



Occasional Paper No. 19

The Darker Side of Bright Students: Gifted and Talented Heavy Metal Fans

Cadwallader, S.M.



978-1-905877-34-8
OCCASIONAL PAPER 19
Online Version
April 2007

The Darker Side of Bright Students: Gifted and Talented Heavy Metal Fans

Abstract

In a survey of 1,057 members of The National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY) 6% of student members stated that heavy metal was their favourite genre of music and a third of members rated it within their top five genres. This is interesting because heavy metal is often perceived negatively by society and therefore may be thought to be incongruent with the social perception of gifted and talented individuals. Quantitative analysis of self-reported musical taste preferences and demographic, attitudinal, psychological and behavioural variables were combined with data from an online group interview with 19 NAGTY members to explore this issue. Some of the key findings suggest that: 1) those who like the heavy metal genre report lower self-concept scores for peer and parent relationships as well as for self-esteem; 2) heavy metal is used cathartically by those that like it in order to dispel negative emotions; and 3) gifted and talented students enjoy the dark, emotional and sometimes political content of heavy metal.

The Darker Side of Bright Students: Gifted and Talented Heavy Metal Fans

Musical taste has been the subject of research in a variety of fields, but has primarily been the interest of sociologists and psychologists. Hargreaves & North (1997) note the wide range of disciplines that feed into music psychology, and how the interdisciplinary boundaries are constantly in flux within the field. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (1999) are very clear in their appraisal of the importance of music:

Music enables children to define themselves in relation to others, their friends, colleagues, social networks and to the cultures in which they live ... The teaching of music deepens and extends everyday experiences, providing new opportunities and forging important links between the home, school and the outside world (p. 162).

This description captures the educational importance of music as a subject but perhaps more poignantly it hints at the implicit importance of music within society. People listen to music while working, travelling, relaxing and socialising - it completely suffuses modern life.

The extent to which adolescents in particular immerse themselves in music is considered immense (Zillmann & Gan, 1997). Brake (1985) suggests that 70% of popular music recordings are purchased by 12-20 year olds - a huge market share claimed by a group with variable amounts of disposable income. More recently the advent of the internet and other digital media has meant that the nature in which music is recorded, stored and sold has changed a great deal (Macdonald, Hargreaves, & Miell, 2002). However, the high level of music consumption by adolescents seems unlikely to be falling. North, Hargreaves and O'Neill (2000) explored the self-reported musical listening habits of 2,465 Staffordshire teenagers and found that on average they listened to music for 2.45 hours a day and rated listening to music as their favourite indoor activity.

It seems that adolescents substantially value music and spend a great deal of time listening to it, but is this because it simply provides an enjoyable leisure pursuit or does it also serve other purposes? North, Hargreaves and O'Neill (2000) explored the reasons *why* adolescents listen to music and, through statistical analysis, suggest that these reasons can be divided into the following three factors: 1) creating external impression, 2) fulfilling emotional needs, and 3) enjoyment. Arnett (1995) also stipulates five uses of the media (including music): 1) entertainment, 2) identity formation, 3) high sensation seeking, 4) coping and 5) youth culture identification. These could be reasonably mapped on to the factors North et al. (2000) provided as a useful framework from which to explore adolescents' perceptions of *why* they listen to music.

These typologies could be conceived as being linked to the 'Uses and Gratifications Theory' of media consumption which suggests that individuals choose which media they expose themselves to based on social and psychological influences (Rosengren, 1974). This theory suggests that the use of media by the individual is motivated by the desire to fulfil certain needs or wishes such as bolstering self-esteem, forming personal identity, improving social relationships through shared media experience, and engaging in escapism (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). The central tenet of the approach is that the consumer is actively seeking out certain types of media to consume in order to meet their requirements – a notion that conflicts with traditional media theories which suggest that the individual is 'affected' by the media (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974).

The uses and gratifications approach is advocated by Arnett (1995) who suggests that by choosing the media that they consume, adolescents (and indeed adults) are taking part in their own socialization: '... adolescents may choose from a diverse range of media materials the ones that best suit their individual preferences and personalities' (p. 519). Arnett (1995) goes on to suggest that: 'Media consumption may give adolescents a sense of being connected to a wider peer network, which is united by certain youth-specific values and interests' (p. 524). This plays neatly into the typology provided by North et al. (2000) as it provides a mechanism by which the media of music can be used to define oneself to the outside world in relation to a wider group network. This wider network could be described as a youth culture and could form the basis of a form of social identity.

Musical taste and social identity

Tarrant, North, and Hargreaves (2002) suggest that musical preferences are a popular way for adolescents to explore different identities because such preferences are often major characteristics of youth cultures with which millions of young people may identify. Larson (1995) suggests: 'Popular music listening allows adolescents to internalise strong emotional images around which a contemporary sense of self can cohere' (p. 535). The role of musical preference in identity emerges as an important one from sociological and psychological literature. Bourdieu (1979) states that taste preferences are an indicator of social class: 'nothing more clearly affirms one's 'class', nothing more infallibly classifies, than taste in music' (p18). The role of music and other media for indicating social class has also been discussed by Roe (1994) who suggests that those with a 'broken trajectory', that is those who are moving either up or down the class ladder, will display media preferences that are deviant to their status background. He also suggests that those individuals on a downward trajectory are more likely to consume socially disvalued media - such as heavy metal and horror movies.

North and Hargreaves (1999) have found evidence to suggest that being presented with an individual's musical taste preferences has an impact on impression formation. Additionally, Finnäs (1989) found differences between the preferences that young people stated publicly and what they privately said they favoured. Hargreaves, Miell, & Macdonald (2002) suggest that:

...music can act as a powerful badge of identity for adolescents, perhaps more than any other aspects of their lives, and that as such it represents a fundamental influence on their identities (p. 17).

It seems that this 'badge' has significant social and psychological connotations for the wearer and must be selected with care.

Tarrant, North, and Hargreaves (2002) link Social Identity Theory with music preferences by suggesting that tastes are not only used as a 'badge' to announce something about the individual, but also as a way of indicating group membership: 'We propose that a major appeal of music to adolescents lies in its ability to help them form positive social identities.' (pp. 138-139). If this is the case, music preference may be used to define in-groups from out-groups and therefore to alter individual or group behaviour (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and indeed there is some support for this (Tarrant, North, & Hargreaves, 2002).

'Heavy Metal' music

There are many musical genres that could be linked to certain youth styles and social groups but heavy metal serves as an interesting example when viewed from the context of the gifted and talented because of its bleak and socially disvalued content (Arnett, 1996). It is probably fair to say that heavy metal has a bad reputation. A preference for heavy metal has been linked to negative traits such as amorality, disrespectfulness, cynicism and Machiavellianism in young men (Hansen & Hansen, 1991). Also, heavy metal has often been considered to be an anti-social influence and has even been accused of prompting young people to take drugs (King, 1988) and to perform criminal acts (Arnett, 1996).

A longitudinal study by Roe (1995) suggests that media preferences for heavy metal and violent films are associated with a negative attitude to school, poor academic performance, downward social mobility, and in some cases delinquency. Roe (1995) goes on to suggest a theory of 'media deviancy' which states that certain socially disvalued media is used to express frustration or anger at society by those who feel they are on society's fringe. Associating with a negatively perceived youth culture may help isolated individuals to raise their self-esteem through identification with a peer network that shares their indignation with society - by valuing and feeling valued by such a group the individual can neutralise the negative feelings of isolation.

Despite his findings Roe (1995) is keen to point out that a) the connection does not always occur – there are many successful students who listen to heavy metal and many unsuccessful students who do not, and b) this does not suggest immersion in heavy metal culture causes deviancy or isolation but rather that the preference may be symptomatic of it. Lacourse, Claes, & Villeneuve (2001) suggest that heavy metal use may actually have a cathartic effect and they even tentatively suggest that it can reduce suicide risk in girls. Arnett (1996) states that his interviewees all stated similar effects:

Heavy Metal music characteristically has the effect of calming them (the Metalheads) down, of purging their anger rather than inflaming it. (p. 81)

This fits neatly with a uses and gratifications conception – heavy metal music is used by certain isolated or disenfranchised members of society in order to sooth their negative emotions. However, fans of the genre probably have a variety of uses for their music of choice, and catharsis may just be one of many.

Giftedness and identity

There is a popular myth that the gifted child is a lonely individual whose obscure interests and accelerated development leave them isolated from their peers and struggling to come to terms with, and therefore harness, their ability (Gross, 1998). Van Boxtel & Monks (1992) suggest 'a portrait of a gifted underachiever' (p. 174): an individual with great potential who fails to channel it for a variety of reasons. They suggest that such individuals lack self-esteem and emotional stability and are unable to maintain social relationships. The empirical evidence they provide compares gifted achievers, gifted underachievers and a control group and suggests that the underachievers have a comparatively external locus of self-control and the lowest academic self-concept score of all of the groups. Zuo & Tao's (2001) study suggests that a lack of successful identity formation can be responsible for this, and suggest that 'By addressing the issues of identity, one can address the root cause of achievement and underachievement' (p. 220).

Counter to this literature, recent research suggests that the gifted and talented (at least as defined in the English Model of Gifted Education) are in fact a very diverse group that are generally well adjusted in their engagement with school (Campbell, Muijs, Mazzoli, Hewston, Robinson, & Eyre, 2006). Freeman (2001) suggests that in fact the only thing that separates the gifted and talented from the rest of the population are their gifts and talents. Such diversity does not rule out the possibility that some gifted students do feel the isolation that the stereotype attributes them, and exploring this subgroup in more detail is important as these are the students that are probably most likely to be let down by the system and to underachieve.

If it is the case that some gifted students are isolated from their peers due to asynchronous development (Silverman, 2002), perfectionism (Schuler, 2002), coping with the gifted 'label' (Freeman, 2001) or for other reasons, then it is likely that self-esteem in non-academic domains will need to be drawn from other sources. Perhaps identification with youth cultures based on musical preferences could play a role in this by allowing the student to feel a part of something. Identification with such imagined groups may help gifted and talented individuals to protect or boost their self-esteem. The use of music and music-based youth culture to forge identity, feel part of a wider community and to dispel negative feelings could all be related to the social and emotional needs of the gifted student.

Research focus

Rather than attempting to support a hypothesis the aim of this study is to explore gifted and talented students' liking for 'Heavy Metal' using both quantitative and qualitative sources of data. There are four main questions that will focus this paper. The breadth of these research questions reflects the explorative nature of this study.

- 1) What is the popularity of heavy metal among gifted and talented students?
- 2) Do those who are interested in heavy metal have differing characteristics to the other gifted and talented students?
- 3) How do the characteristics of gifted and talented heavy metal fans compare to the characteristics of the fans discussed in the literature?
- 4) How do gifted and talented students 'use' heavy metal music?

Research Design

Survey analysis

The survey was sent out to 4,000 members of the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth in summer 2005 (Campbell et al., 2006). The response rate was just over 25% (1,057 valid responses) and participants had a mean age of 14 and an age range of 11-18. With regard to music preferences, the survey required participants to rank their 'five favourite types of music' from 1 (most favourite) to 5 (least favourite) using a list of nine genres: Hip-hop, Classical, R & B, Pop, Rock, Heavy Metal, Jazz, Dance and Singer/songwriter.

Statistical analyses (cross-tabulations and t-tests) were carried out to compare the students that ranked heavy metal in the top 5 with the rest of the cohort (those that did not) on several of the measures that were collected by the survey. The variables of gender, ACORN postcode category (as a proxy for socio-economic status), self-esteem/self-concept (Using Muijs'[1997] scale), and leisure time pursuits were

chosen for this analysis because they provide an interestingly varied set of comparisons that could proffer clues about social identity and media use.

The online group interview

An online group interview to explore the issues surrounding heavy metal was set up. The infrastructure, and indeed the sample, required for this interview was already in place on NAGTY's internet chat forums, a virtual space where registered members of NAGTY are able to discuss a variety of academic and social topics. Only registered NAGTY members can log-in and leave messages in the forum, meaning that the sample ranged between the ages of 11 and 19 and theoretically was drawn from a wide ranging population of gifted and talented students.

An introduction was set up at the beginning of the thread which gave a very brief explanation of what the study was about and why it was being conducted: 'I have set up this thread for those of you who enjoy metal music in order to find out more about your musical tastes and what they mean to you' and 'Please feel free to chat to me and among yourselves on this thread – I want this research to reflect your views.' These statements were designed to give the participants ownership of the study and a sense that they had the freedom to express themselves and dictate the content of the research. This was an attempt to allow the participants to define terms with their own words and meanings making the use of incorrect constructs less likely.

Initially students were asked the following questions about the heavy metal genre: 'What do you like about this type of music? What do you think draws you to it? Do many of your friends share your interest in metal?' Other questions were formulated throughout based on the direction the discussion took. The researcher intermittently posted these questions to try to get clarification or expand on an interesting point but mainly acted as a facilitator.

Results

NAGTY survey analysis

Heavy metal music was the eighth most likely genre to be ranked but was still placed in the top 5 by over a third (36%) of the sample. It was the sixth most likely genre to be ranked as first with 6% of the sample favouring it. It seems heavy metal is by no means the most popular genre but is still enjoyed by a substantial proportion of gifted and talented students in the sample. There were significant gender differences on the Pearson Chi-square between those that ranked heavy metal and those that did not (chi-square = 32.47, df = 1, p = .000, phi = .18), with males being more likely to rank the genre than females. This result was similar when taking into account only those that ranked it first, with disproportionately more males favouring it than females (chi-square = 13.32, df = 1, p = .000, phi = .11). In both of these analyses the assumptions of the test were met but the effect sizes were modest. No statistically significant difference was found between those ranking heavy metal and those not regarding ACORN group.

The self-esteem and self-concept measures will now be discussed. Before beginning it should be noted that global self-esteem is very positively skewed making analysis difficult because of a lack of variance. The other measures of self-concept (academic, body image, sporting ability, peer relationships and parent relationships) are similar although there is more variation in the data for these measures. It seems that the self-reported levels of self-esteem and self-concept of those members of

NAGTY that responded to the survey are largely positive, though there are still substantial differences to be explored.

Results suggest that those who ranked heavy metal had lower global self-esteem ($t = -1.91$, $df = 1000$, $p = .056$, $D = -.12$), and lower academic ($t = -2.77$, $df = 1023$, $p = .006$, $D = .18$), peer ($t = -2.32$, $df = 984$, $p = .020$, $D = .15$) and parental ($t = -2.32$, $df = 1024$, $p = .024$, $D = .15$) self-concept scores. Interestingly there were no significant results for the group that had ranked heavy metal as their favourite genre although this could be due to the substantially smaller size of this group.

Those who ranked the genre heavy metal within their top five spent more time playing computer games and listened to music both at weekends and during the week than those that did not rank it. Interestingly this group also reported spending relatively more time 'making music' and spending relatively less time doing homework. Appendix A displays the relevant statistics.

The online group interview

A total of 19 NAGTY members participated in the online interview at different points. The amount of input varied from a single post consisting of a few lines of text to multiple posts of substantial length that reflected the issues that had been raised both by the researcher's initial questions and the subsequent discussion among those participating. Although the initial questions were aimed at those who liked the heavy metal genre, several participants who posted were not particular fans and a few actively disliked it. The voluntary and fluid nature of the design meant that no demographic information was available. The participants' real names are not used.

The diversity of heavy metal

The first thing to note is that many of the participants said that heavy metal music was not easy to define. Many participants spoke about the diversity of heavy metal and the blurred boundaries between different definitions. Rob even went as far as to advise the researcher against confounding entirely different subgenres:

'Don't go into researching it thinking metal is in itself one genre. There are hundreds of subgenres within it; prog metal, heavy metal, death metal, black metal, grindcore etc'. - Rob

Note here how heavy metal has been included as a subgenre derived from the wider genre of metal. Defending heavy metal's musical diversity seemed to be very important to fans of the genre, Richard in particular seeming passionate about it:

'GASPS yes there is variety in metal despite what some vocal bigots would lead you to believe' - Richard.

Heavy metal youth culture

The participants in the online interview were aware of a stereotypical image of the 'metalhead' and described this stereotype in terms of attitude and of appearance:

...the specific stereotypical image of a metalhead is piercings, tattoos, leather jacket, long hair, and a half smoked fag. I only conform to 1/5 of these (long hair), but I can see the appeal behind the rest (apart from the cigarette, euugh). - Richard

The participants who enjoyed heavy metal did not seem to identify entirely with this stereotype nor did many of them consider themselves 'metalheads', with those that did doing so in a rather tentative manner. Indeed, the participants generally did not seem to be part of a heavy metal youth culture. Those that liked the genre said that only a few of their friends also liked it, which suggests it was not a prerequisite for friendship or a fundamental aspect of the peer group.

The attraction of heavy metal

The questions about what participants liked about heavy metal and what attracted them to it produced a range of responses. The aesthetic value of the music was discussed and a healthy debate between those that liked the genre and those that did not ensued. On the one hand many participants spoke of the exciting rhythms that characterised it and the skill of the performers, while those that disliked the genre were also very explicit:

'I find metal music nauseating and contaminating. It is totally repugnant, and has little to no redeeming features.' - Claire

Of those involved in the discussion that did not like heavy metal, Claire in particular showed a strong distaste for the genre in her posts and was highly articulate as to why:

'The most likely reason that 'metal' has arisen as a genre of music (is) as a reflection of the ugliness our late capitalist society has put into people. The emptiness and lack of moral nourishment and authenticity is reflected in the music.' - Claire

Her strongly worded criticisms were responded to by those that liked the genre in an equally articulate manner, with several participants suggesting that music and beauty were subjective and that metal music was authentic and expressive. Finding the polarized nature of opinion towards the genre was an interesting bonus.

Also interesting was the level of importance that many participants attached to the content of the lyrics. Most of those that liked the genre suggested that the lyrics carried more emotional heft and greater meaning than the music of other genres. Several participants said that they could empathise with the lyrics or relate to the themes being expressed in the music, a few suggested that the genre often had a political edge or expressed opinion about social and cultural issues.

'Song lyrics are a great way of expressing yourself, so, obviously, some metal bands use their lyrics to show political ideas... Personally, I find these lyrics interesting, which adds to my enjoyment of the music.' - Anna

'...most of the metal bands I listen to sing mostly about politics' - Chris

It seems the participants appreciate the themes of the genre and believe that it offers intelligent or at least meaningful commentary on the world some of the time.

Heavy metal and mood

The extent to which heavy metal and its consumption was dependent on mood was frequently mentioned by the participants. The use of heavy metal for catharsis was emphasised on several occasions, with participants stating that they liked to listen to it while angry, upset or stressed out:

'Definitely helps when you're stressed!!! Not sure why, I just think it's the general 'thrashyness' of the music, you can't really jump your anger into the floor and listen to music at the same time with other types of music.' - Liz

Heavy metal is useful for releasing negative emotions but not just for this purpose. Others also suggest that it can be quite playful, fun music that works as pure entertainment. James sums up his use of heavy metal, and music in general rather neatly:

'As with most music, it depends heavily on the person's mood at the time. So whilst there probably is your "average Metalhead fan", there will also be a lot of other fans who just feel "Metalheady" every so often. Which I guess goes some way to justify my playlists being named emotions. ☺' - James

It seems that his music preferences are fluid, dependent on the context and on his mood at the time.

Discussion

With regard to self-esteem and self-concept, results suggest that those that ranked heavy metal had slightly lower self-esteem as well as lower self-concept in the academic, peer and parent relation domains. This could be related to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) as involvement with a genre of music that has a defined youth culture may reflect attempts to raise low self-esteem through association with a perceived outgroup. The lower self-esteem and weaker peer and parent relationships may reflect feelings of isolation and therefore be linked to a liking for the 'harder' types of music and the youth cultures that surround them (Arnett, 1996). The genre does seem to be one of the more rebellious with regard to its reflections on society and so may be appealing to the slightly more disillusioned individuals in the sample.

This interpretation is very tentative for two main reasons. Firstly the survey results suggest overwhelmingly positive self-esteem and self-concept scores for the majority of participants and so it is more a case of those that ranked heavy metal having *less positive* scores rather than negative ones. Secondly, there are many variables that can mediate self-esteem and self-concept and although this finding fits with the social identity literature it does not demonstrate the extent to which those that ranked the genre identify with it or with other fans. Indeed, the online group interview suggests that most of the participants did not consider themselves to be 'Metalheads', nor did they particularly identify with any form of youth culture that may surround the genre.

Indeed any causal relationships between music preferences and other factors are very difficult to establish and so this study can only make inferences based on the available literature and in light of empirical data. The central character in Nick Hornby's (1995) novel 'High Fidelity' asks himself whether he listens to Pop music because he's miserable or if he's miserable because he listens to Pop music – it seems that the question about mood and music will remain rhetorical, and although the theory of uses and gratifications would suggest the former explanation, it would seem unlikely that the relationship is not two-way, at least to some extent.

There is another branch of social identity theory that may be of use to this discussion: Optimal Distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991). This theory states that individuals are motivated by both the need to feel unique and the need to belong to a group or wider community. The result is a drive to achieve 'optimal distinctiveness' or a balance

between collectivism and individuality. It could be argued that by subscribing to a certain type of music and, to varying extents, the youth culture surrounding it, the students are attempting to strike such a balance. On the one hand they are incorporating the style associated with the genre into their own identity and using the media to forge or display their own unique set of characteristics, but on the other they are seeking membership to a wider peer group (though it is perhaps virtual or imagined) searching for a place within a collective, no matter how dispersed this collective actually is.

For example, Richard talks about the appeal of the stereotypical 'Metalhead' image which suggests he feels that it fits with his identity at least to an extent. However he rejects one aspect of this image, smoking, as this is incongruent with his identity, or at least the one that he wishes to portray to others. In a way this fits neatly with the theory of optimal distinctiveness – Richard identifies with other fans of heavy metal and is attracted to the style associated with the youth culture but does not wish to fit in with this group to the extent that he loses certain individual characteristics that he regards as important. There is scope to be a part of the youth culture and to feel a sense of affinity with other members but this is offset against the desire to stand out from the crowd and maintain at least some degree of individuality. The participants did not seem to appreciate or agree with the idea of being identified as a 'Metalhead' but their appreciation of specific aspects of this youth culture seemed to lead to them identifying with certain parts of it.

The evidence provided in this study could be used as support for the uses and gratifications theory of media consumption. Reports from fans of the genre in the online interview refer explicitly to the use of heavy metal for catharsis – literally using the loud and often aggressive music to jump out frustrations and anger. Although the more ardent fans stated that 'There's Metal out there for every occasion' (Richard), many also stated that they listen to the genre when they are in a bad mood. It seems heavy metal can be used explicitly for the purpose of mood moderation. The finding that those that ranked the genre report lower self-esteem and academic, peer and parent self-concepts could also be taken as support of this as it could be argued that such individuals may be more likely to encounter negative moods more frequently and so have a greater use for heavy metal. Perhaps the pressures associated with being gifted and talented can be temporarily dissipated with the aid of the music, which could explain its somewhat surprising popularity within the sample.

As James suggests, perhaps individuals, particularly gifted ones who may experience more pressure than their peers or perhaps be more aware of the contradictions in the world (as suggested by their appreciation of politically charged heavy metal lyrics), just feel 'metalheady' from time to time and they use the music to fulfil their need to purge this negative affect. It should be noted however that there is limited evidence that most gifted and talented students suffer from emotional and social problems – in fact the evidence is often to the contrary (for a summary, see Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002).

As mentioned above, to an extent the evidence also suggests another factor that may attract the gifted and talented to heavy metal. Arnett (1996) hints that some heavy metal may hold political and thought provoking messages beneath a veneer of negativity:

'In a sense, the themes in Heavy Metal songs are simply a contemporary expression of this adolescent capacity for energetic and righteous social criticism. What distinguishes Heavy Metal ideology from other such protests is its deep cynicism.'
(p. 166)

There is an extent to which the data from the online group interviews support this. It could be suggested that the participants' higher abilities may be reflected in their preference for the genre. Their appreciation of the themes in the lyrics was certainly expressed articulately and they perceived that at least part of their liking for the genre stemmed from their desire to hear music with meaning and emotional impact. It may be that the dark themes and powerful expressions of feeling are particularly interesting to gifted and talented adolescents who may be looking at the world in a more complex way than their non-gifted peers. However, without a comparison group of non-gifted students to parallel both the level of popularity of heavy metal and the nature of how it is perceived, such suggestions remain highly speculative.

The media now caters for every desire and provides young people with a variety of inspirations from which to pick and choose. Heavy metal may provide an image for an adolescent to completely or partially adopt and may serve specific functions within this identity. This may be why it holds such popularity among those who are disaffected or those that may experience negative emotions caused by pressure or lower self-esteem. It can be used to purge the negative emotions associated with such problems cathartically, the lyrics and music sympathising with the difficulties faced by the individual and perhaps alleviating feelings of isolation by reflecting the fact that the listener is not the only one to think or suffer in a particular way. The style and message of the genre may appeal to certain individuals some of the time and others all of the time and the pressures associated with giftedness, or the appreciation of more complex material, may lead to a propensity for the gifted and talented to prefer it at least on occasion. Of course it could not be suggested that all individuals who are gifted enjoy the music (this much is clear from this data). How music is used is clearly complex and there are many other methods by which an individual can relieve stress, but the trends suggest that this is one valid possibility even if the preponderance of this type of use remains unknown at present.

Before concluding a few issues of concern should be raised regarding the research design adopted for this study. There is an issue regarding the extent to which the sample that responded to the survey can be compared to that which participated in the online interview. It is entirely possible, perhaps even likely, that individuals with certain characteristics are more likely to respond to a questionnaire than they are to engage in an online interview and vice versa. Also problematic is the survey question about musical preference itself. The item required participants to rank their favourite genres from one to five but only featured nine possible options which may have forced participants to respond in a way that did not precisely reflect their beliefs. Also it is possible that the list excludes some important music styles even though the survey was piloted with a small group of students from NAGTY and this group perceived no problems with the measure.

Also important is to discuss the use of the term heavy metal itself. This is an issue because if the term is completely misunderstood then the construct validity of parts of the study could be severely threatened. However, as was verbalised by the participants, heavy metal does not really have a stable definition and those who spoke about it seemed to have different perceptions regarding its meaning and the type of music that it encompasses. One participant even suggested that heavy metal was a subgenre within a wider genre called Metal. How can conclusions be drawn if it is not even clear what genre is being explored? The answer is that the aim is not necessarily to make inferences about heavy metal itself but rather to discuss how a gifted student may use louder and perhaps less socially acceptable (at least with most adults!) forms of music to purge negative emotions and to form identity. The genre of heavy metal and what characterises it may be defined differently by each

and every individual but how they use this music seems to show a pattern for those who favour it, and it is this pattern that has been the focus for the study rather than the genre itself.

Finally there is an issue of the measurement of self-esteem and self-concept. This study uses Muijs' (1997) instrument, but there are many others of high validity (See Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991, for a review). It is not possible to discuss this fully here, given the extensive range of work in this field, but it is possible that using a different instrument, with its different assumptions about the nature of self-esteem, might have produced somewhat different results in respect of the self-esteem and self-concept outcomes.

Conclusions and Future Research

The lack of any comparison groups causes an issue with the design which makes strong conclusions about the gifted and talented population difficult to make. Ideally it would have been useful to compare the preferences of the gifted and talented cohort to a matched cohort of non-gifted participants using the same measures. Although the data suggests there are differences in preferences and perhaps in the way those preferences are realised and used, there is no way to state this with much authority given the lack of a direct comparison. Also useful would have been to compare gifted and talented 'Metalheads' to those who were not identified as gifted in order to ascertain any differences in how this particular preference was perceived and used by the two groups.

With regards to social identity theory the findings from the present study do not offer coherent evidence to suggest that individuals with low self-esteem will align themselves with a youth culture or that they will evaluate this youth culture more highly than other groups in order to alleviate negative affect. However, the data does hint that social identity theory may be a useful perspective from which to approach music preferences and a refined design could reap different results. One possible way of exploring this would be to set up a quasi-experimental design similar to that used by Tarrant et al. (2001). Such a study could, to a limited extent, ascertain whether gifted and talented students use musical preference to define in-group and out-group, whether they favour the in-group, and if so whether favouritism is mediated by self-esteem or other domains of self-concept. Such a study would have to be meticulously designed but could provide substantial evidence for or against the argument that music preferences form part of the social identities of gifted and talented students.

It seems that this paper has opened many channels for further research while providing evidence for the diversity of gifted and talented students in England and evidence for the diversity of music and its use by the individual. The findings contradict the stereotypes of both the gifted adolescent as a classical music loving, isolated individual, and the heavy metal fan as a troubled individual that rejects academic life. Although there are definite trends in the data presented here that suggest those who like heavy metal may display certain characteristics, overall this study highlights the complexity of the issues and the fact that there are multiple exceptions to the rules.

References

- Arnett, J. J. (1995). Adolescents' Uses of Media for Self-Socialization, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. Vol. 24, No. 5, pp. 519-533.
- Arnett, J. J. (1996). *Metal Heads: Heavy Metal Music and Adolescent Alienation*, Oxford: Westview Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1979). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* London: Routledge.
- Blascovich, J. & Tomaka, J. (1991). Measures of Self-esteem. in J.P. Robinson, P.R. Shaver, and L.S. Wrightsman (Eds.), (1991) *Measures of personality and social psychological attitudes*. Academic Press: San Diego.
- Brake, M. (1985). *Comparative Youth Culture: The Sociology of Youth Cultures and Youth Subcultures in America, Britain and Canada*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Brewer, M. B. (1991). The social self: On being the same and different at the same time, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 17, pp. 475-482.
- Campbell, R.J., Muijs, R.D., Mazzoli, L., Hewston, R., Robinson, W. & Eyre, D. (2006). Engagement with School, Identity and Self-esteem: Some Characteristics of Gifted and Talented Students in England, *NAGTY Occasional Paper 11* (Online article), Available at: <http://www.nagty.ac.uk/research/publications/index.aspx> Accessed on August 23rd 2006.
- Compaine, B. M. (2001). *The Digital Divide: Facing a Crisis or Creating a Myth?* Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Finnäs, L. (1989). A comparison between young people's privately and publicly expressed musical preferences. *Psychology of Music*, Vol. 17, pp. 132-145.
- Freeman, J. (2001). *Gifted Children Grown Up*. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Gross, MUM (1998) The "me" behind the mask: intellectually gifted students and the search for identity. *Roeper Review*, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 167-173.
- Hansen, C. H., & Hansen, R. D. (1991). Constructing personality and social reality through music: Individual differences among fans. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, Vol. 35, No. 3, pp. 335-350.
- Hargreaves, D. J., & North A. C. (Eds.) (1997). *The Social Psychology of Music*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hargreaves, D. J., Miell, D., & MacDonald, R. A. R. (2002). What are musical identities, and why are they important? in R. Macdonald, D. Hargreaves, and D. Miell (Eds.) *Musical Identities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hebdige, D. (1979) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen.
- Hornby, N. (1995). *High Fidelity*. London: Gollancz.
- Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gervitch, M. (1974) Utilization of mass communication by

- the individual In J. G. Blumer, and E. Katz,(Eds.), *The Uses of Mass Media: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research*. London: Sage Publications.
- King, P. (1988). Heavy Metal music and drug abuse in adolescents. *Postgraduate Medicine*, Vol. 83, No. 5, pp. 295-304.
- Lacourse, E., Claes, M., & Villeneuve, M. (2001) Heavy Metal use and adolescent suicide risk. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 321-332.
- Larson, R. (1995). Secrets in the bedroom: adolescents' private use of media. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Vol. 24, No. 5, pp. 535-550.
- Macdonald, R., Hargreaves, D., & Miell, D. (Eds.) (2002) *Musical Identities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Muijs, D. (1997). *Self, School and Media*, Leuven: Catholic University of Leuven.
- Neihart, M., Reis, S. M., Robinson, N. M., & Moon, S. M. (Eds.) (2002). *The Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children: What do we Know?* Waco, Texas: Prufrock Press.
- North, A. C. & Hargreaves, D. J., (1999). Music and adolescent identity, *Music Education Research*, Vol. 1, pp. 75-92.
- North, A. C., Hargreaves, D. J., & O'Neill, S. A. (2000). The Importance of Music to Adolescents. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 70, pp. 255-272.
- O'Neill, S. A. (1997). Gender and music. In D. J. Hargreaves, and A. C. North. (Eds.), *The Social Psychology of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (1999). *The Review of the National Curriculum in England. The Consultation Materials*. London: QCA.
- Roe, K. (1994). Media use and social mobility. In K. E. Rosengren, *Media Effects and Beyond: Culture, Socialization and Lifestyle*. London: Routledge.
- Roe, K. (1995). Adolescents' use of socially disvalued media: towards a theory of media delinquency. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Vol. 24, No. 5, pp. 617-631.
- Rosengren, K. E. (1974). Uses and Gratifications: A Paradigm Outlined. In J. G. Blumer, and E. Katz (Eds.). *The Uses of Mass Media: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Schuler, P. (2002). Perfectionism in gifted children and adolescents. In M. Neihart, S. M. Reis, N. M. Robinson, and S. M. Moon, (Eds.). *The Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children: What do we Know?* Waco, Texas: Prufrock Press.
- Silverman, L. K. (2002). Asynchronous development. In M. Neihart, S. M. Reis, N. M. Robinson, and S. M. Moon (Eds.) *The Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children: What do we Know?* Waco, Texas: Prufrock Press.
- Tajfel, H. (1978). *Differentiation Between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. London: Academic Press.

- Tajfel, H. & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin, and H. Worschel, (Eds.) *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relation*. Monterey, California: Brooks/Cole.
- Tarrant, M., Hargreaves, D. J., & North, A. C. (2001). Social categorization, self-esteem, and the estimated musical preferences of male adolescents. *Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 141, No. 5, pp. 565-581.
- Tarrant, M., North A. C., Edridge M. D., Kirk, L. E., Smith, E. A., & Turner, R. E. (2001) Social identity in adolescence. *Journal of Adolescence*, Vol. 24, no. 5, pp. 187-204.
- Tarrant, M., North, A. C. & Hargreaves, D. J. (2002). Youth identity and music. In R. Macdonald, D. Hargreaves, and D. Miell, (Eds.). *Musical Identities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van Boxtel, H. W. & Monks, F. J. (1992). General, social, and academic self-concepts of gifted adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 169-186.
- Zillmann, D., & Gan, S. (1997). Musical taste in adolescence in D. J. Hargreaves, and A.C. North (1997). *The Social Psychology of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zuo, L., & Tao, L. (2001). Importance of personality in gifted children's identity formation. *The Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 21

Appendix A

Statistically significant differences between those that ranked Heavy Metal and those that did not on self-reported use of leisure time

Leisure activity (hours spent)	t	df	p	Cohen's D
Computer games week day	4.209	567	.000	.29
Computer games weekend	3.538	721	.000	.24
Music listening week day	3.467	577	.001	.24
Music listening weekend	3.373	628	.001	.23
Homework week day	-3.110	842	.002	.20
Homework weekend	-2.598	821	.010	.17
Music making	2.643	591	.008	.18



**The National Academy
for Gifted and Talented Youth**

The University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 7AL United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)24 7657 4213

Fax: +44 (0)24 7657 4221

Email: gifted@warwick.ac.uk

Web: www.nagty.ac.uk

April 2007

ISBN Number: 978-1-905877-34-8

THE UNIVERSITY OF
WARWICK

department for
education and skills