

Plastic Hits

Tween music consumption habits and their relationship to music production

Mauricio Rey Garegnani

Grup SSIT TecnoCampus - Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

mauriciomrey@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The dynamic nature of contemporary society has revealed the emergence of groups that need to be considered from a perspective that transcends evolutionary, formative or folkloric analysis. Today, thanks to the combination of a broad ethnomusical perspective and new observational perspectives on minors deriving from gender studies, we are able to observe the shades of complexity within children as a group. But who are tween girls and boys? What kind of music products do they consume? Aged between 9 and 13, tween girls and boys possess specific evolutionary and psychological characteristics that predispose them to specific habits of music consumption that differ from those of other digital natives¹. From our perspective, these habits have a close relationship with the characteristics of the sound, production and distribution of the items consumed and whose useful life span is limited by their functionality. This article puts forward an initial analysis of the characteristics of some music products designed for tween girls and boys as part of a project looking at consumer habits of this group in the Barcelona metropolitan area. In doing so, it seeks to complement Tyler Bickford's research (2008, 2012 and 2014) on identity and music listening habits of tween girls and boys from a new angle that examines both the sound itself and the new context of Web 3.0.

* For our purposes we understand the concept of digital natives as defined by Prensky (2001) in a broad sense. Having said this, and going beyond the nuances the author added in 2009, we agree with the criticism focusing on overestimating the technological abilities of those born into the digital world.

Tweens: the age between

Authors such as Natalie Coulter (2014) maintain that the category of tween emerged as a product of the industry during the 1980s. Others such as Tyler Bickford (2008) argue that it was not until the 1990s that the category was established to identify a particular niche in the market. Beyond the chronology of becoming visible as a group, it is important to note that these individuals, who are approaching adolescence, possess specific biological, psychological and evolutionary traits marked by hormonal, psychological and cognitive and social changes (Aberastury, 1970). This stage is therefore characterised by a child-like outlook coexisting alongside incipient puberty and an awakening interest in sex: Sponge Bob and Paw Patrol sit side by side with the eroticised bodies seen in tracks such as *Felices los cuatro* by Maluma. In terms of cognition, there is a shift from concrete to abstract, hypothetical, multidimensional and relative ways of thinking during this stage (Piaget, 1985). In the social sphere, they begin to exhibit signs of a different culture to that of their progenitors (Benet & Pitman, 2001), which is usually shared by their peer group (Silvestre & Sole, 1993). As maintained by Stone and Church (1970), this desire to belong is made clear in fashions and trends that are legitimised by the reference group. Positioned between childhood and adolescence, the collective experience of cultural phenomena acts as a bridge between the family group and a teenager's own choices. Music and its epistemic potential (Martí, 2000) is an essential part of this process. Individuals gradually start to abandon the repertoire of the family group – children's songs and the culture consumed as a family – and begin to build a collective repertoire that offers elements to help them create their own perception of reality (Frith, 1987; Martí, 2000; Cook, 2001).

Methodology

We used a mixed methodology in our study. This first involved two complementary surveys five months apart with a sample of 170 primary and secondary school students from Santa Coloma de Gramenet and Cerdanyola del Vallès¹. This sample included participants of both sexes ranging from 10 to 13 years old. This information was complemented by a short field study of 30 hours of observation and discussion with class groups and 10 interviews of open-ended questions with family members and teachers. Once the initial information had been collected, we interpreted the results according to the musicological analysis model proposed by Alan Merriam, completing the musical aspects with the observation model proposed by Bruno Nettl.

1 The surveys and observations were conducted with students from the fifth and sixth year of primary education (ages 10-11) and the first year of secondary education (aged 12) at two schools: Escaladei in Cerdanyola del Vallès and FEDAC in Santa Coloma de Gramenet. All surveys were completed anonymously, with the consent and authorisation of the head teachers at the centres involved.

Tween music listening habits

Due to their psychological traits, digital native tween girls and boys have different music listening habits to younger children and teenagers (Rey & Roquer, 2018). In our study, we have classified these habits under five interrelated headings:

Temporality	Frequency, timescale and validity
Attitude	Approach to listening
Socialisation	Ways of consuming and interaction
Device	Relationship with devices, environments and media
Sound	Sound characteristics of the products

Figure 1 – Systematisation of tween music listening habits

In terms of temporality, it is important to note that listening to music is a central activity for tween girls and boys². When asked about its importance, participants responded that it has a similar status to sports or rules-based games. In relation to validity, both the analysis of the rankings extracted based on the answers of the participants surveyed and observation of the number of views on YouTube and of the charts of the preferred stations³ reveal a high turnover of products⁴. When asked about this aspect, tween girls and boys were unequivocal: their music has an expiry date. These data, which are firstly unthinkable for other groups for whom music is a fundamental part of their identity, lead us to believe that tween girls and boys establish a kind of functional relationship with music; they consume and use the products, but after a short time they replace them with other music with similar characteristics. As regards their attitude, we can distinguish four types of listening: exclusive (only listening to music), inclusive (as a parallel activity), social (shared), and participative (singing, dancing, playing on platforms, etc.), with inclusive being the preferred category. As shown by the work of Bergh and De Nora (2014) and Bickford (2014), the socialisation of tween music consumption is a lengthy topic in itself. In keeping with the interests of this article, we are going to limit ourselves to highlighting two aspects: the consumption of concerts and ways of accessing the repertoire. Regarding the first, participants stated they were not frequent consumers of live music⁵. Moreover, they stressed that those who do attend concerts do not tend to share their musical tastes. We recognise this situa-

2 When asked about how often they listen to music, 87% of participants said they listen to music more than four days a week. Even though our age group is excluded from the *Encuesta de hábitos y prácticas culturales en España* (Survey of cultural habits and practices in Spain) undertaken by the National Institute of Statistics, the results obtained are in line with its results curve insofar as the individuals who listen most frequently are also the youngest.

3 Data on YouTube views and plays on Spotify obtained from www.kworb.net. Data on the national radio station charts obtained from www.promusicae.es.

4 After five months, only 6% of the audio products for tween consumption are still found in the rankings. This timescale seems to be related to two elements: they are either tracks that are part of the music consumed as a family and are therefore relatively cemented in the individual's identity, or they achieved very high market penetration and continue to remain in the charts in a residual fashion.

5 Even though 67.7% of participants said they had been to a concert, less than 2% had done so in the last year.

tion as essential to understanding the relationship tween girls and boys establish with their preferred products and which is built on the virtual experience. Considering the dominance of this medium in which the imaginary is made plausible, in addition to tween girls and boys being psychologically mature but lacking any real-life experience, we can see how easily a virtual conception of reality can creep in. As regards repertoire, participants stated they mainly access products through suggestions from their peer group and by its virtual extension on social networks. For the most part exempt from parental control thanks to the freedom of Internet access and the penetration of mobile devices within the age group⁶, tween girls and boys shape a repertoire that allows them to break the rules and that provides information on the context at the same time as it strengthens ties within the group. Regarding devices, the family car radio and listening online using mobile devices are their preferred methods. Smartphones and computers have replaced Mp3 and Mp4⁷ players and YouTube⁸ has become the main search engine for content. In relation to radio, even though the extremely high level of penetration in the segment shows its validity, the comparative information between the number of views and access to the charts seems to show that the Internet is the way into the repertoire, whilst radio is the space that legitimises most of the products as well as being a place where they are shared with other individuals from different age groups. Another piece of information to bear in mind is that CDs have become a format solely for music screened by parental control, resulting in a fossilisation of the repertoire contained on this format.

I've got a pen, I've got an apple: childhood, preadolescence and commercial music

Bickford refers to two strands when considering the historical evolution of music aimed at children in post-war USA: educational and commercial (2012). According to him, commercial music aimed at preadolescents began to gain a foothold in the mainstream during the first decade of the 21st century. This came about due to the impact of products such as *Hannah Montana* and *High School Musical* – promoted by the Disney Channel – and the volume of sales achieved by adapting *Kidz Bop*⁹ pop products for children. With the exception of some products and cultural nuances, this division can be extrapolated to our present-day

6 According to data from *the Encuesta sobre Equipamiento y Uso de Tecnologías de Información y Comunicación en los Hogares* (Survey on Equipment and Use of Information and Communication Technologies in the Home) conducted in 2017 by the National Institute of Statistics, the use of mobile devices (smartphones and tablets) among minors showed an increase compared to previous samples.

7 Despite 95% of participants stating they own an Mp3/Mp4 player, only 2% stated this as their preferred type of device.

8 While it may seem that tween girls and boys consume music visually, the predominance of YouTube as a playback format is attributed to its search engine being simple and intuitive to use, given tweens' superficial technical skills, and not down to its functionality for video playback.

9 Defined by Bickford as “pop filtered by parental control”, *Kidz Bop* has no direct equivalent in Spain. To find similar examples of adaptations of the repertoire for children we have to go back to songs such as *See you later alligator* by Bobby Charles, recorded by the group Parchís in 1982 with the title *Hasta luego cocodrilo*.

context, or at least to the widespread access to the Internet. Hereafter, the proliferation of mobile devices among tweens and the consolidation of Web 3.0, which is built around user searches, has paved the way for a type of product that individuals can access independently, in many cases allowing them to subvert parental control and access products other than those offered by the big labels. Promoted by the Internet itself¹⁰, some products invert the traditional production processes, although they eventually become absorbed by the standard industry model.

When analysing this evolution it becomes obvious that the industry – from the first record companies and publishers to major distributors of Internet content – has been keen to legitimise children as consumers. From the adult-centric perspective of educational products to hypersexualisation, childhood has become the target market. During this process, the industry has discovered that children’s potential as consumers is not limited to their ability to absorb products designed for their age group. Also experts on their consumption habits in the new online context, the industry can offer a model that can be extrapolated to an adult audience (Barber, 2008). As mentioned in the previous section, when it comes to consuming music, tweens are guided by its virtuality, speed and (given their functional relationship with the products) are unconcerned by issues of authenticity arising from its homogeneity. These elements are the ideal basis for a consumer model based on product obsolescence. By expanding the market at both ends¹¹, the music and entertainment industry not only legitimises tween girls and boys as a niche consumer market, they can also project this model of fast, homogeneous material that quickly becomes obsolete towards a large section of the adult audience, to some extent infantilizing them in the process¹².

Stage	Description	Example
'70 - '90	Groups of children or young people	Jackson 5, Parchís, Menudo, NKOB...
'90 - '05	Boy bands and adaptations of mainstream products for children	Backstreet Boys, Take That, Kidz Bop...
'05 - '10	Disney Channel: emergence of the tween market	Hannah Montana, HSM, Violetta...
'10 - ...	Tween artists hit the mainstream – YouTube	Justin Bieber, Miley Cyrus, PSY...

Table 2 - Historical evolution of commercial groups aimed at young people and tweens

10 In this new era marked by the rise of reggaeton and Latin music, artists promoted by big labels such as Maluma and J. Balvin sit alongside independent products that have come directly out of the Internet itself such as Bad Bunny and Ozuna.

11 *Trolls* (Walt Dorhn, 2016): a deluge of colours and mainstream pop singers to attract parents and children to the cinema; *Swalla* (Jason Derullo, 2017): lollipops, repetitive beats, clichés and the same deluge of colours, this time dancing across eroticised bodies. Both examples conform to the model of broadening the reach of the products.

12 By talking about the process of infantilization we do not wish to undermine the culture of children, which requires careful and respectful consideration from a musicological point of view. Quite the opposite, the use of this term attributes value to childhood as culture and, at the same time, tries to describe a process through which adults or those with superior cognitive development acquire behaviours from earlier stages of cognitive development.

Tweens and music: sound

We have taken the model proposed by Bruno Nettl¹³ (1973) as an initial reference on which to base our analysis of the sound. With this in mind we have supplemented the sections in line with the context and purpose of our study by defining the following categories: beat, song structure, harmony and modality, instrumentation, timbre, lyrics and texture.

For tween girls and boys, the beat is the most important aspect when choosing a track, ahead of lyrics and melody. The comparative analysis of the products preferred by participants reveals a monopoly of 4/4 bar, as well as the predominating patterns of reggaeton, hip-hop and trap. At the same time, a tempo approaching *moderato* is most common. When asked about their perception of the beat, participants' answers point to the idea that a "rhythmic song" is not linked to a high BPM – as evidenced by trap tracks – but rather to the repetition of a pattern. In terms of structure, the standard pop song format that increases in texture and intensity predominates: introduction – generally instrumental and colourful aimed at positioning the song around a character, time, or place –, verse, pre-chorus, chorus(es), post-chorus and bridge. In this section the frequent use of rap as a bridge should be noted. This creates a section of greater tension and contrast not only provided by the narrative of the text (the language tends to be more explicit) but also by the vocal timbre¹⁴. The harmony is distinguished by the use of simple loops of no more than four chords and harmonic clichés. Most striking is that the chord sequence Im / bVI / bIII / bVII is present in a high number of chart tracks¹⁵. This leads us to reflect on the concept of authenticity. As previously noted, the relationship between tween girls and boys and the products they consume is functional, meaning that instead of being a disruptive factor, the repetition of elements allows products to be easily replaced without having to assimilate significant changes. This functionality is also clear in their relationship with the idea of product creation: they are indifferent to who created it or how original it is.¹⁶ They also do not place much importance on the singer, as can be seen in the high turnover of products and their brief time in the charts. For tweens, it is sufficient for a product to speak to them through references to elements in their immediate environment such as football, celebrities, the aesthetics of video games or brands.¹⁷ Shifting the traditional rock or pop model in this way indicates that instead of setting themselves up as role models, musicians aiming their products at a

13 In his suggested methodology for the ethnographic study of Western folk music, Nettl lists the following analysis parameters: sound and style of song, form, polyphony, rhythm and tempo, melody and scale.

14 *Swalla*, Jason Derullo ft. Nicki Minaj & Ty Dolla \$ign (2017); *Havana*, Camila Cabello ft. Young Thug (2017); *Despacito*, Luis Fonsi ft. Daddy Yankee (2017) or *Bailame Remix* by Nacho, Yandel & Bad Bunny (2017) are examples of this.

15 *Bailando*, Enrique Iglesias ft. Descemer Bueno & Gente de Zona (2014), *Hey Dj*, CNCO & Yandel (2017), *Súbeme la Radio*, Enrique Iglesias Ft. Zion, Lennox & Descemer Bueno (2017) or *Bailame remix* and *Despacito* are some of the most striking examples. The case of CNCO is intriguing. The similarity between their signature track *Hey DJ* and *Súbeme la radio* by Enrique Iglesias has not prevented them being his support act on the USA 2017 tour.

16 Being original or different was not positively evaluated by the participants, who rated this factor after other elements such as choreography, the music video and humour.

17 Analysis of the images portrayed in music videos deserves detailed attention and will be the subject of future research.

tween audience actually wish to assimilate with their audience. In terms of modality, the minor key predominates. The instrumentation is marked by a heavy presence of stock sounds and the scant use of acoustic instruments. These are usually restricted to being used as ethnic or geographic markers and tend to be found in the introduction or coda of the track. As regards voice, two patterns can be discerned: melismatic and broken. These patterns tend to be associated with stereotypes related to gender and attitude. The widespread use of autotune as an organic element brings us back to the theme of authenticity and virtuality as it does not appear to undermine the products' value. In terms of lyrics, content concerning love and sex is plentiful, as are consonant rhymes and repeating phonemes. These elements are linked to tweens' interests and their psychological development. However, they also relate to the partial listening caused by non-linear attention that comes from not fully understanding the text and a multitasking approach to listening. Finally, in terms of texture, an accompanied melody that becomes increasingly more textural similar to electronic music is the prevailing model.

Conclusions

After analysing the data collected, we believe that evolutionary and contextual characteristics lead tweens to establish a functional relationship with most of the music they consume. For tween girls and boys, most sound products have a limited life span and are no longer valid after 4 or 5 months. This time period is conditioned by the high number of products available and which are accessible at low cost and free from parental control, facilitated partly by consumption over the Internet but mainly by the products' functional relationship within the peer group. The music industry understands this situation and distributes products for tweens notable for their homogeneity and which are churned out quickly in order to be consumed voraciously. In parallel, the relationship between the evolutionary characteristics of the group, their functional relationship to the tracks and the obsolescence of the products translates into a specific perspective on the concept of creation. From this it can be surmised that tween girls and boys do not experience the same conflicts around authenticity usually found in other age groups and demographics. Because of this, the industry, ready to respond to the insatiable rate of consumption, is not required to innovate and can simply recycle content. Experts in the consumer behaviour of tweens and producers of products designed to become obsolete, the music and entertainment industry aims to extend this model of consumption to a large section of the adult audience, whom, according to Barber (2008), it infantilizes. Understanding tweens' relationship with music is a challenge with implications that extend beyond this group alone and that provides information on other sectors of society. The new musicology must pay attention to this and respond dynamically to the challenges of the 21st century.

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