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Differences in How Boomers and Millennials Experience Listening to Recorded Music

by

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Abstract

Music is present in people's lives. This work looks at cultural changes among two generations, the Baby Boomers and Millennials. Furthermore, there is a focus on values held by each generation when it comes to recorded music. Through textual analyses, claims are made about consumer habits, preferences, and relationships with music held by these distinct generations.

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Introduction

Music is present in people's lives. It is bestowed upon new generations through habits and actions accepted by its members. By the time the 1960s arrived, music was embedded in many different facets of culture; whether it was politics or fashion, music was front and centered (Gewen, 2008). Because of its prevalence in culture, it appears to prove power in the communication of feelings and emotions through lyrics accompanied by a great beat and a catchy melody. Many argue that music is its own language because it allows for expression and communication that cannot be achieved otherwise. Even though there could be an analysis of the evolution of musical compositions through history, this work looks at recorded music and its relation with its listeners. The primary focus is on the values and culture that are developed and reinforced in the engagement of recorded music for two generations, Baby Boomers and Millennials. The way in which the music industry operates changes due to technological advances and with that, consumers of music are in need to adapt to the new capabilities. As a result, it is important to note that different musical media available to the industry affect the listener.

One way in which technology is changing is by everything becoming digitalized and discs as physical artifacts are disappearing (Beekhuyzen & von Hellens, 2008; Dang, Dejean, & Moreau, 2012; Molteni & Ordanini, 2003). In turn, this technological shift relates to individuals' habits and the shift in preferences of people. This affects the use and the way in which people relate to music.

We can look at the concept of habits and preferences and apply it to a specific population, Baby Boomers. Boomers are individuals born between 1946 and 1964 (Christian, 2011). This generation experiences music in a way that relates to their lives,

their values, and to rock ‘n’ roll. Through another lens, we can look at the Millennial Generation. Millennials are individuals born between 1977 and 1994 (Christian, 2011). This generation streams music through technological devices, via the use of social media among other platforms. They tend to focus more on mainstream content instead of specific musical genres. Millennials also use music as a way to enhance certain parts of their lives, rather than feeling fully represented by the music of their generation. This work, is an essay exploring these two different generations and their differing relationship with music.

Methods

The methodology used for this work is a review of a set of literature that can provide a greater understanding of the experiences from Millennials and Boomers in their interactions with recorded music. Through a textual analysis, it is hoped to discover how members of each generation explicate their connection and exposure to music.

Through findings guided by the research question, this work falls under the academic disciplines of sociology and cultural analysis. Additionally, there are only two groups that are being analyzed through the literature as part of the target demographic.

RQ1: What are the differences between how Anglo-American Baby Boomers and Millennials experience and access recorded music?

Cultural Shift

Current consumers are migrating to cyberspace by taking part in online behaviors when they interact with recorded music. As a matter of fact, “36 million Americans, or 27% of Internet users are downloading music...over the Internet” (Pew, 2005 as cited in Beekhuizen & von Hellens, 2008, p. 88). The habit of going online to access music is

becoming more prevalent in today's social culture. Not only are people downloading works online, music sharing is an important social habit (Beekhuyzen & von Hellens, 2008; Brown, 2008). This shows file sharing as a way in which individuals socialize; they share music as to express their emotions, make statements, and through online sharing among friends, you can strengthen relationships (Waycott et al., 2005 as cited in Beekhuyzen & von Hellens, 2008). This idea also touches on preferences. Music preferences are an intrinsic facet of an individual's identity. Listeners today like to personalize their content and by accessing the Internet to do so, they can purchase the individual tracks—known as singles—that they resonate with, rather than buying an artist's entire album (Beekhuyzen & von Hellens, 2008).

The Boomer's Experience, and Reasons For That Experience

The term "Baby Boomers" is a label used in Euro-American cultures in order to identify individuals who were born after World War II. This caused inflation in the population of North America with all of the new babies coming to life (Niöse, 2015). Now in their late 50s and early 60s, this demographic makes up approximately one-third of the entire USA population (O'Shea, 2012). This generation grew up with music integrated in their lives with things such as films, fashion, and even politics (Gewen, 2008). They developed a strong sense of self when it came to greater sexual freedom, political protests, and counter-cultural movements (Niöse, 2015; O'Shea, 2012). More importantly, this generation is one closely guided by music—specifically rock 'n' roll (Christian, 2011; Grossberg, 1992; Kotarba, 2002; Kotarba, 2012; Larsen, 2015; O'Shea, 2012).

There is a felt representation this population has for this music. As a result, music played by the artists who were popular in their time carry a high level of meaning in a Boomer's story. When it comes to values, they are imperative determinants of people's behaviors and attitudes (Rokeah, 1973; Schwartz, 1992 as cited in Gardikiotis & Baltzis, 2012). Self-direction, power, achievement, benevolence, persistence, and hedonism are a few examples of values. Boomers are highly guided by values in almost everything they do, or listen to. Rock 'n' roll is comprised of blues, country, pop, rock and soul (Cooper, 2014). As a result, boomers have a long list of favorites ranging from the Beatles to Fleetwood Mac, from Aretha Franklin to John Fogerty, from Led Zeppelin to Bonnie Riatt, and from Johnny Cash to Dolly Parton. Grounding in two of his texts, sociologist Kotarba strives to explain how rock 'n' roll still serves to influence daily decisions and views of Boomers as lovers, friends, believers, parents, political actors, community members, and social adaptors (2013 as cited in Cooper, 2014).

Boomers were teenagers during the time rock 'n' roll was beginning to form and rise in the USA (Kotarba, 2002; O'Shea, 2012). "rock 'n' roll music has been fundamental to the experience of growing up ever since the end of World War II" (Frith, 1981 as Cited in Kotarba, 2012, p. 2). This music has a reputation for expressing the beliefs of recklessness, and lack of responsibilities experienced by teenagers (Christian, 2011; Grossberg, 1992; Kotarba, 2002; Kotarba, 2012; O'Shea, 2008). Though partially true, the increased interest from the Boomers began to shape the music. Songs started to reflect juvenile culture, and it began to accommodate the needs conveyed by the Boomer fandom.

There was a decrease in parental control during this time (Kotarba, 2012). People began to be preoccupied by consumption of products for economic stimulation, and this large young crowd desperately wanted to have fun; this created the perfect niche market for members of the music industry to go after and it produced the ideal setting for the evolution of what we now know as rock 'n' roll music (Gewen, 2008; Kotarba, 2012). Rock 'n' roll artists started to compose music that spoke to the needs of this burgeoning fan base in hopes to fulfill their desires (Kotarba, 2002). Data shows that today's Baby Boomers have a lack of interest in popular music and hang on to their likings of old music; music that reminds them of their youthful years (Forman, 2012). In other words, this group of people has developed an attachment to rock 'n' roll and the music has become an intrinsic part of their identity.

As a result, that high level of investment has a lasting influence on how they value recorded tracks (Kotarba, 2013 as cited in Larsen, 2015). Boomers enjoy physically going to brick and mortar locations to consume their products and buy their music in forms of records and CDs (Forman, 2012; Kotarba, 2002; Kotarba, 2012; Parment, 2013). Generally, as people advance in their years of life, there is a tendency of disconnecting from popular culture, stop following new trends and instead maintain old habits developed at an earlier stage of life (Forman, 2012; Parment, 2013). That said, a number of Boomers have caught on to digital behaviors despite of observed patterns of resistance that comes with age. According to American Life Project and the Pew Internet, "the practice of online music downloading is rising among those of the third age" (as cited in Forman, 2012). In this case, and due to the time relevance of this study, Forman specifically talks about Anglo-American individuals in their 60s which form part of the

Boomer population (2012). Beyond recorded music, Boomers use rock 'n' roll culture to guide them through the rest of their lives (Forman, 2012; Kotarba, 2012).

The Millennial Experience, and Reasons For That Experience

Technological advances impact culture, and this is something to remember when looking at more recent generations (Holbrook, 2000; Lefsetz, 2014; Tepper & Hargittai, 2009). After discussing Baby Boomers, Millennials experience music in an overtly distinct way. For many, music is incorporated only in small sections of their everyday lives. The population is split and there are two sections that hold large number of Millennial members. On one side, a number of Millennials listen to music only in places such as the theatre, concerts, through iPods, when trying to enhance a specific emotion, and when trying to party with others. All while on the other side, we have the other relative half of the portion of this group that listens to music all day (Bahanovich & Collopy, 2009; Gewen, 2008; Tepper & Hargittai, 2009). Scholars in this field have yet to integrate a holistic understanding of this population and their music consumption values (Brown, 2008), but there is data on their music consumption behavior.

There is an economic, cultural, and social importance to this work. Knowing the trends of how these two generations use compact discs, or streaming devices provides insight for two large groups of the USA population. Understanding deeply rooted values behind what represents the collective of each generation is meaningful. For example, designers of music streaming services and scholars who study cultural and consumer behavior can apply these findings for further understanding of these groups. The research presents connections and differences discovered which provide meaningful insight, and can encourage an appreciation for both generations.

Unlike Boomers identifying deeply with rock ‘n’ roll, Millennials have a wider range of music genres they resonate with. Anything from metal rock, R& B, hip-hop, and country, as well as liking artists such as Beyonce, Eminem, Tim McGraw, Keith Urban and Kanye West could be fair game (Christian, 2011). “It appears as though this group mostly enjoys more the aspect of the sounds of their music and the interaction with friends when listening to it, like dancing” (Christian, 2011, p. 22). In other words, Millennials use music as a way to impact their interpersonal connections as opposed to appreciating the musical composition, and lyrics.

This generation downloads music through digital avenues, however CD collections are growing among this group. Through a study conducted by Bahanovich & Collopy, they discovered that purchasing CDs is a rising habit specially if Millennials have a deep admiration for the artist (2009). However, purchasing CDs is currently not the norm.

Millennials want music and they want it immediately. For example, a participant that is a Millennial took part in a Bahanovich & Collopy’s study. They stated: “I have some songs on my phone. I use that when I’m in class, because I use my MP3 player for my college work, and I use my MP3 player because I’m usually listening to music when I’m driving around. I tend to keep most of my music on my computer because I’ve got thousands and thousands of songs” (2009). This direct quote is meaningful because it discussed several points. First, it mentions some of the habits practiced. This individual described their daily events in relation to their engagement with recorded music. They listen to music through their phone in class, and then they use an MP3 player for a

different setting and a different part of their day. They conclude by explicitly sharing their high amounts of music content in their possession.

Before the launch of the Apple iPod, some commentators anticipated it would be a market failure. However, this product became a novelty and swiftly became accepted. A reason for this outcome is because of the iPod's ability to be a fashion accessory, the device provided a music library, it had download storage, and it facilitated file-sharing capabilities (Brown, 2008; Tepper & Hargittai, 2009). The fact that this device spoke to its consumer's lifestyles, value, and needs is what makes the iPod such a great market success (Brown, 2008; Tepper & Hargittai, 2009).

Discussion and Comparison of Key Differences Between Generations and the Implications of Such Differences

As seen above, the role music plays in the lives of these two generations is different. Sociologically, Boomers raised on rock 'n' roll music continue to use this music genre to celebrate, master, and make sense of their everyday lives, and with that there has been the cultural and social shift of relying on the internet for accessing recordings. (Kotarba, 2012). Scholars have not made the connection that rock 'n' roll is beyond the music that expresses a point of view of unhappy teenagers through amplified guitar sounds with danceable rhythms; these teenagers whom stories were told of in the earlier years of rock 'n' roll music are now parents, and even grandparents. The music of rock 'n' roll has grown beyond juvenile ideologies and it has shifted into representing the sounds of the American culture (Kotarba, 2012). Songs such as Born To Run by Bruce Springsteen, Hotel California by The Eagles, and Don't Stop Believing by Journey have

moved from simply being popular songs, to marking an essence of an era (“The 50 Best Songs of Our Boomer Generation,” 2015).

Millennials are different because no single genre represents these individuals (Christian, 2011). As a matter of fact, they pride themselves in having access to an enormous amount of songs in their music libraries (Bahanovich & Collopy, 2009; Christian, 2011; Tepper & Hargittai, 2009). And although Boomers are catching on to the online cultural shift, and Millennials are increasing their CD purchases, Millennials are the persistent users of online platforms to access and share their music files (Bahanovich & Collopy, 2009; Tepper & Hargittai, 2009). In a way, Millennials focus on collecting large quantities of musical track, whereas Boomers value tracks individually.

It is clear that these generations experience recorded music differently. However, there is a similarity that has significance; both of these generations operate from their own sets of values. Even though Millennials use digital media to search for new music, they are still heavily influenced by their social networks and traditional media to find this content (Brown, 2008; Ng, Schweitzer & Lyons, 2010; Tepper & Hargittai, 2009). Millennials value their friends and the popular culture around them to impact their consumer behavior. Boomers identify with rock ‘n’ roll. They value freedom and creative expression. Having have grown up during the rise of rock n’ roll, they had the opportunity to influence it due to their high level of demand (Gewen, 2008; Kotarba, 2012).

Several additional questions remain that this analysis does not address. As mentioned earlier, scholars in this field have yet to spend time and energy connecting the relevance of values Millennials hold, their consumer behaviors, their social habits, and

how it is all integrated to their way of interacting with recorded music. Researchers have spent time collecting data and analyzing each of these concepts individually and miss thinking beyond those boundaries. It is speculated that there is a relationship between music impacting Millennials, and Millennials impacting the music. Boomers played a large role in affecting what the music of their time sounds like, and they did that by attending the concerts and demanding their recordings. Millennials are repeating these actions with a heavier demand on content rather than quality an artist can create.

There are a number of follow up questions to be considered for future research: Can an individual fully and generously appreciate music if they have unlimited access to copious amounts? What are the outcomes of Boomers maintaining their prior ways of engaging with recorded music, instead of adapting to the technological cultural shift? How does a Millennial's social ability influence their consumer behavior?

Limitations

This particular area of study presented a number of limitations. To start, the subjects' ages for one of the generations studied provided some complications. Not a lot of qualitative data is published and accessible on Millennials, yet. As of 2016, this generation is mainly in their twenties, with a few members in their late teens, and early thirties. Millennials are young. Scholars are slowly catching on to the importance of prioritizing the development of discourse among this population.

Secondly, there is a gap of research informing on the development of music sharing technologies (Beekhuyzen & von Hellens, 2008). Extreme technological advances have been made in the last couple of years. Although as members of society, you observe new gadgets that begin to circulate among social groups, the literature does

not encapsulate that. Scholarly articles lack a robust number of publications on the introductions of these devices and the social and cultural implications to be had on the members.

Lastly, the research question guiding this work could be answered only by exploring vastly segmented discourse communities. “Youth, media and popular music studies have developed in separate fields of research, resulting in a lack of integration of key areas of enquiry, such as the relationship between the cultural and structural in youth music consumption...” (Brown, 2008, p. 388). It is becoming more apparent that recorded music, consumers, cultural analysis, media communication, and sociology come together when exploring this topic. Comparing these fields more frequently will assist in discovering different perspectives that are yet to be represented in academia expanding and improving our intellectual merit and creating an opportunity to cause a broader impact.

Conclusion

Music plays a key role in a person’s life. The fact that audible sounds can be captured and have the capability to be replayed infinitely is an impressive concept. Each era has a sense of music that represents its members. Whether an individual and their collective generation feel that the songs produced in a certain period of time speaks authentically to their lived experiences, or it enhances social gatherings with their friends, music is part of the mix. Music is important to today’s media landscape because the audience expects good music to be integrated in everything that can communicate aurally. Currently, one of the audiences for the largest music target market is in Millennials; a number of them are young, but a large portion of them are old enough to be

influential in purchases made in their household. That said, this is an evolving process that will continue to change as time passes. The music alone is not where the power lays. It is in the meaning constructed and agreed upon by members of the group that makes music something special.

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