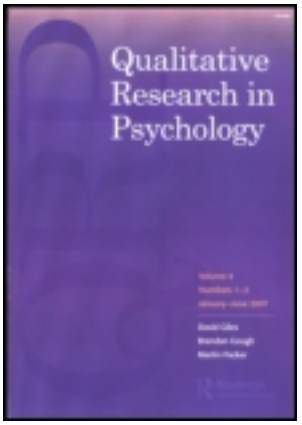

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Alinka Greasley [a] , Alexandra Lamont [a] & John Sloboda [a]
[a] Keele University, School of Psychology , Staffordshire , UK
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Exploring Musical Preferences: An In-Depth Qualitative Study of Adults' Liking for Music in Their Personal Collections

ALINKA GREASLEY, ALEXANDRA LAMONT, AND JOHN SLOBODA

Keele University, School of Psychology, Staffordshire, UK

A wide range of psychological approaches have been used to explore musical preferences, yet few studies have focused on people's own preferred music. This article reports the results of a qualitative study into the breadth, content, and rationale of musical preferences. In-depth interviews were conducted with adults (age range 18–73 years) at home with their music collections, which acted as an aide memoire to their preferred styles. Results show that people typically prefer a wide range of styles, providing support for the increasing trend towards omnivorous musical tastes; that there are considerable differences in the extent to which musical characteristics (e.g., lyrics, instrumentation) and responses to music (e.g., cognitive, affective) shape preferences; and that musical preferences play a key role in shaping self-identity. Findings highlight the merit of using qualitative interviewing, with its emphasis on subjective perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations for exploring musical likes and dislikes, and have implications for future studies in the field. In particular, the research underlines the need for a shift away from approaches that explore musical preferences by presenting listeners with a list of predetermined style categories, as these are likely to be interpreted in different ways.

Keywords: music collections; musical preference; musical style; musical taste; qualitative; responses to music; uses of music

Introduction

In what has been described as "the most sophisticated mapping of British cultural practices and preference ever undertaken" (John Frow), Bennett et al. (2009) have shown that musical tastes, more so than any other cultural field (e.g., reading, art), differentiate between groups of individuals, with age, ethnicity, occupational class, and educational qualifications playing a key role (see also Savage 2006). While some studies have shown an increasing trend towards "omnivorous" musical taste, that is, a tendency for people to be open to appreciating all genres (Peterson & Kern 1996; Peterson & Simkus 1992; van Eijck 2001), Bennett et al.'s research highlights that people's liking for musical genres cluster together, and follow particular patterns, which are often characterised by an intense disliking of other genres. For example, people who prefer classical music tend to dislike urban and electronic styles; people who prefer rock, urban, and electronic music tend to dislike classical and

Alinka Greasley is currently at the University of Leeds. The research was carried out at Keele University in the Unit for the Study of Musical Skill and Development.

Correspondence: Dr. Alinka Greasley, School of Music, University of Leeds, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds, West Yorkshire, LS2 9JT, United Kingdom. E-mail: a.e.greasley@leeds.ac.uk

country music; and those who prefer both classical and electronic styles are reflexively aware that their preferences do not follow a "typical" pattern, describing their taste as a "liking of extremes" (Bennett et al., p. 85). Such taste patterns have been found in other studies. Rentfrow and Gosling (2003) found that preferences for classical, jazz, blues, and folk music cluster together, as do preferences for rock, alternative, and heavy metal and rap/hip-hop, soul/funk, and electronic dance music.

So why do these taste patterns emerge? And what influences our musical preferences? A range of theoretical approaches have been used to study musical preferences, each providing important insights into liking/disliking for styles, yet there is still a great deal to be learned about who likes what, and why. In this article, we critically evaluate psychological explanations of musical preference and report the findings of a study which places people's music collections at the heart of the analysis.

Arousal-Based Approaches

Neuropsychological research has shown that engagement with music can be as physiologically rewarding as food, sex, or drugs (e.g., Blood & Zatorre 2001; Panksepp & Bernatzky 2002). When people reported more intense "chills" or highly pleasurable intense experiences, areas of the brain responsible for reward, emotion, and arousal were more strongly activated (Blood & Zatorre 2001; Blood et al. 1999; Panksepp 1995). One explanation for musical preference relates to this biological effect of music on the brain and focuses on the notion that individuals have unique (and preferred) levels of arousal which explain their preferences. There are two strands of research that have explored this explicitly: experimental aesthetics and individual differences approaches.

Studies of musical preference carried out from within an experimental aesthetics framework typically present listeners with simple, often artificially contrived and always experimenter-selected musical stimuli and then measure their verbal or behavioural preferences (North & Hargreaves 1997). Results from laboratory-based studies converge to show that people's liking for music varies as a function of certain musical characteristics such as complexity, familiarity, and tempo (North & Hargreaves 1995, 2000a; Russell 1986). For example, North and Hargreaves (1995) found participants were able to listen to complex music a greater number of times than simple music before tolerance for listening to the music decreased. Other research has shown that liking for music increases with repeated exposure and subsequently decreases with overfamiliarity (Russell 1986). Results from naturalistic-experimental studies, wherein specific musical variables are manipulated, but experimental conditions are naturalistic settings (e.g., aerobics classes, a café) have shown that people prefer listening to highly arousing music during exercise and arousal-moderating music when relaxing (North & Hargreaves 1996b, 2000b) and that the appropriateness of music for any given situation is likely to influence musical preferences (North & Hargreaves 1996a, 1996c). This approach has highlighted the role of specific musical characteristics in shaping preferences however none of these studies have explored people's preference for musical characteristics in relation to their own preferred music. These studies also tend to draw conclusions about stylistic preference from research using specific pieces.

Research on musical preferences from an individual differences approach has been characterised by studies that seek to relate personality characteristics such as extraversion or neuroticism to preference for certain styles of music or specific musical attributes, typically using established personality measures in conjunction with questionnaire-based musical preference measures. A number of empirical studies have related extraversion to preference for highly arousing styles of music such as heavy metal, rock, dance, and rap

(Dollinger 1993; McCown et al. 1997; Rawlings et al. 1995; Rentfrow & Gosling 2003). In contrast, preference for "softer" forms of music has been associated with lower levels of psychoticism and extraversion (Rawlings et al. 1995); one study showed that highly intuitive people reported a greater preference for classical, jazz, soul, and folk music (Pearson & Dollinger 2004). Research has also linked taste patterns (typically referred to in the music-psychological literature as musical preference "dimensions") to personality characteristics. For example, Rentfrow and Gosling (2003) found that people who preferred "reflective and complex" music (e.g., classical, jazz) had active imaginations, valued aesthetic experiences, and viewed themselves as intelligent; people who preferred "upbeat and conventional" music (e.g., pop, country) were more conscientious, agreeable, conservative, and less open to new experiences. There are a growing number of studies linking musical preferences, patterns of taste, and personality (see Rentfrow & McDonald 2010). However, this approach remains unable to identify whether personality type is a direct cause of preferences or whether personality type may influence individuals' levels of engagement with music and musical activities which, in turn, affects their preferences. Thus, the explanatory power of this approach remains limited.

Social-Psychological Approaches

Other research has sought to account for social influences shaping musical preferences (Konečni 1982) and explained the ways in which preferences serve group membership functions by highlighting the role of music in personal and social identity. Zillmann and Bhatia (1989) demonstrated that men considered women to be more attractive and sophisticated when they expressed preference for classical music than when they expressed preference for heavy metal. Finnäs (1989) found differences in the musical preferences young people stated publicly and those that they privately endorsed, and these tendencies were larger among those whose preferences deviated from the majority. Other studies have shown that adolescents and young adults in particular use their musical preferences to reinforce how they see themselves and send a message out to others, lending support to social identity theory (North & Hargreaves 1999; North, Hargreaves & O'Neill 2000; Tarrant, North & Hargreaves 2002; Tekman & Hortaçsu 2002). Recent enquiry into the role of musical preferences in interpersonal perception found that music was the most common topic of conversation when people were getting to know each other over a period of 6 weeks, and that musical preferences (specifically, people's top-10 list) provided information about an individual's personality characteristics with a greater degree of accuracy than has been found in studies using photos or video clips to convey information to observers (Rentfrow & Gosling 2006). Furthermore, people demonstrated clear and consistent stereotypes about fans of various musical styles. For example, classical music fans were thought to value comfort, beauty, intellect, and love, whilst rock music fans were thought to value excitement and courage (Rentfrow & Gosling 2007).

Given that people use their musical preferences to convey information about themselves to others it is unsurprising that research has shown that music is used in the construction of self-identity over time (DeNora 2000). In her ethnographic study of the role of music in women's lives, DeNora argues that music is used as "an active ingredient" in the care of the self—that music is "a device for the reflexive process of remembering/constructing who one is" (p. 63). Music is a valuable cue in evoking autobiographical memories (Baumgartner 1992; Cady, Harris & Knappenberger 2008) and in bringing emotional experiences from memory back into awareness (Scherer 2004),

highlighting the need to take listeners' diverse memories and associations with music into account when exploring musical preferences.

In addition to its capacity to hold autobiographical memories, music has been shown to serve a wide variety of functions for individuals (Batt-Rawden & DeNora 2005; Crafts, Cavicchi & Keil 1993; DeNora 2000; Hays & Minichiello 2005; Sloboda 1999; Sloboda, O'Neill & Ivaldi 2001). People use music as an accompaniment to solitary and domestic activities, with the most frequently reported functions being reminiscence, transcendental meditation, mood regulation, and catharsis (Sloboda 1999); to regulate self-conceptual states such as getting "revved up" or relaxing after a day's work (DeNora 2000); and for enhancing health and well-being (Batt-Rawden & DeNora 2005; Hays & Minichiello 2005). In particular, DeNora's (2000) research highlights the ways in which individuals engage in "self-conscious articulation work," thinking ahead about the music they need to hear, or that might help (and also which styles to avoid in pursuit of self-regulation).

These studies, which have employed more open-ended methods such as free written response and interviewing, have explored why individuals choose to listen to music in daily life, and shown that people's experiences with music are intensely personal, underlining the need for an approach which prioritises listeners' own constructions, interpretations, and uses of music.

Music Collections

Given that people tend to buy the music they prefer in order to re-experience it (Lacher 1989; Lacher & Mizerski 1994), it is surprising that no psychological research has focused on music collections as a means of exploring preferences. Research on collecting behaviour has shown that patterns of consumption fulfil life-structuring functions; that objects collected become part of the owner's extended self (Belk 1995; Pearce 1995); and that the acquisition of objects provides capacity for "reflexivity and introspection, a tool of autobiography, self-discovery, a way of knowing oneself through things" (Hoskins 1998, p. 198). This resonates with DeNora's findings about the use of music in the construction of biographies. Exploring people's music collections may shed light on the role of musical preferences in self-identity in ways that the existing social-psychological literature, with its reliance on experimental or questionnaire methods, has thus far not been able to do.

The collection is the most proximal environment for music listening, as it confronts the individual every time they are in their most intimate and frequently inhabited locus, the home (Hennion 2001). Although advances in miniaturised equipment (e.g., iPod) enable people to carry large portions (or the entirety of) their music collection with them as they go about their daily lives, studies of everyday musical behaviour have shown that music listening occurs most frequently at home (North, Hargreaves & Hargreaves 2004; Sloboda et al. 2001).

Furthermore, the collection is a self-tailored environment comprising mainly deliberate choices (to acquire) over time; it thus embodies and reminds people of these choices. Recent research exploring the content and rationale of women's clothing collections has demonstrated this (Woodward 2007). Woodward's findings highlight that clothing is infused with meaning not only through its physical appearance (and the ways in which it fits with other clothes already in the collection) but also through how it smells, sounds, and feels against the skin. In a similar way, a person's music collection is a multimodal node for psychological engagement. It does not just constitute the acoustic dimension of preferences (e.g., how the music sounds), but it also represents their visual (e.g., cover illustrations), spatial (e.g., arranging music on a shelf or in a folder on an iPod), and kinaesthetic (e.g., patterns

of active engagement with and uses of music) integration into the primary personalised locus of the individual. The results of Woodward's ethnography, which included in-depth interviews and observations of women selecting clothes from their wardrobes, suggest that exploring music collections is likely to further understanding of why people prefer and choose to listen to the music they do.

The Current Study

Many psychological studies exploring preferences have been reductionist, employing experimenter-chosen or experimenter-manipulated music (e.g., North & Hargreaves 1997); asking participants to rate their preferences from a limited list of predetermined categories (e.g., 14 styles; Rentfrow & Gosling 2003); or to state one style that "best describes their current taste in music" (e.g., North & Hargreaves 2007). Whilst this has enabled researchers to explore links between musical characteristics and preference, between preferences and personality traits, and to identify the ways in which preferences cluster together, more research is needed which explores the breadth of people's preferences. Are there individuals who prefer one style? Or do people listen to a range of styles, as studies on musical taste (Bennett et al. 2009; Savage 2006) and the functions of music (e.g., North et al. 2004; Sloboda 1999) suggest? The first aim of the current study is to explore the breadth of people's musical preferences. There is also a lack of research which investigates people's reasons for liking/disliking musical characteristics in relation to their own preferred music. How important are specific musical characteristics in shaping preferences? Is this consistent across individuals? Does the importance of musical characteristics vary according to the style people are listening to? A second aim of the research is to explore preference for musical characteristics in more detail than has been achieved in previous studies. Qualitative research would provide insight into these lines of enquiry, yet there are almost no qualitative psychological studies on preference, as key researchers in the field (e.g., North & Hargreaves 2008) have acknowledged. Studies from within a sociological perspective have highlighted the merit in using qualitative methods for exploring musical likes and dislikes (e.g., Bennett et al. 2009). Furthermore, it is notable that no psychological studies have focused on music collections as a way of exploring preferences, given that this represents the assembly of many deliberate choices over time, and research has shown that music is used in the construction of self-identity over time. Sociological enquiry (e.g., Hennion 2001; Woodward 2007) suggests that exploring the content and rationale of music collections in an ecologically valid setting (people's homes) is likely to further understanding of daily musical choices.

Overall, the current study aims to explore the breadth, content, and rationale for musical preferences by focusing on people's music collections (i.e., their own preferred music).

Method

A combination of semistructured and active interviewing was employed. Semistructured interviewing focuses on people's subjective experiences and facilitates the exploration of personal and complex issues that do not lend themselves to quantitative analysis (Banister et al. 1994; Smith 1995; Willig 2001). A central tenet of interviewing is the consideration of participants as *co-researchers*, which reflects a more general shift in psychology towards doing research with rather than on people (Elliott, Fischer & Rennie 1999; Persson & Robson 1995; Smith 1995). Another key feature of interviewing is *reflexivity*, which

refers to the ways in which the researcher implicitly and explicitly shapes the research process and data analysis (Banister et al. 1994; Henwood & Pidgeon 1992). The approach adopted also contained elements of active interviewing, which focuses on engaging people in meaningful talk about their everyday worlds (Holstein & Gubrium 1995, 1997). Active interviewing is based on the premise that interviews are social productions, that interviews fundamentally shape the form and content of what is said, and that both researcher and participant are equally active in the production of interview data (Holstein & Gubrium 1997). In the current study, the interviewing technique does not subscribe to fully fledged active interviewing (which gives equal importance to the *hows* and *whats* of knowledge production) but was nonetheless designed in line with many of the procedures outlined by Holstein and Gubrium (1995). First, care was taken over introductions and requests to participate, and participants were informed clearly about the aims of the research at the outset. Second, the interview schedule was used in a flexible way, and participants' responses were allowed to shape whether specific questions were necessary or appropriate as frames of reference for the subsequent conversation. Third, the interviewer (the first author) interjected herself into the interviews in ways that incited or encouraged participants' narratives to show that she was interested in the ongoing line of discussion. Fourth, care was taken to draw out problematic conversation in interviews, such as signs of confusion, contradiction, ambiguity, and reluctance, as this often indicates circumstances in which meanings are being examined, reconstructed, or resisted. Active interviewing is a theoretical stance towards data collection and analysis which proposes that one cannot expect answers on one occasion to replicate those on another because they emerge from different circumstances of production. This is particularly likely to apply to musical preferences because they are continually changing (Hargreaves et al. 2006).

Participants were recruited in an opportunistic way. Some were students recruited in psychology classes; some were recruited through a general announcement posted on a university mailing list distributed to staff and students asking for volunteers to take part in a study on musical preference; others were personal friends/acquaintances. In total, 23 participants (11 women, 12 men) between 18 and 73 years old (mean age = 27.45, SD = 9.34) took part in interviews in their homes over a period of 11 months. The research was carried out in line with the British Psychological Society's guidelines for ethical practice (British Psychological Society 2009).

Interview Schedule

The interview schedule centred on participants' collections and was designed to encourage them to talk about their musical preferences in as much detail as possible. The first question was intended as an ice-breaker and asked participants to describe the different types of technology through which they typically engaged with music. The underlying aim of this was to establish whether their collection was represented by the CDs/records that were visible, or whether they had music stored elsewhere on computer or on a Walkman of some kind. If they had music stored in other formats (such as iPods, MP3 players, computers, etc.), this was also explored in conjunction with their more visible collection. Participants were then asked to describe how their music collection had built up over the years. Prompts encouraged them to reflect in a chronological way, asking them to describe music they had listened to as a young child, to recall the first album they had bought, and to report on the various influences they felt had shaped their musical likes and dislikes over time.

After these general questions, participants were asked to select music from their collection to facilitate discussion of musical characteristics, and responses to and uses of preferred

music. They were asked to pick an album they had been listening to a lot, one they had not listened to for a while, one that was emotionally powerful, and one that induced a reliable emotional response. Selections were made in this order so that the more specific questions would start with music people could talk about easily (i.e., an album they had listened to a lot recently). After this, CDs/vinyl/MP3 folders were picked at random by the interviewer to ensure that participants talked about a range of music in their collection. For each album discussed, prompts encouraged participants to describe the history of the music, when and why they had acquired/purchased it; and when they had last listened to it. They were then asked to talk about their preference for specific musical characteristics (e.g., instrumentation) and asked whether they used different tracks on the CD in different ways to encourage them to reflect on their uses of music without asking direct questions such as "do you use this CD to reminisce?"

The interview then finished with broader questions again, such as "are there any important ways in which you use music that these selections have not represented?" which provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on whether they had talked about all ways in which they used their preferred music. At this point, if they had not talked in detail about music they disliked, participants were asked to explain some of their reasons for disliking musical styles, as little psychological research into musical preferences had outlined people's reasons for disliking music.

Reflections on the Interviews

The interviewing process was reflexive, and several adaptations were made to the interview procedure as data collection progressed. First, halfway through the interviews it became apparent that there was an underlying similarity in how participants were responding. Whilst overall they experienced difficulties in describing and categorising music (this is discussed in detail in the results), the nature of the questions (collection approach, focusing on CDs) was predisposing them to talk about music at a certain level; they tended to operate at the level of an artist or album rather than specific tracks. Given the actual point of contact between music and its function would more likely be specific pieces or tracks, participants in the later interviews were asked to play the music in question and talk through what could happen when they listened to it. This incorporated an additional active ingredient into the process, as it required participants to interact with the music in the context of the interview, and for the interviewer (first author) to interact with the participant, the music, and make a note of participants' responses to the music, thus taking an active role in what Holstein and Gubrium (1995) describe as the process of meaning-making.

A second point related to participants' accounts of the role of lyrics in shaping their preferences. Whilst earlier interviews covered the importance of lyrics and reasons for liking/disliking lyrics, in the later interviews participants were encouraged to describe exactly what they meant when they reported that they could "relate to" the lyrics, and also asked them to describe which sentiment particularly resonated with them. Third, if participants were talking about music they and the interviewer shared a preference for, the interviewer did not always adopt a neutral stance, interjecting personal opinion (where appropriate) to elicit more detailed accounts. Some participants wanted to share their preferred music and lent the interviewer vinyl/CDs from their collection so that she could listen whilst analysing their accounts of why these were preferred pieces.

There were also a number of points to highlight in relation to the questions asked. Some participants found the request to "pick a CD they had been listening to a lot recently" difficult because they felt they listened to so much all the time. The question was reinterpreted

by one young man: "Ah you see this is a strange time, I don't know what I'm listening to . . . I'm actually in-between." It appears that he was not answering the question in a factual, historical way (relating to the actual number of minutes he had experienced specific CDs for recently) but instead was trying to find a CD which fitted some special "mental category," suggesting a rich self-definition in relation to his listening and preference behaviour.

Another question which was met with ambiguity by some participants was the request to "pick a CD that was personally significant," and here we draw on an example which highlights the importance of arriving at shared understandings in the interview context:

Alinka: Could you pick out—this is going to be difficult I'm sure, as there are a lot of CDs here—but could you pick out a couple of albums that are really personally meaningful for you, emotional for you . . .
Susan: Emotional, hmmm, that's, depends what you mean by emotional, do you mean that really happy, up-beat or personally significant or . . .
Alinka: Personally significant . . .
Susan: Oh, yeah, that's, that's quite tricky actually 'cause I don't think that any of them really are. . . .

The assumption that Susan would have a number of CDs that were personally meaningful was based on the size of her music collection, which consisted of around 1 000 CDs/tapes/records. In the interviews leading up to this point (Susan was the 12th interview), those with large collections had struggled to choose a CD because they had so many they considered personally meaningful. Susan's response suggested that the amount of music people own does not necessarily reflect the significance of music in their lives, and highlights the ways in which meanings are socially constituted within the interview.

Coding

Interviews were transcribed *verbatim* and transcriptions checked back against the original audio recordings for accuracy (this included checking the names of artists online). Data were then coded for potential themes in line with the principles of thematic analysis put forward by Braun and Clarke (2006), first using paper and pen methods and second using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. A total of 85 codes and 18 main themes were identified (see Appendix A), including a set of main themes (e.g., "music preference"); subthemes (e.g., "appreciation linked to knowledge"); and a number of codes that did not seem to fit anywhere at first (e.g., "lyrics"). The 18 themes were derived from the accounts with the exception of one ("engagement, involvement"), which was imposed on the data to explore similarities/differences in participants' general levels of engagement with music (this is explored elsewhere; see Greasley & Lamont 2011). Codes and themes were then analysed at a broader level to explore how they fitted together conceptually.

Concern has been raised about the usefulness of presenting the hierarchical structure of qualitative software programs, as they potentially limit the way in which the researcher conceptualises the data (Weitzman 2003); the use of visual diagrams to represent relationships in the data enables the presentation of a much greater variety of ideas (Braun & Clarke 2006; Gibbs 2002). All three authors constructed visual diagrams separately to ensure validity in interpretation. Whilst a full consideration of the themes is beyond the scope of this article, here we focus on our aims to explore the breadth, content, and rationale of musical preferences.

What Musical Styles Are Preferred and How Are These Described?

Breadth of Musical Preferences

A list was constructed of all the musical styles the 23 participants talked about spontaneously in their accounts of preference (see Appendix B). The list does not contain overlapping descriptions (e.g., many referred to "classical" but this is logged only once) but does include variations on particular styles (e.g., electric, electro, electronic, electronica) to exemplify the diversity of descriptions. Lists were constructed for each participant separately, and preferred artists, albums, and tracks were also documented alongside style and substyles.

No one reported preference for a single musical style (thus in sociological terms, it could be said that there were no "univores" in the sample; Peterson & Simkus 1992), and there were only a few participants who listened to a narrow range of styles and artists. Those who listened to a narrow range emphasised that they would not buy music unless it was familiar to them, and tended to acquire music from other people, rather than making deliberate choices themselves. For example, Scott (M: 73yrs) reported preference for eight musical styles, of which four were substyles of big band music, a style he had liked since his childhood. Adam (M: 22yrs) described his preference for five styles (80s, ballads, cheesy, instrumental, and soundtracks) but reported that much of what he preferred stemmed from his brother's musical preferences when he was younger or university friends' musical preferences.

Only one participant lacked a strong commitment to any musical styles. Joanne (F: 20yrs) owned approximately 20 CDs (with no music stored on other formats) which she retrieved from beneath a pile of old clothes under a desk in her bedroom for the interview. She reported that she rarely listens to or purchases music (which was evidenced by the thick layer of dust that had settled on the CDs), and that her preferences mainly stem from her father's musical influences (e.g., 70s rock, punk, acoustic). In her accounts, she reported preference for power ballads, soundtracks, and musicals. However, Joanne's musical behaviour differed markedly from the rest of the sample.

The majority of participants had a considerable breadth of musical preference, listened to a wide range of musical styles and artists, and described themselves as being open-minded and willing to listen to new music. This provides support for the increasing prevalence of "omnivorous" musical tastes (Peterson & Kern 1996; Peterson & Simkus 1992; van Eijck 2001). For example, Rich (M: 25yrs) described his preferences for 38 musical styles and substyles. He was a disc jockey and had a comprehensive music collection consisting of more than 1 000 pieces of vinyl, nearly 1 000 CDs, and a large amount of music stored on other formats such as tape, MD, and MP3s. He argued: "You can never have enough (laughs) . . . there's always new good tunes that you want and that you have to buy." Whilst Rich was one of the most highly engaged participants, and could be defined as a collector, his breadth of preferences was not unusual. Andy (M: 24yrs) talked about his preference for 29 styles. Chrissie (48yrs) spoke of her preference for more than 20 styles. Even those who had stated that music was not as important to them as other activities (e.g., religion, sports) reported preferences for a wide range of styles.

There was some evidence that preference for particular styles clustered together. For example, Rich's (M: 25yrs) three most preferred styles were drum and bass, hip-hop, and reggae; Gary's (M: 49yrs) preferences centred on various forms of classical (e.g., Baroque, Renaissance Polyphony) and folk music, which provides support for Rentfrow and Gosling's "reflective and complex" musical preference dimension; and Scott

(M: 73yrs) preferred classical and country music and disliked heavy metal, which fits in with the patterns identified by Bennett et al. (2009) in their cluster analysis of musical taste.

Describing and Categorising Music

Whilst all of the participants talked about their musical preferences at different levels of categorisation (e.g., a specific sequence from within a track; a song/piece; an album; an artist/band; an album series; or style), and their accounts contained a considerable number of categorisations (as outlined above, see Appendix B), many had difficulties defining their preferred music in terms of simple style categories. They often identified an artist's music as spanning several different styles. For example, John (M: 47yrs) pointed out that "my favourite artist would be Neil Young, and he cuts across just about every genre that's existed." Similarly, Gerry (M: 29yrs) explained: "I never focus on a style . . . for the last 15 years I have been a Dylan fan, but throughout the years, he has changed his style." Participants also talked about the problem of overlapping styles and difficulties in categorising music which was a combination of different styles. Andy (M: 24yrs) reported that one of his albums spanned hip-hop to drum and bass and that another was drum and bass by a hip-hop artist. Rich (M: 25yrs) stated that one of his most preferred artists, Aphex Twin, was a combination of acid techno and classical music.

Furthermore, although style categorisation labels provided a way to describe the content of music collections, the labels did not appear to serve any particular function beyond this. Two main findings informed this assertion. First, some participants emphasised that style categorisations meant very little to them, as the following accounts illustrate:

> I like what I like, so if it falls into the pop music genre, then it falls into the pop music genre, if it's underground, then it's underground, that bit has never worried me too much. (Tom, M: 24yrs)

> I bought Artful Dodger, and I've got Mis-Teeq 'cause I liked their songs, or some of the songs they did, so it's not like, I'm not buying that because it's garage or whatever, if I like it, I'll get it. (Hannah, F: 26yrs)

Second, participants often used the same stylistic category when referring to different music. Will (M: 22yrs) considered "cheesy" music to consist of manufactured pop songs/tracks devoid of any musicality. Sophie (F: 19yrs), on the other hand, considered cheesy music to consist of "golden oldies" and "fun tracks" from a number of different styles (e.g., pop, rock, and indie). Thus, the *meaning* of specific style categorisations depended, to a large extent, on the person making the categorisation, supporting previous arguments regarding the fluidity and complexity of musical genre categorisations (e.g., Bennett et al. 2009; Hebdige 1979; Hennion 2001; Holt 1998).

Influences on Breadth of Preferences

Participants reported a range of influences on their breadth of preferences. First, breadth of preferences was influenced by general levels of engagement with music. Those who were less engaged tended to show a lack of strong commitment to musical styles, were more likely to listen to other people's music, more likely to acquire music from friends, and less likely to purchase music themselves. Conversely, those who were more engaged showed strong commitment to musical styles, encouraged others to listen to their preferred music,

and expressed a sense of necessity and urgency about buying or obtaining new music. Their music collections were often very comprehensive as well as substantially larger than the less engaged participants. Whilst results pertaining to individual differences in levels of engagement with music are explored elsewhere (Greasley & Lamont 2011), our results suggest there may be a positive link between a high level of engagement with music and "omnivorousness" in musical taste (Peterson & Kern 1996).

Second, participants reported that the listening context influenced their openness to (and enjoyment of) new music. A wider range of styles (particularly disliked styles) could be tolerated when out and about in pubs, clubs, shops, and restaurants than when listening at home; and several participants emphasised that they would like some styles of music if they were exposed to them in the "right" context, as the following extract from John (M: 47yrs) highlights:

> [T]he best band I ever saw live as performers was the Dixie Chicks and I never really listened to the Dixie Chicks although they were quite catchy numbers, I just thought they were catchy little numbers, you know, rocky country, but because I saw them and they were so together, so sharp, so precise, sort of rehearsed, sort of professional, I can really enjoy the Dixie Chicks, so there's something about that experience that changed it.

Such accounts corroborate studies highlighting the importance of the listening context in shaping responses to and uses music (North et al. 2004; Sloboda et al. 2001) and also provide support for Hennion's (2001) assertion that concerts are performances, which make something happen: "At times one is opposed to one's neighbours' enthusiasm; a moment of challenge, where what counts is that the unexpected can happen, that one likes what one thought one did not like" (p. 13). Seeing an artist(s) perform live can have a significant impact on preference for an artist's music, in both positive and negative ways.

Third, attention was drawn to the important role of social interaction and social influence in shaping preferences (Konečni 1982). Many reported that they would not have heard of (and subsequently liked) a great deal of the music they owned had it not been for family, friends, or acquaintances. Sophie (F: 19yrs) emphasised that she liked the band Busted because her best friend was so enthusiastic: "I was just forced into liking it (laughs), if you wanna be my friend, you've gotta like Busted, ok? (laughs)." Susan (F: 30yrs) highlighted the role of her partner in increasing her preferences: "He was into Aphex Twin, and Dead Can Dance, and Cocteau Twins, which I'd never really heard of, but once I had, I was like, these are really good." Rich (M: 25yrs) explicitly acknowledged the influence of others: "Obviously who I hang around with can be a big impression on what music I like and listen to," but also emphasised that he in turn influenced others: "I like turning people to different, to, to my kind of music, I like making them realise that it is actually good."

Fourth, many emphasised that the internet was now the main channel through which they accessed information about all aspects of different styles of music, and reported that it provided enhanced ways of listening to (and coming to like or dislike) new music that might not otherwise have been heard or considered. Participants reported that downloading programmes had increased the speed and ease with which they can acquire all the music that an artist has written, produced or featured on and that the process of downloading acts as a filter to decide whether the music is really liked before purchasing it. Internet radio stations were also reported to serve as an introduction to new and diverse styles of music, and were identified as qualitatively different to listening to the radio because of the accompanying forums (which allow people to keep connections with each other in a way not possible

through the radio). Discussion groups, forums, and mailing lists supplied information about preferred artists; provided an arena to discuss their musical preferences with others; and opened them up to new music. Finally, recommender systems (e.g., Amazon) were reported to influence breadth of preferences. Results show the extent to which (younger and older) adults use the internet as a resource through which to discuss, reflect upon, and learn about new music, supporting Peterson and Kern's (1996) assertion that the general increase in people's breadth of preferences is shaped, at least in part, by the presentation of the arts via mass media.

Reasons for Liking/Disliking Music

Analysing the rationale for preferences, the reasons participants gave for liking and disliking music can be grouped into four main categories. First, participants reported liking for music that was related to characteristics of the music itself (e.g., lyrics, instrumentation). Second, participants emphasised the way in which their responses to music influenced their preferences, particularly in terms of what they thought about music (cognitive responses to music) and how the music made them feel (affective responses to music). Third, participants talked about their uses of music. Fourth, participants talked about the ways in which they identified with particular artists and styles and the impact this had on their preferences. We explore these in detail below.

Characteristics of Music

One of the aims of the current study was to explore liking/disliking for musical characteristics in greater detail than has been achieved in previous studies. This focus was warranted, as results show that the degree to which specific musical characteristics influence musical preference varies between individuals, and also within individuals depending on the artist or style to which they are listening.

Whilst overall, participants liked music which combined different musical characteristics (e.g., different sounds, instruments) and disliked music that contained little variation in characteristics, there were considerable differences in the extent to which lyrics, voice, instrumentation and expectation/violation in music were reported to shape preferences. Here we illustrate with reference to lyrics and voice.

At one end of the spectrum some felt that lyrics were the most important determinant of their preference for different styles of music. For example, Gerry (M: 29yrs) reported that "unless the music is exceptionally good, the lyrics are the first thing I am looking for." These participants reported that they needed to know the lyrics because it was integral to their understanding and appreciation of music, and emphasised the importance of the message the artist was conveying verbally. Lyrics were liked if they were thought-provoking, sending a message (be it political, ethical, or moral), or telling a story; "good" lyrics were described as those which they could relate to in some way. When participants said they "related to the lyrics," this did not necessarily mean they related to everything the artist was saying. Rather, they reported "taking what they could" from the lyrics and applying them to their own lives in personal ways, providing support for existing studies which have shown that people seek advice about their everyday problems in the context of lyrics in music (Gibson, Aust & Zillman 2000; Stratton & Zalanowski 1994). Lyrics were disliked if they were (using adjectives from the accounts) meaningless, unimaginative, repetitive, annoying, aggressive, violent, offensive, or blasphemous. There were two devout Christians in the sample who considered knowledge of lyrics to be particularly important because they did

not want to be endorsing or singing along to music with offensive or blasphemous lyrics. Vic (F: 20yrs) stated that when she uploaded newly purchased albums onto her computer, she always deleted tracks which contained such lyrics.

Other participants fell in the middle of the spectrum, reporting that lyrics were central to their appreciation of music with certain styles (e.g., popular music) but not so important as to dictate their preferred styles. In other words, large parts of their collections comprised music without lyrics (e.g., electronic dance music). At the other end of the spectrum, some asserted that they never listened to lyrics and were usually indifferent to what the artist was trying to convey verbally. Scott (M: 73yrs) emphasised that he always listened to the music rather than the words. Will (M: 22yrs) maintained that the overall feel of the music was more important to him than the lyrics, and went so far as to say that he was "anti-lyrics."

In a similar vein, some participants felt that an artist's voice was the most important determinant of their preference. John (M: 47yrs) emphasised the important of vocal style, reporting that he liked voices that were, in his words, "different," "unusual," "quirky," "peculiar," "strange," "funny," or "unconventional" but was quick to emphasise that these singers needed to be able to sing in tune. A common reason given for disliking music was an inability to hear the words, decipher the lyrics, and/or sing along, and much of this was attributed to vocal style. Kim (F: 40yrs) disliked heavy metal and thrash metal because it contained indecipherable shouting or screaming, and emphasised that she thought heavy metal all "sounded the same" unless the band had a particularly good vocalist or specific vocal style.

Susan reported that lyrics were generally the most important influence on her preference, but when she was describing her preference for Liz Fraser [from the Cocteau Twins], she noted that "she warbles on but somehow she's just really soothing and you just don't care what she's singing, she could be singing the telephone book." This is an example of when characteristics that are *usually* influential in shaping preference are overtaken by another musical characteristic (in this case, the artist's voice is so good that the lyrics are described as inconsequential). There were many examples of this throughout the accounts, highlighting that the importance of characteristics depended on the artist or style in question.

In general, when participants were describing styles of music they *disliked*, they frequently stated that they could not distinguish between artists, and that it all "sounded the same." They often acknowledged that this was because they lacked familiarity and understanding of those styles.

Responses to and Uses of Preferred Music

The finding that participants reported their preferences were linked to knowledge, familiarity and understanding of music supports previous research linking preference and familiarity (North & Hargreaves 1997; Russell 1986). However, there were differences in the degree to which participants felt knowledge and understanding of music (cognitive response) and the way in which music made them feel (affective response) shaped their preference behaviour. John (M: 47yrs) and Gary (M: 49yrs) emphasised that their preferences were shaped by knowledge of the context surrounding the music. John talked of his engagement with music as a form of intellectual pursuit:

> I do it for interest, and because I'm a bit of a collector mentality, a completist mentality I have to have in my mind, a time line of genre, and if there's a gap in that time line I need to listen to it so I think, oh, so that's where reggae came

> from, so I can't listen to reggae without having had, listened to some Ska, and I can't listen to new wave without having listened to some punk, even though I don't particularly like punk, I've gotta have an association, or a reference point, so I build up comparatives, so, so my record collection goes all from the fifties right through to now, and I sort of like, islands of I really like that artist, I really like that artist and for me they symbolise that time, so it's quite an intellectual thing for me rather than an emotional personal thing, although it does, music does get my emotions sometimes. . .

John read the music press regularly (e.g., *Rolling Stone* magazine, books, newspaper reviews), and when explaining how his collection had built up over time he noted that he often latched onto facts, rather than the music *per se*. When asked whether he would buy a CD just for one track, he reported that it was unlikely he would hear an artist on the radio and go and buy the CD. Instead, he would need to know more about the artist first (and find them interesting) and then he may wish to hear the track in context by purchasing the album.

Gary provided similar explanations, and reported that his preferences were derived from an understanding of the music, rather than his use of music for mood-regulation: "My musical likes are about the music as an object rather than any emotion that it might be particularly expressing." Although none of the other participants presented such an objective view of their music listening, several noted that their appreciation of music was heightened by knowledge of the skill required to produce the music. Tom (M: 24yrs) described his preference for scratching with reference to the ability needed to achieve the sounds: "I think the appreciation really comes from the technical perspective, I mean the sounds are cool, but it's *how* he just did that." Gerry (M: 29yrs) explained that he was more likely to prefer a piece of music if he could reproduce it by singing and/or playing the guitar/harmonica.

In contrast to these objective and technical responses to music, some reported that their affective responses to music were most influential in shaping their musical preferences. Susan (F: 30yrs) emphasised that she did not want to have to think about music: "With classical, I, I don't stick with that, because it's not immediately gratifying, I've got lazy in my old age, I just want nice music, right now." Karl (M: 27yrs) spoke of one of his most preferred reggae tracks as an instant dose of medicine: "It puts me back into that nice comfortable place within a couple of beats." Chrissie (F: 48yrs) used the analogy of a snake bite to emphasise that Martha Wainwright's music was, for her, emotionally wrenching (music as "poison") yet at the same time cathartic (music as "medicine"). The use of "music as drug" analogies to explain responses to preferred music has been found in previous studies (e.g., Hennion 2001).

Nearly all of the participants reported using their preferences to regulate mood. This included managing adverse moods to help get back on track, gaining solace and self-assurance, catharsis, and being comforted by memories preferences evoked. For example, when asked to pick a CD she had been listening to a lot recently, Nat (F: 26yrs) pulled Kings of Leon *A-Ha Shake Heartbreak* from a pile on the floor. She had purchased the album five months ago on the basis of her liking and commitment to the band and was already acutely aware of the various ways in which she used the music for mood regulation:

> *Alinka:* Do you use different parts of the CD in different ways?
> *Nat:* Definitely, for example, earlier when I was saying if I need to get energised, *Four Kicks* is just the song that just would hype me up no matter what, erm, er, *Milk*, number 5, is more mellow and makes you think

> and feel a little bit more, I don't know how to describe feel any better for you, sorry, that's not very helpful, erm, *Soft* makes me laugh and *The Bucket* makes me think of my younger sister, 'cause I managed to convert her into this band by making her listen to that over and over again, so yeah, very much so with this album, there's lots of different, sort of, parts to it in my opinion . . .

The sophistication with which participants reported using music to regulate mood supports recent research on the functions of music for affect-regulation (van Goethem & Sloboda 2011) and studies highlighting people's therapeutic uses of music in everyday life (Batt-Rawden & DeNora 2005; DeNora 2000; Sloboda 1999).

However, although participants reported listening to different types of music to evoke different moods, this was not always clearly defined, as Rich's (M: 25yrs) account demonstrates:

> I listen to different CDs depending on what mood I'm in yeah, I tend to find if I'm feeling like, if I'm feeling happy, I'll just listen to some dance music or some, er, hip-hop or reggae, and if I'm, if I'm not so happy, I, generally I listen to something like Morrissey or Radiohead or something like that, that's a bit darker, although having said that I listened to Morrissey today and I'm not in a bad mood at all, so, you know, it's, it's not exactly all true.

Participants were only able to describe what they usually did, and this may not coincide with what actually happens on a day-to-day basis. This served as a reminder that whilst interviewing captures individuals' own theories about their music use, it is less accurate at characterising actual use. Experience sampling methods have been shown to be instrumental in this regard (Greasley & Lamont 2011; Sloboda et al. 2001).

Emotional responses to preferred music were often described with reference to lumps in the throat, chills or goose bumps, and some could pinpoint pieces of preferred music that induced these physiological responses reliably. Chrissie (F: 48yrs) reported that she invariably cried when she listened to her favourite Hanson track "Crazy Beautiful." When she played this track later on in the interview, she actually started crying, providing visible evidence to support her account of the effect the music usually had on her. Gemma (F: 22yrs) described a favourite track from her teenage years that she said always used to evoke chills, although stated that "it probably wouldn't do it any more." Whilst she was searching through boxes of CDs that had been stored away in the garage, she found the album and was encouraged to play the track she had previously been talking about and describe the feelings it evoked. Despite her assertion that the music would not have the same effect on her, the music did induce chills: "There it is (laughs), see, still does it, I haven't listened to this in ages," thus illustrating a reflexive awareness of her responses to preferred music.

Cognitive Versus Affective Responses to Music

Many of the participants separated their cognitive and affective responses to music, that is, what they *thought* about various styles of music and how that particular music made them *feel*. Will (M: 22yrs) maintained that he could appreciate the skill required to perform classical music, but found it boring to listen to. Gerry (M: 29yrs) reported that he could respect and appreciate the technical aspects of certain heavy metal and rap tracks but that he did not derive any pleasure from listening to those styles. There appeared to be an implicit

connection between participants' conceptions of good quality music (whatever this constitutes and however they themselves define this) and the sense that one "should" appreciate good music. When Sophie (F: 19yrs) was accounting for one of her most preferred songs, "Perfectly Comfortable" by Alan Fletcher, she stated that "this is the worst song ever to be made, but I love it, I just listen to it all the time." When asked to elaborate, she explained that she could relate to the lyrics (which were about going to war with Iraq and how younger generations would have to cope with the consequences) but that she considered the music to be devoid of any musicality. Jeremy (M: 20yrs) noted of the band Busted: "They're not very talented, but it's just quite light easy music to walk around and things." The tendency for participants to separate their cognitive and affective responses may explain why some had albums in their collection even when they did not like the artist's music. Hannah (F: 26yrs) bought the album *Joshua Tree* by U2 when she was in America because she felt she "ought" to have it but never listens to it:

> [T]he band don't do it for me, and they **still** don't do it for me, even now everyone loves them, I don't like Bono's voice particularly, I appreciate what he stands for and what he, what his, you know, how people regard him, I think he does probably do a lot of good work, but the music I find quite soulless, I just don't find any connection in it at all, I don't know if it's the music or the lyrics, but I don't find **any** connection with it at all . . .

It also provides an explanation for why some were embarrassed when they were describing their preferences. In his interview, Adam (M: 22yrs) whispered that "this is fucking embarrassing, but Cliff Richard, and I can't even say I don't like him." When Sophie (F: 19yrs) was in front of her computer talking through the tracks on her "Revision 2" playlist, she clicked play on the track "Oh Maria" from the Sister Act soundtrack but accompanied her action by saying, "I really shouldn't be letting you listen to this." Interestingly, those who used the most discursive disclaimers ("I know this is poor quality, but I like it") were generally less engaged participants who tended to have more difficulties in explaining their likes/dislikes, showed more embarrassment, and justified their preferences more overall.

Identifying with Artists and Styles

Although participants often ignored their perceptions of the quality of the music, giving precedence to their affective responses to music, they were less compromising if it meant aligning themselves with particular values or beliefs they did not endorse. Jeremy (M: 20yrs), a devout Christian, described how as his faith strengthened, and he had become a youth church leader, he was compelled to get rid of some of his most preferred music on the basis of its ambiguous lyrics and the negative affect the music induced. He stressed that this had not been an easy decision to make:

> Well I used to be **really** into Muse, like they were, I went to see them, I had all their albums, they were one of my favourite bands, but . . . it's very hard to tell what they're singing about, 'cause they write very obscure lyrics, and it, it just came to the point of me thinking, do I want to be singing along to something that I don't know what I'm singing about, do I want to coming to an agreement with something that could be really opposite to what I stand for as a Christian, and erm, so I just had to er, stop and say no, and I just got rid of all of my CDs,

> and er, I just went through my whole CD collection and got rid of a lot of stuff that I questioned whether I should be listening to or not . . . it was **so** hard . . .

Jeremy's descriptions of getting rid of albums from his collection resonate with some of the accounts provided by women in Woodward's (2007) research on clothing collections. The women in her study often threw out clothing when they were trying to discard certain aspects of themselves which no longer reflected their current self-identity.

The discourse of "not wanting to associate" with certain styles and artists highlighted that reasons for disliking music often extended beyond evaluations of the musical characteristics (e.g., lyrics) and related to more general concerns about the impression listening to that style of music would create to others. Vic (F: 20yrs) emphasised that she did not want to be associated with the type of people who listened to reggae music: "It's got the whole smoking weed and that kind of association, I don't like that." Gemma (F: 22yrs) did not want to associate with the type of people who liked garage music: "It's the knob-heads that listen to it, it's so aggressive, the whole scene is just violent and full of gang warfare."

A few of the participants were keen to avoid being associated with pop music, reporting the style was devoid of artists with any musical talent, lacking in authenticity, and produced simply to make money. John (M: 47yrs) argued that pop music was "bland" and lacking in creativity: "I'm looking for the creative spark which has energised that performance, I want something real, and not, er, it's not music." Others commented that they disliked the way pop music was hidden behind lip synching and heavy production techniques. One participant, Tom (M: 24yrs), took extreme objections to pop music: "Pop for pop music's sake, that offends me, I'm actually offended by it." When he later went on to describe his preference for Justin Timberlake, who could be described as a pop artist, Tom emphasised:

> I wouldn't admit in public that I liked his, much stuff by Justin Timberlake, simply because it's Justin Timberlake and everything, he's, you know, rather than just being the music, he's a, he's a full image association and obviously you don't wanna sort of necessarily in my case, I don't wanna be assumed through that, you know, kind of genre really. . . .

What is interesting is that Tom provides contradictory accounts of his engagement with music. Earlier on in his interview he says assertively, "I like what I like, so if it falls into the pop music genre, it falls into the pop music genre," yet here he states that he does not want to be assumed through this genre. Jeremy (M: 20yrs) had a similarly strong reaction and stated that his dislike of pop music arises from the fact that "one hit wonders" (e.g., Gareth Gates) could reach the top of the charts yet established bands who had been producing music for a long time often could not (e.g., Coldplay). His account implied that *his* preferences stemmed from an appreciation of good quality music (bands who had put time and effort into their music), whilst the general public behaved in a capricious way, purchasing music because everyone else was buying it (and were therefore less educated).

There were further examples of in-group/out-group behaviour. Chrissie (F: 48yrs) stated it had taken her some time to establish herself as a Hanson fan because many of the younger fans did not appear to understand why a woman in her mid-forties might like the band: "I mean, when I go to a Hanson concert, people look at you strangely and they say well whose mum are you?" (laughs). However, as she had forged connections with other "older" fans through the Internet, they developed a shared social identity as "older Hanson fans" as a mechanism of dealing with the young people's perceptions:

> There's enough older Hanson fans in the world for me not to feel old because I know how they are and where they are and, you know, so we all kind of feel old together, when we're all together.

The ways in which participants reported associating with (or avoiding) specific artists and styles, and their awareness of how they would be (or were) perceived if they stated these preferences publicly, lend strength to studies from a social identity perspective highlighting the role of musical preferences in identity processes (e.g., Tekman & Hortaçsu 2002), and support recent evidence (Rentfrow & Gosling 2007) that people hold stereotypes about fans of various musical styles (e.g., Vic and her perception of reggae fans as "weed smokers" and the way in which Chrissie was treated by younger Hanson fans at a gig). However, rather than being a dominant feature of adolescents' musical behaviour (cf. Tarrant et al. 2002), the current data suggest that preferences play a central role in the formation and maintenance of identities across the lifespan. Furthermore, exploring music collections can shed light on how musical preferences are used to reflect or alter aspects of self-identity, such as was the case with Jeremy and his decision to throw away certain albums.

Discussion

The current study has explored the breadth, content and rationale of musical preferences by interviewing people at home with their music collections. There are a number of key findings which have implications for future psychological studies in the field. First, the breadth of preferences reported here supports the rise of omnivorous taste in music (Peterson & Kern 1996). It is far more common for individuals to prefer a wide range of styles than to prefer a narrow range of styles (although there are some patterns within these eclectic tastes). Second, the diverse range of stylistic labels people use to describe their preferences resonates with recent arguments regarding the changeability of genre categorisations (e.g., Hennion 2001; Holt 1998; Savage 2006). Bennett et al. (2009) summarise the issue succinctly: "The categorising of musical genres, both by people as they engage musically, and by social scientists themselves, is an exercise in classification which itself needs to be critically unravelled, rather than treated simply as a neutral precondition for study" (p. 78). Taken together, these two findings suggest that whilst reducing preferences into tick-box categories or asking participants to rate liking for a limited number of styles is useful for quantifying preferences and identifying the ways in which preferences for styles cluster together (e.g., Chan & Goldthorpe 2004; Rentfrow & Gosling 2003), conclusions drawn from such studies should be critically examined.

Another key finding is that preferences for musical characteristics vary between individuals and are style-dependent. Some focus on the lyrical content of music, whilst others focus more on the instrumentation, or the ways in which the music fulfils or violates expectation; and this can change in response to the particular artist/style an individual is listening to. This implies that any comprehensive explanation of why an individual likes a specific piece of music must break down that piece into its various components to discover exactly *what* is preferred and why. This argument has been made previously by Holt (1998) but has received little attention, presumably because of the time-consuming nature of exploring preferences using this approach.

The current study has also highlighted differences in the extent to which responses to music shape preferences. For some people, understanding and knowledge of music is central to their appreciation, whilst others give precedence to the ways in which music makes them feel, over and above what they may know or think about the music itself.

Whilst there is a growing body of literature on specific responses to music (e.g., Hodges 2009; Huron 2009; Juslin 2009), no previous research had highlighted the extent to which people are able to compare and contrast the ways in which their responses to music shape their preferences.

These comparisons also shed light on issues of taste more generally. People buy music they think they should own but which they do not enjoy listening to (e.g., Hannah, U2) and hide preferred artists from their friends they do enjoy listening to (e.g., Tom, Justin Timberlake). This supports studies from within a social-psychological framework highlighting the role of musical preferences in self-identity (e.g., Tarrant et al. 2002), and also recent sociological work that has shown that people listen to certain styles whilst at the same time emphasising that it is not really "their" music (Bennett et al. 2009). At a broad level, the results support Price's (1986) definition of taste as "a social matter . . . that gives the impression that preference for one kind of music is better than preference for another" (p. 154).

Methodological Considerations

The current results highlight the utility of concentrating on the collection as an object of research for exploring musical choices, just as Woodward's (2007) focus on women's clothing collections furthered understanding of why women choose to wear what they wear. Interviewing participants in their home meant that they did not have to rely on memory of their preferred music, as their collections acted as an "aide-memoire" which increased the credibility of their retrospective accounts. The careful documentation of preferred musical styles and artists reported here would not have been possible if interviews had not taken place in participants' homes. Focusing on collections also enabled them to interact with music in a far more contextualised manner than has been achieved in previous studies. Encouraging people to play their preferred music during an interview evoked reflections on the wide range of (interacting) influences on liking for music, such as specific musical attributes (lyrics, tempo), feelings (moods, emotions), and memories (experiences, people, places) evoked by the music. This 'active' element of the interview highlighted that people can locate preferences that evoke reliable physiological responses, which are related to specific musical characteristics (Sloboda 1991), and illustrated the ways in which people are reflexively aware of their responses to preferred music.

One of the main limitations of the study was the sample used, which was recruited in an opportunistic way and comprised mainly young middle-class white people, and thus was not representative of the UK population as a whole. Bennett et al. (2009) have shown that musical taste is shaped by age, ethnicity, and social class, and future research should use a more diverse sample in order to acknowledge and build on these findings. In particular, age may explain some of the individual differences found in the current study.

Further discussion with one participant a year later highlighted that the results may be limited in generalisability. Hannah (F: 26yrs) told us that she would probably talk about completely different music if interviewed again, highlighting that preferences are in a constant state of flux (Hargreaves, North & Tarrant 2006); the way in which a person describes the music they prefer will always be in reference to past and previous musical experiences. However, whilst this may limit the extent to which the findings can be generalised in terms of specific time-points, such variation would apply across all individuals (Woolgar 1996).

Another limitation is that participants were only able to report on how they usually engaged with preferred music. Whilst there is every reason to suggest, given their ability

to pinpoint specific artists and styles that elicited particular responses, that the participants provided accurate accounts of their music uses, these may not map onto actual listening behaviour in identical ways. Future research could adopt experience sampling methods, as previous studies on the functions of music have (e.g., North et al. 2004; Sloboda et al. 2001), but with greater consideration of the range of styles people are listening to and their differing responses to these.

Future Directions

In light of the above results, we propose some specific lines of further enquiry. First, future research should keep abreast of advances in technology. If this study were run again, it would be necessary to pay even closer attention to the various technological devices that are used to store and playback music, as increasingly people have their entire music collections on portable devices (e.g., iPod, hard drive), some of which log how much time the person spends listening to what. These devices would enable investigation of the construction of playlists, providing further insights into patterns of preferred music use. In addition, there is now a range of Internet-based music services such as *Spotify* (a digital music streaming service) that could be used to explore patterns of taste. *Spotify* allows users to organise their favourite music into playlists, and to publish playlists for others to see. The current research suggests that the music people choose to share with others may not be related to the music they actually spend time listening to, and future research could explore this in further detail. Another increasingly popular music service is *Soundcloud* (an online audio distribution platform which allows musicians to promote and distribute their music). People can label the genre of an uploaded track or mix in any way (some recent examples include "trash folk euro dance" and "ambient shufflestep"); therefore, this could be a means of exploring the democratisation of genre labels.

Second, future research should focus on the trajectory of musical preferences. How do preferences develop over time? What influences how, when and why they change? The themes and codes outlined in the current study (see Appendix A) illustrate the aspects of people's experiences that future studies should address. For example, participants reported that their preferences were constantly changing ("changes in music use over time") as a result of seeking new music ("importance of variety"); changing relationships with the music they already owned ("preference is gradual"); and various aspects of their social environments more generally (e.g., "social influence").

Third, given the similarities in methodology between Woodward's ethnographic study of women's clothing collections (wherein women were interviewed at home with their clothing collections to explore daily choices) and the current study, future research could explore similarities and differences in the consumption of music and clothing. In particular, there are a number of parallels which warrant further exploration, such as the way in which music and clothes are used in the construction of autobiographical narrative; are linked to particular modes of being and identities, activities and contexts; and the way in which consumption practices are characterised by different levels of engagement.

Finally, listening to preferred music is one way in which people can actively improve their psychological well-being and health (regulating mood, releasing emotions, obtaining solace, gaining self-confidence, intellectual pursuit), which has implications for the field of health psychology. The use of preferred music can be an effective medical intervention in everyday life for a multiplicity of reasons, including personal attachment,

autobiographical memories, emotional response, and familiarity (Batt-Rawden & DeNora 2005; van Goethem & Sloboda 2011). Future research needs to be sensitive to these more individualistic aspects of people's engagement with music.

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About the Authors

Alinka Greasley is Lecturer in Psychology of Music, University of Leeds, UK. Her research explores the role of music in people's everyday lives, with a particular focus on musical preferences, listening behaviours, and differences in levels of musical engagement.

Alexandra Lamont is Senior Lecturer in Psychology of Music at Keele University, UK. Her research centres on issues of musical development and musical engagement across the lifecourse, looking at why and how people choose to engage with music in a range of situations.

John Sloboda is Emeritus Professor in Psychology, Keele University, UK, and Research Professor at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, UK. His current research focuses on the interactions between performers and audiences in live performances and also how these interactions affect creative practice.

Appendix A: List of Themes & Codes in NVivo

(1) Changes & fluctuations over time
- (1 1) Breadth of music preference
- (1 2) Phases, incl. coming back to the music
- (1 3) Social influence, comparison
- (1 4) Open-earedness
- (1 5) Media influence, new music

(2) Importance of variety
- (2 1) Use of random play
- (2 2) Importance of variety within albums
- (2 3) Compilation 'way into other artists'

(3) Technology
- (3 1) Gender differences in tech use
- (3 2) Technology, how it impacts on behaviour

(4) Listening behaviours
- (4 1) Track skipper or not
- (4 2) Listening in a different way
- (4 3) General
- (4 4) Purchase behaviour
- (4 5) Collector behaviours
- (4 6) Listening repeatedly

(5) Activities, daily functions
- (5 1) Exercise & sports
- (5 2) Work
- (5 3) Domestic chores
- (5 4) General
- (5 5) Travel
- (5 6) Going out, gigs, nightclubs
- (5 7) Importance of context

(6) Preference is gradual
- (6 1) Music ~growing~ on the listener
- (6 2) Listener ~growing~ out of the music
- (6 3) Wearing music out

(7) Self-therapy
- (7 1) Mood regulation
- (7 2) A way into things
- (7 3) Value & meaning
- (7 4) Emotional response & catharsis
- (7 5) Intellectual pursuit & interest
- (7 6) Beliefs
- (7 7) Safety & comfort

(8) Resource in everyday life
- (8 1) Sense of urgency
- (8 2) Necessity

(9) Categorisation & organisation
- (9 1) Cross over in musical style
- (9 2) Media influence
- (9 3) Difficulties with definition
- (9 4) Comparison between styles & artists
- (9 5) Playlists

(10) Music preference
- (10 1) Ultimate favourite
- (10 2) Reasons for LIKING music
- (10 3) Reasons for DISLIKING music
- (10 4) Authenticity of artist/s
- (10 5) Authenticity of musical style
- (10 6) Identify with the artist, character
- (10 7) Appreciation linked to knowledge

(11) Talking about music more vs. less
- (11 1) Specificity in discourse
- (11 2) Embarrassment
- (11 3) Enthusiasm
- (11 4) Difficulties in talking about music

(12) Broader social determinants
- (12 1) Individual differences & taste in music
- (12 2) Popular & mainstream vs. other
- (12 3) Identity, personal & social
- (12 4) Music consumption in general
- (12 5) Public opinion, stereotyping artists

(13) Responses to music
- (13 1) Cognitive & affective ~ cog vs. aff
- (13 2) Unemotional response, detached
- (13 3) Technical reactions to music

(14) Memory
- (14 1) Autobiographical memory
- (14 2) Reflexive awareness of own music use
- (14 3) Reminiscent function
- (14 4) Remembering music in your head

(15) Engagement, involvement
- (15 1) High engagement
- (15 2) Low engagement

(16) Performance, production, mixing, making tunes
- (16 1) Influence of playing an instrument
- (16 2) Singing, dancing
- (16 3) Performance to a crowd

(17) Collection
- (17 1) I've got it because I ought to have it
- (17 2) Classic, everyone has this

(18) Biological & physiological
- (18 1) Biological reductionism
- (18 2) Drug, food, love analogies
- (18 3) References to the brain
- (18 4) Chills, thrills & physiological response
- (18 5) Physical response

Free nodes:
Artist serves different functions
Background vs. attentive listening
Denying music
Expectation in music
Imagination, journey, consciousness
Importance of a single track
Importance of an album
Importance of visual, music videos
Importance of voice
Lyrics
Musical style serves diff. functions
People love music they do not own
Plus for the methodology

Appendix B: List of Styles and Substyles Spontaneously Mentioned by 23 Participants

20th Century Music	Blues	Disco	Hardcore	New Wave	Rocky
20th Century Spiritual	Bouncy DnB	Disney Songs	Harp Music	Nursery Rhymes	Rocky Country
2-Step	Bouncy Jungly	Down-Beat	Heavy	Old Skool	Rocky in a Safe Way
40s Dance Band	Boy Band	Drum and Bass	Heavy Electric	Old Skool Hip-Hop	Rocky Pop
50s	Brass Band	Drumy	Heavy Metal	Old-Fashioned Rock	Romantic
60s	Brass Band Music	Electric	Heavy Rock	Opera	Romantic Russian
60s Folk	Break-Beat	Electro	Hip-Hop	Organ Music	Rubbish Music
70s	Brit Pop	Electronic	Hip-House	Period Music	Rustic
70s Folk	British Guitar Bands	Electronica	House	Piano Classical	Salsa
70s Love Songs	Canterbury Movement	English Folk	Hymns	Piano Music	Salsa Music
70s Reggae	Catchy	English Renaissance Polyphony	Indian	Piano-based	Scratching
70s/70s Jazz Rock	Celtic	Experimental	Indie	Platipus Psychedelic	Secular Indie Rock
80s	Cheese	Film Music	Indie Light for Teenagers	Trance	Shouty Music
80s Glam Heavy Metal	Cheesy	Folk	Instrumental	Polonaise	Ska
80s Grunge	Cheesy American	Folk Rock	Irish	Pop	Ska Rock Band
90s	Cheesy German Euro Dance	Folk-Influenced Music	Irish Folk	Poppy	Soul
90s Cheese	Cheesy Pop	Folky	Jazz	Popular Country	Soul-Searching Ballads
Acid House	Chill Out	Funky	Jump-Up DnB	Popular Music	Soundtrack
Acid Techno	Chilled Out Jazzy DnB	Funky Rock	Jungle	Post-Modern Punk	Soundtracks
Acoustic	Christian	Funny Rock Bands	Late 18th Century	Progressive	Spanish
Acoustic Guitar	Christian Rap	Gabba Techno	Late 19th Century	Progressive House	Swing
Acoustic Punk	Christian Rock	Gangster Rap	Latin	Progressive Rock	Techno
African	Christmas Music	Garage	Male Solo Singers	Punk	Teeny-bopper
Ambient	Church Music	German	Marching Band	Punk Rock	Thrash Metal
American College Rock	Classic 60s Rock	German Indie Pop	Melancholy	Punky	Traditional Music
American Hip-Hop	Classic Rock	German Pop	Melancholy Indie	Ragga	Trance
American Rock	Classical	Godly Music	Mellow	Rap	Trancey
Asian	Classical Guitar	Gospel	Metal	Rave	Trancey DnB
Avant-Garde	Club Mix	Goth	Mindless Pop Pap	Reggae	Tribe Music
Background Music	Contemporary	Greek	Modern Jazz	Relaxation Music	Underground
Bad Cheese	Counterpoint	Greek Folk Music	Modern Music	Religious	Underground Country Bands
Ballad	Country	Grime	Morris Dancing Music	Remix Dance Poppy	Up-Beat
Ballads	Country & Western	Grunge	Motown	Renaissance Sacred	West Coast Hip-Hop
Ballady	Crappy Cheese	Guitary	Musicals	Polyphony	Woodstock
Bands	Dance	Hard Beats	Neo-Classical	RnB	Worship Music
Baroque	Dancey	Hard House	New Age	Rock	
Beatz	Dark DnB	Hard House or music like that	New Age Music	Rock Ballad	
Big Band	Dirty Heavy Metal	Hard Techno	New Metal	Rock ‘n’ Roll	