

Teenagers' Coorientation and Information-Seeking About Pop Music

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A visit to any well-stocked magazine rack in an urban area discloses a jumble of teen-oriented publications splashed with details about the lives of rock singers and groups. Increasing numbers of newspapers—including the above-ground variety—publish review columns about record releases and stories of local appearances by rock and blues stars. The explosion of news about pop music in these and other media suggest there may be a market for information about performers, as well as an attentive teenage audience for the primary product, the music.

Teenagers' communication about music is, therefore, a potentially common behavior. Because of the hold exerted by peer groups in the teen culture, communication about music also lends itself to research into how use of the mass media serves social functions and has social origins. The discussion and data that follow raise theoretical questions of broad applicability to communication behavior. At the same time, some insight is provided into the importance of music information to the teen culture.

We begin by distinguishing two familiar kinds of communication behavior. One is *information-seeking* that is directed

toward sources outside social systems of which one is a proximate member. Use of the mass media and expert institutionalized sources are the most common examples. In this communication mode, the individual usually recognizes that the source he approaches has more to tell him than he has to tell the source—hence, the term information-seeking.

The second is information-*sharing*. Here the communication mode is usually interpersonal and within social systems where members have direct contact with one another. Verbal and nonverbal information is likely to be exchanged rather than simply sought, because (1) it is technically possible to exchange, (2) information is more equally distributed among parties, and (3) the parties have a continued interest in relating to each other.

Having raised these two categories of communication, we propose several ways in which coorientation concepts help clarify social functions served by seeking information in the mass media. Study of this topic amounts to prying apart the ways in which coorientation variables intervene in the web that binds information-seeking outside a social system to information-sharing within it.

Our use of the term “coorientation” refers to only one feature of the coorientation model presented in the paper by McLeod and Chaffee earlier in this issue. The model depicts dyadic states. The dyadic feature of interest here is congruency. Our concept is the awareness of other persons (peers, in the case of adolescents and pop music) thought to like the same musical groups.

The coorientation model also contains two observer-derived features, agreement and accuracy. However, these concepts are best viewed as potential outcomes of communication, rather than as causes.¹

Availability of coorientation partners indexes the potential social utility of information—the number of dyadic relations in which the information can be used. A principal social utility during interpersonal information exchange is learning about other persons (Watzlawick et al., 1967).

Two hypotheses can be derived from these theoretical assumptions. One, out-system information-seeking should be associated with amount of congruency. Two, this correlation should, in turn, be contingent on individuals' perceptions of the information object—whether it has social utility.

We examine these hypotheses and related applications of coorientation concepts. First we distinguish the usefulness of congruency as a predictor of communication, compared to more familiar variables expressing individuals' orientation toward objects of information. As we shall see, coorientation is important—even to the link between information-seeking and use of a socially based method of orientation, like phonograph-listening.

The second section of analysis documents the social utility that binds coorientation and information-seeking—at least with respect to adolescents and pop music. Third, we ask whether this relationship derives from a more general and sociological process of social integration.

Fourth, we report some correlational data that help characterize the learning experiences contributed by information-seeking to information-sharing. Here we are concerned with subjective descriptions of learning.

Finally, we inquire whether diversity in a person's coorientation sphere is associated with the strength of correlation between information-seeking and -sharing as two quite different communicative acts.

Data have been drawn from a series of studies into teenagers' responses to various kinds of music, popular and symphonic, conducted in junior and senior high schools in the Seattle area.²

COMPARING ORIENTATION AND COORIENTATION AS PREDICTORS OF INFORMATION-SEEKING

By now, many have discovered that variables expressing a person's social relationships—his friendships, integration into groups, and the like—are usually more powerful predictors of

mass media use than individual characteristics (Chaffee, 1972). The power of coorientation as a predictor of out-system information-seeking about pop music can be illustrated by comparing it to a more familiar variable, the individual's orientation toward music through direct exposure to singers and groups that he likes.

Coorientation, as used here, refers to the number of peers thought to enjoy the same music. Our questionnaire starts by asking youngsters to list their favorite musical groups and songs. We then inquire whether there are "any persons you know who like any of the singers, groups or songs" written as favorites. Respondents write the full names of any coorientation partners. Respondents indicate partners' role relationship (parent, brother or sister, other kid or someone else), and write the singers, groups, or songs that are thought to be mutually liked. Youngsters also indicate whether they have talked recently about their favorite music with any of the named partners.

Our measure of youngsters' information-seeking is the number of favorite singers or groups they have read about in the past seven days. Respondents tell us each group that was the object of their interest, and describe the media where they read about it—magazine, newspaper, book, record cover, or somewhere else.³

The measurement of direct exposure to pop music poses special challenges. Teenagers can use radio, television, and records. Intercorrelations among these media behaviors are lower than one might expect, however,

Availability of popular music on television is uncertain, often placing the young viewer at the mercy of program formats he cannot anticipate. By comparison, music saturates the radio environment. Transistor sets provide a portable wallpaper experience, and it is common for tenth graders to report they tune in to hear their pop favorites more than five separate times per day.

Record-listening differs in quality from the other media. It is a purposive communicative act, requiring the audience to choose among alternative messages. Content availability and

selection are under the user's control. And, despite the advent of portable record players, most listening requires some physical confinement.⁴ For these reasons, we chose record-listening to index teenagers' orientation toward pop music.

We find that frequency of record listening is not as great a predictor of information-seeking as is coorientation ($\gamma = .32$, compared to $.44$ in the Evergreen Survey, for example). More important, what correlation there is between record listening and information-seeking is contingent on amount of peer coorientation, as Table 1 shows. The correlations are gamma coefficients; z-values are shown in parentheses. The distribution for coorientation has been dichotomized at the median to yield two nearly equal groups. Distributions for record listening and seeking are shown below the broken line.

The primacy of coorientation over the orientation variable is clear. The strategy of theoretical explanation this exemplifies has been even more graphically illustrated elsewhere (Clarke, 1971).⁵

TABLE 1
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN RECORD LISTENING AND
INFORMATION SEEKING, BY AMOUNT OF PEER
COORIENTATION

	Number of Peer Coorientation Partners	
	Few	Many
Correlation between frequency of record listening and information-seeking	.53 ^a (z = 3.26)	.06 (z = 0.37)

Percentage who play records 1-2 times a day or more	39%	51%
Percentage of information seekers	33%	56%
n =	154	190

SOURCE: Evergreen Survey.

NOTE: The significant correlation between record playing and information-seeking is not an artifact of the popularity of record jackets as a source for finding out about performers. When use of this medium is removed from the index for seeking, the gamma coefficient remains large and statistically significant ($G = .56$, $p < .01$).

a. $p < .01$.

A PROCESS THAT LINKS COORIENTATION TO INFORMATION-SEEKING

What is the process by which a knowledge of other persons in one's social system yields an appetite for information that can be obtained outside the system? One answer is that the linkage between coorientation and out-system information-seeking depends on a peculiar function that information may serve. This function is to enable us to make judgments about others inside the social system. If a person views object-orientations as a way of judging other persons, then coorientation about the object should lead to information-seeking. If this information use is lacking—if object-orientations do not help one form opinions of others—coorientation should not lead to information-seeking.

Let us express this hypothesis as a pair of concrete cases involving teenagers and pop music. For Susan H., pop music and record stars are important objects for more than their entertainment value. They are also objects that can be used to form impressions of other kids at school. The kinds of music that others like tell Susan something about them as persons.

A large sphere of coorientation partners (other kids who like the same music) would confront Susan with many opportunities for impression formation and recurring demands for music information that would facilitate this task. A small coorientation sphere would produce fewer occasions for making judgments about others. As a result, Susan would need less of the information about pop music that magazines, record covers, and other media sources provide.

Ralph M. is different from Susan in that musical interests do not strike him as good criteria for forming impressions about other kids. Perhaps he would rather make these judgments on the basis of clothes, good grades, interest in hot rods, sports, or some other dimension. For Ralph, the number of coorientation partners should not be linked to his information-seeking about pop music.⁶

These two concrete cases illustrate an interpersonal-utility explanation for why coorientation affects information-seeking outside the social system. We tested the hypothesis on some ninth graders, and Table 2 shows the results.

TABLE 2
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN COORIENTATION VARIABLES AND
INFORMATION-SEEKING, BY IMPRESSION FORMATION

	Form Impressions of Others on Basis of Music Likes or Dislikes	
	No	Yes
Correlation between peer coorientation and information-seeking	.29 (z = 1.00)	.50 ^a (z = 2.31)
Correlation between talking with peer coorientation partners about music, and information-seeking	.10 (z = 0.30)	.58 ^b (z = 2.92)
n =	58	96

SOURCE: Edmonds Survey.

a. $p < .02$.

b. $p < .01$.

The data reveal that the correlation between coorientation and information-seeking is highly dependent on impression formation. Two groups of respondents are shown—those who feel that musical likes and dislikes are relevant criteria when forming impressions of other kids, and those who do not feel that music has this significance. Within each of these groups, two correlations (γ) are presented. One is the correlation between number of peer coorientation partners and information-seeking. The second is the correlation between amount of talking about music with partners and information-seeking.

We should observe that this interpersonal-utility explanation is bound to specific situations; its power is confined to *topics* and *persons* involved with impression formation. For pop music and teenagers, the explanation presented in Table 2 is helpful for 96 out of 154 cases. For presidential candidates and adults, the explanation might apply in a different proportion of cases.

THE POSSIBILITY OF SPURIOUSNESS IN COORIENTATION PREDICTIONS OF INFORMATION-SEEKING

We have noted that coorientation achieves its effect on information-seeking through the mechanism of impression

formation. It is reasonable to ask whether coorientation variables are not simply newfangled substitutes for a more familiar concept, social integration (Erbe, 1962). Integration, the fulcrum for so much sociological communication research, may account for the explanations of information-seeking achieved with more elaborate, topic-bound variables expressing person perception.

In another study of tenth graders (Glacier Survey), we inquired into sociometric linkages. We asked youngsters to name persons they liked to talk with almost every day at school. As it turns out, the number of talking partners named by a youngster barely predicts amount of information-seeking about pop music, a highly visible topic in the peer culture (chi-square = 8.2, 3 d.f.; $p = .04$).

We also found that coorientation and information-seeking correlate regardless of whether youngsters have many or few general talking partners. There is no evidence that peer group integration accounts for the more particularistic findings drawn from coorientation analysis.

IS INFORMATION THE COMMODITY SOUGHT AND SHARED?

While information-seeking outside a social system can be distinguished from sharing within the system, these two communication behaviors should correlate—if information is really the object of the activity, and if information lends itself to social validation. But the nature of sharing that is associated with media use deserves more precise study than attempted so far.

Many studies have confirmed that use of the mass media correlates with frequency of interpersonal discussions. It is not clear that these correlations indicate a “flow of information,” “opinion leadership,” reinforcement, or something else. One would like to determine whether discussions linked to media use result, at least subjectively, in information gain, and whether information given exceeds information received.

Persons are qualified to report at least three information aspects of their conversations with others: (1) whether conversations help them find out things they did not know about a specified topic, (2) whether these encounters give them a chance to tell things that others apparently do not know, and (3) whether discussions give them a chance to learn something about the other persons involved. If information-seeking and -sharing are linked, media use should correlate with each of these subjective outcomes—even when we control for *frequency* of conversations inside the social system.

In one survey, we quizzed tenth graders closely about their talk with “other kids about singers, musical groups or their songs.” We asked how regularly they did this, whether they ever found that other kids liked different music than they did, and how often these conversations resulted in the three kinds of information exchange summarized above.

Consistent with other research, amount of reading about pop music correlates strongly with frequency of peer music talk. More important, media use correlates with each of the information outcomes of music discussions—even when frequency of talk is partialled out. Table 3 shows both zero-order coefficients (product-moment), and partials for relationships between amount of reading about pop music and three information aspects of talking with others. In this analysis, we eliminated the one teenager in six who reported that music conversations never disclosed differences of music opinions among participants.

Data in Table 3 also emphasize the importance of viewing communication within the peer social system as an occasion for information-sharing. Equivalence among the correlation coefficients does not support an interpretation that interpersonal communication is the event for “two-step flow of information.” Use of the mass media correlates equally with *finding out* from others about music and *telling* others about music.

TABLE 3
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN INFORMATION-SEEKING AND
INFORMATION ASPECTS OF MUSIC DISCUSSIONS

How often are music conversations . . .	Print Information-Seeking	
	Zero-Order	Partial, Controlling for Discussion Frequency
A chance to find out something new you didn't already know about music?	.22 ^a	.23 ^a
A chance to tell others something they didn't already know about music?	.28 ^a	.22 ^a
A good way to find out more about others, as persons?	.28 ^a	.25 ^a
n = 230		

SOURCE: Glacier Survey.

a. $p < .02$.

DIVERSITY OF COORIENTATION AND COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOR

One of the coorientation model's more important contributions is to alert us to different kinds of interpersonal relationships and how they affect communication behavior. Until now, we have been discussing shared *evaluations* of pop music as the basis of coorientation. It is time to expand our inquiry.

The number of congruent coorientation partners overlooks the question of heterogeneity. And heterogeneity, or the variety of object-orientations perceived in one's social sphere, is certain to be associated with distinctive and interesting communication behaviors.

Both conceptual and measurement problems become apparent, however, when we try to deal with one person's perceptions of the things that he and others do not evaluate in a similar way. People tend to discuss shared likes and to recall them. Furthermore, the potential universe of mixed likes between two persons is almost limitless. The list of music one member of a dyad likes and the other member dislikes, or is indifferent toward, or fails to cognize eludes easy description.

In our research we have approached this indirectly. In one survey, we followed the sociometric question with an item inquiring into perceived music interests. After each respondent had listed other kids at school with whom he liked to talk most every day, he was asked to indicate if any of them were interested in pop singers or groups.

We can ignore for the moment the absolute number of peers a youngster might list as being interested in pop music—or the number of names he might show later in the questionnaire as sharing his musical likes. These variables reflect the size of the respondent's social milieu, as well as its composition.

The heterogeneity of music evaluations that a youngster might confront is revealed by how much greater is the number of interest nominations than shared-like coorientations. On the basis of results from one school, it is evident that most youngsters encounter some diversity with respect to pop music; sixty percent knew more kids who were interested in music than who shared some of their music likes. Another eighteen percent knew the same number of kids in each category. Twenty-two percent listed more names of kids who shared their likes than peers who were interested in music.

Amount of diversity in coorientation stands in an interesting theoretical position concerning information-seeking in the media and frequency of discussions about music with peers. Three hypotheses can be advanced:

- (1) Persons in a heterogeneous coorientation environment should exhibit greater information-seeking in the media than persons in a homogeneous environment. They are exposed to a greater array of information and opinion in their social system; information from cosmopolitan sources outside the system will therefore have utility.
- (2) There is no reason to expect heterogeneous youngsters to talk about music more than those with a homogeneous coorientation environment. Music discussions simply serve different purposes for the two types. For the heterogeneous, conversation about music can be an occasion for discovering new tastes. For the homogeneous, conversation usually leads to reinforcement.

- (3) The final hypothesis bears on the *relationship* between media use and frequency of music talk. This correlation should be apparent only among youngsters with a heterogeneous coorientation environment. There is no reason why new ideas about pop music encountered in magazines and other media should provoke conversations in a cliquish environment. In a clique, what stimulates talk are the attitudes already held, not information from outside the system.

Table 4 shows data relevant to the three hypotheses. Heterogeneous respondents are those who made more interest nominations than shared-like coorientation partners. Homogeneous youngsters are the remainder. Percentage differences for information-seeking in the media and for the frequency of music talk are tested by chi-square. Correlations (product-moment) are shown between information-seeking and music talk.

The data clearly support the three hypotheses. Amount of media behavior, and the linkage between this and interpersonal discussion, are dependent on having a diverse coorientation environment.

These findings also speak indirectly to the assertion that mass communication is conducive to a mass society. Here we find

TABLE 4
DIFFERENCES IN INFORMATION-SEEKING AND MUSIC TALK
BETWEEN HETEROGENEOUS AND HOMOGENEOUS
COORIENTATION GROUPS

	Music Coorientation	
	Homogeneous	Heterogeneous
Percentage who have read about pop music in the past seven days	35%	54% chi-square = 9.6; 1 d.f. ^a
Percentage who talk with other kids about singers, groups or songs at least "every other day"	39%	43% chi-square < 1
Correlation between information-seeking and music talk	.13	.37 ^a
n =	114	169

SOURCE: Glacier Survey.

a. $p < .01$.

that media exposure and a principal social correlate of media use are manifest by teenagers with the most pluralistic milieu. It is difficult to argue in this case that the mass media level the audience's outlook to a common ingredient.

That this point is demonstrated in the context of adolescent enthusiasm for popular music is particularly telling. Teenagers' vulnerability to social pressure and market conditions in the pop music world suggest that opinion coalescence should be especially noticeable among readers of teen magazines, record jackets, and other media features about the teen scene. Evidence in Table 4 points in the opposite direction.

CONCLUSION

Several theoretical implications of mass media use are illustrated by the data reported here. Coorientation states offer a primary explanation for information-seeking outside the social system, compared to orientation toward the objects of information.

We have also shown that forming impressions of acquaintances affects whether perception of social surroundings influences use of the mass media. Knowing how others feel and making judgments about them on the basis of their feelings combine in a complex way to produce information-seeking relevant to those feelings.

Coorientation is not social integration in masquerade. Theory based on coorientation concepts adds new explanatory power to our understanding of mass media use.

Information-sharing seems the proper way to label the communication consequences of media use. In our studies, mass communication is associated with the *exchange* of information with others and an increased awareness of what they are like as persons. Social-power concepts, based on a directional flow of information, are not appropriate.

Finally, coorientation diversity leads to a distinctive linkage of communication behaviors, involving considerable contact

with the mass media and an exchange of information within one's circle of friends.

In addition, our substantive findings suggest a few observations about teenagers' responses to the pop music scene. Their heavy exposure to music has been widely noted, but the extent of print information-seeking about performers has been less obvious.

Two distinct followers of this news are apparent. One kind of reader is the teenager who feels he is in the company of peers who enjoy some of the same music that appeals to him. He seeks music information, in part, to handle problems of person perception.

The second kind of reader is less common—roughly one-third as many as the first kind, according to our surveys. He is the teenager with few friends sharing his music tastes. Though isolated from this social support, he frequently listens to favorite records. By implication, information serves personal, perhaps cognitive, needs rather than social functions.

Although we have not asked teenagers about the directional flow of specific information within the peer group, correlations derived from their descriptions of typical music discussions suggest a model of information *exchange*. It would not seem appropriate to view the peer group as a linear series of information links in which teenager A passes ideas to teenager B, who transmits them to teenager C.

Within the peer culture, some teenagers are information-rich, and others information-poor. The rich are heavy users of magazines, record jackets and other sources of data. They report telling others and learning from others about music through frequent discussions. And they experience heterogeneous coorientations that include peers whose music tastes differ.

Most of these data portray a social system that has capacity to resist some of the more primitive forms of manipulation from outside agencies. This parallels a point made a decade ago by Wilbur Schramm. It is frequently more rewarding to learn how people use entertainment media than to search for ways that the mass media "use" people.

NOTES

1. Distinctive interpersonal communication may result from disconfirmation of one's perceptions of others—i.e., from confronting evidence about how accurate one's feelings of congruency are. For illustrative research into ways in which coorientation processes may cause interpersonal communication, see Pearce and Stamm (forthcoming).

2. This research has been supported by the U.S. Office of Education and by the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities. Ninth and tenth grades have been surveyed in a variety of urban and suburban schools by administering questionnaires to all students attending classes during a single day. Data from all but twelve to fifteen percent of a grade level are usually secured this way. Results reported below are drawn from individual schools studied at various stages in our overall research design. Culmination of this project is a field experiment that examines adolescents' response to attending symphony concerts.

3. Considering opportunities for accidental exposure to messages in the mass media, a validity check is in order before concluding that this use of print represents active seeking of information. Accordingly, we also asked respondents whether there was anything they wanted to find out about favorite performers. Their replies were coded for whether or not information was sought about some identifiable attribute of a singer or group. Question-asking correlates strongly with print information-seeking in all the schools we have studied ($\gamma = .42$; $p < .01$; in the Evergreen Survey, for example). Record covers are the most prominent medium for information search, followed by magazines, miscellaneous sources, and newspapers.

4. Record listening also tends to be a more social behavior than use of the other media. Whereas fewer than ten percent say they usually tune in radio or television to hear music with friends, more than a quarter say that joint listening to records is common.

5. Now that variables of coorientation and information-seeking have been introduced, we can return briefly to teenagers' direct exposure to pop music and provide some empirical support for the distinction between radio and record listening. Use of these two media correlates, but radio—the wallpaper experience—does not at all predict information-seeking, whereas record listening does predict, among youngsters with few coorientation partners. A fourfold typology based on frequency of radio and record use discloses some of the different dynamics of these media:

		Frequency of Record Listening to Hear Music Favorites	
		<i>seldom</i>	<i>often</i>
Frequency of Radio Listening to Hear Music Favorites	<i>often</i>	“passives” 3.2 44%	“addicts” 3.7 50%
	<i>seldom</i>	“nonaudience” 2.0 34%	“selectives” 3.8 66%

Labels within the typology are meant to suggest the control exercised by listeners over the music they hear. The first figure in each cell (data from Evergreen Survey) is the median number of coorientation partners. The percentage figure is the number of teenagers who have read about pop stars or music in the past seven days.

An interaction effect is apparent in both these data. "Selectives"—teenagers who make comparatively heavier use of records than radio for pop music listening—have more coorientation partners and exhibit greater information-seeking than the "passives"—adolescents who are frequent users of radio, but seldom listen to records.

These facts underscore the need to consider radio and records as fundamentally different ways for teenagers to gain orientation to music.

6. In part, any link between amount of coorientation and information-seeking depends on the rate of information obsolescence. We expect that the more rapidly fashions about objects change, the more strongly coorientation should predict information-seeking—and the more contingent this relationship will be on impression formation.

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