



Adolescents' Music Tastes in the Streaming Era: The Case of Belgium

Cultural Sociology

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Luca Carbone 
KU Leuven, Belgium

Laura Vandenbosch
KU Leuven, Belgium

Abstract

The sociological literature about music considers youth as a crucial period for the development of one's music tastes and identity. Yet, scarce research has documented the taste profiles of adolescents and their composition in relation to identity characteristics, especially in the current streaming era. In this article, we integrate different strands of literature analyzing the role of music tastes in identity building to define and segment the composition of contemporary adolescents' taste profiles. We employed data from a cross-sectional study among Belgian adolescents ($n=533$, $M_{\text{age}}(SD)=15.3(1.6)$, 61.1% girls, 83.2% Western European) and used latent class analysis to derive their taste profiles. Multinomial logistic regression subsequently segmented the socio-cognitive, social, and digital characteristics of these profiles. Our findings contextualize adult taste profiles among adolescents and the streaming landscape, shedding light on cultural tastes as gendered technologies of self-presentation.

Keywords

adolescents, cultural hierarchies, gender, music streaming platforms, taste profiles

Introduction

The sociological study of music has long been invested in understanding the role of music tastes as key markers of individuals' everyday lives (Glevarec and Nowak, 2022). Music tastes have been typically defined as the expression of likes and dislikes for various music pieces or genres (Peterson and Kern, 1996). They form primarily during adolescence due

Corresponding author:

Luca Carbone, School for Mass Communication Research, Faculty of Social Sciences, KU Leuven, Parkstraat 45, Leuven, 3000, Belgium.

Email: luca.carbone@kuleuven.be

to significant changes characterizing this period. First, the elaboration of socio-cognitive beliefs and changes in social bonding make music an important badge to define ingroups and outgroups through the expression of different music tastes (i.e. socio-cognitive positioning; Rentfrow and Gosling, 2007). Similarly, social characteristics such as one's gender, ethno-racial characteristics, and socio-economic resources are key in developing and expressing different music tastes (i.e. social positioning; Nagel and Lemel, 2019). Finally, in increasingly digitized societies, the access, consumption, and sharing of music through music streaming platforms (MSPs) further contribute to generating new music experiences and tastes (i.e. digital positioning; North et al., 2008).

Yet, this literature has rarely been combined into an integrated account of the socio-cognitive, social, and digital components involved in the formation of adolescents' music tastes. While part of this literature has studied adolescents but disregarded the social value (i.e. prestige) attached to likes/dislikes (Rentfrow and Gosling, 2007), other studies have focused on prestige but uniquely among adults (Lizardo and Skiles, 2016). Moreover, this literature has largely ignored contemporary systems of music consumption (e.g. MSPs), focusing instead on Information Communication Technologies (ICT) (North et al., 2008) related to traditional media, such as television and CDs (Weingartner, 2021). This is surprising considering the ubiquitous role of MSPs for music consumption and sharing, especially among adolescents (Hesmondhalgh, 2022; IFPI, 2023).

In this article, we provide an integrated approach to the socio-cognitive, social, and digital factors structuring adolescents' music tastes. Employing data from a cross-sectional study among Belgian adolescents ($n=533$, M_{age} (SD)=15.3 (1.6), 61.1% girls, 83.2% Western-European), we first derived adolescents' taste profiles using latent class analysis. We subsequently employed multinomial logistic regression to segment these profiles according to socio-cognitive, social, and digital characteristics. Adolescents' music tastes were finally derived by interpreting differences across the profiles' composition.

Music Tastes

Music tastes have been typically studied by grouping participants into taste profiles, based on their expressed preferences for music genres. These profiles are subsequently segmented according to characteristics of interest, such as stereotyped attitudes (Rentfrow and Gosling, 2007) or socio-demographic features (Chan, 2019). This literature has adopted two different strategies to measure taste profiles, dependent on whether the profiling was based on music-specific subgroups or on genre hierarchies. One has grouped subgenres (e.g. heavy metal and classical rock) to define broader genre categories (e.g. rock) (Mulder et al., 2006) or groups with similar audio-lyrical characteristics (e.g. mellow, contemporary) (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013). The other has grouped genres based on their prestige (e.g. classical as highbrow, metal as lowbrow), as granted by cultural intermediaries, such as music critics, or by listeners themselves. Taste profiles such as the omnivore or the snob are typical examples of such a grouping strategy (Peterson and Kern, 1996). By expressing appreciation or disapproval for various genres, individuals simultaneously express aesthetic and moral judgments as an evaluation of one's and others' position in society.

These literatures are limited in two ways. The first (i.e. profiling based on music-specific subgroups) has largely focused on adolescents, disregarding the prestige attached

to genres in the definition of cultural hierarchies (Rentfrow and Gosling, 2007). These studies are thus unable to capture the uses of music in relation to processes of social distinction and group belongingness, where taste profiles function as badges. The second (i.e. profiling based on genre hierarchies) has more explicitly focused on the prestige of genres, but mostly targeting adult populations (Lizardo and Skiles, 2016). This is problematic as adults tend to have rather stable music preferences, while adolescents undergo stronger changes (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013). Adolescents' taste profiles can differ from those of adults because of different purposes for music consumption (e.g. as a badge rather than as a background, Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013). Critically, they can also differ because of socio-cognitive characteristics (e.g. stronger importance in being politically active and more risky decision-making among adolescents, Defoe et al., 2015), and because of technologies (e.g. MSPs) not available to previous generations.

In short, it still remains unclear what are the music taste profiles of contemporary adolescents. To address this gap, our first research question (RQ) asked: *What are the music taste profiles of contemporary adolescents?* (RQ1)

Segmentation of Taste Profiles

The study of adolescents' taste profiles is particularly important to understand the relationships between the expression of cultural tastes and key characteristics that accompany adolescents while growing up. This segmentation is further important to understand theoretical mechanisms that could underlie processes of taste formation (e.g. gender differences in highbrow consumption, Bihagen and Katz-Gerro, 2000) and influences (e.g. internalization of music messages in adolescents' beliefs, Carbone and Vandenbosch, 2023). To better understand the composition of music taste profiles, the next sections offer an integrated reading of three main areas in which music tastes have been studied among adolescents, namely socio-cognitive, social, and digital characteristics.

Socio-cognitive Positioning. The relationship between music tastes and youth's socio-cognitive factors becomes particularly important during adolescence because of the formation of beliefs about oneself and others that characterize this developmental period of life. During adolescence, socio-cognitive skills gradually develop to facilitate the formation of one's identity in relation to others, such as complex forms of abstract thinking, emotion regulation, and perspective-taking (Choudhury et al., 2006). These skills allow adolescents to reflect more in-depth about values and beliefs defining their position in society and (Flanagan et al., 2014). Moreover, these changes allow adolescents to develop aesthetic categories used to signal such beliefs through the choice of cultural products, music included. By connecting aesthetic features (e.g. complex/simple, intellectual/practical) with moral principles (e.g. good/bad, right/wrong; Hanrahan, 2018), associations like 'good because complex, bad because simple' are used to decide about one's and others' music preferences (Brisson and Bianchi, 2021, 2022).

These aesthetic categories develop according to one's dispositional openness, defined as a combination of 'intellectual, imaginative, sensitive, and open-minded' tendencies (Roccas et al., 2002: 792). Previous literature about music tastes has focused on two aspects of dispositional openness, namely cosmopolitanism and meritocracy

(Brisson and Bianchi, 2021; Friedman et al., 2015). While cosmopolitanism manifests an *inclusive* expression of openness, aimed towards the inclusion and appreciation of diversity, meritocracy resembles an *exclusive* expression of openness, meant to explicitly define boundaries and distinctions between deserving and undeserving social groups (Taylor and O'Brien, 2017).

As an attitudinal expression of openness, cosmopolitanism represents the tendency to view cultural diversity as an asset to cultivate and promote, indicating a curious mindset open to being challenged and inspired by new influences (Skey, 2012). Previous research has indeed found that individuals with broader musical tastes are more cosmopolitan compared to those with narrower tastes (Flemmen et al., 2019). Being curious and open to new music influences might promote the propensity to develop broader music tastes rather than to prefer one or few genres. In this sense, cosmopolitanism signals aesthetic dispositions, such as openness, curiosity, and desire for innovation.

While previous research has extensively focused on cosmopolitanism, little research on music tastes has paid attention to another dimension that has been, instead, extensively studied, namely, meritocracy (Jarness and Friedman, 2017). Generally speaking, meritocracy is the belief that hard work is essential to reach success (Taylor and O'Brien, 2017). Concerning music tastes, sociological studies have shown that a meritocratic narrative is also employed as a strategy for boundary construction (O'Brien and Ianni, 2023), to define symbolic boundaries between ingroups and outgroups based on the tastes of their members (Lamont, 2019). According to a meritocratic perspective, not subscribing to a correct modality of music consumption (in other words, not listening to the 'right' artists or genres) can be seen as the expression of a passive and lazy disposition, uninterested in cultivating refined music tastes (Friedman et al., 2015). For example, Ollivier (2008) showed that individuals with omnivore tastes tend to see themselves as curious, cultivated, and voracious, while perceiving those who prefer mass culture, such as pop music, and with narrower tastes (i.e. univores) as simplistic and passive. These judgments derive from a narrow definition of the legitimate modality of music consumption, one that promotes openness and curiosity (Flemmen et al., 2019). Individuals draw from their meritocratic beliefs to define their music tastes and to infer personal characteristics (e.g. openness rather than laziness) based on such tastes.

Cosmopolitan and meritocratic beliefs become important during adolescence for the formation of music tastes (Flanagan et al., 2014). Yet, no study has mapped the composition of music tastes among adolescents based on their socio-cognitive beliefs and only a handful of studies have tackled this question among adults (Chan, 2019; van Eijck and Lievens, 2008). If music tastes serve the purpose of personal understanding and social distinction, it is crucial to understand whether beliefs that are generally used for these purposes are also relevant in the definition of adolescents' music tastes. Building from this literature, our second RQ is therefore interested in understanding: *What are the levels of cosmopolitan (RQ2a) and meritocratic (RQ2b) beliefs among adolescents with different music taste profiles?*

Social positioning. Music tastes are intrinsically social; they shape and are shaped by social processes such as friendship formation or social distinction. Existing literature has extensively focused on the role of gender, ethno-racial, and socio-economic characteristics. Regarding gender, this literature has documented higher levels of highbrow music consumption among women compared to men (Bihagen and Katz-Gerro, 2000),

explained by differences in terms of gender socialization, involvement in the labor force, and peer networks (Christin, 2012). Some research has also documented differences in how music preferences cue ethno-racial identities, including those among immigrants (Elias and Lemish, 2009). For example, Marshall and Naumann (2018) showed that strangers correctly guess someone's race uniquely based on music preferences. Interestingly, their respondents were also aware of how music preferences reflected one's own race. These differences are crucial for perceptions about cultural assimilation among ethno-racial minorities and majorities (Stewart et al., 2019). Gender and ethno-racial characteristics are therefore two key characteristics related to music tastes. For this reason, our third RQ asks: *What are the proportions of different gender (RQ3a) and ethno-racial (RQ3b) groups among adolescents with different music taste profiles?*

Together with gender and ethno-racial characteristics, the resources provided by ones' family have also been studied in relation to the type of music consumed (e.g. genres and artists; Childress et al., 2021) and the modality of such consumption (e.g. on Spotify or using vinyl records; Webster, 2020). In particular, youth growing up in families with higher educational (i.e. higher degrees obtained) and cultural (i.e. higher knowledge of prestigious culture) capital have more opportunities to be frequently exposed to multiple cultural activities, including listening to different music genres and going to concerts (Nagel and Lemel, 2019). Existing literature has adopted a social identity perspective to suggest that individuals tend to use music to achieve, maintain, or enhance a positive image of themselves through in-group favoritism (Lonsdale, 2021) or the formation of ingroup/outgroup stereotypes (Rentfrow and Gosling, 2007). In this sense, music could be used by adolescents to signal and uphold their socio-economic conditions, signaling closeness to similar and distinction from different socio-economic groups. For this reason, our fourth RQ asks: *What are the levels of parental education (RQ4a) and cultural capital (RQ4b) among adolescents with different music taste profiles?*

Digital Positioning. The social positioning of adolescents also informs the possibilities and extent of interactions with digital technologies, such as music on MSPs. Growing up in a family with high and heterogeneous forms of capital facilitates the access to digital technologies (Webster, 2019) and their uses (e.g. for political or non-political purposes, Weingartner, 2021). The almost endless availability of music on MSPs creates the ideal conditions for the realization of a democratizing process of music taste formation, where a user's background does not interfere with their possibilities to form music tastes, promoting instead personally tailored music experiences (Hanrahan, 2018). Yet, recent research has challenged the idea of MSPs as democratizing forces by showing the biases intrinsic to these algorithms. Despite being *potentially open*, the access to music is actually patterned by previous preferences and governed by algorithms that prefer male, international, and established artists (Melchiorre et al., 2021). Currently, we still do not know much about the role of MSPs in processes of taste formation (Prieur et al., 2023). We interrogate such a process by considering three digital aspects in relation to music tastes, namely the adoption, frequency, and quality of music consumption on MSPs.

Adoption. MSPs have become central in the formation of adolescents' tastes, such that the term 'algorithmic identity' is now used to refer to the process of identity formation by and through the algorithms governing such platforms (Cheney-Lippold, 2011). Most of

the emerging literature about MSPs and algorithmic recommendation systems, though, has been rather theoretical or focused on algorithmic biases, but less is known about how such technologies influence processes of taste formation (Webster, 2019). Adolescents' music tastes could be directly related to their access to MSPs because of the role of recommendation algorithms in profiling users and providing suggestions (Prey, 2018). For example, the large availability of music could bring individuals to broaden their tastes in terms of genres (i.e. omnivores in genre prestige), but become more similar to each other in terms of artists listened to (i.e. univores in artistic prestige), because of the tendency of algorithms to suggest mainstream music (Knox and Datta, 2020). Alternatively, individuals could become increasingly insulated in their own preferences (i.e. univores), because of the role of recommendation algorithms as individualizing forces that tailor their suggestions to each user's specific preferences (Prey, 2018).

Access to MSPs could also indirectly inform the definition of music tastes depending on the social characteristics of their audiences. For example, adolescents from lower social classes might still be increasingly disadvantaged by technological progress, in terms of quality of the access (e.g. using an old phone or limited data) or uses of the platform (e.g. not being able to acquire status by creating playlists and sharing them on other platforms, such as Instagram). Such limitations could impact the formation of their music tastes, for example by restricting their access to music or by reducing the quality of the one accessed. At the same time, adolescents from higher social classes might refrain from using MSPs, seen as a massively available product, to enjoy a qualitatively better music experience through items such as vinyl LPs (Webster, 2020) or portable cassette tapes (Udarchik, 2018). Such 'vintage' consumption – rather than through the latest technological products, such as MSPs – is often connected to issues of 'authenticity, nostalgia and identity' that provide higher degrees of social status (Veenstra and Kuipers, 2013: 355). In both the direct and indirect case, the definition of adolescents' music tastes depends upon access to MSPs and to the algorithmic system that governs users' experiences of the platform. The first part of our fifth RQ is therefore interested in understanding: *What are the levels of MSP adoption among adolescents with different music taste profiles?* (RQ5a)

Frequency. At the same time, if MSPs personalize their content according to users' preferences through their algorithms, it can be expected that repeated exposure to MSPs significantly contributes to the definition of one's music tastes. This can be seen not only in terms of sheer exposure but also in considering the training of recommendation algorithms, as more information obtained through repeated and consistent exposure yields a more precise algorithmic recommendation (Prey, 2018). For example, individuals with omnivore tastes might have more opportunities to become even more omnivorous, while univores can become even more insulated in their few preferences. In other words, the amount of time spent on MSPs can be an important source for one's music tastes. To address this point, the second part of our fifth RQ asks: *What are the frequencies of use of MSPs held by adolescents with different music taste profiles?* (RQ5b)

Quality. Adolescents can have qualitatively different experiences on MSPs depending on what they can do on and with the platform (Hanrahan, 2018). In the case of MSPs, a crucial aspect in this regard refers to the access to all or only some of the platform's features. As an example, the free version of Spotify is inclusive in terms of access, allowing

anyone with a digital device to access the platform, but exclusive in terms of uses. Various features, such as the presence of advertisements in between songs or the inability to select a specific song of an artist can have a fundamental impact on the enjoyment and type of experience that is possible to achieve while using MSPs. For instance, a free subscription might signal a commercial, disinterested, and mainstream disposition towards music, while a paid subscription can relate to specific needs related to music listening, such as enjoying music for long periods of time or curating one's own library. As such, the third part of our fifth RQ is interested in understanding: *What are the subscription practices on MSPs among adolescents with different music taste profiles?* (RQ5c)

Methodology

Sample

To answer our RQs, we used a cross-sectional dataset¹ among Belgian adolescents 12 to 18 years old ($n=533$, M_{age} (SD)=15.2 (1.6), 61.2% girls, 80.9% Western-European). Approval for the survey was granted by the ethical board of the host university (KU Leuven). Adolescents were recruited from seven schools in Flanders, Belgium, between September and October 2021. In a first phase, we randomly drew schools to reach a proportionally balanced sample in terms of gender and age, and contacted principals by email to ask for participation. We continued the procedure of contacting schools after a potential of 1500 adolescents could be reached through the recruited schools. A total of 54 schools were contacted via multiple emails and telephone calls, but due to the ongoing covid-19 pandemic at the time of the data collection, principals were less available to participate. We were therefore unable to fully balance our sample, which resulted in a slight overrepresentation of girls compared to the corresponding population in secondary education (sample: 61%; population: 49%) (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2021). Moreover, our sample has a higher socioeconomic status (SES) compared to the population, as defined by the levels of higher education obtained by adolescents' parents (sample: 73.1% (father), 85.3% (mother); general level population: 54.1%) (Statbel, 2022).

Informed consents were distributed to parents through schools in a digital format starting in March 2021. Participants were informed that the goal of the study was to investigate their media use habits, their social life, and how they see the world. To increase confidentiality, all participants were informed that data would be anonymously stored in a secured server, that their survey answers would have been processed separately from their identification data, that they could end the survey at any moment without any consequence, and that, in case of full completion, they would receive a reward of 10 euros in vouchers. Finally, we informed participants about the potential risks of discomfort related to participation and provided them with information about a Belgian youth organization in case of need.

Measures

Music Genres Preferences. Respondents rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (=Strongly dislike) to 5 (=Strongly like) how much they like or dislike the following music genres:

'Pop (Ariana Grande, Ed Sheeran)', 'Latin/Reggaeton/Reggae (Maluma, Bob Marley)', 'Rock (Foo Fighters, Queen)', 'Heavy metal (TOOL, Marilyn Manson)', 'Alternative/Indie (Billie Eilish, Lana del Rey)', 'Blues/Funk (Bruno Mars, B.B. King)', 'Electronic/Techno (Avicii, Marshmello)', 'Classical (Bach, Beethoven)', 'Jazz (Aretha Franklin, Frank Sinatra)', 'Rap/Trap (Travis Scott, Cardi B)', 'RnB/Soul (John Legend, Beyonce)', 'Country (Taylor Swift, Billy Ray Cyrus)'. These genres were chosen as they are the most commonly used across research on music taste profiles (Lizardo and Skiles, 2016).

Socio-cognitive Positioning. Cosmopolitanism was measured following Leung et al. (2015) asking participants to 'Indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following ideas'. Response categories were 'I am willing to study or work abroad in another country when I am older', 'I am open to live in a different country when I am older', 'I enjoy learning more about different countries in the world' (range=1–5). Respondents answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (= strongly disagree) to 5 (= strongly agree). The variable was created by averaging the three items composing the scale and by grouping participants in four groups based on their quartiles (<25%: low (17.1%); 25%–50%: middle-low (19.6%); 50%–75%: middle-high (37.9); ≥75%: high (25.4%)) (M (SD)=3.8 (0.9)).

Meritocratic beliefs were measured using an adaptation of the Attribution for Poverty and Wealth scale, developed by Flanagan et al. (2014) specifically for adolescents. Respondents rated the following items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (= Strongly disagree) to 5 (= Strongly agree): 'People are poor because they are lazy and don't want to work hard', 'People are poor because they got into drugs and alcohol, and some ran away from home', 'People are poor because they waste their money', 'People are poor because they are discriminated against', 'People are poor because there is no work', 'People are poor because they got laid off and could not afford their homes anymore'. The original scale (16 items) was shortened by selecting the three highest loading items on each factor following an online pilot survey study among Belgian adolescents conducted in August 2021 (n=121, $M_{age}=15$, 54% girls). Exploratory factor analysis on these pilot data showed a two-factor solution that mirrored the distinction between meritocratic and structuralist explanations of inequalities found in previous research (Lamont, 2019) (meritocratic factor: eigenvalue=5.08, explained variance=30%, $\alpha=.77$, 3 items; structuralist factor: eigenvalue=3.73, explained variance=20%, $\alpha=.61$, 3 items). The items of the structuralist sub-scale (i.e. last three items) were reverse-coded and the scores of all the six items were averaged to create a measure of meritocratic beliefs, such that higher values indicated stronger meritocratic beliefs. The variable was created by averaging the six items composing the scale and by grouping participants into four groups based on their quartiles (<25%: low (19.8%); 25%–50%: middle-low (19.8%); 50%–75%: middle-high (24.7%); ≥75%: high (35.8%)) (M (SD)=2.7 (0.5)).

Social Positioning

Age, gender, ethno-racial identity. Age was measured by subtracting the year in which participants were born from 2021, the year of the survey (M (SD)=15.2 (1.6)). Gender was measured with the item 'I am a' with response categories 'boy', 'girl', 'other', 'prefer not to say' (61.2% girls). Ethnic background was measured by providing the following categories (multiple responses were allowed): 'West-European', 'East-European',

‘African or Middle-East’, ‘North-American’, ‘South-American or Latin-American’, ‘Asian’, ‘Other, namely’ (to be filled), ‘I don’t know’ (coded as a missing response). Given the low number of participants with a non-Western-European ethnicity, the variable was recoded into three categories, namely Western-European (80.9%), non-Western-European (5.5%), and mixed (10.2%).

Parental education. To measure parental education, we asked the following question separately for each participant’s father (or male guardian) and mother (or female guardian): ‘What is the highest degree that your dad/mum or male/female guardian obtained?’ followed by the categories ‘No diploma’, ‘Primary education’, ‘Secondary education’, ‘College’, ‘University’, ‘I don’t know, but my dad/mum works as a:’ (this value was recoded based on the job information provided, based on the specialization level), ‘Doesn’t apply to me’ (coded as missing value). The two variables (one for the father and the other for the mother) were created by grouping participants into two groups, (1–3 = low; 4–5 = high) ($M_{\text{fat}} (SD) = 4.3 (0.9)$, $M_{\text{mot}} = 4.4 (0.8)$).

Cultural capital. To measure cultural capital, we followed Weber and Becker (2019) and asked participants ‘Think about the number of books (including e-books) your family has at home. Approximately how many books do you have in your home?’ (answer options: ‘10 books or less’, ‘11 to 25 books’, ‘26 to 100 books’, ‘101 to 200 books’, ‘201 to 500 books’, ‘More than 500 books’; range = 1–6). The variable was created by grouping participants into three groups, (1–2 = low (8.7%); 3–4 = middle (47.6%); 5–6 = high (43.7%); $M (SD) = 4.2 (1.2)$).

Digital Positioning

Adoption. To measure the adoption of MSPs, we asked ‘On which streaming platform do you generally listen to music?’ using the following answer categories (multiple answers were allowed): ‘Spotify’, ‘Apple Music’, ‘YouTube’, ‘Tidal’, ‘Amazon music’, ‘Other (please specify)’ (to be filled), ‘I don’t listen to music on music streaming platforms’. The variable was created by grouping participants into three groups, based on whether they listened to a single (49.2%), multiple (49.7%), or no MSPs (1.1%).

Frequency. To measure the frequency of use of MSPs, the following question was asked: ‘In the past 4 months, how many hours have you been listening to music using streaming platforms (Spotify, Apple Music. . .)?’. Respondents answered using the following options: ‘Few hours a month’, ‘Few hours a week’, ‘30 minutes or less per day’, ‘Between 30 minutes and 2 hours per day’, ‘Between 2 and 4 hours per day’, ‘More than 4 hours per day’. The variable was created by grouping participants into three groups, based on whether they listened to music for a few hours a month or more rarely (low, 27.3%), between 30 minutes or less and 2 hours per day (middle, 43.5%), or more than 2 hours per day (high, 28.4%).

Quality. Finally, to measure the quality of consumption, namely, whether respondents had a free or premium account, they answered the question: ‘For which streaming platform do you have a paid subscription plan?’, with the following answer categories (multiple answers were allowed): ‘Spotify’, ‘Apple Music’, ‘YouTube’, ‘Tidal’, ‘Amazon

music', 'Other (please specify)' (to be filled), 'I don't have a paid subscription plan to any music streaming platform'. The variable was created by grouping participants into three groups, based on whether they have a subscription to a single (57.6%), multiple (2.5%), or no MSPs (39.9%).

Analytical Strategy

The analysis is divided into four parts. First, we assessed the prestige of genres by looking at the ratings given to various albums on the Belgian website *Dansende Beren*² during 2021. Music critics have often been considered key gatekeepers that inform and establish the prestige of cultural products (van Venrooij et al., 2022). Yet, the definition of prestigious and non-prestigious genres should not be considered universally valid, because of its variations across social and geographical boundaries, such as across class-lines or national borders (Schmutz, 2016). To understand the cultural background in which Belgian adolescents form their music tastes, it is first necessary to assess Belgian-specific hierarchies between music genres (Jarness, 2015). To do so, we focused on reviews published by music critics on the Belgian website *Dansende Beren*. We considered this source because, among other Belgian websites with music reviews (e.g. Focus Knack, Humo), it was the only one with an archive that covered reviews in the year of the data collection, 2021. We gathered all the albums reviewed during 2021 (N=780), extracted the albums' ratings – on a 0 (worst) to 5 (best) scale – extracted the genres from Spotify, and calculated the z value of the mean rating for each genre. In this way, we order the genres based on the level of prestige granted by key cultural gatekeepers in a specific country, instead of assuming cultural hierarchies built in other countries or in a different decade. Figure 1 in the Online Appendix shows the ordering of genres based on their prestige level.

Second, after assigning each genre with a prestige score, we fitted multiple LCA models (function 'poLCA' in package 'poLCA' version 1.6.0.1 available in R version 4.2.2), each with a different number of classes, from 1 to 10 (Visser and Speekenbrink, 2010). We then compared the AIC and BIC values of each model and considered the model with the lowest values (Weller et al., 2020). Once the number of classes was chosen, we extracted the posterior probabilities of each person to belong to each class and transformed them into class-specific z-scores.

Third, we evaluated the taste profiles based not only on the magnitude of each preference but also on the combination of prestigious and non-prestigious genres in each profile, as defined in the first step through the assessment of country-specific cultural hierarchies. Fourth, we used descriptive statistics and multinomial logistic regressions (function 'multinom' in package 'nnet' version 7.3.18 available in R version 4.2.2), in which each variable of interest was regressed onto each music taste profile. Music-taste groups were evaluated by segmenting each taste profile based on the socio-cognitive, social, and digital positioning of their members.

Although this traditional three-step approach is known to produce biased estimates due to the potential role of covariates in predicting the formation of the classes (Vermunt, 2010), we used it for two main reasons. First, a one-step approach (where the classes are estimated together with the covariates) is also known to produce biased estimates

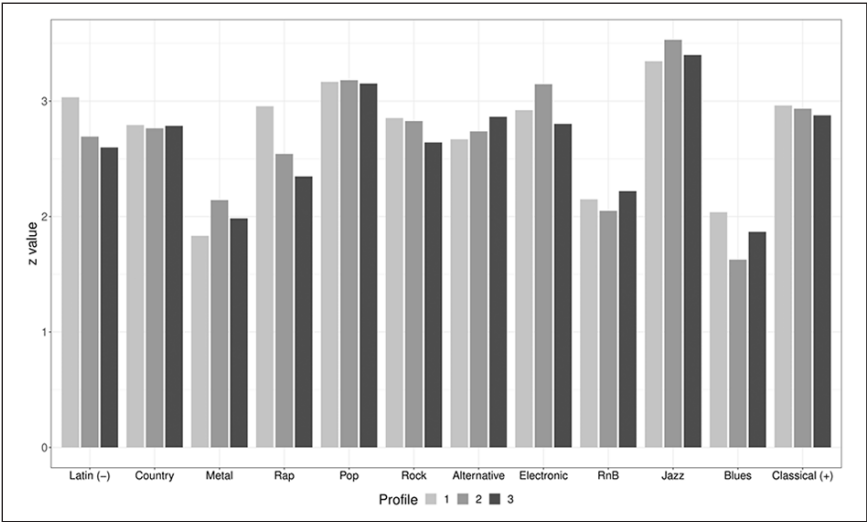


Figure 1. Music taste profiles.

(Vermunt, 2010), where ‘the latent class variable could lose its meaning as the latent variable measured by the indicator variables’ (Asparouhov and Muthén, 2014: 329). This study is the first to evaluate the taste profiles of adolescents and, as such, it is primarily interested in evaluating the taste profiles without further influences of covariates. Second, we do not have specific hypotheses or expectations about which covariate might influence which genre preferences or class. As such, also the improved three-step (Asparouhov and Muthén, 2014) and two-step (Di Mari et al., 2023) approaches are not suitable for our purpose, as they require the role of the covariates (i.e. the ‘direct effect’, Asparouhov and Muthén, 2014: 334–335) to be known in advance. This is particularly problematic when the number of covariates increases substantially, as in our case with 11 segmenting variables, because it becomes increasingly difficult to disentangle the direct and indirect effects of each variable (Vermunt, 2010). In other words, the goal of this article is to first estimate the classes uniquely based on genres and to subsequently segment these classes based on the variables of interest. This will inform future research about the role of each variable and their potential inclusion in the estimation of new classes (using improved three-step or two-step approaches). For these reasons, we followed existing research (e.g. Oncini and Triventi, 2021) and separated the estimation of the classes by their segmentation.

Results

Music Taste Profiles

To answer RQ1, the results of our LCA showed a 3-class solution as the best-fitting for its BIC (AIC=17917.76, BIC=18541.87), which was preferred over an 8-class solution

(best in terms of AIC = 17632.47, BIC = 19303.90) for its parsimony (Weller et al., 2020). The average preferences expressed by respondents for each genre were, in order: Pop (M (SD) = 3.6 (1.1)), Blues (3.5 (1.0)), Electronic (3.4 (1.2)), Alternative (3.4 (1.2)), Rap (3.3 (1.3)), RnB (3.2 (1.1)), Rock (3.2 (1.2)), Country (3.1 (1.1)), Latin (2.7 (1.0)), Jazz (2.6 (1.2)), Classical (2.1 (1.1)), Metal (2.0 (1.0)). Figure 1 shows the distribution of the three profiles over the selection of genres.

Despite the similar trends, it is possible to identify three main differences across the profiles. First, Profile 1 ($n=126$, 24%) is characterized by the highest preferences for three of the four lowest-ranked genres (i.e. Latin, Country, and Rap) as well as for two highest-ranked ones (i.e. Blues and Classical). Second, Profile 2 ($n=101$, 19%) is characterized by the lowest average preference across all genres ($M_2=2.3$ ($SD_2=0.3$)) compared to the other two profiles ($M_1=3.6$ ($SD_1=0.7$); $M_3=3.0$ ($SD_3=0.5$)), but with the highest preferences for Metal, Electronic, and Jazz, and the lowest preferences for Blues and RnB. Finally, Profile 3 ($n=304$, 57%) has medium levels of preferences across all the genres, with the highest preferences for Alternative and RnB and the lowest preferences for Latin, Rock, and Electronic.

After describing the outlines of the profiles, we turn next to an analysis of their socio-cognitive, social, and digital composition. To do so, we descriptively characterize the profiles in Text 1 and Table 1 in the Online Appendix. Table 2 in the Appendix shows multinomial logistic regression results, which we use next to segment the profiles. We draw from Table 2 in the Online Appendix to address each RQ, uniquely reporting statistically significant differences.

Socio-cognitive Segmentation

Profile 1 shows lower levels of middle-high meritocratic beliefs (RQ2b) and higher levels of cosmopolitan beliefs (RQ2a) compared to the other two profiles. Moreover, while holding more meritocratic beliefs than those in Profile 1, respondents in Profile 2 have lower meritocratic beliefs than those in Profile 3 (RQ2b).

Social Segmentation

Profile 1 has younger adolescents than Profile 3, and more girls (RQ3a) than the other two profiles. Instead, Profile 2 has more boys (RQ3a) of non-Western-European ethnicity (RQ3b) than Profile 3. We also see that Profile 1 has higher levels of cultural capital (RQ4b) than Profile 2, but no other statistically significant differences were detected for RQ4a (parental education).

Digital Segmentation

Profile 1 is characterized by higher levels of MSP adoption (RQ5a) than Profile 2, and higher listening frequencies (RQ5c) than those in Profile 3. Moreover, while having lower levels of listening frequency than those in Profile 1, adolescents in Profile 2 still have higher levels of listening frequency compared to those in Profile 3 (RQ5b). In relation to RQ5a, although the large effect was likely due to small sample sizes, it is nevertheless interesting to notice that all the respondents in Profile 1 used at least one MSP.

Moreover, while having lower levels of listening frequency than Profile 1, adolescents in Profile 2 still have higher levels of listening frequency (RQ5b) compared to those in Profile 3. We did not find other statistically significant differences for RQ5c (quality of use of MSPs).

Discussion

In this article, we charted the music taste profiles of contemporary Belgian adolescents and further investigated their socio-cognitive, social, and digital segmentation. By combining information from the taste profiles and their segmentation, three music-taste groups emerge, namely a refined, a practical, and a mainstream taste group.

Profile 1 represents a **refined taste group**, mostly composed of girls with Western-European or mixed ethnicity and with high cosmopolitan beliefs. Profile 1 is defined as refined for two main reasons. First, adolescents within this group express preferences for what is considered as refined among elite cultural intermediaries (van Venrooij et al., 2022), but also for genres that are at the bottom of the scale (such as Latin and Rap). Such a combined preference for highly and lowly institutionalized genres could indicate a capacity to appreciate and select preferred artists across the hierarchy. This is in line with the high cosmopolitan beliefs expressed by this group. Yet, it could also indicate a discrepancy of hierarchies across adolescents and institutionalized cultural intermediaries. For example, Latin artists such as Bad Bunny, Pitbull, and Rosalía are increasingly popular among adolescents (Soares-Quadros et al., 2023), despite this genre being at the bottom of the hierarchy established by critics. In addition, genres such as Latin and Rap are often characterized by commentaries on social injustices and representations of socio-economic markers of success (Podoshen et al., 2014). The preferences for these genres might further signal refinement by indicating attention to socio-political issues, simultaneously expressing values related to social justice (e.g. against racism) and attention to status markers (e.g. expensive jewels). Adolescents might therefore consider genres, such as Latin and Rap, as ‘cooler’ than Classical or Blues, placing them at a higher level of prestige than other, traditionally established, genres (Michael, 2015).

Second, Profile 1 is also characterized by higher levels of MSP adoption than Profile 2 and listening frequency than Profile 3, indicating the central role of MSPs for this profile. The frequent consumption of music on MSPs makes these platforms central in the formation of music tastes for Profile 1. MSPs are increasingly seen as elite cultural intermediaries, with massive amounts of data that grant them a privileged position in the definition of cultural hierarchies (Webster et al., 2016). In this sense, the music attended by listeners in Profile 1 represents refined preferences to the extent that it is frequently consumed on, and shaped by, new elite cultural intermediaries, such as MSPs. Together, adolescents in Profile 1 tend to express combined preferences for highly institutionalized genres (e.g. Classical) and for lowly institutionalized but ‘cool’ genres (e.g. Latin and Rap), and frequently consume these genres on MSPs (i.e. on new elite cultural intermediaries). The ability to navigate between institutionalized and non-institutionalized genres while adhering to what is considered as the legitimate modality of music consumption (i.e. on MSPs) can indicate that music functions as a badge of refinement and curation (Jarness and Friedman, 2017).

In addition, Profile 2 resembles a **practical taste group**, characterized by older non-Western-European boys, with high meritocratic and low cosmopolitan beliefs, high levels

of parental education, and low levels of cultural capital. Adolescents in this group expressed, on average, the lowest levels of genre preferences across the three profiles. Simultaneously, they also indicated the highest preferences for Metal (a traditionally masculine genre, Rafalovich, 2006), Electronic and Jazz (typically instrumental genres), and the lowest preferences for Blues and RnB. This group also showed lower levels of MSP adoption and listening frequency than Profile 1, but higher frequencies than those in Profile 3.

Adolescents in Profile 2 also expressed particularly high meritocratic beliefs. Meritocracy is characterized by values such as self-reliance and productivity that closely match traditional masculinity norms such as stoicism and competitiveness (Levant and Wimer, 2014). As such, the expression of high meritocratic beliefs among the predominantly male adolescents in a practical identity potentially hints at the role of music in signaling and constructing adolescents' masculinities. This can be better seen when read in combination with their genre preferences. On the one hand, preferences for a typically masculine genre such as Metal might indeed indicate the importance of music to signal (male) adolescents' masculinities (Rafalovich, 2006). On the other hand, high consumption of typically instrumental music such as Jazz and Electronic might further indicate preferences for music that can be used as a background (e.g. while studying) rather than to elaborate on its content (e.g. reading lyrics). Once again, such genre preferences might indicate traditionally masculine norms of goal-directedness (e.g. to improve oneself), rather than attention to content that might elicit cognitive and emotional elaboration, further supporting the uses of music in the construction of adolescents' masculinities.

Finally, the most prevalent profile is Profile 3, which resembles a **mainstream group**. Adolescents within this group expressed average preferences across all the genres, with the highest preferences for Alternative and RnB and the lowest for Latin, Rock, and Electronic. They are mostly Western European, with middle-high levels of meritocratic and cosmopolitan beliefs, parental education, and adoption of MSPs, yet characterized by particularly low levels of listening frequency on MSPs.

This group is labeled mainstream because it constitutes the largest group, it expresses average music preferences across all the genres, and it has low levels of listening frequencies. Considering their composition, we envision two ways of defining participants in this taste group. On the one hand, their low levels of listening frequencies could indicate a popular mainstream, where music selection does not play an important role. That is, this group could, for example, have short and targeted listening sessions with anything that is included in platform-curated playlists (Li et al., 2022) or is recommended by MSPs' algorithms (Knox and Datta, 2020). In this sense, music could be seen as an 'equalizer' rather than as a 'marker of distinction', as an opportunity to connect with people through shared preferences rather than to display one's niche and extensively curated music tastes, rejecting snob attitudes (Michael, 2015). On the other hand, they could constitute a cultivated mainstream. Their average levels of music preferences could be an expression of underlying heterogeneous preferences, including adolescents with very niche and specific music preferences that are either not captured by the genres proposed here or are mixed together in the presentation of a single mean (Kowald et al., 2021). Simultaneously, their low levels of listening frequencies refer to MSPs, not necessarily to music in general. That is, adolescents in this group could prefer other music supports, such as vinyl LPs or other 'vintage' forms of consumption, to prioritize the quality of the experience and of the sound rather than its quantity (Webster, 2019).

Limitations

In defining these taste groups, we acknowledge four main limitations of this study. First, we do not have actual measures about the uses of music (e.g. as a background activity or to get inspired), about the reasons for consuming music (e.g. to better focus or to improve one's own understanding of social issues), or about identity processes (e.g. to remain updated with what everyone is listening to or to distinguish oneself from others). Given the lack of integrated research about taste groups among adolescents, especially on MSPs, our interpretations primarily derive from the segmentation of the profiles. We see this as a first step towards a better characterization of taste groups among adolescents in the streaming era and encourage future research to further characterize these groups by specifically looking at their uses and functions.

Second, although we considered a country-specific cultural hierarchy, we were not able to compare reviews from sources with different degrees of legitimation, such as internationally renowned outlets (such as Pitchfork) and more local ones. Moreover, we uniquely considered the hierarchies established by music critics, without considering those of respondents themselves, which might be crucial in interpreting their genre preferences (Childress et al., 2021). We therefore recommend future research to continue the effort of establishing culture-specific hierarchies by accounting for different sources.

Third, we followed previous literature (Lizardo and Skiles, 2016) by using broad genre categories, such as Rock and Rap. Yet, such a choice could hide important sources of variation. For example, the knowledge of niche genres could serve as a potential source of distinction by showcasing specific knowledge. Moreover, the presence of within-genre hierarchies (Childress et al., 2021) further complicates the use of broad genre categories as status markers. The digitalization of music production and consumption is increasing the amount of music produced, as well as the potential variety of music consumed (IFPI, 2023). Although broad genres-categories might still function as social markers of distinctions, future research is encouraged to take into account more specific categorizations, such as in terms of subgenres or within-genres hierarchies (e.g. of artists, albums, tracks).

Fourth, we recognize potential power issues in the analyses and warn about the generalizability of our results. For an LCA solution with 3 classes and 12 items, Dziak et al. (2014) suggest a sample between 449 and 607 participants to have a power of 0.80 and to detect an effect size of 0.3. Considering our sample of 533 adolescents and that our effect sizes are between 0.1 and 6.2, our study could be potentially underpowered for small effect sizes, or it could meet acceptable levels of power for larger effects. Moreover, we recognize that our sample was selected among schools in Flanders and with a slight overrepresentation of girls compared to the corresponding population in secondary education. As such, we warn against a facile generalizability of our results to other postindustrial societies and suggest future research to explicitly account for cultural differences when comparing results with those derived from our sample.

Future Directions

Despite these limitations, our results provide three main contributions to the existing literature on music tastes. First, by specifically focusing on adolescents, we mapped the taste profiles among an age group where music tastes as well as personal and social forms of identity are under intense development (North and Hargreaves, 1999). Compared to the

outlines previously identified for adults, we found that the three profiles among adolescents are all roughly resembling an omnivore outline. This could be a product of age differences (i.e. adolescents having more fluctuating preferences than adults) as well as technological affordances (i.e. MSPs giving everyone access to heterogeneous types of content). At the same time, previous works have criticized the literature about omnivorousness for its theoretical (e.g. difference between genre liking and actual listening time) and methodological (e.g. inconsistent measurement strategies) issues (Brisson, 2019). This article further remarks that the ubiquity of access to heterogenous content that is granted by MSPs makes omnivorousness a typical feature of streaming cultures, rather than a strategic choice made to distinguish oneself from others (Glevarec and Nowak, 2022).

Second, we offered a combined reading of socio-cognitive, social, and digital characteristics of adolescents' music-taste profiles. Our results align with existing literature about the gender stratification of cultural tastes. Previous literature has extensively documented the higher levels of highbrow cultural consumption and cultural capital among women compared to men (Bihagen and Katz-Gerro, 2000). Similarly, we identified a refined taste group, mainly composed of girls with high levels of cultural capital. In addition, we also found that this group has high levels of cosmopolitan beliefs, potentially indicating adolescents' commitment to cultivating their own openness through high levels of MSP adoption and frequency, as well as the appreciation of music with various degrees of consecration. Instead, the high levels of meritocratic beliefs among the practical boys could represent a masculine tendency towards grit (Gerber, 2015), where music functions as a technology to facilitate the achievement of their goals, such as to motivate them to get in shape at the gym or to create a focused mental setting while studying (Hammer and Good, 2010). Music tastes could be used as self-presentation technologies, through which girls control the image they themselves give to others based on the expression of their cultural tastes, while boys use it to functionally improve their skills and to achieve their goals (Haferkamp et al., 2012). By better surveying the uses of music in mediated contexts typically used for self-presentation practices, such as Instagram and TikTok, future research could more precisely study how adolescents use their music tastes in self-presentation practices.

Third, we specifically focused on the adoption, frequency, and quality of music consumption on MSPs. In this regard, our analyses showed that most of the adolescents listened to music on MSPs (98.9% on at least one platform), with high listening frequencies (72% for at least 30 minutes per day), and often with paid subscriptions (60% with at least one paid subscription). MSPs feature as a central position in contemporary adolescents' music diet, but it currently remains unclear what their role in processes of taste formation might be. Looking at the differences between the three taste groups, we found that while the girls in a refined group tended to have high levels of MSP adoption and listening frequency, the boys in a practical group expressed higher levels of listening frequency but lower subscriptions. The higher levels of adoption and listening frequencies among the first group could indicate their higher selectivity and that they give greater importance to being up to date (also) because they are consuming music on MSPs. At the same time, the lower levels of listening frequencies among those in the mainstream group could be potentially indicative of less particular tastes (i.e. liking and disliking music that is generally liked and disliked) because of their lower exposure to individually tailored algorithmic recommendations or to highly

niche tastes that are formed on other supports than on MSPs. Yet, looking at the outlines of the taste profiles in Figure 1 in this article, we do not see major variations between the profiles in the combination of likes and dislikes across all the genres. This finding could lend support to a homogenization thesis, according to which recommendation algorithms make users converge toward a mainstream (Knox and Datta, 2020). Alternatively, it could also derive from the scarce level of granularity that is granted by the study of music genres (van Venrooij et al., 2022). To better understand the role of MSPs in shaping music tastes, we therefore recommend future research to adopt more fine-grained information about users' music preferences, such as looking at the consumption and respective prestige not only of genres, but also of artists, albums, and single tracks (Childress et al., 2021).

Conclusion

The sociological literature about music considers youth as a crucial period for the development of one's music tastes and identity (Glevarec and Nowak, 2022). Yet, scarce research has documented the taste profiles of adolescents and their composition in relation to key developmental and contextual characteristics, especially in the current streaming era. In this study, we synthesized different strands of literature analyzing the role of music tastes and key changes lived by today's adolescents to study the composition of adolescents' taste profiles. Our results call for a more focused approach on MSPs as active agents in the definition of cultural hierarchies and online musical communities (Krogh, 2023), crucial in the formation of music tastes. Moreover, a closer focus on gendered self-presentation practices promises to shed additional light on the uses of music tastes as identity badges. Overall, this study moves the sociological study of music forward by better specifying the aspects in which music tastes serve as identity badges, especially in the formative years during adolescence and in the current streaming era.

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ORCID iD

Luca Carbone  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1688-9468>

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online at the following link: https://osf.io/fv4uc/?view_only=fc86941954554f169277c2ff4eab626d.

Notes

1. This dataset is the first wave of a three-wave longitudinal study. More information about the study can be found on the project website: <https://www.projectmimic.eu>. The syntax used for the analyses can be found at: https://osf.io/fv4uc/?view_only=fc86941954554f169277c2ff4eab626d.
2. <https://www.dansendeberen.be> (accessed 8 March 2022).

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Author biographies

Luca Carbone (MSc., Tilburg University) is a PhD student at the School for Mass Communication Research at KU Leuven. Their work lies at the intersection of cultural sociology and media entertainment, and engages with questions about cultural production of success narratives, music uses and effects, and on adolescents' identity and health developments.

Laura Vandenbosch (Ph.D., KU Leuven) is an associate professor at the School for Mass Communication Research at KU Leuven. The relationship between media and well-being is the core subject of her research, leading to international publications in several fields including developmental psychology, sexology, body image, social relationships and communication theory.