

4-2020

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Music Preferences Among College Students Through the Decades

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HNR 499

## Music Preferences Among College Students Through the Decades

### Abstract

Music plays a part in every person's life, whether they realize it or not. From the radio to background music to ringtones, music influences most aspects of our lives. Radio took music from local clubs and concert halls to places that were thousands of miles away. Radio evolved to vinyl discs and then into cassettes and compact discs. These went further in MP3 recordings and on into streaming services that control the music of today's industry. The 1960s brought soul, R&B, Motown, and rock to the world. The 1970s brought hard rock and pop and pushed the industry into less city individualism. The 1980s took on punk rock head-on and pushed pop even further into the scene. The 1990s continued the pop takeover and included hip-hop into the charts. The 2000s took hip-hop and rap further into a less censored industry and kept pop in the top. The 2010s made people feel more in their emotions by bringing in topics that weren't written about previously. Students at Grand Valley State University had preferences that matched with the trends that were current with the music industry. Their preferences headed towards pop and hip-hop, much like the previous decade. Pop, hip-hop/rap, and rock had significant evidence to say there was a difference between genre and year in college. Alternative, hip-hop/rap, and country had significant evidence to say there was a difference between genre and honors status. There was significant evidence to say there was a difference between years in college and whether or not they changed in preference in the past three years. There was no significant evidence to say there was a difference between honors status and whether or not they changed preferences in the past three years. The top platform that students did use was Spotify.

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### Background

From King's courts, concert halls, and operatic theaters to streaming services, gigantic concert venues, and social media music has spread throughout the world in a revolutionizing way. As music is forever growing and changing, so is the way people listen to it. At the start of recorded music, there was the phonograph and the graphophone in 1877. This moved into flat disc recording and popularized the phonograph into people's homes.

Electrical recordings started to become more popular than acoustic recordings and moved into a rise in radio station broadcasting. Discs were made more durable in 1948, and tapes began becoming more compact in 1963. The "walkman", an on-the-go listening device, took its place in the industry with cassette tapes (1970s) and not long after, they included compact discs (1980s). After the compact disc had its time of popularity, MP3 recordings (early 2000s) took over the market and allowed for most convenient access to music that is still employed today (Library of Congress, n.d.).

The psychological effects of music were explored, relating types of music to sensation-seeking that is defined as a personality trait where a person seeks out new and novel sensations that they normally don't experience (Weisskirch, R. & Murphy L., 2004). With this study, they found connections with sensation seeking and punk, reggae, and heavy metal music. The connections could help predict music trends with how people may act and what they explore on the internet. Another study done on preferences in people from grade 1 through senior citizens, found that there were trends in how particular the tastes of each age group were (LeBlanc et al., 1996). Students in Grade 1 and College had the highest levels of preferences and lowered levels in between these age groups. With this in mind, by analyzing the music preferences in college students, we can have a more accurate prediction of trends rather than using other groups due to

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the increased level of preferences.

Much like evolution, we can explore how music tastes have changed and evolved into the preferences of today's industry. A study was done on the reactions of listeners as they heard different types of music, and it found that there was a five-factor model that music followed (Rentfrow et al., 2011). The model included the different categories that genres could fit themselves into. These categories included a “Mellow factor, an Unpretentious factor, a Sophisticated factor, an Intense factor, and a Contemporary factor” (2011). This model suggests there aren't particular genres, but rather, there are groupings of music based on their type of sound. There were also connections found between the social and auditory characteristics of the music that people had the most reactions.

With these studies in mind, the following questions came to mind: is there a connection between a student's year in college and genre they listened to, is being in the honors program affect what genre students are listening to, where are students listening to music, and what artists are students listening to currently? With trends in music, qualitatively, do the current preferences in music match the change in patterns from previous decades? Based on regions of the country, are there trends within different cities?

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### Method

In part one, a qualitative analysis was done on the music trends through each decade, starting in the 1960s. Each year was analyzed by its Billboard Top 100 Hits playlist and the equivalent radio station survey until the surveys were no longer available. When the radio station surveys were no longer available, the trend analysis was only done based on the Billboard charts. The radio station surveys analyzed were from regions of the United States, including Chicago, New York City, Miami, Seattle, and Los Angeles.

In the second part of the project, a survey was sent to undergraduate students at Grand Valley State University. The students were asked about their year, major, and whether or not they were involved in the honors program. They were also asked questions about their music preferences, including who their favorite artists were, what genre of music they listened to the most, and where they listened to music. The answers were then analyzed using a chi-square test to determine if there were any statistical connections. They were also then connected with the trends from part one.

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### Results

#### **Part 1:**

In the 1960s, much of the influence of music was restricted to regions of the country where artists originated, but the music was beginning to spread throughout the country through broadcasts. California had a large influence on the music in Seattle, like the Beach Boys (Friedlander, P., 2019). Detroit, where Motown Records was located, also had a considerable impact on the music in Chicago and New York City. With many of the cities, some local artists made their way onto the top playlists for their city, including The Righteous Brothers out of Los Angeles, The Toys out of New York, and The Sonics out of Seattle. Surprisingly, during the 1960s, Chicago had the most matchups of songs on radio station playlists with those of Billboard. The Billboard office was in New York at that time, making New York an influential hub that affected the charts across the country (Billboard, n.d.). Another interesting finding was the R&B influence that was based in New York City compared to the other cities. New York had large influences from Ray Charles, Dee Dee Sharp, and The Contours and only a few of the rock influencers that were seen in other cities. A vast influence on the whole country was the groups found in Europe, mainly the United Kingdom, known as the British Invasion. These groups included The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and The Animals (Puterbaugh, P., 1988).

As the 60s came to a wrap with their R&B, soul, and rock hits, the 70s ushered in an era of pop and hard rock that took over the music industry with expanding recording and broadcasting companies (Friedlander, P., 2019). Much like the 1960s, there were still many cities with artists that were popular only in the region, including artists like The Staple Singers and Coven in Chicago. There was also much more expansion of music from city to city. Artists that are considered greats in today's terms were often not on the Billboard chart, but they were on

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most cities' top 10. The initial British invasion came in the 60s, but there continued to be a significant influence by British bands in the 70s. Queen, Led Zeppelin, Fleetwood Mac, and Badfinger brought in the hard rock influences that were headlining in the U.S. (Cofer, J., 2012). As the entrance of punk rock into the music world took hold in the late 1970s, there were no groups in the charts of any cities until the 1980s.

Punk rock took a place on the charts alongside pop and hard rock in the 1980s. The Clash and Blondie led the charts in the punk rock genre. Surprisingly, The Sex Pistols, who were the band to make headlines in the punk rock scene, were nowhere to be found on the Billboard charts or the charts from any city. As censorship was still prevalent, it could explain why their voices were not heard in the top charts. Unlike the preceding decades, the 80s brought about less individualism per region as broadcasting communities took hold around the U.S., and music distribution became easier as cassette tapes pushed their way into the music industry. With the short life of punk rock, the 80s brought pop into the forefront that continued into the 90s and further. The genre included artists like Madonna, Wham!, and Duran Duran. They ushered in a new era of music that has continued to evolve into the music of today.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, rock dominated the charts, but the 1990s were taken over by pop. The pop genre revolutionized into a new style by the induction of many boy bands and girl groups into the charts. Some of the groups included TLC, New Kids on the Block, and Boyz II Men. Many of these groups are still names heard in the 2010s. Rap and R&B had a minor influence on 90s hits, including artists like Snoop Dogg and Puff Daddy. The music industry continued to evolve as cassette tapes disappeared, compact discs took over, and were then themselves eclipsed by MP3 recordings that could be distributed to customers quicker and easier.



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MP3 recordings took the 2000s into an era of the creation of streaming services that didn't fully take hold until the 2010s. Pop groups and artists continued to dominate the charts, but hip-hop and rap also earned their places. Rappers including Eminem, 50 cent, and Kanye West, got their start in the 2000s and continued to take chart spots through the 2000s and 2010s. Girl groups and boy bands began to fade in the 2000s and individuals from those groups found their voice. Beyoncé broke off Destiny's Child and Justin Timberlake left NSYNC to spread their single voices across the country. The 2000s also ushered in more relaxed censorship. Music videos showed women with very little clothing, and people were shown using alcohol and drugs. Songs like “Laffy Taffy” by D4L, “Drop It Like It’s Hot” by Snoop Dogg, and “Milkshake” by Kelis shared messages that sexualized women in music production. Sex, drugs, and alcohol took over the industry and opened music up to subjects that had previously never been discussed. These subjects continued into the 2010s.

In the 2010s, pop and hip-hop covered the charts with alternative and rap taking a small share of the spots. Artists like Justin Bieber and Taylor Swift were voices heard throughout all of the 2010s. Very few groups were listed on the charts as more artists took independent approaches to their music. Censorship continued to relax as song titles included swear words and innuendos for sex, drugs, and alcohol. With these topics, several songs talked about issues that were not done previously and were relevant to things going on in the current society. These topics included suicide awareness, drug and alcohol abuse, and songs about acceptance of everyone. Music took on a more serious tone that wasn’t taken in previous decades and opened the world of music to songs that brought strong emotions to play.

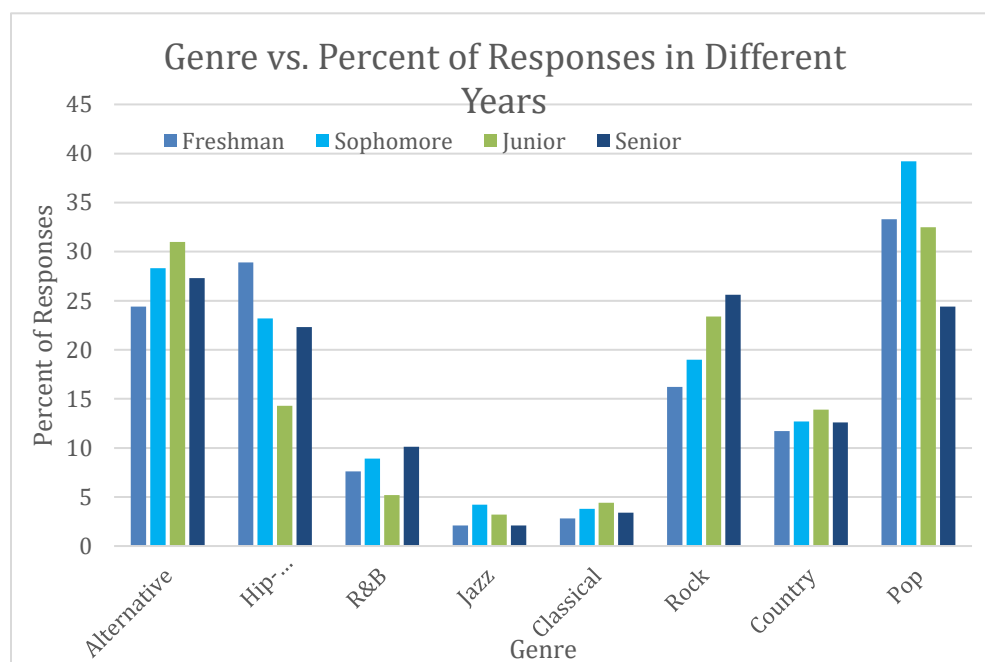
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### Part 2:

After the closing of the survey, there were 1,466 responses from the pool of 4000 undergraduate students and 1700 honors students. Of the 1,466 responses, there were 479 that did not complete the survey after consenting. The year for each student was relatively evenly distributed. Most responses came from freshman at 28.20%, and the least amount of responses came from sophomores at 22.97%. 54.76% of responses were from students not involved in the honors program, and 45.24% were from the students that were.

There were 2,138 unique artist responses from the ten artists that each participant listed. Post Malone was the top response with an 11.6% response. Billie Eilish was second with 10.0% of responses. The top ten artists listed were Post Malone, Billie Eilish, Harry Styles, Panic! At the Disco, Khalid, Drake, Taylor Swift, Queen, Luke Combs, and Ariana Grande, respectively.

The top overall genre was Pop at 22.85% of responses. Pop was the top genre for freshman, sophomores, and juniors. Seniors were the only year that did not have pop as their top



genre. The top genre for seniors was alternative at 27.3% of responses from seniors. The top genre for students in the honors program was pop with 35.6% responses. Pop was

Chart 1: Trends in genre preference compared to student's year at Grand Valley. Pop was the top genre for freshman, sophomores, and juniors. Alternative was the top genre for seniors.

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the top genre for students not in the honors program with 30.0% of responses.

For the pop, hip-hop/rap, and rock genres, a chi-square test had p-values below 0.05, showing that there was statistical evidence to say there was a difference between the student's year in college and genre of preference. The other genres had p-values above 0.05. Alternative, hip-hop/rap, and country had p-values below 0.05, showing there was significant evidence that

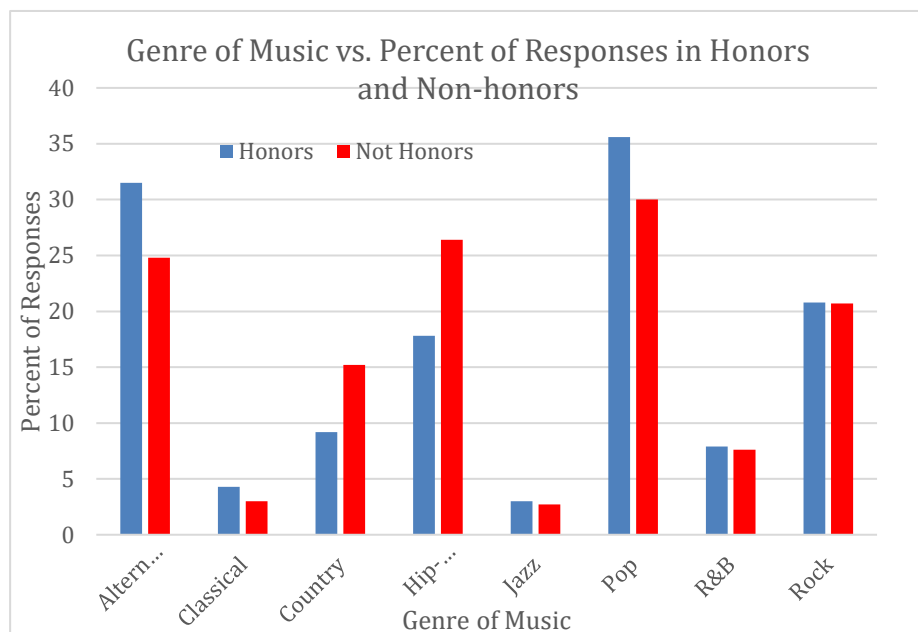


Chart 2: Trends in Genre Preference compared to Honors Status in Grand Valley students. Pop was the top genre for both Honors and Non-honors students. The least selected genre was jazz for both groups.

there was a difference between honors students' and non-honors students' preferences in those genres.

When the students were asked about their favorite artist now and three years ago, 81.16% of the people that responded said their preferences had changed. A p-value for honors status versus artist change was above 0.05 which shows that there is no significant evidence that there was a difference between students that were honors and students that were not honors. A p-value for difference in year and change in artist was below 0.05, indicating that there was significant evidence to suggest there was a difference between the years and how often the students had a change in their favorite artist over three years. The platform that was chosen the most by

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surveyed students was Spotify. 32.34% of responders selected Spotify. The least selected platform was iHeart Radio with 0.23% of the responders selecting it.

Platform	Count
Apple Music	203
iHeart Radio	5
Pandora	72
Radio	152
Social Media	177
Soundcloud	49
Spotify	707
Youtube	301
Other	85
Did Not Respond	435

Table 1: Student preference of music platform from a total of 2186 responses.

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### Discussion

There was statistical evidence to suggest a connection between genres and the year students were in college for some of the genres. There was also statistical evidence to suggest that there was a connection between genres and honors status for some of the genres. There would need to be a further study done to see if the other genres could have a relationship between the various years of students and honors status. As more students were answering the different genres, the more likely there was a connection between the two questions, therefore if there were a yes or no question, it would better be able to determine these connections.

I discovered that most students were listening to their music through Spotify. As an up and coming artist, they should be considering focusing their efforts on posting music mainly through Spotify, but they could also push their music on more than just that platform. Students did identify they were listening to music through other platforms as well. Further study could be done to determine how often the students were finding new artists on that platform and with Spotify's algorithm, how often they are posting advertisements and playlists containing new artists.

As the 2010s came to a close, pop continues to reign supreme on the Billboard charts. Artists like Billie Eilish, Taylor Swift, and Ariana Grande have taken over the charts and are seen in the preferences of college students. Hip-hop has also played a minor role in the top charts including artists like Post Malone, Drake, and Khalid. The students also aligned with these trends in the charts, as many listed them as some of their favorite artists. A surprising discovery in the data was the resurgence of the group Queen that was prevalent during the 1970s. Some of this may have come from the release of a movie about the band called "Bohemian

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Rhapsody” in 2018 that focused on the life of Freddie Mercury, the lead singer, and his role within the band.

In the Billboard charts, the 1960s through the 1990s introduced a constant transition through genres. The late 1990s until current music has not seen such a difference in trends compared to those in previous generations. Grand Valley Students also matched this trend in no change as they continued to choose pop and hip-hop music that matched with the trends in the 2000s and 2010s. This continued interest in pop and hip-hop music may come from the variety in music-making that has come alongside the innovation in technology. More artists are now relying on technically produced music that does not always require the involvement of traditional instruments used in previous decades including pianos, guitars, and drums.

When the 1960s artist produced their music, they used many instruments including guitars, drums, brass instruments, and pianos that have been phased out to only include a few instruments. Large productions went out of style in the later decades to where the current industry uses more technology to create the sounds needed to produce a song. With this technology involvement, a new genre has also made its name known in the industry: alternative. This genre was prevalent in seniors at Grand Valley.

Further studies should be conducted to determine how these trends in music could be determined by personality types or by particular majors. There could also be further studies on how economic and societal influences helped to identify trends in genre preference as well as specific artists. There is also a considerable influence that comes from people that aren't in college that are in the same age group as college students. Further analysis of social status could explore preferences in that aspect.

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### Conclusion

In conclusion, current trends in college students at Grand Valley State University follow how the patterns were evolving in the 2010s. The end of the 2010s headed into music that touched on topics that had not been discussed in previous decades. Further studies should be done to determine more factors that could influence the preferences of people and the trends seen in the music industry.

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