Ypsilanti: A cultural assessment

Sarah Mark

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Ypsilanti: A cultural assessment

by

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Thesis
Submitted to the Department of Communication, Media, & Theatre Arts

Eastern Michigan University
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in

Communication

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Ypsilanti, Michigan
Abstract

This research examines the culture of Ypsilanti, Michigan. Participants consisted of four leaders and five residents, all long-term citizens of Ypsilanti. Participants were interviewed and first asked to describe the general culture of Ypsilanti, then asked to comment on the potential presence of a music and arts scene as part of the culture of Ypsilanti. These questions are research questions one and two, respectively. Participants were recruited through word-of-mouth as people heard about the research through people I know. A content analysis of the interviews was conducted to find conceptual patterns in participants’ descriptions of the general culture as well as the arts and music culture. Diversity, history, uniqueness, a comparison to Ann Arbor, and the presence of music and the arts were repeatedly mentioned in participants’ answers regarding the general culture. Five of the nine participants say music and the arts are part of Ypsilanti’s culture.
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Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

During the summer of 2010 I helped organize a music festival in Ypsilanti called The Michigan Roots Jamboree. At this time I had an informal discussion with an Ypsilanti leader who described the culture of Ypsilanti as consisting of arts and music. I have lived near Ypsilanti my entire life and my perception of Ypsilanti’s culture was different. I decided to conduct research into the culture there and find out if music and arts are considered as part of Ypsilanti’s culture or not. I conducted a communication qualitative analysis consisting of in-depth interviews to determine the answer.

Communication is essential for creating culture. We communicate from the time we come into the world through movement and sound with those around us, and as we grow older we learn communication is shared meaning amongst people; we learn how to assign various meanings to all kinds of communication, depending on our culture and times we live in. For this reason, culture is uniquely human as only humans can communicate verbally and create together in our communities. Therefore the qualitative research I have conducted was done so through the lens of communication.
Literature Review

A review of the literature regarding communication and culture identifies several ways in which culture is discussed. Culture has several definitions, is necessary for humans to survive, is created and sustained through speech communication and assigned meaning of cultural artifacts, and is researched frequently in the intercultural communication discipline as well as through an intracultural lens. Because culture is essential to our survival, it is important to understand what makes up a particular society’s culture and to understand how different groups of people create unique culture amongst themselves. Understanding a culture can make a difference when seeking to change or help a culture, or simply find out if change is needed. Understanding or not understanding a culture that is not one’s own could translate to making enemies, friends, or business associates of another culture. Therefore it is essential to understand and be able to represent not only one’s own culture, but also to understand another culture we may interact with.

The term culture, according to Webster dictionary, has five definitions and several sub-definitions. The definition of culture I am using is found in two of these definitions. First, culture is “the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding
generations” (Meriam-Webster, 2011); second, “culture is acquaintance with and taste in fine arts, humanities, and broad aspects of science as distinguished from vocational and technical skills” (Meriam-Webster, 2011). My research looks at the culture of Ypsilanti through the eyes of nine interviews with long-term residents of Ypsilanti. More specifically I sought to find out if these citizens thought of art and music when describing the culture of Ypsilanti, hence the two definitions I’m utilizing above.

King and O’Boyle work at Cultural Studies & Analysis, a cultural think tank based in Philadelphia; both have done a lot of cultural research. They explain “when Americans talk of culture, we use the word in several ways… Elite culture (also called High Culture)... the high aesthetics of the fine arts, ballet, Shakespeare, the symphony” (King & O’Boyle, 2002) is one way. Cultural anthropologists take culture further and include what is “Visible” culture – customary greetings, proxemics, and food, for example. This broader definition is now thought of as a particular style, or “non-mainstream ethnicity... folk customs” (King & O’Boyle, 2002). King & O’Boyle argue that Americans have a “Deep Culture,” which is the system driving the other cultures mentioned above, Elite and Visible. Deep Culture is shared by all humans but produces different outcomes (cultures) in different areas. Deep Culture is below our consciousness; it can be found in answering the questions, why and how do cultures develop (King & O’Boyle, 2002)?
King and O’Boyle consider culture the longest-running invention of humankind, enabling us to “become the dominant life form on this planet” (King & O’Boyle, 2002). Culture, they say, starts in our minds and the assumptions we share regarding how we interact with the world, including how we define and solve problems. King and O’Boyle explain cultural receptivity as the process of obtaining another place’s culture and making it our own. For example, the architecture of America came from Greece via Rome, the apple pie and log cabin that are typically associated with American culture came to us from Sweden, and the cherry blossoms that mean spring is coming were a gift from a Japanese Emperor. Their point is clear – we take cultural artifacts and symbols from other cultures, yet we make them our own; the same happens in reverse. For example, McDonald’s started in the United States, yet “in Germany it is valued for its efficiency, in Japan for low-cost social centers, and in Hungary it is viewed not as an inexpensive meal” (King & O’Boyle, 2002). Each culture adopted the franchise but integrated McDonald’s into their own cultures, making McDonald’s represent something different depending on their culture.

Aldridge agrees that culture is uniquely human and important to our survival. “Culture is about survival of the human species” and “to study the value roots or the basis of various cultures via intercultural communication disciplines might lend predictability to either the survival of a particular culture and/or understanding of its elemental roots”
Aldridge emphasizes the creation of culture being possible through speech communication. Essentially, culture is created and sustained by humans communicating and is necessary for us to survive.

Culture is also situated in time; as times and people change, culture changes. Aldridge emphasizes this when he looks at how culture has been looked at through time, highlighting the importance of understanding a culture historically. While Aldridge looks at the United States as a whole and from an intercultural standpoint, I looked at one city in Michigan, and to understand the culture I also looked at Ypsilanti’s history, discussed below. In explaining his approach to teaching intercultural communication, Aldridge shares the example of a book written about Asia’s culture. Aldridge critiques the author because the findings are not applicable to all of Asia, yet the book is written as though everything in it applies to Asia. The book’s author, Lee Kuan Yew, says Confucian value traits apply to all of Asia, but they do not apply to parts of Asia such as Muslim and Chinese cultures (Aldridge, 2002). This is one reason that instead of researching the culture of the United States or Michigan, I chose to study the culture in one city located in Michigan because a state or larger geographical area may reflect a very different culture than one city. Ypsilanti may not share all of Michigan’s cultural values, and therefore an intracultural perspective looking at Ypsilanti alone would do good to further understand the culture in Ypsilanti. If
Aldridge is correct and humans have survived through culture being passed down through generations, it would be good to understand Ypsilanti culturally and how it has been and potentially will be, as seen through the eyes its residents.

Culture usually is found in a particular geographic location, although recently groups of people online who may not share the same geographic location but do share an online connection, may experience their own culture. For the purpose of my research, I am focusing on culture that is found when looking at a group of people in one geographic location.

Intracultural research “identifies and examines communication patterns endemic to a particular country or co-culture within a society” (Shuter, 1990) and is closely tied to intercultural research. Intercultural research looks at more than one culture and how different cultures interact, while intracultural research looks at one culture in-depth and seeks to understand that culture by itself. According to Shuter there are several benefits for conducting intracultural research; intracultural research not only furthers understanding of a specific group of people, but also helps to develop intracultural communication theory. Intracultural research provides “a conceptual framework for analyzing interaction within a society,” helps theorists to develop research based on findings in a society and would work to develop “cultural specialists.”
This research would also impact how intercultural communication is taught. Once teachers have better intracultural data, they would be able to teach about different cultures from around the globe utilizing in-depth information from various cultures.

Out of all communication scholars, Robert Shuter has written the most extensively on intracultural research. In 1990 Shuter reviewed all intercultural communication studies conducted between 1980 and 1990 – 51 studies total. He found that while this research furthered research in theories of the intercultural communication discipline, often the research “neglected people, context, and national culture” (Shuter, 1990). That decade’s research sought to validate theories such as uncertainty reduction and intercultural adaptation. Shuter acknowledges that developing these theories did help with understanding general human behavior, but says the researchers looked at interactions without taking into account the culture at the time and place, two components that Aldridge (2002) and King and O'Boyle (2002) emphasized are important to consider.

Shuter makes the case for conducting intracultural studies because it’s important to understand a single culture in a world where cultures come together for reasons like globalization and trade. For example, at the time of his writing, Western Europe was attempting to achieve trade unification; having an intracultural understanding of each
country would be beneficial when change is afoot, such as trade unification was at the time.

While Shuter makes a convincing argument for researching understudied areas of the world such as South Asia, I make the same argument for understanding smaller cultures within the United States. Today the economy of the United States is struggling, with each city and state doing its best to recover and prosper in the midst of hard times. For each city and state and our country as a whole to prosper, it is helpful to understand what makes and drives various cultures found inside our country.

Robert T. Oliver is another person who has written extensively about intraculture and interculture research; however, he never uses these terms because he is a rhetoric and public address scholar who studies events or a specific person, or conducts an audience analysis. Indeed it is Shuter who calls out Oliver’s contributions in a 2011 review of Oliver’s contributions to intercultural and intracultural communication scholarship. Shuter says Oliver should be given more credit for his contributions intraculturally and interculturally, as his lifelong analysis of Korea, China, India, and Great Britain has been extensive and brought to light understandings of each of these places, especially Korea (Shuter, 2011).
Intracultural research has not happened much in recent years. There are a few articles written in the same journal Shuter’s 1990 article (mentioned above) appeared in, The Southern Communication Journal. This was a special issue devoted to intracultural communication research looking at patterns in individual societies. Shuter says “when cultural patterns are linked to communication, the terms refer to shared, recurring, and culturally derived ways of interacting that are manifested in the ebb and flow of human transactions within a society” (Shuter, 1990).

One researcher studied a group process that took place in North Yemen every day. Because of his intracultural research, we have a better understanding of how decisions are made, the nature of discussions, the ways people interact, and different ways to approach a problem in this area of the world. We also see clearly the nature of speech communication being so essential in forming culture. Frye, the study’s author, participated in qat sessions, which consist of groups of people that get together every day and chew qat - men with men and women with women. Qat is a mild euphoric stimulant. Frye’s research found the central part of these groups is not the qat itself, but the speech communication that takes place during qat sessions. These groups are what we in the United States would refer to as task groups because often problems are solved in the qat sessions, but they are not known as task groups in North Yemen. During qat sessions participants move through
three phases – forming, elevation, and Solomon’s Hour, similar to small group communication stages such as forming, storming, norming, and performing that communication scholars in the West are familiar with. Qat participants “share information, make decisions, and reinforce cultural norms” (Frye, 1990). Frye attended 30 qat sessions as a Peace Corps volunteer learning about the culture he was living in. Although qat sessions happen elsewhere such as Madagascar, North Yemen has the most users; Varisco (1986) estimated 90% of men and over 60% of women are regular qat users, with one of the reasons for high qat usage being that there isn’t much else to do. Participants are given “opportunities to sharpen one’s thinking and linguistic competence, reinforcing culturally desirable behavior” (Frye, 1990). In forming, stage one, guests arrive, socialize, and put qat in their mouths. Conversation revolves around getting to know others sitting close by, qat quality, and the origin of the qat being used in the session. In elevation, stage two, group members discuss their thoughts and opinions and come to a consensus. “Evidence of resistance to group influence does not stand out...spirited argument between individuals might occur... but these would be encouraged as part of the entertainment, constituting not a challenge to leadership or threat to group cohesiveness, but a welcomed springboard to lively group interaction” (Frye, 1990). In the West this type of disagreement may decrease group cohesiveness, but in qat sessions these discussions serve as a springboard to the final stage,
Solomon’s Hour. During Solomon’s Hour the room quiets and everyone turns into themselves in an intrapersonal fashion, reflecting. Nothing like this has been documented in the West as part of a task group. After introspection, members begin to quietly leave and the qat sessions end. Frye ends his study by explaining that even though some users do not like qat, these users strategically use less of it so they are still able to participate without feeling the effects of qat. Frye’s intracultural research into understanding qat sessions and the culture of North Yemen may provide a different way of approaching drug problems in and beyond that area and gives us some understanding of North Yemen culture. This study is an example of how an intracultural perspective and research can bring much understanding of a particular culture.

Another intracultural study is on Ohio Mexican Americans’ writings – found in their writings are themes of “separation and desire for inclusion…the quality of otherness is the Mexican influence crucial to Anglo understanding of Mexican American rhetorical self-presentations” (Gonzalez, 1990). Gonzalez found the themes of otherness to help sustain the Mexican American’s cultural identity to the Anglo majority. Gonzalez’s analysis of writings of Mexican Americans gives an in-depth look at one particular Mexican American culture found in Ohio and shows how the theme of otherness correlates to the still-present pain of their history. Gonzalez also points out a cursory communication study looking at the same culture may not see the deeper meanings and
themes unless they pay attention to the symbolism present throughout the historical writings studied, and “without such attention the surface meanings in the discourse are likely to be misread” (Gonzalez, 1990). Gonzalez’s intracultural study sheds light on important cultural factors still present in today’s Mexican Americans and also inadvertently demonstrates the importance of knowing the history of a culture of people.

Flavia Bastos, an art educator, makes a compelling argument for the need to understand one’s own culture. Bastos teaches art education from a cultural perspective and encourages her students to engage in qualitative research in their own cultures. She also states the importance of dialoguing with those from other cultures for the purpose of explaining our own cultures and learning about other cultures. Although Bastos does not use the phrase *intracultural communication*, what she is doing is teaching her students and making a case for learning about a single culture and being able to communicate it, in a specific [art education] context. Bastos makes a good point: we may travel to another culture or learn about another culture in some way, but in order to engage in shared learning with people in other cultures, it is wise to learn as much as we are able to learn about our own culture.

To learn about the culture I live in, I take into account the history, speech communication of the people interviewed, the time we are living
in, and the importance of understanding my own culture in order to share about it with others. As Gonzales pointed out looking deeper into what Anglo-Americans meant by their writing, I too looked deeply at what people in Ypsilanti say about their culture and what this may mean, as I seek to answer the following research questions.

**Research Questions and Analysis**

RQ1: How do citizens of Ypsilanti describe the culture of Ypsilanti?

RQ2: Is there a relationship between how citizens describe the culture of Ypsilanti and how they describe arts and music in Ypsilanti?
Chapter 2: Data Collection Method

Participants consisted of nine citizens – four of them serve the city in an official capacity, such as City Council, and are referred to throughout this paper as a leader, when appropriate. Five of them do not serve the city in an official capacity and are referred to as residents. All participants have lived in Ypsilanti for at least the last four years. Participants ranged in age from 32 to 71. All participants are White Americans, with a diverse ethnicity represented – Polish, Cornish, Native American, German, and Irish were present. Participants were given confidentiality as part of their participation agreement; no information will be detailed regarding who they are throughout my research and analysis.

Some participants were told about my research through word-of-mouth; friends I had their acquaintances contact me to participate. Some participants recommended other participants and had these participants contact me.
Demographics

Ypsilanti is currently 64% White, 29% African American, 3% Asian, less than .5% American Indian or Alaskan Native, less than .5% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and 1% Other. The population is 22,000 – half female and half male. Currently the industries in Ypsilanti consist of educational services, health care, and social assistance, 35% each (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

Content Analysis. Content Analysis is a methodology that is conducted in two ways: conceptually and relationally. My research was conceptual. Conceptual analysis involves reviewing a body of text, such as interviews, quantifying the frequency of key words and phrases related to research questions, and analyzing meaning and relationships therein. Finally, inferences are made that go beyond the concepts for a deeper analysis of what the findings could point to. The process of defining categories that consist of key words or phrases is called selective reduction (Methods of Conceptual Analysis, n.d.). In the interviews I conducted, I focused on answers to three cultural questions and looked for appearance and frequency of words and phrases, such as culture, music, and arts. I also looked for any other pattern that emerged, such as the comparison to Ann Arbor.
Chapter 3: History

Ypsilanti is the second-oldest city in Michigan; it became a settlement in 1823, Woodruff’s Grove, and was named Ypsilanti in 1825 after General Demetrius Ypsilanti, a hero in the Greek war for independence, by Judge Woodward of Detroit, who recognized and was in awe of Demetrius’s military successes. As Ypsilanti grew, Depot Town became the thriving center due to its close proximity to the Huron River and the railroad in Depot Town. Ypsilanti has an industrial heritage starting with long underwear being produced at a mill in the 1880s; in the mid to late 19th century, the river industries slowed and auto-related business became the biggest economic force, with the nearby Ford Motor Company plant in Willow Run. In the 1940s, Ford’s plant in nearby Willow Run produced bombers for World War II. In the busiest part of the war, the plant produced a bomber an hour. After World War II, the bomber plant was turned into a commercial airport, and in 1966 commercial airport traffic was all moved to Detroit Metro and the airport at Willow Run eventually became one of the biggest cargo airports in the United States (Willow Run Airport, n.d.).

Ypsilanti consists of 4.2 square miles and includes Eastern Michigan University, the downtown Michigan Avenue area, and Depot Town. Surrounding Ypsilanti is Ypsilanti Township. Kentuckians were brought up to live in Ypsilanti Township and work in the bomber plant in
the 1940s; the township today still has people who came from Kentucky as residents. There was and still is tension between the blue-collar workers of Ypsilanti Township and the people of Ypsilanti because “neither side understood the other” (Mann, 2003).

The structure of Ypsilanti’s political offices consists of a Mayor, a six-person City Council, and several departments that oversee a variety of city functions, such as the Planning Department and City Manager’s Office (City of Ypsilanti, n.d.).

**Presentation of Data**

The findings of a content analysis yield three ways citizens of Ypsilanti describe the general culture – historical, diverse, and unique. Additionally, almost all participants compared Ypsilanti to Ann Arbor. A majority of participants indicated music and arts to be part of the culture of Ypsilanti. Findings are summarized in the table below. Next, figures for each of the findings is presented along with excerpts of interviews that correspond with each finding.
Table 1

*Summary of Findings*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Content Analysis – Findings that Emerge</th>
<th>How many participants mentioned this?</th>
<th>Total Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison to Ann Arbor</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music and Arts is part of Ypsilanti’s culture</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
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When asked to describe the general culture of Ypsilanti, seven of the nine participants included diversity in their answer.
Figure 1. Diverse
A leader:

We’re economically diverse, we are ethnically diverse, we are socially diverse... any way you can think about culture, Ypsilanti is diverse in that way (personal interview, March 8, 2011).

A resident:

It’s so mixed, you have a variety of people (personal interview, March 21, 2011).
When asked to describe the culture of Ypsilanti, six of the nine participants identified the culture as historical. One participant identified Ypsilanti as having the third largest historical district in Michigan, when Ypsilanti actually has the seventh largest historical district, according to Michigan’s State Historic Preservation Office (personal communication, August 29, 2011). The participant’s answer, although incorrect, demonstrates there is knowledge of Ypsilanti having a historical district.

Figure 2. Historical
A leader:

The city is deeply based as an industrial city and has a rich history...a lot of the car shows and cultural icons you see throughout the area definitely reflect that, although I’d say over the last ten years... the city’s really taken on the second face of being more of an urban off-the-beaten-path kind of experimental playground...as the social fabric continues to change you have more people...students and artists that continue to stay or are drawn to the city. I think you almost have two competing interests...some people that have been around that identify the city as one way, and then you have a younger group of people that are trying to bend that identity or offer something that is almost opposed to that identity (personal interview, March 4, 2011).

A resident:

There’s a shift because Ypsilanti was historically very much a working class town...it’s always had the University as a central part of it, but in terms of the year-round residents there are more younger people actually moving into the area because they really like the arts climate here and they just like the feeling of the town (personal interview, March 4, 2011).
When asked to describe the culture of Ypsilanti, frequent words were given such as *edgy* and *funky*, depicted below under the heading of unique.

*Figure 3. Unique*
A citizen:

It’s young, hip, and vibrant...I like the funky, the hip, the creativity, and the community. There’s a lot of strength here (personal interview, March 10, 2011).

A leader:

Edgy, unpolished, cutting edge, unique, and creative...it might happen here before it happens somewhere else (personal interview, March 18, 2011).
A pattern emerged that showed it is common to state a comparison between Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti for participants; seven of the nine participants compared Ypsilanti to Ann Arbor when asked to describe Ypsilanti’s culture.

Figure 4. Comparison to Ann Arbor
A leader:

I think Ypsilanti is the right size in that it’s small enough where you know your neighbors and large enough where you can get something done, there’s enough of a structure, there’s a downtown, so you don’t get lost downtown, yet you can do things with businesses downtown. Ann Arbor is a lot bigger, sometimes you can get lost in Ann Arbor (personal interview, March 23, 2011).

A resident:

Stepchild to Ann Arbor (personal interview, March 21, 2011).
Regarding research question two, I looked for a relationship between how participants described the culture in general and how they described music and the arts present (or not) in Ypsilanti. My findings indicate Ypsilanti is perceived as having an arts and music scene as part of its culture. Five of the nine interviewees mention arts, music, and the city changing into an artsy community. Arrows below depict the order these phrases and words were spoken in as well as the relationship they have with each other. For instance, Corner Brewery was described as having a dynamic music scene.

*Figure 5. Music and Arts Culture*
A leader:

The cultural climate is emerging because Ypsilanti is transforming itself from an industrial city to a city of education, arts, and entertainment (personal interview, March 23, 2011).

A resident:

In the sense of high culture, I think Ypsilanti is really burgeoning... lots of focus on crafts and art and Spur Studios and all those things are leading to a very high level artistic and music culture in the City (personal interview, March 10, 2011).
Chapter 4: Analysis and Discussion

Diversity is defined as “the condition of having or being composed of differing elements” (Meriam-Webster, 2011). Ypsilanti is diverse in several ways according to both residents and leaders, as seven of the nine participants indicated such. Census data show this to be true in terms of ethnic make-up of residents there, and the presence of an industrial history mixed in with an arts and music scene indicate diversity in the types of people found there. Some towns may be known for their sports, who lives there, or as “a place to be.” Ypsilanti appears to be none of these. Participants emphasized how different Ypsilanti is in itself, being such an old structural city mixed with an academic population and people who still live around town who were brought up from Kentucky during the war. The result is a melting pot of activity and people, with people in Ypsilanti who are aware of this, as it almost always came up when discussing Ypsilanti’s culture. Participants’ observations and descriptions of the culture, being spread through speech communication via interviews, supports Aldridge’s (2002) claims that culture is understood via looking at the history and listening to the communication of the people. Culture, after all, is created by the people – and in Ypsilanti, the people are diverse. The transformation and co-occurrence of an industrialized culture alongside an arts culture in Ypsilanti may be key to the wellbeing of the people and economy there. Detroit, Michigan, for instance, was severely handicapped when the auto
industry went down in the last several years, making Detroit no longer the place where that industry is presently growing. Currently, Detroit can claim roots of the auto industry (history) and is known as the place where cars originated; now, the identity of Detroit is undergoing change and the economy is struggling. Leaders in Detroit are starting to capitalize on industries they see growing now, such as the green technology industry (Muller, 2011). A 2010 report published by the Land Policy Institute, an Institute dedicated to providing scientific research from Michigan State University and other Universities to Michigan’s policy-makers (Land Policy Institute, 2011), details the changing culture of Detroit from one of industrial workers to a broader focus consisting of arts and music, green technology, and natural resources available; the authors detail that if Detroit is to survive, the culture needs to be changed, backing up what Aldridge (2002) says regarding the creation of culture being necessary to our survival (Adelaja & Hannah, 2010, p. 6). It follows that the cultural diversity consisting of industrial roots, a unique history, and music and the arts is an asset that may help Ypsilanti not only make it through these hard economic times, but eventually flourish. Too much of a hold in one industry turned out badly for a place like Detroit, which not too long ago had all its eggs in the auto industry basket. The report finds diversification in Detroit necessary to its survival (Adelaja & Hannah, 2010, p. 8) and the same could easily be true for another city that holds onto one element only for its identity. Due to its
inherent diverse population and culture, Ypsilanti is uniquely positioned to grow simultaneously in different directions. It is home to students, artists, professionals, and economically advantaged and disadvantaged, and this diversity will help sustain the city through hard times.

Ypsilanti has a historic cultural identity, according to six of the nine residents. With three museums inside the city’s 4.2 square miles and another nearby, it’s no surprise residents find history to be a part of the town’s cultural identity. Much more could be learned about Ypsilanti’s history than is in the scope of my research; exploring the rift between residents of Ypsilanti Township and Ypsilanti would be a good starting place. Having history figure prominently in participants’ answers demonstrates the importance of both understanding a culture’s history, as Aldridge (2002) pointed out, and the importance citizens of Ypsilanti still place on knowing their town’s history. This also lends weight to perception of Ypsilanti undergoing change from an industrial city to an arts city, as Ypsilanti is historically industrial. Ypsilanti’s Automotive Heritage Museum details the history of cars and their makers, something for which several cities in Michigan are known to have been a part of (Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Museum, n.d.).

Every participant described Ypsilanti’s culture as unique in some sense. For example, one leader described Ypsilanti’s culture as an “experimental playground” (personal interview, March 4, 2011), and
another participant pointed out how Ypsilanti has a Mexican channel playing Texas Polk music (personal interview, March 10, 2011), which contributes greatly to the uniqueness as well as the diversity of Ypsilanti. Another leader describes Ypsilanti as “artistic, bohemian” and “family-centric, or you can raise a family in Ypsilanti” and goes on to describe the sense of community felt and experienced through an example of when the senior center had to be shut down due to city budget issues, and residents stepped in and ran it voluntarily; it’s still running to this day several years later (personal interview, March 23, 2011). Another leader describes the sense of community as well; he moved to another local town first and was expecting to experience a connected feeling with this town and his neighbors, yet did not. When he moved to Ypsilanti he did experience this sense of a close, caring community (personal interview, March 4, 2011). The picture that develops through these interviews is one of a tight-knit, involved, artistic community developing its own identity based on the town’s unique history and evolving culture; the closeness of the community shows in how people all know each other in the neighborhoods, work closely with police via neighborhood watches, and get involved in local happenings such as art shows at the Riverside Arts Center or local art fairs around town. People in Ypsilanti come together in the form of neighborhood associations throughout the city, mentioned by several participants when explaining their involvement in the community. One leader explains: “I see a lot more collaboration,
people doing things out of their own free time or the company of people they do it with, neighborhood watches and people looking out for their people that they know whether or not they know them personally, they just have this common bond of sharing a block” and “there’s a much deeper sense of belonging in a place as diverse as Ypsilanti, as opposed to kind of a whitewashed community” (personal interview, March 4, 2011).

Five of the nine participants indicated Ypsilanti has a music and arts component when asked in general about Ypsilanti’s culture; they mentioned several venues and events that illustrate the presence of this culture as evidence. Because five of nine participants do constitute a majority, my research shows that more people believe Ypsilanti has a music and arts component than do not. Five of nine is just barely a majority; I posit this finding may allude to a greater truth about the population of Ypsilanti, which is the majority of people are aware of a music and arts scene, but almost an equal number are not. Nine participants cannot represent a whole city, but if the number had been 7 or 8 participants of the nine affirming the existence of an artsy culture, I would be more comfortable in stating that most people in Ypsilanti do describe the culture in this sense. As it stands, finding out more would require further research. Events and venues mentioned by participants depict a fair amount of evidence for the presence of a “ burgeoning” (personal interview, March 10, 2011) local music and arts cultural
component. As culture is created and spread via speech communication amongst people, these descriptions help to create the actual reality that this scene does exist. Riverside Arts Center, SPUR Studios, Dreamland Theater, Corner Brewery, Shadow Art Fair, and DIYpsi events were each mentioned when participants were describing the music and arts culture in Ypsilanti. SPUR Studios received press coverage when it opened in 2009 as a rental space where artists of any kind have a space to craft their work and meet other like-minded people; SPUR filled almost to capacity in a few months (Eberbach, 2010). SPUR Studios was described as “the Ypsilanti creative community’s answer to an overflowing demand for affordable artist studio space and band practice in the surrounding Ypsilanti-Ann Arbor area” (Eberbach, 2010). Dreamland Theater, a nonprofit that opened in 2002, has a special focus on puppetry, although it provides a venue for music, plays, experimental theater, and other gatherings; Dreamland provides art classes including puppetry to anyone of any age (Dreamland Theater, n.d.). Shadow Art Fair is a unique art fair that happens once a year, lasts for one day, and costs two cents to get into. Local artists have 12 hours to display their work. The fair is supported by VG Kids, a local company whose founder started SPUR Studios; Corner Brewery hosts and provides beer (proceeds from beer are donated back) and Zingerman’s, a well-known Ann Arbor restaurant and food company, donates food. Funds raised go towards a grant for artists who need help funding their creative ideas (Shadow Art Fair, Ypsilanti
Corner Brewery is a local brewpub owned by its larger counterpart in Ann Arbor, Arbor Brewing Company. Corner Brewery is set apart from the main Depot Town and Michigan Avenue districts in Ypsilanti, as it is situated in what used to be Motor Wheel Office; it resembles a large coffeehouse, serves healthy food, has an enclosed beer garden out back, and often holds events of varying kinds, such as live music, fundraisers, and meetings (Corner Brewery, n.d.). One of the resident participants called Corner Brewery a “pillar of the community for culture and bringing in music and dynamic events” (personal interview, March 10, 2011). DIYpsi is an indie art fair for local artists to sell their creations and happens at least twice a year (DIYpsi, n.d.). Given that Ypsilanti is only 4 square miles, having several creative venues and events happening around the city lends evidence to support the presence of not only a unique culture with events such as puppet theater, but also a very present arts and music culture, being created in true Ypsilanti fashion – from the ground up. Indeed one resident participant states in regard to the artistic and music culture present in Ypsilanti, “I love the way that Ypsi approaches those issues, in a way that seems very down to earth. People just have an idea and they decide they’re going to figure out how to make it happen” (personal interview, March 10, 2011).

It seems clear that Ypsilanti’s music and arts culture is present and known, given the examples detailed above. Even as it stands on its
own, Ypsilanti is clearly thought of in relation to Ann Arbor on a frequent basis by participants.

In Figure IV it is clear some participants feel negatively about Ann Arbor, or view Ypsilanti as somehow “lesser than” Ann Arbor. For example, one participant states, “I resent the fact that people say you live in Ypsi because you can’t afford to live in Ann Arbor, that’s not the case” (personal interview, March 10, 2011) and another states, “There’s a sense of pretense in Ann Arbor” (personal interview, March 21, 2011). These statements explicate DeTurk’s power analysis – could Ann Arbor be the dominant nearby group of people as opposed to Ypsilanti’s smaller non-dominant community? Do Ypsilanti residents feel empathy for Ann Arbor’s culture and residents, and vice versa? DeTurk (2001) makes this point when she says, “Any conceptualization of empathy across cultures or social groups...must cautiously consider dynamics of power.” Are people in Ann Arbor aware of the hostile views of some Ypsilanti residents, or, if there is a true power imbalance between the two cities, is the dominant group of people found in the city of Ann Arbor aware that they are the dominant group? If Ann Arbor is the dominant group, are they unaware simply because they don’t need to be aware, as DeTurk (2002) states? Further research would be needed to answer these questions – yet participants’ constant comparisons to Ann Arbor let me at least know they are always comparing their community to the nearby larger, richer community of Ann Arbor. The negative responses would
indicate the standpoint of those in Ypsilanti is bound to be very different than those in Ann Arbor.

Standpoint theorists point out marginalized groups tend to understand greater the complex dynamics in social structures and communication of people, powered or powerless, due to the necessity of continuously having to navigate the dominant groups’ different norms, communication styles, and views, giving the submissive group a greater understanding than the dominant group in these matters. The dominant group does not have to understand everything, because they dictate and control how things are (DeTurk, 2001).

DeTurk discusses her experience with learning about ethnocentrism in West Africa when she was emerged in the culture there as part of her work for the Peace Corps. She posits to understand a culture, one must enter into it, much like intracultural communication, although she does not use this phrase. DeTurk unpacks intercultural training, specifically empathy, with an eye toward critiquing the inherent ethnocentrism that can be found when engaging in empathy for others, if we are not careful or aware (DeTurk, 2001). Empathy is challenging because it requires stepping into another’s shoes and attempting to understand another’s perspective. DeTurk looks at empathy and social power and says “consideration of empathy as a process of building shared meaning seems much more realistic than true knowledge of
another person’s existing thoughts and feelings” (DeTurk, 2001). The problem with the understanding that empathy is a necessary skill and must be present is this very thought can be ethnocentric because it assumes two people or groups share the same values of “open communication and mutual understanding,” (DeTurk, 2001) when, in fact, they may not.

It is possible people in Ypsilanti have, intentionally or unintentionally, sought to separate themselves identity-wise from what they perceive as a larger group with more power, the people of Ann Arbor. DeTurk brings up the power difference between a dominant group and the subordinate group; dominant members will control, and are encouraged to remain in control in a relational loop with subordinates. Subordinates are caught because they either have to submit, which reinforces how they are treated, or not submit, which they then are punished for. Submissive members who speak up against the dominant group are dismissed and seen as “overly emotional, angry, or violent, and are accordingly controlled through ridicule or punishment” (DeTurk, 2001). Because of these power dynamics, “subordinates learn that direct, honest reactions are dangerous, and that open communication is possible only with each other” (DeTurk, 2001). Dominant members may not believe how strongly subordinates feel, remaining ignorant to the effect they are having, yet submissive members know well because they must be very aware of a dominant member in order to successfully
navigate communication. If tension is high between Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, or between Ypsilanti and Ypsilanti Township, the first thing that needs to be done is to understand the power dynamics, what style of communication each party favors, and each group’s understanding of the other. Ypsilanti participants, in identifying themselves as apart from Ann Arbor, demonstrated a theme of “otherness,” much like what Gonzalez (1990) found when he researched Mexican Americans living in Ohio. The same could be said of Ypsilanti and Ypsilanti Township people, although participants did not discuss this much when giving their views on culture. This tension was discovered a little in other questions asked of participants and in research I did.
Limitations and Future Research

There were two limitations to my research. First, although during the course of the interviews I did ask about participants’ history and connection to Ypsilanti, I did not analyze their answers to establish what class (economic, social) participants may fall in – that is outside the scope of my research. It may have been helpful to understand this information as their perception of the culture of Ypsilanti may be different depending on what level they are living at class-wise. Also, it may have been helpful to interview participants who are newer to living in Ypsilanti – this was also outside the scope of my research. All participants were White. Because Ypsilanti is diverse and only 64% of its population is White, it would have been helpful to have people of other races represented. I attempted to find people of other races to interview but I did not receive any responses.

Ypsilanti has a strong cultural identity. People are proud to be asked about Ypsilanti and have much to say about it, when asked. Ypsilanti is a city where people are not afraid to try new things, are very involved in their community and neighborhoods, and are embracing the arts, music, and hip crowd that calls Ypsilanti its home, while at the same time being aware and appreciative of its rich automotive and industrial city. Ypsilanti can be summed up in one word – the word I heard the most often – diverse.
Further research could dig deeper into what is behind the feelings Ypsilanti people have towards Ann Arbor, beginning by exploring the questions detailed in the above section. Interviewing people who live in Ann Arbor to find out if they are aware of how some people in Ypsilanti view them and how some Ypsilanti people believe people in Ann Arbor view them would be telling as well. Before Ann Arbor people are asked their views, it would be beneficial to find out if they are even aware of how some people in Ypsilanti view them. If they are not, this supports DeTurk’s findings (2001) that a dominant group may not be aware of, or believe, the level of feelings that run deeper in a subordinate group. Standpoint theory would indicate Ypsilanti, if it is indeed found in a subordinate position in relation to Ann Arbor, would have a much better understanding of how to navigate this relationship than the people of Ann Arbor would, out of necessity.

Further research would also be helpful to understand how people of different classes and different races may view the culture of Ypsilanti differently, as well as how they view Ann Arbor - or if they even think about Ann Arbor when describing the culture of Ypsilanti.
References


City of Ypsilanti, Michigan - Welcome to the City of Ypsilanti’s Website.  


Culture - Definition and More from the Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary.  


Methods of Conceptual Analysis. (n.d.). Welcome to Writing @ CSU.


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

APPROVAL LETTER – SEE ATTACHED
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL QUESTIONS

1. Do you live in Ypsilanti or Ypsilanti Township, and how long have you lived there?

2. How old are you?

3. What is your ethnicity?

4. Describe your relationship to the community of Ypsilanti.

5. How would you describe the cultural climate of Ypsilanti today?

6. Where do you obtain your local news and how often?

7. How often do you engage in conversations regarding Ypsilanti in the following settings?
   a. Meetings
   b. Informal settings such as coffee shops, discussions on the street, etc.
   c. Other

8. How do you see Ypsilanti as having changed over the past 5-10 years?
9. How do you see Ypsilanti changing in the next ten years?

10. Describe what you think of when you think about music and the arts in Ypsilanti.

11. Describe anything you know of that is having a negative effect on the culture of Ypsilanti.

12. Describe your involvement in any groups, clubs, or committees in the community of Ypsilanti? (If this doesn’t apply to you, move on to question 13.)

13. What are five words or phrases you would use to describe the culture of Ypsilanti?

14. Is there anything else you would like to add?

15. Would you like to be notified when the results of my research are available? If so, please provide your email address or telephone number.
Informed Consent

**Project Title:** Ypsilanti: A Cultural Assessment

**Investigator:** Sarah Mark, Eastern Michigan University, smark1@emich.edu

**Faculty Advisor:** Michael Tew, Professor, Basic Course Director, Secondary Education Coordinator Communication, Media and Theatre Arts, mtew@emich.edu

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of the culture of Ypsilanti as understood by the citizens of the City of Ypsilanti and Ypsilanti Township.

**Procedure:** I will explain the study and interview protocol to you, answer any questions you may have, and witness your signature to this consent form. You must be at least 18 years old to take part in this study. I will be using an interview protocol consisting of 15 questions. Upon completion of the interview, you will be given a duplicate copy of this informed consent, which includes my follow-up contact information, if needed. The approximate total time to complete the interview will be no more than 30 minutes.

**Audio Recording:** I would like to record (audio only) your interview. I will be transcribing interviews afterwards and audio recording enables me to have better accuracy than if I do not audio record. Please indicate if you do or do not mind being recorded below. If you are not recorded I will take detailed notes during the interview.

___ I agree to be recorded    ___ I do not wish to be recorded

**Confidentiality:** No names or individually identifying information will be revealed. The results will be stored separately from the consent form, which includes your name and any other identifying information. I may quote you using a pseudo name, if you agree that this is ok. If you would like, I will not quote you in the study but only as part of a group. Whether or not you mind me potentially referring to you is completely up to you. Please indicate your preference below. All related materials will be kept in locked file cabinets in my office and electronic data will be stored on my password-protected computer.

___ I do not wish to be quoted in this study    ___ I am fine with being
quoted, using a pseudo name, in this study

**Expected Risks:** There are no foreseeable risks to you by completing this survey.

**Expected Benefits:** Your responses will aid in understanding the culture of Ypsilanti.

**Voluntary Participation:** Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate. If you do decide to participate, you can change your mind at any time and withdraw from the study without negative consequences.

**Compensation:** You will be paid $10 cash for your time.

**Use of Research Results:** Results will be presented in aggregate form. Names and quotes of participants’ may be utilized only if participants indicate this is ok to do (see above). Results may be presented at research meetings and conferences, in scientific publications, or as part of a doctoral dissertation or thesis being conducted by the principal investigator.

**Future Questions:** If you have any questions concerning your participation in this study now or in the future, you can contact the principal investigator, _Sarah Mark_, at 734-474-6980 or via e-mail to smark1@emich.edu. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Michael Tew, at mtew@emich.edu or 734-487-8504.

This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee for use from ___2-25-11___ to ____2-24-12. If you have questions about the approval process, please contact Dr. Deb de Laski-Smith (734.487.0042, Interim Dean of the Graduate School and Administrative Co-Chair of UHSCR, human.subjects@emich.edu)

**Consent to Participate:** I have read or had read to me all of the above information about this research study, including the research procedures, possible risks, and the
likelihood of any benefit to me. The content and meaning of this information has been explained and I understand. All my questions, at this time, have been answered. I hereby consent and do voluntarily offer to follow the study requirements and take part in the study.

PRINT NAME:

Signatures:

Participant (your signature)    Date

Investigator or Specified Designee    Date