were activated. On the second hearing, those associated with anxiety and pain would light up, suggesting that fear made people change their ratings.

A teenager's musical preference is big business. According to the BPI, the record industry trade group, about a third of all albums bought are by those aged 12 to 19. In 2008 that amounted to about £78 spent by each buyer.

The findings back up previous research on conformity, which say that there are good reasons why young people have strong sensitivity about the tastes of their peers.

By adapting to social norms, children learn to avoid teasing and rejection. Later in life, the ability to get on with others improves their life chances.

"We can't deny the fact we care a lot about what people think," said Dr Berns.

"A lot of people think we are individuals and in democratic societies we have freedom of choice. Actually, we're slaves to what other people think."