Social Modes of Listening: How Racial Identity and Music Shape Hook-up Culture and Erotic Capital at Same-Sex Colleges

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File Attachment: Social Modes of Listening: How Racial Identity and Music Shape Hook-up Culture and Erotic Capital at Same-Sex Colleges [1]

Imagine: you're a college student; it's Friday night and you and your friends plan to pregame in your room before heading over to a party you were all invited to.[1] *You make sure the drinks and playlist are ready for the pregame and include songs from Drake, Syd, Raevyn Lanae, Lizzo, Migos, Cassie, Frank Ocean and some current Top 40 songs. Your friends arrive, and after finishing a 6-pack of Angry Orchard Rosé Ciders, they're ready to go to the party. Although you know the party's host through a mutual friend, no one in your group knows what to expect. Nevertheless, you're all excited to attend because after a rough week you're all going to let loose and dance. Before leaving your room, you play "Suncity" by Khalid to get everyone excited for the party. You all start to feel the effects of the alcohol: you're a little buzzed and slowly start swaying to the infectious beat. As the song progresses, you begin to relax and allow yourself to be taken in by the music. You're normally self-conscious about how you look when dancing, but in this moment, you don't care because you feel safe being yourself and letting loose in front of your friends. After dancing to two more songs, you all head over to the party where you're greeted by the sounds of people drunkenly yelling the lyrics of "Primadonna" by MARINA. This isn't what any of you were expecting, but you all decide to give the party a chance. In the hour that you and your friends have been at the party, most of the music that's been played are songs by SOPHIE, MARINA, Natalia Kills, QT, and La Roux. You don't recognize any of the songs played as dance music so you're pleasantly surprised when "MIA" by Bad Bunny starts playing. At this point you expect everyone to be dancing but no one does. Instead, everyone is engaged in conversations about the latest protest they attended, or a lecture that they thought was inspiring and thought provoking. At this point, you all agree that the pregame in your room was more fun and decide to leave.*

The scenario outlined above is one that is all too familiar to the students I interviewed at Bryn Mawr, Smith, and Wellesley Colleges. Many of the students, especially students of color, with whom I spoke described nearly identical experiences at parties they attended. Having been a queer student of color at Wellesley, I was familiar with this experience. The fact that individuals attending different schools reported similar party experiences interested me and made me want to understand music's effect on social participation in queer spaces.

I first began researching music's relationship to queer nightlife scenes in 2017 while still a student at Wellesley. I conducted ethnographic research on the student bar, Punch's Alley – commonly known as "The Pub" – as part of a class project.[2] The Pub functioned as a queer nightclub on Thursday nights – also known as "pub nights" – and was an epicenter for queer hookup culture at Wellesley.[3] I gathered ethnographic data from student interviews which highlighted the importance of music in mediating the social dynamics of queer hookup and party culture as well as who feels comfortable engaging in the hookup culture within such spaces.[4] However, my search for scholarly material on this subject revealed that: 1) very little ethnographic musical scholarship exists on college-aged students; 2) none of it looks at historically same-sex colleges; and 3) none exists on queer nightlife scenes on college campuses.

While my initial findings demonstrated the important role music plays in mediating the social dynamics of queer hookup and party culture as well as who feels comfortable engaging in such spaces, they also raised additional questions about the roles racial identity and cultural background play in this context. The students of color I consulted expressed concerns about participating in predominantly white spaces, like The Pub, because they did not feel welcomed or safe. Unfortunately, this is a common problem for many students of color who attend predominantly white institutions (PWIs). They often have difficulty navigating social environments within these institutions because most student spaces were designed for a predominantly white student population. As a result, students of color find these spaces uncomfortable since they were not designed for them or meet their needs.

Most of the queer students of color I interviewed stated that they often felt othered and objectified in predominantly white queer spaces due to the erotic capital their white peers ascribed to their intersectional identities. Based on these accounts, it became clear that further examination of these scenes was needed to understand how racial identity influences how queer students of color are treated. Further study provided new insight into the interplays of music, historically same-sex institutions, social participation, queer nightlife, and racial identity.

This article explores how music, space, racial identity, and cultural background intersect, and informs who feels included/excluded from queer hookup culture at Bryn Mawr, Smith, and Wellesley Colleges. Using institutional data and student policies, student interviews and playlists provided by students I collected over a two-year period, I examine: 1) what effect school policies have on the formation of party culture; 2) the relationship between music, space, and party culture; and 3) music's relationship to hookup culture and erotic capital.[5]

To do so, I draw upon the works of scholars in the fields of ethnomusicology, sociology, musicology, Black, and queer studies to understand the role of music, racial identity, and cultural background in queer hookup spaces. My findings reveal that the answer is more nuanced and complex than anticipated. While many of the scholarly frameworks on the social use of music, such as Thomas Turino (2008) and Ola Stockfelt (2006) contextualize music's relationship to identity formation, space, and social participation, they do not address how race influences the social affordances of music, and they lack the needed vocabulary and nuance to address the social isolation felt by people of color (POC) whose listening practices are shaped by their cultural backgrounds. To address this oversight, I incorporate scholars whose work utilizes intersectional frameworks to discuss blackness within queer studies (Johnson 2016; Reed 2016), analyze the experiences of POC in white hegemonic power systems (hooks 1992; Cohen 2004; Story 2016), and investigates the links between music and race (Rodano and Bohlman 2000) to provide a more complete reference point from which to draw conclusions.[6]

Student Life Policies and Campus Cultures

Before delving into hookup and party cultures at Bryn Mawr, Smith, and Wellesley Colleges and how music and racial identity fit into them, I will provide some historical context about each college and their student social life policies. Bryn Mawr, Smith, and Wellesley are members of the Seven Sisters Colleges that were founded between 1837 and 1889. Guided by religious beliefs and practices, their mission was to educate women and provide them with similar opportunities only afforded to men at the Ivy League schools – which helped distinguish them from the 50 other women's colleges popping up across the country in the mid to late 19th century (Harwarth et al. 2005). At these colleges, student spaces, like dormitory common areas, were designed to discourage large group gatherings on campus in hopes of preserving women's purity (Harwarth et al. 2005). As a result, students wanting to socialize in large groups, had to do so off campus oftentimes at a neighboring men's college (Harwarth et al. 2005). These practices were in line with societal norms of the time; however, many legacies from that era, such as the design of common areas, still dictate how students socialize today.

Student Life Policies: Drugs and Alcohol

This brings me to Bryn Mawr, Smith, and Wellesley's current student life policies. My research and analysis of their dorm spaces, event, and drugs and alcohol policies aligned with the experiences of students I interviewed in regards to their ability to access their institutions' policies. It also revealed how instrumental these policies are to the formation of social life, and party and hookup culture at these colleges.

A reoccurring theme I heard was that student life policies, especially ones pertaining to parties, greatly affected queer hookup and party cultures at Bryn Mawr, Smith, and Wellesley. Many students, especially those from Smith and Wellesley, stated that the policies were inaccessible and detrimental to the formation of queer social life on their campuses, whereas Bryn Mawr students attributed their prolific party and hookup culture to their school's policies. These comments intrigued me and prompted me to review the policies myself. When I did, I immediately understood why students felt as they did. Bryn Mawr provides all incoming students with a student handbook during orientation that includes state and federal drug and alcohol laws, the college's own drug and alcohol policies, and general information on institutional resources available to students pertaining to drugs and alcohol. This level of transparency and accessibility allowed students to feel confident about their understanding and application of these policies.

Comparatively, Smith and Wellesley's drug and alcohol policies are less accessible and provide less detail. Smith's policy is centrally located on its website, though it was not easy to find. It provides general guidance on alcohol consumption but fails to educate students about state and federal drug and alcohol laws, or its purpose. Wellesley does not have a student handbook so locating their drugs and alcohol policies was even more difficult.

Wellesley's policy contains information about the purpose and intent of its policy but does not mention state or federal laws or provide information on institutional resources.

The inaccessibility of the policies coupled with their ambiguous language resulted in Smith and Wellesley students being the least informed about their school's student life policies which produced discomfort socializing in event spaces on these campuses. This point is important because understanding institutional student life policies is critical to students' perceptions about the number of spaces available for large social gatherings on campus, like parties, as well as their comfort level using these spaces. For example, Wellesley students believed that throwing parties in dorm common areas was prohibited – which is not true. Unlike Bryn Mawr and Smith, Wellesley does not have a formal party policy. The closest it come to one is its "Alcohol Use at Student Parties" statement which is found in the appendix to its drugs and alcohol policy:[7]

All events sponsored by students at which alcohol will be served must be registered in advance with the Office of Student Involvement. These procedures apply to all student events held in Wellesley College common spaces, including, but not limited to, parties, receptions, dinners, mixers, or other social events sponsored by student groups associated with the College.[8]

Student Life Policies: Events and Parties

My ethnographic data also revealed that the degree of transparency and accessibility of event policies at each college directly correlates to the creation/proliferation of social life on each campus. For example, Smith students were more knowledgeable of their school's policies than their Wellesley counterparts, however they rarely utilized common spaces for parties or more intimate social gatherings because the onus of securing and preparing the event space fell on them and required a great deal of institutional oversight. Raina (they/them), a sophomore at Smith of African descent,[9] expressed frustration with Smith's party culture and stated that "much of the issue with Smith's party culture [stem from] the policies."[10] When I asked for clarification, they explained the various types of parties that are permitted under the current policy; they further added that Smith's party guidelines adversely affect students of color:

One of [the party types] is a house-specific party wherein the houses complete their regular traditions and they're simple parties. They're boring. Smith dining will do special catering for it. It's very lowkey, everything ends at like 11. And that's basically just to uphold the [tradition of having a party] in every house so that when Smith students grow older and they have children, they would go live in the house and do the same traditions that they had done thirty years prior. The other type of party that we have [are] house parties. They're registered still, and what I mean by registered is that you fill out a form through the Office of Student Engagement, you inform them that you are having a party, you are telling them that if you want to have a registered party, everyone at campus has to be available to attend the party. There's no restrictions so, if I wanted to have a party and I only wanted POC, I could not register it. They would not approve my party because it's not open to the white students on campus. So, if I wanted to have a party that was POC-only, it would technically be an illegal party. So, this registered party has campus police on standby outside the house throughout the whole party. Campus police will just sit in their car with their bright lights on and just stand outside any entrance of the house that is held in. And the parties have to end at about 12:30. Usually Smith students end parties at that time anyway so that's not that big of a deal. And so, those are the two types of parties that you can legally have on campus. Otherwise, you have an unregistered party and that basically just is like–with these registered parties, you can't serve your own alcohol and that is the main proponent of why a registered Smith party is bad, because you cannot serve alcohol at a registered party. So, an unregistered party is usually thrown in the basement of these houses... [If] it happens in a basement, maybe there's free liquor and those are bad...The main issue with the policy is [that] there's literal policing at these parties. It's very intimidating to walk up into a house and expect to be relaxed and have fun when there's a [campus police] car waiting outside to get you in trouble at any second. The lights are bright [and] it's a dark, dark, dark campus.

Raina also explained that under Smith's event policy a gathering of 10 or more people is considered a party and must be registered with the College.[11]

Gatherings of 10 or more students in student rooms or apartments are considered parties and must be registered with the coordinator of house events in the Department of Residence Life. In a residence house, the event must be held in a public space of the house and is not to include the house corridors or student rooms.[12]

Interestingly, another sophomore named Sonia (she/her), who identifies as Black, also mentioned that parties not registered with the Office of Student Engagement are deemed “illegal.”

H: even if you just have a party or a kickback in your room, you’d have to register it if it’s more than eight people?[13]

S: Yeah, but no one ever does. Like I’ve had a lot of people in my room before and… I never registered it or anything. People don’t really register.

Sonia’s and Raina’s accounts demonstrate a clear disconnect between the rules that govern student socializing, and the actual types of socialization that occurs at Smith. Predominantly white queer spaces feel unsafe and unwelcoming to queer students of color and makes them feel that their options for spaces to socialize are limited. The twin requirement to register all gatherings of 10 or more people and open them to the entire campus creates institutional barriers for queer students of color who wish to host events exclusively for their community.[14]

Though Smith’s event policy is applicable to all students, Sonia and Raina’s anecdotes coupled with Smith’s predominantly white student body (Table 1) is illustrative of an institutional bias that caters towards white students and normalizes the ways in which they socialize. While queer students of color could theoretically create spaces (like parties) exclusively for their members, as Raina articulated, they are not comfortable doing so because they do not feel as though Smith’s policies were designed with them in mind.

	White	Asian-American	International	Latinx	Black	Multicultural	Pacific Islande Unknown
Wellesley	36.4%	20.6%	13.5%	12.6%	6.2%	6%	5%
Bryn Mawr	37%	12.3%	23%	9.2%	6.1%	5.5%	8.2%
Smith	47.7%	9.3%	13.9%	11.5%	6.6%	4.8%	6.9%

Table 1: Composite Overview of the Student Demographics at Wellesley, Bryn Mawr, and Smith Colleges.[15]

This was one of the many differences I noticed between Smith, Wellesley, and Bryn Mawr and it made me wonder if social life for students of color at Smith would be different if they did not face such stringent policies that systematically disenfranchised them. Smith’s use of policies that create a false sense of inclusivity perpetuates the notion of whiteness as normative while simultaneously othering non-white identities through social barriers. As Black and queer theorist Kaila Adia Story notes, coupling the notion that whiteness is unraced with systems of power, like white supremacy, allows white people to distance themselves from their racial privilege while simultaneously designating people of color as the racial other (Story 2016). Through this racial dynamic, white people can maintain “an economic, social, political, and cultural advantage over people of color” (Story 2016).

I also found it interesting that both Smith’s and Wellesley’s student life policies do not clearly outline and provide guidance about how students can and should socialize in on-campus event spaces. Yet, when addressing policy violations, they are very clear and detailed about the types of actions and activities that violate their policies. This is not the case for Bryn Mawr who clearly defines the term party as it relates to its campus:

A Party is an event, wet (with alcohol) or dry (without alcohol), where 30 or more people gather at one time in a residential dorm space. Wet parties cannot be held in public spaces. Public spaces include: The Campus Center, College Hall, Goodhart, Applebee Barn, Cambrian Row, Schwartz Gymnasium, all corridors, stairwells, landings, basements, attics and courtyards, laundries, all dining halls, Pembroke Dance Studio, classroom buildings, the Computer Center, The Dorothy Vernon Room, Canaday Library, and outdoors on college grounds. Bryn Mawr Student Handbook (2018: 59).

Danielle (she/her), a white senior at Bryn Mawr, explained the logistics of throwing a party. Students must register

the event with the Student Activities Office and have a functioning personnel plan that assigns the roles of host, server, and bouncer.[16] To help students navigate and understand this system and its rules, the college uses a level system that is included in the handbook (Table 2).

Level	Occupancy	Number of Hosts Needed	Number of Bouncers Needed	Number of Servers Needed	Approved Residence Hall
1	30-60 people	2	None	2	Batten, Brecon, Denb Merion, Pembroke E and West, Radnor Erdman, Rhoads No and South, Rockefel
2	61-100 people	2	3	2	Erdman, Rhoads No and South, Rockefel
3	101+ people	Not specified (Hosts must meet with Student Activities and Campus safety 2 weeks prior to event)	Not specified (guests are required to sign in)	Not specified (21+ must wear wristbands)	Not specified

Table 2: Bryn Mawr's Party Levels System Overview. Bryn Mawr Student Handbook (2018: 60).

In addition to registering the event and having the appropriate personnel, everyone – including "the bouncers, servers, and hosts – must "be party-trained, which is just like an online alcohol training" and needs to "wear a button that says Bouncer or Host."

It is clear that how a school enforces its student life policies plays a role in mediating the hookup and party culture on its campus as well as the level of comfort students, especially those of color, feel participating in them. As seen above, students at these colleges experience their institution's policies in both positive and negative ways. Wellesley's and Smith's policies foster social environments where queer and non-white students feel unsafe and unwelcome. At Smith, student policies mandated inclusivity and criminalized unsanctioned gatherings which had the unintended consequence of making students of color feel more marginalized and unsafe since they were not allowed to congregate and form community spaces exclusively for themselves. In contrast, Bryn Mawr's policies encouraged students to safely interact with each other at parties and foster inclusive social environments for all identities.

Queer Culture at PWIs

Even though all three colleges have policies that in some form or fashion create obstacles for students of color to connect and socialize, the broader challenge for queer students of color is how to navigate their institution's social and event policies in a manner that feels authentic and retains their individual and collective agencies.

When I asked non-white students to describe their school's queer culture, they responded that it was "very white." They often mentioned their struggles navigating queer spaces where their white classmates placed value on their racial identity in a fetishistic way which made maintaining a sense of self that felt authentic difficult. For example, Wrenn (they/them), another sophomore at Smith and a student of Latinx-descent, remarked that they felt that Smith's queer culture seemed "very limited." They noted that "most everyone I would say who goes to Smith is queer, which is very interesting because it's not that way at a lot of schools," but "when you think about queer culture at Smith, it doesn't include everyone." They asked me if I understood what they meant, and I responded that I did. I recounted that during my first visit to Smith in the Fall of 2018, I was struck by the campus' lack of

diversity. In retrospect, my initial observation and Wrenn's description of Smith's queer culture made sense because, as the demographic breakdown above showed, white students comprise the majority of Smith's student body.

Wrenn's response to my question gave me a better understanding of the campus and also a sense of how their experiences in this subculture shaped their perceptions of their college experience as a whole. However, their description of Smith's queer culture as limited and "dominated by white lesbians," also gave me the impression that they felt excluded from Smith's queer social scene because they did not fit the stereotype of the typical queer Smith student. When I commented that I, as well as other Wellesley students, shared similar sentiments about the queer culture at Wellesley, Wrenn nodded in agreement and then remarked that white people have been normalized as "the standard of queerness" and is probably what people think of when they envision queerness at Smith. This particular exchange interested me because it echoed points made by Alison Reed and Story that the voices of queer POC, in this case students, are largely erased from white social spaces, which in this case are PWI's. When I commented that it sounds like Smith's queer social hierarchy favors white lesbians, Wrenn enthusiastically agreed, adding that they felt that Smith's queer culture was "dominated by upper-middle class queer white women." Their description of Smith's queer culture sounded almost identical to that of students at Wellesley and Bryn Mawr, which also have predominantly white student populations.

Beyond the erasure of POC's from queer spaces – which are often imagined as white – the students I spoke with also expressed feeling objectified by their white peers. Like other predominantly white spaces, POC do not experience the same level of comfort or privilege as their white queer counterparts in such spaces because they often feel othered and erased while simultaneously fetishized by their white classmates because of the erotic capital ascribed to them (Green 2008). As Wrenn noted, this is especially true for non-white and non-cisgender students, like themselves, who often feel like their intersectional identities are further fetishized in white queer environments. For instance, most of the masculine presenting students of color described being fetishized and objectified by white queer students who often saw their combined identity of non-white and masculine gender identity as extremely attractive and desirable. The multiple levels of objectification and fetishization students like Wrenn and other masculine presenting students of color experience in white queer spaces (i.e., parties) detracts from their individual agency and justifiably makes them feel uncomfortable.

Soundtrack to Queer Nightlife

Cultural Modes of Listening

A common refrain I heard from students of color was that large queer campus parties were not fun or the same as parties they would attend at home in part because most were thrown by their white peers and the music selected was either Top 40s songs or throwback music – which didn't live up to their expectations, or standards of what they considered a party. For many non-white students, the music played in dance and party spaces did not fit within what Stockfelt terms their "genre-normative mode of listening" (2006).[17] This mode of listening is shaped by the environment in which one grows up which, for many non-white students, does not include Top 40s songs – or other music popular to predominantly white listeners.

For instance, Donna (they/them), a senior at Wellesley who identifies as Black, worked at The Pub, and described the music played at pub nights as either very dated or a mix of recent Top 40s songs.[18] When asked for examples they responded that The Pub would have Akon, Chris Brown, and Drake themed pub nights and that "they did a lot of Justin Timberlake nights" as well. Sonia and Raina also shared similar stories about Smith parties. Raina, in particular, told me that they felt that "every Smith party turns into a throwback party without that being announced as the theme." They explained that the music played was mostly "2007 to 2012 throwback music" which they felt gave the parties a "middle school vibe, because usually the lights are on [and] not a lot of people are there, and they're standing and they don't know how to dance." Here is how Raina described a typical Smith party scene:

H: So like, it's not really an environment that lets you have parties even though you technically have the space for them.

R: People don't show up so it's like an empty room with music playing really loudly. It's just people standing in a corner, and since it's this really embarrassing old middle school throwback, it's like exactly what, you know, a

middle school party looks like. It's students standing around like waiting for something to happen, waiting for the party to get good. And so it's just people talking like over really old music and so what you hear is academic talk and like, Chris Brown from 2009.

When I asked Raina to give me more examples of music typically played at these parties, they replied that it was a mix of mostly throwbacks and some contemporary music. For example, they mentioned that one "would for sure hear early Lady Gaga [and] Katy Perry" but also added that popular music, like trap, and a lot of Drake would also be played because the "white people here love Drake so Drake is at every party." They went on to say that they found this trend "really interesting because it's not stated in the theme that it's a throwback party but that is what you're hearing."

I was intrigued by Raina's observation because it echoed a recurring theme I noticed across my interviews. Regardless of the school, the music played at parties is dominated by songs that are at least seven years old even though more contemporary music is available. Interestingly, Sonia agreed with Raina's observations about Smith parties, but told me that a different trend occurs at queer parties. According to Sonia most of the queer parties turn "into kick-backs even though they were supposed to be parties." When I asked her to explain what she meant, she replied that it is typical to hear a lot of pop music, like Charli XCX, or SOPHIE or "just very weird" music that is "still pop and it's still upbeat but…Very white queer."

Donna, Raina, and Sonia all described these parties as "very white" and that mostly "white queer people" would be present. Donna grew up in a multicultural community in Atlanta where music served as both a link to cultural heritage and social gathering device. The music that they heard in parties at home, like "hip-hop, neo-soul, rap, reggae"– in other words, black music – was strikingly different from the music they heard in The Pub. Donna explained that "different genres of black music" was consumed "by a variety of demographics back home," including white people who lived in the area. They continued, "coming up here, the music that was being played in The Pub was like older, and like something that I would consider outdated, like music from like two years ago." To Donna, who was accustomed to hearing recently released music at parties and other social gatherings, "it felt like [The Pub] had gone back in time." Donna's experience exemplifies how queer parties, and the hookup culture they foster, do not feel inclusive to students of color. This disconnect between genre-normative modes of listening and the perceived normative social scene is yet another illustration of how predominantly white institutions, like Wellesley, Smith, and Bryn Mawr, can be isolating to students of color.

As I have noted, these spaces are predominantly white, thus students of color are not afforded the same opportunity to make similar spatial relationships to these spaces nor can they translate the social cues embedded within the music because they do not possess the appropriate cultural mode of listening for these white queer environments. Stockfelt argues that the mode of listening that the listener adopts in any situation is dependent on how the person chooses to listen (Stockfelt, 2006). To choose how one wants to listen, one must first possess the adequate mode of listening required to properly do so. However, as highlighted above, students of color are not given the option to choose which mode of listening they want to adopt because they do not possess the adequate mode of listening for the situation.

The twin dynamics of not being able to relate to the social cues expressed in the song, coupled with the prevalence of white students at the party creates an indirect social barrier between students of color and their white counterparts. As a result, students of color feel othered in predominantly white parties because they are unable to understand the expected social conventions that are relayed through the songs played. This in turn magnifies their impression that the space is not meant for them and that they are not welcomed.

DJs and Throwback Culture

With this in mind, I will now turn to the playlists heard in these party spaces to highlight my point. According to Danielle, there are "a couple students who are known to be really great DJs" at Bryn Mawr. She shared two different Spotify playlists that two of her friends created for parties. Both of her friends are students of color and are highly sought after to spin at house parties because they are "really great at curating playlists" and "people will come to hear them DJ because they know they're going to choose really great music." One of the playlists Danielle shared with me was created by her friend, Asa and is titled, "House Party." It features music from notable 1990's Hip-Hop artists like JAY Z, 50 Cent, N.W.A., 2Pac, Ice Cube, The Notorious B.I.G., Run–D.M.C., Salt-N-Pepa, Busta Rhymes, as well as songs by B2K, Mary J. Blige, Sean Paul, Ying Yang Twins, Backstreet Boys, Rihanna, Ja Rule, and Daddy Yankee. Many of the songs on the playlist, like "Promiscuous" by Nelly

Furtado, “Bump, Bump, Bump” by B2K, “Check Yo Self” by Ice Cube, “Pon de Replay” by Rihanna, and “Rompe” by Daddy Yankee are at least 10 years old and were popular in the mid/late 1990’s and early 2000’s.

This struck me as strange until Danielle explained that students at Bryn Mawr really love music-themed parties. Asa’s playlist was for a party that Danielle attended two years ago where music from the 1990’s and early 2000’s was the theme. She described the party as “one of the best parties [she’s] ever been to” and that “people really loved the music.” I heard similar responses from Wellesley and Smith students when discussing themed parties on their campuses. Apparently, students love to attend themed parties; however, they must be able to understand the theme’s cultural context. For example, if someone decides to host a Halloween themed party, most people know how to dress and what type of social behaviors to expect. In contrast, if someone decides to host an ABBA-themed party, only people familiar with the group and their music would understand the social context conveyed by this theme. Consequently, theme parties only make sense to participants who possess the appropriate knowledge about that environment.

Music-themed parties are also popular because they allow students to dress in clothing that typifies a period and gives them an opportunity to dance to music from that period with their friends. One would not expect themed parties to be so popular on college campuses; however, when viewed from the lens of Turino’s theory of the social participation of music, and Stockfelt’s modes of listening, their popularity makes sense. Musically themed parties owe their popularity to the important social cues they convey; additionally, they contextualize the expected rules of participation for the event. For example, Danielle enjoyed 1990’s and early 2000’s music-themed parties because the theme communicated the objective of the party – which was to listen to, and dance to, 1990’s and early 2000’s music as they did in middle school.

For many, middle school was an important period in their lives because it was when they began to socialize with their peers in group settings that foregrounded music (i.e. parties). It also represents a transitional time when they began to explore forms of socializing that up until that point, was considered exclusively for adults. The onset of puberty creates the need for additional social rules around bodily autonomy, and boundaries to become foregrounded in every situation where group activities, like dancing and parties occur. Social cues and behaviors that were previously given little or no thought suddenly become essential to understanding what is happening in one’s social environment. Behaviors that were previously considered platonic and socially acceptable, such as asking someone to dance, are now seen as romantic gestures and only acceptable in certain social contexts.

Hence, themed parties – like the 1990’s and early 2000’s parties Danielle attended – puts students at ease and gives them a sense of comfort due to their longing for a familiar social setting (i.e., culturally-dependent mode of listening). They know and understand the rules of engagement at these gatherings which eliminates the need to spend time and energy learning which social behaviors are acceptable, and which are not. In this way, music-centered party themes reproduce a genre-normative mode of listening that is familiar to participants and allows them to fully comprehend the social codes embedded within the music played (i.e., the participant’s social mode of listening). Even though themed parties communicate the social rules of engagement to participants, they may not feel inclusive to everyone because only participants familiar with the culturally-dependent mode of listening can understand the theme of the party.

Racially-informed Modes of Listening

Context-dependent spatial relationships

Having a cursory understanding of the environments in which queer hookup culture occurs and the different types of social gatherings that contribute to queer social environments is vital for any discussion of music’s relationship to queer hookup culture. My experience as an undergraduate taught me that social gatherings such as dorm parties and pregames can be differentiated from one another by three factors: 1) location, 2) the type of music played, and 3) the context in which the gathering takes place. In the scenario presented at the beginning of this article, I provided an example of a pregame and a dorm party. Both take place in dorm rooms but are distinguishable from each other because of context and, in this instance, chronology. A pregame can be considered a type of dorm party, however, students would not refer to it as such because pregames are considered gatherings that take place before going to a designated (read: primary) social event.

To illustrate this point, let's break it down: you and your friends met in your dorm room with the intention of attending a party together. This first type of social gathering can be distinguished as a pregame because: 1) the location is your room, 2) the artists you have chosen fit what Stockfelt calls the "genre-dependent mode of listening," and 3) you and your friends are gathering with the intention to drink and socialize in an intimate setting before heading out to the primary event (i.e., the party you were all invited to).

Even though you were all socializing and dancing with each other, the pregame was not the main objective of the evening (i.e., the primary event). Rather, it was a vehicle that helped your group reach the end goal of the night: attending the party. This distinction is important because it relates to what I call "context-dependent spatial relationships"– which tells a participant what type of social event they should expect to participate in, and is crucial for understanding how location, music selection, and culturally-dependent modes of listening determine what type of gathering occurs.[19] Additionally, it is also necessary for understanding how sound and space create environments where sexual behaviors can manifest.

Social Modes of Listening

Social modes of listening can be influenced by social identifiers, like queerness and racial identity. As I have stated, there are many factors that go into forming social modes of listening. For example, context-dependent spatial relationships (i.e., themed parties) can influence how one relates to the social environment as well as provide a point of reference for how to interpret the social behaviors exhibited in that environment. This raises the question, do queerness and race inform a person's social mode of listening?

I would argue that they do. As I have demonstrated, determining the appropriate context-dependent modes of listening is heavily influenced by the cultural and racial environment in which one was raised. For example, Raina went to a party in their white friend's dorm room expecting it to be a dorm party but found that it was actually a kick-back. Raina did not consider this gathering a party because music by SOPHIE was playing and everyone was "sitting around, smoking weed, doing whippets, and literally just sitting and talking." SOPHIE's sound can be described as experimental electronic music. Picture listening to PC computer game music mixed with EDM and a range of disjointed voice samples. That is what it is like to listen to SOPHIE. Raina's white friend and Raina had different ideas about what constitutes "party music." For Raina, music by SOPHIE is out of place in a party designated for dancing because it does not have a clear rhythmic danceable pattern (i.e., does not fit their culturally-dependent mode of listening). On the other hand, it is appropriate for the sonic environment of a kickback (i.e., genre-normative mode of listening) because the music played at kickbacks is meant to fill space but not too much that it becomes foregrounded and overpowers conversation.

For many students of color, music by artists like Solange, Sampha, Raevyn Lanae, and SOPHIE fit the mode of listening associated with kickbacks because they create a "chill" and laid-back vibe commonly associated with this form of gathering. Music conveys the desired type of socialization and allows students, like Raina, to understand: 1) what type of socializing is taking place, and 2) the appropriate type of social behaviors. All the students of color I spoke with at Wellesley, Bryn Mawr, and Smith, agreed that the party Raina described would be considered a kickback because the vibe and sonic atmosphere expressed did not fit their criteria of a party.

On a similar note, Sasha (she/her), a white student from Wellesley, explained that she generally goes to pub nights when she has "something hard due that day" or wants "to get a dance workout in."[20] Unlike the other people whom I spoke with, Sasha is not uncomfortable going to pub nights by herself. She told me that she sometimes "just has the social stamina" to go by herself "and have that awkward period of time" where she has "no idea who is there." Other times she "generally [goes] with a buddy" or the 4 or 5 people with whom she went on a winter session trip. In my conversation with Sasha, we mostly talked about her music taste and what she thought about The Pub playlists. She described her taste as "more like alt rock, or oldies and early 2000's," and described the songs played on pub nights as "definitely not [her] taste" because it is "more like groovin' music" and not "jumpable."

Similar to playlists, the presence of a particular group of students in a party space can significantly influence the type of music played in that space – this relates back to the context-dependent spatial relationships. For instance, all the Wellesley students I interviewed agreed that the rugby team used to be the initiators of pub nights; a fact that is exemplified in this excerpt of my conversation with Sasha:

H: So, do you think whoever enters pub night kind of shapes the kind of music that's played?

S: Yeah, well for the most part. Like if Frisbee shows up the music stays a little bit more popping. But, if like I don't know. What's like a defining group that makes the music really slow down?

H: I don't know. I just keep hearing that generally whoever starts pub nights is typically rugby and that once rugby shows up then everyone else shows up.

S: Very true, but they show up from the hoop and sometimes they leave and go [back] to the hoop and you're like "where are all the friends?" As soon as there's a bad song everybody leaves and goes to the hoop and then you have to go rile them up and be like "come back!"

H: So, what would you describe as like a bad song?

S: A song that people don't know and people don't really want to dance to.

H: Do you have any examples? Like something that you were just like "yeah, this isn't really a good song to dance to."

S: The problem is that generally if I don't like the song, I also don't know the song… So, I guess an example would be if Eminem played like that wouldn't be a great song to dance to.

H: So, would you call Drake or the Weekend or someone along those lines like "less dancey" or more of a bad song to play?

S: Sometimes I think Drake works but like you can't have multiple Drake songs you know? You have to have like one and then four other songs and then like maybe another.

H: So Drake is more like going to listening parties as opposed to like "I came here to dance."

S: Yeah, because his music is just like you're trying to move in a circle and like you really can't because you just end up doing the stupid dance that he does on YouTube.

H: So, I guess kind of going back to what you were saying about how when more people show up the music kind of changes and is a little bit more slow, do you notice any kind of change (in the music) when a certain group of people enter? Like does the music change?

S: When people start to enter pub, which is often generally Rugby or Frisbee, the music at first gets faster and gets more dancey.

H: So that's what you would think about as like not good for dancing?

S: I would say that Rihanna could bridge that gap with some of her songs, but not necessarily all of her songs.

H: Like some of her newer stuff not as much?

S: Yeah, like her older stuff yeah. Because that's also stuff that you could scream the lyrics to at the top of your lungs in a drunken stupor, so like yeah. That's sort of like what I'm saying like 2008 to 2010 where people still know the lyrics [to songs].

H: So, things that you listened to in like middle school or high school?

S: Yeah! Where you had time to memorize lyrics because you would drive places and things like that.

H: So like things you heard on the radio a lot more?

S: Yeah, I guess like stuff from back in the radio days.

The genre-normative mode of listening is influenced by the cultural environment in which an individual was raised. Both Raina and Sasha enjoy upbeat music, but there are other sonic qualities, such as vibe and feel, that determine if a song can be classified as party music. For example, music by SOPHIE has an upbeat tempo that

can be likened to those found in conventionally agreed upon party songs; however, other sonic qualities, like feel and the vibe, would not meet Raina's criteria for what party music should sound like. Conversely, Sasha would likely define music by SOPHIE as party music because it meets her sonic criteria of being "jumpable."

Conclusion

As these narratives demonstrate, music has the power to function both as a social unifier and a signifier of who feels included or excluded from a space. They also demonstrate how queerness and racial identity can influence culturally-dependent modes of listening. Raina's and Sasha's stories shows that an understanding of the social environment as well as the type of social gathering, are equally important for determining who participates in queer hookup spaces and their level of comfort in doing so. This is an important distinction because it relates to context-dependent socializing, which informs a participant of what type of social event they will join. As my findings suggest, music played in social settings are differentiated from each other by location, musical selection, and its context-dependent mode of listening. Furthermore, we see that in all social environments in which students participate, music dictates the social context because it communicates the types of social behaviors expected and required in a given situation. Understanding how location, music selection, and the context-dependent spatial relationships determine the type of gathering that occurs is essential for understanding how sound and space create environments where sexual behaviors can manifest.

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Notes

[1] Pregame is colloquial term used to describe a social environment where one consumes alcohol in advance of attending a larger social event. It can be used both as a verb and noun. A larger discussion on pregames and hookups in co-educational setting is given in Lisa Wade’s *American Hookup* (2018).

[2] This work is titled "The Social Modes of Listening: How Racial Identity and Music Shape Hook-up Culture and Erotic Capital at Same-Sex Colleges [11]." It was presented at the 2018 annual meeting of the Northeast Chapter of the Society for Ethnomusicology and was awarded the Lise Waxer Undergraduate Writing Prize for best student paper.

[3] In a 2016 article for *The Guardian*, Lisa Wade, who has conducted extensive research on hookup culture in American universities and colleges, provides a succinct working definition of hookup culture that aligns with my usage of the term in this article. She states that "hookup culture is an environment that idealizes and promotes casual sexual encounters over other kinds, regardless of what students actually want or are doing."

[4] The term "party" is ubiquitously used at all three schools to refer to different forms of socializing that revolves around party environments. At Wellesley and Smith, the term "party," in part, appears to be driven by policy distinctions about places where students may socialize. However, the distinctions as to the subcategories of parties appears to be student driven and not administratively derived. This is an interesting observation because it indicates that party culture is universal since students are the definers and designators of what is considered party culture. I find this explanation credible because certain terms, such as kickback, are used in the same way by students at all three colleges. This suggests that at all three schools there is a shared understanding amongst students of how party culture is organized.

[5] This work underwent Wellesley College's IRB review process and was approved. In accordance with the approved consent form distributed to participants, all names were changed to protect their privacy. In total, I interviewed three students from Smith, two from Bryn Mawr, and included 2 Wellesley student interviews that I repurposed from my 2017 research paper on Punch's Alley. The Wellesley students whose material is presented in this work were all given copies of the IRB consent and agreed to have their experiences included in this paper.

[6] The research presented in this article is taken from my senior undergraduate honors thesis, titled "The Social Modes of Listening: How Racial Identity and Music Shape Hook-up Culture and Erotic Capital at Same-Sex Colleges," which was conducted advised by Professors Petra Rivera-Rideau and K. E. Goldschmitt, and was awarded the 2019 Billings Award in Music by Wellesley College. This research received no funding and, as a result, I relied on interviews to gain an understanding of Bryn Mawr and Smith's queer hookup and party cultures.

[7] Wellesley's drug and alcohol policy does not define the types of social events covered by the policy, nor does it codify its guidelines or resources for students which makes it difficult for them to ensure that they are complying with the college's social policies.

[8] Wellesley College Student Alcohol and Other Drugs Policy, Appendix A.

[9] Some students didn't disclose how they identify racially so I've decided to use terms like "student of African-descent" or "student of Latinx-descent" instead of assuming their racial identity.

[10] The referenced states: "Each undergraduate Smith student is a member of the social system and is welcome to participate in all social events taking place on campus and in residential houses. The social system is funded through the student activities fee (SAF) and by the college" (Smith College Social Events Policies, Procedures and Guidelines).

[11] According to students, rooms at Smith can hold up to 15-20 people.

[12] Smith College Social Events Policies, Procedures and Guidelines.

[13] A kickback is a social gathering where music is played in the background while everyone engages in conversations.

[14] My conversations with Sonia, Raina, and Wrenn revealed that Smith students are more likely to have “illegal” parties because they have autonomy over who is allowed to attend, the music played, and the venue. To reiterate Raina’s earlier point, registered parties provide institutional benefits such as event space and funding. They emphasized that this form of regulation not only creates obstacles and additional challenges for historically disadvantaged groups, but also forces them to gather in spaces without adequate resources and which could also be deemed “unsafe.” An unintended consequence of these requirements is that certain groups of students (like students of color) who are more likely to host unregistered parties, as a way to circumvent the restrictions registered parties impose, are stigmatized by the institution for violating its policies. While it is important to note that this problem is not exclusive to historically disadvantaged groups, the impact appears to be most felt by students of color who are presented with little or no options for sanctioned safe social spaces by their institution.

[15] Information for this table was gathered from Offices of Institutional Research at Wellesley, Bryn Mawr, and Smith Colleges.

[16] The number of hosts, bouncers, and servers required for a party is dependent on the size of the function and whether alcohol will be served. Hosts are given an extensive list of responsibilities that include communicating the party details to the dorm president, as well as coordinating with housekeeping to ensure that the space is restored to its original condition. Additionally, hosts are tasked with managing all the event logistics while server and bouncer responsibilities are restricted to the party itself. Server tasks include serving alcohol to guests that are 21 years or older, monitoring the alcohol consumption of guests during the event, and marking guests’ hands every time they are served.

[17] In his article 2006 “Adequate Modes of Listening,” Stockfelt postulates that different listening practices, or modes of listening, are connected to the specific listening situation in which they are used. What he means by this is that how people relate to, and experience music is shaped by the environment in which they are listening. He defines adequate listening as the act of hearing music according to a given social situation, and the “predominant sociocultural conventions of a subculture to which the music belongs.” He expands upon this point by introducing the concept of “genre-normative modes of listening” which he defines as the environment one most associates as the appropriate listening situation for a specific genre of music.

[18] Donna is one of the Wellesley students I originally spoke with in 2017 as part of my Punch’s Alley research. Their interview was repurposed for this work.

[19] This term adapts Stockfelt’s language to examine the connection between spatial relationships, identity, and cultural-dependent modes of listening.

[20] Sasha is another Wellesley student I originally spoke with in 2017 as part of my Punch’s Alley research. Their interview was repurposed for this work.

Links:
[1] https://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/social_modes_of_listening_final_pdf_1.pdf
[2] https://www.brynmawr.edu/sites/default/files/migrated-files/2018-19_Handbook_Web_0.pdf
[3] https://web.archive.org/web/20050204110037/http:/www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/PLLI/webreprt.html
[4] https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373711
[5] https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373711-003
[6] https://www.smith.edu/about-smith/institutional-research-smith-data
[7] https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373711-019
[8] https://www.wellesley.edu/sites/default/files/assets/departments/studentlife/files/wellesley_college_aod_policy_final_appendix_a.pdf
[9] https://www.wellesley.edu/sites/default/files/assets/departments/studentlife/files/wellesley_college_aod.pdf
[10] https://www.wellesley.edu/sites/default/files/assets/departments/instresearch/files/cds_2018-2019-completed_jsj_edits.pdf
[11] https://repository.wellesley.edu/object/ir864