CultureCase

Exploding the myth of the musical ‘omnivore’

This research was conducted by **Mike Savage and Modesto Gayo** at the **University of York, UK and Universidad Diego Portales, Santiago, Chile.**

Summary

This paper explored the musical preferences of adults in Britain, it analysed data from a substantial survey that asked people about what kinds of music they like and dislike, and the reasons for those choices. Research into musical taste frequently identifies an ‘omnivore’ group, drawn from the educated middle-class who uniquely tend to like a mix of music genres. Instead, the paper found that the real distinctions were between expert and non-expert. It identified six categories of music listener, each characterised by their dislikes as much as their likes.

The survey asked people about eight genres of music

These were rock, classical, heavy metal, urban, country, jazz, electronic and world. It also asked people about eight specific pieces of music. The establishment of mainstream classical music (as exemplified by Classic FM) has ‘transformed the meaning of genre categories’ making old distinctions between highbrow-classical and lowbrow-popular increasingly useless.

The research identified six clusters of music listeners:

‘Classic Enthusiast’ (who like classical and country music and not much else); ‘Aversive’ (who don’t particularly like any kind of music); ‘Uninformed’ (who hadn’t heard the named works); ‘Pop Oriented’ (who exclusively like contemporary music forms like urban and electronic music); ‘Experts’ (who like

many of the genres and specific works, but remain averse to contemporary music – in contrast to 'Pop Oriented'); and Pop Voracious (who resemble 'Pop Oriented' but also like rock and heavy metal in addition to other contemporary music genres). None of the six clusters could be conveniently defined as 'omnivorous'.

Age was a powerful determinant of whether or not people liked (or were aware of) contemporary music genres

The researchers reflected on the social dimension of the study: 'The debate on the omnivore has distracted us from examining the profoundly divided nature of musical taste, one which predominantly pitches younger respondents – passionately committed to new and emerging musical forms – against older ones, whose musical tastes are much less innovative.'

Keywords

music **genre** **UK** **taste** **segmentation** **class** **survey**

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