

**Michelle, music and me: How siblings influence music preferences and  
how music influences their relationship**

by

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### **Abstract**

How do sibling relationships affect the music we listen to? And vice versa, how do the music choices we make influence the perceived intimacy of the relationship between siblings? This study looks at the relationship between two sisters, close in age, and how their individual musical preferences were developed. Through a duo-ethnographic method, the sisters discuss how music figured in their relationship and whether there is a direct relationship between the music they listen to and their relationship. Through this study, different musical influences revealed themselves: parental, friend, personality and sibling. We see that siblings do influence each other's musical choices through the games they play as children, their desire to differentiate in childhood, their identity formation in their teen years, and increased closeness in their adult relationships.

### **Introduction**

#### **Background**

There are multiple dimensions to sibling relationships, some of which are conscious, and some unconscious. Our sibling's have the ability to influence our behaviour in ways no other person in our life can. Being each other's first peers and constant companions, we observe each other's behaviours and make judgments about them, helping us to decide whether we choose to emulate these behaviours or differentiate from them. Regardless of the direction we choose, our siblings have a marked effect on who we become and the preferences we have.

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to explore how siblings influence each other's music selections. By examining my sister's and my relationship, it allows us to see the

effect this sister relationship had on our individual musical choices, what other influences helped form our musical preferences, as well as seeing the effect music had on our relationship.

### **Significance**

Examining musical preference through the sister relationship allows us to understand the effects musical preferences have on how sisters develop their musical taste and their perceived closeness. By examining each sibling's musical preferences, and the personally significant events surrounding music, we can see how a sibling set is similar and different, and how a youthful relationship affected music preference and perceived closeness. Further this examination allows us to see the effects that other relationship have on both musical preference and the sibling relationship.

### **Literature Review**

There are significant holes in the current research on both sibling media influence as well as media preferences. For the purpose of this literature review, it was necessary to look at both the development and effect of sibling relationships on the individual, sibling set, and family, as well as media usage of families and adolescents, and theory on musical taste preferences and patterns.

The literature is similar regarding how siblings influence each other. While researchers approached the subject of influence differently, they generally used social learning theory as their theoretical lens, seeing how the sibling relationship either encouraged or discouraged similarities in personality and preferences.

### **Parental influence on identity formation**

Parental influence is an important aspect of the sibling relationship. The literature is in agreement that parents have a distinct influence on their children's relationship with

each other. By treating the children either the same or differently, children will view their parent's treatment in a different way and adjust their behaviour to fit their perceived roles. Parents will either encourage rivalries or assimilation depending on the family dynamic. "Competition with siblings is not simply for love, but for parental recognition of the child's uniqueness and worth with respect to similar others who share the same relationship to the parents..." (Vivona, 2007, p.1194). Vivona is not alone in this opinion. The positive and negative effects of competition for parental favour was also seen by Arnett, (2007), Burhmester & Furman (1990), Brody (2004), Whiteman & Christiansen (2008), and Weaver et. al. (2003). Therefore, how our parents treat us in relation to how they treat our siblings can have one of the greatest effects on our individual identity formation and sibling relationships.

### **Sibling influence on identity formation**

Our relationship with our siblings has a direct effect on who we become. When we have a strong sense of self, we experience sameness and continuity across time and space, creating our identity. Our identity allows us to move with a sense of purpose and direction through life. From the start, even as newborns, parents can identify personality traits their child possesses. "The evolved identity is used to present an individual's uniqueness, which makes him or her distinguishable from others" (Watzlawik, 2009, p.563). Sibling influence on identity formation is an important part of growing up. "Through their everyday companionship, as well as in their roles as providers of social experience, as combatants, as models, and even as foils for one each other, siblings are thought to influence one each other in ways that make them alike and different from each other" (Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008, p.24). Researchers acknowledged that the time

we spend with our brothers and sisters, directly or indirectly, has a lasting effect on the siblings (Arnett, 2007; Brody; 2004; Burhmester & Furman, 1990; Watzlawik, 2009; Weaver et al., 2003; Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008 and Vivona, 2007).

### **Imitation and identification.**

There are multiple dimensions to sibling relationships. Because of this, a sibling's ability to influence our behaviour is unlike any other. Having access to each other daily and observing each other's behaviour generally leads to one of two means of sibling influence: imitation or differentiation. This can be either a conscious or unconscious decision to behave in a similar or dissimilar way from the other children in the household. Researchers are in agreement that identification or de-identification behaviours are the most common ways in which siblings influence identity formation. "In a sibling relationship, differences and similarities are thus assessed to define one's own position and to be able to answer the question of who one is in relation to one's sibling(s)" (Watzlawik, 2009, p. 563). In some cases, the sibling relationship encouraged children to be more like each other (imitation), in others it encourages opposite behaviour (de-identification). Children used each other for mutual regulation and established their own self worth based on their sibling relationship.

Imitation or identification according to Weaver et al. (2003) is where a sibling tries to emulate the other. They relate to each other's experiences and live vicariously as the other. Siblings use each other as a frame of reference. "Both strategies serve to reduce competition with a rival who is simultaneously loved and hated by striking a compromise with some respect to identity and desire, resulting in a vigorous embrace of some aspect of oneself and repudiation of others" (Vivona, 2007, p.1201). Developmental stages

affect whether a child will choose to imitate or differentiate. The greater the distance in age, the more likely the younger child will see the positive results of specific behaviours and choose to emulate them. (Brody, 2004; Watzlawik, 2009; Weaver et al., 2003; Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008)

### **De-identification and differentiation.**

Differentiation is the primary way siblings influence identity formation (Burhmester & Furman, 1990; Brody, 2004; Vivona, 2007, Watzlawik, 2009; Weaver et al., 2003; Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008). Recognizing a gap in behaviour, the younger of the children will often take on roles that have not been filled by their siblings. Siblings may choose to differentiate behaviour because they see either positive or negative reinforcement from their siblings or parents. Seeing a sibling punished for behaviour serves as a model of what not to do, and thus the other child chooses to take on opposite behaviours. According to Whiteman and Christiansen's (2008) study on sibling influence in adolescence, the majority of second-born reported some form of either modeling, differentiation, or both. Twenty-six percent of older siblings reported that their younger siblings were differentiation influences. They also found that consecutive children were more different than jump pairs, those separated by another sibling, implying that the closer in age the more likely differentiation was to occur.

Differentiation can place one sibling at a disadvantage from the other, taking on roles such as the 'bad one' or the 'smart one' and can lead to a self filling prophecy and possibly dangerous behaviour (Vivona, 2007). This can also lead to unhealthy comparison and skewed self worth, which in turn can result in increased conflict among sibling sets.

Weaver et al. (2003) recognized that siblings with greater age differences had different relationships than those closer in age, and that the greater the differentiation within sibling sets, the more likely there would be conflict between siblings especially at younger ages. The greater the age difference between siblings, the more likely imitation rather than differentiation is to occur and less perceived conflict exists between siblings (Burhmester & Furman, 1990).

### **Mutual self-regulation.**

A final way in which siblings help to define each other's identity is through mutual self-regulation. This is the process by which siblings compare themselves to each other, and try out new behaviours or attitudes within the family before they introduce them into their external peer group. By comparing and testing behaviours on each other, "...mutual regulatory behaviors increase the rewards and reduce the costs of new roles and behaviors for siblings" (Weaver et al., 2003 p.247). These regulatory behaviours can include comments on appearance, as well as non-verbal feedback. This practice can start very early between siblings through teaching and learning activities such as taking objects away, saying no, or interactive play (Brody, 2004).

### **Perception of the sibling relationship.**

As identity forms, relationships build. Once a child has a more defined sense of self they can better relate to those outside of themselves. The sibling relationship is their first peer relationship, and usually most enduring. The differentiation process creates more conflict during childhood and adolescence, but increases intimacy in older age (Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008). A child's perception of their sibling relationships can also affect the extent to which they imitate or differentiate. The greater closeness

experienced in the relationship, the more likely a child will report positive feelings about their siblings and choose to imitate them. The more conflict, the greater likelihood they will find ways to differentiate. Generally, conflict and nurturing behaviours characterize the sibling relationship. This relationship provides children with unique opportunities to understand other people's emotions and points of view, to learn anger management, and resolve conflict and to nurture others (Brody, 2004).

### **Affects of ages spacing on sibling relationships.**

In Buhrmester and Furman's (1990) study of relationship perceptions of middle childhood and adolescence, they found that, "Children reported greater affection, pro-social behavior, and admiration of siblings who were more than 4 years different in age than more closely spaced siblings" (p.1392). Siblings sets less than four years apart reported more domineering behaviour from the elder child and more conflict. As children who differentiated from each other aged, they found that perceived conflict was reduced, and perceived intimacy increased. However it takes until adolescence for close siblings to find their place, so at least well into adolescence, perceived conflict is high.

### **The maturing relationship.**

As siblings mature, their relationship becomes less about identity formation and more about peer interactions. "Siblings in young adulthood serve as confidants, teachers, role models, and friends to each other" (Weaver et al., 2003, p.246). According to Weaver et al., an important role that siblings perform for each other is that of interpretation, or explaining each other's behaviour. Interpretation occurs when siblings interpret parental behaviour for each other or sibling behaviour for parents. The act of interpretation reduces tensions within the family. By reducing conflict there is an



increased sense of security and understanding, resulting in a more positive perception of the sibling relationship.

### **Media and musical forces**

Available research is limited regarding adolescence adoption of media preferences. I was unable to find any research looking at familial influence on media adoption, hence the review of literature is limited to media uses of adolescents as well as adoption of musical tastes and consumerism.

#### **Consumer behaviour.**

The Cotte and Wood (2004) study on family consumer behaviour suggests that a child's perception of home affects his or her attitude, and a summary of findings demonstrate that buying styles are intergenerational. While older children are more likely to accept parental purchasing patterns and brand loyalties, younger children are often more innovative. They will readily search outside of the familial buying comfort zone. Siblings will also use each other as age appropriate reference points. They will look to each other to decide whether product should be accepted or avoided. "So we have a situation where, on the one hand, siblings can and do act as a relevant peer group for each other and may socialize each other to similar attitudes and behaviors. On the other hand, although siblings share at least some genetically derived similarity and share some of the same family environment, they also experience this environment quite differently, and they may try to cultivate differences, particularly as adolescents and adults" (Cotte & Wood, 2004, p.80).

In 1999, Ritson and Elliot did an ethnographic study of the social uses of advertising and adolescence. While aware that advertising had an effect on consumer

habits, this was not the focus of this study. Instead, they looked at how advertising campaigns affected the social interaction of 15-16 year olds. Media was used as a social evaluation tool, meaning that whether an individual was aware of an advertisement helped to enhance their social acceptance and credibility. Marketing messages were used as a tool of socialization and social identity, whether the perception of the advertisement was positive or negative. These ads created a social context for the youths and a sense of belonging. “The conjecture by these informants that they understand the same kind of ads would suggest an explicit recognition of the existence of interpretive communities centered around advertising texts” (Ritson & Elliot, 1999 p.269).

Youth culture, the idea that along with their smaller social groups – friendships cliques, and crowds – young people also constitute a group as a whole, with their own distinct culture an important consumer influence (Arnett, 2007). Music is an important part of youth culture. It lends its self to the identity of individual groups and dictates, not only what the group listens to, but also how they dress and what they value. Consider the grunge scene in the mid 90s. The music helped to express the feeling of a disenfranchised youth who felt hopeless and angry. Artists like Sound Garden, Pearl Jam and Nirvana were the poster groups for this grunge culture, and dressing like these band easily identified youth as fans with similar ideas and attitudes as the music they listened to. Youth culture provided social markers and context to allow an overall understanding of the group and its members’ identities.

### **Media Influences and identity formation.**

Listening to music has always been an important part of the adolescent experience (Arnett, 2007; Avery, 1979). As long as teens have had access to dad’s car and thus the

radio, music has been an important aspect of the teenage years. In Avery's 1979 study on adolescent uses of mass media he stated "The importance of peer relationships and the frequency of parent-child conflicts can be seen directly related to radio and music consumption patterns." (p.63). He goes on to say that:

The shift toward greater consumption of radio and popular music corresponds to the need to spend more time alone and with close friends. Radio personalities and popular music performers not only assume the role of "faithful companions," but provide the basis for conversation and the development of interpersonal relationships. The hero worship of rock and film stars, so prevalent among adolescents, facilitates the teenager's search for identity and new self-image (Avery, 1979, p.64).

In Avery's view, it is through the use of music and the imagery associated with it that adolescents create their evolving identities within their peer groups.

Arnett (2007) discusses the five uses of media: entertainment, identity formation, high sensation, coping and youth culture identification. Using popular culture as reference points, youth will use the images and ideas presented to decide what ideas will influence them. Media allows them access to meaningful images and ideas that may not be available in the home or school. Popular media further provides youth with common reference points. Music is a socializing influence in this way. Knowledge of popular artists and songs can lend social credibility for emerging adults. Their ability to identify with popular images and ideas also provides their peers with a common social context and therefore a better understanding of one another.

As a coping tool, "Music is a media form that may especially lend itself to high-sensation intensity" (Arnett, 2007, p.390). This makes it a relatable and useful tool for adolescents. Music has the ability to help them feel less isolated during a confusing time in their identity formation. Adolescents spend approximately one quarter of their time

alone, providing them with time and space for self-reflection on their self-concept, self-esteem and emotional state. (Arnett, 2007) During these periods where youth withdraw, music can provide a sense of understanding that they do not feel is available from any other social outlet.

According to Mastronardi (2003), teens spend up to half of their waking hours consuming mass media; TV, Internet, music, radio. The media they consume has a direct and indirect effect on their identity. “Research on new media forms is finding that Internet use plays a major role in adolescent identity formation, guiding the development of their relationships with peers, family members, and school” (p.86). Because youth use media as a form of identity formation, depending on the message conveyed in the media form, it can be either helpful or harmful. Mastronardi goes on to say:

...media can exert powerful influences on our lives. The media we use and the stories they tell help to make us who we are. But we must always remember that most behaviors have multiple causes and television alone, or recorded music, or movies, or newspapers, or all the media together are rarely if ever a necessary and sufficient cause of public behaviors; they operate in a larger social system that itself media most social behaviour (p.89).

Today, mass media is available at the click of a mouse, or a press of a button. With hundreds of television channels and the long tail of choices available through the Internet, youth can find hundreds of images and ideas to relate to and contribute to the formation of their identity. As of 2003, 53% of people between the ages of 12-17 years also have downloaded music files” (Mastronardi, 2003, p.86). In 2010, it would be unlikely to find anyone in that same demographic who does not use music downloads as their primary means of obtaining music.

### **Musical preference.**

There are numerous stereotypes that exist regarding fans of specific musical genres. For example, those who like opera are snob and those who enjoy rap engage in a gangster lifestyle are not uncommon ideas. These stereotypes are not without some validity. Social identity theory suggests that we feel positive feelings toward others who share our same musical taste. Because of this groups form and "...group membership is salient and to derive positive self-esteem from this... musical preference is meaningful in terms of group dynamic process" (North & Hargreaves, 2007, p.180).

Music can be seen as a social construct and therefore can say much about its users. Music can express taste and aesthetic preference and hence are important tools in building identity. In both studies reviewing musical genre preferences, (North & Hargreaves, 2007; Van Eijck, 2001) researchers found that musical taste created a sense of belonging and social legitimacy. Through the participation in various activities involving music, fans were able to create relationships and social groups.

Determinants for appreciation of different types of music were tied closely to educational attainment, rather than socioeconomic standings. Musical preference also has some relevance for predicting lifestyle choices, such as how one spends their leisure time and other forms of media consumption. Not surprisingly, North and Hargreaves (2007) found that those who enjoyed popular music were more likely to enjoy more mainstream activities. Those who chose higher brow genres such as classical or opera chose more formal settings in which to experience their choices.

Van Eijck's (2001) research on social differentiation in musical taste patterns found a new middle class. This group selects what they like rather than what is seen as socially acceptable or status building. They engage in both high and low brow culture.

Those people who are young, well educated, and upwardly mobile may be characterized as post modern because of their consumption patterns. Their leisure activities and musical preferences seem incongruent with traditional behaviour expectations. For example, visiting amusement parks while primarily enjoying classical music, or art museum attendance and listening hip hop (Van Eijck, 2001).

### **Methodology**

This qualitative study has taken a social constructivist view using a duoethnographic method. This is the study of my sister and me who are two and a half years apart in age. By using this interview and self-reflection, I have contrasted and compared the experiences of my sister and me from our preteen and teen years, through to today.

Recognizing that our sibling relationship has not occurred in a bubble, it was vital to use the socio-cultural approach to analyze the data. Our relationship has an effect on the world around us as does the world have an effect on our interactions. "The goal of duoethnography is not for the researcher to get to know herself or himself better but rather to begin to reform the dynamic between personal meaning and their socio cultural inspection." (Sawyer & Norris, 2009, p.134)

Through an unstructured interview we told our stories, tracing our shared history of how music has influenced our relationship, and how our relationship has influenced our individual preferences. The duoethnography allowed me to compare and contrast our stories.

Duoethnography disrupts the meta-narrative of a solitary voice. I have used this narrative to see how the sibling relationship has influenced media selection. An important strength of duoethnography is that there are multiple voices telling the story. Multiple voices add meaning to the text. By comparing and contrasting our experiences, I have

attempted to demonstrate how siblings influence media preferences and whether musical preferences can help to create an increased perception of closeness in the adolescent relationship.

Because duoethnography is intended to be a fairly fluid form of research, it allowed my sister, Michelle, and me a fairly natural opportunity to discuss and evaluate our experiences surrounding music without traditional formalized practices. Through content analysis including language, tonality and inference, I was able to determine which influences were most important in the music selections we made. The language used to describe events was very telling within the narrative. By the choice and repetition of words, I was able to see the significance the events had for each of us. Tonality was an even more important part of the analysis. The pitch and speed of the conversation conveyed specific emotions. Whether it was pensive, excited or somewhere in between, I was able to interpret the emotion and infer the importance of the situation being discussed. By evaluating both the language and tone, I was able to infer the significance of the events for both my sister and me.

Through our interaction, readers witness our process and discoveries along with us allowing them their own discovery. As we progress through the conversation we move through, "not only from person to person, but also from artifacts of our lived cultural media, which we include in our study" (Sawyer & Norris, 2009, p.129). The inclusions of these artifacts allow the readers and participants the ability to move through the narrative in a chronological way creating additional context. Artifacts also help to construct meaning within the duoethnography, meaning for both the participant and the reader. Thus the story is real, as are the experiences. As a form of self-study, the duoethnography provides participants the opportunity to re-experience events with added context (Sawyer & Norris, 2009).

### **Findings/Discussion**

The question asked to start the interview was, “Do you remember a particular incident in your preteen years where you and I shared an experience surrounding music?” The question was intended to spur a conversation between my older sister Michelle and me. We are two years, six months and seven days apart in age. By definition, we are considered to be close in age (see Burhmester & Furman, 1990; Brody, 2004; Vivona, 2008, Watzlawik, 2009; Weaver et al., 2003; Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008). I decided this question would be a good starting point to help us see if we had any great influence on each other’s musical tastes, or if music had a great effect on our relationship. A child’s perception of their sibling relationships can affect the extent to which they imitate or differentiate from each other. Many researchers propose that because of our age difference, we should have been making choices that de-identified with each other in an attempt to individualize ourselves, to stand out in the familial relationship, and to ensure that we were identified as individuals (Burhmester & Furman, 1990; Brody, 2004; Vivona, 2008; Watzlawik, 2009; Weaver et al., 2003; Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008). The narrative that followed my question was quite enlightening. With my perception of our relationship as the younger sibling, I expected to see specific results. One expectation was that my sister’s musical choices were made deliberately to either take something before I could, or to withhold it, forcing me to make different musical choices, or suffering the repercussions if I did want something the same. Through my conversation with Michelle, different musical influences revealed themselves: parental, friend, personality and finally sibling. All of these became quite prevalent right from the beginning of the conversation. External influences were also important (this includes mass media and entertainment cultures) within all of the above influences.



## Parents

Michelle and I both enjoy music that is strongly influenced by our parents' preferences. Both our parents are lovers of music, and it was a constant fixture in our home when we were young. It was rare that we didn't have music playing, whether it was the radio or record albums. Both my sister and I enjoy the up-beat pop music from the 60s and 70s as well as some Ukrainian music. Our parents played these genres often. Enjoying this music together created a sense of community and belonging in our family (Hargreaves & North, 2007; VanEijck, 2001). Both mom and dad sought out new music during this time, as well as enjoying the music of their youth.

The popular culture was influencing our family as the radio stations were choosing what they felt was popular and in demand. Michelle recounted the activity that we used to play when she was about six years old where we would sing and dance to the music on the green shag carpet. Music was central to the activity and playing this way brought harmony to our relationship, for a little while at least. According to Michelle we continued to play this way for around three years, until she was approximately nine years old. Within our conversation we recounted the artists of the time that our parents sought out: ABBA, Neil Diamond, Diana Ross. We further discussed how we still enjoy and even seek out these artists today.

After Michelle spoke of the radio activity on the shag carpet, I took the opportunity to recount one of my earliest memories of Michelle and me sharing music. It was in the basement when we played roller rink. I reminded Michelle of how mom would put on records for us and we'd pretend to skate around for hours. This immediately reminded Michelle of more artists that our parents had passed down to us like Boney M

and Queen. This event was when I was about five or six, so it was around the same time of Michelle's recollection of singing and dancing on the green shag carpet. Based on these two stories we can see that the sharing and consciously experiencing of popular music began for my sister and I between the ages of six or seven for Michelle, and four or five for me, a time when children begin to become more acutely aware of the outside world (Vivona, 2007).

Our parents chose the music we listened to for much of our early lives, and we found ourselves either loving or hating it. We sought our parents' approval around music in our childhood. I remember telling dad how much I liked *Buddy Holly and the Crickets* and I could see on his face how much it pleased him. This may have been one of my first attempts at parental approval through music, but it was not the last. In seeking out recognition from my dad in this way, I attempted to set myself apart from Michelle in our father's eyes (Brody, 2004; Vivona, 2007; Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008; Weaver et al., 2003). Both Michelle and I wanted to be seen as separate from each other, and be individuals our father approved of. Our musical preferences helped to do this. Memories of the artists both our parents exposed us to are part of both Michelle's and my earliest memories surrounding music. Today, Michelle and I have invested in quite a bit of the music from our childhood. It is still the only music that we really share both literally and figuratively.

Because of our parents, we were also fairly engrossed in our ethnic heritage through Ukrainian dance and the Ukrainian bilingual program at school. It was only natural that we accepted and enjoyed listening to Ukrainian music on the radio, as well as

the variety of Ukrainian artists our parents would occasionally play when we were camping.

Mom and dad were fairly young parents, and up until they were in their late 30s – early 40s, they listened to the contemporary popular music stations. Once modern music lost its appeal for our father, he returned to his country music roots. When we were between the ages of seven and sixteen, Michelle and I were in complete agreement of one thing: “country music sucks”. As we discussed how our father forced us to listen to CFCW (the local AM country music station) in his truck, we talked about how much we disliked the music he made us to listen to.

We further discussed how our dad’s passion for country music gave us music lessons. Deep down dad wanted us to form a bluegrass trio. He wanted us to learn to play an instrument, preferably a guitar or fiddle. Michelle had started to play the bass in her early teens and dad constantly let me try different instruments. I really wanted to play the cello, but in the end, the instrument we compromised on was the violin, which he did insist on calling a fiddle. I again, sought out his approval through music (Brody, 2004; Vivona, 2007; Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008; Weaver et. al., 2003).

An important place where Michelle and I diverge on musical taste is surrounding country music. In her twenties, Michelle’s attitude on country music completely turned around and she became a big country fan. For me, while I can listen to it, I have never particularly enjoyed it. Through the years Michelle and dad have found artists that they both enjoy and share. Though after our formative years, this common interest in country music placed Michelle in a new role with our dad, setting her apart from me in yet another way, while gaining his approval (Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008).

Music has brought our family together in adulthood. As Whiteman and Christiansen (2007) anticipated, Michelle and I spent our childhood and adolescence distant from each other, but as we have matured our relationship has become significantly closer. We spoke about the concerts that we attended with our dad. He is a difficult person to shop for, so when we see that an artist he enjoys is going to be in concert, we purchase him tickets to see the show and spend time with his girls. Generally these artists are country performers. While these opportunities have not made me necessarily a fan, I have a new appreciation for the music and genuinely enjoy the shows. While not discussed within the interview session, this is also true for musical experiences with our mom. We've taken the opportunity to do the same thing with her. In this way my sister and I have once again used music as a means of connecting with our parents on their terms.

Overall, Michelle and I agree that we both still enjoy most of the artists our parents introduced us to. We seek them out and they are a source of musical agreement throughout the family. In the car, no one tries to change the station, and if any one of us purchases a new collection, there is a sharing of this music between my sister, my parents and me.

An unexpected result of parental, or in this case, familial influence is the passing of music from Michelle or me to our parents. We discussed how Michelle has certainly introduced our dad to new country artists and how my fascination with specific pop artists in the late 80s encouraged some of our mom's musical preferences.

## **Friends**

As expected, peers have a significant influence on musical preference of one another (Arnett, 2007; Avery, 1979). Throughout our discussions, friends figured prominently (this group includes all people who are not part of our family of origin). Michelle's first popular music album was given to her by a friend at her tenth birthday party, as was her first concert experience precipitated by an invitation by a friend at the age of twelve or thirteen. For me, while I chose my own first popular music album when I was about eight years old, my first concert experience at the age of seventeen was definitely influenced by my classmates.

Michelle recounted the day she received that first grown-up record. It was her birthday party. She was in grade five, which made her ten years old; she was one of the youngest kids in her class. The record was by the Go-Gos; the album was called "Vacation". She got it from her then best friend, also named Michelle. This was a significant moment for me as well. It was the first birthday when my sister clearly wanted to be with friends alone, having me remain on the sidelines. I wasn't part of the circle of girls opening presents. I was watching from the couch. Michelle didn't play that record on the sound system in the middle of the house. She played it in her room, and if it were not such a popular album, I can't say that I would know any of the songs on it. This was a clear moment of differentiation for music and emotional distance in our relationship. Friend influence had become primary and interactions with her little sister were no longer desired. She had moved on to different peer relationships.

Popular culture has a substantial influence on the lives of pre-teens and teens (Arnett, 2007), and obviously it influenced what our peer relationship brought to our

musical preferences. In 2003, Mastronardi found that teens spend up to half of their waking hours consuming mass media. While it may not have been quite as significant a portion of our daily lives, in the late 80s and early 90s, I wager my generation was similarly engrossed. We were young during a very influential period in music. The 80s saw the popularizing of music videos and the change of focus in music industry from solely the music to image. A new crop of bands came on the music scene, and only those who had both an attractive image and sound gained commercial success. Television became the new medium for music. Visuals became of the utmost importance to attract audiences. This additional medium added a new dimension to music choices. The watching of videos introduced our generation to new bands. We found that the more interesting the videos were, the more we were attracted to the music. Music was used as a social evaluation tool. We watched what our friends watched. We used music to evolve our identities within our peer groups and constructing a social context among our peers (Arnett, 2007; Avery, 1979; Hargreaves & North, 2007; Ritson & Elliot, 1999; Van Eijck, 2001).

Movie soundtracks also became more important during the 80s. Directors like John Hughes (*The Breakfast Club*, 1985, *Pretty in Pink*, 1986), Joel Schumacher (*Lost Boys*, 1987), Tony Scott (*Top Gun*, 1986) and Emile Ardolino (*Dirty Dancing*, 1987) saw music as an important way to reach audiences, creating an additional social context for their films. Music added to the mood of the movie, and identifying with the music of these films indicated you identified with the film. Like the participants in Ritson and Elliot's 1999 ethnographic study on youth and advertising, for us, these films created another social context for our peers. Through the use of music, and the imagery

associated with it, we, as adolescences, created our evolving identities within our peer groups (Arnett, 2007; Avery, 1979; Hargreaves & North, 2007; Van Eijck, 2001).

Michelle and I spent time discussing how we acquired some of our first music. In many cases we received albums as gifts from family friends. In other cases, specifically for Michelle, she heard new music from the people she worked with at McDonald's. She had two distinctly different groups of people she socialized with, work friends and school friends from opposite sides of the city. Both groups were unique and fairly homogeneous, and as the conduit, she carried different music between groups. Enjoying this music with both groups created a sense of belonging for her (Arnett, 2007; Hargreaves & North, 2007; Van Eijck, 2001) as well as important social context for both groups (Arnett, 2007; Avery, 1979).

The influence of our peers became more apparent in our late teens and early twenties when music became an important part of our social activity. Clubs were chosen based on the kind of music that was played and the group of friends that would be going out. Michelle's interest in country music was spurred from these social outing. In fact, clubbing was a very important part of Michelle's music adoption. Knowing the DJs and having them create tapes for her was an important way that she collected her music.

For me music was part of my school life. Spending three weeks on a bus with my close-knit Ukrainian class during a trip to Ukraine the summer after grade ten provided intense exposure to their musical tastes and in my case, a tolerance for their country music. I became okay with country music in order to be accepted, or at least not ridiculed by the group, but country music was never my preference. I was more inclined to musical theatre, pop and alternative rock music. These preferences were supported by a small

group of particularly close friends who were not part of the Ukrainian class, but did attend the same junior and senior high school as me. This group of friends legitimized my affection for musical theatre and this helped to enhance our individual relationships and social group (Arnett, 2007; Hargreaves & North, 2007; Van Eijck, 2001).

During my late teens and early twenties, while in university, my friends and I had different priorities than my sister and her friends at that the same age, and so clubbing wasn't the way we got our new music. We collected ours from the university scene.

Many of the bands that were popular on campus during the mid 90s are still part of my musical selections today. This may be because I still have that same group of close friends from more than 15 years ago. On the other hand, Michelle's friends have been more transitional depending on her work situation and personal interests. Through this, her musical tastes have adapted and genre preferences have changed. She stated that, "Connie was the first friend who really influenced my music. She liked country. When I got into the electrical trade, I got back into rock." Depending on the period she was in, her musical focus has changed, and her musical library has grown.

Peer influence is definitely an important part of developing musical preference. Today's youth are constantly immersed in media and music, and create their social context by using their preferences to convey their individual identities (Arnett, 2007; Avery, 1979; Mastronardi, 2003). It is logical that the influence between peers is multi-directional and that influence is very important within our development of media preferences as we mature.



### **Personality**

An important part of music choice is certainly personal preferences. As we moved through our dialogue, there were many instances where individuality ruled choice. Michelle often spoke of not necessarily choosing music because others liked it, but because she enjoyed listening to it. I too spoke of choosing music that was unusual because it resonated with me. Playing musical theatre in the open jeep at top volume, I had never cared that someone else would dislike it; I enjoyed it.

Music can be seen as a social construct and therefore can say a lot about its users. Music can express taste and aesthetic preference and hence are important tools in building identity (Arnett, 2007; Hargreaves & North, 2007). I am a singer. I have always loved to perform, and so I have often chosen to listen to music that I felt I could learn and sing. Musical theatre is a big part of my collection. For Michelle she has always been a dancer and so the music she enjoys is music that she can move to. "I don't like to sit. I like the music, I like that, I like moving", Michelle stated. Dance music is a big part of her collection. For very personal reasons we choose very different styles of music. We enjoy and use the music in different ways.

I asked Michelle if she had ever chosen music that she knew I would specifically not like. She responded, "No, no I would never do that because I live with music. I always have music". Music has always been very personal for her. Michelle readily said, "Music affects my mood". Music has the power to change her moods, and selecting the right music to enhance a mood is a very personal for Michelle. During our discussion, Michelle and I spoke of the effect that music had on us. For me, music takes me back to a time in my life, good or bad. I can tell you the place I was when I heard a specific song

or what was happening in the world when a song was popular. For Michelle, it transports her to a different place. Reggae and soul take her back to the beaches of Jamaica. She said, “The reason I like that music is because I don’t like the cold. It takes me (pause), it takes me back to the heat”.

Personality and personal preference will always have an important influence on musical preferences. How an individual feels and how they use music to enhance their moods will encourage different musical selections. In adolescence, youth spend more time alone using music to help analyze and sort through feeling, making this time an important part of identity formation (Arnett, 2007; Avery, 1979). The importance of self-acceptance and peer approval for each individual will also help to dictate how much weight personal preference influences choice of music (Arnett, 2007; Hargreaves & North, 2007; VanEijck, 2001). For Michelle and me, we weren’t as concerned about our preferences being okay outside of ourselves, so we allowed our individuality to shine through.

### **Sibling**

Michelle’s first instinct to answer to my initial question about our childhood experiences together with music was to reply with “Yes. I remember telling you to turn it off”, clearly demonstrating from the start that we had different preferences and some stress in our relationship during the formative years. However, realizing she was speaking of events long after our early childhood, I asked if there was something earlier that she remembered. She did; singing and dancing to the radio on the green shag carpet listening to 630 CHED, which at the time was the top 40-radio station. I remember playing this

game too. We were likely around four and six years old and already the outside world began to show its influence on us as to what music we were playing to.

As children, Michelle and I played together using music as an important part of our interaction. Beginning with singing along to the radio, dancing in our fake roller rink and even playing with our Barbie dolls, we used music to create a peer-to-peer connection. Mutual self-regulation was an important part of our play. Together we tested behaviours and activities before we took them to the outside world (Brody, 2004; Weaver et al., 2003). We were each other's first constant playmates. We were constantly at odds with each other, but close in our own way too (Arnett, 2007). The connection continued that way until Michelle reached approximately ten or eleven years old. At that time she began to pull away and become more involved with her friends than her sister.

Chronologically and developmentally, I was naturally behind my sister, so when she was ready to diversify from our childhood play, I was not quite ready to let her go. Because I was younger, there was a lack of understanding of why she made obvious attempts to differentiate from me. This lack of understanding increased the conflict in our relationship. I tried to imitate her behaviour in an attempt to gain her acceptance, but this only caused greater conflict (Watzlawik, 2009). There were still moments of closeness that she and I recalled, like when we played a game with the radio when we shared a room at our grandparent's home for a short time. "We used to sit there and tape music, (chuckles) off the radio", Michelle recalled. But overall, the opportunities to connect where, as the younger sister I wasn't a pain to her were limited. I wanted to be close to her, and she wanted to be left alone (Arnett, 2007; Avery, 1979).

In Michelle's pre-teen (eleven – twelve years old) and early teen years there was a distinct lack of connection over pretty much everything in our lives (Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008). Michelle's growl to turn my music down is a perfect representation of the relationship we had during those years. She wanted very little to do with me and, for the most part, I tried to stay out of her way. Researchers stated that the pre-teen years are a very natural time for siblings to de-identify with each other, even though imitation reduces conflict and increases intimacy (Brody, 2004; Vivona, 2007, Weaver et al., 2003; Watzlawik, 2009; Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008). Anything I did during these years annoyed her. Michelle stated that she was very resistant to sharing things with me, and this included her music, as well as her stereo system. During our discussion, when asked, there was not a single occasion where she could remember wanting to share music with me because she thought I'd enjoy it. I was surprised to hear within the conversation that she and I enjoyed some of the same artists when we were teens, and that she owned those artists' albums. We spoke about the fact that, at no point did she consciously keep artists from me, but neither did she ever consciously think to introduce me to artists she thought I might like. Michelle openly said, "I never thought of my sister when I was picking music". We did have things in common, but didn't really know it. In those years Michelle wanted to be left alone (Arnett, 2007; Avery, 1979). I had said to Michelle during the interview, "And in some cases you just wanted your little sister to go away", and she replied very matter of fact tone, "Well, yeah". I am sure we missed many opportunities to connect over the things we did have in common.

As we continued the conversation we discussed the reason why Michelle began the interview with telling me to "shut it off", and one of the major differences between

Michelle and my musical preferences. For years, I only owned seven or eight records. I enjoyed listening to the same music over and over again, and Michelle preferred variety. We were polar opposites in so many ways. Michelle disliked repetition and I loved it. She was a dancer and I wanted to sing. She went out with a variety of friends, and I had a small group of intimates. Michelle hated school and I looked forward to it. She resisted our parents' authority and I was content to behave. I spent my time at home in the family space and she was happily isolated in her room. We were very different people and it was a rare occasion that anything brought us together. We were classic examples of de-identification in our behaviour and interests (Brody, 2004; Vivona, 2007; Weaver et al., 2003; Watzlawik, 2009; Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008).

When Michelle got into her late teens and began to go clubbing. She was exposed to the popular dance music of the early 90s and she befriended some of the DJs. Michelle noted, "We used to listen to a lot of that stuff and we used to get tapes made by the DJ's from the different clubs". She would play the cassette tapes they made for her in the car and it was there she began to share her music with me. Again, these were times I remember when I felt close to my sister. In the summertime when we were listening to the music blaring in the truck with the windows open. The two of us, and maybe a friend of hers, laughing and having fun together, I felt like I belonged (Arnett, 2007, Hargreaves & North, 2007, Van Eijck, 2001). These were the "Glenda years" as Michelle called them, when I was sixteen or seventeen at the time, making Michelle eighteen or nineteen. I never became an ardent fan of the music, but I authentically enjoyed that club music. I still do upon occasion.

In her early twenties, Michelle became heavily involved in the country music scene in Edmonton. “I started with country music when I was... twenty one. I started at Esmeralda’s and moved on to Long Rider’s and then Cook County after that”, Michelle figured out. I was one of the oldest in my class, and so if I wanted to go out to a club, I had to go with Michelle. So I started to go to the country bar with her. This was, in my mind, an opportunity to have Michelle once again accept me like when we were kids. Again, I used imitation to gain her affection and attention. While I didn’t quite like the music, for me, the benefit of getting along again made up for the less than appealing music. We had fun together as our relationship matured. We found more places where we could come together and have our differences not necessarily be points of contention (Brody, 2004; Watzlawik, 2009).

As Michelle and I continued to examine our history, we were able to see how technology and media changed through the years, as did our access to the new technology. When we were very young our primary source of music was the radio or records that our parents chose for us. As we got older we owned our own media for playing music and the ability to select what we liked. During my first fifteen years of life we saw records replaced by cassette tapes, and tapes replaced by compact discs.

Our individual willingness to invest in technology was the difference between Michelle and me. We both had our own radios and record players at a fairly early ages, but how quickly we chose to invest in the new technology as we got older was different. I had a job first, so I started purchasing records before Michelle did. I had made what I felt was a decent investment in records, and was satisfied with the selections I had; they were sufficient for my needs. Michelle had a tape player earlier than I did. Cassette tapes

tended to wear out, so when she could afford it, Michelle invested in a stereo system that included a compact disc player for her room, and eventually, her vehicle. “Well, I always make sure I have a good sound system because I love with music”, Michelle noted. For her, the system had to be good. It had to be up-to-date, “...I had a record player, a tape player and CD player, and that’s when CD players first started coming out. I made sure I had all the technology to play all the mediums”. I, on the other hand, waited until our parents invested in the technology for me, purchasing us individual boom boxes in 1990 with both compact disc players and double cassettes. Michelle had never been a fan of sharing with me, so until I had the technology, there was little point in buying records, because they were becoming obsolete, or compact discs, because I didn’t have a player. Consequently, I stopped purchasing music for a time. Michelle had been investing in compact discs for more than a year, “I (Michelle) spent two to four hundred dollars a month on CDs at the time”, and I never quite caught up with her purchasing.

Music and television was one place that we would come together occasionally. “We’d come home and watch *Four o’clock Rock*”, Michelle recalled. We only had one television for the family and if we wanted to watch videos or movies, we had to do it together. We would often watch the music shows together. We saw a lot of the same movies. When Michelle began to drive she was responsible to take me to my commitments, and she controlled the radio. In this way we shared music and Michelle, as the older sibling, influenced my musical exposure. These were the occasions where we would be closer, and in an attempt to keep that feeling of closeness I would often give in to Michelle’s preferences to keep the peace and make her like me for a little while. By this time in our relationship I had seen other sister relationships that were authentically

close. They had lots in common, especially music, so I tried that tact – I agreed with Michelle (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990).

Today, in our thirties Michelle and I have a much healthier relationship. We are once again friends, or maybe even for the first time (Brody, 2004; Watzlwik, 2009; Weaver et al., 2003; Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008). We have come together over music at concerts and even as part of my former part-time job as a karaoke hostess. We share the music of our youth, rarely argue over the radio station and even occasionally introduce each other to new artists, unlike our formative years. We chose to come together, and have found a way to be closer than ever before, just like Whiteman and Christiansen (2008) predicted for sibling sets close in age.

Michelle and I did expose each other to new music throughout our lives, some of which was accepted by the other and some that was clearly rejected. As the older, more controlling sister (Brody, 2004), Michelle introduced me to more popular culture than I did her. Because of her age, she was immersed in popular culture and new music first, and as the older sibling she had greater authority in most situations. She helped to form my identity in many ways. Through music and activities associated with music she taught me tolerance, patience and perseverance. She introduced me to new artists that I used as tools to enhance our relationship, many of which I still enjoy. This is not necessarily true for Michelle in our youth. She rarely admitted to enjoying anything that I liked first however, as adults I know I have introduced her to new music and the new closeness of our relationship has been enhanced with our shared musical preferences.



### Summary

The intention of this research project was to discover whether siblings transfer musical preferences to each other and if, through the sharing of music, there was an increased perception of closeness. Based on sibling research I expected to see that Michelle and I would intentionally de-identify with each other. By examining our different influences and our music selections, I now understand that we differentiated in many ways. It was however in no way a conscious choice to avoid each other's likes or dislikes. My sister certainly did have some influence over my music selections especially during our late teens. In fact, there was a conscious attempt by me in later years to accept and participate in Michelle's preferences as a way of gaining her approval. I found that music did bring us closer to together at times in childhood, but much more so in our 20s and 30s.

This research is helpful within the context of enhancing sibling relationships. Michelle and I fall into a very predictable pattern within sibling relationships. As siblings close in age, we experienced closeness as young children, de-identification and separation as tweens and teenagers, and now as adults we are closer than ever before in our history. Music was definitely a unifying factor throughout our lives, giving us cause to come together. For the parents of children who are close in years experiencing great de-identification, I would recommend that they work early on creating common likes throughout the family, so that during the particularly tumultuous years, there will be a common ground for the family to find some peace.

### **Further research**

In terms of direct influence on musical preference, based on this project, I would suggest that parental influence has the strongest impact on lasting media choices and believe that further examination of this topic would be advantageous. It is important to explore how one's family of origin influence musical taste and media preference. To see whether the influence is one direction or if there are multidirectional influences within families.

I also believe that there is likely a very important link between access to technology and the variety of musical influences that this project was unable to review due our limited interaction with these newer web based technologies. By exploring how personal access and willingness to interact with technology affects the exposure to new music, we will see whether technology has changed how families and peers influence musical preferences.

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