



Research note

Music classification, genres, and taste patterns: A ground-up network analysis on the clustering of artist preferences



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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the use of predetermined genre lists to measure patterns in music taste and, more specifically, cultural omnivorousness. The use of a predetermined array of genres assumes that music genres are rigid and stable concepts, whereas in reality genre boundaries continually emerge, evolve, and disappear. Inspired by Lamont's (2010) call to study classification systems 'from the ground up', we present an alternative strategy to measure patterns of music taste using an open question about artist preferences. We build a two-mode network of artists and respondents to identify clusters of respondents that have similar relationships to the same set of artists. Our results show that research using measurements of cultural omnivorousness based on genre preferences might be hampered, as it misses important subdivisions within genres and is not able to capture respondents who combine specific aspects within and across music genres.

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1. Introduction

In the early 1990s, [Peterson \(1992\)](#) and [Peterson and Kern \(1996\)](#) introduced the concept of the cultural omnivore, when he discovered a shift in American music taste from a highbrow-lowbrow distinction to a contrast between high-status omnivores—who combine elite and popular culture—and lower-status univores ([Bourdieu, 1984](#); [Peterson, 1992](#)). Since then, the cultural omnivore concept has been widely debated in cultural sociology. During the last two decades, researchers around the world have shown the prevalence of cultural omnivorousness in a variety of social settings (e.g. [Peterson & Kern, 1996](#); [Peterson, 2005](#); [Stichele & Laermans, 2006](#); [van Eijck & Lievens, 2008](#); [van Eijck, 2001](#)). Some researchers have focused on 'volume' measurements, based on a score or a scale that counts the number of genres a person likes in order to quantify the 'voraciousness' of a cultural consumer (e.g. [Bryson, 1996](#)). Others have used a 'compositional' approach, which concentrates on specific combinations of music genres (e.g. [van Eijck & Lievens, 2008](#)).

Although there is substantial variety in the operationalization of the cultural omnivore in quantitative research, the use of genres as a starting point seems to be beyond discussion. Researchers use the liking of genres, often combined with a dimension-reduction technique such as latent class analysis or factor analysis, to construct cultural omnivorousness measurements in terms of volume or composition of taste. Nevertheless, the use of broad music genre preferences was questioned by [Bourdieu \(1984\)](#), who insisted that music cannot simply be categorized into cultural genres, as there will be

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differences in the specific types of musical works that are part of these genres. Recent quantitative and qualitative work on boundary drawing around music genres has confirmed this proposition. Genre boundaries are ‘fuzzy’ and the hidden dimensions in genre categories are often overlooked by researchers (e.g. Beer & Taylor, 2013; Beer, 2013; Savage & Gayo, 2011; Savage, 2006; Sonnett, 2016; van Venrooij, 2009).

In this paper, we argue why research on the cultural omnivore based on preferences for a predefined list of music genres might start off on the wrong foot. Inspired by Lamont’s call to study classification systems ‘from the ground up’ (Lamont, 2010; p. 132), we offer an alternative strategy to measure music taste and taste patterns by using an open question about artist preferences. We build on existing knowledge in social network analysis to construct a two-mode network of people and music artists—conforming to the duality between people and cultural items—and we use state-of-the-art network clustering techniques to identify clusters of people who have similar relationships to the same set of artists (Breiger, 1974; Dimaggio, 1987). By using this bottom-up approach, taste patterns emerge from the data, an ad hoc list of genres becomes redundant, and we obtain a more detailed measurement of music taste patterns. In a last step, we link this new typology of taste patterns to known correlates of cultural preferences in order to compare our results with existing research on the prevalence of the cultural omnivore and the sociodemographic context.

2. Theory

2.1. “Classification as culture” (Lena & Peterson, 2008)

Classifications of music genres are central in quantitative research on cultural omnivorousness (Beer, 2013). Cultural researchers typically use a predetermined array of genres to measure differentiation in music taste. However, there is no validated and widely-accepted measurement instrument for music taste. Research differs greatly, in the number and labeling of genres and the instructions for respondents (Peterson, 2005). For example, Chan and Goldthorpe (2007) asked respondents whether they had listened to four genres (opera/opera, jazz, classical, and pop/rock) in the preceding four weeks. In the data used by Bryson (1996), by contrast, respondents were given 18 genres, with the instruction to indicate their preference or dislike for each on a five-point Likert scale. Between these two, the questionnaire used by Peterson and colleagues (Peterson & Kern, 1996; Peterson & Simkus, 1992; Peterson, 1992) instructed respondents to indicate whether or not they liked 10 genres. The consequences of this variety for the operationalization of music genre classifications should not be underestimated. Genres are important initial organizing tools for researchers, allowing them to classify people and draw links between these classifications and sociodemographic characteristics such as social class, age, and gender. Music genres shape boundaries within the music field and they “ultimately feed into sociology’s conception of difference, class and inequality” (Beer & Taylor, 2013; p. 2). The boundaries created by classifying artists into separate genres are inevitably reflected in research that links culture with social divisions. Focusing on the issue of classification systems for music genres, and their possible drawbacks, therefore seems appropriate. We begin by listing the problems we see with music taste measurements based on a predefined list of genres.

First, cultural research that uses predetermined genre lists makes the assumption that genres are rigid and stable concepts (Beer & Taylor, 2013; Lena & Peterson, 2008). This is at odds with the prevailing conviction that music genres continually emerge, evolve, and disappear (Beer, 2013; Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Lena & Peterson, 2008). Music genres are lively concepts, and boundary drawing around genres happens continuously within the dynamics of the field (Bourdieu, 1984; Savage & Silva, 2013). The emergence of decentralized social media seems to have accelerated the dynamics even more. The field of music genres shows signs of ‘declassification’ and of becoming more “differentiated and characterized by a plethora of genres” (Beer, 2013; Dimaggio, 1991; van Venrooij, 2009, p. 317). A predefined list of genres is unable to deal with this vibrancy. It assumes that researchers can keep up with the unremitting dynamics of genre boundary drawing in their research context. In practice, it is almost impossible for an ‘uncool’ cultural researcher to capture emerging, evolving, and disappearing genre boundaries in a predetermined grid (Beer, 2009; Lamont, 2010). Dimaggio (1987) has already drawn attention to the fact that survey questions make fewer distinctions between cultural forms than users of culture do. In particular, broad genre definitions tend to overlook “sub-divisions into genres, periods, styles, authors etc.” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 16; Savage, 2006).

Second, there is no guarantee that a presented music genre list is interpreted universally. Respondents can have different understandings of what type of music fits in a particular genre (Beer & Taylor, 2013; Holt, 1998; Savage, 2006). For example, as stated by Beer, “an artist like Eminem might be pop for one person and hip-hop for another” (Beer & Taylor, 2013; p. 3). This relates to qualitative research that shows, for example, how respondents discriminate between ‘light classical’ and ‘avant-garde’ classical music. Bourdieu’s own analysis on music taste even differentiated between two works by the same artist (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 16–17; Savage, Bagnall, & Longhurst, 2005). Cultural research based on music genre preferences ignores all the interpretational variety within the music genres: a predetermined grid of genres leaves no room for ‘fuzziness’ in interpretation (Beer, 2013; Bottero & Crossley, 2011).

Finally, when asking about music preferences we do not know whether people have actually heard the music encompassed by the presented genres (Savage, 2006). Research has shown that people have stereotypes about music genres, over and above their preferences or dislikes for the intrinsic musical properties of these genres (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2007; Rentfrow, McDonald, & Oldmeadow, 2009; Van Steen & Lievens, 2011). The positive or negative feelings about music genres that people express can be due to stereotyping instead of a real taste preference. These connotations are socially structured

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