

## *Chapter 5*

# **MUSIC AND ADOLESCENTS**

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## **Abstract**

The ways that adolescents engage with music can be understood through the use of two metaphors – music as a mirror that reflects self-knowledge, and music as a stage where identity is performed in relationship with others. Both of these functions contribute to the formation of adolescent identity by providing young people with opportunities to explore and express themselves in both public and private forums. Emotional engagement is an important part of the relationship between teenagers and their music, and many young people perceive music as a positive influence in their lives that supports pleasurable, as well as difficult experiences. A thorough review of the literature suggests that young people at risk of mental health problems may use music less effectively to modulate their mood and the results of music listening to feel better can be unproductive. The distinctions between the ways that teenagers use music reflect their personal state more than the characteristics embodied by particular musical genres such as metal and rap music. Music therapy studies suggest that active engagement in supported music experiences can assist vulnerable young people to overcome personal challenges, particularly when paired with a supportive group environment or an individually tailored program. As access to music improves through new technologies, the investigation of how young people use music as a health resource has become more critical than ever before.

## **Definitions**

### **What Is Adolescence?**

It is common to assume a shared understanding of what it means to be ‘adolescent’; however, many of the features associated with adolescence in popular psychology are culturally rooted and historically informed. Although adolescents are often described as

moody in nature, rebellious, and self-absorbed, these kinds of ‘storm and stress’<sup>1</sup> (Hall, 1904) interpretations have not been consistently identified across cultures. Margaret Mead’s (1973/1928) anthropological research on ‘Coming of Age in Samoa’ identified a complete lack of turmoil during the teenage years in Samoan culture, and she concluded that they did not experience adolescence at all. Similar results in other collectivist cultures have been drawn together by Robert Epstein (2007), who argues convincingly that the rebellious attitude associated with adolescence in contemporary western culture is a response to the lack of respect shown to young people who are as cognitively capable and emotionally mature as the adult population. He implies that differentiation from family is not a requirement of adolescence and laments the division that frequently occurs between young people and those that are most likely to be committed to their health and growth – parents.

Most developmental theorists regard differentiation as a necessary aspect of maturity however. Jane Loevinger explains adolescence in relation to ego development, theorising that identity forms in a sequence from self-interest through to conformity with the beliefs of others and on to the appreciation of multiple possibilities, transcending and incorporating both familial and peer beliefs (Kroger, 2004). Invariant sequences of development such as these are a trademark of developmental theory, of which Erik Erikson’s (1965) model of psychosocial development was the first to emphasize the social aspects of psychological growth. He highlights the importance of peers and family members in the achievement of a firm identity, noting that identity formation is a process negotiated by the adolescent in context with others. Role confusion is theorized to result if a young person does not feel understood by others, and Erikson particularly emphasized the importance of the young person achieving an ‘equilibrium’ between internal beliefs and “what they appear to be in the eyes of others” (p. 253, 1965).

This increasing emphasis on the opinions of others during adolescence can be understood in segue with Jean Piaget’s stages of cognitive development (Piaget & Inhelder, 1958), and is specifically related to adolescents emerging capacity for abstract, inductive thinking. Achieving a ‘formal operational’ stage of cognitive ability means the teenager is able to use meta-cognitive strategies – such as thinking about what oneself, and others, are thinking. Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky described this as having developed a level of formal-logical thinking that allows for self-analysis, with neo-Vygotskians completing the circle back to Erikson’s ideas through the suggestion that cognitive development occurs through social interaction with peers (Karpov, 2003). Robert Kegan also emphasizes the newly achieved cognitive potential of young people, but expresses the abilities of adolescents more practically. He highlights adolescents’ emerging ability to coordinate their activities with the needs of others (instead of only considering their own needs), although still making meaning of this relationship with themselves in the central position, at least initially (Kegan, 1982).

The importance of the relationship between an individual teenager and their peers is a persistent feature of adolescence, and acknowledgement of the cultural influences that shape development has become more than an ‘anthropological’ interest. Cultural consciousness expands understandings of the psychological dimension of adolescence beyond the 13 – 19 year old teenager grappling with the biological ramifications of puberty. These concepts

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<sup>1</sup> or ‘sturm und drang’ as Anna Freud describes it (1966), highlighting the similarities to the movement against the rationalism of the European Enlightenment in Germany in the early 1700s and towards an expanded appreciation of emotional urges

provide a deeper foundation for beginning to contemplate what role music might play in the formation of adolescent identity.

### **What Is Adolescent Music?**

Schuker (2001) provides a useful and concrete definition of the term 'popular music' – explaining that it simply means music that is popular with the masses. The term does not define genre specific characteristics because these change constantly in a reflection of current trends in preferences by the majority of individuals in a particular cultural group. A designated 'youth market' first emerged in the 1950s, with the powerful force of Rock 'n' Roll paving the way for creation of a new economic and social demographic. As popular music underwent another significant change in the mid 1960s, yet another division was created – between those who were under 18 and those who were slightly older and open to more challenging experimentations at the level of social acceptability. The 1980s saw a further market emerge on the scene, as pre-teens began to wield their considerable spending power. Thus adolescent music can be seen as existing at three levels – pre-teen, teen, and immediately post-teen groupings (Frith, Straw & Street, 2001).

Another feature of adolescent music that attracts more attention than its popular characteristics is the frequent expression of angst. James Lull (1987) explains the importance of suffering as a key feature of adolescent music because it is the only place in which conflict is expressed publically. Adolescent music describes topical issues for young people including sexuality, identity, drugs, religion, autonomy, individuality, family values, dancing, social change and drinking (Gold, Saarikallio, & McFerran, 2011). It is therefore not surprising that troubled teens listen to more music than their more fortunate peers (Behne, 1997; North & Hargreaves, 2008) and recent investigations of adult populations are providing further insight into this phenomenon (Saarikallio, 2010). A recent study of Australian youth (McFerran, O'Grady, Sawyer, & Grocke, unpublished) confirmed this documented trend, showing that teenagers who were most vulnerable to mental health problems listened for 10 hours more per week on average than those who were less vulnerable. The average listening time per week across the whole cohort was 17 hours, which matches estimates provided in a large scale study of 2465 younger teenagers where 2.45 hours per day was the average (North, Hargreaves and O'Neil, 2000). The Mp3 revolution will have had a significant impact on the listening habits of young people, but little large-scale data are yet available to document this relatively recent, significant phenomenon.

The final broad consideration regarding adolescent music is related to its longevity. Adrian North and David Hargreaves (2008) report that musical preferences become fixed during late adolescence and early adulthood, although it seems feasible that music from mid and early teenage years may also be significant. North and Hargreaves interpret their extensive body of literature as suggesting that teenagers do not necessarily become attached to the popular music of their decade, but rather, to the music that has been significant for them at a particular moment in their life. Erikson's (1965) concept of identity formation suggests that once established, identity is fixed, and music psychologists confirm that the musical roots are also firmly in place.

## **Reflection or Performance: The Mirror and the Stage**

For the purposes of this chapter, the literature describing the relationship between adolescents and music will be attributed to one of the two metaphors introduced above – descriptions of the intrapersonal, reflective aspects of the relationship, much like what one sees when looking in a mirror; and those that describe the interpersonal, performative functions that serve to enhance relationships with others, described as a stage. Both of these processes can be understood as supporting the process of identity formation, since psychologists of different orientations agree that this stage of development is rooted in personal discovery that takes place in a cultural context.

### **The Mirror**

The metaphor of the mirror has been used by Tia DeNora to explain the intrapersonal functions of music, in that it provides the opportunity to know oneself better. DeNora (1999) describes music as an external object that allows us to see ourselves from a helpful distance. When music functions as a mirror it reflects both significant experiences from the past (DeNora, 2000) as well as everyday experiences that enhance self-understanding. Listening to music creates opportunities to integrate the past and the present in a way that validates both whilst simultaneously allowing for personal growth.

Roe (1987) has also referred explicitly to the reflective properties of adolescent music in his investigation of Swedish teenagers. Rather than limiting the reflective explanation of music to the integration of past and present, Roe describes the ways that teenagers' self-perception is reflected in their musical choices both for the present and also, the future. Perceived social mobility and academic success were reflected in the musical choices made by the young people in his study and could be used to predict each one's future success. Those who nominated easily accessible styles of music as their favourite were more academically successful, while those that identified with isolating music felt more isolated from their peers and did not anticipate any improvements in the future.

Suvi Laiho (2004) offers another interpretation of the mirror metaphor by emphasising the emotional aspects of the reflection. In her review of the literature, she distinguishes four main psychological functions of music during adolescence rather than the two posed here. Similarly to this chapter, Laiho's model positions identity formation as the primary purpose for the relationship between teenagers and music, but places the emotional field in a central position, incorporating both pleasure and mood regulation. Interpersonal Relationships and Personal Agency are then depicted as secondary functions.

The idea that music choices reflect the emotional turbulence of the adolescent's life is a logical one (Gold, et al., 2011). Felicity Baker and William Bor (2008) have also suggested that adolescents' music preferences reflect their mental health status. Their proposal is based on an examination of the literature that posits a relationship between heavy metal music and emotional disturbance, as well as between rap music and antisocial behaviours. Although Baker and Bor emphasize the reflective aspects of these relationships, it is more common for pundits to interpret this relationship as causal. A significant body of literature has been devoted to the assumption that listening to particular types of music does not reflect the young person's identity, but rather encourages the young person to act in particular ways. The

music is considered to be a more powerful force than the individual consuming it, who supposedly acts in accordance with the manner subscribed by their musical choice.

In a review by David Bushong (2002), the literature describing popular music and antisocial behaviour was analysed with this possibility in mind. His cautious interpretation suggested that music does not 'create' disturbed behaviour, but that it does exert a powerful influence by creating a social discourse that describes and therefore validates negative behaviours. This position is upheld by the content of some lyrics found in the metal and rap genres that describe aggressive behaviours and misogynist attitudes, although there are many reasons that young people prefer particular songs and styles of music other than lyrical content (Brown & Hendee, 1989), and most do not believe that listening to lyrics could lead to homicidal or self-destructive behaviours (Wass, Miller, & Stevenson, 1989).

A rigorous analysis by North and Hargreaves (2008) delved further into the interaction between 'Problem music and subcultures' with the authors reaching a slightly different conclusion. They confirm that the literature consistently reveals a relationship between what they call 'problem music' and delinquent / criminal thoughts and behaviours. This correlation has been identified repeatedly in survey studies that ask a range of questions related to mental health status and separately, music preferences. When these findings are considered alongside experimental studies that are designed to examine causation (rather than simply correlation), it becomes clear that healthy teenagers are not likely to be impacted negatively by their music listening habits. However North and Hargreaves do note that the literature supports a premise that 'vulnerable' young people are at risk of being negatively influenced by listening to 'problem music'.

This more specific connection between vulnerable young people and unhealthy listening behaviour was supported by findings from a local Australian study (McFerran, et al., unpublished) of 111 adolescents aged between 15 and 18. Collecting data via an online survey, the investigators tested the hypothesis that adolescents were active in selecting music that matched and improved their moods, asking the young people to explain what types of music they listened to when sad, angry, happy, bored and stressed. Chi square tests revealed a significant association between adolescents whose mental health was rated as 'at risk' (using the Kessler 10 scale (Kessler, et al., 2005)) and a preference for heavy metal music. These young people were also the least likely to experience improved mood after music listening, and most frequently reported their mood deteriorating after listening. This contrasted with the medium to low risk groups, who usually felt better. Once again, this was a correlational finding that does not suggest metal music causes psychological distress, since not all the heavy metal fans were high-risk. Additionally, punk, heavy metal and alternative music preferences were nominated across all the categories as preferred listening when successfully managing moods of anger and sadness.

The concept of music as a mirror, reflecting adolescent identity, is based on a receptive premise. It assumes that music represents some internalized aspect of the young person – their history, their perceived future, their emotions or their mental health. This construct is built upon the kind of neo-Freudian roots that Robert Epstein has challenged in contemporary approaches to adolescence and he highlights the fact that many of the accepted beliefs about adolescence are reflected and reinforced by adult perceptions of adolescent music. Ethnomusicologists (such as Lomax (1976)) have made this point previously, explaining that cultural values are reflected in the musical attributes of national music. However it is possible to approach the topic of music and adolescent identity from a more empowering direction.

Replacing the metaphor of the mirror with the more actively constructed vestibule of a stage holds great appeal for this reason.

## **The Stage**

Ruud (1997) has described the use of music for the formation of identity as a performance. His initial investigations on this topic resulted in the suggestion that young people make active musical choices that express ‘what I want to be’ as much as ‘what I really am.’ The performance is of the individual-in-context, since musical preferences are a public, not private, expression (Ruud, 2010), and the experience is considered to be actively creating oneself anew rather than verbally narrating one’s history (Ansdell, 2003). Ruud (1997) reminds the reader that although their music preferences are personal and internal, they are expressed externally and in relation to others, and are therefore available to both friends and foe. Consciousness of external opinions about musical choices is particularly relevant for adolescents and research confirms that many younger adolescents believe their musical preferences to be strongly related to the preferences of their peers (Tarrant, North, & Hargreaves, 1999; Van Wel, Linssen, & Abma, 2004).

Frith (1981) has also elaborated on the external functions of music, although not explicitly discussing preferences as performance. Instead, Frith is most well known for the metaphor of music as a ‘badge of identity’. This use of music as a connecting strategy with peers was a primary focus of music sociology research during the 1980s when interest in the use of music by subcultures to confirm a shared identity was peaking (Roe, 1999). Frith described the ways that peer groups used music to communicate shared values, with a particular emphasis on the more stereotypically male genres of punk and rock. The use of music as a badge can have both positive and negative consequences, since strongly affiliating with a particular group inevitably means isolating oneself from another group (North and Hargreaves, 1999). Schwartz and Fouts (2003) suggest that eclectic music listening tastes reflect a more healthy mental health status for this reason, although this hypothesis has not been validated empirically.

The stereotyping of certain genres of music has captured the interest of investigators, partially because of the negative associations with problematic music explored above, but also those with an interest in more active constructions of peer group relationships. Some research supports the proposal that teenagers are aware of the performative aspects of their musical choices, since musical preferences expressed publicly differ from those that are confessed in private (Finnas, 1987; North & Hargreaves, 2000; Tarrant, North, & Hargreaves, 2000). Teenagers are also articulate about the nature of stereotypes associated with different genres of music and a high level of agreement has been identified in the ways that these are classified. Tarrant, North and Hargreaves (2001) explored these inter-group processes with a particular focus on differences in perceptions between boys of the ‘in’ and ‘out’ groups of an English secondary school. Stereotypes associated with different types of music were consistent across the two groups and all participants showed preferences for the types of music perceived most positively; it was simply that the ‘in’ group was agreed to like it more.

The contention that music preferences are a ‘performance’ of identity is not only limited to peer-connectedness and group affiliations. The construction of identity through music can also be understood in context of active mood regulation. Rather than music passively reflecting an

internal state of emotional turmoil, many young people describe using music intentionally to regulate and enhance their mood (see also chapter in this volume by Rickard). Suvi Saarikallio and Jaakko Erkkilä (2007) explored this premise as a result of the conclusions reached by Laiho (now Saarikallio) in her categorisation of the existing literature (noted above, Laiho, 2004). They asked eight Finnish teenagers about the importance of music in their lives, taking a non-directive approach to soliciting the opinions of the young people. Results showed that the primary function of music for these young people was mood regulation, with a focus on improving mood. The young people described using music in a way that was intentional but unconscious. Whilst they did not set out to improve their mood, they had a sense of what music they needed to listen to in order to feel 'good'. Their personal choices of music listening generally suited their mood and context in the moment, and although these choices varied as a result, their most preferred music was flexible to different situations.

The descriptions of how these healthy adolescents successfully modulate their mood contrast markedly with the correlations found between vulnerable teenagers and the potentially negative influences that listening may have. The results also challenge the assumption that vulnerable young people are passive in their receipt of the messages of problem music. Further results from a recent survey study by Saarikallio (2008) identified interesting relationships between adolescents' use of music for mood regulation and emotion regulation skills. A significant positive correlation was observed between music use for mood regulation and favorable emotion regulation skills such as reappraisal, as well as a negative relationship with the tendency to suppress one's emotions.

The application of music psychology in the form of music therapy interventions shows that professional support may be of assistance in modulating moods where the young person is unable to do so independently (Ansdell, Davidson, Magee, Meehan, & Procter, 2010). A brief sampling of comments collected from adolescents involved in music therapy research investigations illustrates this potential with vulnerable young people. Bereaved teenagers who have participated in music therapy say that "it makes me feel better – It helped me to get things off my chest so I could move on." (McFerran, 2011). Young people with learning disorders have used music to express themselves and quench their desire for power through "being in control" (McFerran, 2009). Young women with chronic eating disorders have used song writing to express "hope and dreams" for the future (McFerran, Baker, & Sawyer, 2006). Even adolescents with profound and multiple disabilities use music to communicate hidden potentials using unique musical strategies (McFerran & Stephenson, 2009).

## **The Relationship between Identity and Pleasure**

Although identity formation has consistently been argued to be a primary function of musical engagement by teenagers, young people themselves tend to describe their musical experiences using less artificial constructs. Not only do young people spend a remarkable number of hours listening to music, they also engage in music through playing instruments and singing – with 50% of the 2465 adolescents surveyed by North, Hargreaves and O'Neill (2000) reporting instrumental skills. Music seems to be especially and increasingly popular during adolescence (Tarrant, North, & Hargreaves, 2002) and have been rated as the most preferred indoor leisure activity for adolescents, although sports were even more favourably rated (Fitzgerald, Joseph, Hayes, & O'Regan, 1995). Larson (2000) highlights the importance

of structured leisure activities during adolescence for promoting the development of initiative, potentially leading to more positive youth development that encompasses a sense of personal agency and engagement.

Participation in music during adolescence can occur in many and varied ways, most of which are pleasure oriented. In discussion with two groups of older adolescents (totalling 300 18-21 year olds) participating in a University-wide subject called Music and Health, it became clear that the ways that young people used music varied in response to a number of factors<sup>2</sup> (McFerran, 23rd October, 2009). The individual's emotional state at the beginning of the music activity was an important influence on how musical engagement was experienced, with negative and positive moods creating different antecedent conditions. When engaging with music in a positive frame, this was usually maintained and a negative emotional state was usually improved. The nature of each individual's musical identity influenced this outcome however, and performing musicians were more likely to expend energy during the activity rather than generate it. The type of musical engagement also influenced the intensity of the outcomes from musical engagement, and this varied across dimensions of whether it was private or shared, playing or listening, and how critical the individual considered music to be in their lives. A model of musical engagement was developed based on the activities listed by the adolescents involved (as seen in Figure 5) and it was evident that the most common form of engagement with music was listening to recorded music when alone, either by oneself or in public.

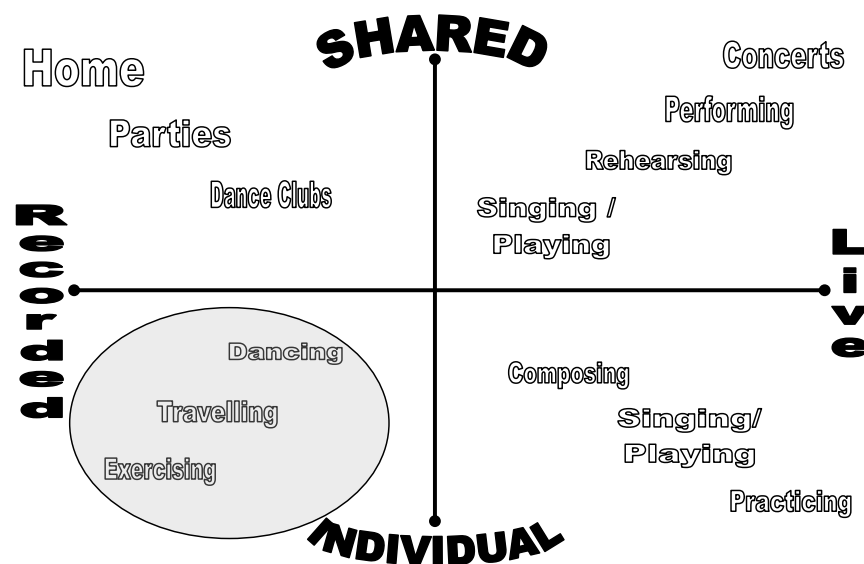


Figure 5. Common ways of engaging with music during adolescence.

The increasing use of private music listening through portable MP3 players is a phenomenon that has yet to be adequately explored. Studies are beginning to emerge as data is collected and analysed, such as an Skånland's (2010) investigation of MP3 listening by healthy adults in Norway. Participants explained that they used music listening in the 'here and now' to regulate their mood, adjust their energy levels and administer their emotions

<sup>2</sup> The 'Conditional Matrix' from Grounded Theory Analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to reach these conclusions.



(Skanland, 2009). A further function specific to MP3 listening was described as creating boundaries around themselves in public places, a finding confirmed by the young people contributing to the commentary on the Music and Health subject described above. A longer list of positive consequences identified by these young Australians included the following feelings:

- Transcendence
- Adrenaline Rush
- Relaxation
- Connection
- Feeling Understood
- Accepted
- Satisfied

Although the majority of outcomes were positive, some negative consequences were also identified, including feeling anxious and judged after public performances, or feeling deflated after listening. In sum, the relationship between musical engagement and identity was closely associated with expressing both positive and negative feelings and the use of music as a performance or a reflection was less prominent in these lay descriptions than in academic discourse.

**Box 5. Summary of key themes in this chapter**

- Teenagers do not necessarily become attached to the popular music of their decade, but rather, to the music that has been significant for them at a particular moment in their life
- Music is unlikely to 'create' disturbed behaviour, but it does exert a powerful influence by creating a social discourse that describes and therefore validates negative behaviours.
- Vulnerable young people are at risk of being negatively influenced by listening to 'problem music', listening to 10 hours or more music per week on average than those who are not 'at risk' of mental illness.

## Conclusion

The relationship between an individual teenager and her/his preferred music occurs in an inter-personal and cultural context. It is difficult to make generalizations about such a complex phenomenon and individual descriptions cannot easily be extended to a large group of people. Nonetheless, it is the highly individual nature of the relationship between a teenager and their music that marks it as an important part of the identity formation process. The particular type of music preferred by a young person is related to their history and their future, their self-perception, and their internal emotional state. Music also functions as a way of performing identity to others, controlling the image that is created through mood regulation and editing

personal preferences for public consumption. Although some commentators suggest that music primes a young person for problematic behaviours, teenagers themselves describe actively using music to positively modify their internal moods and overt behaviours. With increasing access to music being fostered via the MP3 revolution, it is important to consider both of these positions and to carefully investigate unhealthy uses of music. The revolution is also a cause for celebration, since most young people use music to make themselves feel better, and now they can do it more often and with more musical choices available.

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