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## CHAPTER 19

### **“Singing from the Heart”: Notions of Gendered Authenticity in Pop Music**

**Bridget Coulter**

Authenticity is a powerful concept within popular music culture. As Shuker (2002, 20) notes, authenticity carries considerable cultural weight, and Thornton (1995, 26) argues that it is perhaps the most valuable quality that can be ascribed to music. To be considered authentic, music must convey an impression of being ‘real’, ‘raw’, ‘honest’ or ‘original’. In the popular sphere, authenticity is rarely interrogated and, as a result, it maintains an enigmatic quality that increases its symbolic power.

Because of its cultural prestige, authenticity helps determine the taste distinctions of popular audiences (Frith 1996, 71; Keightley 2001, 131; Leach 2001, 143). Ultimately, authenticity presents a dichotomy: “if good music is ... honest and sincere, bad music is false” (Frith 1986, 267). For example, within dominant cultural discourses, rock music is typically considered an authentic style, whereas pop is considered inauthentic (Cook 1998, 11; Hawkins 2011; Keightley 2001, 111; Moore 2002, 210).

The widespread denigration of pop music may reflect the genre’s association with women and girls; girls’ music is frequently trivialised (Baker 2001, 362; Railton and Watson 2011, 75), and femininity is culturally associated with artifice (Coates 1997, 52; Mayhew 1999, 67–68; Thornton 1995, 72). Young female pop audiences are typically presented as passive and hysterical, and portrayals of female fans often downplay their interest in music (Driscoll 2002, 186; Warwick 2007, 5). The key question, then, is how is authenticity conceptualised within a genre that is generally assumed to be inauthentic, and by an audience that is typically portrayed as uncritical? This study sheds light on this question, investigating how authenticity

is understood by adolescent girls and how this relates to ideas of musical value and issues of gender and identity. This research offers a new approach to the study of authenticity, based on primary qualitative research exploring how audiences experience musical authenticity in everyday life.

As musicologists have argued for several decades, scholars need to avoid essentialist approaches to the study of music (Kerman 1985; Leppert and McClary 1987; McClary 1991, 2000). Discussions of music should therefore consider the role of subjectivity in the reception of music. It is vital to acknowledge that perceptions of music are influenced by listeners' identities and experiences, and to consider how music's material properties constrain the range of potential interpretations available to listeners and the ability of the music to afford various subjectivities (Clarke 2005; Cook 2001; Dibben 1999, 2006; Kramer 2011).

Given that the concept of musical authenticity is, to an extent, governed by various musical and cultural conventions, it is possible to explore how music conveys authenticity and how audiences experience it. Scholars such as Fornäs (1995, 274–280), Frith (1996), Grossberg (1993), Moore (2002) and Thornton (1995, 26–86) have attempted to investigate this, and their studies identify three broad categories.

The first of these categories is based on the idea that the authentic in music conveys an essential truth about the music's originator (usually the composer or performer). Moore labels this "first person authenticity", which "arises when an originator ... succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity" (2002, 214). To do this, music must seem to reflect the identity and experiences of the composer or performer, as if to say "this is what it's like to be me" (2002, 212). Similar versions of authenticity have been identified by others, such as Thornton's notion of authenticity of "originality and aura" (1995, 30) and Fornäs's notion of "subjective authenticity" (1995, 276). The idea of first person authenticity

derives from nineteenth-century Romantic cultural ideology, which positions art as the emotional expression of an individual genius, motivated by creativity rather than economic necessity. Despite changes in the production and dissemination of music, Romantic discourses of authenticity and authorship remain firmly embedded in the popular psyche (Frith 1986, 267; Greckel 1979; Mayhew 1999; Negus 2011).

The second category of authenticity is based on the idea that authentic music speaks the truth about a group, community or subculture (Grossberg 1993, 202). This “second person authenticity” (Moore 2002, 220) is similar to “social authenticity” (Fornäs 1995, 276) and “subcultural authenticity” (Thornton 1995, 30).

A third category is identified by Moore (2002), which he calls “third person authenticity”. This arises “when a performer succeeds in conveying the impression of accurately representing the ideas of another, embedded within a tradition of performance” (2002, 218), usually by following the conventions of a musical style.

The flurry of academic debate about authenticity in the 1990s and early 2000s resulted in scholarly agreement that authenticity is a cultural construct, which audiences “ascribe to a performance” (Rubidge 1996, 219) rather than an inherent musical quality (Keightley 2001; Moore 2002). Consequently, some scholars have largely relegated the concept “to the intellectual dust-heap” (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000, 30). Indeed, Middleton even argues that within scholarship, the idea of authenticity “has become an embarrassment” (2006, 203).

However, this approach is not without its problems, and notions of authenticity remain significant in the popular imagination (Middleton 2006, 203). The concept is frequently invoked by musicians, listeners and music critics, and one need only open a music magazine, glance through the online comments about a music video or watch a television talent show to see that ideas of authenticity continue to influence how audiences understand music. For this

reason, it is important to revisit the concept, exploring how and why people use it. In other words, I am interested in examining what authenticity *does* for audiences, and the gender implications of this.

This study examines adolescent girls' attitudes to authenticity in pop music. In order to investigate this, I used informal semi-structured interviews and focus groups, qualitative methods that have been employed by other researchers investigating popular music audiences and musicians (Bayton 1997, 1998; Einerson 1998; Koizumi 2002; Lemish 1998; Lowe 2004; Richards 1998; Williams 2001). My participants were girls between the ages of 10 and 13, who were recruited from two schools and two Guide units in the north of England. Participants were drawn from a wide range of backgrounds by selecting schools and Guide units in different locations, including affluent, deprived, urban and suburban areas. This chapter is part of a wider study, which included 54 participants and explored girls' engagement with pop music more generally. In this chapter, I use data collected in focus groups and interviews with 22 participants from the wider study.

In the following sections, I present an analysis of the girls' beliefs, exploring their subjective responses to authenticity in pop music and how they employ the concept, with particular reference to female pop stars. This is followed by a discussion that investigates the implications of my findings and possibilities for further research.

### **“Be Who You Are”: First Person Authenticity in Pop Music**

It soon became clear during my fieldwork that notions of authenticity were of great importance to the girls. Without being prompted, many of the participants talked about authenticity, and it was the subject of much debate.

The girls mainly discussed authenticity with reference to solo female pop stars, such as Adele, Ariana Grande and Beyoncé. The only male star who was frequently discussed in relation to authenticity was Sam Smith. Although the girls often discussed boy bands, such as One Direction and The Vamps, they did not talk about the authenticity of these stars; instead, the participants generally positioned them as heartthrobs, discussing their personalities and perceived attractiveness. In contrast, the girls had a different gendered view of Sam Smith, positioning him primarily as a singer.

In general, the girls believed that music was authentic if it reflected the identity and experiences of the performer. Molly,<sup>1</sup> for example, preferred music that was autobiographical:

I think it's also from past experiences that I think Sam Smith ... has had, which might make it more stronger and [bring] more affection to the song.

I think [Ariana Grande] ... she's like 21 ... there's enough time for some break-ups and ... past experiences. Because I think past experiences ... bring out ... the most in your voice and better lyrics ...

When listening to music by a particular performer, the girls drew upon knowledge of that star gleaned from unofficial sources, such as television and the Internet. Stars were perceived as authentic if their music reflected their overall star image (Dyer 2004). The idea that music should represent the music's originator is the main tenet of first person authenticity, as defined by Moore (2002, 211–214). Interestingly, the girls understood the musical originator to be the performer and did not discuss song-writing. In a sense, this contradicts the

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<sup>1</sup> All of the participants' names have been changed.

widespread belief within popular music that the songwriter is the musical originator (Negus 2011, 610).

As explained earlier, first person authenticity positions art as an expression of the originator's inner self. My participants were deeply preoccupied with this belief, particularly Imogen:

[Jessie J and Adele] like, be who they are ... and have their own personality.

I think [Miley Cyrus's video for 'Wrecking Ball' is] trying to tell [girls] just to be whoever they want to be and change, and really you should be yourself and be who you are, not someone who you want to be.

Imogen's language strongly suggests the notion of intrinsic selfhood. She describes being authentic as a choice, emphasising agency – an individual can choose to literally *be*, or embody, the self: “you should ... be who you are”. In these quotes, she presents the self as a fixed entity, which cannot be changed regardless of “who you want to be”. This idea of static selfhood dominated the girls' discussions of authenticity.

### **“Singing from the Heart”: The Importance of Unmediated Vocal Expression**

The girls placed enormous importance on the act of singing. Clearly, they regarded pop stars primarily as singers, rather than performers or celebrities.

If [Sam Smith] hadn't got a good voice ... not a lot of people would view his songs ...

(Yasmin)

If they're good singers, I like them. (Chloe)

I like Rihanna because ... her singing is very nice. (Zara)

The girls viewed the voice as a vehicle for emotional expression. Repeatedly, Molly and Fiona used the phrase “singing from the heart” to describe vocal authenticity, and to distinguish between authentic singers (Sam Smith, Beyoncé, Jess Glynne and Ariana Grande) and supposedly inauthentic stars (Nicki Minaj and Miley Cyrus).

[‘I’m Not the Only One’ by Sam Smith is] really like from the heart and it’s really like going out to everyone. (Fiona)

[Miley Cyrus] doesn’t sing from the heart or doesn’t put a lot of effort into it. (Fiona)

The expression “singing from the heart” is open to several interpretations. One interpretation is that “the heart” refers to non-physical attributes, such as the mind or the soul. This is likely to be the intended meaning, given that the heart is culturally associated with emotions. In this sense, “singing from the heart” refers to the voice as a vehicle for the singer’s innermost emotions. The girls valued this mode of performance because they believed it offered insight into the emotional lives of their favourite stars.

The phrase’s reference to the heart, a bodily organ, is also suggestive. This allusion grounds the act of singing within the physical realm, emphasising the bodily source of the voice (the lungs, throat and vocal cords). Understood in this sense, the phrase “singing from the heart” emphasises the corporeality of the voice. Unlike instrumental sound, vocal sound is the product of internal bodily processes, and this creates an air of mystique (Green 1997, 28; Jarman-Ivens 2011, 27). Arguably, this notion of vocal corporeality was crucial to the participants’ feelings of authenticity.

The perceived closeness of the voice to the body creates an impression of unmediated expression, a quality that Moore identifies as a signifier of first person authenticity (2002, 213). When a person sings, the sound (the voice) seems to emanate directly from the source



of production (the singer's body, which is seen to contain the self). This reflects the widespread belief that vocal expression is a sincere expression of the self (Jarman-Ivens 2011, 2; Koestenbaum 1991, 205).

The idea of the voice as an extension of the body is closely linked with patriarchal ideas of femininity, and it is significant that the girls mainly discussed vocal authenticity with reference to female stars – with the notable exception of Sam Smith. This reflects gendered cultural attitudes that situate women within the realm of the physical and the bodily (Bradby 1993, 157; Grosz 1994, 14; McClary 1991, 138–140), thereby presenting singing as inherently feminine and natural (Green 1997, 21–51; Mayhew 1999, 72–74).

In order to better understand what the participants meant by “singing from the heart”, it is worth considering which stars they identified as authentic and which they did not. The stars whom Molly and Fiona believed “sing from the heart” (Sam Smith, Ariana Grande, Jess Glynne and Beyoncé) are all known for their distinctive voices and vocal skill. This links vocal proficiency with the notion of emotional communication, cementing the idea of the voice as an authentic mode of expression. The performance style and image of these stars also broadly conforms to the traditional model of the solo singer, particularly the female pop star or diva. These performers are generally associated with conventional love songs and individualistic songs about inner strength and self-discovery. Arguably, these signs of conventional authenticity convey the impression that these stars intend to “sing from the heart”.

Another marker of authenticity was musical styles, specifically those associated with black culture, such as soul. Although young soul fans may not be consciously aware of this connection, it is likely that – to an extent – their perception of soul music will be influenced by it; the association of soul with blackness is widely accepted and culturally ingrained. For

example, when I asked Fiona how she knew that Sam Smith was “singing from the heart”, she explicitly invoked the link between soul music and authenticity:

‘Cause he’s a soul singer so like he’ll put a lot into making the song. A lot from his voice ... you can just tell that it’s all from the heart, and just the way he sings it.

Most likely inadvertent, such views reflect essentialist notions of Otherness, which continue to resonate in the popular imagination. Black music is still widely believed to be inherently ‘natural’ (Cook 1998, 6; Thornton 1995, 72; Warwick 2007, 11) and blackness, particularly black femininity, is constructed as bodily and animalistic (Railton and Watson 2011, 87–107).

It is also revealing to consider Nicki Minaj and Miley Cyrus, the two performers that Molly and Fiona identified as stars who do not “sing from the heart”, and who were viewed as inauthentic by many other participants. Considering their performance styles, it is likely that Nicki Minaj and Miley Cyrus do not always intend to “sing from the heart”. Instead they frequently adopt an ironic, deliberately artificial aesthetic in their work. Both stars are well-known, and indeed notorious, for their visually spectacular performances, which experiment with ideas of gender and sexuality. Arguably, their flamboyant performances and personae can be understood as examples of camp, particularly the referential vocal style and image of Nicki Minaj (McMillan 2015, 205).

Despite its origins in gay culture (Dyer 2002, 59; Hawkins 2009, 25–27; Horn 2012, 86; Taylor 2012, 68), camp is now firmly embedded in the mainstream and is commonly used by female pop stars (Dickinson 2001; Hawkins 2004; Horn 2012; Robertson 1996; Shugart and Waggoner 2008). Camp is generally understood to be a performance style that employs an inauthentic aesthetic (Bergman 1993, 4–5; Dickinson 2001, 344). More specifically, camp can be a form of parody, which uses irony, aestheticism, theatricality and humour to expose

the artifice of dominant cultural images (Babuscio 1993; Cleto 2000, 164; Dyer 2002, 60). In many cases, parody exaggerates the performativity of gender roles to enact a form of Butlerian gender critique (Shugart and Waggoner 2008; Taylor 2012, 67).

Given the prevalence of Romantic notions of authenticity, it is unsurprising that many listeners react with derision and distrust when confronted with performances that unashamedly celebrate artifice. Arguably, the camp performances of Nicki Minaj and Miley Cyrus invite a more complex reading than the torch songs of Sam Smith or the girl power anthems of Beyoncé; as Dickinson argues, “camp disregards standard modes of readership and gives its objects subversive qualities without worrying about whether they are ‘authentic’” (2001, 344). Not all audiences are familiar with camp aesthetics and, because camp performances can be read as both normative and resistant, some audiences may not recognise such performances as camp (Dickinson 2001, 345; Horn 2012, 94). My participants, for example, took the work of Nicki Minaj and Miley Cyrus at face value and seemed unaware of the camp possibilities of these performances.

At just 10 to 13 years old, my participants may not have engaged with many semantically complex works and may lack the necessary critical skills to offer anything other than a face-value reading based on first person authenticity. First person authenticity offers a simplistic model of cultural analysis, which effectively asks ‘is this person telling the truth?’ This straightforward moral standpoint may appeal to younger listeners.

### **Auto-tune: Musical Botox?**

As explained in the previous section, the girls valued the idea of the ‘natural’ singing voice extremely highly. Consequently, they opposed the use of vocal enhancement technologies, particularly auto-tune.<sup>2</sup>

Notably, my participants did not distinguish between cosmetic uses of auto-tune, which correct pitch imperfections, and aesthetic uses, which enhance the voice for artistic effect. Despite the increasing aesthetic application of auto-tune in popular music, auto-tune is most commonly understood as a corrective tool, and this was my participants’ understanding. Interestingly, they implied that auto-tune was instantly recognisable, suggesting that they were unaware of the prevalence of cosmetic auto-tune – it is used widely in popular music and is usually imperceptible. Because of this misconception, it is likely that they were mistakenly referring to aesthetic, rather than corrective, uses.

The girls’ discussions of auto-tune were highly moralistic, describing it as dishonest and deceptive.

They’re not actually telling you what they can sing like and then it’s lying to their fans.

(Sophie)

One participant, Amelia, was particularly outspoken about her stance on auto-tune:

I think it’s a bit like someone saying ‘oh, I’m really pretty’ but they’ve actually had Botox.

I don’t feel like [Adele] uses auto-tune as much ... I feel like her voice is quite real.

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<sup>2</sup> Auto-tune is a pitch correction technology that is widely used to amend vocal pitch imperfections. Auto-tune manipulates the frequency of specific notes, correcting the pitch whilst maintaining the original vocal quality.

I don't think people should be earning so much money when they've technically got like a robotic voice ... I just have a thing with it. I just don't like listening to auto-tune sometimes.

This quote demonstrates the blurring of boundaries between music's sonic meanings and extra-musical, contextual meanings. In it, Amelia refers to both contextual meanings ("I don't think people should be earning so much money when they've technically got like a robotic voice") and sonic meanings, which she understands as autonomous and inherent ("I just don't like listening to auto-tune sometimes"). This suggests that her interpretation of the sound of auto-tune is influenced by her subjective moral beliefs about the technology, which in turn are shaped by wider cultural discourses surrounding music, technology and authenticity. In other words, she dislikes the sound of auto-tune because she has a moral objection to it. This reflects Kramer's assertion that "musical meaning consists of a specific, mutual interplay between musical experience and its contexts" (2002, 8), as well as the work of other scholars who have emphasised the role of context in the interpretation of musical meaning (Green 1988, 1997; McClary 1991, 2000).

The girls' negative beliefs about auto-tune reflect the widespread view that the supposedly 'natural' human voice represents emotional authenticity (Mayhew 1999, 73). The girls believed that auto-tune undermined the idea of the 'natural' voice, reflecting the idea that "technology is opposed to nature" (Frith 1986, 264). Their attitudes also demonstrate their belief in the importance of unmediated expression. They believed that auto-tune corrupted the mediation process by coming between the sound source (the body) and the product (the voice).

The idea of technology as a 'corruption of the natural' is arguably gendered, reflecting patriarchal attitudes which link technology with masculinity, and naturalness with femininity

(Bradby 1993, 156). My participants believed that the ‘naturalness’ of female performers was highly significant. Their dislike of auto-tune arguably suggests that they conceived it as a masculine symbol, problematising the authentic feminine naturalness of the female singer. By invoking this gendered dimension, the participants asserted a highly gendered, feminine version of authenticity.

### **“Don’t Judge a Book by Its Cover”: Authenticity and Image**

In this section, I explore the participants’ responses to image. Many were keen to stress that they had little interest in the image or physical appearance of pop stars. Even when prompted, they denied that image was important to them and condemned those who cared about it.

People say ‘don’t judge a book by its cover’, and that’s what they’re kind of doing.

(Sophie)

I like their music, [it’s] not about what they look like really. (Lily)

I don’t personally ... think it’s that important because you’re not going to be listening to the image, you’re listening to the music ... (Amelia)

‘Anaconda’ and Miley Cyrus ... seems like it’s about how you look, not necessarily a song that’s come from their heart ... (Molly)

Imogen believed that she was less interested in image than other female fans. By concentrating on musical sound, she felt that she was going against the grain.

Girls like [One Direction] because of their image, not because of their songs ... I don’t really mind how they look ... I just ... listen to their songs.

Imogen's interpretation of this stance as resistant further reinforces the idea of musical authenticity as a dichotomy, with image in direct opposition to sound.

This effort to focus on musical sound suggests an attempt by the girls to gain cultural capital. As Cusick (1999) and Green (1988) note, within dominant cultural ideologies, the idea of "the music itself" (Cusick, 491–492) carries considerable prestige.

However, despite their claims to the contrary, the girls talked extensively about physical image. These discussions mirrored their discussions about music: they were mainly concerned with the dichotomy of real versus fake. Mostly, the girls condemned bodily enhancement, linking this with dishonesty.

[Nicki Minaj] wears a wig ... and it's no need for it ... she should be proud for who she is ... (Zara)

[Miley Cyrus is] fake. Like, she puts so much makeup on ... (Yasmin)

Dolly Parton ... she got all ... plastic surgery and things to make her look more prettier but I think she looked pretty when she just first started ... Miley Cyrus ... she tried to get away from the Hannah Montana image. I think they should just all just stay the same and stay natural ... (Jo)

In contrast, the girls preferred female artists with a more 'natural' appearance.

Iggy [Azalea] ... I don't think she'd put a lot of effort in. Which I quite like. (Imogen)

I prefer [Iggy Azalea] more than Nicki Minaj 'cause ... she doesn't wear wigs, it's just her natural hair ... (Selma)

[Jessie J] doesn't go over the top, she's natural ... she doesn't ... do surgery or she doesn't put ... so much fake stuff on. (Selma)

These statements present beauty products and body modification as deceptive. Whereas some audiences might perceive Nicki Minaj's outlandish wigs as an entertaining aspect of her camp performances, the girls saw them only as a façade. Like their beliefs about auto-tune, the girls' dislike of body modification may derive from a belief in the importance of unmediated expression. The girls considered body modification as a corruption of the natural, an obstacle which came between the source (the body) and the product (the image of the star).

Tellingly, most of the girls' discussions about image focused on female stars. This may well reflect widespread patriarchal attitudes to women which emphasise the importance of women's physical appearance (Warwick 2007, 73). They also position women as Other, presenting femininity as different from and inferior to masculinity (Grosz 1994).

The emphasis on the appearance of female stars may also reflect widespread patriarchal attitudes towards female musicians, particularly singers, who are typically objectified by audiences (Green 1997, 16; McClary 1991, 138). This means that the music of female singers is often judged on extra-musical factors, such as perceived attractiveness, and this can influence perceptions of authenticity.

Almost all of the girls expressed disapproval about the sexualised imagery of pop music, particularly in the work of Nicki Minaj and Miley Cyrus.

In the Miley Cyrus videos, they're quite weird and they're quite a bad influence.  
(Chloe)



Nicki Minaj is taking advantage of girls, and ... showing girls off to be something that ... they don't want to be. (Fiona)

I don't like [Miley Cyrus's] videos and I don't like her ... it's a bit sexual. (Jo)

Given that the girls associated authenticity with sound rather than image, the overtly sexualised images of these stars may have made them seem more inauthentic. As Green notes, "the more that sexual attractiveness becomes part of the delineations, the less respect is paid to the singer's ability to manipulate and understand inherent meanings" (1997, 40).

The girls' preoccupation with the image of female performers also suggests that they may identify with these stars. This idea is widely accepted in popular discourse; it is taken for granted that young people are influenced by pop stars, and this view is perpetuated by the media and politicians through debates about the supposed sexualisation of children. Although scholars have criticised the simplistic nature of this idea (Egan 2013), it is understandable that adolescent girls may be curious about femininity and the female body. From a young age, girls are taught to be aware of how they represent their bodies (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997), and many of the girls in my study admitted that they were insecure about their appearance. Stars provide an opportunity for girls to explore and observe different modes of bodily representation.

This self-identification is evident in Selma's statements about Ariana Grande's image:

I think that [Ariana Grande] puts too much makeup on ... if I was her, I wouldn't put as much makeup on, I would just look natural ...

In this quote, Selma puts herself in Ariana Grande's place, showing a remarkable degree of self-identification. Her language emphasises agency: she portrays both herself and Ariana Grande as individuals, each capable of controlling her own image. By drawing attention to

Ariana Grande's supposedly inauthentic appearance, Selma asserts her own authenticity by comparison. She uses this idea to claim a more empowered identity, which allows her to say to the world 'I am authentic'.

## **Discussion**

The version of authenticity that emerges from this study is a highly specific type of first person authenticity, based on the idea that music is a form of emotional communication that expresses the originator's inner self. This reflects dominant cultural ideas of authenticity, which position art as the product of a great individual. Such ideas rely on the Romantic notion that all individuals possess a true authentic self.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the girls' responses is their remarkably literal understanding of first person authenticity. Whereas some audiences may understand authenticity more vaguely as a vibe or "aura" (Thornton 1995, 30), my participants understood the concept to be a tangible characteristic with strict parameters.

In order for a musical work to be deemed authentic, the girls needed to believe that it reflected the performer's experiences, and they sought evidence that these experiences were genuine. They used this information to draw parallels between the star's musical output and private life, thereby constructing authenticity during the act of music consumption and confirming Meyers's assertion that "the blurring of the private/public distinction that occurs in celebrity media is essential for the maintenance of their star power" (2009, 892). As suggested earlier, this simplistic notion of authenticity may reflect the girls' cultural inexperience and their moralistic approach to the interpretation of cultural works, which was largely based on ideas of truthfulness.

The girls also took the notion of unmediated expression literally. Ideally, they believed that music production should be an uninterrupted process of mediation, from the sounding source, which they located in the performer's body, to the sung product. Consequently, they viewed auto-tune and other electronic effects as an obstacle, corrupting this process. They regarded image in much the same way, basing judgements of authenticity on the mediation of images, in this case, from the visual source (the body) to the product (the image of the star). Just as electronic effects were understood as a corruption of the star's 'natural' voice, body modification was seen to corrupt the star's 'natural' body. The participants did not recognise or acknowledge the aesthetic or artistic possibilities of vocal or body modification. Instead, all modification and enhancement was discussed only in terms of its ability to mask the 'natural'.

This valuing of the 'natural' indicates a fetishisation, a belief that authenticity belongs to the bodily realm. Again, this indicates a peculiarly literal understanding of authenticity, suggesting that the unaltered human body, and therefore voice, epitomises authenticity and 'realness'. Indeed, the idea of the 'unaltered' body in a 'natural' state is problematic since the girls' ideas of 'naturalness' themselves reflect a set of specific cultural practices. This idea goes far beyond Moore's (2002) notion of first person authenticity, instead echoing Fornäs's notion of "subjective authenticity" (1995, 276): "the striving for individual bodily presence in subjective authenticity can take the form of an anti-intellectual biologism that avoids all reflexivity in a mythologising return to pure nature" (277).

Why, then, did the girls uphold such a rigid understanding of authenticity, and what did they gain from this? For the participants, authenticity was a valuable musical currency which they used to make taste distinctions. Using the idea of authenticity to measure musical quality, the girls constructed their own hierarchies of value within mainstream pop music. As Cook

(1998), Frith (1996) and Keightley (2001) note, distinctions of value and authenticity are commonly drawn between popular music genres, such as rock and pop music. This study supports and extends this idea, demonstrating that specific audiences use distinctions of value within specific musical styles. This is particularly notable in the case of young female pop audiences, given that both adolescent girlhood and pop music are widely denigrated and are generally associated with artifice. The girls in my study used distinctions of authenticity to construct micro-hierarchies within a style that is not usually understood as authentic.

In many ways, the participants' literal understanding of authenticity led them to value the concept extraordinarily highly; they had exceptionally rigid standards when judging the authenticity of music and were always on the lookout for signs of artifice and deception. In this way, the girls' focus on authenticity could be read as an attempt, conscious or subconscious, to challenge the widespread characterisation of young female audiences as passive and uncritical, and to assert the value of the music that they enjoy. This could arguably be interpreted as a resistant act, providing them with an opportunity to cultivate a more discerning listener identity, which emphasises their ability to exert agency and make sophisticated taste distinctions. This identity offers the girls access to a powerful position that is not normally available to adolescent girls.

## **Final Reflections**

This study attempts to shed light on the workings of a central cultural concept in the musical lives of girls. However, a number of factors must be taken into account when interpreting my findings. The study uses data collected in focus groups and interviews with just 22 participants, and is not intended to represent the views of the wider population. Instead, my

findings offer insight into the perceptions of a specific musical audience, showing how this group of individuals understands and uses the concept of authenticity.

As with any fieldwork involving interviews, it is possible that the participants may have withheld or modified their views, consciously or subconsciously, because of my presence. There is, however, no significant evidence of this. Most of the participants were enthusiastic about taking part; they seemed keen to express their opinions and were remarkably frank.

The dynamics of the focus groups, however, were at times problematic. Some participants were not comfortable expressing themselves within the groups, probably because the participants already knew one another – a few of the girls admitted this in the one-to-one interviews. However, despite this, the focus groups yielded interesting data, and I primarily used them to introduce the study and build a relationship with the participants.

During the analysis, themes emerged that would be worth investigating in more depth. One such theme is authenticity and male pop stars. It is significant that the girls mainly discussed authenticity with reference to female pop stars. This seems to reinforce my argument that the participants had a highly gendered understanding of authenticity, reflecting patriarchal discourses that position singing as an inherently bodily act that is associated with femininity. Further studies could address this by exploring how young female listeners perceive authenticity in the work of male performers, comparing this with their ideas about authenticity and female pop stars.

The findings of my study also highlight the need to understand how the concept of authenticity operates in other cultural contexts. Further research could explore whether other popular music audiences subscribe to the same highly specific version of first person authenticity as did the girls in my study, and whether they also use discourses of authenticity to assert status, power and agency.

This study confirms that authenticity remains prevalent in the popular imagination. By shifting the focus from the object (the music) to the subject (the listener), my research provides new information about how young female pop audiences understand authenticity, and what they gain from using the concept. For the girls in my study, authenticity shaped their perception of pop music and their understanding of musical value. Moreover, because of the subordinate position of young female audiences and the widespread denigration of girl culture, authenticity was used by the girls as a tool of empowerment, emphasising listener agency and elevating pop music above its status as a low form of culture. This analysis opens up a debate about the possibilities of the concept of authenticity, particularly in relation to issues of gender, identity and power.

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