Musical Preferences: The Effect of Birth Order on Musical Influences

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ABSTRACT

Research on musical preferences is frequently based on LeBlanc's (1980) model that grouped 'Family' and 'Peers' as possible reasons why one may like certain music. This study aims to develop these categories through exploring whether those with the same sibling birth order position are musically influenced by the same sources. Three families were interviewed for this study, each containing three full-siblings. Questions were asked about their musical influences in the past and present, as well as 'chosen influencers' which showed who the participants would turn to for new inspiration. The hypotheses were that first-borns would not be musically influenced by their siblings, but through independent research, friends and parents. Middle-borns were expected to show no clear trends. Last-borns were expected to be influenced by their siblings rather than their friends or parents. The past and 'chosen influencers' section supported these hypotheses, however, 'Partner' and 'Nostalgia' were the most common influencing factors for present listening habits of all birth order positions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Why do we listen to the music we do? In 1980, LeBlanc created a theoretical and graphical framework to portray the reasons why a listener may like or dislike a piece of music. He identified nine main reasons for musical preferences, such as 'Media', 'Peers', 'Educators and Authority figures', and 'Family'. However, this section of 'Family' could have been developed further. LeBlanc's (1980) only statement about 'Family' was that respondent's musical preferences tend to be more dependent on their family pre-teenage years (Ibid., 31). Furthermore, Schäfer and Sedlmeier (2010, 224) highlighted that LeBlanc's (1980) model does not show why one may choose to like a style in the first place. Their study concluded that cognitive functions of music and physiological arousal were the most important determinants of musical preference. Cognitive functions were defined by Schäfer and Sedlmeier (2010) as features of music that act as a means for communication and self-reflection. They used LeBlanc's (1980) model to categorise answers for participants but surprisingly, they combined family, peers, and familiarity into one category. This does not seem to have developed from the work by LeBlanc as music determined by one's parents is likely to be a very different genre to music determined by peers. Other music psychologists have also used LeBlanc's framework to study musical preferences. For example, Boyle, David, Hosterman, and Ramsey. (1981) designed an experiment to examine students' reasons for

preference among pop music selections. They used LeBlanc's (1980) model to devise multiple-choice answers for why one may prefer a particular song. Although this model was thoroughly researched, prompting answers for participants could have led to answers being selected that may not have otherwise been thought about. Their results suggested that structural characteristics, such as melody, rhythm and lyrics, were most important for preferring a piece of music, but sociocultural factors were also viewed as important. Christenson and Roberts (1998) showed that, because music is a social activity and often shared with friends, music preferences may form an important part of interaction with peers in early adolescence. Peretz, Gaudreau, and Bonnel (1998) found that familiarity of music is important for musical preferences. These studies show family and peers having an effect on musical preferences but none, to my knowledge, have explored this category of family further. This current study aims to examine whether different sibling birth order positions are musically influenced by different sources. This supports the work by Schäfer and Sedlmeier (2010) investigating where one is first musically influenced. As these influences may lead into future musical preferences, through familiarity of music, this study will hopefully begin to refine the broad category of 'Family' presented in previous musical preferences research.

No previous studies, to my knowledge, have investigated whether this possible effect of birth order. It is conceivable that those of the same birth order position are influenced by similar sources due to previous sibling research showing that birth order can determine one's traits. For instance, Ickes and Turner (1983) conducted a study 'on the social advantages of having an older, opposite sex sibling' which supported existing research claiming that later-borns have greater social skills. Wu, Kim, Nagata, and Kim. (2018) also performed a study on how siblings interact with each other, depending on their birth order. They compared Confucian-heritage Asian Americans with non-Hispanic European Americans and found that despite their heritage, first-borns reported a pressure to be a role model to later-borns and not to rely on younger siblings but be independent. This study was performed using interviews and gaining an understanding for how the respondents perceived their role in the family to be. It has been shown that there is a common perception from all sibling positions that older siblings should be a source of knowledge for younger siblings (Paulsen, 2013). Minnett, Lowe Vandell, and Santrock

(1983) showed that first-borns were more likely to teach and praise their siblings than later-borns. Whiteman, Shawn, McHale, and Soli (2011) recognised the lack of research on sibling relationships so reviewed the current research on the topic to stimulate further investigations. They showed evidence for older siblings taking 'on the role of an attachment figure or a secure base for younger siblings', but this was more prominent in mixed dyad siblings rather than same-gender dyads due to competitive feelings. Furthermore, they suggest that family members are ideal models for social learning as one is most likely to imitate those 'who are warm and nurturant, high in status, and similar to themselves'. Therefore, older siblings are often imitated by younger siblings. It has been shown that older siblings often serve as role models in many domains such as delinquency and aggression, substance use, sexual behaviour and social competence. White has suggested that in early adulthood, sibling relationships are not as strong, but stabilise in middle and later adulthood. Whiteman et al. (2011, 127) suggest that as siblings develop from adolescence to adulthood, their relationship becomes more peer-like. Due to this changing relationship over time, this study focuses on both past and present influences.

This sibling research suggests that there could be a relationship between musical influences and birth order. On the other hand, Schäfer and Mehlhorn (2017) have suggested through a meta-analysis that there is no correlation between personality traits and musical style preference. However, for this analysis, they used the 'Big Five' personality traits: extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, conscientiousness and neuroticism. I suggest that personality traits such as role model characteristics of a first-born, as suggested by Wu et al. (2018) and Whiteman et al. (2011), would have an effect on musical influences for younger siblings, which could then shape their musical preferences later in life. The majority of sibling research has been conducted using dyads, resulting in no clear understanding of middle-born characteristics (e.g Jacobs, Blanche, and Howard Moss, 1976; Ickes and Turner, 1983; Minnett et al., 1983).

Based on the presented research, my hypotheses for this study are:

1. First-borns will not be musically influenced by their siblings, but through independent research, friends and parents.
2. No significant trend between middle-borns.
3. Last-borns will be musically influenced by their older siblings rather than friends or parents.

2. METHOD

Design. This study used semi-structured interviews to enquire about how and why the participants listen to music. Interviews were used in this study rather than set questionnaires as this allowed the respondent to talk freely about what they perceive as important in their musical lives rather than suggesting pre-researched ideas to them.

Participants. The participants were recruited for this study through word of mouth and were not given incentives for participation. Each family interviewed were raised by a married mother and father in the south of England and were not related to the other interviewed families. Three family units were interviewed, each consisting of three full-siblings. There was an average of 2.83 years between the siblings (SD = 0.69). The youngest participant interviewed was 21 and the oldest 39. One family unit consisted of three males, whereas the other two consisted of one male and two females. All participants engaged in regular contact with their siblings. All results have been anonymised, but each family has a unique number, 1, 2, or 3. Each eldest-sibling, middle-sibling and youngest-sibling are lettered A, B, and C respectively. Further participant information can be seen in Appendix 1.

Materials. Informed consent forms were presented to the participants before the interviews, which can be seen in Appendix 2. The interviews were recorded on an HP laptop using Audacity. Due to the current location of some of the participants, 2A, 2B, 3A and 3C were interviewed over Skype, whereas the others were interviewed in person.

Procedure. The participants were first asked to complete the consent forms before the interviews began. I conducted all of the interviews and used the list of questions shown in Appendix 3 as a guideline. I added follow-up questions where necessary and omitted questions if they were deemed inappropriate based on information given in a previous question. The interviews lasted between 25 and 29 minutes.

The first section of questions aimed to gain an insight into how participants were musically influenced as a child, e.g. whether their parents played music in the house, whether they listened to music with friends, or if they heard their siblings' music playing in the house. The second section enquired into their current listening habits and why they listen to the music they do, e.g. whether their partner always puts they music on in the house, if they play music for their children, or if they put songs on to remind them of a specific time or person. The final section of the questionnaire consisted of one question: 'If you were to seek out a new song tomorrow, that you would be likely to enjoy, how would you go about doing this?'. This aimed to show who the participants trusted in musically influencing them. I have labelled this section 'chosen influencers'.

3. RESULTS

To analyse my data, I transcribed the interviews, keeping each section separate. I then selected the key phrases and coded them in NVivo. Categories were created for the

phrases, rather than having pre-existing categories for the phrases to fit into. This means that each section has different categories in it but is therefore more representative of the phrases given. It does, however, make the sections harder to compare. Each phrase was coded into at least one category. For example, 3A stated 'In France, Mum's still old-school so she has CDs, and she has the CD of *Zaz* in her car and [my husband] and I were driving somewhere and had the CD on, so we listened to the whole CD quite a lot one holiday'. This was coded into two categories: 'Parents' and 'Nostalgia'. Once coded, I transferred the data to Excel as this presented clear stacked bar-graphs. These are important to show how many of the comments given were from each participant. If this was not shown, the results could have been unknowingly skewed by one participant.
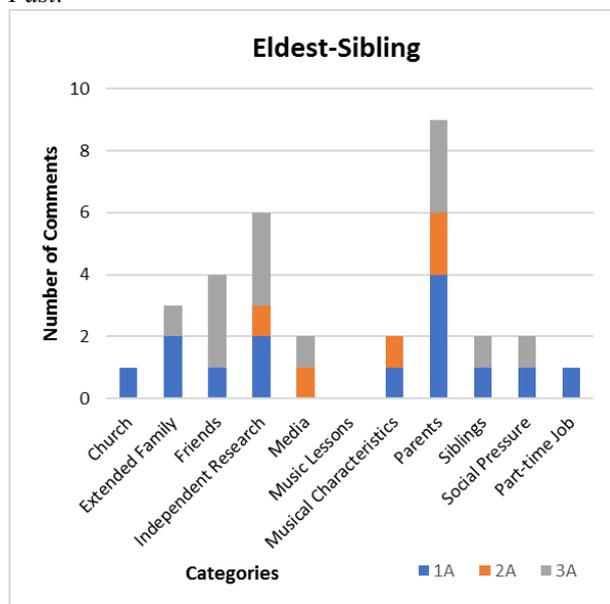
Past.

Figure 1. A graph to show the number of comments made by each eldest-sibling about their musical influences as a child.
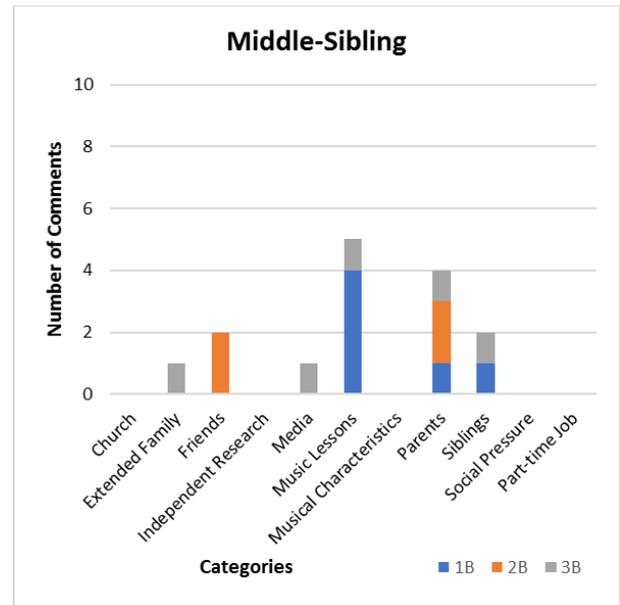

Figure 2. A graph to show the number of comments made by each middle-sibling about their musical influences as a child.
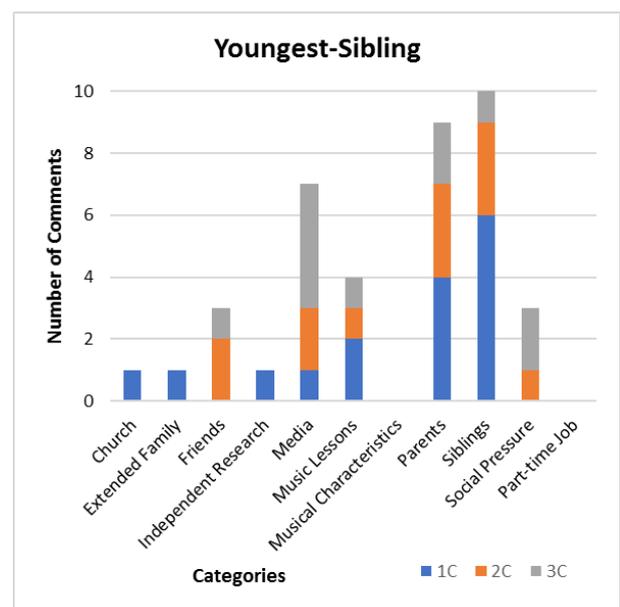

Figure 3. A graph to show the number of comments made by each youngest-sibling about their musical influences as a child.

Primarily, there are four important themes for this study coded in this 'past' section: 'Parents', 'Independent Research', 'Friends', and 'Siblings'. These are considered important as they relate to the previous research stated in the introduction on both musical preferences and sibling characteristics. Comparing all three graphs, Figures 1-3, every participant noted listening to music as a child because of their parents, although the middle-born participants stated the least number of comments on this. It must be highlighted, however, that the same events were occasionally perceived

differently by different siblings, but nevertheless the music they were listening to was still influenced by their parents, and hence coded in the same category:

3A: 'We had lots of dad's music… He had a cassette tape of Bruce Willis that we listened to in the car on holiday.'

3C: 'We mostly just listened to the radio. But also, holidays listening to awful cassettes of dads in the car.'

Independent research was strikingly prominent from all of the first-borns:

1A: 'I would routinely go to a charity shop on the way to or from school and I was deliberately trying to acquire music at an affordable rate, and sometimes it would be based on recommendations from friends or sometimes just looking to try something new.'

2A: 'It was the album on the shelf in Woolworths or something like that and I asked my parents if I could have this.'

3A: 'I used to spend a lot of time in HMV and music shops looking at the shelves and seeing what was out there.'

Although the first-borns are older and hence may be considered to belong to the generation of CDs, 3B and 3C are older than all the other participants. They did not mention 'Independent Research', thus suggesting it is due to birth order rather than the generational differences.

Five of the participants were influenced by their friends as a child. There was, however, no strong relationship between the participant's birth order and whether they were influenced by their friends.

On the other hand, the influence of siblings on one's music listening spiked greatly for the last-borns whereas first-borns recalled ignoring the music their younger siblings played.

1C: 'I don't remember exactly how it happened but [1A] had the CD of Iron Maiden and I must have heard him playing it.'

3A: 'I don't think my siblings particularly influenced my music taste because when I was growing up I don't think of them as particularly close siblings so I would definitely be more influenced by my friends, people I talk to regularly. I think also because they were younger than me, I didn't particularly pay an awful lot of attention to them when I was growing up.'

It is also interesting that 1A was influenced by his older cousin, similar to how a youngest-sibling is influenced by an older sibling. However, this cousin also influenced 1C, but 1C perceived it as being a family music learning experience rather than 1A who took it as a solo learning experience:

1A: 'The first set of songs that I would routinely play would be a mix tape CD that was given to *me* by one of my cousins, age 11 ish'.

1C: 'My cousin gave *us* a mix tape of songs… It was definitely informative. It was something that we listened to together, me and my brothers.'

This 'past' section has shown that first-borns talked mostly about being influenced by their parents and friends along with their independent research. Middle-borns spoke least about why they listened to music as a child, but each mentioned their parents as an influencing factor. Last-borns spoke most about music from their siblings and then parents whereas independent research or friends were much less significant to them.
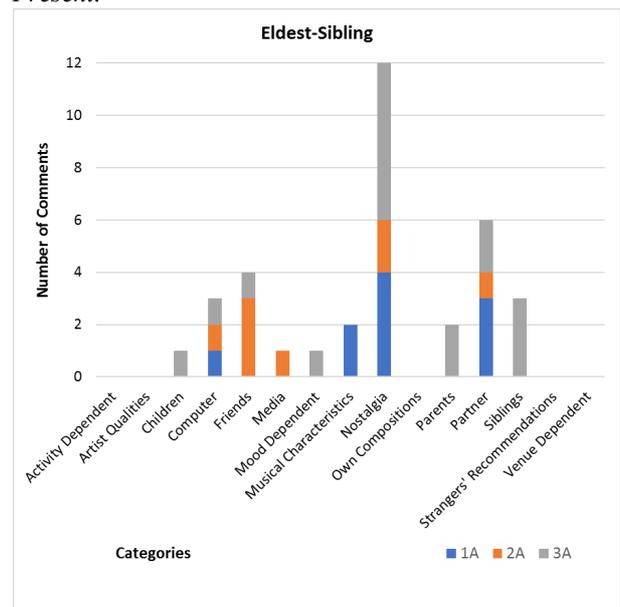
Present.

Figure 4. A graph to show the number of comments made by each eldest-sibling about what currently influences their music choices.
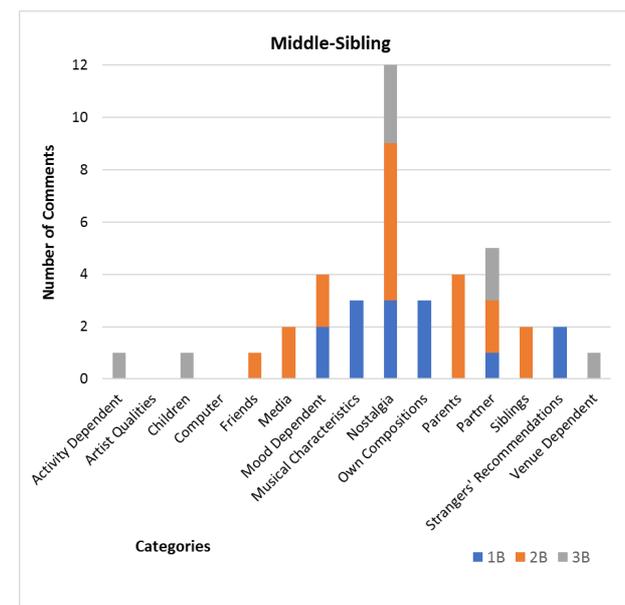

Figure 5. A graph to show the number of comments made by each middle-sibling about what currently influences their music choices.
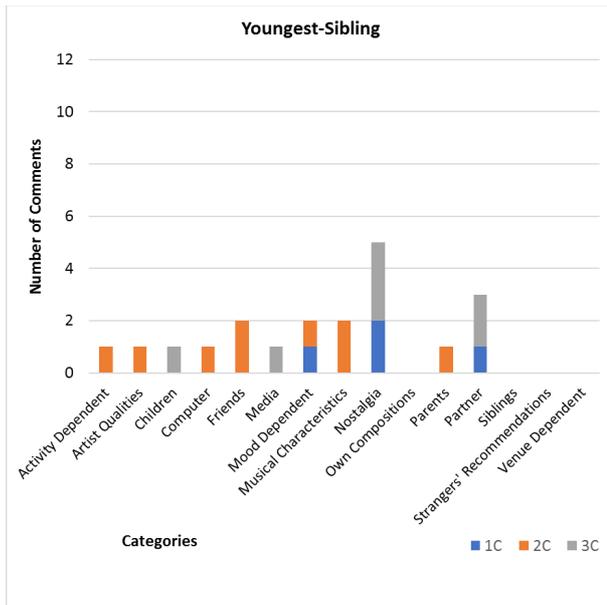
Figure 6. A graph to show the number of comments made by each youngest-sibling about what currently influences their music choices.

The most prominent theme between all siblings in the 'present' section was choosing to listen to music for nostalgic reasons. A further analysis of 'Nostalgia' can be seen in Appendices 4-6. This analysis shows that primarily participants listened to music to because it reminded them of events.

> 3A: 'There is lots of music that I would put on because it's been played at my wedding.'

Although this is not an active influencing source, 'Nostalgia' has still been an influencing factor on the music that the participants listen to currently. Remarkably, no first-born siblings recollected listening to music to remind them about their friends (a prominent influencing source in childhood), but 3A did recall listening to music because it reminded her of her younger siblings. For the last-borns, 3C recalled listening to music to remind him of friends, but none of them recalled listening to music to remind them of their siblings. This is opposite to the general musical influences in the 'past' section.

The next most prominent theme among present reasons for listening to music is 'Partner'. Every participant in a relationship – all except 2C – mentioned their significant other as an influencing factor for their current music choices. For example:

> 1A: 'Normally the music that I would often listen to would be a set of compromised music between what my wife and I enjoy.'

> 3B: '[My husband] always determines what I listen to. Or the kids. But mainly [my husband].'

Noteworthy in this section is that few participants mentioned their parents for why they currently listen to music, but this

is likely due to participants no longer living with their parents. Furthermore, siblings were not frequently mentioned for influencing musical listening habits, which again could be due to leaving the family home. Friends were mentioned by each sibling in family 2, which could therefore be more of a family characteristic rather than due to birth order. Participant 2A did mention that the association of a song to his friends rather than his parents was important for him liking the song:

> 2A: 'I was with some friends skiing and in the bar there was one of the songs that dad used to play, and I was like, well I used to not think much of this song, but now I've heard it in this environment I have listened to it subsequently.'

Each member of family 3 mentioned playing specific songs for their children which therefore, influenced the style of music that they listen to. Family 3 were the only participants with children.

> 3A: 'If we are playing music with the kids around, we try to put on things that they could enjoy as well.'

With technological advancements, the theme of 'Computer' has now been introduced. This includes all forms of automatically provided music recommendations such as Spotify, Youtube or the Amazon Echo. Independent research was no longer present, perhaps suggesting that independent research has been updated to automatic, passive, music suggestions. The fact that 'Computer' was mentioned by all first-borns (Figure 4) supports this suggestion. This was also implied by 3A:

> 3A: 'I just don't [actively shop for new CDs] anymore as it's just not part of how we shop, how we do things.'

The overall themes from this 'present' section suggest that all respondents reported 'Nostalgia' and 'Partner' as the prominent influencing factors for their current musical listening habits.
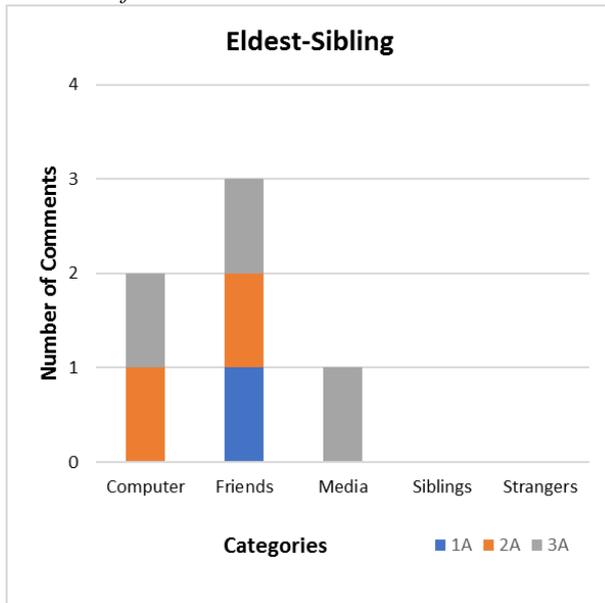
'Chosen Influencers'.

Figure 7. A graph to show the sources that the eldest-siblings would turn to for inspiration for new music.
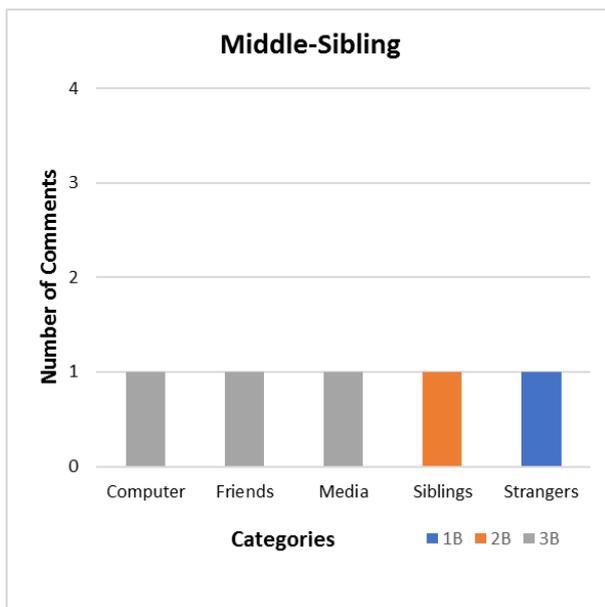

Figure 8. A graph to show the sources that the middle-siblings would turn to for inspiration for new music.
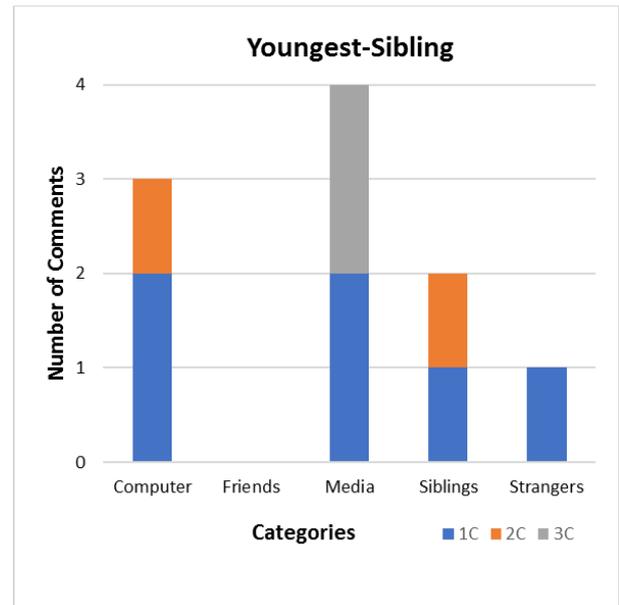

Figure 9. A graph to show the sources that the youngest-siblings would turn to for inspiration for new music.

Where the participants would turn for musical inspiration showed the starkest differences between birth order. The middle-borns showed no overlap between who they would turn to. Each first-born said that they would ask their friends, but none said they would ask their siblings. Alternatively, none of the last-borns said that they would ask their friends but two out of three said they would ask their siblings. Despite this trend, 3C was very adamant that he would not ask his siblings for inspiration:

> 3C: 'I would be more likely to take music suggestions from strangers on the street than my siblings.'

This could be because his older siblings are female whereas the other last-borns have at least one older sibling of the same gender as themselves. This gender difference could also suggest why 3C spoke least about his siblings the past section.

First-borns said that the reason why they would not ask their siblings is because they are not certain of the type of music they listen to, unlike that of their friends:

> 2A: 'I would take recommendations from friends because I know what they listen to. And I guess you can therefore, it sounds bad, but you trust them more.'

> 3A: 'I'm not aware of them particularly being all that interested in music, I'm sure they are, but it's not something that we particularly talk about.'

This lack of knowledge for younger siblings was replicated by 3B:

> 3B: 'I have no idea what [3C] would listen to. Something pretentious and annoying.'

This 'chosen influencers' section implies that first-borns turn to friends for inspiration unlike last-borns. 'Computer' and 'Media' were also prominent sources for musical inspiration which, as suggested in the previous section, could be the updated version of 'Independent Research'. This could suggest that first-borns view 'Friends' as the most important musical influencing factor, and last-borns 'Siblings' the most important. No clear results can be distinguished from middle-borns.

4. DISCUSSION

The results from this study can be condensed into three points:

1. Past: First-borns reported mostly on 'Parents', 'Independent Research' and 'Friends'; middle-borns mentioned 'Parents' most; and last-borns spoke mostly about 'Siblings' and 'Parents'.
2. Present: All birth order positions reported 'Nostalgia' and 'Partner' as the prominent influencing factor.
3. 'Chosen influencers': First-borns would turn to 'Friends' or 'Computer/ Media' suggestions; middle-borns showed no clear results; and last-borns would turn to 'Siblings' or 'Computer/Media' suggestions.

For the 'past' research, first-borns showed substantial independent research for their music which aligns with Wu et al.'s (2018) research suggesting that the oldest siblings do not rely on younger siblings and try to be independent. First-borns also showed an increased influence from 'Friends' for their musical taste compared to last-borns. This would suggest that there is perhaps a difference due to birth order. Christenson and Roberts' (1998) work suggested that music is an important part of early adolescent interactions but from this research, perhaps it should not be generalised to all people but specifically first-borns. The independence that the first-born child seeks perhaps explains why they turn to friends for inspiration as they can then use this new-found knowledge to teach their younger siblings supporting Paulsen's (2013) research.

The prominence of 'Nostalgia' for 'present' listening influences contradicts my hypotheses for this study. The first-borns were influenced by music that nostalgically reminded them of younger siblings whereas last-borns used it to remind them of friends. This could perhaps be due to younger-siblings imitating their older siblings' music tastes to such an extent, such as Whiteman et al. (2011) suggested, that they have very similar musical tastes. Therefore, when last-borns listen to music that has been influenced by their older siblings, they may understand it as their own musical style and not feel nostalgic towards older siblings.

Family 3 reported playing music specifically for their children's needs rather than playing their own musical style to them. Many of the participants were not confident in stating their parents' preferred musical genre, shown in Appendix 7, and this could perhaps be explained by this tailored music playing in the home. This, however, goes against the scholarship on cascading reminiscence bumps showing that people have strong autobiographical memories for music from their childhood, as well as their parents' childhood, due to parents playing their preferred music in the home (Krumhansl and Zupnick, 2013).

Despite Whiteman et al. (2011) claiming that siblings become more peer-like in adulthood, first-borns were still reluctant to ask their younger siblings for musical inspiration and would ask their friends instead. This suggests that for first-borns there is still a strong distinction between siblings and friends even into adulthood.

The strong influence from participants' partners is something to be explored in a further study. It could be interesting to know if there is any difference between birth order and relationships, i.e. if oldest-siblings tend to be attracted to oldest-siblings, and hence are jointly influenced by friends more than family for musical experiences.

To improve the standard interviewing procedure of this study, all interviews should have been conducted in the same location and not over skype to allow for the same rapport between interviewee and interviewer, but this was unfortunately not feasible for this study. A limitation of this study is that only three families were interviewed, and each family had a different order of male and female siblings (MMM, MFF, FFM). The gender of siblings has been shown to have an impact on how siblings react to each other (Kidwell, 1981; Ickes and Turner, 1983; Minnett et al., 1983). For further research, it could be beneficial to have a greater sample to compare the gender birth order of siblings to understand whether that has an impact on musical influences. For example, 2B stated, 'I was very much conscious about being bullied by my brother about music choice'. This may not have been the case if she had an older, female, sister. Furthermore, it could be important to investigate the extent to which first-borns look up to cousins as a source of knowledge, in the same way that Paulsen (2013) described younger-siblings admiring older-siblings. 1A remarked on this flow of knowledge through the families, but due to locations of extended family, this may be specific to local extended families:

> 1A: 'Probably in the way my cousin definitely influenced my taste of music, I have probably influenced my [youngest] brother's taste of music through adolescence.'

To conclude, my hypotheses have been supported for the 'past' and 'chosen influencers' sections, as I have shown that first-borns were the most independent in seeking out new music, along with influences from friends and parents, whereas last-borns were most influences by older-siblings. As expected, few trends could be drawn from middle-borns. However, for current listening habits, all participants were strongly influenced by nostalgia and their partners.

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Appendix 1: Participant Information

Participant	Sex	Age	Age left home	Relationship	Children
1A	M	28	18	Y	N
1B	M	24	18	Y	N
1C	M	21	18	Y	N
2A	M	26	18	Y	N
2B	F	24	18	Y	N
2C	F	21	18	N	N
3A	F	39	18	Y	2
3B	F	36	18	Y	3
3C	M	34	18	Y	1

<u>Appendix 2: Informed Consent Form</u>

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Musical preferences within a family unit.

Researcher(s): Rhiannon Bailey

In this experiment, I will be interviewing you about your listening habits from childhood to present. I will then present you with a short questionnaire for you to complete. All information will remain anonymous and stored in a password protected file. I will write up the project in a report to be submitted for my Music Psychology Module at the University of Durham. You are welcome to withdraw from the study at any time, even after the interviews have taken place. Please ask if you have any questions.

Thank you

Please initial box

1. **I confirm that I have read and understand the information above.**	
2. **I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask any questions**	
3. **I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason**	
4. **I agree to take part in the above project**	
5. **I have been informed about how the data will be used and stored**	

<u>**Participant**</u>

Name   **Signature**   **Date**

....

<u>**Researcher**</u>

Name   **Signature**   **Date**

....

Appendix 3: Interview Questions Guidelines

Past

Can you talk to me about your first favourite song? (Why?)

- How did you discover this song?

Are there any other important songs from your childhood that you feel are worth mentioning?

How were you exposed to music as a child (up to 18)?

What songs do you remember listening to with your parents, if any?

- What genre of music do your parents listen to?

Would you listen to different things when you were alone as opposed to when you were together as a family?

- Who determined what you listened to?

Did you ever go to live concerts when you were younger, if so, who picked the concerts that you attended?

Did your siblings influence the music you listened to? (If not, did anybody?)

- Was it positive or negative?

If your whole family was on a car journey, who would pick the music?

Present

Talk to me about your current favourite song/s. (Why?)

What genre, or genres, of music would you say you listen to now? (Why?)

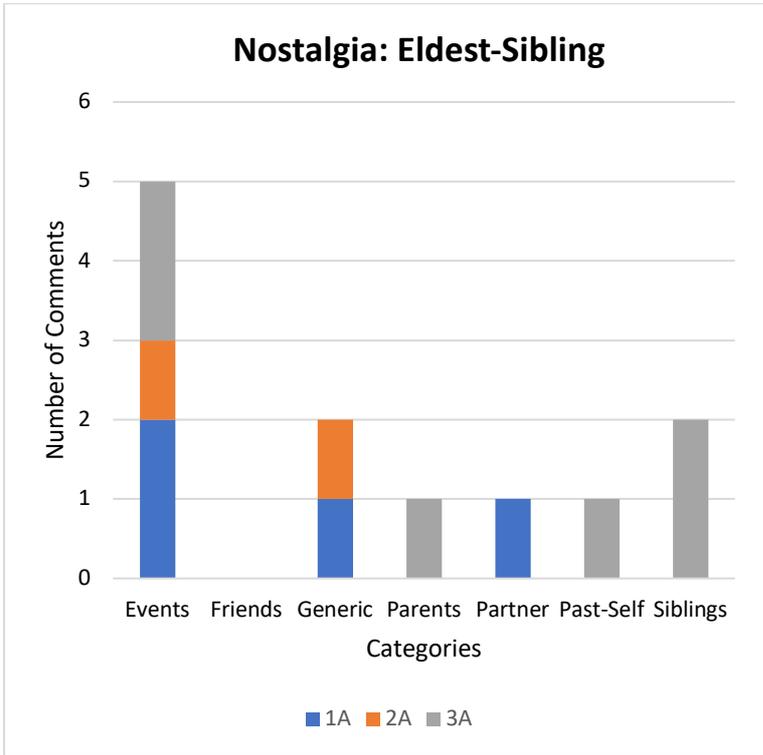In what situations do you tend to listen to music now? (Why?)

Do you ever go to live-concerts nowadays? (If so, who picks the concerts?)
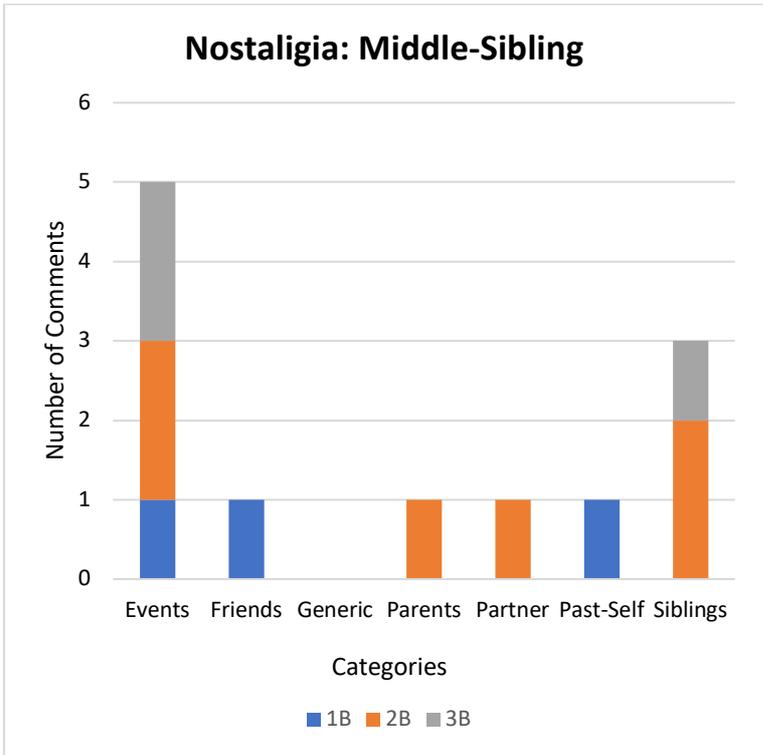
'Chosen Influencers'

If you were to seek out a new song tomorrow that you would be likely to enjoy, how would you go about doing this?

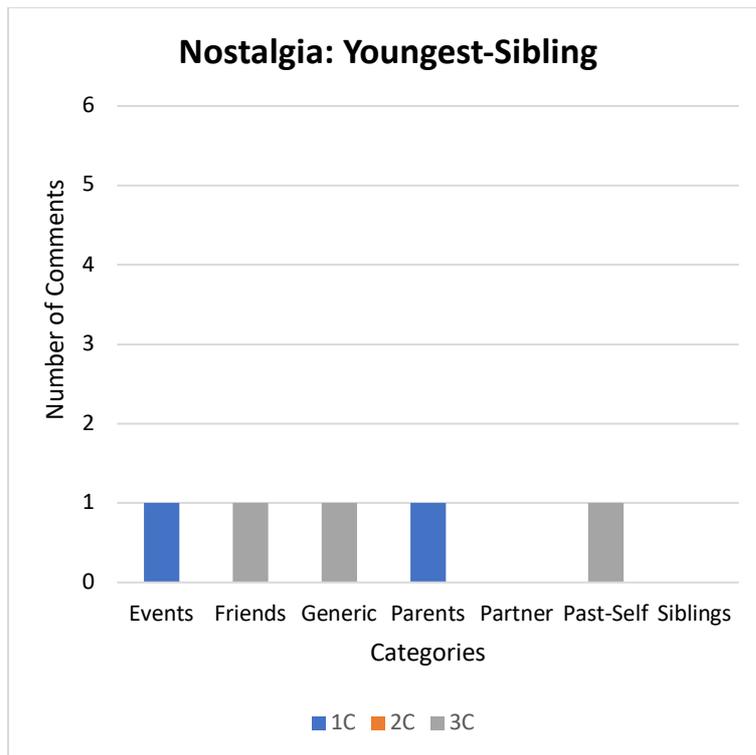** Thank you for taking part in this interview**

Appendix 4: Nostalgia Graph

Appendix 5: Nostalgia Graph

Appendix 6: Nostalgia Graph

Appendix 7: Unsure Responses to 'What Genre of Music do your Parents Listen to?'

1B: 'Well I'm not sure if they would feel that this is representative of what they listened to, but it was Spyro Gyra, *Morning Dance*.'

1C: 'I find dad hard to answer for. I don't really know what he listened to. I do know that he listened to the lighthouse family and men at work, but I don't know why, and I don't know whether that's indicative of his music listening… they basically never listened to music when I was a child.'

3A: 'I think they listen to, oh I don't really know, rock-pop I think? I don't think they like anything really "poppy" but I think, yeah, a sort of mix of that sort of soft-rock, pop music … I think they have a similar music taste, but I've never really asked.'

3B: 'I don't know. I have no idea. We are not a very musical family. But I don't know if that's just me who doesn't attach that to anybody, or if [3A] and [3C] have more of an idea, they might have completely different answers. That would be weird to know. No, I really don't know. I think either way it's going to be old classics rather than anything new or interesting. The Beatles, that sort of thing.'

3C: 'I think probably pop…. Like they buy CDs and stuff and listen to the same ones as we do so mostly pop. And a bit of rock. Like very bland music. We all listen to bland music in our family to be honest. So, I'd say rock pop, that kind of stuff.'