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Taste and Tastemaking

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April 12, 2016

TASTY DATA

The age-old question, “why do we like what we like?” Is one that has been taunting me from the heading atop the course blog since day one of Taste and Tastemaking. It’s immensely complex, contains countless variables, and may not have a single concrete or correct answer. But I’m edging closer to an solution. For the fifty Transylvania students that have participated in my study there are two central study components: Google Form survey (consisting of both musical and personal background) and Last.fm Scrobble data (the music that each user has been listening to). I have the data -- hometown, socio-economic status, parents’ tastes, involvement -- plus every single song that they’ve actively listened to since taking the survey. Now it’s time to dig in.

Overall, this paper will serve as a reflection of my extended studies in taste exploration through software technologies, where I will set a foundation by describing my research process. Next I will utilize my researched survey and streaming data to explain the appeal of fresh, indie music for Transylvania students. Finally, I shall delve into internet music platforms and their aims to capitalize on that appeal for young people amidst a digital age that continues to redefine taste.

THE GEARS

Before we dive right in, it’s important to grasp some of the background mechanical stuff. At the backbone of this project you’ll find code that aims to explore taste. The script was written using the Python programming language and began as a study of musical taste among colleges in

Kentucky. The scope of this course has evolved it into a wider, yet more academically angled exploration of musical taste in general. My script can now look at each user's listening data individually *and* every user's data overall. This means that I can see long lists of every surveyed user's top 100 tracks of the month, and the one single list aggregated list for the University. Armed with a holistic view of the music data, analysis of Transylvania's music streaming is possible, meaning that I can make conclusions. The analysis of overall music data is possible through Python's Counter function and then array aggregation. This means that whenever we search by top artists, each time an artist (e.g. Kendrick Lamar) appears in a user's specified top 'X' number of artists, it gets incremented. So, if out of 50 users, Kendrick appears in 19 of their lists of top artists, then he gets counted 19 times, and that artist will likely be in the peak ranks for overall top artists. This same method can be applied for track names and album titles as well. Let's walk through the sample script output in blue below, starting at 'Lastfm data counting

program' at the top:

1. Prompts for method - artists selected
2. Prompts for time period - 1 month selected
3. Prompts for limit, or the number of results - 50 entered
4. Script executes, calling Last.fm API for each user, and prints results

So, what we get back from the above

script is 35 tracks pulled from each user's top 50

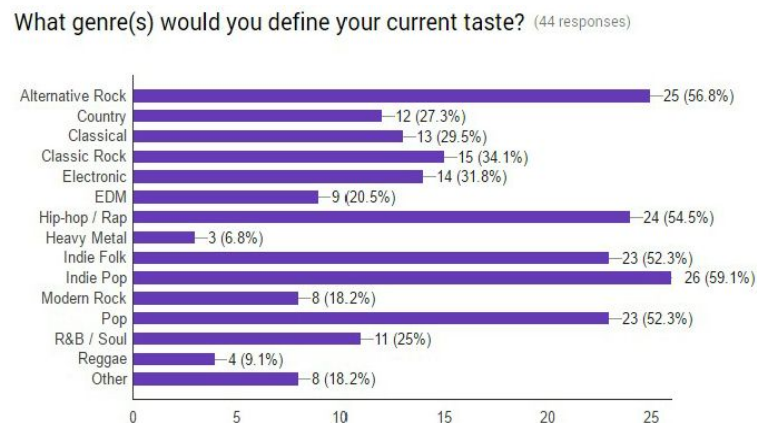
artists since the beginning of their scrobbling history. We see that Drake holds the #1 spot, appearing in the top 50 artists of 10 user's streaming history.

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Lastfm data counting program:
Enter a method (ex. tracks, artists, albums): artists
Enter a time period (ex. overall, 12month, 6month, 1month, 7day): 1month
How many results do you want per user? (0 to 10,000): 50
(u'At #1: Drake', 10)
(u'At #2: Kendrick Lamar', 9)
(u'At #3: Coldplay', 8)
(u'At #4: Adele', 7)
(u'At #5: Ed Sheeran', 7)
(u'At #6: Eminem', 6)
(u'At #7: One Direction', 6)
(u'At #8: Rihanna', 6)
(u'At #9: Kanye West', 6)
(u'At #10: Florence + the Machine', 6)
(u'At #11: Cage the Elephant', 6)
(u'At #12: alt-J', 6)
(u'At #13: G-Eazy', 5)
(u'At #14: The Beatles', 5)
(u'At #15: Beyonc', 5)
(u'At #16: Sara Bareilles', 5)
(u'At #17: Bastille', 5)
(u'At #18: St. Lucia', 5)
(u'At #19: Imagine Dragons', 5)
(u'At #20: Bryson Tiller', 5)
(u'At #21: Justin Bieber', 5)
(u'At #22: American Authors', 4)
(u'At #23: The Weeknd', 4)
(u'At #24: Disclosure', 4)
(u'At #25: Hall & Oates', 4)
(u'At #26: Alabama Shakes', 4)
(u'At #27: Red Hot Chili Peppers', 4)
(u'At #28: Of Monsters and Men', 4)
(u'At #29: The Avett Brothers', 4)
(u'At #30: Iron & Wine', 4)
(u'At #31: Lana Del Rey', 4)
(u'At #32: Vampire Weekend', 4)
(u'At #33: Hozier', 4)
(u'At #34: Fall Out Boy', 4)
(u'At #35: Bon Iver', 4)
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INDIE AT HEART

With over 50 participants, 25 variables depicted in the survey, and a constantly increasing reservoir of music streaming data, there's a lot to thumb through in this study. By leveraging software technologies, this data-laden study is much more achievable. Statistical accuracy is also an obstacle in this survey, as Transylvania has a student population of nearly 1,000 students, and I have 50 participants, or 5% of campus. Based on statistical principles, a sample size that is 5% of the population size has a margin of error of 13.52%. This is a significant margin, but should not jeopardize the accuracy of a study as abstract as musical taste.

In the taste conclusions that follow, I will use Transy students and college students interchangeably, but I do not claim that Transylvania is fully representative of the total college population, or young people in general. The graphs section in the appendix of this paper corroborates and illustrates my analysis, but I will primarily focus on this graph that represents how students define their taste:



Using the above graph, Indie pop and alternative (59.1% and 56.8%) were the two genres that best defined the taste of Transy students surveyed, but not the most commonly streamed

genres, that being hip-hop/rap (54.5% of surveyed). Indie and alternative has made it's way into the charts (e.g. Cage the Elephant, Two Door Cinema Club, Red Hot Chili Peppers), but has been topped consistently by artists like Drake, Kendrick Lamar, and Kanye West. This may be because the way we define our taste and what we actually listen to are fundamentally different. There are a number of possible explanations for this, primarily because indie music is often considered eclectic and authentic, so by listening to it, college students that strive to be unique and independent would be inclined to identify with music reflective of their personality. Indie music and its connotations carry cultural capital that Transy students desire. So, even if they don't actually listen to that much of the genre, students are still inclined to define their taste within the three main sub-genres of 'obscure' music (indie pop, alternative, indie folk) because these genres carry cultural capital that are meaningful to their status, and also find the music as an expression of their personality. A leading 43.2% of students surveyed identified their personality as "Open to new experiences, complex", which may further explain the appeal of indie music on young people -- but possibly fresh, exciting music in general. Especially in the context of a culturally thriving city with tens of thousands of college students, experiences and music that are fresh and have an indie or grassroots qualities carry social and cultural capital that are essential for young people. "Why do you like what you like?" is best answered by the necessity of cultural capital and self-expression for college students during a key time in taste formation where hipster, indie 'college radio' tastes are most popular. However, college radio has lost some of its spark as internet music platforms have emerged to fulfill these musical demands of young people.

PEERING INTO SPACE

In *pop brands*, Nicholas Carah ties together the three big players in the society of popular music culture: culture makers, brand-builders, and

socio-political spaces. He explains that “Partnerships between culture makers and brand builders take place within socio-political spaces, contexts, and institutions that are a product of a struggle over what society should be like” (Carah, 90). Space is the specific focus, as digital and geographic space have an immense influence on taste. We can partition these space categories into a few of their components: *digital* contains social media and all things web 2.0, while *geographic* contains venues and regions. In the time since *pop brands* was published, popular music’s place on the web 2.0 has changed drastically with the emergence (and now near ubiquity) of internet music platforms. As a new space where young people and popular music interact, platforms like Spotify, which will be a specific example, have become valuable brandscapes.

Within these brandscapes, Spotify provides an essentially unlimited catalog of music, expanding musical horizons and shaping the modern musical experience. The 43.2% of Transy students who identify as “open to new experiences, complex” also explains their dedicated use of internet music platforms that revolve around taste exploration and introduction to new musical experiences. Data analysis of music streaming and user profiles allows the platform to cater algorithmically-generated playlists like ‘Discover Weekly’ for each user in order to shape their tastes, so Spotify is also trying to answer “Why do you like what you like?” for their users (Pasick). However, as a company with a 2015 valuation of 8.5 billion dollars and over 75 million users, exploring this overarching taste question via an endless reservoir of music accumulates Spotify serious capital (Fortune). Spotify also offers a student discount to users signed up via ‘.edu’ email addresses, giving the company distinct “insights” into the national college population (Van Buskirk). Spotify knows what young people want (fresh, and/or indie music), why they want it (cultural capital, self-expression), and what they can do with it (profit). If the intersection of young people, popular music, and brands in a digital brandscape both broadens and deepens the

taste of young people, is it wrong that Spotify is doing this with money on their mind?

Empowering the unique tastes of young people for profit are not problematic, but we must be wary of Spotify because while they may be “revenue-neutral” for the music industry, they do have a solid grip on the future of listening (Aguilar and Waldfogel). On Spotify there is currently genuine freedom for taste exploration, and unless that freedom suddenly fades, internet music platforms are and will be a positive player in the music industry.

WHAT’S UP THE STREAM?

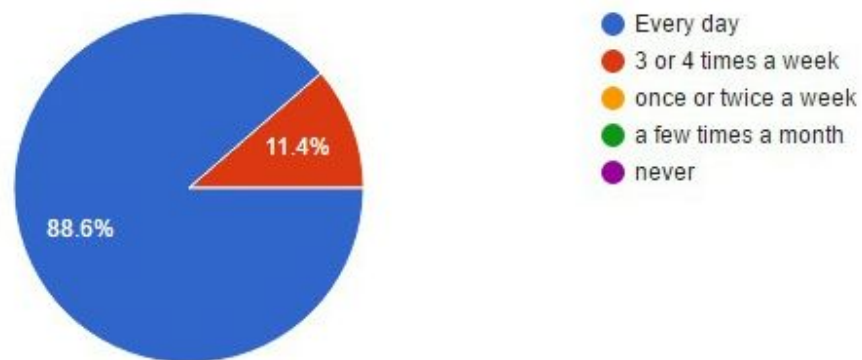
The sheer possibility for learning about in this musical taste research project is both exhilarating and overwhelming, narrowing in on a topic to fit the scope of the class and cohesion of this reflection has been surely difficult. But I’m not done. The next steps of this project will continue to update the research of Pierre Bourdieu surrounding points made in *Let’s Talk About Love*. Carl Wilson declares that he didn’t think Bourdieu was “entirely right,” opening the floodgates to rethink one of the largest taste studies ever conducted (100). I want to pick up where Wilson left off. He posits that there’s more to taste in that “Other factors seem to play a comparable role, including ethnicity, gender, and regional background,” which is data that I now have at my disposal (100). Take [a look](#) at the questions from the survey - they delve into the habitus, fields, and capital that Bourdieu used to structure his study. Through an opportunity with Radio TLX to share musical taste throughout the Transylvania community, this project is far from terminal. By leveraging software tools, I want to explore every angle of “Why do we like what we like?”

APPENDIX

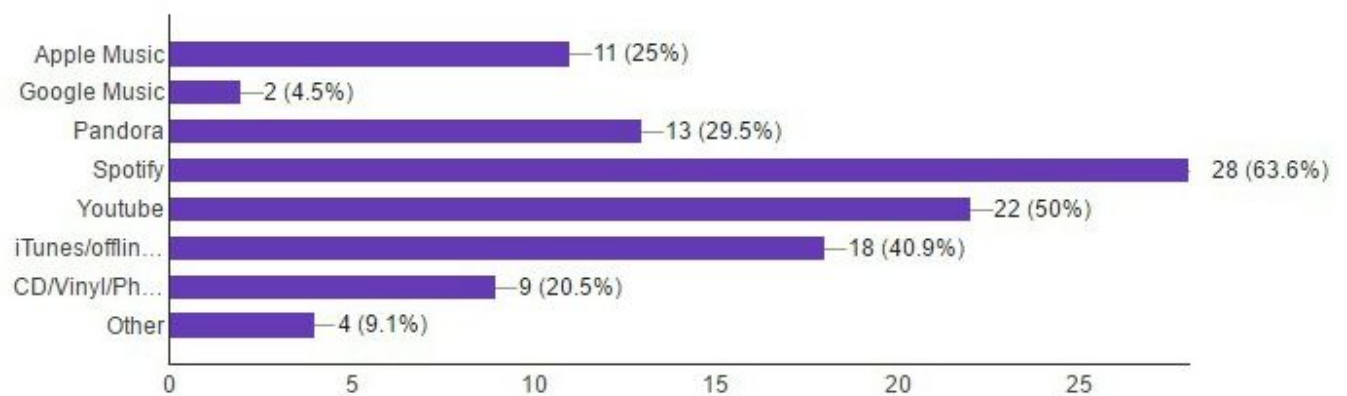
Graphs and Works Cited

Code repository on Github: <https://github.com/ejmudrak/lastfm>

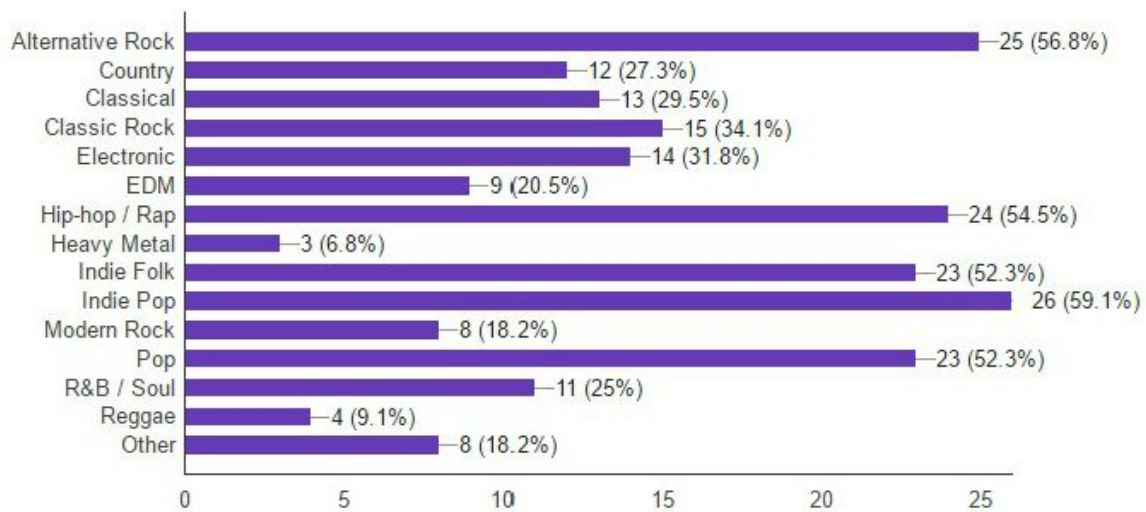
How often do you listen to music? (44 responses)



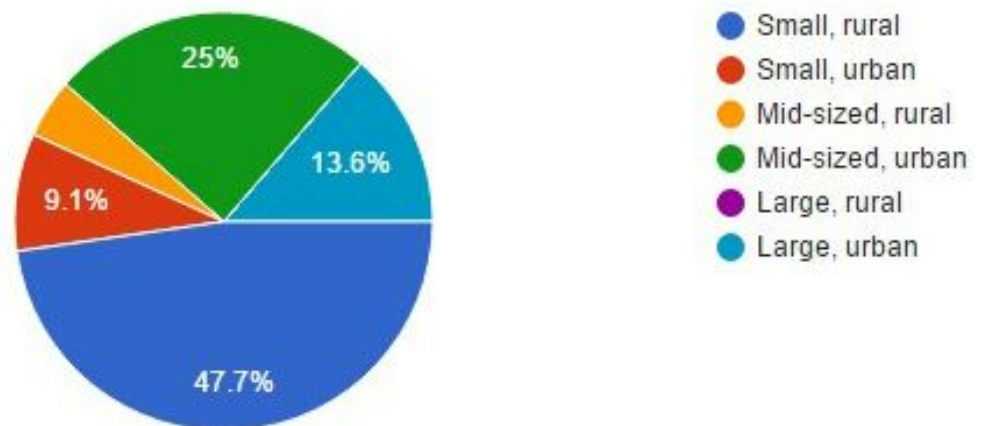
Where do you listen to most of your music? (44 responses)



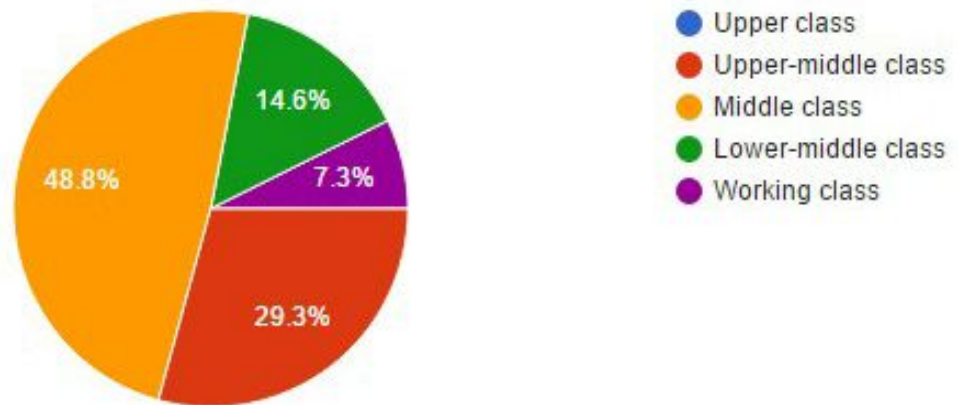
What genre(s) would you define your current taste? (44 responses)



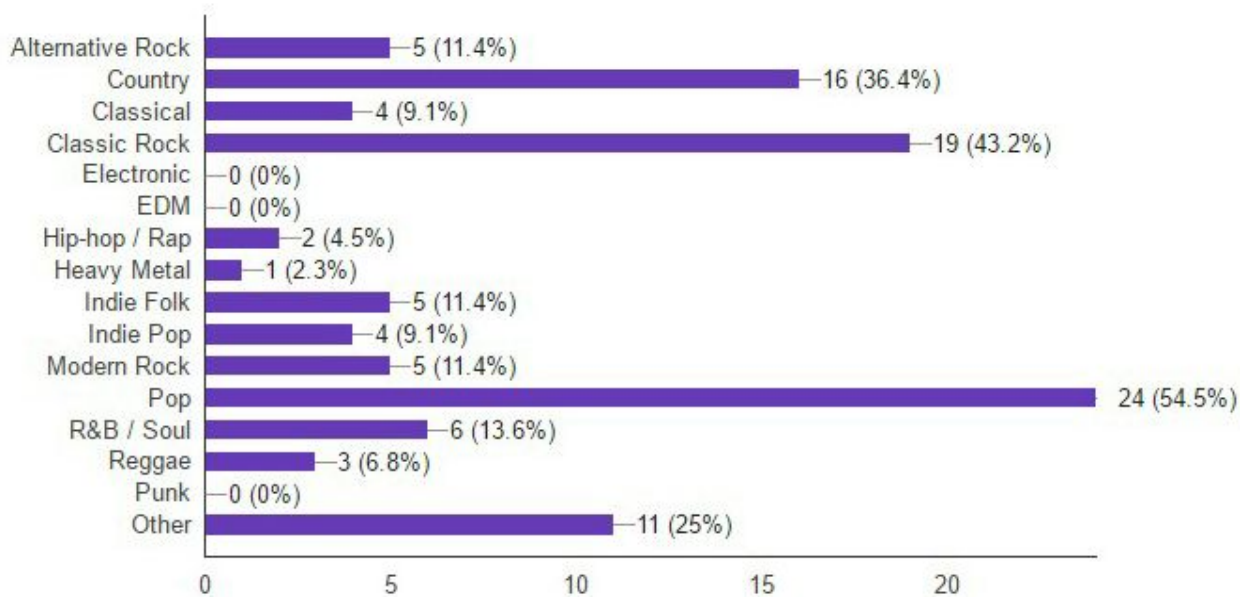
Describe your hometown: (44 responses)



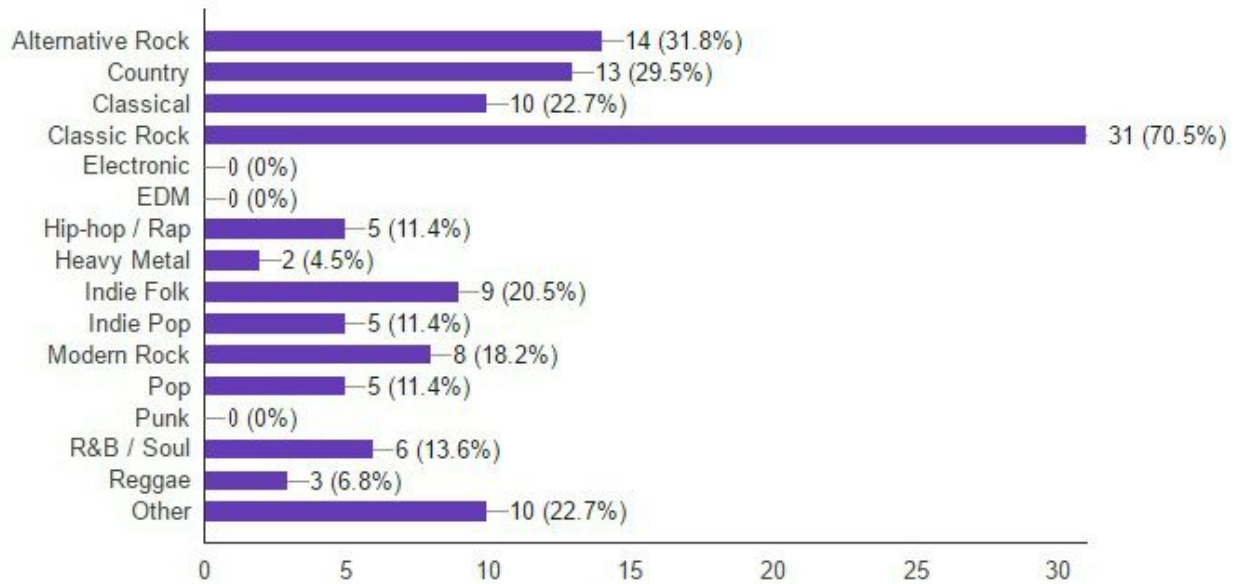
My family may would financially be best described as: (41 responses)



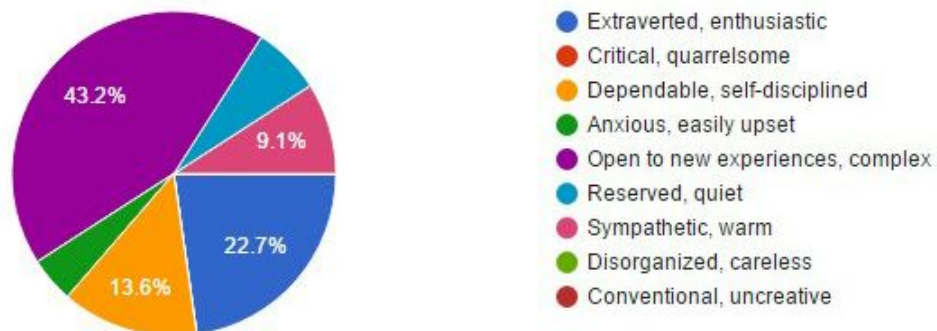
What genre(s) describe your mother's taste? (44 responses)



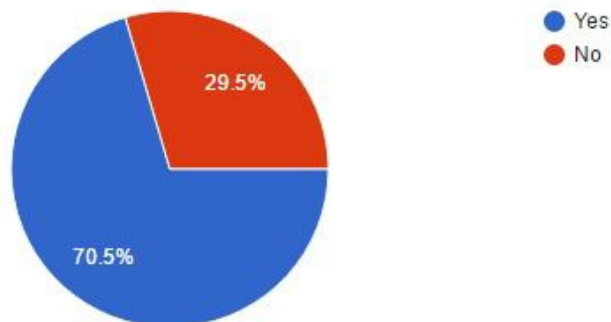
What genre(s) describe your father's taste? (44 responses)



I see myself as: (44 responses)



Did you grow up in a church community? (44 responses)



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