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**Critical literacy, engagement, and agency in popular music  
consumption by young adults**

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# Critical literacy, engagement, and agency in popular music consumption by young adults

## Abstract

The education of an individual occurs in a multitude of places, including one's cultural context. The interactions one has with cultural artifacts, such as music, can impact how individuals interact with larger social movements, power structures, and self-identification. As outlined by Giroux (2006) the meaningful integration of agency and critical cultural analysis, are essential to critical engagement in citizens, and is generally lacking within secondary and post-secondary curriculum. The goal of this study is to assess the engagement practices and experiences individuals have with popular culture, specifically music, and the relation these interactions have to individual, social, and political agency. Utilizing an online, anonymous survey, individual within the 18-24 demographic will outline their current buying habits, motivations, preferences, and interactions with music and its surrounding industry. These results will be analyzed by integrating theory and research regarding cultural and critical studies, various pedagogical approaches to literacy, and popular music studies to better understand the interactions the participants have with their cultural reality. The attempt will be to reflect potential current levels of political engagement, public discourse, agency, and listening trends within the larger sample size and by demographic such as race and education level. These results will suggest current critical practices in those who have recently left the K-12 education system and suggest further steps to maintain or increase said practices.

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CRITICAL LITERCY , ENGAGMENT , AND AGENCY IN POPULAR MUSIC  
CONSUMPTION BY YOUNG ADULTS

By

Mackensi Crenshaw

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### **Abstract**

The education of an individual occurs in a multitude of places, including one's cultural context. The interactions one has with cultural artifacts, such as music, can impact how individuals interact with larger social movements, power structures, and self-identification. As outlined by Giroux (2006) the meaningful integration of agency and critical cultural analysis, are essential to critical engagement in citizens, and is generally lacking within secondary and post-secondary curriculum. The goal of this study is to assess the engagement practices and experiences individuals have with popular culture, specifically music, and the relation these interactions have to individual, social, and political agency. Utilizing an online, anonymous survey, individual within the 18-24 demographic will outline their current buying habits, motivations, preferences, and interactions with music and its surrounding industry. These results will be analyzed by integrating theory and research regarding cultural and critical studies, various pedagogical approaches to literacy, and popular music studies to better understand the interactions the participants have with their cultural reality. The attempt will be to reflect potential current levels of political engagement, public discourse, agency, and listening trends within the larger sample size and by demographic such as race and education level. These results will suggest current critical practices in those who have recently left the K-12 education system and suggest further steps to maintain or increase said practices.

## Introduction

Popular culture is a field of study largely alien to the general public but can be an important site of critical inquiry. The most overarching category of “popular culture” may be popular music. Its daily prevalence and the often personal role music plays in the lives of listeners, places it in the position it to “be a powerful tool for developing social efficacy” (White & Walker, 2008). Yet, there is an argument to be made that the public discourse, that which is outside of the realm of the intellectual, is seemingly absent of critical thought; seen in the consumerism and engagement practices pushed onto the general public by the cultural industry. Such collective action has been reinforced in the last sixty years by the historical landscape, capital, and societal norms of contemporary Western society. Said discourse can be argued to perpetuate discriminatory systemic practices in American culture; such as orchestrated class warfare, contemporary minstrelsy, or reinforcement of strict racial lines and barriers.

There is a seemingly obvious way in which to address such shortcomings: public schooling. Giroux and Simon (1989) write that school is understood through the “legitimation of social forms and subjectivities as they are organized within relations of power and meaning”; which can then empower or disenfranchise its students. Most American schooling neglects popular culture, because it is counterintuitive to the “correct culture” of the class controlling education. A critical pedagogy in schools would allow for students to examine how knowledge is produced, understood, represented, and resisted against in those power structures. Giroux and Simon further suggest that popular culture integration allows students to examine the politics and production of pleasure, and their relation to cultural site.

Through mindfully constructed schooling, encouragement and facilitation of critical thought in the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary “traditional” classrooms can be developed. One such tact is named “popular culture pedagogy”, a form of education described by

Mahiri (2002) as “using many modes of...that are capable of presenting a variety of textual forms like print, pictures, drawings, animation, and sound. Its multimodal, multitextual, and sometimes multicultural influences (and resources for) learning and meaning making contain possibilities for both agency and restraint”. The lack of said pedagogical practices in schools contributes to the perpetuation of limited awareness in systemic impact made by popular music in the everyday life and actions of students living in Western culture.

The lack of ability to identify, analyze, and come to terms with the social, cultural, and political impacts of popular music, and popular culture at large, by the non-academic and intellectual public impairs the development of social efficacy, awareness of institutional and economic power structures, and ethnographic histories within a larger multicultural society. This study, in analyzing the listening practices, motivations, musical education backgrounds, and industry engagement levels of young adults hopes to locate commonalities and trends which may develop a better understanding of current levels of critical engagement in those who have recently left the K-12 setting. These trends, when placed in theoretical and historical frameworks, can lead to a conclusion regarding consumerism and sociological practices surrounding contemporary 21st century music listening and its future.

## **Cultural and Theoretical Context**

### **Popular Music**

Popular music is typically seen within a populist lens, asserting it as the music that “the people” choose to consume; and therefore, is the music that has the most mass appeal in a given time and place (Kassabien, 1999). This notion, while commonplace, does not address music which is ambient, larger industrial forces which produce and distribute such music, or the cultural politics and influences of the historical moment. Yet, the existence of these external

forces and individual consumption patterns suggest that music can be both autonomy-granting *and* a commodified ideological tool (Kassabian, 1992). This assertion suggests that personal autonomy and choice can still be practiced in a pre-existing, if not pre-determined, cultural spaces. It also assumes that an individual's identity both influences and exists independently of the choices that they choose to make. This assumption underpins this study, as it examines how young adults in the current cultural moment choose to access, and then use, the music which they engage with.

Story (2006) proposes four distinct ways in which popular culture/music can be read. The first is that popular culture is simply something that is "liked by many people". It cannot be directly measured in popularity, so just because one thing is more popular, doesn't eliminate the other. Second, that popular culture is seen as a product created and constructed for the masses by specific interests, to maintain hegemony of the pervading power class. Popular culture is seen as an extension of apparatuses that can be used to manipulate the working class, and therefore maintain a dominant ideology. The contrary, and third view, is that popular culture is produced by the people, for the people, indicating that "the people" have some amount of active participation in the production and distribution. The final view is that a text is simply a raw material that various industries and hegemonic powers provide, but that it is the people who create the culture(s) surrounding them. Simon and Giroux (1989) suggest that popular culture is a cultural site with varying politics and ideologies, reliant largely on a historical context, in which varying groups collide. Therefore, "popular culture" is a transaction of dominance, complicity, and resistance over the dominant ideology, with varying groups attempting to legitimate or name a specific experience of history, community, or pleasure. They name popular

culture then as a form which is created and structured by the “politics of difference” within a specific context.

Popular music studies, within the context of pedagogical practices, takes the final approach. A common view being that, “Music is a vital component of pop culture and the knowledge and understanding of popular music can be a powerful tool for developing social efficacy” (White & Walker, 2008). Social efficacy, in this point, is referencing popular music as it exists in conjunction with economic structures and functions, struggles of morality, imperialism, and discussions surrounding ideology. In this case, the prevailing effort is to focus specifically on providing students the means to construct a narrative and dialogue around cultural artifact, and guiding them to a point of autonomous, independent, and immediate, if not subconscious, critical analysis.

### **Consumerism**

The history of popular music in America, and its widespread consumption, often begins during the mid-century post-war period of economic prosperity. The typical narrative asserts that the prosperity of suburban families allowed for the adolescent and young adult to become a demographic for marketing of various goods, services, and products (Buckingham, 2013). The “creation” of rock n’ roll as a marketable and inherently youth listening community stems from here and has guided the study of youth counter and subcultures. The focus on youth, while valuable, has excluded the practices of marginalized or otherwise ignored groups, therefore preventing meaningful engagement with the topic of audience in pop music studies (Hesmondhalgh, 2002). On a societal scale, this has permanently cemented the idea of pop music as youthful, leading to marketing and production of artifacts that align with the Western view of childhood and adolescence.



Popular music can be situated in the place of what Kasabian (2002) describes as the “ubiquitous” and what theorists like Grossberg (1992) label as “everyday life”. The general belief regarding the consumerism and general intake of music, for the “average” person, falls within one or both. The ubiquitous is music that the listener cannot control, but still exists in the space that they are occupying. Such music can be a part of an individual's or group's everyday life or is in the background of the activities often seen as mundane or “ordinary”. While not actively sought out, such music still frames worldview; a concept further explored in this paper. Popular music, whether seen as music for or by the people, a raw material, or otherwise, fits within the everyday life of most individuals in Western society (Hesmondhalgh, 2002). One can choose to listen to that music, often involving the exchange of money or use of product, or they hear it against their will like when they enter a store or an elevator or get put on hold when making a call (Kassabian, 2002). This distinction, between hearing and listening, is critical to understanding consumer practices and the role of the large music industry.

The introduction of the personal listening device, commonly referred to as the brand name “Walkman” led to some of the initial writings on changing effects of music consumption on the social, personal, and societal planes. As described in the book, *Object Lessons: Personal Stereo*, Tubus-Dubrow (2017) says, “To add movement to music, and music to any situation that we come across, that would be more than just portable hi-fi, it would be an inexhaustible source of new pleasures and experiences”. There was a belief that the Walkman could provide liberation, autonomy, and access to expanded worldviews through the use and consumption of music, popular or otherwise, and other recorded sound such as audiobooks. That new technology and the cultural artifacts which it spread, was met with resistance from both the political left and the right. Bloom (1987) highlights the fear of the Walkman and contemporary music forms such

as rock, as creating a culture of instant gratification, laziness, and regression in societal behaviors and values. Those on the left feared that use of the Walkman, would encourage societal retreat from what they saw as larger social responsibility (Tuhus-Dubrow, 2017). There was also the view that popular culture, in being restricted by the industry surrounding it, produced a dominant image and standardization that prevents the people from creating authentic forms of self-expression (Giroux & Simon, 1989). In both views, the Walkman exasperated mass culture and atomization, leading to a moral conflict in consumers (du Guy et. Al, 1997). The rise in popularity of personal music devices and popular music studies, presented a new interest in the effects of music on the individual, group, and larger social sects.

More recently, the struggle over technology and music has surrounded the use of streaming services. The Recording Industry of America reports that streaming services earn 75% of all revenue from music sales (RIAA, 2018). The current estimates suggest that in the population of U.S. music buyers, 86% of consumers utilize streaming services. Industry anxieties over the paying of artists is the prevailing commentary within popular publications such as *Rolling Stone* (Flanagan, 2019; Ingham, 2019). These rates suggest that the majority of individuals no longer “own” music in the traditional sense, as they would when purchasing cassette tapes, vinyl, compact disks, or even an mp3 file. The 2018 Music Consumer Profile released by the Recording Industry of America indicates that 18-24-year olds make up about 14% of all music buyers in the United States. Among this group, online streaming is the most popular form of accessing music, with the demographic making up 15% of the overall streaming market. The demographic is also reported to make up 22% of the all users who pay for streaming, but only 7% of those who utilize free streaming (RIAA 2019). It is estimated that internationally, 75% of people access music, mostly streaming services, through use of a

smartphone (IFIP 2018). Such reporting emphasizes the emerging role of streaming in the popular music industry and demonstrates the need for continued research of music consumerism, musicology, and in the writings of histories in the streaming age.

With the rise in streaming, both physical and digital download sales have decreased 18% since 2017. Yet, there has been a renewed interest in vinyl, seen with its 8% increase of sales. (RIAA, 2018). In 2018, vinyl sales made up 13.3% of all physical album sales. Similarly, the cassette tape has also seen a rise in sales, an estimated 18.9% from 2017-18 (Wang, 2019). Of those vinyl sales, only 8% were “new” albums, or those released within the year. Of the top 10 selling albums, only one consisted of music recorded prior to 1985 (Wang, January 2019). Some label executives such as Tim Fraser Harding of the Warner Company, have said that “heritage” or older artists and bands, still perform extremely well in physical sales (Wang, May 2019). This is all to suggest that while streaming is popular, especially among the demographic in question of this study, there is still a market for physical copies of albums and tracks; and that this demographic participates in those sales.

It is important to note, as Hogg (2012) does in his writings on technology and music, that the belief that technology is related only to electronics is a dominant Western ideology. Hogg suggests that anything which helps us to listen to and understand music, such as memory, is a form of technology. The intergenerational transmission of music provides opportunities to discuss technologies as memory as well, with music taste being formed and supported by that of the parents, grandparents, or siblings. While research demonstrates that children’s music tastes may not be identical to their parents, they are certainly influenced by them (ter Boght, 2011). The mere existence of genres such as folk and gospel, which are rooted in oral traditions of African slaves, Anglo-Saxon immigrants, and others, further allows for the consideration of

memory and family as a source of technology in which listeners access music (Tawa, 2005).

When considered in the larger study of group socialization, intergenerational trauma, and ethnography, technology can be expanded to incorporate more.

### **Individualism and Autonomy**

In the contemporary landscape, with use of personal listening devices and personalized streaming, music consumption itself is largely viewed as a personal act, though many theorists and musicologists are of the belief that music is inherently social in nature. It is widely seen that, “Music is socially mediated, but this social mediation occurs on a number of distinct and mutually modulating or intersecting” planes (Born, 2012). This mediation is dependent on the planes that an individual inhabits, which cannot be determined, entirely, by the individual themselves. Born suggests four planes: that music is mixed with institutions therefore allowing it to be produced and transformed, that music refracts social identities and their formations, that music can create communities based on self-identification, and that music produces its own unique social groups. These planes which music lies in can be demonstrated by exploring the introduction of the Walkman in the late 70’s. While it was subject to scrutiny by various political and social groups for the supposed isolation it provided from other people and communal issues, it was widely popular among consumers and provided a new market in the industry and the underground. Innovation in attachments such as shared headphone jacks and the creation of the mixtape changed how the consumer shared and experienced music (Tuhus-Dubrow, 2017).

Research in genre preference and music consumption has largely focused on connection to personality and other psychological factors, not social influence. Taste has been proved to be almost as consistent as personality, but the formation of that taste has received less intensive study. Some work has demonstrated that education, race and racial centrality, and age correlate

with specific listening trends; though the extent of that influence is not as easily measured (Bryson, 1996; Marshall & Naumann, 2018). Other research has explored the interaction of parental taste on children, indicating strong correlations within family units (ter Boght et al, 2011). Further research has indicated that education also plays an impact on taste (Bryson, 1996; ter Boght et al, 2011). Similarly, it has been proven that racial identities affiliated closely with certain genres of music (e.g. rap/hip-hop as “Black”, country as “white”), can lead to listenership among those in that group as a need for cultural identity. Likewise, those with strong racism quotients are more resistant to genres with artists predominantly of another race (Marshall & Naumann, 2018). Each indicator suggests that there are external and society-based forces regulating and influencing an individual’s choices on music, suggesting that one is not totally autonomous in their choices.

The reality is that there is no real body of empirical work which reflects audience choice and interaction in the everyday consumption of music (Hesmondhalgh, 2002). There is much that exists on preference, and the connection of those preferences with controls such as geographic location or racial group (Schafer & Sedlmeirer, 2010). But, personal factors and relations to music, how it is used, and the choices one makes surrounding it are disjointed and rely heavily on numerical data that provides some insight on preferences but not the experience and motivations informing those preferences. As Hesmondhalgh (2002) suggests, researchers should be asking questions such as “What is it about the role of music in people’s lives that distinguishes it from the role of other experiences, as a means of gaining pleasure, of coping with life, and of making, passing, or understanding time and space”.

## **Critical Literacy in Education**

The National Council for Teachers of English (2005, 2013) has shifted focus on the 21<sup>st</sup> century to the incorporation of multimodal literacies in English education. NCTE (2005) describes multimodal literacy as “Multiple ways of knowing (Shorte & Harste) [and] also include art, music, movement, and drama, which should not be considered curricular luxuries” (p. 2). Such thought has helped to leave curricular movement such “hip-hop” pedagogy, which for some students helps to prevent the “Westernization” of the education of culturally diverse students (Belle, 2016). A multimodal and new literacy approach to educational curriculum also promotes the incorporation of critical thought and analysis, expanding possible student engagement with history, politics, culture, science, and other disciplines of study.

The concept of critical literacies is one which encourages the development of skills and interactions with culture and academic subjects which help to develop the ability to “read the world” (Gainer, 2012). Critical literacies can involve actions and skills such as the ability to recognize processes such as transfer and relation, utilize technology, and to derive personal and anti-hegemonic meaning. Mandlin & Sandlin (2015) assert that these should be done in attempts to address systems and locations of power, and to build awareness of popular culture beyond purely interactions of pleasure. This is a deviation from what could be “traditional literacies” which encourage mastery of basic reading, writing, and mathematics; and instead calls for an education or schooling to develop ability in pupils to question cultural, historical, and personal and group ideology and context (Giroux, 2016). Such development is a direct threat to structures of power, as there is a historic and contemporary record of marginalized groups using popular culture and new technologies to grant themselves voice (Giroux, 2016; Gainer, 2012).

While such education is often positioned as occurring outside of schooling, the work of Jesse Gainer (2012) suggests that this engagement and skill development can take place in the traditional schooling. He suggests that, “Schools are public places that are wonderfully situated to lead efforts in developing engaged citizens ready to meet demands of 21st century literacies” (pp. 14) . Empirical studies of structured and intentionally planned curriculum intended for critical literacy surrounding popular culture, suggest that Gainer’s suggestion is attainable with a diverse population of youth (Mahiri & Connor, 2003; Witkins, 1994). The intention of this curriculum is to facilitate skill development which can be then be used on cultural artifacts and contexts that cannot be replicated within the traditional school setting and context (Mahiri, 2000). While there have been popular culture classes and programs created in higher education, there is a noticeable lack of such inclusion within the secondary or elementary educational fields, especially in the U.S. This can be attributed to the lack of widespread acceptance of cultural studies as a legitimate and/or valuable field, and the general view of popular culture as “lowbrow”. Such belief raises ethical questions of whether such studies at a K-12 level will “prepare” students for adult life after mandatory schooling as perceived by the public and political sphere (White & Walker, 2008; Maudlin & Sandlin, 2015).

### **Literature Review**

Maudlin and Sandlin (2015) describe popular culture as a range of texts from a particular time and place and consumerism practices. This definition allows for movement and fluidity of popular texts, as it allows meaning to change depending on the reader, time, location, and variety of other factors. Meaning is therefore dependent on context; a structured and varied field of practices where specific articulations are attained. An articulation in this case referring to how a specific individual and group related to the social and historical conditions and the world they

live in (Grossberg, 1992). The variations of articulation produce taste, and taste then dictates that which is “popular”; as Grossberg asserts that there is no true, singular set of cultural practices. In other words, there is no criteria which qualifies something as being “popular”. It is taste of the context and individual which dictates consumption by the masses and is not subjected to the critical or commercial systems that discriminate a cultural artifact but can be influenced by outside forces. Horner (1999) extends this to the popular music listener, suggesting that an individual’s view is never truly their own, and instead is formed from their lived experiences and current views, bound in a very specific historical, cultural, and material condition and/or context. The interdependent nature of popular music requires that it is studied within a multiplicity of theoretical lenses and fields of studies.

Popular music studies have often been situated within traditional, or classical, music studies. Classical music is considered to be “universal”, a label which asserts that it is an innately human creation, and therefore a context-independent entity whose value comes from its own being, the music itself. Green (1999) calls this assumption “reification”, and says that this judgement system is often, and wrongly, extended to pop music. She suggests that even those in the field of music education and study who see a value in popular music, often do so through the structures and values used in classical music analysis: complexity, universal appeal, and the extent of its commercial appeal. Many theorists lean away from such analysis. They suggest that popular music, as opposed to the “legitimate culture” of the dominant class, which in this case could be classical music, is matter of taste and not an innately “pure” or “natural” cultural practice. Therefore, its values cannot be legitimated by the critical and commercial systems of discrimination used by the dominant class (Grossberg, 1992).



To combat such essentialist readings of popular music, there is an acceptance that music cannot exist without a specific social context which it lives in. Grossberg (1992) asserts that culture is a communication with power, and that power is attained and secured through this cultural communication instead of forces as readily believed. Relations between social groups, such as Black and white or rich and poor allow for the maintenance of power structures through the mass consumption of that culture. In popular music, such communication could be demonstrated through the production and distribution of music through use of publications or popular charts. For example, the establishment of “race records” and the R&B Charts maintained a distinct racial line in music, mirroring that of American society. The popularity of music on these charts correlated with political and social changes as well as social uprising (Stewart, 2005). This is reflective of the consumption performed by the general public. Therefore, the distribution of production of such music is reflective of tastes in a larger culture of music and political ideology. Popular culture exists to be used as a commodity that can lure the masses into a certain passivity and subordination. It is only through the deconstruction of that culture and its various texts, will allow the masses to free themselves from that dominant ideology (Maudlin & Sandlin, 2015).

This deconstruction can begin to be done by looking at the individual listener. Barn (2012) asserts that music is socially facilitated and determined but is done so on various cultural planes which interact and connect in various ways. Therefore, it can be argued that one’s engagement with music is dependent on a variety of social factors. Sanjeck (1999) specifically notes the possible effects of education, economic, and geography on music listening habits. Education would allow for access to formal texts, “highbrow” genres, and musical training. Socioeconomic status has the ability to regulate what forms and how one listens to music,

therefore limiting the scope of genre, era, or relevance of music. Geographic location can determine exposure to genre. In this framework, certain groups can actively be barred from exposure to specific forms of music. Sanjeck explains that music is delegated by a “network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means...produce(s) the kind of art works that the art world is noted for”. He explains further that this is done through industry funded and facilitated means, such as Billboard charts and curated playlists (such as on radio stations). For example, the introduction of “Top 40” radio in the mid-50s allowed for radio stations, funded through corporations and distribution companies, to tightly control the variety of music a population of people (car owners, region, etc.) had access to (Tawa 2005). This type of facilitation limits, seemingly, the agency that one has in “discovering” music for themselves.

The assertion of an individual’s dependence on social, cultural, and political factors has been argued to conflict with how consumers believe popular music is assessed for value. It is shown that often what music consumers as being labeled as “bad” is that which is perceived to lack a certain amount of agency or choice by the listener (Kassabian, 1999). Such public critics would say that popular music, in being popular among many people and therefore appearing more frequently in the public sphere, takes away agency in finding your own music. The evolution of listening techniques then, are changing the way one practices choice and expresses themselves through music. The creation of personal musical devices, iPods, and streaming via smartphone has allowed for an unprecedented amount of customization in preference and control in music experiences (Tuhus-Dubrow, 2017). In following this line of thought, this would allow for access to “good” music to be easier and expanded to a larger base of people. Kassabian

(1999) says that practicing of agency is liberating in a capitalistic society, as it provides the consumer control in their intake and buying practice.

Contemporary mass consumption further complicates and complements the genre and demographic classification occurring in popular music. In her history and analysis of *Book of the Month Clubs*, Radway (1999) explains the intricacies of mass pre-determined consumption. Consumption, as she suggests, is highly tied to authority and societal acceptance, writing of “classic” novels, “The classic was a classic because its claim to legitimacy and worth was already established by accepted authorities and it was therefore understood to have, first, a particular use and value, and then, later, with its entry into the marketplace, a specific exchange-value” (pp. 518). Authorities can be academic, but also include those who control production and marketing. An interview with Tim Fraser Harding (2019), who oversees Warner Brothers’ initiatives for reissues of older popular music, explains that renewing interest in “heritage” acts is one of the key ways to make record companies money. Looking at sales from vinyl shows this popularity, where only one of the top ten selling albums of 2018 had tracks recorded before 1985 (Wang, 2019). This connection demonstrates Radway’s assertion that criticism and consumption are intricately linked and interdependent. The consumption of albums such as *Thriller*, the 2nd top selling vinyl record of 2018, is dependent on its critical acclaim and title of “one of the best records of all time”. She says that people buy classics not to listen or read or watch them, but to own them as a symbol of culture and/or wealth. Yet, the critics ability to write about *Thriller* and cultural producers to use it, is totally reliant on its continued consumption by the public masses.

Kassabian (1999) also suggests that the choice given in contemporary society can lead to a complacency and lack of exploration of genre and cultural space, such complacency leads to commodification of social identity; or rather the commodification of everyday life. Capitalism

and cultural authoritarianism have allowed for music, a non-object, to be commodified through production, distribution, criticism, and marketing. The manipulation of the space music holds in most people's day-to-day lives, plays out in various instances and moments in the cultural landscape. For example, the introduction of the twelve-inch LP in 1948 changed the amount of time one must dedicate to music, as each side of the vinyl could play about twenty-five minutes. The thirty-three RPM single disk allowed people cheaper options to consume popular singles (Tawa 205). Such progress and marketing allowed for music to function as both a form of cultural and economic capital, representative of some sort of societal power (Tuhus-Durbow, 2017). Power may be presented in small musical scenes, large-scale class division, and the intersections thereof. Brackett (2012) says that the history and withstanding acceptance of American popular music charts, specifically regarding music created by Black Americans, suggests that the public has an interest in individual preference categorization. Such accepted use of categorization reinforces social divides that can maintain feelings surrounding race, class, age, gender, or geography. Their use also helps to establish music scenes that can become politically and economically powerful, both in their own contexts and in the larger cultural landscape. Such as the case of race (e.g. race records) or class (e.g. hillbilly records); which enables and “others” oppressed and marginalized groups in the American landscape of 40s and 50s (Brackett 2012).

The identities which evolve from such classification systems can be limiting. Out of such essentialist notions of genre and distinction comes the modes of resistance against power and its various forms. While music and genre are constructed and manipulated by social forces, there's also the ability for it to construct reality as well (Born, 2012). The characteristics of a particular form of music may embody and express meanings that are innately social and cultural to a group, therefore validating and expressing the realities of individual experiences. (Shepherd, 2012).

Brackett (2012) says that an individual's varied preferences and the shared experiences through music between demographics, suggests that audiences are not fixed in their musical and social identities. Born suggests that while an individual audience, performer, technician, or other musical individual bares their own and socially granted identities and histories, the social nature of music allows for individual identity formation and the intersection of those identities. These coalitions justify Kassabian's (2002) belief that individuals are not inherently subjects to be exploited by capitalistic or ideological structures but are instead living and navigating pre-created networks and maps in music and music academia.

A post-structuralist approach to living within these popular music maps, positions listeners as the authority and guides. Horner (1999) suggests that their lived experiences and engagement with music provide the knowledge needed to understand music within a given society. Similarly, Grossberg (1992) asserts that because every individual experience the world differently, the maps that they create of mattering and meaning are specific to them, and the structures that have shaped their specific identity constituting and creating said meaning. This approach is often used to look at protest music, both overt and covert in nature. While consuming, and hearing music, is a seemingly passive action in the world of politics, work from theorists such as Ballinger (1999) positions such passivity as a form of resistance. The concept being that if politics or politically motivated messaging can occur in informal, and possibly passive, means then political resistance, such as with the actual creation and listening of music, can occur in such ways as well. Ballinger further asserts that mass and popular political music helps to create solidarity among marginalized and oppressed groups, as music is a unifying factor that allows for both recognition and the sharing of knowledge and experience regarding their

oppression. This allows for artists, listeners, and musical scenes to become agents, a site of practice used to attempt to control the direction of a given society (Grossberg 1992).

There are theorists who believe that engaging with music in and of itself, independent of larger apparatuses can be a liberating and an act of social change. Shepherd (2012) suggests that reality is created by people acting together for social/political reasons. Therefore, agents and their various sites, such as in creating music for the public, are inherently creating a tangible change in the reality of those who engage with it. Therefore, in engaging with popular music, people are participating in what Forth (1998) says is a “social transaction” where people engage with a larger cultural message, which can subvert or empower. This engagement allows people, particularly young people, to identify and develop their own judgements, values, and identities while living in systems that exist in a particular context. Such developments lead to cultural formations, such as music scenes, that can exist outside of only one social context.

While individuals have the ability to create and receive meaning, and to make active political change or for the practices to be effective, the agents must have access to apparatuses and institutions such as media or voting. (Grossberg, 1992). One could also argue that the public school could also be a place to create meaning (Parker, see the article listening to strangers). Within the context of public schooling, Maudlin and Sandlin (2005) assert that the construction of meaning outside of hegemony “will require students to perform at higher cognitive levels than expected on standards-based curriculum but epitomizes education that is aimed at teaching democratic values”. Democratic values include concepts such as individuality and public discourse which, when utilized, have the ability to liberate subjects from apparatuses and structures which aim to oppress and limit them. The teaching and study of popular culture, in facilitating democratic and public discourse skills, threatens such power structures. Because of

this threat, schools which are maintained by nation-states, will never adopt or incorporate pedagogical practices that threaten its power (Keller, Bekerman, Giroux, & Burbles 2008). The pessimistic response being that pop culture studies will not be taught in traditional school settings will have to instead should be incorporated into the education of the population through alternative means outside of state apparatuses.

There is a belief among some that cultural and critical theorists, or rather aptly named “the intellectual class,” have allowed this authoritarian network to maintain ideological influence and individual access. Hesmondhalgh (2012) for example, suggests that the lack of investment and interest in humanist and aesthetic sentiment in Marxism and post-structuralism writings, has created a larger gap in belief systems and intent between the artistic and the intellectual class. He argues that such widening has led to the strengthening of power in state apparatuses specifically those who benefit from a distinction between art and intellect. Firth (2012) suggests that popular studies is not a search of liberation or in everyday life for the average person, but instead is the search for a model or theory of consumption that can satisfy the intellectual. The assumption being that intellectuals do not have popular culture as a part of his daily life as the average person does. Furthermore, there is a belief that the stud and therefore impact of popular music in everyday life may in fact be exaggerated. Hesmondhalgh (2002) writes, “Academics tend, by the very nature of their work, to be very concerned with interpretation, and they may, as a result have overestimated the amount of active interpretation that people carry out in their everyday responses to music”(pp. 125) . So, while popular music has been seen as a source of liberation there are also those who believe that it has been grossly misled, at times overstated, and with little potential to alter how the music industry and popular music is viewed by both the public and within the field.

It is widely believed that individual music taste and preference can communicate one's positioning within a larger society. Bryson (1996) claims that people use cultural taste, in this case in the form of music preference, to maintain and reinforce symbolic lines and borders between their own groups or individuals and social groups/demographic that they want to distance themselves from. There is extensive study in the individual psychological characteristics that music preference can correlate with, as well as personal group identification. Research demonstrates that listeners of certain genres have higher affiliations with specific personal qualities, ethnicities, social classes, and values by members of other social groups. Participants in a survey conducted by Rentfrow, McDonald, and Oldmeadow (2009) for example, demonstrated a high level of agreement on the perceived personal qualities of classical and jazz listeners, the personal and moral values of rap listeners, ethnicity of rock, jazz, and classical listeners; and social class of classical and rap listeners. Marshall and Naumann (2019) found that certain genres can, in fact cue racial identity of listeners to others. Their findings also indicated an individual's own racial centrality, within the larger sociopolitical context, had the potential to influence their own tastes, with listeners more likely to listen to music by white artists or genres affiliated with other races. Bryson's work (1999) indicated that a high racism quotient correlates with a significantly increased dislike for rap, reggae, blues/rhythm and blues, jazz, gospel, and Latin genres.

Black popular music, and its listenership, specifically raises the question of race among young adults, popular music, and American society. As Brackett (2012) points out, "Black music" emerges from its relationship with other categories of music existing within a given period. It was a result of public and industry acceptance of a classification system based on the notions of larger society. Brackett argues that the existence of the "crossover" hits demonstrates



this, as it relies on manipulation of established categories in which an artist or listener could move toward and away. Firth (1998) gives this distinction between Black music and “other” forms, saying that it represents the binary the African as figure of both desire and fear. Radano (2012) states that the cultural capital of Black music rests on how it preforms race within the moment of its creation. Non-white performers are able to perform their humanity, while also racializing their cultural contributions, such as with the covering of songs of Black artists while also “sanitizing them” (Stewart, 2005; Tawa, 2005). The white and Black binary in music preference, stereotyping, and categorization is one of the most prevalent and significant source of division in the social study of music preference (Bryson 1996; Marshall & Naumann 2018; Rentfrow, McDonald, & Oldmeadow 2009).

An individual’s educational level can also correlate with their music preferences and likes. This is often affiliated with the idea that education correlates with increased liberalism, and therefore would increase tolerance and exposure. Bryson (1996) suggests instead that the “liberalism” is instead a value of the upper middle class and is instead used as a status symbol or cue of socioeconomic class. The results of Bryson’s study found that education decreased the reported number of genres an individual “dislike”, suggesting a musical tolerance and diversity. Yet, the results also suggested that the group would reject genres popular among less educated participants such as gospel, country, heavy metal, and rap. This population did have a wider exposure to music, responding as “not knowing” a genre as a lower rate than those of lesser education. Some work has suggested that within the last twenty to thirty years, that those with traditionally highbrow taste have become more omnivorous, with higher rates of listening to genres such as country, bluegrass, and gospel. This has been linked to structural changes in media distribution, changes in values to race and multiculturalism, generational changes, and a

new embracement of avant-garde and art (Peterson, R. & Kern, R., 1996). This signals a potential change in the correlation between education and music preference.

## **Methodology**

The questions of this study begin with how and why young adults engage with popular culture and further, if they do so critically. This then alludes to the larger questions regarding education and the impact of educational sites in the development of critical analysis skills. This will be done by addressing the following three sub questions:

1. Does formal music education in theory and history lead to diverse and higher levels of wholistic music engagement (genre, publications, politics, etc.)?
2. How do social identities effect the taste, motivations, uses, and engagement practices of young adults?
3. How do young adults view and engage with the political implications of music? And are there variations based on education or taste?

The goal of this study is to answer these questions and begin to understand the dynamics of popular culture/music, education, identity, and society. Achieving this goal includes two distinct steps; identifying numerical trends in music engagement practices of the demographic and its subgroups; with then the collection of qualitative data for support, disqualification, and/or elaboration of said trends.

## **Hypothesis**

Current reports from the music industry points to clear contemporary trends. Streaming is quickly becoming the most common way to get music, specifically among the 18-24 demographic (RIAA, 2018; IFPI, 2017). The Recording Industry of America (2018) has cited Pop and rap as the most popular kinds of music, with artists in these categories making up the

majority of the top 10 artists of the year. It is my belief that general responses regarding taste and consumerism practices of music will reflect these current trends in the 18-24 demographic; with streaming being the most common way to listen to music and pop being the most listened to genre.

Research has also demonstrated that higher levels of education, regardless of the content, leads to more diverse music tastes and tolerance. Research has also noted that race plays a significant part in the genre preferences of individuals (Bryson 1996). Educational research has shown that students, given the opportunity to critically engage with music have been able to demonstrate consciousness of social, political and cultural implications of such music (Mahiri & Connor, 2003; Maudlin, & Sandlin, 2015; Belle, 2016). This information leads to the hypotheses:

1. The sample will indicate an overall lack of critical engagement with music; with low scores on items related to music publication/media interaction and political engagement, and a demonstration of motivations focused on the self.
2. The sample will demonstrate a lack of agency in the formation of their music tastes due to their methods of listening and finding new music.
3. Participants who have taken music theory and history classes will have overall higher rates of listening in regard to genre, and stronger engagement with politics and music publications and media.
4. Participants who identify as non-white will have higher rates of listening to traditionally non-white genres, will highly rate parents and families as influences on their taste, and will have higher engagement with politics.

## **Methods**

The use of surveys for studies into music preference, listening habits, and one's relationships to music is the norm (Mellander, Florida, Rentfrow, & Potter, 2018; Marshall & Nauman, 2018). The survey developed here utilizes genre and decade to develop the preferences, motivations, and influences on the participants to establish general trends. These trends will be coded to concepts such as the self, autonomy, and politics. These trends will allow for measurement of engagement with popular genre, consumerism practices, and social relationships which may demonstrate autonomy, agency, or consciousness existing within the plane of popular music.

## **Survey**

The survey was published on the hosting website Survey Monkey. It was shared in a variety of electronic and internet-based formats. The link to the survey was shared via e-mail by both the researcher and by professors of students at Eastern Michigan University to students at the undergraduate level. The link to complete the survey was also shared on the researcher's personal Facebook and Twitter pages. The scripts used for these formats provided a description of the survey and estimation of how long completion would take. The posts, tweets, and e-mails were sharable, and could be spread by users on the interfaces without knowledge and/or consent of the researcher. This allowed for larger scope of recruitment across geographic regions, social class, and various communities. Electronic consent was obtained through the survey, requiring participants to agree to the consent form before proceeding. The collection of data was anonymous, and no information about the individuals IP address or network was kept and affiliated with their answers.

The survey had 147 responses, with 115 of those being completed, giving the survey a completion rate of 78%. Those who did not complete and submit the survey did not qualify (e.g. not being in the age demographic) or began but did not complete the survey in its entirety. The initial question of the survey required participants to identify themselves as being in the 18-24 demographic. If participants indicated that they were in the “25+” range, then they were notified that they did not qualify for the study and were not permitted to continue. There were no other demographic disqualifiers for participants, Participants were recruited through various internet sources including social media such as Twitter and Instagram, as well as through email. The use of social media platforms among this demographic encouraged the heavy recruitment practices through them.

The survey was anonymously answered and did not ask questions that would allow for the identification of an individual, their place of work, schooling, or home. The survey would not make use of individual responses, and instead would use aggregate data and larger controls such as race and education, in order to analyze the results. This format of aggregate data collection and utilization consistent with other forms of music preference surveys, and (Mellander, Florida, Rentfrow, & Potter, 2018). Questions related to demographics, music preferences and taste, engagement with various formats, publications, and political messaging. Demographic questions allowed for later controls such as race and education, in which deviations of various groups within the larger demographic could be analyzed.

The survey consisted of sixteen questions. The initial five were demographic questions relating to age, race, education, gender, etc. Participants were permitted to choose one or multiple answers when appropriate (e.g. race). Questions related to genre and decade preference and music education experience also allowed for multiple answers. Seven of the questions

utilized a Likert scale. This format was used with questions regarding listening practicing, political engagement, consumption, and use of music publications. A five-point scale was utilized for all questions within this format. Use of a scale was intended to allow averaging of scores which, when placed in context, could constitute meaning and trends to be identified, such as higher scores correlating with higher engagement with music publications by an individual, group, or large-scale demographic.

## **Results**

The survey resulted in 144 responses, with 114 being eligible for use. There were 18 respondents, or 12.24% of the total responses, which exceeded the age of 24 intended for this sample size. The remaining 11 respondents did not complete the survey in its entirety and closed the browser window or left the web page before completion. Of the 115 completed responses, 76% identified as female and 16.6% identified as male. The remaining 7.4% identified as gender queer or transgender. The lack of equitable gender representation should be taken into consideration, moving forward, though not the focus of this study. The only recent visibility and growing support of the LGBTQ community does not provide a wealth of research looking into their unique experience with music.

When it comes to race, 88.7% of respondents identified as white, non-Hispanic. The remaining respondents identified as Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, or Two or More Races. Of non-white groups, Black respondents made up the vast majority, with 8.7% of all respondents identifying themselves as such. The representation of non-white students does not align with the reported rates throughout the country (Snyder, T., Brey, C., & Dillow, S., 2018). So while, there are noted differences in this group's reported responses

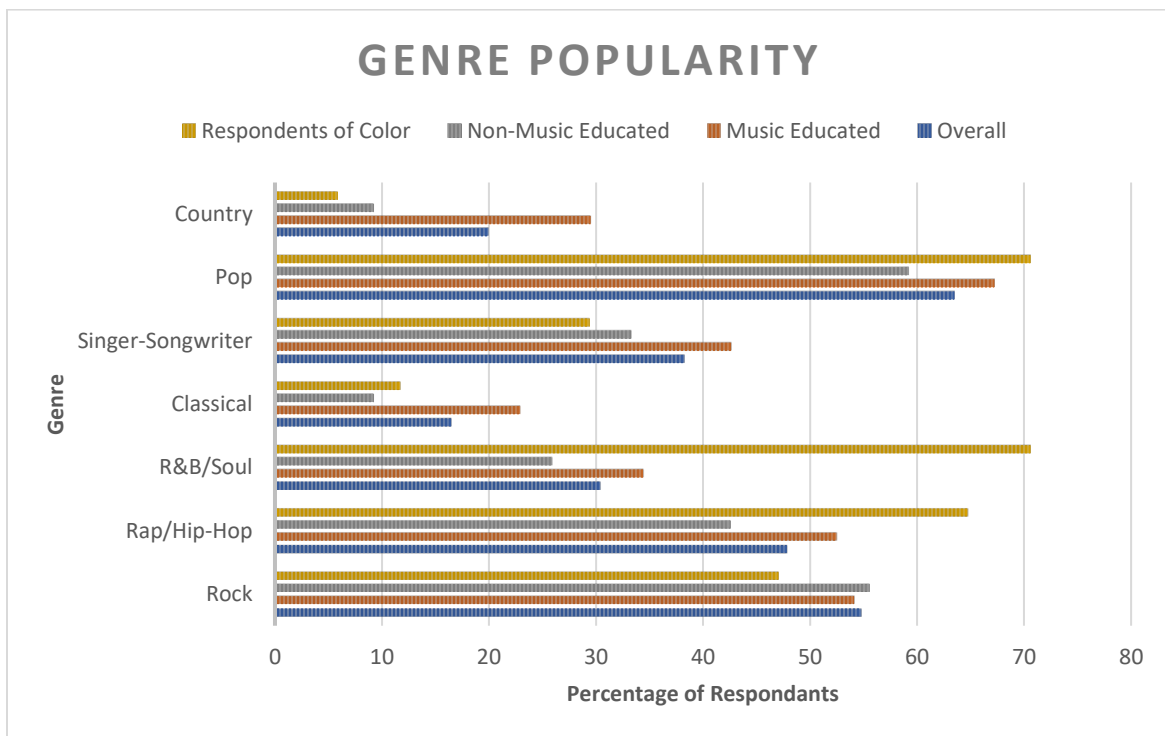
compared to white-identified participants, the limitations of the sample size should be taken into consideration.

Sixty-two percent of respondents indicated having taken a music theory or history class. Of that group, 29.57% indicated it was taken during high school while 33.04% indicated it was taken at the undergraduate collegiate level. 35.4% of respondents indicated that they took the class out of general interest in the content, while 36.28% indicated they did it out of a class requirement for the respective degree. Participants from racial/ethnic minority groups were more “musically educated” with 76.47% having taken a music class in the past. This demographic was more likely to indicate that they took the class out of general interest of the subject (52.94).

The three most popular genres of music for the sample as a whole was pop (63.48%), rock (54.78%), and rap/hip-hop (47.83%). For respondents identifying with ethnic/minority groups, the most popular genres were Pop (70.59%), Soul/R&B (70.59%), and Rap/Hip-Hop (64.71%). Participants also had the option to identify an “other” genre, which 45.22% of respondents did. There were two genres with enough respondents to indicate a significant listener base within the sample. The first was “indie” at 16.5% of all responses, and then “alternative” at 13.0%. These included comments which may have been phrases or subgenres such as “Alternative R&B” or “Indie Rock”. If these genres were included in the overall ranking of the provided genres, indie would be 7th in a ranking of the general sample, and alternative would be ranked 9th. Other genres mentioned include: K-Pop, Funk, Gospel, J-Pop, New Wave, Jazz, Latin, Mellow, Ska, Soft Rock, Post Rock, and Kraut Rock.

There were noted variations in genre preference based on (musical) educational background. Those who indicated taking a music theory or history class had similar top genres as the overall sample but indicated higher rates of listening to Rap/Hip-Hop (+4.63), R&B/Soul

(+4.0), Classical (+6.43), Singer-Songwriter (+4.36), and Country (+9.51). Those participants never receiving music history or theory classes indicated that they have the same top genres but listen to certain genres at a lower rate than the whole sample in Rap/Hip-Hop (-5.24), R&B/Soul (-4.5), Classical (-7.26), Singer-Songwriter (-4.93), Pop (-4.22), and Country (-10.74). This would also indicate lower listening rate in those genres compared to the participants who had received some music education.



Pre-50s music has a reported listenership 9.57% of respondents. 50s music has 7.83% of respondents, then jumping to 26.09% in for 60s music. From there it increases steadily overtime, until it reaches the 2010s, with a listenership of 87.83% of respondents. Participants from racial/ethnic minority groups had lower rates of listening for pre-50s, 50s, and 60s; but had an increased listenership for the 70s at 41.18%. This is an 8.14-point increase from the responses of the general sample. This group had higher listening rates for the 80s, 90s, 2000s, and 2010s as well. Those who have received music education have higher rates of listening for the pre-50s,



70's, 80's, 90s, 2000s, and 2010, but lower rates for 50s and 60s. Those with no music education had higher rates of listening for 50s and 60s, but lower rates for all other surveyed decades of music.

Participants were asked how they listen to music and how frequently, with streaming services being an outlier. 86.96% of all participants indicated that they used streaming services daily to access music. Traditional Radio was indicated to still be used frequently, with 60.87% of participants indicating its use every day or on a weekly basis. Live music is also popular, with 94.78% of participants accessing it on a yearly basis.

#### **How Often Participants Use Music Access Tools**

Type	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Yearly	Never
Streaming	86.96	9.57	2.61	0	0.87
Internet Radio	11.3	14.78	8.7	11.3	53.91
Traditional Radio	23.48	37.39	17.39	6.09	15.65
Digital Download	10.53	17.54	21.93	9.65	40.35
Physical Copy	6.09	12.17	23.48	26.96	31.3
Live Music	1.74	5.22	28.7	59.13	5.22

The reported purchasing habits of participants aligned with their reported intake of music. 84.34% of participants reported being “likely” or “extremely likely” to purchase a subscription to a streaming service. 66.08% of participants reported being “likely” or “extremely likely” to purchase concert tickets. Vinyl had the third highest likelihood, with 28.97% reporting a likelihood of purchasing. Subscriptions to internet radio was the least likely purchase with 47.83% of participants reporting they were “Not at all likely” to purchase. That was followed by vinyl at 32.46%, and then digital downloads with 20.87%.

### Likelihood of All Respondents to Purchase Music

Type	Extremely Likely	Likely	Moderately Likely	Unlikely	Not at All Likely
Subscription to Streaming Service	70.43	13.91	8.7	3.48	3.48
Subscription to Internet Radio	4.35	4.35	12.17	31.3	47.83
CDs	7.83	20	26.09	28.7	17.39
Vinyl	14.91	13.16	10.53	28.95	32.46
Digital Download	9.57	16.52	26.09	26.09	20.87
Concert Tickets	31.3	34.78	23.48	6.96	3.48

The motivations for listening to music for all groups placed personal comfort (96.52), hobby/interest (92.18), and boredom (75.65) at the most common. This is also true for non-white participants and those with music education, reporting similar rates as the general sample size. The largest variation came from the group of participants with no music education, with personal connection (72.22) having a higher percentage of respondents than boredom (64.81). Academic interest had the lowest portion of responses for all participants and for subgroups of participants. Those with music education had the highest percentage share of this motivation (39.34) and those without music education having the lowest percentage (22.22).

The influences on music tastes list personal research and friends as the main source, with 68.69% and 63.48% of participants reporting that they “always” or “often” find music through these sources respectively. The lowest reported influences on taste were parents (24.35) and reviews (8.7). There are noted variations based on demographic and controlled groups. Participants from racial and ethnic minority groups, had friends being the main influence on taste (76.47), with a positive 13-point difference from the general sample. The influence from the radio has a noted decrease in reported influence for this group, dropping 19.82 points. This group

also has a higher reported influence from parents and family (29.41). Those who have received formal music education classes reported higher influence from parents (PERCENTAGE) but maintained similar reporting levels as the overall sample population.

A Likert scale was used to measure the engagement participants had with varying music publications and media. The weighted responses (with 1 being little engagement and 5 being high engagement” to the question “how likely are you to engage with the following music publications” are as follows: Documentaries (3.5), Books (3.13), Podcasts (3.02), Blogs (2.59), and Magazines (2.17). This ranking was generally true across control groups except for several small variations. Those who indicated never taking a music class had lower scores than the general sample, and when compared to those who had taken a class, specifically regarding the use of books (-.24). People with music education were likely to have higher engagement with various publications than the general sample, as were participant from racial/ethnic minority groups.

#### **Average Scores of Music Publication Engagement**

	All Respondents	Non-White	Music Educated	Not Music Educated
Magazine	2.17	2.29	2.2	2.15
Blogs	2.59	2.82	2.62	2.56
Podcasts	3.02	3.28	3.08	2.94
Books	3.13	2.25	3.34	2.89
Documentaries	3.5	3.65	3.54	3.45

The following are participant responses are scored averages from a Likert scale (with 5 being more politically engaged/more levels of agreement), which addressed political beliefs surrounding music. As the trends previously discussed, those from racial/ethnic communities have higher rates of engagement with music, in this specific instance, when related to politics.

Those who have taken music history and theory classes also have higher scores, and those with no music education classes show lower scores of engagements.

### Average Scores of Political Engagement

	All Respondents	Non-White	Received Music Education	No Music Education
Music can be a tool of protest	4.63	4.82	4.64	4.62
I enjoy music with political messaging	3.88	4.29	3.84	3.93
Musicians should take political stances	3.64	3.94	3.61	3.69
Music helps define my identity	4.26	4.35	4.33	4.19

## Discussion

### All Participants

The general sample population reporting that pop, rock, and rap/hip-hop being amongst their favorite genres aligning with the most recent consumption reports from the industry (RIAA, 2018; RIAA, 2019; IFPI, 2019). It is important to note that the nature of this survey and this specific item, does not allow for consideration of the variety of subgenres or artists that participants may be listening to. Yet, these results suggest that most individuals in the 18-24 demographic listen to pop, and about half listen to rock and rap. The listenership by decade steadily increases over time, with over 50% of participants reporting the listening of music from the 90s, 2000s, and 2010s. The corroboration of industry reports by these survey results can be readily explained by the other items from the survey.

It should be noted that not all individuals define “pop” the same way though, and that there is no set definition for the genre. There are subcategories of other genres as well, such as “indie pop” or “bedroom pop” that can affect how genre is chosen by participants. The

perceptions of the listener/participant in question is what determines these genres, and they are not traditionally or culturally fixed as one would imagine a genre such as “jazz” would be. Likewise, “pop” in one geographic location is not necessarily the same for another and could vary based on cultural and demographic makeup. In 2017 Pandora internet radio released each state’s most popular bands and music artists, reflecting distinct cultural differences and popularities based on geographic location. For example, in southern or rural western states like Arkansas, Alabama and Oklahoma, country musician Chris Stapleton will appear alongside consistent favorites like Drake, Beyoncé, and Future. Similarly, in states with large Hispanic populations, you see Latinx musicians such as Branda Sinaloense MS de Sergio Lizaarraga in California (Lynch, 2017).

Streaming is the most common and popular way to access music, with 86.96% of participants indicating that they use this method at least weekly. The next common was radio with 60.87% reporting at least weekly use. Both platforms are heavily influenced and involved with corporations, record companies and labels, and other industry influences. For example, Spotify’s “Discover Weekly” playlist, supposedly designed based off the user’s listeners habits, is sponsored by Microsoft (Wang, 2019). This could influence the songs placed on the playlist, if they are affiliated with Microsoft advertising and partnerships for example, the song may be more likely to appear in a user’s playlist. These platforms can also promote certain playlists to receive more play, hence why Spotify’s most played playlist in 2018 may have been “Today’s Top Hits”, consisting of the typical Top 40 popular music (Spotify, 2018). A quick glance at both Spotify and Apple Music’s most played artists, songs, and albums from 2018 reveal the effects of such control, with the same artists and songs on *both* lists; though one can assume they have different users. Such artists include Drake, Post Malone, XXXTENTACION, Cardi B,

Ariana Grande, Taylor Swift, and Camia Cabello (Spotify, 2019; Aswad, 2018). These artists arguably all fit into the “pop” and “rap/hip-hop” genre categories. Streaming being the most common form of music access for this age demographic, and possibly those who are younger, explains the popularity of “pop” and hip-hop/rap music, streaming popularity also could contribute on the concentration of pop and hip-hop music in recent decades. If money via streaming is made per song play, companies are more likely to position popular songs in a position to receive more plays.

Such saturation and concentration does not occur exclusively on the streaming platform, as demonstrated with the revival of vinyl among the music buyer market. Among the survey responses, 28.07% of respondents indicated that they were “likely” or “extremely likely” to purchase vinyl. This was a higher percentage than both subscriptions to internet radio, CD’s, and digital download. When “moderately likely” is added, the percentage of participants increases to 38.6%. Unlike streaming, 66% of vinyl sales are of albums that are over three years old (Porter, 2019). But, many of the most popular vinyl albums of 2018, were number one selling albums upon their release, such as *Purple Rain*, *Thriller*, and *Rumors* (Wang, 2019). Similarly, Spotify (2018) reported that the top streamed “throwback” songs in 2018 were “Africa” by Toto,” Take on Me” by A-Ha, and “Billie Jean” by Michael Jackson; all songs which were number one singles upon their respective releases. This suggests that popular music in the Top 40 sphere has longevity. Production companies such as Warner Brothers have begun departments that deal with “heritage acts”, specializing in the marketing and reproduction, remastering, and redistribution of older albums; which includes curating playlists for streaming services (Wang, 2019). Popular films such *Guardians of the Galaxy* and its sequel, have music editors who strategically create soundtracks that re-popularize songs; leading to soundtracks such as *Guardians of the Galaxy*:

*Awesome Mix Volume 1* to be the best-selling vinyl record and cassette album for several years; and to be the only number one album to consist totally of previously released songs.

This is all to suggest that while many participants feel as though they are practicing agency, in choosing a playlist to listen to or using a less popular form of music listening; much of it is influenced by forces beyond their control. While 68.64% of participants are reporting that they find new music through “personal research”, their taste is in fact being morphed by corporate forces creating music listening culture. That creation can be contemporary, such as with Microsoft’s sponsoring of a playlist on Spotify, or it can be withstanding such the revitalization of older popular music by distribution companies. The more frequent practice of creating soundtracks made up entirely of music from a specific era, such as in *Guardians of the Galaxy* or *Stranger Things*, influences through ubiquitous listening *and* manipulation of contemporary music listening practices such as curated playlists. So, while participants may indeed be researching new music on a streaming platform or industry website or social media, that which they can find is heavily influenced on structured distribution and advertising, perpetuating industry desires for mainstream consumption and popularity. The high rate of music sharing and influence among friends (63.48) only perpetuates such mainstreaming of the same artists, and allows for hegemonic ideals of music, genre, and various ideologic messages to be maintained.

Participants are also influenced by media outlets and various publications. Participants reported moderate engagement with certain music media including documentaries (3.5), books (3.13), and podcasts (3.01). The accessibility of these three mediums specifically may contribute to their popularity. Streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime allow for access to documentaries on a personal device nearly anywhere and at any time. The watching of a

documentaries can be a passive activity, making it easier to engage in, hence higher levels of engagement among participants. Reading provides barriers in physical access, prior knowledge, and literacy level. The higher engagement level among this sample size may be attributed to the number of individuals currently or at some point having attended a college or university (86.95), where library systems are readily available. Podcasts, like Netflix, are also easily accessible on smartphones and via streaming services as both an active engagement and ubiquitous listening option. The high level of engagement is promising, as it shows that many participants are seeking out a public space in which music commentary occurs, and conversations and sharing of music can be had. Such initiative or openness in seeking them out, suggests an agency in further engagement and community-seeking that does not necessarily exist in one's own personal taste formation. What is limiting this seeking of engagement, is the content of those publications and commentaries which are revolved largely around praising of popular music.

A search on Netflix in August of 2019 for "music documentary" for example reveals in the first twenty search results topics such as Woodstock and the history of hip-hop, as well as artists such as Amy Winehouse, The Doors, The Beatles, Bob Dylan, Bob Marley, Lady Gaga, Jimi Hendrix, and Beyoncé. All these subjects have already been heavily covered in a variety of medias: books, magazines, essays, museum exhibits, TV spots, and even history classes. Most of the subjects are white-centric, either in genre or in "crossover" appeal; with very little mention of soul or R&B, which 70.59% of non-white participants reported listening to.

Yet, when it comes to books and podcasts, things that can be easily self-produced and published, there is a noticeable difference in the range of topics covered. A brief look at a *Publisher's Weekly* (2018) article regarding 2018-19 Music Books, reveals a diverse range of books being published about music history and criticism, bands, vocalists, producers, and other



aspects of the industry. For example, there are six books explicitly dealing with rap/hip-hop as a genre or a specific artist; something that is not necessarily reflected in Netflix's documentary selection. Similarly, books on the list include genres such as punk, classical, jazz, and country; as well as the more predictable pop and rock books expected. Podcasts reflect a similar reality. A look at the Apple podcasts charts will reveal a varying amount of podcast options that are genre specific, or incorporate a variety. This includes ones hosted by organizations such as National Public Radio and The New York Times, as well as independently produced ones.

The popularity of documentaries among participants, while suggesting a certain amount of agency in seeking out engagement, may be again reinforcing traditional perspectives of a "high culture" now being imposed on the popular music sphere. The documentaries featured prominently on streaming services, reinforce ideas that there are artists or music that is worth studying or making films around: in this case popular musicians who are white, or create music that is "acceptable" for a white audience. Books and podcasts, in being just as accessible but easier to make, produce, and share; allow for more diverse voices, interests, and topics within the field of music criticism and commentary. The accessibility of such discourse, and the engagement that this population seems to have with it, may begin to explain the reported responses for questions regarding activism and politics within music.

When asked if participants believed that music could be a tool of protest, 97.37% of all participants either "strongly agreed" or "agreed"; none "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed". This suggests that this demographic understands and acknowledges the potential political value of music, a common theme and discussion point in books and podcasts, and a constant point of concern for the political right in the U.S. The authorship of this media allows for them to explicitly discuss the writing of music and the meaning to a certain community or group,

therefore allowing a wider audience to understand their purposes, and the implications. This acknowledgement of music being used and access as a form of political protest does not translate to individual acceptance or support of it using it in such a way.

When asked whether participants enjoyed music with political messaging, only 69.56% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” and 13.92% “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed”. So, while participants acknowledged the capabilities of music, they did not necessarily enjoy accessing or engaging with them. There is no way of knowing whether participants are thinking of music which is overtly and explicitly political in nature or music with any kind of messaging. This aligns with how participants reported utilizing music in their daily life. 96.52% reported using music as comfort or relaxation, which for some, seems contrary to political involvement. Similarly, if 75.65% are using it to remedy boredom, then messaging may not actively be decoded by the listener. If a participant sees music as an escape from reality, or as ubiquitous in nature, then political themes may seem like an unwanted distraction or may not be heard at all.

Similarly, the demographics of the sample, largely white and college-educated, may be impacting their reaction to political music, often fueled by racial and class discrimination and in the format of less popular genres such as country and rap. As Gainer (2013) points out “We need to understand that the messages of authors and the interpretation of readers are bound by cultural, historical, and political lenses”, meaning that the specific social and cultural positioning of the sample may put them in a position to either not need to engage with protest music or to disagree with the messaging. We must also consider that only 31.33% of participants reported engaging with music out of academic interest, which inherently effects how one approaches listening. When music is placed in an educational context, even that which may be considered “traditional” a listener is often asked to look at musicality and context (genre, time, place, etc.). This could be

an indication of a lack of critical lenses, developed through practicing of literacy development, in which participants can use to approach music, then we can assume that their want to listen to more overt, politically critical songs, may not be as inherent.

There is also the assumption that popular music is, or should be, lacking substance, easily embodied by the consumer class. The conservative intellectual class, liberal intellectual though such as that popularized by the Frankfurt School, the public educational system, and other cultural gatekeepers may instill a false sense that popular music should not be political, as allowing that freedom would provide it cultural, intellectual, social, and political meaning and merit. This would challenge the narrative established for “highbrow” music study. Such assumption would also place popular music, and those who produce it, as a political and cultural force that could challenge hegemonic ideology. This can be seen when asked if musicians should take political stances, only 57.39% agreed, 31.30% were undecided, and 11.31% disagreed. These responses seemingly contradict the earlier that notion that music can be a tool of political protest and places the artist in an indiscriminate position in the relationship of art and creator.

Such results regarding artist politics could be indicative of multiple things that listeners are doing. One, is that they choose to support an artist on their own terms. In other words, participants may support an artist who they believe is allowing them to enjoy music with no social implication or support an artist *until* there is no social implication. Recall that, 87.83% of participants “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they purchase music to support the artist, suggesting that they may consider the personal connection with the artists’ music or consider the artists personal belief systems and values. There is also the possibility that the listener is simply choosing to not engage with the politics of an artist, ignoring the meaning(s) of music or not considering a specific political, social, or cultural moment. Listeners may not be aware of social

messaging within the music that they listen. As discussed earlier, the “personal research” that 36.52% of participants say they almost always use to find new music is heavily influenced by corporate interests. With these considerations, it can be concluded that participants have little agency in seeking and “discovering” music on their own terms or efforts, even if it does align with their taste. Media outlets and sources may also be encouraging or provoking the political sentiments of a specific artists or song, as these are just as much controlled by those same interests as the music distribution itself.

The contradiction also suggests that the listener, intentionally or unintentionally, is stripping an artist’s agency. While listeners agree that music can be a tool of protest, indicating a knowledge and awareness that political agency and discourse can occur in popular music, their responses are asking artists to forego that agency. A manifestation of this is when corporations or political campaigns take a song and use it in forwarding of their own agenda, often without artist consent or consideration of the ideological messages appearing in the music. This not only affects artist autonomy, but also influences the collective societal narrative surrounding the song. A message can therefore be easily misconstrued by the public, and the resulting discourse can either wrongly celebrate or degrade the creator if the music. To combat this, artists often will reclaim their music, and leverage legal action to preserve the ideological alignment and narrative they presented; such as with Bruce Springsteen asking President Ronald Reagan to not use his song “Born in the USA” (Dolan, 2014). In this way, the tool of music as a form of political protest exists not only in its existence, but in the surrounding discussion and narrative that surrounds it.

The reported results in sample does suggest that social, political, and musical discourse is occurring, and that active decoding and contextualization of meaning by participants in this study

is occurring, perhaps naturally. This qualifies reception theory and supports Ballinger's (1999) claim that audiences actively work to make meanings, sometimes multiple, of the music that they are experiencing. The decision to decode and to come to that conclusion is a form of agency (Gainer, 2007). But Gainer also points out that the choice one makes to ignore or avoid the meaning that the listener derives is also the practicing agency. When placed in the context of these results, it can be concluded that both forms of agency are occurring within this demographic. But the results also suggest that some participants of certain demographic groups are more apt to perform certain forms of agency than others.

### **Non-White Participants**

For historically oppressed and marginalized people, popular music, political or otherwise, has the potential to become a tool which a group uses to connect with one another. In this way, music becomes a way to awaken a shared experience of the subordination the group faces by the larger culture, class, or group and can aid in empowerment (Ballinger 1999). This concept can be seen in the responses of non-white participants, half of whom identify as being Black.

The notion of popular music representing something different in this population can begin to explain the variation in results seen among those participants who identify as non-white. If agency requires access to apparatuses and institutions that allow for control of the direction of society, such as mass media; then non-white groups responses and uses of popular music reflect an attempt to use music for social change and group empowerment and liberation (Grossberg 1991). Popular music was and continues to be a more accessible institution for racial and ethnic minorities than government and social institutions. When a group lacks access to sites of agency to enact social change, they must turn to alternative means (Grossberg, 1992). Therefore, music may play a different role in the critical readings of the world of people who belong to such

groups. This is all to say that the variation in results from the survey between participants who identify as non-white and those who identify as white, can be understood in the larger context of American society, history, and culture.

When looking at genre for this demographic, there are two things to note. First, the overall rates of listening (percentage of participants in these demographics) were higher for all genres. Second, the most listened to genres for this group were pop (70.59), R&B/soul (70.59), and rap/hip-hop (64.71). The latter two are genres that are historically Black, often focusing on the emotional contexts and state of Black Americans, the affirmation of Black pride, and the sharing of Black musical capabilities to white audiences, capturing the Black American experience (Tawa, 2005). These ideas though can easily extend to other groups, and the emergence of Latinx rap music for example helps expand the reach of these genres. Meanwhile, “pop” as a genre is heavily dependent on geographic location in the country, socioeconomic status, and. Therefore, that which is considered “pop music” can vary greatly and encompass other more explicit genres. For example, the covers of R&B songs done by British invasion bands such as the Beatles, are considered today to either pop or rock; but the source material is Black R&B music. The popularity of the previously mentioned genres suggest that this demographic is more likely to listen to genres in which their demographic group is represented by the musicians, applicable to their context, or embedded in this culture.

That assumption is supported by the average score for this group of participants on whether “music helps to define my identity” was a 4.35 on a 5-point scale, a solid indication that this group uses music in confirm themselves. While not a significantly higher score compared to all respondents, when placed in theoretical, ethnographic, and historical context, there is a distinction in identity value. This is to suggest that the way in which music identifies them, or

what about their lives it defines, may be vastly different than in the general sample. Studies in race and taste formation indicates that individuals will rarely have a preference more inclined toward music affiliated with other racial groups (Marshall & Naumann, 2018). The preference of genres and specific decades historically affiliated with specific racial groups, experiences, cultural movements, and protests, alludes to the shared experience and culture that Ballinger (1992) invokes, specifically that the shared experiences of the listening group is pushing back against power structures and established institutions.

While genres such as soul/R&B and hip-hop/rap are perceived as traditionally Black, the shared experience of oppression through economic, political, and cultural means is similar among groups though it manifests in vastly different ways. As genres of the oppressed, these were more accessible for other minority groups, both in contemporary and historical terms. 1950s Doo-Wop music for example, a subgenre of R&B, and often placed on “race charts” was popular initially among Black groups, but quickly came to include interracial, Latin, and eventually white groups. The similarity among these groups is that they came to from poverty-stricken neighborhoods, such as the Italian sections of Bronx. White appropriation of the genre and manipulated to fit their white mainstream audience, it also allowed for expression the Italian cultural experience in America, including their discrimination and economic depression (Albrecht, 2017). So, while a different experience for white participants, the Black created genre still served as a source of cultural and economic empowerment; signifying a foundationally different reason for the expression and creating of music among originators of the genre.

The shared experience of music can also be demonstrated with the reported decades of listening for this demographic group. Pre-50's, 50s, and 60s music had lower rates of listening among this demographic; but by the 70s listenership is up to over 40% of participants. This could

be attributed to explicit political nature of 70s music in the specific genres which this group identified as their most listened to. The Vietnam War and the emergence of The Black Power Movement produced music that was socially aware, with artists who prior to this period fit within the “pop” sphere becoming politically radical (Tawa, 2005; Stewart, 2005). Music from non-white artists also became less “pop” and developed and employed musical choices that were more culturally relevant to their specific group. Such results could indicate that for contemporary listeners in this demographic, the political nature of this music may be a desirable trait, and one that they seek out or are drawn to. Or, that music which is more representational of their culture in sound, content, or artists identity is important.

The belief that non-white participants are seeking out political music can also be seen in their significantly higher averages for questions regarding politics. The average score was 4.82 when it came to agreement on whether music can be a tool of political protest, suggesting that this group is extremely aware of the ways in which music can be used. When looking at the reported motivations for this group, the tendency to listen with choice, awareness, or agency may be higher. 100% of participants in this demographic either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they listen to music out of personal interest or as a hobby, 35.29% reported listening out of an academic interest, and 76.47% for social connection. Similarly, about 76% of this population reported having taken a music theory or history class, 14 points higher than seen in the general population. This group also indicated taking said class out of a general interest at about 50 points, higher than the general sample. If these reporting’s are accurate, then it can be assumed that much of this demographic is actively engaging with music, e.g. doing more than just listening. It could be assumed that they are observing or participating in commentary and discourse surrounding the music itself, the artist, the industry, or subsequent culture. This



manifests in this groups average scores for music publication engagement, which are higher in four out of the five mediums of music media. The only one in which there is a lower score, is for books, which one point lower.

This demographic actively engaging with music media and their demonstrated awareness of politics in music, also suggests a preference or like of music which is political. While the average score for all respondents was a 3.88 in response to whether they enjoyed music with political messaging, racial and ethnic minorities had scores of 4.29. This suggests that this demographic *enjoys* music political or ideological music. As discussed, genres such as rap/hip-hop and soul/R&B are historically political in nature, and so the correlation between the genre popularity within this demographic and the widespread acceptance and enjoyment of ideological messaging within music is not surprising. Yet, just as with the general sample, there is a contradiction between this enjoyment and acceptance of overtly political music and the belief of individual artists want or right to be political in their art. While the average score for agreement that music can be a form of political protest was 4.82, the average score for agreement that musicians should take political stances was 3.94. The score for “enjoying political music” was higher as well with 4.29. Unlike the contradiction seen for the sample overall, there is a less clear source for this demographic, as the result suggest that they are more likely to listen to, and enjoy, popular music with explicit or implicit political content and whose music has historically and culturally served as political and cultural liberation. What is seen again, though to a lesser extent, is the potential of stripping of the agency from musicians and music artists.

The source of this contradiction is less direct than with the general public. Recent scholarship in the history of these genres and their manifestation of politics provides guidance. Stewart (2005) presents a typology that categorizes political commentary in Black popular

music. What his work suggests is that as Black popular music progressed from the 1950s, it embodies typologies that appealed to a more militant and aggressive approach to liberation. Types such as “All God’s Children Declarations” which utilized common interests with whites and blacks under the guise of Christianity, were replaced with “Confrontational Declarations” and “Defiant Challenges” which encouraged Black self-defense and demanded the ceasing of exploitation from external forces outside of the Black community. It was with this shift that the controversy and negative feelings toward Black music arose, eliciting stereotypes and assumptions of value systems and morality (Rentfrow, McDonald, & Oldmeadow, 2009). In this way, it may not be the artists political statements themselves which this demographic disagrees with, but the effects that those comments have on the communities which they are ultimately attempting to liberate.

Another explanation could be based in the belief of the non-white individual who believes in economic growth or the manipulation of existing structures of power for liberation. Tawa (2005) explains how the most successful Black music endeavor of Motown Records was backed by an appeal to white audiences to recognize the musical abilities of Black artists. Motown’s success then was an appropriation of white highbrow culture, adopting traditional models of melody, orchestration, and presentation with aspects of Black music and culture, not through untouched representation of Black culture and experiences. The less political approach by Motown led to unrepresented, and in many ways unrepeated, economic and cultural capital growth for a Black cultural production site. Similar, Ritchie Valens’ “La Bamba” combines a traditional Spanish folk song with translated lyrics and rock n’ roll elements, making it accessible for white controlled Top 40 radio (Meraji, 2018). Just as Motown did, “La Bamba” utilizes “ethnic” or non-white aspects of culture and puts it in a commercially friendly package.

This approach therefore requires artists to avoid being overtly political, therefore leading to them not disclosing their political affiliations. Doing so would be a barrier to the commercial success of the music they are producing. This, again, takes the political agency away from the artists and creators of the music, and places them as apolitical beings and sources of entertainment.

### **Education**

Education has correlated with an expanded notion of tolerance and wider range of listening practices (Bryson 1996, ter Brought et al. 2011, Sanjek 1999). The results of this study indicate that about 62% of respondents had taken a music theory or history class during high school or college. The emphasis on theory and history is significant, because as opposed to classes that focus on performance, these courses often provide a historical, political, and cultural context that could influence that effect the way one engages with music in the classroom setting. The music studied in these classes is often regulated to that which is “highbrow” such as classical and jazz (De Vries, 2010). But, the large number of participants who have taken the classes, suggests that there are many young adults who possess, at some capacity, the language and knowledge to engage in music criticism and analysis.

Participants who had received music education listened to all genres of music at higher rates than the overall sample population and those without music education, excluding the genre of “rock”. Participants who had never been involved in music education had lower rates of listening for all genres except for rock. Music historically produced by racial and ethnic minorities (R&B/Soul and Rap/Hip-Hop), had higher rates of listening among those who have taken music education classes. This aligns with Bryson’s (1996) argument regarding multicultural capital and the tastes of the educated elite. The liking of “diverse music” provides a source of capital for upper-middle class Americans, as restrictive taste is seen as “unworthy”

among those circles. Peterson and Kern's (1996) research suggests that those who would traditionally belong to groups that engage in "high-brow" culture (e.g. genres like opera or classical) have become more omnivorous in taste. They attribute this to several concepts and changes, including changes in values related to race and gender, changes in aesthetic study, and the gentrification of various types of pop culture by the ruling class to advance ideology and maintain power. Therefore, the omnivorous listening habits of the musically educated group may be more reflective of changes in the ideology and apparatuses of the ruling class, who also determine what is focused on in traditional music education. This may be a driving force in the taste formation of "educated" participants.

Research suggests that genres most often disliked by the "tolerant" population are those that have a less educated listenership, such as country (Bryson 1996). The educated class has expanded their listening to genres by marginalized groups with hesitancy. Yet, the sample in this survey rated as having a notably higher rate of listening for country music among people who have taken music history classes, reporting with a listenership at nearly 30% of this demographic, 10% higher than the overall sample. This suggests that for this age demographic in contemporary times, the stigma surrounding country music may have lessened. Recent scholarship asserts the role of non-white and female artists in the development of the genre, potentially altering the perception among the educated classes (Barretta, 2017). The changing perceptions around country music and its history may be better positioning it to be included in the canon that is designated in the "multicultural capital" of the intellectual class. This result may also be reflective of the sample in question, as the recruitment methods extended only as far as sharing on social media. Considering the authors outreach to individuals in Ohio, Michigan, and the larger Midwest; the role of country music may be different in the culture of this area. If the

survey were to be conducted in different areas of the country, such as the west coast or in New England, there may be a notably different outcome due to difference in culture, history, and economic role.

Predictably, those with music education had the highest rate of listening to music out of an academic interest, suggesting a possible correlation with music education and heightened interest in the academic study of music. This could also help to explain their high rates of listening for a genre such as classical, as they may have been influenced by their classes, as music education classes are highly focused on the study of traditional western music. There is also the possibility that they are listening to the genre with the intent of analyzation and pursuit of academic knowledge. Similarly, this group was more likely to find new music or be influenced by their parents, a phenomenon that appears for certain genres of music. Ter Boght (2011) reports that parent education positively correlates with the taste formation of their children for the traditionally “highbrow” genres such as classical.

This group has slightly higher rates of engagement with media and publications than the general sample, though not as significant of difference as non-white participants. The highest difference could be seen with their engagement with books, which was .21 points higher. The “book” definition was left open, and therefore could be attributed to textbooks as well, therefore making this population have a higher rate of engagement. Similarly, books may be more accessible to this group, as they would be more versed in the language of discourse that exists within the field of music study due to their background in music education, as it focuses highly the western canon and not on informal music practice (Green, 2007). The age and education of the sample also suggests that participants have access to a libraries or books, as most students were currently enrolled in college. Those who received a music education had similar responses

to the entire sample when given questions related to the politics of music. Most of the response score were within .05 points of the sample size, suggesting that music education may not have a great impact on how an individual feel about the political nature of music. Participants, like the general sample, acknowledged the capability of music to be a tool of protest. Along the same patents, the scores of whether they enjoyed music were significantly lower, as was their belief in whether musicians should take a political stance. In traditional music education, students are taught that the study of classical music for example should come from the music itself, and not the from specific context. Likewise, student may fall into the pattern of not valuing popular music or recognizing its societal significance.

What is most surprising is that students who had no background in music education had higher scores in some areas regarding politics and political stances. When asked whether they enjoyed music with political stances, their score was .09 points higher than those with music education. This could be a result of several things. Those who have not received music education may not have been influenced in the value system which favors the high-brow western musical traditions, therefore positioning them to see value in a wider range of music. This group may also be in a social position considered lower than that who have received music education classes. In this case protest music, often dealing with issues of economic disparity, may be more apt to utilize music as a form of personal protest or as a rallying cry, such as with the case of non-white participants. This group was also more likely to agree with the idea that musicians should take political stances, with a .08 higher score. Again, if this group is more likely to utilize protest music as a way of political engagement and identity formation, as opposed to intellectual exercise, they could respect the personal belief of an artist more.

Those with no music education also have lower scores in every category of engagement with publications. This could be attributed to lack of access, both economically and academically speaking. Those with no background in music education are not necessarily the target audience for publications regarding music, the creators of such publications may be reinforcing the notion that this population lack the academic language, knowledge of history, and theoretical background needed to engage with commentary and discourse surrounding music. Attaining the actual physical means necessary may also be an issue, especially if one can assume that these individuals are coming from a different background than that of those who have attained and have had access to a music education beyond basic instrumental or vocal performance. These results do not mean that these individuals are not engaging in music in any capacity, as the results of this survey suggest they do,

While having a diverse taste of music and high scores of engagements with music media, those with music education do not have significantly higher scores in political engagement than the general population. So, while they have a more omnivorous taste, and are assumingly intaking political music, they do not indicate a preference for it. This population agreed in the role of music as protest, as did the general sample. They indicated an enjoyment of political messaging, but not to the extent that non-white participants did, which was .45 points higher. This population most likely has a higher socioeconomic status and is majority, so this population may in fact be a participant in the groups that political music is criticizing. This group, like the general population, also only had a mild support of artists taking political stances. Similar reasons could lead to this, such as disagreement over messaging, but also could include things such as adopting the belief that popular music is a form of entertainment. The education of these

students, while adopting some values of multiculturalism and omnivorous listening habits, may still embody and impress specific belief surrounding academic and cultural value.

It should also be of note, that those with no music education had higher scores in two areas of political engagement than those with music education and the general sample. This population had higher scores for enjoyment of political music (+.09) and belief that musician should take political stances (+.08). While not significantly higher, it does indicate that those with no music education are not less apt to engage with politics in popular music and in some cases are more in-tune with said stances. As a group that is probably more heavily connected to political issues in music, such as economic disenfranchisement, than their higher rates make sense. So, while education may impact an individual's listening habits and engagement with media, those differences do not necessarily impact political engagement through the medium of popular culture.

### **Implications**

This study aimed to answer several questions regarding the formation of taste, critical engagement, and the effects of identity and education on popular music consumption. The results of this study, when coupled with current research in education, cultural theory, and popular music provided guidance.

The first hypothesis suggested that the sample would have low levels of critical engagement with music, demonstrated by low scores on items related to music publication/media interaction and political engagement, and a demonstration of motivations focused on the self. The results had complex implications. What was discovered is that the general sample does possess the ability and the resources to critically analyze and engage with music. Majority of participants indicated that they were aware of the political nature of music and agreed it can be



used as a tool of protest. This acknowledgment coupled with a reported interest in accessible music media and commentary, positions this age group to engage in a public discourse and commentary on the nature of popular music. The responses also indicated a resistance in engaging in the political aspects of popular music out of personal dislike, motivations of self-fulfillment and self-care, as opposed to socially or academically motivated actions. The influences of the hegemony surrounding the popular music industry, its uses, and its limitations reflected the engagement that participants were willing to have when it came to politically motivated music, and the role of artists in the political landscape.

The second hypothesis inferred that the sample would demonstrate a lack of agency in the formation of their music tastes due to their methods of listening and finding new music. The responses of participants regarding practices did indicate an unknowing influence on taste. While there was an indication of agency in seeking out new music and sharing music with others, as well as knowledge acquisition and practices of public engagement, the ways in which participants engaged does not inhibit them from industry and cultural influence. Participants heavily rely upon methods of access (e.g. streaming services and radio) that are controlled not only by the music industry but corporations outside of record and distribution companies. While genre and decade are vast, when placed in context of listening practices, it can be quickly revealed that participants are most likely listening to a restrictive library of music.

In the third hypothesis, the belief that education would create higher rates and lead to a stronger engagement with politics and music publications and media. This was shown to not be the case, and that individuals with no music education had higher rates at times. While individuals with musical education had higher rates of listening and engagement with music media materials, this did not seem to impact their beliefs surrounding politics, as they aligned

with the general sample in most ways. It is believed that this could be related to the continued impression of highbrow culture and traditional music education that places emphasis on the music itself, and not necessarily context. When looking at the politics of popular music, context is critical to conducting meaning and implications. While popular music can be analyzed as a standalone piece or through listener response, as is often done with classical, it does not allow for wholistic understanding or analysis. Popular music has traditionally been low brow music of the lower classes, and only recently began to be studied seriously. This population may be internalizing these notions to some extent, as the group did recognize the political opportunities that popular music has.

The final hypothesis suggested that participants who identified as non-white would have higher rates of listening in traditionally non-white genres, would highly rate parents and families as influences on their taste, and would have higher engagement with politics. When coupled with the historical legacy of popular music in the United States, the results of the study suggest a distinct difference in the musical experience for those of racial and ethnic minorities. The results suggest a higher engagement with music, politics, and media; which point to this group using popular music with different motivations and expected outcomes. The taste of this groups varies from the overall sample population by positioning those genres that are historically dominated by marginalized groups as the most popular and listening to older music at higher rates. This group reported enjoying music of a political nature at higher rates, and highly rated music as a form of identity formation and socialization. This population was more likely to engage with certain forms of media, specifically those that are easiest to self-produce, and were more influenced by their friends and families on the formation of taste.

The results of this work suggest that young adults in the 18-24 demographic are positioned to be actively involved in critical analysis of popular music and its existence in their respective cultural circles. Young adults demonstrate an acknowledgment of the potential power of popular music in political and cultural spaces and are willing to engage with public discourse surrounding that music. This suggests that there is some amount of ability to critically discern and create meaning from these cultural artifacts. The demonstration of such skill suggests that there is some amount of critical analysis being done by this age group.

The question of agency, in this choice to actively politicize music is not as obvious. While the demographic demonstrated a willingness to discuss, read, and observe conversations regarding the music they listened to, the results do not suggest that this is being done with protest or ideology being placed in the center. In this way, it could be argued that many young adults still practice an agency that Gainer (2012) would describe as being resistant or faux ignorance of the ramifications of music, the artist, and ideology. The consistent results in this regard when extended to those who had received traditional music theory or history classes, suggests that the traditional notion of popular music being inferior or being analyzed within the classical tradition is still being upheld in contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century schooling. The large portion of the participants who attended or currently attend college, suggests that critical engagement with popular culture beyond just music may also be falling into a traditional “high” and “low” class denotation systems that discount the critical approaches that can be used to examine the world and reality around students.

The results did suggest that for marginalized populations, the historical and cultural role of music may allow these identifying individuals to have better access to critical discourse surrounding popular music. Music for these groups has been a historical source of liberation,

specifically in the United States, and has survived and developed through cultural and memory-based phenomenon such as oral story telling. In keeping with the theme and practicality of liberation, these groups come with a specific world view and experience that position them to better analyze the political messaging and cultural critiques in popular culture. This provides a unique opportunity for the integration and introduction of pedagogy that engages these groups and their unique experiences within American culture.

The choice of individuals to ignore the liberating powers of music and use it only as a source of entertainment, suggests a separation of pleasure and politics. The survey demonstrated an understanding and accessibility of sites of discourse and cultural production available to the consumer, and a choice by many to engage within certain contexts and social lenses. Young adults in this sample seem to be willingly unengaged with the political nature of the creation, production, distribution of the music that they listen to. The radically changing musical and technological landscape, coupled with the suggestions in this study and others, demonstrates a need and opportunity to integrate critical and popular culture pedagogies into all levels of education. The consideration of curricular and pedagogical approaches that centers non-traditional literacy development, student's cultural experiences, and mass culture; provides the opportunity for empowerment and liberation through analysis of reality. Through the deconstruction, response, and creation of discourses and their own cultural artifacts, students would be better prepared to work in self and community advocacy work and become engaged, informed, and critical members of American society.

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