

# You Are What You Listen To

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(PhysOrg.com) -- It may not be possible to judge a book by its cover, but judging someone by the contents of their iTunes library could be a very different story, new research suggests.

Studies at the University of Cambridge have revealed that many of us use musical taste both as a means of expressing our own identity, and to form and refine our opinions about other people.

Researchers found that sample groups of subjects regularly make the same assumptions about people's personalities, values, social class and even their [ethnicity](#), based on their musical preferences.

Rock fans, for instance, are commonly held to be rebellious and artistic, but emotionally unstable. Classical music-lovers, on the other hand, are seen as personable and intellectual, but unattractive and a bit boring.

The studies have been led by Dr. Jason Rentfrow, from the University's Department of Social and Developmental Psychology and a Fellow of Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, who is conducting ongoing research into the links between [personality](#) and musical taste.

His work forms the subject of a new short film, "The Music In Me", produced as part of the "Cambridge Ideas" series marking the University's 800th anniversary and available from Saturday August 22nd at [www.800.cam.ac.uk/page/145/cam...-the-music-in-me.htm](http://www.800.cam.ac.uk/page/145/cam...-the-music-in-me.htm). A new analysis also appears in the psychology journal, *Group Processes And*

### *Intergroup Relations.*

The results show that music is a powerful form of social expression that can reinforce stereotypes and, potentially, social prejudices. By stating a preference for a musical style, many of us appear to use music as a "badge" to tell people about our personality and values.

"Humans, as social beings, develop techniques that help them to predict what another person is going to be like from the moment they first meet," Dr Rentfrow said. "Because we can't carry out a full psychological assessment on the spot, we ask them questions which help us to build up a picture of their personality. This research suggests that, even though our assumptions may not be accurate, we get a very strong impression about someone when we ask them what music they like."

Previous studies have analysed how young people in particular use music as a badge of identity. Until now, however, little has been done to examine exactly what kind of messages we are sending and receiving when we make claims about our musical taste.

Dr Rentfrow asked subjects to consider six broad genres - rock, pop, electronica, rap, classical and jazz. More specific terms were not used as they are not always widely understood. No definition of the genre was given beyond its name, however, as the researchers were interested in the assumptions that people would make.

The participants were asked to rate fans of each genre according to a set of personality dimensions widely used by psychologists and known as the "Big Five". These are: Extraversion (associated with sociability, energy and enthusiasm); Agreeableness (warmth, friendliness, compassion); Conscientiousness (duty, responsibility, self-discipline); Neuroticism (anxiety, stress, impulsiveness) and Openness (curiosity, intellect, creativity).

Next, they were asked to rate fans' personal qualities, such as intelligence, physical attractiveness and athleticism, on a scale of 1 to 7. The same scale was then used to assess a series of 18 things that fans might value, such as "a comfortable life", "true friendship" and "national security". Finally, subjects assessed the likelihood that fans might come from each of 16 UK ethnicities and five degrees of social class.

The results were then measured in terms of "effect sizes", which helped to identify any area in which there was a noticeable level of consensus between the study's participants. The researchers found that this existed in 77% of cases, and that people agreed particularly strongly about the types of people who like classical music, rock and rap. The profiles for each genre were both consistent and differed sharply from one another, suggesting that the stereotypes are both clear-cut and firmly held by many subjects.

Jazz fans, for example, were viewed as friendly, emotionally stable people with a limited sense of responsibility. Rap fans were viewed as more hostile, but were seen as energetic and athletic. Classical music was linked to white, upper-class people and rap to black or mixed black people from lower class backgrounds. All six styles were deemed associable with middle class people.

The study suggests that while these stereotypes may not be true, they do mean that people are making very clear statements about their self-image and their personality when they discuss their favourite bands or composers. The researchers also argue that the way in which these genres are portrayed by artists and in the media appears to reinforce, and therefore perpetuate, such stereotypes.

"It is now common practice to list your favourite bands on sites like MySpace or Facebook," Dr Rentfrow added. "This research shows that in doing so, many of us are also making clear public statements of who

we are and how we should be perceived, whether we are conscious of that or not."

Provided by University of Cambridge ([news](#) : [web](#))

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