

9 Music and Collectivity

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explore issues of music and collective consumption by using notions such as consumer culture, consumer tribes, brand communities and scenes. This is not intended to be an exhaustive analysis of music and community or collectivity. Rather, this chapter focuses specifically on a number of ideas which have potential implications for the analysis, interpretation and understanding of music markets. Part of the contribution of this book is to examine what they buy us in terms of understanding exchange relationships, what their limitations are, and how these limitations might be remedied by combining them with social identity and consumer culture theory. The discussion of brand community builds on the earlier discussion of branding in Chapters 5 and 6. The focus of consumer tribes builds on the discussion in Chapter 7 about music consumption by focusing on collective aspects of consumption. The notion of scenes is one which has emerged within music studies.

Consumer culture

In his well-known book entitled *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, Featherstone (2007: 12 ff.) argues for a focus on the 'growing prominence of the culture of consumption' (emphasis in original). He identifies three ways of looking at consumer culture: (a) pleasures, dreams and desires associated with consumption; (b) a sociological view on the 'ways in which people use goods in order to create social bonds or distinctions'; and (c) the idea that capitalist production drives

consumption and ideologically seduces consumers. He sees consumer culture (2007:27) as using 'images, signs and symbolic goods which summon up dreams, desires and fantasies', and these 'suggest romantic authenticity and emotional fulfilment'. Consumer behaviour is defined by Arnould *et al.* (2004: 9) as: 'Individuals or groups acquiring, using and disposing of products, services, ideas or experiences'. In older consumer behaviour textbooks, the individual consumer is treated as a rational economic individual. The thrust of the applied research is the description and analysis of consumers and potential customers in terms of their behaviour and attitudes. There is a heavy emphasis on cognitive psychology, as well as borrowings from sociological theory. Consumers are analysed in terms of their choice criteria, buying process, buying involvement, influences from peers on the buying decision, and roles occupied in the buying centre. Despite this treatment of the consumer as an individual, in general, marketers understand the benefit of getting people together in groups as both a recruitment and retention strategy. It enables resources (marketing spend) to be focused economically and relationships to be 'managed'. However, in their monograph entitled 'The Unmanageable Consumer', Gabriel and Lang (2006) explore characterizations of the consumer in different literatures as chooser, communicator, explorer, identity seeker, hedonist, artist, victim, rebel, activist, citizen. Their conclusion is that in the 'twilight of consumerism':

the fragmentation of images of consumption is itself a symptom of the malaise of contemporary consumerism ... The same fragmentation of the consumer may keep academics busy, since each tradition can claim the consumer for itself, exaggerating those features which fit its arguments, while blatantly disregarding the rest ... and in a world where everyone claims the consumer for her- or himself, the consumer must now be deemed unmanageable, claimed by many, but controlled by few, least of all by consumers themselves (2006: 189-190).

The culturalist approach to popular music identified by Middleton (1990) constructs the consumption of popular music brand texts as an active rather than passive process. Consumption is conceived as a process of meaning-making, and the notion of 'active' or 'creative' consumption recognizes that consumers are reflexive about their

consumption activities, actively interpreting or judging, appropriating or resisting the texts offered for consumption. De Certeau *et al.* (2002) argue that meaning is produced by consumers as they use and experience consumption offerings in the context of their everyday lives. Earlier interpretive consumer research work by Hirschman (1983) envisaged consumers as having intelligence, creativity, and consciousness. In her paper on consumer subjectivity, Schau (2000) proposed that 'imagination provides a critical link between identity and consumption. Furthermore, through the dynamic force of imagination consumers: 1) make sense of sensation, 2) construct and express individual and group level identities and realities by manipulating signs, accumulating possessions, and developing consumption practices'. Beck (1992), Rose (1996), Giddens (1991, 1998) and Fairclough (2000) argue that there has been a fundamental shift in Western society toward neo-liberal rationalities which encourage people to fulfil themselves as free individuals and be linked to society through their consumer choices. Musical preferences offer rich opportunities for individuals to forge social identities and experience the solidarity, security and sense of belonging attached to identification with like-minded peers (see e.g. Larson 1995).

Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) suggest that in conditions of postmodernism the self is 'something which the person actively creates, partially through consumption'. They quote Thompson (1995) who describes the self as a symbolic project, which the individual must actively construct out of the available symbolic materials, materials which 'the individual weaves into a coherent account of who he or she is, a narrative of self-identity'. They note that the relationship between individual self-identity and collective is one of tension.

Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) also suggest that consumers will consume things with particular meanings and for what these things may enable them to say about themselves. The lived and mediated experiences (actual or communicated) serve as symbolic resources for self-construction. Lived experience has stronger value for the consumer than mediated experience. Applying this framework, one might then say that a fan experiences a band at a gig (lived experience) and through the media (mediated experience). The fan then relates these experiences