CultureCase

Music preferences map onto economic and political divides in America

This research was conducted by **Charlotta Mellander, Richard Florida, Peter J. Rentfrow** and **Jeff Potter** at **Jönköping University, Sweden** and **three other institutions**

Summary

This paper looked at the musical preferences of people living in 95 of the largest urban areas in the US in order to arrive at an area-level understanding of those preferences. The research discovered that when comparing different areas, ‘musical preferences generally reflect and reinforce America’s broader economic and political divides’.

The research is based on a nationwide survey of 120,000 individuals

Each person had voluntarily participated in an online ‘music personality test’ at some point between 2001 and 2013. The study divided up people’s music preferences according to five dimensions: ‘mellow, unpretentious, intense, sophisticated and contemporary’. The researchers then compared the music survey results to data from the census or election records which provided information on race, education, etc. in the nation's 95 largest urban areas.

There seems to be a divide between two musical cultures in urban America

‘Broadly speaking, two musical types—sophisticated and contemporary [music deemed to be ‘inspiring, intelligent, complex, and dynamic’ and ‘percussive and electric’]—are associated with more affluent, more educated, more knowledge-based places that are also denser, more diverse, and politically

liberal. Two other musical types— unpretentious and intense [music deemed to be ‘relaxing, unaggressive, soft, and acoustic’ and ‘distorted, loud, aggressive’] —are associated with less advantaged, less educated, more working class places that are more politically conservative and have larger white populations’.

A few caveats are worth keeping in mind

The results ‘are based on a sample of self-selected participants who completed a self-report survey on the Internet’, which means they are not based on download, streaming or purchase data, and those respondents are more likely than the average person to be committed to their music affiliations.

Keywords

cities **genre** **USA** **survey** **music**

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