

Guadalupe Bueno

Hadiya Jones, Emma Claire Jones, and Sam Dinger

Sociology

August 2, 2021

On the Subject of Music: What's Culture Got to Do With It?

Abstract

In this research paper, I explored the influence that the amount of cultural exposure has on a person's music taste. I also considered the impact that age has on this relationship. I read and cited articles that dealt with this area of ethnomusicology and considered them in my study. From my research, I gather that there are factors from culture and human interaction and experience that can affect how people interpret music, like taste cultures and music criticism. My findings, based on a short survey that I conducted, support my hypothesis and further justified the undeniable connection between culture and music. My research question of how the amount of exposure to ethnic culture and backgrounds affect someone's music taste that I explore in this paper gives me an idea of how factors of identity, like culture and ethnicity, can stem into the unnoticeable parts of life and how strongly it plays a role for everybody.

Introduction

When Stevie Wonder said, "Music is a world within itself with a language we all understand," he wasn't kidding. From the barrios of Washington Heights to the festivals in Japan, music comes from everywhere and is in almost every culture. Everyone has heard music in one way or another and everyone has their own tastes. People don't usually think about why they listen to it, but they still have subconscious connections to the simple joy, no matter where it

comes from. That important connection is what I plan to look into and analyze in this paper. My purpose for the research and data collection is to examine the correlation of exposure to ethnic culture and one's music taste. I believe that the more exposure someone has to a culture, the more likely they are going to listen to songs that originated from that culture. I wanted to dive deep into this topic because it is interesting to see the effect of past experiences and influences lasting and taking place in the modern era. Music is such a big part of everyday life for many people, so it is beneficial to understand at least a part of why.

Literature Review

To gain a better understanding of ethnic culture and its correlation to music, I researched and consulted the following sources and compiled the information that was necessary and relevant to my research question. I have found that ethnomusicology is a recurring concept within the majority of my cited sources, as it is what my research question is exploring.

Ethnomusicology is the field of sociology that studies the significance of music in the context of ethnic backgrounds. It can range from how certain types of music, music uses, and musical instruments came to be to how it relates to people and society through critique and oral tradition. With these many areas of music to study, there are some common factors that play into each of them. Two of them that are found within some of my research and will be relevant are the key ideas of taste cultures and music criticism.

A chapter in the book “The Routledge Reader on the Sociology of Music” written by Morten Michelsen explains these two concepts in detail and shows how they connect with each other as well as the importance they have when looking at music and taste. He explains the key term “taste cultures” first, and cites many different examinations and analyses from history to

give perspective on how long it has been speculated and how it was discovered. Since the historical context as a whole of either of the concepts that Michelson discusses, I will only be going over the important point that he makes. Since the mid-1900s, many early sociologists synthesized theories of subcultures dealing with music taste by examining groups in societies, mostly with a class-based perspective(intext cite). It was pointed out that most of the fields of study were, “in some way or another related to taste, to sets of complex relations concerning liking and disliking between individuals, groups and musical sounds.” This is where the concepts of taste cultures and taste publics were idealized. In 1966, sociologist Herbert Gans suggested these concepts to discuss these topics of taste and how more complex they actually were than just a general dichotomy of class differentiation. According to Gans, “Taste cultures are not cohesive value systems, and taste publics are not organized groups; the former are aggregates of similar values and usually but not always similar content, and the latter are aggregates of people with usually but not always similar values making similar choices from the available offerings of culture.” Both concepts are often confused with each other due to their similar definitions and methods, but it is important to know the distinction between them. There have been many debates over the explanations of taste cultures since Gans’s idealization of the term, but regardless of that, it is an important factor to consider when looking at why people like certain music. Since taste cultures are looking at people with similar values making similar decisions of similar content, I will be mostly using that term instead as it coincides with what I will be analyzing from my data.

Moving on, Michelsen also goes into detail about music criticism, describing it as a subset of music journalism. Music journalism as a whole is the practice of criticism on music that stems off into many methods, both critical and non-critical. It is a sense that dates back to

the early eighteenth century that simply just examines how to talk about sound and music. This type of journalism and critique can have critics from any background and can be a great factor in determining what music genre is popular and what is not. Many common genres, like jazz and rock, for example, have been subjected to criticism from music journalists for years. These can set standards as to who “belongs”, and can be a factor as to why certain groups of people listen to certain music, having a role in taste cultures, and it is what I will be taking into consideration when diving into my research.

To delve more into the value side of the taste culture idea, I examined the relationships found between music and identity from Timothy Rice’s 2007 article on the subject. In the article titled “Reflections on Music and Identity in Ethnomusicology”, Rice examines seventeen articles published between 1982 and 2006 within the journal “Ethnomusicology” that have the word “identity” in the title. He wanted to reflect on the treatment of the two subjects within the field and how they surfaced as common themes in American ethnomusicology. Rice comes to the conclusion early in the article that ethnomusicologists don’t go in-depth about identity when discussing it in their research, leaving out a crucial understanding of the correlation between such a topic and music as well as taking it for granted. Thus, he takes it upon himself to take a closer look at how the themes of identity have manifested in the field. For the sake of brevity and relevance, I will be summarizing his findings as best as I can as they pertain to my work.

Rice cites psychologist Erik Erikson’s literature and found main themes within his work on the idea of identity, splitting the concept into two parts: individual self-identity and group identity. Individual self-identity, as he explains it in his literary analysis, answers the questions that pertain to self-definition and self-understanding as well as grant a sense of belonging. He gives the example of an unsatisfactory work experience, stating, “...one way that music

contributes to identity in the sense of self-definition or self-understanding is in situations where people work in unrewarding hum-drum jobs but musical competence provides them with a sense of pride and self-worth.” He continues on these forms of identity and how they are applied by examining studies done on Shanghai music clubs and Yoruba musicians. Similarly, he identifies group identity as a collective of these individual identities that are put together based on various characteristics, like music. The way Rice describes it is very similar to Michelsen’s definition of taste cultures, as it is a collective interest of a grouping from similar values, and uses the Indian caste of Carans as an example of the social identity since their culture was greatly intertwined with music and poetry recitals. The use of music in these cultures helps construct these identities and allows reflections on the lives of the people that created and follow these practices. This is a very important factor to consider when it comes to the correlation between music and ethnicity because ethnicity is essential to constructing identity and the culture coinciding with that ethnicity can explain the significance behind the music and why someone enjoys it. These factors studied in the literature display how important and strong the relationship between music and cultural identity is and how it is a strong underlying factor within one’s music taste.

I wanted to examine the strength of these factors within actual recordings of musical elements in cultures, so I found an example of the musical influence in action within a chapter of the book “Cumbia!” called “Cumbia Music in Colombia: Origins, Transformations, and Evolution of a Coastal Music Genre”. Leonardo D’Amico covers the influences that the music genre of Cumbia has gained from the African diaspora, which is a common influence in many popular genres today in fact, and how it is performed in the culture as well as how it spread to others and garnered an identity from musical criticism. D’Amico explains the many instruments

and “ritmos”(rhythms) that are used in the Caribbean coastal genre and how they are performed in accordance with common cultural events like festivals, namely the famous Carnaval. He goes into how the style of music is derived from many different cultures, with many of the instruments and elements being derived and taken from African-styled music. It is speculated that the origins of the genre and name have connections to lower-class citizens and fugitive slaves. According to D’Amico, “It is the artistic and cultural product of the rural and artisan classes, who reveal a tricultural Afro-Indo-Hispanic heritage... In traditional costeño music culture, the term cumbia has a variety of connotations: it refers at the same time to a rhythm, a musical genre, and a dance.” This allowed people in the rural areas to easily gravitate towards that very liberal and upbeat style of music and learn it themselves through oral tradition. Once radio broadcasting came into play, the distribution of this traditional, rural sound spread even farther. More people were gaining access to this music and different Latin Americans were making their own takes on the genre, adding their own musical elements into the mix and making the genre flourish into the mainstream. D’Amico even notes on the success of cumbia gained from the mass distribution, saying, “Thanks to orchestral arrangements of many radio station bands, the cultivated “urban” interpretation of traditional “rural” melodies (originally performed by conjuntos and brass bands) led to a transformation of the folk repertoires into new urban musical forms.”

D’Amico’s chapter expresses the connection and the reach that music can have to people, whether they are originally from that culture or are indirectly exposed to it. It encompasses the factors that were expressed by Rice and Michelsen, with the culture grasping senses of identity in the origins and musical storytelling as well as gaining more exciting variations of criticism and remixes from other surrounding countries. These factors show how much culture can affect

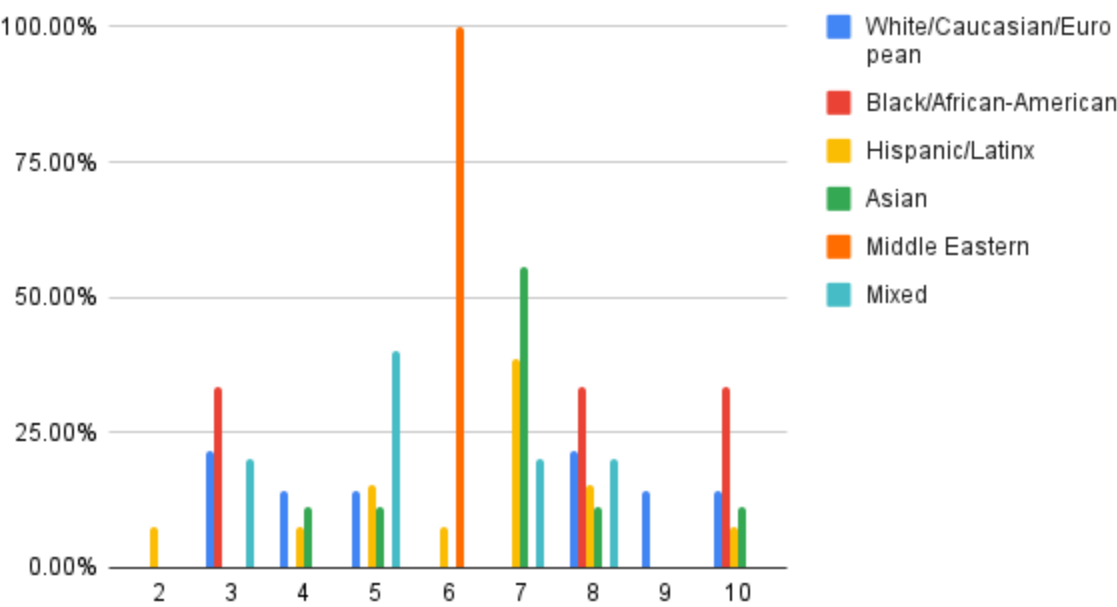
music and people's connection to certain genres, even if it is unconscious. I will be utilizing an ontology that gives a brief history of multiple music genres and what cultural influences they have been derived from so that I will be able to accurately correlate the genres with their cultures. These are the types of elements that I will be using to understand the results of my data and structuring my questions.

Research Methods

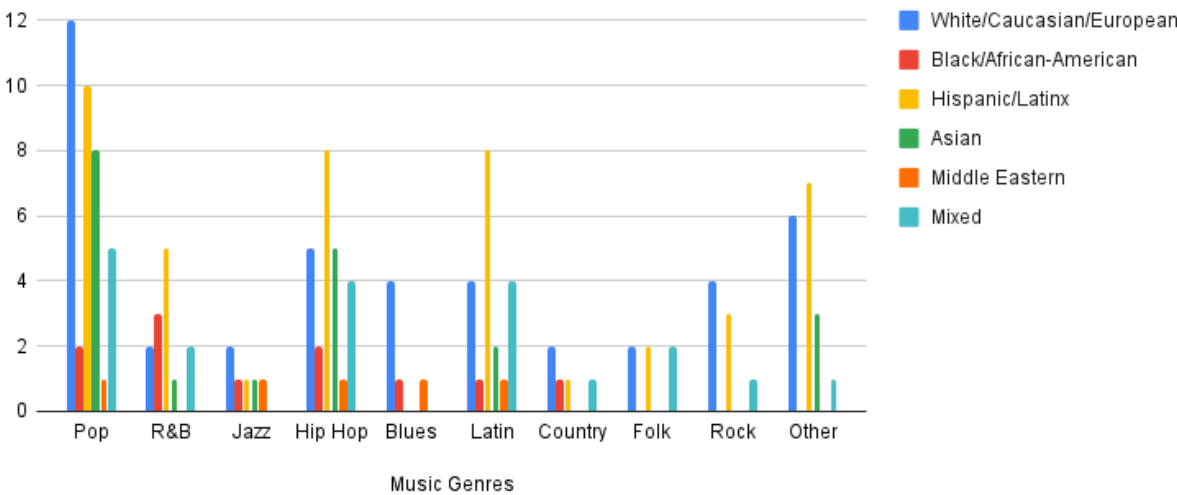
I administered an anonymous short survey of eleven questions to respondents to see how exposure to ethnic culture influences music tastes in modern times with an anonymous sample of people. The survey took about 7 minutes to complete on average. Most of the questions were multiple-choice questions, and they were used to gauge the respondents' exposure to cultures and what music they listened to most often. I also used scale and open-ended questions to get answers that elaborated on the multiple-choice questions, asking why and how they were connected to both of those factors. This short questionnaire was administered so that I could get a random sample of respondents to answer questions that gave me specific information for certain variables. It allowed me to see the factors that I had learned about in my research being applied and analyze the data for myself. The results of this survey will be very useful in further understanding my research topic and backing up my hypothesis and research.

Findings & Analysis

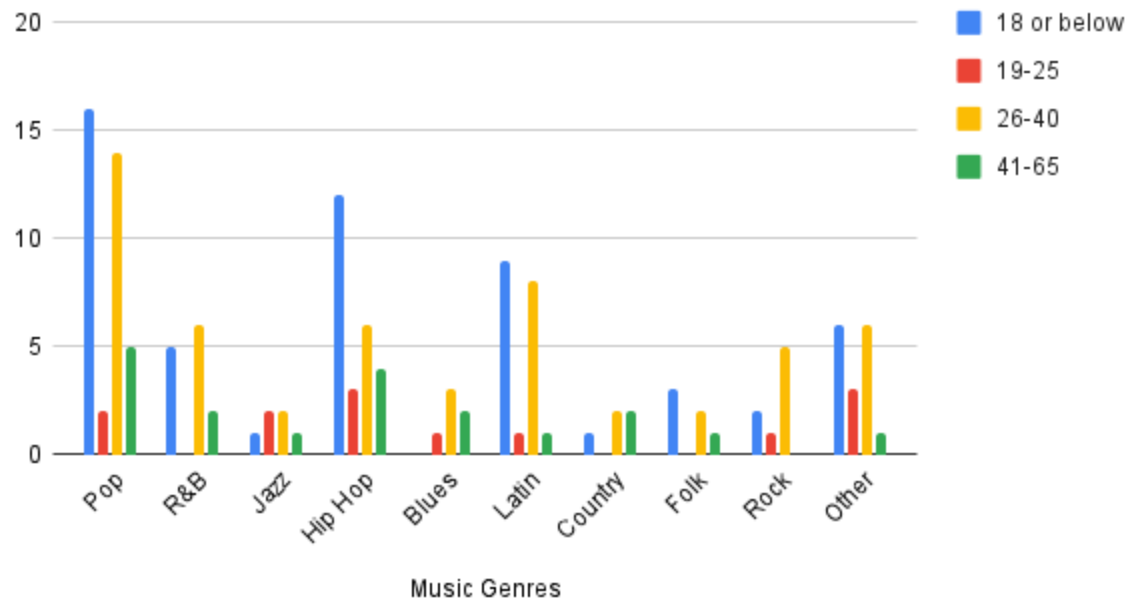
Ethnicity & Exposure



Ethnicity & Music Taste



Age & Music



In this anonymous study, I had gained a lot of information that both intrigued me and supported my research and theorizing done prior. The survey was sent out on multiple social media platforms, including Instagram, Discord, and Reddit, as well as directly shared to people my peers knew. It had received 45 responses, and most of the questions were answered. The graphs above show the most relevant variables that I tested in the questions which deal with the factors of ethnicity, cultural exposure, and music taste. In the survey, I also accounted for age as a confounding variable for the results that I was expecting to see in the data. There was a wide range of answers for the question that asked for how in touch the respondents were with their cultural background, but many, as shown in the first graph labeled “Ethnicity & Exposure”, tended to be mildly exposed to their culture. Fourteen of the respondents were White, making up the majority of the participants, thirteen were Hispanic/Latinx, nine of them were Asian, three were Black, one was Middle Eastern, and five of them were mixed. Because of these

proportions, it's important to keep in mind that the statistical data presented in the graphs above may not apply generally for the groups involved in this study.

When asked how they were exposed to their culture, participants said that they were mostly exposed through home experiences with family members, from the environment they grew up in, from the internet and media that they consume, and friends that they surround themselves with. Similar answers were given when asked about their exposure to cultures other than their own. This means that they are subject to cultural exposure for a good portion of their daily lives, whether it be to their own or others, and this gives more connection to those backgrounds.

The answers to the question that asked about what genres of music did the participants most listen to were very diverse, but very informative as the data, which is shown in the second graph labeled “Ethnicity & Music Taste” above, shows some trends that support my hypothesis and research. For context, the question options consisted of a limited selection of genres that I wanted to focus on because of their connection to the culture(s) they were influenced by and what ethnic group they were dominated by, but participants were also able to put in other genres as well. The options consisted of Pop, Rhythm & Blues (R&B), Jazz, Hip-Hop, Blues, Latin, Country, Folk, and Rock, which are all common and culturally heavy genres. The “Other” category is used to cover the less popular genres that people chose, but it's important to know that what they put down, for the most part, also had strong cultural connections, mentioning genres like K-pop, Ska, or Arabic Tarab music. For Pop music, the majority of the participants from each ethnic group enjoyed listening to it, which is understandable because the genre is very mainstream and easy to listen to for everyone and encompasses elements from various other genres. For Afro-inspired and Afro-dominated genres, the Black and Hispanic/Latinx

respondents created the majority; however, they tended to prefer the more upbeat and current genres, like R&B and Hip-Hop, than slower and more “old goldie” genres, like jazz and blues. A similar trend appeared with the Latin music category, where Hispanic/Latinx respondents greatly preferred listening to the Latin American genres, like bachata, merengue, salsa, and more. The reasons behind these choices are the main connection between the data shown and how it connects to what I am researching.

When participants were asked why they listened to those genres, the answers were varied. Many of the respondents just said that they liked the music just simply because they liked it, it was good for them, and/or it was calming, which didn't give me too much to work with. The other responses, however, were a bit more descriptive. Those respondents said that they enjoyed the rhythms and messages in the music, they grew up listening to those genres, and/or it made them feel connected to their culture in some way. This, along with the trends shown in the data, further justify my research that culture has a factor in musical preferences.

Many of the respondents who had mid to high exposure tended to choose music from, influenced, similar, or dominated by their ethnic cultures. The reasons why people liked certain music genres and how they were exposed to them as well as their culture matched with how music spreads, where it comes from, and why people tend to gravitate towards them. This is clearly shown in the data, with factors of taste cultures and music criticism at play with what genres were popular among these groups. I do want to briefly cover the other factor that I considered when collecting this data though, and that would be the factor of age.

I pointed out earlier that the Black and Hispanic/Latinx participants preferred the more upbeat area of ethnically influenced genres, and I believe that, as well as certain other trends in the data, is due to the mainstream of the genres and the age of the respondents. Majority of the

respondents were 18 years old or younger, making up 40.9% of the participants. About 34% of the respondents were 26 to 40 years old, with the smaller portion of the rest being 41 to 65 and 19 to 25 respectively. From my knowledge, younger age groups tend to gravitate towards more energetic and relevant music than older groups of people, and seem to find that they relate more to that type of music. On the other hand, older generations enjoy slower music and genres that are more relevant to their youth than current times. This is not specifically accurate for everyone, but this is the general trend that I have noticed in my normal life and in the data I compared for this, which is shown in the third graph labeled “Age & Music.” The graph shows that people 18 or under tend to choose upbeat and popular genres, such as Pop and Hip-Hop. Younger generations have more technological proficiency, and so have more access to different genres on the internet. Because of this, they can be attuned to more mainstream music and have their tastes be spread farther than they normally would. Older groups, however, tend to have more interest in older music that was popular back in their times, which tends to be slower and less relevant genres. Again, in the data and from my prior knowledge, these trends are generalizations and the data shows that they are not strictly applicable. Regardless, it was important to mention with the context of my primary data and analysis.

Overall, my findings support my hypothesis and the research in my literature review. The ethnicities of the respondents generally matched the music genres they listened to the most, and the exposure levels they specified were generally high. The trends show the connections between ethnic exposure and music preference that use the factors of taste cultures, music criticism, and more in the analysis. Despite the possible underlying factor of age, these biases hold true.

Conclusion

Music and culture have been intertwined for ages, whether that be through the actual musical sounds they produce or within the choices that people make. From support from my data and research, I can conclude that my hypothesis was correct. The amount of exposure to ethnic culture increases the likelihood of someone choosing to listen to music that comes from or is similar to that culture. Though the sample size and the proportion of certain groups in my data was smaller than preferred, it gave me an in-depth understanding of the application of the factors explored in ethnomusicology in today's time. Many people today still find a way to gain a connection through cultural music, even if they weren't fully exposed to the origins of it. Though the genres we listen to today are constantly changing and not fully what the original intent wanted, most of them still hold true to the elements, sounds, and messages that their musical roots stem from. Music has and always will be a part of our identities that stem from other identities, and that is a beautiful thing. The next time you listen to music, no matter how modernized it may seem to be, take a moment to think about how it connects to you and where you came from.

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