
The Role of Music in the Lives of Homeless Young People in Seattle WA and Vancouver BC

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Abstract

I outline my proposed dissertation study of music in the lives of homeless young people. Participants will include homeless young people and service providers in Seattle WA and Vancouver BC. The study is a mixed methods design including surveys, semi-structured interviews, and design activities. This study will lead to contributions to human-computer interaction (HCI) and the psycho-social literature on youth homelessness.

Keywords

Homeless young people; music; risk-taking behaviors

ACM Classification Keywords

K.4.2 [Social Issues]: Miscellaneous;

Research Situation

I am a PhD candidate at the University of Washington Information School, a 2011-2012 Fulbright Fellow to Canada, and currently a visiting graduate student at the University of British Columbia School of Library, Archival and Information Studies. I am an information system designer investigating the socio-technical aspects of technology. My career aim is to make meaningful contributions in scholarship and education as a university professor. My training and experience in research has primarily been in qualitative methods and in the application of Value Sensitive Design [3].

Motivation and Background

Homelessness among young people is a pressing problem with lasting social and economic consequences in the U.S. and Canada. One U.S. expert estimates that up to 3 million young people, age 12-24 are homeless annually [10, p. 5]. In Canada the proportion of homeless youth is estimated at .2% annually, resulting in an estimate of 50,000-60,000 young Canadians experiencing homelessness each year [2].

An extensive literature investigating the psychological and social (psycho-social) aspects of homeless young people in Canada and the U.S. has found that these young people are a heterogeneous group ranging from youth to young adulthood, with varying experiences of abuse and neglect, and that homeless young people engage in risk-taking behaviors that have the potential to be harmful or dangerous such as substance abuse or sexual behaviors that put young people at risk for contracting HIV/AIDS [7,10]. At the same time and separate from literature on homeless youth, extensive research has found positive associations between media use, such as music preferences particularly for heavy metal, hard rock and rap music, and increased risk-taking behaviors in young people who are not homeless. Although causal relationships between music and risk-taking behaviors have not been found, parents and physicians have been cautioned to consider young people's music interests, and legal experts have proposed that music which explores dark themes might well be considered as a risk factor for suicide [1,6]. Meanwhile, only one study was found that investigated music and homeless young people [5] and no study with homeless young people has explicitly investigated associations between music and risk-taking.

Similarly, very little research has investigated the experiences that homeless young people have with technology. In order to fill this gap and with the overarching goal of improving the welfare of homeless young people since 2007 I have engaged in a series of research, design, and service projects with homeless young people [11,12,13,14,15]. These projects include helping to create a community technology center for homeless young people where I worked with 100 young people in 18 months as a volunteer instructor [4].

Three major findings have arisen from my work. First, homeless young people are making extensive use of information systems and technologies, and are regular users of MySpace, Facebook, music players and mobile phones [12,13,15]. Second, homeless young people have ordinary experiences with technology, which are conditioned by the extraordinary circumstances of homelessness [11,12,13]. For instance, current work has found that service agencies are key places where homeless young people get access to the Internet. However, agencies have policies in place regarding technologies. So, for example, in order to encourage a homeless young person to engage in employment-related activities while using agency computers, service providers may limit the amount of time he is allowed to use Facebook. Third, homeless young people have a keen interest in music from a wide range of genres, and use digital means to listen to music and share music with others. Importantly, my work has also found that some homeless young people in Seattle are interested in hardcore punk and horrorcore rap, music that is noteworthy for its themes of extreme violence and suicidal ideation [12]. Preference for similar dark music is correlated with higher levels of risk-taking behaviors in young people who are not homeless [1].

At the same time and largely separate from the human-computer interaction (HCI) literature, Eric Rice has employed surveys in social work research to investigate homeless young people's uses of technology. This work has found both positive and negative associations between ties maintained by homeless young people in face-to-face and computer-mediated social networks and decreases in sexual and drug-related risk-taking behaviors [8,9].

Given these findings a major opportunity emerges: (1) to investigate associations between music preferences and risk-taking among homeless young people; (2) to investigate the impact of agency policies on homeless young people's use of technology; and (3) to bridge the HCI and the psycho-social research literatures and practice. In collaboration with Prof. Rice, by jointly designed research instruments and protocols, I plan to make the most of this opportunity.

Research Questions

I will ask two primary research questions and three sub-questions. The first primary question: (RQ1) "What role does music play in the lives of homeless young people?"; and sub-questions (RQ1a) How are music listening experiences of homeless young people mediated by technology and by policies at service agencies?"; (RQ1b) "What associations exist between music preferences and risk-taking behaviors in homeless young people?" and (RQ1c) "How does living in Seattle WA or Vancouver BC condition music preferences and listening experiences of homeless young people?" Finally, I propose a second primary question focused on envisioning and design: (RQ2) "How could a music player be specifically designed to help homeless young people?"

Research Goals and Methods

To address the above questions, the research will take place at two service agencies – one in Seattle WA and one in Vancouver BC. Both sites are well-respected youth service agencies which have agreed to be collaborating organizations. The plan of work consists of three components. The first is an on-line survey. I will administer this survey to homeless young people (n=200; 100 in Seattle and 100 in Vancouver). The

purpose of the survey is to provide quantitative data regarding demographics, experiences with technology, access to technology, music preferences, listening experiences, and risk-taking behaviors. The survey will provide data relevant to RQ1 and RQ1a-RQ1c.

The second component is individual, semi-structured interviews with homeless young people (n=40; 20 in Seattle and 20 in Vancouver) and service providers at the collaborating service agencies (n=24; 12 in Seattle and 12 in Vancouver). The purpose of the interviews is: (1) to expand on young people's responses to the survey; (2) to explore agency policies regarding homeless young people and technology; and (3) to elicit accounts of the impact of these policies. The interviews will provide data pertaining to RQ1a-RQ1c.

The third component, a design activity including sketching and scenario writing will complement data gathered via the surveys and interviews. In this design activity, homeless young people and service providers (n=200 homeless young people; n=24 service providers) will work individually to: (1) sketch a music player device specifically for homeless young people that may exist in the near future; and (2) write a scenario about how the device might be used. The design activity addresses RQ2, yielding information that is useful for design. (Note: Not all data collected will be analyzed for the dissertation.)

Expected Contributions

Expected contributions will be fivefold: (1) Detailed quantitative data regarding homeless young people, an underexplored population in HCI and their uses of technology, including associations between music and risk-taking behavior; (2) In-depth qualitative data

regarding service agency policies that mediate the ways that homeless young people use technology; (3) New knowledge for the design of systems specifically for homeless young people; (4) Novel comparative data between the U.S. and Canada which may bring new perspective to HCI; and (5) Contributions to the HCI literature that draw explicitly on theory and practice in psycho-social research on youth homelessness.

Dissertation Status

In June 2011, I completed my general exam and achieved candidacy and in Nov. 2011 defended my dissertation proposal. I plan to collect data from Feb. 2012 – Dec. 2012, and defend the dissertation in June 2013. By May 2012 about 50% of the data collection will be completed, so the CHI doctoral consortium will provide timely feedback, particularly regarding data analysis and interpretation.

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