

# THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN THE LIVES OF HOMELESS YOUNG PEOPLE: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is a preliminary report of findings in an on-going study of the role of music in the lives of homeless young people which is taking place in Vancouver, British Columbia and Seattle, WA. One hundred homeless young people in Vancouver took part in online surveys, 20 of these young people participated in interviews and 64 completed design activities. Surveys included demographic and music questions. Interviews consisted of questions about music listening and preferences. In the design activities, participants envisioned a music device and provided a drawing and a scenario. Since the study is on-going, findings are limited to descriptive analysis of survey data supplemented with interview data. These findings provide initial insights into music listening behaviors, social aspects of shared music interests, and preferred music genres, bands and artists, and moods.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is a pressing problem with lasting social and economic consequences. Experts estimate that in a given year, 3 million young people age 12-24 experience homelessness in the U.S and 50,000-60,000 experience homelessness in Canada [11,13]. The number of homeless young people and interest in their welfare has prompted research into their characteristics and circumstances. This extensive research with homeless young people has found that these young people are a heterogeneous group ranging from youth to young adulthood, with varying experiences of abuse and neglect [11,13]. Indeed, much is known about the psychological and social (psycho-social) aspects of homeless young people, but far less is known about their everyday lives, including interests in music, and associated experiences with technologies.

Subsequently, since 2007, the first author has investigated the experiences that homeless young people, aged up to 30, have with technologies, including music players [15,16,17]. One finding arising from this work is that homeless young people have a keen interest in music and

use digital means to find and listen to music and share music with others. The current study builds on this prior work by taking a general and exploratory stance, asking: What role does music play in the lives of homeless young people? In response, this paper presents preliminary findings from an on-going study in Vancouver, British Columbia and Seattle, Washington, reporting on data collected in Vancouver in February and March 2012.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Consideration of the role that music might play in the lives of young people began in antiquity. Writing in B.C.E. 350, Aristotle proposed that music “might have some influence over the character and the soul” and should therefore “be introduced into the education of the young” [2]. In the 20th century, the music interests of young people living at home have been studied extensively in the psycho-social literature. For example, over 100 studies since the 1970s have focused on possible associations between preferences for particular genres of music or types of music-related media use and risk-taking behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use, high-risk sexual activity, and so on [1]. Despite the high rates of risk-taking behaviors among homeless young people [11,13] and the general lack of knowledge regarding homeless young people’s interests in and behaviors related to music, after extensive searching only a single study in the psycho-social literature was found that had investigated music and homeless young people [7].

In a similar fashion, studies in the domain of music information retrieval have investigated the music listening and sharing behaviors of young people living at home. Williams [14] examined issues relating to popular music audiences by conducting unstructured small group discussions with teenagers in England. His subjects stated that music was important in their lives, but “interestingly, they framed its significance in terms of its practical use (of music) in their daily routines,” rather than identification or self-construction [14]. Laplante and Downie published a series of studies examining music related behaviors of young adults in Montreal, Canada, specifically on music seeking in everyday life [9], relevance judgments [8], and outcomes of music seeking [10]. In one study, participants reported that informal channels such as friends, colleagues or relatives played a significant role in obtaining

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music information [9]. In another study, participant's relevance judgments were based on a combination of different criteria, some pertaining to the music itself, but also external factors such as use, disposition, or personal knowledge [8]. Finally, further analysis revealed that participant's satisfaction with music depended on both hedonic (i.e., experiencing pleasure) as well as utilitarian outcomes [10]. Carlisle [5] conducted in-depth online interviews with five young Australians, aged 18-22, and found that each young person wanted digital music for markedly different reasons and had high personal stakes in their musical perspective. Taken together, these studies provide important insights regarding the needs, uses, and music seeking behaviors of young adults in various regions. However, as in the psycho-social literature, searching did not reveal studies with homeless young people. Subsequently, the current study aims to increase knowledge by providing empirical data on the role of music in the lives of homeless young people.

### 3. STUDY DESIGN

When the current study is complete, all procedures will have been carried out with equal numbers of participants in Vancouver, BC and Seattle, WA. This brief, preliminary report only includes data from homeless young people in Vancouver (collected in February and March 2012) since data collection in Seattle is planned to begin in June 2012. The study uses convenience sampling and is taking place in collaboration with two youth service agencies, one in each city, that provide assistance and shelter for homeless young people. Data in the study is anonymous and names of participants are not collected.

In keeping with the exploratory nature of the goals of the research, the study is a broadly conceptualized, mixed methods design. The procedures with homeless young people include three components: (1) an online survey with up to 100 homeless young people in each city; (2) individual, semi-structured interviews with up to 20 homeless young people in each city; and (3) a self-directed, individual design activity with up to 100 homeless young people in each city. Following approved human subjects protocols, young people were recruited by staff at a homeless youth service agency while attending agency programs. The first author obtained verbal consent from all participants, then introduced and conducted or moderated the surveys, interviews and design activities. The procedures took place sequentially so that a young person first engaged in the survey and was then invited to take part in an interview - until 20 interviews were completed. Finally, all young people who took part in the surveys, whether or not they had been interviewed, were invited to complete the design activity. Homeless young people were compensated with gift cards, from \$5-20 depending on the number of procedures. In sum, 100 homeless young people in Vancouver, BC completed surveys,

20 of these people also completed interviews and 64 participated in the design activity.

## 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Overview

The data analyzed in this paper include self-reported survey responses from 100 homeless young people to ten key demographic and music questions (Table 1) with detail from four additional survey questions. Homeless young people completed surveys on one of three laptop computers. Time needed to complete the surveys ranged from 15-65 minutes ( $M=35$  minutes). Importantly, in order to minimize stress due to the personal nature of the questions, responses to survey questions other than age, gender, race, and sexual orientation were voluntary, resulting in some no responses. Survey participants were 16-24 years old ( $Mdn=22$ ) and predominately male (63%). Participants identified as heterosexual (68%), bisexual (21%), homosexual (6%), queer (4%), and unsure (1%). Most participants reported their race as White (38%), Aboriginal (27%), or Mixed Race (23%). Half of the participants (50%) had not completed high school (Table 1).

Additionally, regarding homelessness, participants reported that they first became homeless between 2 and 23 years of age ( $Mdn=16$ ). Participants also reported that they had experienced a total between 0 and 132 months (11 years) of homelessness during their lifetimes. The "0 years, 0 months" responses may indicate that, despite attending programs at an agency that provides services exclusively for homeless young people, some of the participants did not consider themselves to be homeless or they had very recently become homeless. However, these 15 responses should be interpreted cautiously since "0 years, 0 months" was the default answer. Thus, these responses may also indicate skipped questions. If these responses are eliminated, the number of months of homelessness reported by the remaining 85 respondents was 1 to 132 months during their lifetimes ( $M=24$  months).

Regarding music, 97 participants reported that they listened to music on a daily basis and for many reasons with the most frequent responses being related to emotional welfare. Notably, for these questions, there were three "I don't listen to music" responses from two participants. The first participant gave contradicting responses, indicating that she listened to music "2-4 hours a day" on one question and "I don't listen to music" on the other. This may indicate some change in her music listening behavior, although this was not confirmed. The second participant, who took part in an interview, was a guitarist and singer who performed on the street to make money. Explaining her responses, she stated, "I don't listen to music. I play music."

Approximately one-third of the young people indicated that they listened to the same music as their parents, and

half indicated other family members. Over half of the young people indicated that they listened to the same music as friends from home or the streets. Indeed, 17 participants also indicated that they made decisions about establishing friendships based on music preferences. More than half of the participants listened most often to hip hop, rock, and rhythm and blues (R&B), although techno and metal were also listened to by nearly half of the participants.

## 4.2 Discussion

The data presented so far indicate that music does play a role in the lives of homeless young people. In order to elaborate this role, a discussion follows regarding: (1) music-listening behaviors; (2) social aspects of shared music interests; and (3) genres, bands/artists and moods. The discussion is supplemented with evidence drawn from 20 interviews with homeless young people. Since names of participants were not collected in order to preserve participant's privacy, pseudonyms are used to identify participants as needed.

Participants in the interviews were 14 young men and 6 young women, aged 18-24 ( $Mdn=21$ ). Consistent with prior work [16], interview times ranged widely, from 9-70 minutes ( $M=45$ ). However, despite homeless young people's general distrust of adults and strangers, with one exception the participants seemed at ease, speaking willingly and at length. Of the 20 interview participants, 13 people had personal music players, such as MP3 players and mobile phones, and 15 people reported that they had music collections ranging from "11-50" to "over 10,000" songs ( $Mdn=101-500$  songs). The size of these song collections may seem surprising. However, in the interviews, some participants stated that since they did not have money to pay for music, they "stole music" and used a variety of "pirate" websites to download songs.

The interviews with homeless young people included questions regarding music listening and preferences, as well as questions related to the importance and influence of music. The interviews began with an activity where young people wrote responses on a 24-hour timeline. When writing on the timelines, participants were asked to indicate what music they listened to, where they were, who they were with, what they were doing, and so on.

After the timeline was filled in, young people rated the importance of music (from very low to very high) and the influence of music (from very negative to very positive) on 5-point Likert scales. The importance of music was rated from low to very high with an average between high and very high (4.125 out of 5). The influence of music was rated from very negative to very positive with an average between neutral and positive (3.75 out of 5). As part of this rating, young people told stories about a time when music was important and a time when music had a positive or negative influence. Finally, young people shared at least one favorite song using a speaker to play

| DEMOGRAPHICS        |          | WHY DO YOU LISTEN TO MUSIC?*                                    |          |
|---------------------|----------|---|----------|
|                     | <u>n</u> |   | <u>n</u> |
| <b>Age</b>          |          | Calm down or relieve tension                                    | 77       |
| 16-18               | 9        | Help get through difficult times                                | 74       |
| 19-21               | 35       | Relieve boredom   | 72       |
| 22-24               | 56       | Get rid of negative feelings/anger                              | 68       |
| <b>Gender</b>       |          | Express feelings or emotions                                    | 55       |
| Male                | 63       | Be creative/use imagination                                     | 54       |
| Female              | 36       | Wake myself up  | 51       |
| Transgender         | 1        | Reduce loneliness   | 48       |
| <b>Ethnicity</b>    |          | Separate myself from society                                    | 47       |
| White               | 38       | Get better playing/writing music                                | 34       |
| Aboriginal          | 27       | Create an image   | 33       |
| Mixed Race          | 23       | Be trendy or cool   | 16       |
| Black               | 4        | Please my friends   | 12       |
| Asian               | 3        | Please my parents   | 3        |
| Arab                | 1        | No response   | 3        |
| Latino              | 1        | I don't listen to music   | 2        |
| Other               | 3        |   |          |
| <b>Degree</b>       |          | <b>ON AVERAGE, HOW MANY HOURS A DAY DO YOU LISTEN TO MUSIC?</b> |          |
| None                | 50       | 1 hour or less  | 26       |
| High school         | 38       | 2-4 hours   | 34       |
| Trade school        | 6        | 5-8 hours   | 19       |
| 2 yr college        | 3        | 9 hours or more   | 18       |
| 4 yr college        | 0        | No response   | 2        |
| No response         | 3        | I don't listen to music   | 1        |
| <b>Current job?</b> |          | <b>FRIENDS WITH SOMEONE BASED ON THE MUSIC HE OR SHE LIKES?</b> |          |
| Yes                 | 26       | Yes   | 17       |
| No                  | 73       | No  | 80       |
| No response         | 1        | No response   | 3        |
|                     |          | <b>WHAT KINDS OF MUSIC DO YOU LISTEN TO?*</b>                   |          |
|                     |          | Hip hop   | 70       |
|                     |          | Rock  | 65       |
|                     |          | R&B   | 56       |
|                     |          | Techno  | 49       |
|                     |          | Metal   | 47       |
|                     |          | Pop   | 42       |
|                     |          | Reggae  | 38       |
|                     |          | Punk  | 35       |
|                     |          | Jazz  | 30       |
|                     |          | Other (includes Dubstep, Country, Rap, Celtic, etc.)            | 44       |
|                     |          | <b>WHO LISTENS TO THE SAME MUSIC AS YOU DO?*</b>                |          |
|                     |          | Friends or people you know from home                            | 61       |
|                     |          | Friends or people you know from the streets                     | 52       |
|                     |          | Brothers, sisters, cousins, or other family members             | 50       |
|                     |          | Boyfriend, girlfriend, or sex partner                           | 44       |
|                     |          | Friends or people you met online                                | 33       |
|                     |          | Parents (including foster family or step family)                | 31       |
|                     |          | Staff at youth agencies   | 13       |
|                     |          | Boss or employer at your job                                    | 10       |
|                     |          | No response   | 7        |

**Table 1.** Self-reported participant characteristics (n=100). \*Multiple responses were allowed.

songs from music players, or playing videos on YouTube, or singing songs that they had composed or memorized.

### 4.2.1 Music-listening Behaviors

In the surveys and interviews, homeless young people reported that they listened to music on a daily basis, more

often for practical purposes than for identification or self-construction echoing the findings in [14]. For example, on the one hand, over 70 of the 100 participants reported that they listened to music for practical purposes, such as to “calm down or relieve tension,” “help get through difficult times,” or “relieve boredom.” On the other hand, fewer than 50 participants indicated that they listened to music in order to “separate myself from society,” “create an image,” “be trendy or cool,” or “please my friends (parents),” issues related to identity and self-construction.

As further evidence of the practical aspects of listening to music, the timelines from the interviews indicated that all 20 respondents listened to music while engaging in activities such as waking up and going to sleep, hanging out with friends, and looking for work. For example, Sheila was 22 and listened to music from the time she woke up to the time she went to sleep. Sheila spoke of the importance and practical aspects of music while also highlighting its impact on her emotions, saying:

*I've been through a lot of f\*\*ked up shit in my life and it's nice...to hear people's opinions...how they dealt with things in music ... to kind of relate 'I'm not the only one'.... I just think music is part of my life and I don't think there would ever be a point...where I would say, 'I don't want to listen to music,' 'cause I either want to cry to it or I want to be happy to it or I want to dance around to it, but there's always a song for no matter what emotion you're experiencing.*

In another example, Brian, who was 21, listened to music throughout the day. However, he said he did not listen to music while studying for college classes where he had recently begun to learn how to read and write. Brian rated the influence of music as both very positive and very negative. Speaking of the positive influence, he said that he liked to listen to 1990s rock music such as Bob Seger. Brian said that this music “brings you back to the positive times growing up,” particularly playing games with his brother and friends. More recently, he found that:

*When I'm doing my art I like to listen to MP3. So it kind of calms me so I'm into the artistic zone. Art is my hobby. I just recently discovered that after I quit drinking.*

On the other hand, he found that even some of his favorite songs by the Canadian musician, Matthew Good, could have a negative influence on his emotions:

*I have post traumatic stress disorder,... some of the music that I listen to kind of triggers me... and makes me feel down. Cause some of the songs I do enjoy are really deep and really sad,... so I get kind of saddened a bit..., so I then actually change the song to try to get on a happier page.*

#### 4.2.2 Social Aspects of Shared Music Interests

Findings in the current study indicate that friends or family are sources of music information [9], and that shared interests play some role in social relationships. In survey and interview responses, homeless young people reported that they shared music interests with friends from home as well as friends from the street. For some interview partic-

ipants, shared interests with friends led to the desire to attend music concerts, which can be difficult for homeless young people due to their economic circumstances. However, Arthur, age 21, a Dubstep fan who played a favorite song by Flux Pavilion [6], spoke enthusiastically about plans he had to go to an upcoming concert. Arthur and his friend Drew, age 20, another Dubstep fan, also talked in their individual interviews about going together to raves, dance parties where electronic music is played.

Although for most respondents (80%), music was not a determining factor in establishing friendships, 17% responded positively on the survey when asked, “Do you decide whether to be friends with someone based on the music he or she likes?” Indeed, for some participants, not having shared music interests could be potentially isolating. For instance, Matthew, age 20, enjoyed death metal music, and chose a favorite video by Behemoth to play during his interview [4]. Matthew expressed surprise when the first author was not put off by the video and said he rarely listened to his favorite music with other people because they did not share his taste in music.

Participants also reported shared music interests with family. For example, Sheila, introduced above, spoke about choosing the music for her mother's funeral:

*And I had a lot of good stuff like you know like the classic “Arms of an Angel” kind of thing, but I also had songs like me and her used to listen to that were in it [the funeral], so they [the songs] may not have been like funeral appropriate but they were what we'd listen to.*

In a second example, Amanda, age 24, said that her adoptive mother had introduced her to music and that she liked to sing because it made her mother happy. Amanda had been homeless for nine years, and earned money by singing and playing guitar on the street. A long-time heroin user, Amanda recounted how she had recently “got clean with my music” when she had been invited to sing one of her own songs at a concert. Amanda shared her performance via a video, and said she had been clean for 22 days at the time of the concert, adding:

*She [Amanda's mother] was sitting right there [in the audience] and she was crying. Everyone was crying. It was a big deal that I was clean.*

#### 4.2.3 Music Genre, Bands/Artists and Mood

Homeless young people reported their music preferences via two different survey questions. One question asked what kinds of music were listened to the most (Table 1). Hip hop emerged as the most preferred category followed by Rock and R&B. However, there is precedence in the literature that music preferences may be gender specific [3]. When broken down by gender, the top three categories preferred by young men were Hip hop, Rock, and Techno, while the top three categories for young women were R&B, Rock, and Hip hop. These differences are potentially noteworthy given that associations between Hip

hop (i.e., Rap) music and risk-taking, and the emotional use of music, such as R&B, have been investigated [1].

However, while genre has been used traditionally in studies as a way of gauging young people's music preferences, genre can only go so far in typifying music preferences. Subsequently, in a second question participants named their three favorite bands/artists, resulting in 192 unique responses (out of a possible 300). Table 2 lists the top 17 responses, chosen by three or more participants, and includes mainstream artists, such as Eminem, as well as "underground" bands such as Insane Clown Posse.

| Band or Artist       | Style [12]     | Total | M | F |
|----------------------|----------------|-------|---|---|
| Eminem               | Hardcore Rap   | 11    | 7 | 4 |
| 2Pac                 | Gangsta Rap    | 9     | 6 | 3 |
| Marianas Trench      | Punk-Pop       | 5     | 2 | 3 |
| Wiz Khalifa          | East Coast Rap | 4     | 3 | 1 |
| Lady Gaga            | Pop            | 4     | 2 | 2 |
| Dr. Dre              | Gangsta Rap    | 3     | 3 | 0 |
| AC/DC                | Hard Rock      | 3     | 2 | 1 |
| The Notorious B.I.G. | Gangsta Rap    | 3     | 2 | 1 |
| Insane Clown Posse   | Rap-Metal      | 3     | 2 | 1 |
| Iron Maiden          | Heavy Metal    | 3     | 2 | 1 |
| Korn                 | Heavy Metal    | 3     | 2 | 1 |
| Skrillex             | Dubstep        | 3     | 2 | 1 |
| Lil Wayne            | Southern Rap   | 3     | 1 | 2 |
| Nicki Minaj          | Hardcore Rap   | 3     | 1 | 2 |
| Nickleback           | Heavy Metal    | 3     | 1 | 2 |
| Adele                | Pop/Rock       | 3     | 0 | 3 |
| Deadmau5             | Club/Dance     | 3     | 0 | 3 |

**Table 2.** Favorite bands and musical artists, by male (M) and female (F).

Given that homeless young people reported that listening to music can have an impact on emotional well-being, moods associated with bands/artists were analyzed. Using allmusic.com, 176 unique mood labels were found for 155 of the 192 bands/artists [12]. Of the top 20 moods (Table 3), *aggressive* and *confrontational* appear to have strong negative valence, while *energetic*, *confident*, *rousing*, *brash*, *fun*, *playful*, *freewheeling*, *intense*, *party/celebratory* and *boisterous* appear to indicate high levels of energy or intensity. While no claims can be made about effects of these moods on homeless young people, it appears that the moods in music may be related to reasons for listening to music (Table 1). Recall that Sheila noted how listening to songs with themes related to difficult life experiences could be cathartic; reducing her feelings of isolation and that Brian found that certain songs could trigger his post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms.

Additionally, Marvin, age 24, explained a cathartic effect of his favorite music, saying:

*Do you ever get mad?, you kind of get pissed off and you just go to your room and you listen to music. It's either that or you punch your little brother out or something.*

| Mood            | Count | Mood              | Count |
|-----------------|-------|-------------------|-------|
| Energetic       | 68    | Intense           | 38    |
| Aggressive      | 66    | Party/Celebratory | 38    |
| Confident       | 63    | Boisterous        | 36    |
| Rousing         | 63    | Dramatic          | 36    |
| Brash           | 51    | Stylish           | 36    |
| Fun             | 42    | Earnest           | 35    |
| Playful         | 42    | Reflective        | 34    |
| Confrontational | 41    | Passionate        | 34    |
| Freewheeling    | 41    | Rebellious        | 33    |
| Fiery           | 39    | Visceral          | 33    |

**Table 3.** Top 20 moods corresponding to 155 bands and artists.

Finally, music with high energy/intensity moods may play a relatively straightforward, practical role as homeless young people move through their daily lives. For instance, recall that on the surveys, participants indicated that they listened to music in order to "wake myself up" and "reduce boredom," and similar answers were given when interview participants completed timelines.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

In prior and on-going work, findings have revealed that homeless young people have ordinary interactions with technology which are conditioned by the extraordinary circumstances of homelessness [15,16,17]. In this report, we have presented further evidence that indicates aspects of the ordinary and extraordinary. For homeless young people who participated in this study in Vancouver, British Columbia, music appears to play a role in daily life that may be fairly ordinary. Like most young people their age, homeless young people listen daily to a variety of music and music plays a part in their relationships with friends and family. Yet, for homeless young people in this study, experiences with music were also extraordinary. Sheila found comfort in songs that resonated with her difficult life experiences. Amanda played music to make money while living on the street and as part of overcoming her drug addiction. Brian listened to music to regulate aspects of post-traumatic stress disorder, a common result of problematic circumstances during childhood [13].

Importantly, as these results are preliminary, further work is needed to fully elaborate the role of music in the lives of homeless young people. Once the study is completed in Seattle, a comprehensive thematic analysis of the interview data, including the themes of music listening behaviors and social aspects of shared musical interests, with independent cross-coding will take place. Additionally, associations between preferred music, bands and artists, moods and risk-taking behaviors will be analyzed. Finally, results from the design activity where participants envisioned a music device that could help homeless

young people (Figure 1) will be analyzed and independently cross-coded. Results from this design activity analysis will provide context and additional evidence of the role of music and associated technologies in the lives of homeless young people.



So I was sitting one day on granville + georgia st, chilling out after a long day of walking. My bags sitting at my side trying to get enough change for a bite to eat. When some lady dropped this thing that looked like an iPod. I ran to pick it up, gave it back to her + being the kickass lady she was she gave the player to me + said it would be better use to me. I asked her what it was + why she was being so nice. She told me she bought it brand new the day before + it wasn't to her liking [sic]. She said it has lists of shelters + places to get food + their phones numbers in it. So she wanted to help someone out.

I was so grateful [sic]. I was able to escape from reality with beautiful music for a little while. Then it came time for me to find another tree to sleep under. All of a sudden I remembered about the shelter listings on the MP3. (the [sic] lady called it a Musik Monster) First place that came up was [the collaborating agency]. I called, did an intake + now am living happily in my own home. Looking for the next person to help with my Musik Monster.

**Figure 1.** Design activity drawing and scenario.

## 6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the study participants and the collaborating service agency. Partial support for the first author was provided by Fulbright Canada.

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