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SOCIO-POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND MUSICAL PREFERENCES

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FOR SOME TIME, RESEARCHERS HAVE ACKNOWLEDGED THAT TELEVISION, radio and newspapers can serve as agents of socialization.[1] However, music, unlike other media, has not been systematically studied, either as an agent of socialization, or as a reflection of the attitudes of its audience.[2] Nevertheless, the function and social effects of popular music have received considerable public attention. For example, the Cuban regime declared all forms of rock music subversive to the government. In the United States, many Americans, including former Vice-President Agnew, have argued that popular music is an opinion formation device, capable of "hypnotizing and brainwashing" American teenagers.[3]

What scholarly evidence is there to substantiate the view that there is a significant relationship between the "message" context of popular music and the attitudes of the listening audience? In the realm of conjecture, academicians have disagreed on the answer; one school has seen music as background noise with little meaning while another school has assumed that music is central in evoking a new social ethic.[4] In the realm of empirical research, most studies have avoided a direct examination of the linkage between music content and audience attitudes.[5] For example,

[1] For example, see Bernard Rosenberg and David M. White, eds., *Mass Culture* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1957).

[2] For a similar assessment, see Robert R. Cole, "A Content Analysis of Popular Lyrics," *American Behavioral Scientist*, 14 (Jan./Feb., 1971), pp. 389–400.

[3] See Gary Allen, "More Subversion than Meets the Ear," and Spiro Agnew, "Turning on the Vice President," in R. Serge Denisoff and Richard A. Peterson, eds., *The Sounds of Social Change* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972).

[4] Members of the first school include Jacques Barzun, *Music in American Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1958) and David Reisman, "Listening to Popular Music" in Rosenberg and White's *Mass Culture*; the second school includes Theodore Roszak, *The Making of the Counter Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1969) and Herb Goldberg, "Rock Music and Sex," *Journal of Sexual Behavior*, 1 (1971), pp. 25–31.

[5] The one major exception to this description is offered by William S. Fox and James D. Williams, "Political Orientations and Musical Preferences Among College Students," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 38 (Fall, 1974), pp. 352–371. Like the present study, these authors also examine empirically the relationship between general political orientation (i.e., political ideology) and categories of music preferred by students. However, they differ from this study in four fundamental respects. First, their interest is not in whether music transmits "messages" to the audience, but whether music is political (pp. 358–359). As a result, they do not attempt to make specific predictions from the lyrical content of the music to the attitudes held by the audience, and they are not interested in investigating the direction of these relationships. Finally, their research only looks at political ideology, while this study investigates a larger variety of socio-political attitudes. Nevertheless, their findings complement the thrust of the predictions discussed below.

one approach has been to pursue content analyses of popular song lyrics.[6] While these types of studies have shed light on the nature of the messages contained in the lyrics of popular music, they have *assumed*, but not investigated whether such messages were transmitted to the listening audience.

Other empirical studies have looked at specific songs or categories of popular music and have investigated the deliberate uses of this music in social movements, the effects of frequency of exposure to music by the audience, and the degree of homogeneity of audience tastes as predicted by a variety of background characteristics of the audience.[7] However, none of these empirical studies have attempted to determine whether or not the "messages" contained in the lyrics of popular music could predict to the socio-political attitudes of the audience exposed to the music.

The purpose of the present study is two-fold. First, we wish to investigate the relationship between socio-political attitudes and musical preferences of college students. This step is an essential prerequisite for pursuing the larger question of whether popular music reflects, shapes, or both shapes and is shaped by the attitudes of its audience. Thus, initially, we will test the general prediction that musical preference patterns are related to other attitudes in the individual. Secondly, we will attempt a "first test" of the impact of music on attitudes, by empirically investigating whether changes in the content of popular music have led to similar changes in the attitudes of the audience exposed to the music.

SOCIO-POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND MUSICAL PREFERENCES

The first test of the relationship between musical "messages" and audience attitudes focuses on the degree of *political alienation* found in both popular music and its audience. By political alienation, we are referring to "a person's sense of estrangement from the politics and government of his/her society," a subjective state expressed in terms of a lack of confidence or trust in the institutions and processes of government.[8] Since content analyses of different categories of music have revealed significant differences in political alienation themes found in the lyrics of rock, folk

[6] Examples include James T. Carey, "The Ideology of Autonomy in Popular Lyrics: A Content Analysis," *Psychiatry*, 32 (1969), pp. 150–164; William F. White and John H. Butler, "Classifying Meaning in Contemporary Music," *Journal of Psychology*, 70 (1968), pp. 261–266; and Cole, "A Content Analysis of Popular Lyrics."

[7] These approaches are illustrated in an excellent collection of research on the socio-cultural correlates of popular music in Denisoff and Peterson, *Sounds of Social Change*. See also Leon A. Jakobovitz, "Studies of Fads," *Psychological Reports*, 18 (1968), pp. 443–450.

[8] The definition used here is adopted from Robert E. Lane's *Political Ideology* (New York: Free Press, 1962), pp. 161–162, and discussed by William A. Gamson in *Power and Discontent* (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press, 1968). The measure of political alientation used in this study is taken from James W. Clarke and E. Lester Levine's operationalization of Lane's definition; see their "Marijuana Use, Social Discontent, and Political Alienation: A Study of High School Youth," *American Political Science Review*, 65 (March, 1971), pp. 120–130.

and country/western music, we were able to pose some specific predictions about musical exposure and attitudes of the musical audience toward political alienation. As folk music has been the traditional avenue of protest movements in music,[9] we hypothesize that those who primarily prefer folk music will also be the most politically alienated of our sample. Conversely, the conservative nature of country/western music[10] leads us to predict that its musical audience will be *least* alienated from the political system. Since the political content of the lyrics in hard rock tend to favor themes of alienation, but also devote relatively little attention to this area,[11] we expect rock audiences to fall between the extremes of folk and country/western audiences in terms of their alienation from politics.

Social alienation is a second broad concept which we incorporated into our analysis. For the purposes of this study, it is defined as a feeling of estrangement from society and "the culture it carries." The common ground underlying this estrangement is a consistent maintenance of unpopular and adverse attitudes toward familism, the mass media, current events, popular education, conventional religion, and nationalism.[12]

We focused on this attitudinal set in our analysis because researchers (1) have noted the disenchantment of substantial numbers of youth with many primary agents of socialization, and (2) have suggested that those students who are socially alienated reject the more conventional forms of mass media and turn toward music as their primary medium.[13] On the basis of the lyrical content of popular music, we predict that, since rock and folk music lyrics reportedly offer alternative life styles by stating new attitudes toward sex, drugs, and social relationships,[14] individuals who prefer rock and folk music will also demonstrate a high degree of social alienation. By the same "content" reasoning, those preferring country/western music, referred to as the "'Ballad of the Silent Majority," would be least alienated.[15]

The third relationship to be investigated in whether the kind of music one listens to is associated with the extent to which one employs female *sex-role stereotypes.* The sexist connotations of hard-rock have been duly

[9] See R. Serge Denisoff, "Folk Music and the American Left," in Denisoff and Peterson, *Sounds of Social Change.*

[10] See Paul DiMaggio, Richard Peterson, and Jack Esco, "County Music: Ballad of the Silent Majority," in Denisoff and Peterson, *Sounds of Social Change.*

[11] Cole, "A Content Analysis of Popular Music."

[12] The definition is adopted from Gwyn Nettler's "A Measure of Alienation," *American Sociological Review,* 22 (Dec., 1957), pp. 670–677; the measure of social alienation utilized in this study is Nettler's updated scale, reported in Charles M. Bonjean, Richard J. Hill, and S. Dale McLemore, eds., *Sociological Measurement: An Inventory of Scales and Indices* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1967).

[13] See Kenneth Keniston, *The Uncommitted: Alienated Youth in American Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), and Denisoff and Peterson, *Sounds of Social Change.*

[14] See for example, Carey, "The Ideology of Autonomy in Popular Lyrics," Goldberg, "Rock Music and Sex," and Roszak, *The Making of the Counter Culture.*

[15] DiMaggio, "Country Music."

explored by feminist critics.[16] Indeed, these authors refer to this form of music as "cock rock" and find it surprising that, although an aura of "revolution" is attributed to rock music in the 60's and 70's, this music has become "more blatantly, menacingly sexist than anything that had preceded it."[17] Not only the lyrics but the lack of female instrumentalists in rock music serve as clear indications of male chauvinism and control.

In contrast to rock, folk music has been not only a ready outlet for female performers who were excluded from the rock industry, but lyrically, folk music has also represented persistent attempts by performers to highlight the caste system between men and women in American society. Thus, we would predict that those rejecting traditional sex role orientations would prefer folk music over rock or country/western. Finally, country/western music seems to be one which, lyrically, clearly perpetuates concepts of traditional sex-roles between men and women, particularly in courting, family relations, and child rearing.[18] Thus, on the basis of such lyrical content, we would predict that those who favor traditional sex-role orientations would be *most* likely to prefer country/western music.

Finally, some authors have pointed to a new cultural orientation developing among youth in Western societies.[19] Seen as the development of a *"post-bourgeois" ideology*, it is defined as a trend toward the rejection of materialistic values, in favor of more participatory, "individual worth" values in society. Since content-analyses of lyrics both in rock and folk music have clearly demonstrated a trend toward rejection of materialistic values, we decided to examine this orientation in our analysis, predicting that those favoring a post-bourgeois ideology would favor rock and folk music, whereas those favoring a more materialistic orientation would favor country/western music.

PROCEDURES

Our initial sample consisted of 250 students enrolled in psychology and political science courses during the 1972–73 school year at the University of Arizona. The final sample count (eliminating incomplete questionnaires) included 131 men and 101 women, divided roughly equally between the two disciplines. No significant differences appeared between the two groups on any of the attitudinal measures. In terms of demographic characteristics, those sampled did not appear to be significantly different from those in other undergraduate majors at the University.

[16] For examples, see Marion Mead, "Does Rock Degrade Women?" *Journal of Sexual Behavior*, 1 (1971), pp. 28–31; Lester Bangs, "Women in Rock," *MS.*, 1 (Sept., 1972), pp. 23–26; Naomi Weisstein, "Feminist Rock: No More Balls and Chains," *MS.*, 1 (Oct., 1972), pp. 25–27.

[17] Weisstein, "Feminist Rock," p. 25.

[18] DiMaggio, "Country Music."

[19] In particular, see Ronald Inglehart, "The Silent Revolution in Europe: Intergenerational Change in Post Industrial Societies," *American Political Science Review*, 65 (Dec. 1971), pp. 991–1017. Inglehart's post-bourgeois ideology scale was adopted for this study.

The data were gathered from answers to a pencil and paper questionnaire which included the four attitudinal measures, as well as questions designed to tap types of music to which the subjects listened.[20] In addition, the questionnaire solicited information concerning age, sex, academic class standing, major, and grade point average. Data relevant to our hypotheses were analyzed by a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for each of the dependent variables (attitudinal measures).[21]

RESULTS

Using a one-way analysis of variance test (ANOVA) significant differences among groups based on their first choice musical preferences were found on the political alienation measure, the sex-role orientation measure, and the post-bourgeois ideology measure. Differences between groups were not significant on the social alienation measure, but the differences in mean scores between rock and folk preferences (7.09 and 7.24 respectively) and country/western (5.17) conformed to the predicted direction (see Table 1). Subsequent post-hoc analysis, utilizing Duncan's Multiple Range Test, further confirmed the predictions. Folk music listeners were most inclined to reject traditional sex-roles (mean = 117.62); country/western listeners were least inclined to reject traditional sex-roles (mean = 103.33), while rock listeners scored closer to the country/western group (mean = 109.37).

As predicted, a similar pattern held for political alientation. Folk listeners were most alienated (2.24), country/western listeners least alienated (1.08), and rock listeners fell between these two extremes, although—as predicted—closer to the folk group (2.18). The prediction concerning a linkage between post-bourgeois ideology and musical preferences was also corroborated by the data. Rock and folk listeners were more inclined to espouse a post-bourgeois ideology (2.30 and 1.85 respectively) than country/western listeners (1.50) although the differences between folk and country/western listeners were not statistically significant.

THE IMPACT OF MUSIC ON ATTITUDES

To this point, the study has dealt with preferences and attitudes of college youth at the turn of the 1970's, a time when music was associated with

[20] In order to assure that subjects classified the music they preferred to listen to into categories which were consistent with the authors' classification system, they were asked to list their favorite artists and circle the type of music each represented. The responses to this item served as a check for the questions on type of music preferred; we found a close relationship between the authors' and the respondents' classification systems ($r = .89$).

[21] All post-hoc tests were conducted using Duncan's Multiple Range Test. Since our measures involve both ordinal and interval data, there may be some question in the mind of the reader concerning the appropriateness of our statistical analysis. John Cohan, "Some Statistical Issues in Psychological Research," in Bernard Wolman, ed., *Handbook of Clinical Psychology* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965), pp. 95–121, provides an excellent discussion of the use of ANOVA in place of nonparametric statistics for ordinal data.

TABLE 1

Mean Scores and ANOVA Test of Significance on Measures of Social Alienation, Political Alienation, Attitudes Toward Women, and Post-Bourgeois Ideology by Musical Preference[a]

Rock N = 105	Folk N = 65	Country/Western N = 22		
	Social Alienation			
7.09	7.24	5.17	F = .93	NS
	Political Alienation			
2.18	2.24	1.08	F = 3.78	$p < .01$
	Rejection of Traditional Sex Roles			
109.37	117.62	103.33	F = 2.38	$p < .05$
	Post-bourgeois Ideology			
2.30	1.85	1.50	F = 2.39	$p < .05$

[a] Respondents who identified jazz and classical as their favorite types of music were removed from the analysis, since predictions were made on the basis of the lyrical "messages" within each category of music.

both youth and protest movements. The results of our research suggest that there are significant relationships between musical preference and selected attitudinal orientations of college students. However, we have been unable to shed any light on the *direction* of these relationships. Any of the following patterns are plausible:

(1) The "selective reinforcement" hypothesis: These relationships exist because students seek out music containing those lyrics which reflect their attitudes towards politics and social life; when those lyrics no longer reinforce these attitudes, students will search for music containing those lyrics which *will* reinforce their attitudes.

(2) The "symbolic" hypothesis: The relationship between musical categories and attitudes exists because students who identify themselves with certain types of music do so for symbolic reasons; for example, students who are conservative politically or socially perceive country and western music as conservative, and therefore express an affinity for this genre of music.

(3) The "causation" hypothesis: Students will expose themselves to types of music for reasons which may have nothing to do with the lyrical content of music (e.g. peer influence); however, continuous exposure to certain patterns of messages in the lyrics leads to the acquisition of new attitudes.

(4) The "two way flow" hypothesis: Students may expose themselves to music which—in terms of lyrics—is consistent with their attitudes. However, their affective orientation to certain types of music (e.g. rock) or artists (e.g. The Stones) is strong enough so that they continue to listen

to "their music" even when such music is undergoing substantial change. Prolonged exposure to the "new messages" will have an impact on attitudes in one of two ways: (a) either new attitudes—consistent with the new messages—will be acquired, or (b) the new messages will no longer reinforce existing attitudes. Since many students have rejected other agents of socialization, this lack of reinforcement may result in an atrophying of existing attitudes.

Both the "causation" (3) and the "two way flow" (4) hypotheses place the role of music in the perspective of being an important agent of socialization. Hypotheses 1 and 2, if valid, would relegate the role of music to an *indicator* of attitudes,[22] without any causal significance. In this research project, we did not have the type of long-term panel design which would have allowed us to test hypothesis 3 or 4. However, we were able to formulate a rough test of the first two hypotheses.

If musical messages do have an impact on attitudes and are not associated with attitudes solely because listeners select music for lyrics consistent with their attitudes, then we should find that:

(1) listeners would not choose their music primarily according to their lyrical content; and/or

(2) as the lyrics of the music change in a direction away from radical socio-political themes, no significant relationships between categories of music and these attitudes should be found.

To test the first condition, we asked our respondents on a forced choice item to tell us what was the primary reason they chose their favorite type of music. Only one in ten indicated that lyrics had anything to do with their choice. We removed this "lyrics conscious" group from the original sample and reran the analysis. The results for this subsample were identical with the results for the larger group, tending to disconfirm the notion that the relationship noted exists because the audience is tuning in for reasons associated with lyrical content.

The second condition—whether changes in musical lyrics were associated with changes in attitudes—proved to be much less ameanable to empirical observation. However, we encountered some profound changes on the music scene which simplified our task.

During the fall of 1974, with the assistance of a group of upper division students, we conducted a content analysis of the "top 40" singles and "top 20" albums currently on the charts, using the four measures of attitudes.

[22] For one major attempt to assess the utility of music as an indicator of attitudes, see Paul Hirsch, *et al.*, "A Progress Report on An Exploratory Study of Youth Culture and the Popular Music Industry," Survey Research Center, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1970. Most attempts to investigate the relationship between lyrics of "pop music" and audience attitudes have short-circuited over questions of whether the audiences listen to the lyrics and/or can understand the lyrics. For a discussion and critique of scholars who claim little or no audience awareness of lyrics, see Karen B. Mashkin and Thomas Volgy, "Music and Socio-Political Attitudes: Are the Lyrics Important?" pp. 114–116, in Thomas Volgy, ed., *Mass Media and Political Culture* (Tucson: Institute of Government Research, 1975, forthcoming.)

We found (1) not only very few total references to politics, sex-role orientations, or condemnations of materialistic life-styles; but (2) when those references were found, different categories of music (e.g. rock, folk, country/western) could no longer differentiate between the content of those messages. On the basis of this analysis and our own exposure to a large variety of music, we concluded that major changes had occurred in the content of popular lyrics: not only had ideological differences blurred across musical categories, but in addition, the radical themes associated with much of popular music had been replaced with more "entertaining" stories of adventure and personal experience.[23]

On the basis of these "observations," we generated another sample of undergraduates in the fall, using the same sampling criteria noted for the earlier survey of 1974, and administered a nearly identical version of the earlier paper and pencil questionnaire.[24] Assuming some sort of impact on attitudes on the part of music and recognizing that the lyrical differences across our musical categories had blurred, we were predicting that these categories would no longer predict to significant differences in socio-political attitudes among respondents.

It should be recalled at this juncture that our research is not based on a panel design. When we conducted our first survey, we guaranteed anonymity to our respondents; neither did we have the foresight at the time to anticipate the changes which would occur on the music scene. Therefore, we had no way of retrieving our original sample. To compensate somewhat for this problem, we generated our second sample using identical procedures, and in addition, we asked our respondents in 1974 whether their "favorite music" preferences had undergone any change in the last two years. We excluded from the analysis all those who responded to the above question in the affirmative. We felt that by restricting our analysis to those who reported *no changes* in their musical preference patterns, we would be working with a sample roughly comparable in musical preference to the 1972 group.

Table 2 highlights the results of our analysis; our three major categories of music types no longer constitute significant predictors of variance in attitudes among respondents. On the basis of these findings, we concluded

[23] A good illustration of this change is contained in one of the most successful albums of 1974, Bruce Springsteen's *The Wild, The Innocent, and The E Street Shuffle*. Others have also noted these changes; for example, see Karen Durbin, "Can A Feminist Love The World's Greatest Rock and Roll Band?" *MS.*, 3 (Oct., 1974), pp. 23–28. Unfortunately, we cannot provide any "hard" evidence to show that in 1972, these socio-political themes were not already changing. However, discussions with students in an upper division course on mass culture in 1972 did lead to widespread agreement that the "messages" we noted for different categories of music were very characteristic of those categories. A similar discussion in 1974 led to a widespread agreement in the course that the messages "disappeared."

[24] The second questionnaire did not contain the social alienation scale since the earlier analysis did not find any significant differences between social alienation and musical preferences.

TABLE 2

Mean Scores and ANOVA Test of Significance on Measures of Political Alienation, Attitudes Toward Women, and Post-Bourgeois Ideology[a] by Musical Preference for 1974 Sample[b]

Rock N = 52	Folk N = 23	Country/Western N = 17		
Political Alienation				
1.92	1.90	2.05	F = 1.60	NS
Rejection of Traditional Sex Roles				
114.60	115.19	108.28	F = 2.12	NS
Post-bourgeois Ideology				
1.61	1.66	1.85	F = .51	NS

[a] Our second survey did not include the social alienation measure since its relationship to musical categories in the earlier survey was not found to be statistically significant.

[b] Sample excludes respondents who claimed that their favorite music had changed in the last two years, or those who identified jazz or classical music as their favorite.

that significant relationships between musical preferences and attitudes were probably (1) not due to change; (2) not solely due to a singular search for music whose lyrics reinforce existing attitudes; (3) not solely due to a symbolic attachment to certain forms of music which may be perceived by the audience as consistent with their own attitudes without that music reinforcing those attitudes.

Admittedly, the data we are able to provide at this point lacks the power of a panel design and is still open to alternative interpretations. For example, we still cannot reject the possibility that due to some third variable, both lyrics and audience attitudes changed at the same time, but independently of each other. However, on the basis of our data, we do suspect that prolonged exposure to the lyrical content of music has some definite, reinforcing, or acquisitive consequence. Assuming the rejection of many of the conventional agents of socialization on the part of many college students,[25] we would argue that even the reinforcing function of music should be highly salient for students' growth and development.

CAVEATS

In conclusion, the reader is directed to several limitations of the present study. One major concern revolves around the fact that this study was con-

[25] Keniston, *The Uncommitted*. Whether Keniston's findings in the 1960's are applicable to our sample is arguable. However, the reader may note that the principal reason why musical categories were unable to significantly predict to social alienation of the audience is due to the relative homogeneity of the sample on Nettler's measure of social alienation. In other words, our sample does seem to reject many of Nettler's traditional agents of socializations.

ducted with a college sample confined to the University of Arizona. Although this group may be representative of students in general,[26] future research on a wider population is advisable, especially with regard to questions concerning societal norms.

Another major limitation, noted earlier, lies in the lack of longitudinal analysis of these patterns on individual respondents. Ultimately, questions dealing with cultural change can only be tackled with research designs which measure those changes over time in the maturation of individuals. Unfortunately, long-term panel designs require financial support of the scope which was not available for this study. It is our hope that others, with appropriate resources, will begin to chart the long-term impact of forces like music on the contemporary culture.

[26] For a discussion and analysis of the similarities between University of Arizona students and college students in general, see Thomas Volgy and Sandra Volgy, "Women and Politics" (Tucson: Institute of Government Research, University of Arizona, 1974).