Analyzing Perceptions of Music From a Songwriting Perspective

A Senior Project Presented to
The Faculty of the Communication Studies Department
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts

By
Jackson S. Reynosa
Spring 2020

Dr. Jnan Blau
Senior Project Advisor

Dr. Grace Yeh
Department Interim Chair

© Jackson Stephen Reynosa
ABSTRACT

This study seeks to understand listeners’ perceptions of music from a generational and songwriting approach. A total of 123 participants aged 18 and older took part in an open-ended survey design that measured their subjective music preferences. Four different sections tested participants’ music taste, music tied to generations, an original song made by the researcher, and songwriting in a holistic sense. It was found that participants exercised individualism and authenticity in their responses throughout. By using the Uses and Gratifications Theory, it is explainable that people listened and sought out music for their own unique reasons. By applying Mood Management Theory, it was found that a majority of participants listened to music for its ability to aid with their emotions. Finally, by using the Expectancy Violations Theory, this study found that people preferred to be surprised when they listened to a song—assuming they were already familiar with the song’s structure, and associated the surprise with positive sentiments.

*Keywords: Music, Songwriting, Music Preferences, Expectancy Violations Theory, Mood Management Theory, Generational Music, Uses and Gratifications Theory*
Introduction

Songwriting scholarship is generally an underdeveloped realm in academia. While nearly everyone listens to music, not many people acknowledge the source of their favorite songs. It is crucial to understand songwriting in its fullest form. While it is important to inspect the creative side of songwriting, it is also necessary to denote its practical and lucrative purpose. Many songs we hear on the radio were written for the sake of appealing to listeners all over the world. The creation of ‘Popular Music’ has thus perpetuated a systematic way of producing music for the masses. Ultimately, our music media is designed in a way that privileges a certain sound, a particular look, and a distinct style. This creates a large barrier to entry for any new musicians looking to penetrate this industry. Each decade or so, usually there are a select few artists that dominate the realm of Popular Music. This is due to their ability to maneuver through a system that honors a cookie-cutter way of doing things.

The most successful songwriters operate behind the scenes. They often take refuge behind bigger names who have credibility within the industry. For instance, songwriter Max Martin has written hits for Katy Perry, Taylor Swift, The Backstreet Boys, Britney Spears, and more (Getlen, 2015). There are a select few people who have their hand in nearly every song we hear on a daily basis. Whether we are aware of it or not, many of the world’s favorite artists are not entirely responsible for the songs they release and perform. According to writer Tim Ingham, of the U.S. top 10 hits chart in 2018, an average of 9.1 credited songwriters were used per song (Ingham, 2019). In essence, the hit songs we hear are very well-planned and well-thought-out.

While examining Popular Music can be useful, it does not encapsulate all of what songwriting has to offer. By solely appreciating songs for their ability to appeal to everyone, it is evident that we lose out on the authentic nature of music. The popular songs that get replayed on
the radio do not encapsulate all of what music has to offer. The beauty within the art lies in music’s ability to appeal differently to everyone. Listeners have such unique and eccentric taste, that it is unrealistic to assume everyone will prefer the same songwriting styles. The goal of this project is to understand songwriting in two different ways. First, it will aim to examine the specific criteria that has the ability to curate a widely-appreciated song. Secondly, it will understand the subjective preferences that listeners have when it comes to choosing their music. In doing so, the reader will gain insight on what an audience-preferred songwriting style is—all while recognizing and acknowledging the variation that exists between listener responses. Following a literature review that will introduce the reader to the ideas covered in this paper, an open-ended survey pertaining to music taste will be explained and concluded. Throughout this study, participants were asked questions that pertained to four categories: holistic music taste and habits, music in the context of one’s age group, an original song written by the researcher, and holistic songwriting preferences.

**Literature Review**

**Explicating Popular Music**

The term, ‘Popular Music’, is a collection of music that is distributed to the masses. Throughout time, Popular Music has increased its prevalence and power in our society. This is due to the genre’s purpose in its early stages—the roots of Popular Music were entirely founded on the basis of capitalistic intentions. British music critic, Peter Gammond, explains the linguistic history behind Pop music. He remarks, “the abbreviation ‘Pop’ was not in use as a generic term until the 1950’s when it was adopted as the umbrella name for a special kind of musical product aimed at a teenage market” (Gammond, 1991, p. 457). Beginning as a marketing
strategy, Popular Music has continually been able to infiltrate the media and manifest itself into our musical systems. Much like how large corporations control our world’s economy, the music industry is ruled by an elite few. Author Roy Shuker denotes these business moguls as ‘multimedia conglomerates’ (Shuker, 2012). An example of this is Warner Media—a multi-media corporation that controls a large part of the film and music industry. Their music brand, Warner Music Group, holds an incredibly strong position within the entertainment industry. The Warner Music Group is so successful, that they are a parent company to the very highly accredited label, Atlantic Records (GiGlue, 2017). Essentially, the companies with large media presence have more opportunity to mass-produce and distribute songs. This is due to their ability to meet the initial capital demands for top-notch recording, songwriting, and talent. In addition to this, their connections with media allows them to find success in circulating their music throughout society. Thus, it is transparent that Popular Music is controlled by those with the most resources and connections within the industry.

In essence, Popular Music isn’t bound to a single, specific genre. It is one of its own, since it depends on the tastes and trends that are ever-changing in the world. Authors Stuart Borthwick and Ron Moy understand Popular Music as something that is bound to the reproduction of social relations (Borthwick & Moy, 2004). Throughout time, society undergoes numerous historical, political, economic, and social changes, that is reflected in the music being mass-produced and distributed. It is very evident that music imitates life. The Beatle’s decision to release the song “Revolution” in the 60’s was a direct response to the Vietnam War. Likewise, the BritPop invasion in the 90’s featured a popularized new style, in a “right place, right time” fashion.
Every generation has a different definition of what Popular Music should be. The Popular Music on the radio today does not reflect what it was even a decade ago. The Taylor Swifts and Lady Gagas of the world were once Nirvana, Devo, or The Cure. In essence, while new trends have replaced older ones, Popular Music still seems to operate the same. Author David Pattie asserts that “the medium appears so different should not mask the fact that, at base, the deep structures of the market have remained relatively unaffected.” (Pattie, 2015, p. 305). The music industry’s job is to keep up with listener’s current demands. They do so very systematically, in which artists are thrown into the industry and given the necessary resources to sell music to a large audience. Moreover, the choice to include certain artists in this process is up to a select-few people. Author Roy Shucker notes how “the music industry has a number of gatekeepers, [that make] the initial decision about who to record and promote” (Shucker, 2012, p. 141). It is no secret that these gatekeepers hold an immense amount of power in this regard.

Popular Music is a genre that has been created in order to profit off of society. In the words of author Simon Frith, “Pop Music now [has] a different audience with different kinds of expectations” (Frith, 2016, p. 196). The songs heard on the radio are tailored towards those who are more likely to be good fans— the music industry has an expectation that listeners will buy into certain artists. Whether it be through buying merchandise and records, or attending concerts, artists under record labels are marketed and sold like a product. The debate over whether or not Popular Music serves a positive purpose for society is entirely subjective and unanswerable. At one point in time, Popular Music embodied society, and society reciprocated their dedication to it. However, the genre in its modern stage has continually been critiqued for its inauthenticity and ‘sell-out’ strategies. Many people choose to identify with modern Popular Music, while many don’t. A KCPR radio writer, Tristan Noak, asserts that a meta-modern stance on Popular
Music views the genre as an authentic and valuable form of music (Noak, 2016). In other words, there are many people in this generation that identify with Popular Music. With this being said, the potential for polarized views on this subject is maximized—people choose to like or dislike Popular Music largely based on their own subjective perspectives and life experiences.

**Explicating Songwriting**

Songwriting is a skill that comes with experience and practice. Through trial and error, songwriters come to understand what strategies work and what strategies don’t. Like any other art form, songwriting success is somewhat dependent on the artist—it is up to them to figure out what their ‘sound’ is, and how to get to a place where they feel comfortable in their process and proud of their creation. The importance of individual songs in our music culture has heightened over the past few decades. Especially in the streaming age, there is an ever-growing importance of ‘singles’, and a lack of emphasis on ‘albums’ (Hughes & Keith, 2019). At one point in time, listeners had no other option but to buy or listen to an album fully through on a CD or record. Now that listeners can maneuver through a streaming environment that allows them to pick and choose individual songs, single songs have become much more important. The new item on many artists’ minds is: “how can I/we capture and maintain the attention of a new listener with one song?”

Songwriting is largely dependent on the society in which one resides. Due to music’s saturation in our society, songwriters consistently draw inspiration from other musicians in the field. Many people argue that songwriting is a completely self-induced, creative process. While this is true, this paper seeks to understand how songwriting can be analyzed through societal standards. Songwriting professor Phillip McIntyre understands songwriting as an approach that is
more social than personal. Since society poses a strong influence over one’s ability to produce something completely authentic, he believes that creativity is communal (Mcintyre, 2019). Whether they know it or not, many great songwriters produce songs that are familiar to people. Many songwriting tactics have become standardized in order to elicit a strong, positive response from listeners. For instance, the ‘Discriminant Recognition Pattern’ is when a song carries the right amount of stimuli needed for a listener to attend to it (Harrison, 2018). Another theory mentions how multiple factors combined can make way for a great song. The ‘Multiple Intelligence Theory’ proposes that good songs contain linguistic-verbal skills, chord knowledge, interpersonal skills, and intrapersonal skills (Harrison, 2018). The ability for a songwriter to excel, we thus see, is a more complex process than one might think. There are multiple components that one can or should recognize and attend to if they wish to reach listeners in a profound way. Like writing a book or giving a speech, songwriting depends on an ability to establish a compatible relationship between the listener and the song.

While songwriting ability can be improved through education and practice, experience plays a significant role. It is clear that the best songwriters in the industry have had years of experience. Singer-songwriter and author, John Braheny states, “[songwriters] have been emotionally affected by so many great songs for so long that they instinctively know, for instance, when there 'needs' to be a chorus or bridge, when a lyric or line could be stronger, etc” (Braheny, 1990, p. 8). At this point in their training, a songwriter’s ability becomes second-nature. From here, every choice a songwriter makes is a ‘feeling’ that can’t necessarily be explained by logic. Songwriting is an incredible outlet to explore oneself and create a product for others. The very thought of starting and completing a new song is an enthralling experience for many people. The in-between processes of writing a song are always a subject to frequent
changes. A song undergoes numerous changes between the moment it is written to the time it is tracked and mastered (Tobias, 2013). More often than not, a song will undergo constant manipulations until it is finally recorded and distributed. Whether the song is written in a more raw form and transcribed into a recorded format, or written in a studio environment with all resources accessible on site; different songwriters use different strategies to make their product.

Expectancy Violations Theory

Developed in 1993 by Judee K. Burgoon, Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT) examines how people will respond if their expectations are violated in a social setting (Burgoon, 2015). When a violation occurs, a person will assess and prioritize either the negative or positive valence of this occurrence. In music scholarship, limited research has been done regarding EVT and music listening. However, a small pool of studies have examined the melodic value of a song to understand how people constantly judge music by its complexity or simplicity. One computer model was able to identify a song’s complexity with 46%-74% accuracy upon hearing it (Eerola, 2016). While humans aren’t computers, we still have our own innate judging systems we abide by. When people hear music, they automatically are able to form an opinion on whether the song sounds repetitive, if, say, it is too quirky and flashy, or if it has the right combination of both.

When people listen to music, they often hold certain expectations of a song. As listeners, we not only respond to the sound sequences we have already heard, but we make internal predictions on the sequences still to come (Omigie, Pearce, & Stewart, 2012). These expectations can alternately be unmet, met, or excelled by the songwriter. Expectancy Violations Theory can thus be incredibly important to consider when discussing recorded music. When a large effort is made by an artist to write, record/produce, mix, master, and distribute songs, it is very realistic to
accept the songs we stream online as being in their final form. Since a great deal of effort went into the song’s process, each artist has an underlying motive for releasing the songs they do. When our expectations are violated within a song (for better or for worse), it is evident that the artist intended to evoke this response from us. One study saw how in live performances, “the intention to produce specific auditory effects leads to stronger expectancies” (Maidhof et al, 2010, p. 2401). In a live, professional setting, it is very necessary that an audience and the performer would have a high set of expectations of the musical experience. However, under a recorded format, this attention to detail is even more heightened. While the expectations each listener holds are very subjective and personal, everyone has a pre-written blueprint for how they wish a song should go. When we listen to our favorite band’s new single for the first time, we are usually listening actively to see where they take the song, and why they take the song to the place they did.

A primary assumption of this theory is that people hold expectations of the world around them. EVT pioneer, Judee K. Burgoon states how these expectations “serve as perceptual filters, significantly influencing how social information is processed” (Burgoon, 1993, p. 32). Not only are people aware of their own expectancies, but they use them to critically examine the sources of stimulation that exist around them. In the context of this project, EVT depicts how listeners wholeheartedly critique the music they are exposed to on a regular basis. One’s own innate set of expectancies gives them the opportunity to classify whether certain infringements ought to be positively or negatively perceived. By understanding this, it is possible to see why listeners choose to discard certain music and accept others.
Uses and Gratifications Theory

Researcher Alan Wells examines music as a “self-administered psychotherapy— that works” (Wells, 1990, p. 116). Music serves the purpose of achieving the goals of the listener. Listening to music is entirely voluntary, and people choose to do it because it improves their lives in some way or another. This coincides very well with Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), which examines how and why people choose to attend to or consume certain types of media. This theory asserts that media curators’ primary role is to fulfill the needs and motivations of the audience (Mehrad & Pegah, 2016, p. 2). The music industry has continued to take notice of the premise that this theory exerts—thus, their main goal is to introduce artists and songs that people will find value in, and consume for their own personal benefit.

In UGT research that involves music, very rarely do participants listen for the same reason— it is innate that people listen to music for different purposes. Researchers Adam Lonsdale and Adrian North conducted a thematic analysis of UGT in music listeners. Through an open-ended study design, they found that “participants reported listening to music as a means to manage their mood, to provide background noise, to accompany another activity, to participate in musical behaviors, to reflect on the past, to enjoy the music, to encourage social interaction, and as a distraction” (Lonsdale & North, 2011). In accordance with other music research, UGT is often measured by allowing participants to log free-response answers. In doing so, participant responses hold a sense of authenticity and individuality. This upholds UGT’s dedication to the variability within answers, and one’s intuitive stance on why they listen to music. In essence, while music can serve a variety of purposes for its audience, UGT theorizes why some people might use it for different reasons than others. In order to fully gauge this in the context of music,
it is necessary to understand the pre-existing needs participants have, and how they use music to satisfy these needs.

**Mood Management Theory**

This theory posits that people selectively attend to certain media in order to reinforce, validate, or offset their current mood states (Zillmann, 1988). Music has the capability to aid with people’s affective states. Multiple studies have found music to have a therapeutic quality to it. One study, for example, proved that adolescents use music to satisfy social and emotional needs (Tarrant, North, and Hargreaves, 2000). It is very evident that teenagers use music for the sake of validating the feelings they have. In addition, this showcases how music continues to reinforce our psychological needs from an early age and throughout our lifetimes.

As listening habits have continued to change with new technologies, the emotional impact has heightened. With the coming of iPods and other handheld musical devices, people are now able to carry this emotional aid with them at all times (Bull, 2005). As opposed to stationary listening tactics that were once common, this mobility has allowed people to listen to their music anywhere, and at any time. This has proved to be essential for those who depend on music to supplement their day-to-day activities. The increased accessibility of music in today’s society has thus allowed for people to become reliant on a source from which they derive happiness (or sadness).

Another study on Mood Management Theory examined how people utilize music depending on their mood. Researchers Knobloch and Zillmann found that participants in bad moods were more likely to listen to joyful music for longer periods than those in good moods (Knobloch & Zillmann, 2002). In this instance, participants used music for its inverse effects.
When those in a bad mood listened to happy music, they were attempting to reverse the state of their feelings. Depending on a listener’s preferences, they can either choose to aid sad feelings with sad music, or try to offset this mood by listening to happy music. Nonetheless, music’s role in supplementing one’s state of emotion is quite significant.

In essence, three theories can effectively explain how people attend to music, and why they respond to it in the way they do. The Expectancy Violations Theory explains how listeners set forth their own expectations when attending to music. As a byproduct of this, listeners become hypersensitive music critics in this sense—when violations to these expectations are made, the listener judges the song for better or for worse. The Uses and Gratifications Theory notates how listeners have certain needs that must be satisfied by listening to music. While people attend to music for different reasons, there is always an underlying motive for listening to the type of music they do, and in the particular setting they do. Finally, Mood Management Theory explains how people use music to balance, or aid their affective states. In doing so, it is evident this theory reinforces an aspect of UGT—listeners’ music choices depend on their own desires, needs, and preferences. Later in this paper, these three theories will be discussed in relation to the survey.

**Methods**

In order to understand participant music tastes and preferences, a google forms survey was created and distributed online. The participants for this study were gathered through a snowball sample, in which the survey was administered in a way that sought to gain as much traction as possible. The link for the survey was distributed to the online settings, Instagram and Reddit, as well as other more direct forms of contact (texting, calling, word-of-mouth). In total,
123 adult participants over the age of 18 took part in this study. To maintain integrity within this study, all answers were kept anonymous and voluntary throughout. The only personal information asked of participants was the year in which they were born—a question that understood music preferences across a generational divide. Furthermore, and in accordance with the accompanying Institutional Review Board consent form, the questions in this study primarily targeted the subjective experiences felt by music listeners. In this respect, this study’s methods can be better characterized as more of a survey than a questionnaire—questions were posed to understand each person’s experience, with no one ‘right’ answer.

**Music Preferences**

On the survey, seven questions pertaining to musical preferences were asked. These questions ranged from understanding one’s basic listening habits to aspects of their musical taste. The first question in this section asked, “Do you consider yourself to be an active music listener?” Participants were given the opportunity to self-label their listening routines, with the answer choices being “yes”, “no” or “somewhat.” In asking this question, it was hoped that participants would reflect on something they probably aren’t used to being asked. By leaving the term, ‘active’, to an open-interpretation, participants had to place judgement on their own listener profile. The next question asked, “How often do you feel you listen to music?” Adverbs of frequency were provided as potential answers for this question: “always”, “often”, “sometimes”, “rarely”, or “never”. Similar to the first question, this sought to understand how people self-classify their own listening rituals. The third question pondered, “How often do you seek out new music?” Responses were categorized amongst the same adverbs of frequency used previously: “always”, “often”, “sometimes”, “rarely”, or “never”. This question intended to grasp
whether participants were enthralled in the experience of constantly updating their music profile. In doing so, this study could gauge how interested participants were in listener culture—a culture that generally champions new musical discoveries. The final question of this section asked, “What is your favorite setting to consume music in?” For this, a short text box was provided in order to give participants a chance to specify and elaborate based on their own desires.

The next three questions were more specific to musical tastes and preferences. The first question was, “What is your favorite genre of music currently?” For the sake of sorting replies, the survey provided numerous genres for potential answers, with an option to write-in. The next answer asked, “What is your favorite musical artist at the moment?” This question was answerable through a short, customizable text box to allow for variability and authenticity in responses. Similarly, the final question asked, “What is your favorite song at the moment, and who is it by?” Responses were left open-ended for this question as well.

Music and Generational Differences

This section of the survey pertained to musical outlooks that are marked by age and generational differences. Each of the questions in this section were left open-ended—a larger text box was provided for participants to customize their response to the degree they felt comfortable with. The first question asked, “What year were you born in?” Not only does this question provide for a starting point to detect age, but it sets up the next question: “What genre of music do you feel best defines your generation?” This was implemented to gain an understanding of each person’s subjective experience with popular music culture in their generation. Likewise, the next question asked: “What artist(s) do you feel best defined your generation?” The wording of
this question allowed for participants to put more than one artist if they felt that was necessary. The last question of this section asked: “Do you feel you identify with the musical tastes and preferences of your generation? Please feel free to elaborate and explain why or why not.” As stated, the purpose of this question is to foster authenticity and subjectivity within answers. This was asked in order to understand whether people related to the music that held a stronghold in their generation, or if they went against the grain.

Song Analysis

In this section, participants were instructed to listen to an original composition made by the researcher. Following this 3 minute, 45 second song, numerous questions were asked regarding each participant’s listening experience. This section pertains to songwriting preferences entirely based on a pre-recorded song. Before listening, they were told to take note of the timestamp they enjoyed most in the song. This way, it would be possible to note which points in the song were overwhelmingly enjoyed by the majority. Another question sought to understand how the song could’ve been improved, or areas which it excelled: “What did you like or dislike about the song?” The next four questions tested listener feedback to specific musical categories of the song. A linear scale of 1 to 5 was used to gauge responses, with a 1 being “Very Poor”, and a 5 being “Excellent”. The first of these four questions asked, “How would you rate this song's lyrical content?” The lyrics for this song are in reference to a story created by the researcher (TEXT 5A). The next question stated, “How would you rate this song's chord quality?” This was described as the songwriter’s decision to use particular chords in the song (IMAGE 5C). The next question asked, “How would you rate the songwriter's choice to make this song in the tempo it is at?” Since the tempo of this song was at 120 beats per minute, the
decision to include this was for the interest of understanding the tempo preferences amongst participants (IMAGE 5B). The final question asked, “How would you rate this song's structure?” The song structure was very similar to other popular songs: often utilizing a verse→ prechorus→ chorus circulation of parts (IMAGE 5B).

In order to test Expectancy Violations Theory, a small Rap verse was inserted in the song from 2:24-2:39. This part shifts the song’s major tonality to minor, and has an entirely different feel to it. For the sake of this study, this part sought to catch listeners off-guard, and allow them to assess whether this violation was positive or negative for their listening experience.

**Songwriting Analysis**

The final section of this survey examined songwriting preferences from a more holistic perspective. Participants were asked three questions regarding what musical characteristics they enjoy most in a song. The first question asked, “What is the most important aspect to you in a song?” Possible answers for this question were: “lyrical content”, “chord quality”, “tempo”, “song structure”, or the chance to write-in an answer. Essentially, this question’s intention is to understand which musical characteristics people prioritize in their listening experience.

The second question asked, “Why do you listen to the music you listen to?” The answers that were provided presented the participant with 5 major themes. The first theme was “[a song] supplements my mood or feelings”. Sometimes, people seek out songs that supplement their emotions or general state of being. The next answer was, “[a song] serves a particular function”. This examines a song’s practicality in achieving the goals of the listener. For instance, an example of this would be listening to fast-paced EDM (electronic dance music) while exercising to increase energy and motivation. A third theme revolved around the nostalgia-factor that many
songs have. This answer stated, “[the song] allows me to reminisce on a time in my life”. Very frequently, songs have an ability to remind a listener of a certain person or place— in this case, it would make sense that certain people would seek out songs that hold sentimentality. The fourth answer revolved around a song’s ability to captivate listeners. It stated, “[the song] has catchy parts, and I can sing along to it”. In this instance, many songs can be judged by their potential to reach an audience through appealing and vibrant hooks. The final answer for this question stated, “I personally resonate with the song’s meaning”. This has more-so to do with lyrical content, and an attention to the motive of the song. In addition to this, a write-in answer was also available for participants.

The last question in this section read, “What type of songwriting style best fits your preference?” Three choices were presented for this question: emphasis on structure, emphasis on quirkiness, and emphasis on hooks. Each of these are detailed below.

**Emphasis on Structure:** sections are often repeated and a listener can easily follow and expect certain parts to occur (there is usually a clear repeating verse and chorus).

**Emphasis on Quirkiness:** music is unconventional, unpredictable, and there are many surprises that occur within the song.

**Emphasis on Hooks:** the middle ground between what a listener expects to happen, and new parts that surprise the listener.

The decision to divide songwriting styles into three choices coincides with personal experience of being both a listener and a songwriter. Many people prefer to listen to music that has an emphasis on structure— this music is set-in-stone, repetitive, and predictable. A common characteristic of these songs is their ability to be sung along to. The songs that fall within this category are often featured on modern Pop radio. An example of a song is “Shape of You” by Ed
Sheeran, which features a consistent melody with no drastic change. Reversely, an emphasis on quirkiness is the exact opposite—this type of music is unconventional and rarely maintains the same melody and song structure throughout. These songs can sometimes be hard to follow for listeners—however, this is a quality that can be considered appealing by many listeners’ standards. This quirkiness is showcased the song “Oulala” by the band, Vundabar. Finally, an emphasis on hooks is the middle-ground between these two choices. In this category, songs are traceable, yet novel at the same time. Many songs that hold this quality are able to communicate the melody and structure to the listener, while maintaining their interest by inserting occasional hooks. These three categories were created for this study in order to gauge how participants will prefer each type of style. Due to its middle-ground songwriting philosophy, this study predicts that an ‘emphasis on hooks’ will be the preferred choice.

Results

Music Preferences

The first question asked, “Do you consider yourself to be an active music listener?” 123 responses were logged for this question (CHART 1A). Overwhelmingly, 110 participants classified themselves as very active listeners, or 82.9% of the population. 17 participants considered themselves to be an active listener to some degree (13.8%). A smaller group of 4 participants did not consider themselves to be active listeners at all (3.3%). The next question gauged the frequency of people’s listening habits. Another 123 responses were logged in response to this question, “How often do you feel you listen to music?” (CHART 1B). 47 participants indicated that they always listen to music (38.2%). 61 participants responded that they listen to music often (49.6%). 14 people responded that they only sometimes listen to music
(11.4%). Only 1 person indicated they rarely listen to music (0.8%). No participants responded that they never listen to music. The same sample size of 123 applied to the third question, which asked, “How often do you seek out new music?” (CHART 1C). 26 people stated that they always seek out new music (21.1%). 49 people indicated that they often seek out new music (39.8%). 36 people felt that they only sometimes seek out new music (29.3%). 12 participants indicated that they rarely seek out new music (9.8%). No participants responded that they never seek out new music.

The next question asked after preferred genres amongst participants (CHART 1D). 122 people took part in this question, and there was a high degree of variability within the results. 18 people stated that Pop music was their preferred genre (14.8%). 38 people responded that Rock was their favorite type of music (31.1%). 5 participants put Rap as their favorite genre (4.1%), whereas 4 people put Rhythm and Blues (3.3%). 9 people (7.4%) responded that Electronic Dance Music was their genre of choice. 3 respondents stated that Classical music was their favorite (2.5%), and 7 more implied that they identified most with Folk music (5.7%). The remaining 31% of participants were very split on their preferences in genres. Metal music made up (3.3%) of this chunk, with 4 participants stating they enjoyed it most. 8 participants wrote-in Alternative music (6.6%), whereas 5 people wrote-in Indie music (4%). Other notable mentions were Funk music (2 people, 1.6%), Country music (2 people, 1.6%), subgenres of Metal (2 people, 1.6%), subgenres of Punk (3 people, 2.4%), and Film Score/Musical Theatre (2 people, 1.6%). One participant responded “I don’t care about genres”. Another participant stated that depending on their mood, they looked for different genres. Finally, one person stated that they appreciated all genres.
The next question sought to understand each participants’ favorite musical artists. Since responses were so distinct from one another, it was rare to see any overlap between answers. Pop singer, Dua Lipa, was the only solo artist that appeared twice. The only group that appeared twice was the Blues Rock band, Alabama Shakes. In general, participants’ favorite artists coincided with their preferred musical genre. For instance, if the respondent put ‘Rock’ as their favorite genre, they were more likely than not to put a Rock band as their favorite artist. On the topic of favorite songs, participants were also prone to put songs that reflected their favorite artist. This occurred numerous times—one respondent put Gorillaz as their favorite band, and “Aries” by Gorillaz as their favorite song. Similarly, one participant whose favorite artist was Billie Marten put her favorite song as “Mice” by Billie Marten. Also, it was common that participants responded with a song that corresponded to the genre of their favorite artist. For instance, one person put their favorite artist as Carly Rae Jepsen, and their favorite song as “Lover” by Taylor Swift. Since both are pop singers, this goes to show how some people stick to genres they know and enjoy. Other times, participants chose entirely different music choices for their favorite artists and songs. This occurred in one respondent’s answer, who put Brittany Howard as her favorite artist (a Folk and Rhythm and Blues musician), and “German Love” by STRFKR as their favorite song (a Neo-Psychedelia and Synth-Pop band). This level of contrast was also prevalent in another answer which had a Rapper, Holly Hood as their favorite artist, and “Science Fiction,” by the band, Arctic Monkeys, as their favorite song.

The final question in this section asked participants, “What is your favorite setting to consume music in?” While responses were left open-ended, six recurring themes were manifested in answers. Since participants were allowed to place multiple answers if they chose to, the following data examines how many times each theme was brought up in responses. The
most prevalent answer fell into the category of listening to music during transportation. 53 respondents alluded that they listened to music while on the move—many people in this category preferred to listen to music while driving in the car, taking a walk, or riding the train. The second most popular answer fell into the category of using music as a supplementary source to aid with other activities. 37 people indicated that they liked listening to music while doing something else. Amongst these answers were: listening while doing chores, showering, doing homework, or browsing the internet. The next popular answer was listening to music while at home, or in a calm, sedentary setting. 36 people included this theme in their answers, with the majority stating they listen while in bed, or while lying on the floor. In the fourth theme, 11 participants concluded that they would listen to music anywhere and anytime. The fifth theme revolved around exercising, and using music to aid with a workout of some sort. 7 people alluded to this theme in their answers. Finally, the sixth theme was listening to music in an event-related atmosphere. 6 people preferred to listen to music in this kind of lively environment—like a concert, bar, or nightclub.

### Music and Generational Differences

In order to understand music and generational differences, participants were asked of their birth year (CHART 2A). Out of the 122 people who answered this question, more than 74% of respondents were born between 1997 and 2002. The remaining 26% were born from 1948 to 1996. It was very apparent that the age distribution favored younger participants over older participants. 21.3% of participants were born in the year 1998—an indication that the researcher’s own birth year influenced the age group that the study was primarily distributed to. The next question stated, “What genre of music do you feel best defines your generation?” In
this section, participants were given the opportunity to place multiple answers. The Pop genre showed up in 54 people’s answers— an indication that Pop music is considered to be very prevalent and widespread in the lives’ of many participants. The next most popular answer was Rap music, which 30 participants put. In both of these categories, nearly all participants were born past the year 1997. Hip-Hop was the third most seen answer, in which 12 participants all born within the 1990’s answered as such. A very interesting feature on this section was the older generation’s answering habits. One person born in 1964 listed their generation-defining genres as Punk and New Wave music. In addition, 6 different people alluded to Grunge music as being a generation-definer, with a majority of people answering being born from 1974 to the early 1990’s. Another respondent, born in the year 1968, viewed Classic Rock as a genre that defined their generation.

The next question asked, “What artist(s) do you feel best defined your generation?” A variety of answers were observed in this section and like previous sections, participants were advised to list as many artists as they saw fit. The top answers were Drake and Taylor Swift, who were each listed 10 times by participants. The next popular answer was Rihanna, Lady Gaga, and Kanye West, who each were mentioned 8 times, then Justin Bieber and Beyoncé, who were both listed 6 times. Not surprisingly, nearly all of these responses were given by participants who were born in the mid-1990’s or later. A respondent born in 1964 put the Sex Pistols and Madonna as their genre-defining artists, whereas a person born in 1968 put U2, Van Halen and Def Leppard. A few respondents born in 1983 viewed Radiohead as their genre’s main artist, and numerous late 1980’s/early 1990’s babies paid homage to N’Sync and the Backstreet Boys. The artist that saw the most spread was Britney Spears, who garnered recognition from people born

The final question in this sequence pondered whether or not participants felt they self-identified with the musical tastes and preferences of their generation. 28 participants responded that they did identify with the musical tastes of their generation (24.5%). In contrast, 45 participants felt that they did not identify with the musical tastes of their generation (39.5%). Another 39 people stated that they somewhat identified with the musical tastes of their generation (34.2%). Many respondents went into detail on their answers in this section. One respondent who was born in 1979 wrote: “Yes [I do identify with my generation’s music tastes]. For a very brief moment in time, people started becoming androgynous. Men and women wore baggy clothes, had long hair, wore makeup… millennials have no clue.” Another participant, born in 1983, who identified with their generation’s music taste stated, “Yes, actually the older I get the more I identify with my youth's music. Petty squabbles between the styles back then lose their significance, while the general nostalgia and the ‘we were better than you punks are now’ feelings get stronger.” Both of these answers showcase how many older generation participants felt a strong dedication to their age’s music—one respondent saw their commitment occur as a youth, and the other, later in life.

Reversely, one response indicated how someone can go from identifying with their generation’s music at a young age, to branching off from this music later in life. A participant born in 1995 stated “No, [I don’t identify with the music tastes of my generation]. When I was a kid I was very into pop music and whatever was trendy with my peers. But as I’ve gotten older and reached adulthood, I’ve realized that my taste is very different now, and I don’t actually listen to too much pop music.” Other participants felt themselves in the middle-ground between a
“yes” and “no” answer for this question. One participant born in 2001 voiced, “Somewhat. I don't really care what other people are into. I just listen to what I like. It's cool when I like a popular song though because I don't listen to a lot of popular stuff.” Another participant, born in 1998, expressed: “To an extent - I enjoy pop music, though it isn't what I consume most. I wouldn't say I appreciate the craft behind pop music, but I can and will sing along/dance along if I need to, in a social context.” Both of these statements showcase how an individual can appreciate aspects of their generation’s ‘sound’ but not entirely associate with the music tastes of the masses.

In another sense, many people held polarized views on this topic. In many instances, these views were very positive. One person born in 1964 asserted, “Yes, I feel [my generation’s music] definitely makes me who I am as a musician.” Another listener, born in 2001, stated: “Yes, I feel the musical tastes of my generation is pop music by popular artists— a lot of which I like.” It is evident that these two participants, 37 years apart, both share a strong dedication to their age-group’s music. However, in many occurrences, participants held negatively polarized views on their generation’s music preferences. One person, born in 2000, stated “No. I prefer rock music, and I don't really like excessive use of computer generated sounds/auto-tune that is in today's pop music. The themes and lyrics don't appeal to me either.” While many people outwardly disagreed with their age-group’s sound, others provided a justification for their musical distance from the masses. A participant born in 2001 stated, “I don’t really feel a strong connection to the whole ‘generational’ thing, you know? I just listen to whatever and I don’t really socialize much, so I don’t know what’s popular with people my age.” Another person gave a full explanation as to why they were closed off to the popular music sector of their generation, and thus, why they don’t identify with it. Born in 1999, this respondent indicated “Not really, [I
don't identify with it]. For one, I was raised in an extremely conservative Christian household so I wasn't allowed to listen to secular music at all until I was about 13. So I didn't get the chance to identify with any music of my generation pretty much at all.” Throughout this section, it was apparent that each participant came in with unique experiences and outlooks on how popular music has influenced, or failed to influence them.

**Song Analysis**

For the sake of understanding songwriting critique, this section was entirely based on an original song the researcher wrote and recorded for this study. Upon listening, participants were then asked, “What did you like or dislike about this song?” A majority of responses indicated that people had mixed reviews when it came to appreciating the song. Many people responded with positive statements, like one participant born in 1996: “It made me feel like a teenage girl and I love that feeling.” Here, it is apparent that the song had an ability to tap into their nostalgia, and bring them back to a certain time in their life. Other people liked the song for its individual characteristics. One person, born in 1979, asserted they liked the song for its “catchy, original lyrics.” On the contrary, many people didn’t receive the song as well. A participant born in 2002 asserted, “I don't really like the repetitive rhythm or the subject of the lyrics.” Another person born in 1997 voiced, “The lyrics are incomprehensible for me, and I didn't like the vocals. Can't say I liked anything specific about the song.” Throughout this question, it was very evident that many people enjoyed, and didn’t enjoy the song for various reasons. Other respondents included mixed reviews of things they liked and disliked about the song. One participant, born in 1999, stated: “I liked the overall concept, lyrics and production quality could be improved a lot.” Another person born in 1985 put, “I liked the ‘meandering’ sound, and how it had a somewhat
complex structure for a pop song. The soft voice of the singer and the lyrics leave a lot of room for interpretation; it reminds of the band Phoenix. I didn't like the rapping bit and the guitar solo at the end.”

Many people alluded to the Rap verse in the song—a feature that particularly elicited a strong response within participants. Since the Rap part was an off-putting feature for many, an overwhelming majority disliked the inclusion of it in the song. One participant born in 2000 declared, “I really enjoyed the song. The one thing I wasn’t fond of was the rap segment. It felt disjointed from the rest of the song.” Similarly, another person born in 1998 answered, “I really didn’t like the rap bridge, it felt inauthentic and unnecessary.” While most people felt this part failed to uphold the song’s integrity, a few responses enjoyed the Rap part. One participant, a Rap fan born in 2000 stated, “I liked the intro guitar and the rap towards the end.”

Another question asked respondents what their favorite moment was in the song. Participants were told to mark the timestamp they enjoyed most—this was used to analyze which part of the song was overwhelmingly appreciated. 36 people stated that they enjoyed some aspect of the chorus. 30 people referenced their appreciation towards the verse of the song, with a majority of these stating they liked lyrical content or the guitar riff. 17 people thoroughly enjoyed the pre-chorus of the song, which only occurs once after the first verse (IMAGE 5B). 15 people responded that they enjoyed the guitar solo most, which occurred at the end of the song. 13 people enjoyed the Rap part, and 10 people appreciated the breakdown of the song (IMAGE 5B).

Next, participants were told to rate the song’s musical characteristics on a scale of 1 to 5—with a 1 being ‘poor’ and a 5 being ‘excellent’. This first question revolved around lyrical content, and the song’s ability to excel in its melody and content (TEXT 5A). The results
represented that of a bell curve (CHART 3A). 10 people (8.3%) rated the song’s lyrical content as a five—the highest possible rating. 32 people (26.4%) rated lyrical content as a four. The highest selected answer was a three-rating, in which 44 people (36.4%) selected this answer. Another 26 people (21.5%) rated the lyrical content as a two, and 9 people (7.4%) rated it as a one.

The next question had participants rate the quality of the chords used in this song (IMAGE 5C). The graph for this question showcased a more positive pool of answers (CHART 3B). 30 people (24.8%) rated the song’s chord quality as a five. 52 people (43%) rated the chord quality as a four, and 30 people (24.8%) rated it as a three. 8 people (6.6%) rated it as a two, and 1 person (0.8%) rated it as a one. Later, participants were told to judge the tempo choice of the song (IMAGE 5B). Similarly, results for this were relatively positive overall (CHART 3C). 31 people (25.6%) rated tempo as a five overall, while 50 people (41.3%) rated it as a four. 30 participants (24.8%) rated it as a three, 8 participants (6.6%) rated it as a two, and 2 participants (1.7%) rated it as a one. The last question asked people to rank the song’s structure of parts (IMAGE 5B). Answers for this question were more evenly distributed amongst each ranking (CHART 3D). 30 people (25%) rated the structure as a five—an indication that these people enjoyed the way certain parts flowed together in the song. 42 people (35%) rated it as a four, whereas 41 people (34.2%) rated it as a three. Finally, 6 people (5%) rated it as a two, and 1 person (0.8%) rated it as a one.

**Songwriting Analysis**

The final section of the survey was composed of three questions that asked broad, holistic questions of listeners. By adopting a songwriting approach, these questions were posed in order
to recognize and attend to listener’s needs when writing a song. The first question asked, “What is the most important aspect to you in a song?” The four main answers provided made up 77.9% of responses, while write-ins accounted for the remaining 22.1% (CHART 4A). The top answer was ‘chord quality’, in which 42 people (34.4%) put this. 24 people (19.7%) viewed ‘lyrical content’ as the most important aspect to them. 23 (18.9%) people put ‘song structure’, and 6 people (4.9%) put ‘tempo’ as a song’s most important aspect.

It is possible to categorize the fill-in answers into five larger themes. In the first theme, participants wrote in answers that pertained to musical characteristics. Some of these answers were more reliant on musical theory, like one answer which stated ‘Polyphony and Harmony’ were key components of what they look for in music. Other answers honed in on more specific regions of the song— one person put ‘energetic guitar’, while another put ‘voice quality of the singer’. The next theme revolved around a combination of two or more elements. An example of this is when one person answered that ‘rhythmic interest, chord changes, and sound choices’ all equally mattered to them. Another person put ‘lyrical content and song structure’ as their answer of choice. The third theme is solely based on the melody patterns showcased in a song. 4 people decided to put ‘melody’ as the most important aspect to them. The fourth theme coincides with the overall mood or feeling a song has. Many answers in this section referenced the ‘emotional response’ that can be felt by a song. Other answers in this realm mentioned ‘catchiness’, ‘energy’, and ‘overall sound’. The final theme revolved around subjectivity, and song-to-song variances that discourage a proper answer to this question. 3 participants stated that every good song contains distinct qualities that make them unique and memorable.

The next question posed, “For what primary reason do you listen to the music you listen to?” 6 main answers were provided to participants, with an option to write in. The main answers
accounted for 85.3% of responses, whereas the remaining 14.7% were write-ins (CHART 4B). 60 participants (49.2%) responded that they listen to music to supplement their mood or feelings. 14 people (11.5%) listen to music because they resonate with the song’s meaning. 13 people (10.7%) like music because it is catchy and they can sing along to it. 7 people (5.7%) listen to music because it allows them to reminisce on a particular time in their lives. Another 6 people (4.9%) listen to music solely for its practical purposes. Finally, 4 people (3.3%) related to all of these answers. The remaining write-in answers revolved around music’s ability to inspire and resonate within an individual. One person said, “[The music I listen to] inspires me to create my own music and provides me with contentment that I may be lacking in everyday life.” Another respondent appreciated certain songs’ ability to immediately evoke a positive response: “I just vibe with it.”

The last question asked, “What type of songwriting style best fits your preference from the choices below?” As referenced earlier, many answers followed the given template, as well as the free-response option (CHART 4C). Overwhelmingly, 66 participants (54.1%) preferred an emphasis on hooks. Many people liked when a song had recurring and expected parts, but also, novelty and surprise throughout. 35 participants (28.7%) chose an emphasis on quirkiness. This group generally favored unconventional and unpredictable music the most. 15 participants (12.3%) liked when songs had an emphasis on structure. These people enjoyed when a song was easy to navigate, and every part was foreseeable. The remaining 4.9% of participants were either indifferent on the issue, or varied their answers depending on the circumstance.
Discussion

Music Preferences

Participants rated their holistic musical habits much higher than their listening frequencies. While an overwhelming 82.9% of participants viewed themselves as active music listeners, only 38.2% stated they *always* listen to music. A majority of people, 49.6%, stated that they *often* listen to music— an indication that while music is an integral part of many participant’s lives’, they don’t always find the time to listen. This trend persisted and expanded in the realm of staying up-to-date with music. Only 21.1% of participants stated they *always* seek out new music, whereas 39.8% responded with *often*, and 29.3% responded with *sometimes*. Through this even spread, it is apparent that participants were more resistant to prioritize new music. This is either due to a lack of interest in expanding their musical library, or an absence of the time it takes to find new, enjoyable music. The Uses and Gratifications Theory can provide an explanation for the results seen in this section. Again, this theory attempts to understand how people use different media sources depending on their personalized agenda. While 82.9% of people were self-described ‘active music listeners’, many people weren’t interested in attending to new music and unfamiliar artists. The listener’s choice to actively look for new music entirely depends if they are up for the challenge of sifting through songs they may or may not like. Many people in this study preferred to listen to music that was already familiar to them—perhaps new music wasn’t in their listening agenda.

There was a high degree of variability in participant’s favorite genres, artists, and songs. Every respondent came into this study with their own unique musical preferences and styles. Out of all genres, Rock music gained the most appreciation, with 31.1% of participants saying they enjoyed it most. Nonetheless, a majority of answers ranged across a very wide spectrum of
musical genres—there were fans of Metal, Musical Theatre, and everywhere in-between. It was very interesting to note the level of dedication to subgenres in music. For instance, multiple people put Rock subgenres as their favorite music, while many others put subgenres of Punk. This goes to show the influence of larger genres, and their ability to breed thriving fan communities for new types of music. Moreover, fans in these subgenres are more tightly-knit than one might think—a revelation that is found in multiple people’s decision to allude to subgenres in their answers.

Participant’s artist preferences were also very scattered. Very few artists’ made multiple occurrences in the answers: only Dua Lipa and the Alabama Shakes were honored more than once. Participant’s favorite songs were generally very reflective of their favorite genres and artists. Sometimes, people’s favorite song was directly related to their favorite artist—like the participant who put Gorillaz as their favorite artist, and “Aries” by Gorillaz as their favorite song. Other people connected their tastes in a more indirect way. Many times, a participant’s favorite song or artist existed in the realm of their favorite genre. Multiple people whose favorite genre was Pop either answered with a Pop artist or song for the proceeding questions. Other times, participants didn’t match their favorite genres, artists, and songs to any degree. This would seem to indicate that certain people seek different styles of music for particular instances, while others choose to exclusively listen to a certain type of music.

On the topic of environments people wished to consume their music in, responses could be categorized under a few main themes. Whether it be driving, walking, or on a train, most (53 people) preferred to listen to music on the move. Other people preferred to listen while doing other activities (37 people), or in a sedentary state of being (36 people). A few people indicated that a certain type of musical environment was irrelevant to their habits (11 people), and that
RUNNING HEADER: ANALYZING PERCEPTIONS OF MUSIC

they would listen to their music anywhere and anytime. Other groups (7 people) chose to listen while exercising (7 people), or in a lively environment (6 people). The Uses and Gratifications Theory can detail how different people choose to listen on different occasions. While some people use music to escape their surroundings on the train or the bus, others might prefer to listen while lifting weights. Likewise, while many preferred to listen in a quiet, calm setting, others viewed music as an essential component to their party routine.

Music and Generational Differences

A majority of participants were either Millennials or Gen Z. Since 74% of participants were born between 1997 and 2002, a modern bias was portrayed in responses. A majority of respondents viewed Pop (54 people) and Rap (30 people) as generation-defining genres. Since Pop and Rap music are currently the most widely-appreciated genres amongst younger listeners, it is safe to conclude that this particular demographic influenced the results for this section. Similarly, the generation-defining artists were also dominated by those born in the 1990’s/early 2000’s. With the most popular answers being Drake, Taylor Swift, Lady Gaga, Rihanna, and Kanye West, it is clear that modern artists were favored over all others. In addition, this reiterates the idea that Rap and Pop are the most revered for many people of this era. Participants from older generations resorted to picking genres and artists that better fitted their upbringing. While many people from the 1960’s either favored New Wave, Punk, or Classic Rock, those from the 70’s and 80’s enjoyed Grunge, Folk, or early Pop. In this section, one’s age completely correlated to their views on generation-defining genres and artists.

Regardless of age, people generally chose not to identify with the music of their generation. While 39.5% of participants stated they did not identify with their generation’s
music, 34.2% indicated that they somewhat identify with it, and 24.5% fully identified with it. This goes to show that across multiple age groups, there were people that both liked and disliked the widely-held music taste of their peers. It was more common than not that older people identified with their generation’s taste. This is partially due to nostalgia, in which many of these people compared their generation’s music to the self-perceived, less-desirable music of today. As indicated earlier, one participant born in 1983 noted: “Yes, actually the older I get the more I identify with my youth's music. Petty squabbles between the styles back then lose their significance, while the general nostalgia and the ‘we were better than you punks are now’ feelings get stronger.” Reversely, it was very common that younger participants did not identify with their peers’ music. A person born in 2000 stated: “No. I prefer rock music, and I don't really like excessive use of computer generated sounds/auto-tune that is in today's pop music. The themes and lyrics don't appeal to me either.” Across all age groups, there were people who held authentic views regarding where they stand in the musical world of their generation.

**Song Analysis**

Participants held very mixed views regarding the study’s original song. For the same reasons many people liked the song, others critiqued it. For instance, while many people liked the rhythmic motive of the song, others did not appreciate its repetitiveness or simplicity. Likewise, while many people enjoyed the lyrical content and sound-quality, others disliked the odd use of vocabulary and the poor vocalic production. A particular area of interest was the Rap part, which occurred from 2:24-2:39. Many people found this part to be off-putting, unnecessary, and inauthentic. According to Expectancy Violations Theory, the participants who felt this way assigned a negative valence to the violation that occurred during their listening experience. This
is perhaps due to their previous knowledge of the song’s structural and stylistic context. Since this song was in the Pop/Rock genre, and had an instrumentation that corresponded to this genre, many participants might’ve held expectancies that resided within this musical style. As a guess on the part of the researcher, there might have been a large amount of expectancies violated when the Rap part entered, due to its stark differential in chord quality, rhythmic integrity, vocalic style, and overall intensity. However, not all people disliked the Rap portion of this song. In a question that sought to know what participants’ favorite part in the song was, 13 people enjoyed the Rap part the most. These people assigned a positive valence to the off-setting violation that occurred during their listening experience.

Throughout listening to the song, 36 people enjoyed the chorus most, 30 people enjoyed the verse most, and 17 enjoyed the pre-chorus. The song’s lyrical content was rated much lower than it’s chord quality, tempo, and structure. However, across all categories, participant ratings were very dispersed and subjectively given. Overall, the song’s chord quality received the highest praise out of every category. 67.8% of participants rated it as either a four or five (out of five). In this section, participants were able to exercise their power as song reviewers. These reviews mimicked the expectations they hold for the songs they like and listen to. It was evident that criteria varied from person to person, and allowed for such an eclectic pool of responses.

**Songwriting Analysis**

While the previous section examined a particular song, this portion sought to understand listeners’ perspectives on songwriting more broadly. Generally, people viewed chord quality as the most important aspect in a song (34.4%). People viewed lyrical content as the next most important (19.7%), followed by song structure (18.9%) and tempo (4.9%). The next section
questioned why people listened to the music they do. An astonishing 49.2% of people remarked that they listen to music to supplement their mood or feelings. Mood Management Theory posits that people listen to music in order to cope with their affective states. In this section, it is very evident that participants’ answers complied with this theory—many people prioritized music’s ability to aid with their moods and emotions. This finding has larger implications in the scope of songwriting scholarship. By understanding emotional needs as existing alongside listener’s musical needs, songwriters can tailor their techniques to better fulfill this demand. This study supports the notion that in order to tap into a large audience, songwriters should focus their work on appealing to those who seek emotional validation from their music. The final question tested the preferred songwriting styles amongst participants. Overall, 54.1% of participants valued an emphasis on hooks, opposed to 28.7% who preferred quirkiness, and 12.3% who enjoyed structure in a song. This indicates how many participants appreciated a blend between expected parts, and certain surprises that catch a listener off-guard.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this study, participants’ musical preferences were measured and analyzed. By taking a songwriting and generational approach, this study’s design allowed for subjectivity and open-endedness in answers that pertained to music. In regards to musical preferences, it was found that participants view themselves as active music listeners, but don’t always actively seek out new music. Moreover, their self-identification as active listeners doesn’t match up with their listening frequencies, which were far lower in comparison. Participants all held different views when it came to their favorite genres, artists, and songs—each person came into the study with their own unique life experiences that contributed to their partiality. In addition, the
environments that people preferred to listen to music in were entirely different. The Uses and Gratifications Theory can describe how people like to use music differently depending on their personal listening agenda, level of comfortability, and experiences.

Relativity persisted throughout participants’ generational views on music. A great degree of ‘musical ethnocentrism’ was showcased here—when one’s own musical identity is perceived as superior over others (Boer, 2013). It was evident that many people took pride in their generation’s music taste, and prioritized it over other generations’ sounds. However, across all age groups, participants had mixed reviews over whether or not they identified with the music that defined their generation. With this being said, older participants were more likely to identify with their generation’s music than younger people were.

In response to songwriting, many participants held mixed reviews in what they like/dislike about a song. In general, people viewed chord quality as the most important aspect in a song. Likewise, a majority of people choose to listen to their music due to its ability to supplement their mood and feelings. By applying the Mood Management Theory here, we can come to understand many people’s motives behind listening to the types of music they do. Humans are emotional beings that rely on different media sources to help regulate their affective state. In essence, by applying MMT to this study, it is possible to recognize this, and adapt one’s songwriting goals to fit the needs of satisfying listener’s emotional needs. This finding can help the reader comprehend why certain songwriters choose to focus on lyrical and chord content to tap into the emotions of a listener.

In the sphere of holistic songwriting preferences, participants overwhelmingly appreciated a songwriter’s emphasis on hooks. In other words, they enjoyed when there was a healthy balance between expected parts that recurred throughout, and new, surprising hooks that
could be incorporated in every so often. This indicates how there is a strong relevance of Expectancy Violations Theory within music and songwriting. Ultimately, the goal of a songwriter is to establish a good, expected structure and melody that listeners can follow and familiarize with. Upon doing that, they must hope to violate listener’s expectations in ways they deem hold positive value. This way, a song will have the ability to repetitively resonate with, and maintain interest amongst listeners.

Through conducting this study, I have learned a significant amount on songwriting within the lens of music scholarship. By analyzing listener preferences and subjective experiences, I have internalized the notion that songs appeal to listeners differently and for various reasons. In my senior project, I wanted to understand why certain songs become more popular than others, and if there is a way to predict this phenomenon. My band, ‘Dudeo Perez’, has had a very contrasting experience with our first two albums released. Our debut album, ‘Allons’y’ (2019) accumulated 170,000 plays, whereas our sophomore album, ‘King of Last Year’ (2020) only garnered 18,000. As a songwriter, I am constantly reflecting on my own experiences and techniques. Was ‘Allons’y’ just a better album with better songs? Perhaps. However, it is evident that audience reception to songs is dependent on many factors that come into play. Music serves an incredibly subjective function to society. By choosing to do this study, it was my own attempt to provide an insight into the minds of music listeners. I have learned that my own ‘musical ethnocentrism’ often comes into play when I write songs— when I write, I often assume that people just want ‘catchy’ songs over all other factors. However, this study concludes that people seek out music for a variety of reasons— with ‘catchiness’ only making up only a small portion of them. Essentially, while certain styles of songwriting may be preferred by an audience, there is no one-correct-way of going about it. People use and appreciate music differently. Moreover,
music plays a huge role in the formation of our personal identities and habits. Each person carries their own unique musical library with them wherever they go, and they act in accordance to the music they listen to. It is unlikely to gain the approval of a majority of listeners through one song. Likewise, it is also unlikely that a song has the ability to be despised by every listener in the world. Thus, as a songwriter, it is important to keep working on your craft. Those worried about rejection within songwriting should always go forth with releasing their new music. Odds are, someone, somewhere out there will like it.
References


doi: 10.1177/026192X93121003


Getlen, L. (2015, October 4). Every song you love was written by the same two guys. *New York*
Post. Retrieved from https://nypost.com/2015/10/04/your-favorite-song-on-the-radio-was-probably-written-by-these-two/


Appendix

CHART 1A

Do you consider yourself to be an active music listener?
123 responses

CHART 1B

How often do you feel you listen to music?
123 responses
CHART 1C

How often do you seek out new music?
123 responses

- Always: 29.3%
- Often: 39.8%
- Sometimes: 9.8%
- Rarely: 21.1%
- Never: 11.8%

CHART 1D

What is your favorite genre of music currently?
122 responses

- Pop: 31.1%
- Rock: 14.8%
- Rap: 6.5%
- Rhythm & Blues (RnB): 5.7%
- Hip Hop: 5.6%
- Reggae: 4.1%
- EDM (Electronic Dance Music): 4.1%
- Classical: 4.1%
- Country: 2.4%
- Jazz: 2.4%
- Other: 1.6%

1/6 ▼
**CHART 2A**

What year were you born in?
122 responses

**CHART 3A**

How would you rate this song’s lyrical content?
121 responses
CHART 3B

How would you rate this song's chord quality? (the choice of the chords used in the song)
121 responses

CHART 3C

How would you rate the songwriter's choice to make this song in the tempo it is at? (it is 120 beats per minute)
121 responses
**CHART 3D**

How would you rate this song's structure? (how parts in the song were laid out. This song was verse, pre-chorus, chorus, verse, bridge, chorus)

120 responses

![Chart 3D](image)

**CHART 4A**

What is the most important aspect to you in a song?

122 responses

![Chart 4A](image)
CHART 4B

For what primary reason do you listen to the music you listen to? (please choose the answer that you most identify with, or add an answer that is not already listed below)
122 responses

- It supplements my mood or feelings (49.2%)
- It serves a particular function (ex: listen to music to study) (12.3%)
- It allows me to reminisce on a time in my life (11.5%)
- It is catchy and I can sing along with it (10.9%)
- I personally resonate with the song’s... (9.9%)
- All of the above (5.3%)
- It helps me reflect and calmly decide about my life (3.3%)
- I just like it. I’m a musician and a producer (1.6%)

1/3 ▼

CHART 4C

What type of songwriting style best fits your preference from the choices below?
122 responses

- Emphasis on structure: sections are often repeated and a listener can easily follow the song (54.1%)
- Emphasis on quirkiness: music is unique and unpredictable (28.7%)
- Emphasis on hooks: the middle ground between structure and quirkiness (12.3%)
- dense lyrical content (5.3%)
- Emphasis on tonality, polyphony and harmony (3.3%)
- Depends on my mood (1.6%)
- Part of the first one but also in general... (1.6%)
- No idea (1.6%)
- Emphasis on lyrical content (1.6%)
TEXT 5A

LYRICS

Said I’m done
And I’ve got nothing to lose
So you can steal out your mother’s safe
I don’t care if the neighbors see

I will say
He’s been unnecessarily rude
And if he goes then he won’t come back
But he’s resourceful so I’ll give him that

Oh, Oh
So come away
With things that you want to do
Sean is the core, life is the king

But Jessie’s voice is out of noise
And he runs out of lies and tells me what I want him to
George has got a plan for you

Highwaters are back in
And checkered shoes
So can you spoil me now, adopt my subtle attitude
George has got a plan for you

Pleased to meet you
And I have too much to figure out by myself
He usually comes home at twelve

George says
“I haven’t got enough time for this”
“I’m missing everything I like for this”
“I probably won’t answer you again”

See by the way
And the way that I think of you now
And the things that you went through
   Oh, Oh

   Yeah, Ah
   And I’m thinking like ‘man why you gone?’
   It’s a little bit stressful
And I’m thinking it’d be best if you cleaned up this mess, fool
So think about her, and everything she does for you, Ooh
   Yeah this is wrong man, just call your mom, man

But Jessie’s voice is out of noise
And he runs out of lies and tells me what I want him to
   George has got a plan for you

   Highwaters are back in
   And checkered shoes
So can you spoil me now, adopt my subtle attitude
   George has got a plan for you
IMAGE 5B
IMAGE 5C

VERSE
C#m  D#m  E Maj.  G#m  B Maj.  E Maj.

PRE-CHORUS
C#m  G#m  B Maj.  E Maj.  C#m  B Maj.

CHORUS
E Maj.  G#m  B Maj.

IMAGE 5D

BREAK-DOWN
C#m  G#m  B Maj.  E Maj.  C#m  G#m

LEAD-UP
C#m  D#m  G#m  A Maj.

OUTRO
E Maj.  G#m  B Maj.