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Pop and Indie: What Do They Mean and Why Does It Matter? Genre and Marketing from Within the UK Music Scene

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the evolution of "pop" and "indie" as words and as genres from within the London music scene, and to suggest the most appropriate or effective marketing techniques based on a standard understanding of each genre and its implications. For each of these genres, I establish two definitions: a semantic definition, based on the etymology of the word and the cultural implications of the genre's origins and history, and a sonic definition, based on any overarching standards of how the genre's music sounds. In defining each genre's sound, its history and evolution are considered, as well as its modern connotations.

For this research, I conducted a series of interviews with the employees of a London-based music management firm regarding their own experiences with and understandings of genre from within the industry. These responses were synthesised with a number of historical and academic texts on the genres of pop, indie, and alternative music, as well as music publications from different years and eras of music.

Each genre's differences are key to understanding how best to connect its music to its audience. A modern semantic definition of pop music is most relevant when marketing the genre today; marketing pop relies heavily on personality expressed through social media and can have a harder time being discovered through playlisting, or a placement of new music onto curated genre-specific playlists. Indie music's sound is more historically consistent, so a historical sonic understanding is most useful for marketing indie; playlisting and live performances are a better fit for marketing this genre, whereas social media presence should pay homage to an indie lineage.

INTRODUCTION

The music world is always changing. Since the postwar inception of "popular culture" in the UK and US in the 1950s, the music that the average citizen listened to was necessarily shaped by the circumstances it was created in. This evolution has fascinated me since my childhood, when I realised around age ten that the pop music I loved must have evolved from the pop music that my parents listened to when they were my age, and that that music must have come from something else. Taking the Western world decade by decade and considering the historically changing sociopolitical atmosphere as I learned about it, the evolution of music from the jazz and swing sounds of the first half of the century to the electronic pop I was used to started to make more sense in a way that opened the world up to me. An internship at a multi-genre management company in the heart of London's music scene became a key for me to further explore the specifics of how music changes over time, who that matters to, and why.

During my time taking a British subcultural history class alongside my music business internship, notable British artists like the Beatles, the Smiths, and the Arctic Monkeys have found their way into my frequent listening rotation. I have become more attuned to what different variations on "rock" music sounded like at different points in history, and I can pinpoint its subgenres with baseline confidence. I think most of us can – the Beatles' earlier catalogue is a kind of rock and roll "pop" of its time; the jangly and dreamy sound of the Smiths is still present in what we call "indie" today; the rock-instrument Arctic Monkeys begs the modifier "alternative" on the modern scene.

These descriptive words come up a lot in the music business. Upon signing a new artist to the company or receiving a demo album or single, one of the first things we do is identify the genre. It's instinctual, second nature. The management group gets all kinds, from epic, sprawling prog rock concept albums to shy and sincere bedroom indie pop singles. None of their artists are pop radio megastars, but many aspire to a mainstream radio sound, and most are independently produced. Classifying these songs for distribution onto streaming platforms begs the question of how literally to take the names of genres that they may fall under:

Pop – short for "popular", meaning enjoyed by the many. Lots of people listen to it, so it is popular, so it is pop. A quantitative word describing audience response.

Indie – short for "independent", describing the way the music is made and distributed. Qualitative, describing the artist's process.

These literal definitions alone do not describe the sound of either of these genres, though the most casual listener is aware that there is a specific sound associated with each one. Our understandings and even our definitions of these genre descriptors have changed over time. "Indie" is a sound now – and its artists can belong to a big label. "Pop" covers a vast number of sounds, and an album can still have a "pop" sound without millions of listeners (this one is particularly relevant to my coworkers, many of whom are singer-songwriters themselves, independently produced, alternative to the mainstream "pop" roster but nonetheless a "pop" sound).

I confronted this incongruity over lunch with a colleague one afternoon, whose songwriting degree and handful of years of professional experience in both the worlds of

music business and production lend her a sharp insight into the issue. This conversation led me to my central question: assuming that genre definitions do in fact change over time, **how do the modern connotations of "pop" and "indie" in the London music scene differ from their denotations, and how do those connotations inform the way these genres are marketed?**

My position within the music industry – particularly London's music industry – gives me unique leverage to explore this question. London has been at the forefront of a plethora of influential genres since at least the 1950s. Music is an important focus of every British subculture across the whole of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. My internship position gives me access to a whole library of music history, both written and oral. My boss has an impressive collection of books on music phenomena – history, fashion, events, and business of the last one hundred years or so – displayed on a bookshelf in the office. I was quick to ask if they were available to borrow, and quick to learn that I was the only employee in sixteen years of the company to ask. I was happy – my boss began pointing out recommendations right away – but a little shocked. The people in this office live and breathe music – surely they would take a recreational historical interest in how it evolves?

This made me realise the kind of impact that my research could have – to turn the attention of the music marketing world to the terms they may take for granted. Understanding the details of pop and indie music can help marketers find the most effective ways to sell their artists' music. Music marketing in the age of streaming and social media relies on quick categorisation. A better understanding of the connotations

of and differences between the pop and indie genres can bolster marketing techniques across these platforms.

For this study I have drawn upon the publications available to me through my boss's library – at least forty years in the making – and have interviewed a number of my colleagues about their experiences in the music industry as artists, managers, and marketers. I have synthesised their hands-on understanding of genre with book research on the history of the pop and indie genres, particularly within the UK music scene. The scope of my research is limited to the company I'm interning with; opinions may vary across the national scene, but there is variety in my colleagues' perspectives, and at the very least my research acts as a case study of one organisation.[1] Based on my observations, I understand that the sounds of "pop" and "indie" music will continue to evolve in the coming five, ten, and fifty years, eventually rendering my modern definitions outmoded. But at that point my research becomes a historical snapshot in time that can help to contextualise the next form that the music world will evolve into, and the forms after that. By the end of this paper we will have a better understanding of how these genres arrived at their modern connotations from their origins, and what their contemporary meanings suggest for music marketing.

OUTLINE

This paper is divided into sections by genre. For each section, I will begin with a discussion on the cultural history and implications of the genre, as well as the etymology of its name, to establish a semantic definition. Then I will explain the sound of the genre and its evolution over time to establish a sonic definition. I will end each section with a

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[1] For further discussion on research approach and rationale, see Appendix I on page 28.

discussion of the marketing implications of the genre via playlisting and social media, the genre's cultural and sonic implications for connecting with a modern audience, and any of its connections to another genre.

POP

      As we'll see for each of these genres, the word "pop" describes two significant aspects of music: its semantics and its sound. Both of these aspects have evolved since their genre's inception; for pop, the sound more so than the etymological meaning. In fact, the semantics of genre labels remain relatively static while the sounds of the genres tend to change with technological and sociopolitical shifts over time – some more than others. Today's "pop" would be unrecognisable to a young adult from the 1950s, and is even distinctly different from the "pop" of five or ten years ago. I'm keeping "pop" in quotations as we're referring to the combination of its semantic and sonic meanings, neither of which we've defined yet. We'll begin with the semantics, which requires a bit of a cultural history lesson.

POP | CULTURE + ETYMOLOGY

      The word "pop" as used to describe music is the same "pop" used to modify "culture" as the Western world developed a new style of multimedia entertainment after World War II. The industrialisation first developed at the turn of the century was perfected during the war effort, when mass-production became a tactical necessity. Victorious, the UK (and US) prospered culturally after the war; the colourful, noisy, mass-manufacturable, marketable appliances, clothing, magazines, and music that

emerged in the war's wake was dubbed "popular culture", for its possession of "autonomous values which are outside of, and indifferent to, the critical values of Western 'fine arts' and 'official culture'" (Cordell 72). Pop culture was – and is, though its dominance makes it less of a big deal today – an alternative to the typical implications of entertainment and art as a delicacy for the "cultured" upper class – opera, theatre, symphonies and the like. Pop culture was culture by and for the people – or at least it was marketed to seem that way.

Especially in terms of music – rock and roll had just been born and was being marketed to the simultaneously conceived concept of the teenager – a relatable human personality was a necessity for securing success. A typically successful British pop star story of the 1950s often told of "a garage-hand or a waitress" transformed "into a 'star' overnight", but who "still retains the tastes and allegiances of his group" (Cordell 73). Popular music and its celebrated personalities were considered "pop culture" not only because of their favourably unsophisticated sound but because of their accessibility to the common person as well.

The pop music we hear on BBC Radio 1 today may sound nothing like the music our postwar ancestors were listening to, but the "pop" name still remains. It starts to feel redundant: popular music is common. The logic is circular. The moniker "pop" persists as a qualitative measure of the relative number of people listening to that kind of music.

POP | SOUND + EVOLUTION

Something curious about taking the semantic definition of "pop" music on its own is that it covers a wide variety of sonic genres. As mentioned, the first sound of postwar

pop music was rock and roll; this sound was all but obsolete by the doowop- and motown-dominated 1960s pop scene. Folk influence permeated the pop of the '70s, and synthesisers came around in time for the '80s to redefine pop as an almost exclusively electronic genre through the '90s and into the twenty-first century. Today's pop radio mixes rap and R&B in alongside singer-songwriter piano ballads – and yet it is all "pop" in the sense that it is all accessible to the common listener – "easy to listen to and relatable in a way that it just doesn't scratch the surface", in the words of one coworker (P.I.1). When asked to describe what pop sounds like, another colleague opened with "At the moment, Olivia Rodrigo" (P.I.2), the subordinate clause indicating the necessarily evolutionary nature of the pop sound.

Though the array of popular genres has changed greatly over the last eighty years, the core tenets of pop have not. Bill Drummond of avant-garde pop group The Timelords wrote in 1988 that the four pillars of successful pop music are as follows: "a dance groove that will run all the way through the record", a run time of "no longer than three minutes and thirty seconds", a specific order of verses and choruses, and "some, but not many" lyrics (Timelords 673-4). These tenets essentially hold true; with each decade and its new musical stylings, pop music is short, predictable music that people can sing and dance to.

In gathering an understanding of the generalisation of that sound, I asked my colleagues for a snap characterisation of each genre off the top of their heads. Three-quarters of my interviewees described pop music as "happy"; one-half said "upbeat"; another half used "commercial" as a descriptor for the genre at large. The image of pop music as happy and upbeat that my colleagues described took me by

surprise – Adele, Lewis Capaldi, and Ed Sheeran immediately come to mind as British

artists who have found fame in large part from downtempo, often sad pop ballads. Still,

their lyrics about love and heartbreak – often just specific enough that any listener can

build a personal connection to the song – are, in the words of someone more interested

in alternative genres, "really basic things that you could think about even without

listening to the songs" (P.I.1). Built into the pop genre is a baseline broadness of

experience: the music must be easily emotionally accessible in order to be marketable

to the masses, as its semantic definition demands.

As early as 1957, members of the music industry recognized that "[t]he pop song

is advertisement – advertisement contained within its own performance" (Cordell 77).

Like pop culture at large, pop music is meant to be mass-produced and sold to as many

people as possible. This does not necessarily represent any kind of morality or lack

thereof that pop music may hold; it is an observation of the culture that the genre grew

out of, and that culture's economic function. This has not changed – in today's industry,

"marketing music is a lot different from marketing products" (P.I.1.); it requires a kind of

creativity unnecessary when selling a physical product that one can demonstrate or

show off. In that sense, the pop sound must be "commercial", widely appealing,

because it needs to be sold. Music is a rare commodity in its intangibility, but it is a

commodity nonetheless, and a mass-produced one at that.

POP | MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

It is impossible to market a song without playing the song itself, meaning that

airplay is critical for a potential pop hit (Cordell 77). While radio, film, and TV dominated

the first fifty years of pop music and its airplay, the advent of online streaming and social

media in the twenty-first century has provided artists and advertisers with new pathways

to get their music discovered. Creating a sympathetic, if not somewhat parasocial,

persona is integral to pop artists both because relatability is a central factor to all

meanings of the genre, and because the feeling of a personal connection with the artist

will make the audience more invested in their releases, the way one might care about a

friend's personal projects. This technique is particularly important because, both

semantically and sonically speaking, the label "pop" is too broad for other forms of

marketing to be appropriate.

POP MARKETING: PLAYLISTING

The general commercial appeal of pop appears to give it an edge in marketing –

"even people who don't even like pop" are going to listen to, in one colleague's

example, Harry Styles, whose inoffensive, danceable sound is designed to appeal to the

general public and is playing everywhere – in shops, on the radio, online – due to his

globally established personality (P.I.1). However, the ease with which Styles' music

markets itself highlights the difficulty in marketing new pop music – pop fans have

already found pop music they like. The pop genre is so vast and so prevalent that it is

difficult to break into, especially now that most of our music is fed to us by algorithms

based on the previous listening activity of ourselves and of others. "Playlisting" is a

marketing technique through which an artist or distributor "can upload [a] song, pay for

some credits to pitch to various curators, and then find a list of curators that would be

most likely to promote the song based on their general preferences"; the compatible

curators will then place the song onto a third-party playlist (that is, a playlist not made by the streaming service or its typical individual users) where listeners can discover it ("Playlistification" 4:21-4:31). Another option is pitching directly to Spotify for a shot at appearing on one of their editorial playlists, which are often pushed out to the entire Spotify user base.

Hypothetically, achieving this recognition would make discovery incredibly easy. The issue is that the vastness of the pop genre can drown out new or otherwise small artists. A colleague says, "If you look at 'New Music Friday' [Spotify's weekly-updated compilation of pop releases, with over four million followers], it's quite useless as a genre thing because it's new music [in general, with disregard to sound]. So, there's gonna be a high skip rate on that playlist, and people are gonna go to the stuff they like" (Spotify; P.I.3). It can be "a bit scary" to face the impenetrable wall of the pop scene, because marketing to such a broad crowd means "less return on investment" (P.I.1). There is so much pop music and so many people listening to it by default, so securing oneself within the genre can be a popularity contest between artists rather than their sounds.

Unlike more niche genres or genres with a specific cohesive sound, it does not make sense to market new pop music with an emphasis on the music being "pop"; "if you got an artist that is very 'pop' and flits from style to style, you've gotta market the artist" (P.I.3). Personality is everything when it comes to pop music – a truth of the genre since its postwar origins, "when [celebrity] judgement criteria made the shift from 'content' to 'personality'" and a star was expected to remain "an 'available' type identifiable with the mass" in order to achieve proper success (Cordell 76, 73). The

Timelords observed in the late '80s that number one songs were able to break through the sameness of the pop formula because of some "originality" of the artist (Timelords 674). In order to succeed in a genre defined by its universal relatability, there needs to be a personality behind the music whom the audience can relate to.

POP MARKETING: SOCIAL MEDIA

Today, building a celebrity persona takes place on social media, which is a key tool in modern music marketing. Regardless of a song's original genre or style, "if it's made it onto TikTok then it's just pop now" – the young, internet-active user base of the short-form video sharing platform is a goldmine of an audience for music discovery (P.I.2). TikTok and Instagram, and the ability to "boost" posts on these sites by paying for an algorithm to push them out to a large number of viewers, are tools for marketing that doesn't have to look like a typical advertisement. When teasing or publicising an upcoming or new release, a pop artist "lip-synching or dancing" to their own music can show a sense of pride in their creation, and invites the audience to enjoy the song in the intended manner (P.I.1). Even when not actively featuring their songs, "influencer-style" content including "speak[ing] to camera", "be[ing] relatable and fun and easygoing", and showing off "your clothes [or] your background" are all important in becoming the kind of person whom followers will want to see – and hear – more from (P.I.1).

Advertising pop music in the modern day is grounded in social media presence, which needs to include more than just the song. A pop artist must be some combination of talented, attractive, funny, or otherwise relatable, and willing to share their work passionately online. Arguably, only the last of these is a common requirement – the rest

can be mixed and matched and still achieve market success. The key at the heart of building a loyal following is consistency; "you have to keep creating content" in order "to convert people from watching a couple of your videos to actually following you" (P.I.1). The up-and-coming pop music celebrity cannot be an untouchable star (even the stars of the established pop canon have historically had some factor of down-to-earthness, whether through fun personalities or humble backstories); they must become something of a friend to their audience, which is an accessible goal through the connective nature of social media. This social pseudo-connection both creates an emotional incentive for a potential audience to become a practical one, and plays into the relatability so integral to the pop genre, both semantic and sonic.

INDIE

When asked to describe "indie" off the top of their heads, my coworkers gave descriptions that implied an unpolished sound quality: "a little bit more rough around the edges, DIY, British" (P.I.3); "like it was recorded 25 years ago, even though it wasn't" (P.I.2). This is a good general descriptor that ties back to indie's history – a post-punk movement that proudly carried on the tradition of the precedent subculture's intentionally amateur sound.

INDIE | SUBCULTURE

After the death of punk in 1979 (colloquially marked by the death of Sex Pistols' bassist Sid Vicious), the subcultural musical world split into three notable groups: the New Romantics, the Goths, and for lack of an official title, the Indie Kids. British author

and indie historian Sam Knee describes the early '80s indie era as "sandwiched between the new wave and grunge", thus "written out of history in favour of the more familiar territories that bookend either side of the decade" (Knee 3). The Indie Kids, in aesthetic comparison with the other youth movements of their time, were dull and forgettable. Indie bands did "not look much different from their audiences, usually selecting T-shirts and jeans to perform in"; even now, the general stereotype of indie in the 1980s is remembered as "four boys in scuffy jumpers with Doctor Martens" (Fonarow 43; P.I.3). This pre-grunge look was intentional in its unremarkable nature, "a subtle subversive reaction and rejection against the clichéd yuppie flamboyance as purveyed by the mainstream" and even by the other subcultures of the time (Knee 4). Aesthetically, indie offered an accessible alternative to any kind of physical, financial, or indeed musical effort.

The Indie Kids do share an interesting similarity with their more glamorous subcultural counterparts: an inspiration from the Romantics of old. However, where the Goths and New Romantics drew on the Romantics' flamboyant style and dramatic emotional expression, the Indie Kids opted for a more muted though no less genuine "exaltation of emotional and sensitivity, the sorrows and sufferings of young Werther, the privileging of creative spirit over an adherence to formal rules, and an interest in specific cultural/local identities" (Fonarow 55). The Thatcher era of mass unemployment, which encouraged individualism with disregard for any kind of collective group or indeed even society at all, influenced a sort of collective melancholy in the coming-of-age population, who turned to the greats for inspiration of how to express their discontentment. It was from this period of economic and societal bleakness that the indie movement was born.

INDIE | ETYMOLOGY

  After our interview, my boss took me back to the office and dug out the 9 September 1978 issue of *New Musical Express* to show me an example of the kinds of bands that populated the indie charts at the time of the genre's inception. We paged through the whole thing side-by-side, past articles on Blondie and the Buzzcocks, advertisements for imported records and Grateful Dead concerts, and by the time we reached the Ultravox ad on the back page, we hadn't found the indie chart. "That's strange," noted my boss. It must not have been in that issue.

  There was good reason for the chart's absence from this issue – the first "independent" chart wouldn't appear in music publication until October of the following year, when *New Musical Express* compiled their first list of "top-selling releases" at "selected independent retail outlets" across the UK (Fonarow 32). The word "independent" in the music world was originally used to describe the distribution method of its artists, not the sound nor even the production of the "genre". I put "genre" in quotes here because through this understanding, "independent" is an attribute, not a genre. "Genre" describes a sonic constant or an aesthetic expectation across a body of music – a classification based on "a particular style, form, or content" ("Genre"). Distributing independently does not imply a specific sound. It just so happens that the artists using this method in Britain in the late '70s and early '80s were the ones who had evolved from punk, carrying forth its self-driven DIY ethos, and sharing with one another a similar sound.

INDIE ETYMOLOGY: CHARTS

Today, the British independent charts still persist with regard to distribution rather than sonic genre. In the 28 January 2019 issue of *Music Week*, pop ballad vocalist Adele (53.7M monthly listeners on Spotify), genre-explorationist rapper XXXTENTACION (35.9M), and modern indie rock band Arctic Monkeys (47.8M) all appear together on the Official Independent Singles Top 30 Chart ("Charts" 49). Each of these artists, along with their charting contemporaries, are wildly popular in terms of listeners and followers, and in the case of these three, are vastly sonically different. One could imagine a very small overlap in diehard fans of each artist (indeed, X's listener base skews more American and more male while Adele's and Arctic Monkeys' are slightly more global and heavily more female; between these two, Arctic Monkeys' listeners skew younger ["XXXTENTACION: Audience", "Adele…", "Arctic Monkeys…"]).

So why do these artists appear alongside each other on the independent chart rather than the official top 75 pop songs of the week, despite being relatively well-known or even able to be classified as mainstream artists? The answer goes back to the etymology of "independent" as a description of distributor. No matter how popular an artist or record becomes, "[a]ny major corporation could have an independent band by distributing the record through one of the independent distribution companies" (Fonarow 37). This loophole may be a useful one when considering the competition for the mainstream pop charts – large, established, well-loved personalities are difficult to compete against, because their marketing is essentially done for them. If an artist or label wants to chart at all, which in the British music industry is both "a means to and a measure of success", especially when a record can remain on the charts for several

weeks, an independent chart provides an alternative place for the artist or label to do so (30).

Listed alongside each "independent" artist and their song (or songs) that charted that week is their distributor and label (XL [PIAS Cinram], Bad Vibes Forever [EMPIRE], and Domino [PIAS UK] respectively) ("Charts" 49). XL and Domino are both self-described independent record labels, and Bad Vibes Forever is XXXTENTACION's self-established label for his music, fashion, and other pursuits. Meanwhile, PIAS describes itself as "a family of independent record labels" from all over the world "run by passionate music lovers", which matches the original indie distribution ethos of "a moral, aesthetic, and egalitarian enterprise" with passionate, hands-on involvement in the music being created (*[PIAS]*; Fonarow 38). Bad Vibes Forever's umbrella company EMPIRE is an American record label and distribution company that specialises in hip-hop, with no mention of "independence" on its webpage, likely due to the association of "independent" with genre sound rather than distribution method.

The parenthetical distinction of smaller independent labels from larger corporate bodies is absent from the pop charts in the same issue – this distinction is unique to the indie charts. As Fonarow reminds us, "records with an independent distribution, despite the size or nature of the ownership of the record label, are eligible for inclusion on the independent chart" (Fonarow 30). The labels are listed as a kind of justification for why artists who share no coherent sound appear together on a specialised chart, like the Upfront Club Top 30, the Urban Top 20, and the Commercial Pop Top 30, which are classified in large part by genre or sound. The independent chart appears to be unique

in its functionality – it is the only chart in *Music Week* to be classified by its distribution method rather than its sonic genre.

In a contemporary context, the independent chart seems to serve as a loophole for popular artists to continue to dominate over smaller ones – a phenomenon not exclusive to the music world. Consider the *New York Times* Bestseller list – or rather, lists – for book sales in the US. The list of lists has evolved to cover five different categories of adult books and four categories of children's books per week, with five more genre-specific categories and two audiobook lists ranked monthly. What's more, the same book can chart multiple times in the same week if it sells well across categories – marketing consultant Rob Eagar observes that "the same 10–15 books usually take up the majority of all the available slots every week" (Eagar). The criteria for charting a bestseller have the illusion of becoming more specific, with categories for fiction, nonfiction, hardcover, paperback, and every combination of these, with the five genre categories besides, when in reality they have become broader. More kinds of books have the opportunity to chart now, but instead one popular book can dominate as long as it is printed across multiple categories. In a way, these book charts mirror the way the contemporary independent music charts function in Britain. As long as a label or distributor defines itself as independent, it is eligible for consideration and placement on the independent chart, meaning that otherwise-considered "pop" or "hip-hop" artists fill up the slots on the indie chart, leaving little room for artists with an "indie" sound.

But what is that "indie sound"? Does it still exist? Does it sound the same as it did when it started? To address that we have to rewind to the post-punk discussion of

indie's subculture, and reconnect to the emotional, moral, and material tenets of the genre.

INDIE | SOUND

In the forty-five years since its inception, we have seen a subtle evolution in the way indie sounds and a larger one in the meaning of the word itself as a classifier of music. Part of my understanding of the generalisation of the word "indie" comes from a game I've taken to playing with friends – a song comes on in a café, and I ask them what genre it is, and how do they know? Whether they have as much fun with this game as I do or not is not the point of playing – rather the game gives me an insight into the non-industry perspective on these words. What I've learned is that identifying music as "indie" almost always comes down to "vibes" – no one concrete rule for what fits that classification. The nebulous quality of the term "independent" when used in regards to music may be a part of this evolution into something more vague. The independent charts no longer display a common sound – the sound represented is varied, and the charting "independent" artists are often mainstream. The bands of the early days are remembered, and that memory has evolved into the indie subgenres of today.

Besides its literal etymological definition, the collective indie sound is most important in describing the genre – and a constant that we can observe over history. In the 1980s, most of the music that was circulating through independent distributors had the same sound – "anything after punk that was still a bit DIY" – and so the sonic genre of "indie" was born (P.I.3). People who were alive during indie's germination could give a more specific description of the genre's sound: "guitar-based, drum, jangly, The Cure",

for example (P.I.4), which aligns with Fonarow's researched understanding of typical indie bands as "basic four-piece combos with electric guitar, bass, drums, and vocals" (Fonarow 39). Vocally speaking, indie began as a more male genre, though this has changed over time; indie in general is not defined by gender (though a male band and a female solo performer come to mind quicker than the reverse). These stylisations of indie, as well as a feeling of an almost liquid quality to the flow of its music, still persist throughout the genre today.

Another historical and persistent staple of the indie sound is a distinct feeling of amateur-ness inherent to performance and production of the genre. At the beginning of indie, "technical proficiency" was discouraged, as it was seen as "formal training that distances a performer from the essence of music" (Fonarow 42, 43). There was a sort of reverse snobbery regarding indie artists, who subculturally represented a down-to-earth working class antihero. This ideology is not too different from the required relatability of the pop star, though the application is different and arguably more authentic in sound. The "rough around the edges, DIY" indie sound that evolved out of punk persists today, when indie artists may not be thinking so much about punk but are still concerned with authenticity of emotional expression over any kind of classical training. Today's indie "sounds like it was recorded 25 years ago, even though it wasn't", which can be both an homage to the lineage of the sound as well as a product of the circumstances of an independent musician (P.I.2). "It's an intentional shit sound"; in ex-*NME* journalist Simon Reynolds' kinder terms, "an insistence on short songs, lo-fi, minimalism, purism, and guitars, guitars, guitars" that honours the classic indie longing for a time outside of one's own (P.I.2; Reynolds qtd. in Fonarow 36).

The subject material of indie is another key component of its cohesive sound. The modern indie audience might observe "a lot of love songs or songs about feeling bad about yourself" (P.I.1); the second of these themes in particular runs through the indie heritage from the start. It makes sense that as a post-punk Thatcher-era young adult-driven genre, indie songs would be "often brooding and contemplative and address the issue of not belonging" (Fonarow 54). This pathos, along with the loose, guitar-driven instrumentation, sets "indie" the sonic genre apart from "indie" as a description of an artist's distribution.

INDIE | EVOLUTION

In comparison to pop and in terms of sonic cohesion, indie has not evolved as drastically as pop has – the jangly guitar and DIY recording techniques that characterised early indie are still a marker of indie music produced today – and a sincere one at that. When modern pop music borrows sounds from the earliest days of its genre, it is seen as a novelty or an otherwise cheeky callback to another time, functioning as a kind of narrative device to get a certain tone across, relying on listeners' understanding of the time period being referenced. On the other hand, indie's modern variations contain clear and sincere traces of the original indie sound without commentary. In this comparison, it seems that indie has more respect for its lineage than pop – and lineage is crucial to the preservation of the indie sound over time.

The Britpop movement of the 1990s both began to normalise the indie sound as well as build on it with more aggression or energy than its precedent sound. Along with a change in energy, the indie artists of the '90s were with their instrumentation and more

popular with their sound: "by the time you get to Blur, they're getting a bit more proficient, but they're still indie, 'cause that's the heritage they follow" (P.I.3). Many artists – particularly bands – that are considered "indie" by a modern audience would be seen as unacceptably polished on the 1980s scene. Scouting for Girls and Starsailor are two early 2000s British rock bands who are "very proficient pop bands, and they're not really 'indie' bands at all, 'cause they're really good at playing their instruments, they're not scruffy, quite humorous, they're not that alternative", but it isn't wrong to group them in with modern indie bands because "they've come from that place" – they followed Britpop, which followed indie (P.I.3). Although the indie sound has expanded to include more electronic, polished, or mainstream elements, the shared heritage of the Smiths to Blur to post-Britpop still binds the genre together. A modern indie artist doesn't even need to say it in an interview – their family tree of influence is clear in the jangle of their guitar, the flowing undercurrent of their music, or their ironic lyrical belief that they are all alone.

INDIE | MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

Indie is bigger now than it used to be – streaming and social media give a wider audience faster, cheaper access to music they might not have discovered otherwise. However, indie still has a more particular audience than, say, mainstream pop radio. A certain pride persists in being an indie fan; from a perspective of long-term music business experience, "the types of music that want allegiance to the genre are rock and indie; the type of music that wants allegiance to the artist [is] pop" (P.I.3). Because indie is not the mainstream default, its listeners must seek it out; they may be a little more

picky about what they listen to than pop fans. While the semantic definition of indie is still the one that matters statistically on the charts, the sonic definition makes more sense to use for the genre identity required in marketing.

INDIE MARKETING: PLAYLISTING

The specificity of indie's sound means that playlisting is a more viable option for getting new indie music discovered. The rise in small everyman-type singer-songwriters garnering fame on TikTok assists the typically smaller nature of the artists populating these playlists, especially when compared to their contemporary pop greats, so the competition feels fairer. Indie's broadness means that both its sonic and semantic definitions can modify other genres, like "indie folk" or "indie pop". Beyond that, Spotify has a tendency to invent new, more niche microgenres like "indie poptimism" ("It's happy indie pop because you also have sad indie pop, right?" [P.I.2]), so when it comes to playlisting, there are more specific options to pitch to, meaning a higher chance of acceptance onto third-party playlists.

Understanding indie's microgenres is the first step in a sort of work-backwards technique to marketing new indie music. First, the artist should identify the type of people who listen to their music, or whom they want to listen to their music, and which subgenre those people are likely to identify with. Understanding how this audience identifies, particularly socioculturally, can help the artist identify their music as a broader category when they input it on a streaming service, and then to pitch it to more specific third-party playlists to maximise reach. This technique may be useful for more experimental or alternative indie sounds; it is worth consideration for upcoming indie

artists of any subgenre.

It may also be worth consideration for smaller pop artists who can identify a strain of indie heritage in their own music. Because the indie genre can be identified by a cohesive sound, "bands that do not have an independent label or independent distribution to be considered by some to have membership within the indie community" (Fonarow 39). Cross-listing as both indie and pop as two distinct genres should be an intentional choice that remains honest to the sound of the music being listed; if done so it is a viable way to open up a wider potential audience and break into the pop scene from a different avenue.

INDIE MARKETING: SOCIAL MEDIA

As discussed in the pop section, social media is an important tool in connecting an artist to their appropriate audience, and can also be used to help understand that audience, which can inform marketing decisions going forward. However, the kind of content that is effective in promoting indie artists on social media is different from the relationship-building personality-showcasing content expected from pop artists (although of course presenting oneself as relatable and interesting never hurts in building an audience connection). Indie artists should focus more on live performances of their music, rather than the lipsynching that is the standard of the pop crowd, especially since the history of indie "is a bit more on the live scene" than pop (P.I.2).

A general pride in or "allegiance" to their genre and its lineage will also do indie artists well on social media. Many artists on social media will compare their new music to some older cultural touchstones – this is a good idea particularly for indie artists,

whose modern sound exists expressly because of the artists who came before them, as with Starsailor and Blur and the Smiths. Even if indie involves more of an allegiance to the genre than to any particular artists within it, a reference to an artist's influences helps ground their sound in the historical context of indie and legitimises them as part of the genre's lineage.

CONCLUSION

For marketing pop and indie music, it is imperative to understand the difference between the genres' semantic definitions (which are related to a genre's cultural history) and sonic definitions (which are related to the present sound of a genre after some evolution). Of these two genres, "pop" is a bigger umbrella term, with modern pop encompassing a number of commercial, surface-level relatable sounds and lyrics. Pop music marketing is rooted strongly in its semantic definition of popularity through personality and easily-accessible relatability. "Indie" may fit within an alternative bubble as a genre outside of mainstream pop, but stands alone as a sonically cohesive genre of its own. The sonic definition of indie is more useful for marketing the genre than the semantic one, whose practicality is confined to popular charting artists. Being able to use precise language when describing new music can help reach the most effective potential audience to build a fanbase.

Further research could include building an understanding of "alternative" as a genre of music, which did not quite fit into the scope of this study, as well as exploring the sub- and microgenres that streaming services have begun to invent in order to classify music in more specific ways. "Alternative" music could be studied in much the

same way as pop and indie – where does it come from? What does it sound like? How do its fans connect with it? Studying microgenres would require an internal look at music streaming platforms and potentially a direct conversation with someone who is directly involved in developing and relegating these niche subgenres.

Appendix I: Research Methodology and Justification

This study consists of both primary and secondary research. One form of primary qualitative research used is semi-structured personal interviews with the employees of Autonomy Music Group. This technique consisted of a predetermined set of questions that were asked in a loose order but were expanded upon, altered, added to, and rearranged depending on the responses given. Personal interviews give a candid, insider look at the music industry from a group of people with active working experience and music education. To reduce bias from other colleagues' input, interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis. To preserve anonymity, each interviewee is cited in the text as "P.I." ("Personal interview series" in the bibliography) with a number denoting the order in which their input appears in the paper, to distinguish between different responders.

It should be noted that the sample size is a small one and is potentially biassed within a large scale because the interviewees are all members of the same company. As a result, these interviews and their responses can be understood as a case study within the London music business, particularly within this singular management company.

Another form of qualitative primary research used was document analysis of music publications. This technique functioned more to provide examples than to build a historic foundation. I had access to a limited number of physical publications from my boss's archive. They each provide a direct historical snapshot of the music industry at the time of their publication. This research also involves some rudimentary statistical

analysis of data regarding artists' listeners and followers, with information from Chartmetric, an online statistical resource used by music industry professionals to observe trends in artist and audience data. Chartmetric compiles demographic and other statistical data based on artists' streaming and social media platforms, most notably Spotify, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. Its numbers are specific and accurate within a couple of months.

The historical foundation of my research is built largely upon secondary qualitative research involving document analysis of previous writings on genre. A key text for building my understanding of the history of indie music was Wendy Fonarow's *Empire of Dirt: The Aesthetics and Rituals of British Indie Music* (Wesleyan UP, 2006), which is itself thoroughly researched and has been referenced in a number of other academic writings on the subject of the British indie music scene.

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