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### **Musical taste and in-group favoritism**

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Abstract

Musical taste is thought to function as a social 'badge' of group membership, contributing to an individual's sense of social identity. Following from this, social identity theory predicts that individuals should perceive and behave more favorably towards those perceived to share their musical taste than towards those who do not. The findings of two studies supported these predictions. The first showed that stereotypes of the fans of different musical styles demonstrate in-group favoritism, and the second study used the minimal group paradigm to show that individuals allocate greater rewards to those believed to share their musical taste. This suggests that those who share our musical taste are likely to be considered in-group members, and should be subject to in-group favoritism.

**Keywords:** Musical taste; In-group favoritism; Social identity;

### Musical taste and in-group favoritism

Musical taste has been argued to function as a social 'badge' (Frith, 1983; North & Hargreaves, 1999), used by people to symbolically represent their membership of different social groups. Given the proposed relationship with group membership, musical taste is expected to contribute to an individual's sense of social identity.

'Social identity' refers to those aspects of one's self-concept defined by the different social groups we are members of, or identify with (e.g., gender, nationality). This contrasts with personal identity, which refers to aspects of the self-concept defined by attributes that distinguish us from other group members (e.g., personality, intelligence). Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) claims that to maintain a positive social identity and high self-esteem people are motivated to evaluate the groups they belong to (so-called in-groups) more positively than other relevant out-groups. This in-group bias is expected to lead people to perceive and behave more favorably towards those who share their musical taste than towards those who do not. Given the proposed association with group membership, those who share our musical tastes should be more likely to be considered in-group members than those who do not share our musical tastes, and for this reason they should also be subject to in-group favoritism.

Recent research supports these predictions. For example, people attribute more positive characteristics to fans of musical styles they themselves like than they do to those who like other musical styles (North & Hargreaves, 1999; Tekman & Hortaçsu, 2003). Similarly, when asked to estimate the musical taste of in-group and out-group members, adolescents associate in-group members more with positively stereotyped musical styles and less with negatively stereotyped musical styles (Tarrant, North, &

Hargreaves, 2001). Furthermore, if led to believe that members of an out-group share similar musical preferences, people hold more positive intergroup perceptions than if told nothing about their musical tastes (Bakagiannis & Tarrant, 2006). Similarly, when perceived to share our musical taste individuals are evaluated more positively, seen to be more desirable as potential friends, and more sexually attractive (Knobloch, Vorderer, & Zillmann, 2000; Zillmann & Bhatia, 1989).

The present research investigated two questions developed from the assumptions of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978). Study 1 explored whether peoples' *stereotypes* of musical taste reflect the principles of in-group favoritism. Regarded as cognitive antecedents of prejudice (Tajfel, 1969), stereotypes are typically regarded as responsible for the characteristic processes of social cognition that underlie in-group favoritism. The second study used a 'minimal group' research design to investigate whether individuals behave more favorably towards those perceived to share their musical tastes than those who do not.

### Study 1 – Stereotypes of musical taste and in-group favoritism

If stereotypes represent the cognitive antecedents of prejudice (Tajfel, 1969), the investigation of peoples' stereotypes seems a sensible starting point for any study of in-group favoritism. Stereotypes simplify normally complex social situations, exaggerating perceived differences between social groups, whilst also minimizing perceived within-group variability. In this context, stereotypes exert a significant influence upon how we see the members of different social groups, having direct implications for in-group favoritism.

Social identity theory suggests that through a process of social comparison individuals are motivated to evaluate members of their own social group more positively than members of relevant out-groups. People's stereotypes should exhibit the same in-group bias. The present study explored this idea; individuals were expected to hold significantly more positive stereotypes for fans of their favorite musical style than for fans of their least favorite musical style.

As noted earlier, recent studies support the idea that people perceive those who share their musical tastes significantly more favorably than those who do not. Whilst consistent with the predictions of social identity theory, these studies are, however, subject to several limitations. For example, participants in both North and Hargreaves' (1999) and Tekman and Hortaçsu's (2003) studies were asked to rate the typical fans of only two musical styles (e.g., chart pop & rap), which may have led inadvertently to the polarized stereotypes found. This approach might have also oversimplified participants' musical tastes, reducing them effectively into an unrealistic dichotomy. Furthermore, both studies neglected to investigate the influence of self-esteem: social identity theory argues that in-group favoritism is motivated by the need to increase self-esteem.

The present study, therefore, investigated whether stereotypes of the fans of several musical styles exhibited in-group bias; in doing so it provided a more realistic account of peoples' individual musical tastes than has been done hitherto. Moreover, the present study also investigated if personal and collective self-esteem mediated the extent individuals exhibited in-group favoritism. Specifically, individuals with low self-esteem were expected more likely to positively differentiate fans of their favorite musical style from the fans of their least favorite.

## Method

### *Participants*

Three hundred undergraduates (150 females, 150 males) participated voluntarily. Participants' mean age was 20.23 years ( $SD = 2.47$ ). Participants were recruited so that an equal number liked each of the six musical styles investigated ( $n = 50$ ), of which, an equal number were male and female (i.e., 25 males and 25 females).

### *Measures*

A questionnaire established how positively or negatively participants evaluated typical fans of six musical styles. The musical styles chosen (i.e., heavy metal / rock, hip-hop / rap, chart pop, dance music, indie rock, & R'n'B) were representative of the musical tastes of the undergraduate population sampled. Participants rated the extent to which 18 statements (e.g., "Chart pop fans are popular") described typical fans of the six musical styles using 11-point scales (0 = *Poor description* and 10 = *Excellent description*).

Each of the statements used one of 18 different adjectives chosen because of their previous use in studies of intergroup evaluation (e.g., Locksley, Ortiz, & Hepburn, 1980; Tarrant, 2002). Nine adjectives represented positive and socially desirable characteristics (e.g., honest, friendly) and nine represented negative, socially undesirable characteristics (e.g., cruel, selfish), and were presented in a random order. Moreover, the sequence in which participants judged the typical fan of each of the six musical styles was also randomized between participants. Following this, participants were asked to indicate which of the musical styles was their favorite and least favorite.

Participants also completed measures of personal and collective self-esteem. The Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale was used to assess one's overall evaluation of self worth. The 10-item scale asks participants to indicate the extent to which they agree with each of the statements (e.g., "I certainly feel useless at times") using a 4-point rating scale. Personal self-esteem (PSE) scores range from 0 to 30, where high scores indicate a positive evaluation. The PSE scale is internally consistent ( $\alpha = .74$ ) and reliable over a two-week test-retest interval ( $r = .85$ ) (McCarthy & Hoge, 1982; Silbert & Tippert, 1965)<sup>1</sup>.

The collective self-esteem (CSE) scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) was used to assess the tendency to evaluate one's social identity positively. Together with an overall CSE score, the 16-item measure contains four subscales, namely; (1) *membership esteem* (i.e., an individual's judgment of how good or worthy he/she is as a member of their social group); (2) *private collective self-esteem* (i.e., personal judgment of how good one's social groups are); (3) *public collective self-esteem* (i.e., individual judgments of how other people evaluate one's social groups); and (4) *importance to identity* (i.e., the importance of one's social group memberships to one's self-concept). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed with each of the 16 statements using a 7-point rating scale (i.e., 1 = *Strongly disagree*; 7 = *Strongly agree*). The CSE scale is internally consistent ( $\alpha = .85$ ) and reliable over a six-week test-retest interval ( $r = .68$ ) (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992)<sup>1</sup>. CSE scores for the four subscales range from 4 to 28, where high scores indicate a positive self-evaluation of one's social identity. Overall collective self-esteem scores are the mean score of these 4 sub-scales.

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<sup>1</sup> In present study, both the personal self-esteem scale ( $\alpha = .86$ ) and the collective self-esteem scale ( $\alpha = .87$ ) were found to be internally consistent.

## Results

Two repeated measures *t*-tests investigated whether participants judged fans of their favorite musical style significantly more favorably than fans of their least favorite musical style. Specifically, participant's overall mean positive and negative ratings (i.e., the mean score of the nine positive & nine negative adjectives respectively) for fans of both their favorite and least favorite musical style were compared. In both cases, the nine positive and nine negative adjectives were found to form internally consistent scales when participants were asked to rate fans of their favorite musical style ( $\alpha = .80$  &  $.80$ ), and least favorite musical style ( $\alpha = .80$  &  $.80$ ). Overall, participants were found to rate fans of their favorite musical style ( $M = 6.18$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ) significantly more positively than fans of their least favorite musical style ( $M = 4.48$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ), where  $t(299) = 14.97$ ,  $p < .001$ . Participants were also found to rate fans of their favorite musical style ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ) significantly less negatively than fans of their least favorite musical style ( $M = 4.98$ ,  $SD = 1.67$ ), where  $t(299) = 12.98$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Pearson's *r* correlational analyses tested for any relationship between self-esteem scores and the extent to which participants' judgment of typical music fans positively differentiated fans of their favorite musical style from fans of their least favorite musical style. To measure this, two new variables were calculated. The first represented the mean difference between the overall mean rating for fans of the participants' favorite musical style and least favorite musical style on the nine positive statements. The second new variable was calculated by repeating this with overall mean ratings on the nine negative statements. Scores for each of these new variables



were then correlated with scores for both personal and collective self-esteem. No significant correlations were found<sup>2</sup>.

## Discussion

When asked to rate typical fans of several different musical styles, participants were significantly more likely to attribute positive characteristics (e.g., fun, friendly) to fans of their favorite musical style than to those of their least favorite; and were significantly less likely to attribute negative characteristics (e.g., cruel, ignorant) to fans of their favorite musical style than to those of their least favorite musical style. These findings are consistent with the predictions of social identity theory, indicating that peoples' stereotypes of musical taste exhibited in-group favoritism. Unlike previous studies (North & Hargreaves, 1999; Tekman and Hortaçsu, 2003), this was found in ratings assigned to a range of different musical styles, such that the current findings provide the most robust evidence yet for the predicted relationship between musical taste and social identity. Personal and collective self-esteem should have mediated the extent to which participants' ratings demonstrated in-group favoritism, but this prediction was not supported.

## Study 2 – Musical taste and intergroup behavior

Study 1 showed how in-group favoritism influences how people perceive stereotypical music fans. The present study investigated whether a similar in-group bias also influences how people behave towards others. Specifically, this study

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<sup>2</sup> Contact author for details of these correlations.

experimentally tested whether people behave more favorably towards those perceived to share their musical taste than those who do not. This was investigated using the 'minimal group' research design.

A 'minimal group' research design is an experimental procedure used to arbitrarily assign people into groups. Typically, participants are asked to complete a relatively simple or trivial task (e.g., estimate the number of dots on a screen). Following this, participants are then divided into different groups, supposedly because of their performance on the earlier task. However, unknown to participants, the assignment of group membership is in fact entirely random. Participants are informed privately of which group they have been assigned to, whilst the group membership of all other participants remains anonymous. Interaction between group members is prohibited so that throughout the experiment participants are unaware of who belongs to which group. Once assigned to groups, participants are then asked typically to either give their opinions of, or allocate rewards to members of both the in-group and out-group(s).

Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, and Flament (1971) first demonstrated how minimal group conditions could influence people's intergroup behavior. When assigned randomly into one of two groups (seemingly because of a preference for one of two artists), Tajfel et al (1971) found that participants consistently allocated more money to in-group members than to those did not share their artistic preferences (i.e., the out-group). This showed that categorizing people into one of two groups was alone sufficient to elicit in-group favoritism. Indeed, reviews of subsequent 'minimal group' experiments (Brewer, 1979; Tajfel, 1982) suggest that despite using different samples and dependent measures, at least 30 studies have shown that social categorization into different groups leads to in-group favoritism.

Bakagiannis and Tarrant (2006) report the only previous instance in which the ‘minimal group’ design has been used to investigate the social implications of *musical taste*. Participants were assigned to one of two groups (i.e., supposedly ‘convergent thinkers’ and ‘divergent thinkers’), and told that the two groups were likely to have either similar or different musical preferences. If led to believe that the out-group shared similar musical preferences, participants held more positive intergroup perceptions than if told nothing about their musical tastes. Bakagiannis and Tarrant (2006) argued that by sharing musical tastes this provided both groups with a common in-group identity, which served to reduce intergroup discrimination.

In the present study, a ‘minimal group’ research design was used to randomly assign participants into two groups on the basis of their supposedly different musical tastes. Participants should behave more favorably towards those believed to share their musical taste (i.e., the in-group) than those who they believed did not (i.e., the out-group). To assess this, participants were asked to decide how much other group members should be rewarded for their participation in the research, with the hypothesis that these rewards should indicate in-group favoritism.

Past research has measured the allocation of rewards using a series of matrices, where participants are presented with several different reward options for in- and out-group members. Originally developed by Tajfel et al (1971), these matrices represented different reward strategies employed by participants (e.g., maximum joint profit, maximum in-group profit). These matrices are subject to considerable criticism, however. Most significantly, their forced-choice format *explicitly* presents participants with the opportunity to demonstrate in-group favoritism (Locksley, Ortiz, & Hepburn, 1980); and unrealistically restrict the allocation of rewards, which may particularly pre-dispose participants to behave according to demand characteristics of

in-group favoritism. For these reasons, the present study used a simpler means to measure the allocation of rewards, whereby participants were free (within reasonable predefined limits) to allocate whatever rewards they chose. The study also investigated whether personal and collective self-esteem mediated the allocation of rewards.

## Method

### *Participants*

Thirty-two psychology undergraduates (3 males, 29 females) participated as part of their course requirement. Mean age was 18.78 years ( $SD = .55$ ).

### *Design & Procedure*

The study was based on the premise of a market research survey showcasing new bands to a student focus group. In groups of eight, participants listened to two-minute excerpts taken from 14 different songs. All songs used were written and performed by unsigned dance music artists (see [www.unsignedmp3.com](http://www.unsignedmp3.com)). These songs were chosen for two reasons. First, unsigned artists were used to limit participants' prior familiarity with the songs. Second, dance music characteristically uses instrumentals, guest vocalists, and samples: participants could be assumed to be less likely to recognize that all 14 songs were from different artists.

To prevent interaction, participants were seated at one of two parallel tables, such that both halves of the group were facing away from one another, and those sat at each table were seated some distance apart. Participants were asked to remain silent throughout and avoid communicating with each other. The 14 songs were played in

seven successive pairs. After each pair, participants indicated on their answer sheet which of the two was their favorite. Participants then completed a five-minute “market research music survey” which occupied them whilst the experimenter seemingly analyzed their responses to the pairs of songs to determine their musical tastes. Following this, participants were told that all the songs played earlier were written and performed by two different (and actually fictional) musicians namely, Paul Lewis and Citizen 64; and that the survey was intended to assess their respective popularity amongst a sample of undergraduates, with a view to deciding which of the two would be signed by the record label that commissioned the survey.

Participants were then told that recent surveys at other universities showed that individuals normally preferred one or the other of the two artists; and that analysis of their responses to the 14 songs showed that four of the group preferred Paul Lewis and that four preferred Citizen 64. Participants were thanked for their help, told they would be paid for having taken part. However, because no appropriate fee had been arranged with the record label sponsoring the research, participants would be allowed to suggest how much money they should receive. Subsequent interviews with participants after the research indicated that this cover story was convincing.

Participants were each given a reward allocation sheet that privately informed them of their apparent preference for one of the two artists. This allowed participants to be assigned randomly into one of two experimental groups (Paul Lewis fans or Citizen 64 fans) of equal size. Participants were also given a participant number, and told that the remaining seven members of the focus group had also been given a number, so that they would be unable to identify each other and their group membership. This ensured that the allocation of rewards was anonymous, avoiding

the potentially confounding effect of prior relationships between participants on the allocation of rewards.

Participants allocated reward tokens rather than money to control the possible range of rewards allocated (although participants were told that this was “because the amount of funding for the survey has not as yet been confirmed”). The reward allocation sheet told participants they could give each of the other seven members of the group anything between 0 and 100 reward tokens. Participants were required to indicate the number of reward tokens they wished to allocate to each of the other group members. The reward allocation sheets showed that three participants shared the participant’s own musical taste (i.e., the in-group) and that the other four participants did not (i.e., the out-group)<sup>3</sup>.

After completing the reward allocation sheets, participants completed measures of personal self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), and collective self-esteem (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) as in Study 1<sup>4</sup>.

Participants were fully debriefed three to four weeks later by email, once data collection was complete. They were told the true purpose of the study, informed that they would not receive any financial reward for participating, received an explanation why the deception was an essential aspect of the methodology, and given the opportunity to withdraw their data (although none did so).

## Results

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<sup>3</sup> Contact author for an example of the reward sheet given to participants.

<sup>4</sup> In present study, both the personal self-esteem scale ( $\alpha = .86$ ) and the collective self-esteem scale ( $\alpha = .81$ ) were found to be internally consistent.

A repeated measures *t*-test showed that participants allocated significantly more reward tokens to those perceived to share their musical taste ( $72.92$ ;  $SD = 25.10$ ) than to those who did not ( $68.34$ ;  $SD = 25.99$ ) ( $t(31) = 2.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The eta-squared statistic (.12) indicated a small effect size (see Cohen, 1988).

Pearson's *r* correlational analyses were used to test the relationship between self-esteem and the extent to which participants' allocation of rewards favored those perceived to share the same musical taste. Specifically, the mean difference between in-group and out-group rewards was correlated with participant's scores on measures of both personal and collective self-esteem. No significant correlations were found<sup>5</sup>.

## Discussion

These findings further support the idea that musical taste is a social 'badge' of group membership. When randomly assigned to one of two groups, participants rewarded group members perceived to share their musical taste significantly more than those who did not. As such, participants' allocation of rewards exhibited in-group favoritism. This is consistent with the predictions of social identity theory, and Bakagiannis and Tarrant's (2006) findings concerning musical taste. As in Study 1, however, the extent to which allocation of rewards favored in-group members was not mediated by self-esteem.

Using a 'minimal group' research design, the present study was able to exert a level of experimental control often missing in research concerned with the social functions of music. Despite this, the approach may not be entirely appropriate as a means to understand the social implications of musical taste. Random assignment of

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<sup>5</sup> Contact author for details of these correlations.

participants into different groups may be inappropriate simply because this assignment may not necessarily correspond with their individual musical tastes. For this reason, future investigations of in-group favoritism should use real groups of music fans, whilst retaining the experimental control of a minimal group design (i.e., no interaction between participants & anonymous group membership). 'Real' music fans should exhibit in-group bias to a much greater extent than the artificial groups created experimentally in the present study.

### General discussion

The two studies reported here offer further support for the idea that musical taste is used as a social 'badge' of group membership, which contributes to an individual's social identity. In keeping with the predictions of social identity theory, participants in both studies exhibited in-group favoritism toward those who shared their musical taste.

Study 1 showed that participants held significantly more positive stereotypes of fans of their favorite musical style than they did of fans of their least favorite musical style. Study 2 showed that when assigned randomly to one of two groups, participants rewarded group members perceived to share their musical taste significantly more than those who did not. In view of these findings and earlier research, the idea that musical taste functions as a symbolic 'badge' of group membership and social identity seems increasingly plausible.

Social identity theory asserts that in-group favoritism is motivated by an individual's need for high self-esteem and a positive social identity. In both studies reported here, however, there was no relationship between self-esteem and in-group



favoritism. This calls into question whether the present findings can be attributed to the causal mechanism typically proposed by advocates of social identity theory to explain instances of in-group favoritism. The factors that might have led to a failure to identify any effects of self-esteem in the present research represent an obvious candidate for future research. In the case of collective self-esteem, future investigations might consider using a modified scale, specific to the social groups concerned (i.e., “How do you feel about fans of your favorite musical style?”) rather than a global measure concerned with all the social groups we are member of. Similarly, if self-esteem did not apparently motivate participants to exhibit in-group favoritism, future research may attempt to determine what did. One possibility is that in-group bias is mediated by an individual’s degree of identification with the group in question, in this case fellow music fans. Previous studies have repeatedly shown that identification with the in-group is positively related to intergroup discrimination (e.g., Perreault & Bourhis, 1998; Sidanius, Pratto, & Mitchell, 1994).

If shared musical taste is a criterion of in-group membership, this raises further issues for future research regarding musical taste and social identity. For example, the ‘out-group homogeneity effect’ (e.g., Judd & Park, 1988; Quattrone & Jones, 1980) is likely to influence how we perceive people who do not share our musical taste. More importantly however, the simple demonstration here that social identity theory applies to musical contexts could open the possibility for future research to use musical taste as a suitable medium to investigate the effects of social identity theory, and further contribute to our understanding of both social and music psychology alike. Furthermore, the particular importance that adolescents ascribe to music (e.g., Fitzgerald, Joseph, Hayes, & O’Regan, 1995), means that musical taste

may provide a particularly naturalistic basis for future minimal group research when using undergraduate samples.

In summary, the present findings provide further support for the idea that musical taste is used as a social 'badge' of group membership, which contributes to an individual's sense of social identity. In keeping with the predictions of social identity theory, participants exhibited in-group favoritism toward those who shared their musical taste. This suggests that shared musical taste is a possible criterion of in-group membership. As such, musical taste may function symbolically as a social 'badge' used by people to display group membership and to differentiate themselves from members of the out-group. However, at present, a great deal of work remains to be done to confirm this.

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