

Investigating “Community” Or Peer Group Influence Among Early Adolescents

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Abstract

Having friends or being part of a friendship or peer group is a significant social achievement for adolescents and an indicator of social competence (Berndt, 1990). Whilst it has been acknowledged that child peer influence varies with age, gender and product situations, previous findings do not consider adolescent peer influence in relation to the family structure and type. This paper considers how peer groups or “communities” influence consumption of music during early adolescence and how this consumption is moderated by family type (intact, blended or single).

Key Words: Music, Peers, Family Type, Communities,

Introduction

Adolescence includes developing independence, a sexual identity, recognition of “self” and a place in society (Carter, Bennetts and Carter, 2003). However, this socialisation of the adolescent does not happen in isolation, with one of the most powerful and persuasive forces effecting change in the adolescent being the peer group (Harris, 1998). This study considers the role of peer group influence in relation to music consumption among adolescents. By developing an understanding of adolescent peer pressure in various situations social policy makers and those with traditional related marketing interests may be able to position their communication messages more effectively.

Peer Influence

Peer influence and the way in which this differs by age have been explored by Bachmann et al (1993). These authors posit that as children grow older, they begin to recognise that peer influence is important in some product situations (publicly consumed items) but not in others (privately consumed items). Children aged 9-11 have well developed impression skills with children 12 and over probably the ultimate purveyors and receivers of referent group influence and are clearly aware of the tendency for impressions to be formed on the basis of consumption preferences and choices. However, apart from these preliminary quantitative indications, little research evidence exists on how peer groups influence children of different ages or if this differs by family structure and type.

Family Type Influence

Not all adolescents live with both parents. It is widely recognised that the types of families and households in the West are increasingly disparate, reflecting changes in relationship development and closure (for UK see Social Trends, 2003). There has been a well-documented decline in the “traditional” or “intact” family household

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(Haskey, 1998)² and consequently, stepfamilies (or blended families as described by Brown & Mann, 1990) formed as a result of individuals re-marrying or co-habiting with new partners are more prevalent than single parent households. 8% of the total numbers of families in the UK are now “blended”. There is a growing necessity to consider differences between family constitution (intacts, stepfamilies and single parent families) Dekovic & Meeus (1997).

Family structure and type then has been identified as a useful concept to explore. If reference group influence varies by the product context and situation and as children become more socially adept perhaps at a younger age, it is possible that reference group influence could vary by family type and structure. As such, exploring how peers may influence music consumption and under what conditions and specifically considering this relative to family type and structure will add to the body of literature in this area.

Communities

Essentially peer and friendship groups can be conceptualised as communities. That is within each peer or friendship group boundaries are created whether those boundaries are spontaneous or intentional and that by being part of a friendship or peer group there are connotations associated with either membership or belonging. As “shared practice by its very nature creates boundaries” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002) being a member of a group is less of an outcome and more a part of everyday existence. However as membership or belonging to a group often entails the use of different vocabularies, styles and sets of experiences, it could be that, particularly for adolescents the importance of social acceptance from other group members (Berndt, 1990) may also provide a sense of achievement when being accepted by such a “community of practice”.

Central to this study is the learning process and the shared knowledge that results from community formation. The privileged knowledge accrued by adolescents through peer group association is implicated in the acquisition of identity. As peer group (community) members, adolescents will not just learn about and, as suggested by Lave (1988), ‘privilege abstract knowledge’ (for example abstract information about artists and coded symbols or gestures), but also learn ‘to be’, and acquire the ability to act in a way that is socially acceptable to their community (Brown & Duguid, 2001). An adolescent’s world is made up of the communities or peer groups that they belong to or associate with. These social worlds not only allow for a binding together of small communities within the individual’s immediate environment (in this case for example, at school) but also permits extensive flows of knowledge across communities and in doing so allows individuals to feel part of a national or global community (Knorr-Cetina, 1999).

Intentional boundaries can also be created with potential for negative connotations. Boundaries can limit individuals within the group as it may impinge on the other communities or friendship groups that they can belong to outside their primary organisation or group. However, given that music, as an interpersonal statement, is least expensive in terms of time and resource commitment it may be that music affords the fluidity and flexibility to move more readily within and between groups.

² Lone-parent households with dependent children doubled from 3% to 6% (from 1971-1991) (Social Trends, 2003) with the latter figure remaining constant for 2002

Research Questions

- Can we facilitate a greater understanding of the role of peer (community) influence during early adolescence in relation to music consumption?
- Would an exploration of the intentional or spontaneous boundaries of peer communities contribute to an understanding of peer influence?
- Is it possible to generate insight into the relevance of the family context in terms of its effect on peer influence?

Method

The potentially sensitive and complex role of music with regard to interpersonal relationships coupled with the research challenges specific to the population of interest (teenagers) suggested a qualitative research approach. Music as a form of self-expression was chosen by the researchers to explore the characteristics of peer group association and peer affect.

As the focus of this research is to be how peers may influence music consumption and under what conditions, attention needs to be given in defining these categories and as such the participants. The participants were children from the same class in school and had known each other typically since they had started school (between six and seven years).

The research method was threefold: peer focus groups, observation and individual diary accounts. Six focus groups were conducted with 10-12 year olds. Children were allowed to choose their own groups although the groups were restricted to male only and female only to facilitate group dynamics and minimise distractions. Thirty-six children in total made collages and took part in discussions relating to their work. The peer focus groups were dual moderated to allow the researchers to facilitate discussion whilst the collages were being completed. Dual moderation provided the researchers the opportunity to observe the behaviour within the group and this assisted with the interpretation of the transcripts. In addition, whilst creating the collages, the participants were gently probed about their friendship groups (for example, who they spent time with at school, outside of school, length of friendships). Family types and composition were also noted.

A mixed methods approach was used to triangulate the data (to see if the phenomenon was coherent using both focus groups (public) and diaries (private)). Twenty-six diaries were kept for a week by the 10-12 year olds and returned to the researchers. The adolescents were asked to write in their diaries everytime they listened to music, what the music was, who else was with them and how they felt at the time. The diaries allowed the adolescents to provide a more personal account of their music choice and tastes. The other ten children either did not complete diaries at all or the diaries were incomplete. This could have been because they were not interested in the task or because their interest in the task faded as the week progressed. There did not appear to be a pattern in relation to the diaries being returned (for example, both boys and girls completed diaries).

The focus groups were recorded and transcribed with the data analysis being facilitated by the use of Nvivo. Themes were identified by the researchers from the literature. These included spontaneous or intentional group boundaries, the learning process, privileged knowledge and the sharing of information and music as a facilitator of group association. However, an emergent approach was adopted that allowed for a more exploratory and less positivistic design.

The following section summarises the key findings of this fieldwork. Initially the apparent characteristics of early adolescence in relation to music consumption are explored followed by a discussion on the peer group “norms” that allow inclusion or peer group belonging (practices within the communities). These include language,

dress and expert knowledge. Finally family type in relation to music consumption is explored.

Findings

Peer group influence appears to be intense at this stage and the data illustrates that it appeared to be more difficult for adolescents in a group or community to “commit” to what music they liked as opposed to what they disliked. As Hogg & Banister (2001) indicate however, the negative aspects of consumption choices carry significant meaning in creating personal, social and cultural identities. This also emphasises the social significance of music. Indeed sharing music is very personal for this age group and knowledge of other peoples’ music taste is considered intimate. Peer group influence was evident for both boys and girls, although girls appeared to be more concerned about having the same music tastes as their peers than the boys.

Peer group “norms” or “community practices” manifest themselves in a number of ways during the focus groups and included language used to describe music, association and disassociation with particular groups or artists, dress and having expert knowledge.

Language

It was evident that language used to describe music, and in some cases detrimental language, was used as a “code” to include or exclude members. For example, aside from excluding the researchers, language or particular codes were exchanged regularly by members of the same male friendship group. The word “gay” was used generally as a disparaging remark as opposed to the way in which it is contemporarily articulated. Additionally the force by which language was used both in volume and gesticulation further emphasised group membership.

Music Preference (consumption) and Disassociation

Characteristics that peer groups found both attractive and unacceptable were portrayed through their preferences and music consumption. For example when artists were described as “cool”, “funky” or “genuine” they were considered to be affiliated to the peer group. Conversely, where artists were perceived to be arrogant or conceited, they were rejected by the group as being odious. Where only one group member liked an artist, they were observed as being ostracised from the group.

Dress

Practices within the “community” were reinforced and confirmed through particular items of clothing that were closely associated with artists or music adopted by peer groups. This clothing could be branded with the artist’s name or simply clothing and other worn items that were perceived to be iconic of a particular type of music. The way clothing was worn also appeared relevant to peer group approval.

Expert knowledge

Having expertise or “privileged” knowledge (Lave, 1988) about artists or bands was also noted as a shared practice. Knowledge regarding music genre or sharing knowledge within friendship groups was evident with “mixed” CDs being made and given from one friend to another. Lack of access to technology in this instance was not used to exclude group members. In some cases there was active educating of members of the peer group who were less knowledgeable about what was acceptable

within the group. There appeared to be a disparity between this finding and that of Holbrook (1999) as he suggests that “experts” on music taste and legitimacy are less likely to be given credence. We found the opposite to be the case.

Further to this, in order to retain status regarding expert knowledge and consumption of music, there was a requirement from the peer group to their members to illustrate their commitment to the music deemed acceptable by the group.

Family Type

The participants in the focus groups and those completing and returning the diaries included adolescents from intact, blended and single parent families. The diaries indicated that there was sharing of music between adolescents and their parents – perhaps suggesting a more private consumption or situational consumption of shared music taste.

Yet consuming music within a family setting that was different to the music listened to when with peers was more apparent for adolescents raised in a blended family type. It may be that these children were less confrontational and avoided conflict or that they consumed different music in a public forum because they had lower self-esteem and perhaps there was a greater necessity for these participants to adopt or copy the views of other peers to maintain their position in their social group. This was more apparent with the observation of girls in the sample. Harper and Ryder (1986) suggest adolescents of divorce experience problems with peers and this may be a way in which adolescents raised in blended families deal with potential conflict. Both male and female adolescents raised in blended families also prefer to commit to one band or artist acceptable to their peer group. That is, there appeared to be a greater need to comply with group norms than merely to seek information (Bachmann et al, 1993). This was apparent in all the groups and the individual diaries. That is, adolescents raised in blended and single parent families focus on a single band or artist rather than enjoy an eclectic mix of music preferred by the adolescents raised in intact families. Schwartz and Fouts (2003) equally found this to be the case. Indeed, concert tickets, T-shirts and other forms of clothing to demonstrate commitment were more marked with adolescents raised in blended and single parent households.

Implications for Marketing

This research illustrates that there are a wide number of practices within adolescent “communities of practice”, specifically in relation to music. Whilst some of the practices are explicit (i.e. language), a number are more tacit (i.e. expert knowledge). Adolescents raised in single parent or blended families appeared more likely to demonstrate commitment to one band or artist that is approved by the group they belong to and were more likely to identify with peers through music consumption. As children with low self-esteem are likely to be more susceptible to peer-group purchase influence (Achenreiner, 1997), it would appear from this exploratory research that adolescents raised in blended households may be more likely to conform to peer influence and encouragement regarding consumption and perhaps more likely conform to peer norms as opposed to merely seeking information from group members. Perhaps what could have been considered was the role the parents thought they played in both parent-peer inter-relationship, what they felt the peer influences were and the strength or degree of this affect. A greater understanding of self-esteem (perhaps utilising existing scales) may also have added weight to the data.

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