Rafal Zaborowski

Music Generations in the Digital Age

Social Practices of Listening and Idols in Japan

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Acknowledgements

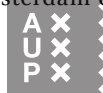It has been a long concert.

I thank all my participants in Aichi and Tokyo who generously invited a stranger to accompany them in their homes, workplaces and leisure spaces. I wish I could thank you by name. Thank you also to Ian Condry, Shinkai Makoto, Ogawa Tomohiro, Kawaguchi Noritaka, and members of cultural centres in Aichi, who opened many doors for me in my fieldwork.

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Nothing would happen without Masaki. You are awesome.

Matilda, never change.

I love you both.

Preface

'Mum, what's that song that goes "Am-beh, am-beh?"'

It was Poland in the mid-1980s and I was three, maybe four. My mother didn't know. It took, probably, a few weeks before the song was on one of the two television channels again (or was it on the radio?), and my father and I happened to listen to it together.

This is my first music-related memory. The second must have happened not long after that. I was in a music store, in a long queue, lifted up by my mother to a tall man behind the register, so I could proudly ask: 'Can I have Michael Jackson's album, please?'

'Am-beh, am-beh', as readers might have guessed by now, had been, of course, 'I'm bad, I'm bad', the chorus line from Jackson's bestseller hit song 'Bad'. It was the title song of his 1987 legendary album, and apart from the US, it charted in Canada, UK, New Zealand, and several European countries. I didn't know anything about that at the time, naturally. I was just happy we were able to get the album (a vinyl record) and I could sing along to the tune at home. This was the first meaning-making through music that I can recall. Whereas the line 'I'm bad' has been interpreted by music experts as Jackson's attempt at 'roughing up' his image and departing from his gentler pop style, for me, 'am-beh, am-beh' meant something cool, flashy and exotic. It also marked the beginning of my burgeoning music collection.

By the time I was ten, indulged by my parents I had amassed a collection of albums (now on cassette tapes). At the time, popular music (largely from the US, UK and Western Europe) was starting to become widely available in Poland, and it was cheap too, as in the absence of copyright law, the cassette tapes were usually pirated and sold unofficially at markets and fairs. There was rarely a period of silence; when a cassette ended, I would just flip it to the other side and push 'play' again. Unsurprisingly, the songs stuck in my head and, since I could not understand English, the foreign songs spurred a myriad of original interpretations of what I thought they meant.

As the music accompanied my everyday activities, I sang and I listened, recorded and dubbed. I used music to measure time (as all tapes are the same length) and to provide the soundtrack to the wars my toy soldiers enacted. And of course, I learned my first English phrases through music – some of them correct and some terribly ungrammatical. I accepted and used both, good English and bad English, and in some cases it took me years to realise those mistakes (and to understand what the song lyrics really said).
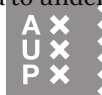
In time, I learned my first Japanese words through songs as well, only to be embarrassingly told, in Japan, that I spoke Japanese like a teenage girl from Tokyo. Of course I did – teen music stars had taught me well.

It is now 2023, and, like many others, I am periodically switching between various music streaming services. I have moved house numerous times over the past ten years, within the UK and outside of it. I have learned to keep the amount of my personal possessions in check, and therefore most of my music collection remains in Poland, in my old room in my parents' house. Some of it that is digitalised is scattered across my external hard disk drives and virtual storage. But mostly, listening to music now means for me either occasional digital purchases, or streaming songs through my phone or on YouTube. Which is to say, for me, listening to music does not happen as often as it used to.

Music practices change over one's lifetime, as do the meanings associated with these practices. This book investigates to what extent this is because of us: our lifestyles and surroundings, our upbringing and accumulated experiences, our socioeconomic and cultural capital, our age and gender, our families, our multiple professional and personal identities? Then, to what extent is this about music, dynamically changing in form and style? Finally, to what extent is this about the technology, which experienced a rapid shift from eight-tracks and cassette tapes, through to MDs and CDs, to MP3 players, lossless digital audio formats and streaming services (with vinyl present throughout)? And what is the role of the large, structural, globalising forces of power, embedded in what, according to Zygmunt Bauman (2000), is 'liquid modernity', what Anthony Giddens (1991) calls 'late modernity', and what Ulrich Beck (1999) dubs a 'risk society'?

In this book, I start with these questions to remind myself that music listening is complex, even though it sometimes feels simple and straightforward. It is complex, because as I write about how music practices reveal the patterns and meanings embedded in everyday life, I investigate the processes of interpretation and how they are situated vis-à-vis different sets of identities and emotions. My aim is to uncover how generation actualities shape listening practices – and more broadly, how the processes of cultural production, circulation and reception of music shape each other. These are all multifaceted issues, and in the following chapters I unpack them carefully, noting emerging challenges and limitations.

At the same time, it all starts with something seemingly straightforward – a reader and the text, a member of the audience decoding an encoded medium, a music listener hearing something that sounds unmistakably like 'am-beh, am-beh'.

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Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Cambridge: Polity.

Introduction: Listening, Music, Generations

Abstract: This chapter introduces the author's interest in the study, the aims of the book, and the approach to audiences and listening. The chapter also gives context to the presence of music in Japan and introduced theoretical, conceptual and methodological challenges surrounding research on Japanese music audiences.

Keywords: Listening, music, generations, audience, Japan, fieldwork

Dancing about Architecture?

Writing about music has always been difficult. Our personal experiences, just like mine detailed in the Preface, seem to suggest that music is hugely relevant to our lives, that it is embedded in and revealing of our routines and practices, that it is one of the meaningful threads in our everyday existence and the symbolic exchange. However, it is difficult to analyse what is actually going on when we interact with music, because on the one hand, music is very personal, and on the other, it is situated strongly in the social sphere of our lives.

When we think about music, we often imagine it as a social, cohesive force, much more than we do about new media. The academic and media debates suggesting that technology, and the internet, are driving us apart (Turkle, 2011) do not focus on music as often as they focus on social media or video games. Sure, moral panics have concerned various musical genres and artists (Jenkins and Maier-Katkin, 1992; Cohen, 2002; Wright 2000), but there has been much more research on cultures, sub-cultures, groups and collectives (now and in the past) which have told us that music can be understood as social behaviour or as mass communication, yet it is always strongly tied to group identity and belonging (Frith, 1978; Hebdige, 1979; Cashmore, 1984; Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000).
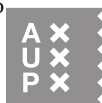
Is this still true in the digital music soundscape, where audiences interact with songs more in isolation from each other: through individual playlists, personalised streaming sites, personal headphones and devices – and yet, through their generational experiences? In 1936 Walter Benjamin famously argued that with mechanical reproduction a certain mode ('aura') of engaging with art disappeared, and this opened up the potential to experience art differently. It happened with the invention of photography and film, as Benjamin noted, but we can easily make the connection to recorded music (cf. Benjamin, 1977). We can discuss Benjamin's notions, and disagree on whether real authenticity disappeared along with the dawn of music record production or not, but most scholars and observers of music or media would probably nod in agreement with the argument that the availability of records allowed for a plethora of new, contextualised and culturally situated practices.

While I am unconvinced, then, that it is the internet that drives us apart and that it is the music that brings us together, I think that questions of unity and separation through technology are not the right questions to ask – and that more probably, following Doctorow (2008, pp. x–xi), it is that 'somewhere in the network and the music, there's a mix that brings us together because we're apart.' But as it is with other media analysed through the lens of communication studies, it is sometimes challenging to escape some of the simplified, contrasting alternatives: of whether music is cohesive or alienating, or of whether music does something to us (and then we focus on those effects) or we do something with music (and as such, we emphasise our aims and gratifications). Both approaches can end up disregarding the music completely, ignoring the complex ways it is produced, received, circulated, interpreted and negotiated.

So how do we know what the practices surrounding music reception are, and how can we go about investigating them? Some believe that the effects that music has on our bodies and minds can be measured by tracking the tangible changes in our bloodstream and respiration rates. Researchers from the Sonic Arts Research Centre at the University of Belfast conducted a three-month experiment with software called 'Emotion in motion', which measured electrodermal activity and heart rate signals as part of a public exhibition in Dublin (Jaimovich, Coghlan and Knapp, 2013). Similarly, there are medical researchers studying the physiological effects of music on the human body, looking at, for instance, how music affects blood pressure, sensitivity and circulation (Bernardi et al., 2006) – important findings, to be sure, but they don't tell us much about the practices of music or even
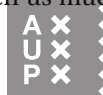
about the music itself, since no musical factors have been found to be relevant to the phenomena observed, apart from the tempo (faster music resulted in an increase in blood pressure and sensitivity, and vice versa). Analysis of physical reactions, then, misses the social and cultural aspect of the music experience. It does not answer the question of how music is revealing of our lives, and how it mediates and is mediated through our everyday routines. And while knowing that faster songs make our bodies more sensitive might have clinical value for practitioners and surgeons, it will not get us any closer to engaging with issues of symbolic power, identity or cultural exchange.

Looking for meaning in music, music scholar and educator Lucy Green (1988) differentiates between inherent and delineated meanings. The first refers to meanings that are in the music itself, in its structure and its elements. The second denotes meanings stemming from the connection between music and the culture it exists in; they are contextualised in the social sphere through the use of music. This parallels similar dichotomies in cultural and media studies – text and context, denotation and connotation – and just like the debates surrounding these, Green did not intend to suggest that inherent qualities of music could be easily distinguished from delineated ones. However, some scholars such as Richards (2003) still critiqued Green's distinction for seemingly suggesting that the inherent in music appears to be pre-social. For Richards (2003, p. 28), music is always socially produced and a product of choice between formal alternatives – and therefore it is never neutral, never inherent, and always motivated.

And then, surely, even if we want to approach music as possessing inherent qualities, if we conceptualise music as an entity which 'does something to us' (which is not how this book approaches music), we need to acknowledge that less popular strand of research in music studies: one that does not celebrate music as a unifying force or a source of identity, but rather points out how music can also be a tool of corporal punishment in the military (Grant, 2013) or a form of torture used in detention centres (Chornik, 2013). More recently, Sally Anne Gross and George Musgrave (2020) demonstrated how conditions of music production affect the wellbeing of musicians: music there is a source of joy but also significant pain. On another level, just as sound may bring pleasure through familiarity, but may also be a weapon of crowd control (e.g., LRAD), music can imply sociality, but also connote stress. In the words of Felipe Trotta (2020, p. 6), music is 'a shared artefact that produces conflicts, enacts inequalities and brings prejudices, social struggles and segregations to the surface.' In our everyday lives we talk
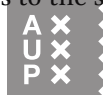
about noise levels in a club; we negotiate music in a shared workspace; we complain (in our heads, mostly) about unpleasant music seeping through somebody's headphones on a crowded train.

Some of the listeners observed and interviewed for this book talked about music in this way: about music as a pleasure, but also as a social duty. High school student Kōki enjoyed listening to his iPod on the way home, but he had no interest in current musical trends, and found it annoying when others asked him about music. Salaried administrative employee Tsuyoshi liked to sing, but found karaoke stressful, as it meant performing social rites and revealing his private music taste to his bosses and co-workers. There is, then, the anxiety about acceptance and a focus on managing boundaries. Engaging with music together with other people is as risky as accepting them as friends on a social network, but arguably even more is at stake with music, as musical engagements can be significantly more personal than Line, more emotional than Instagram, and, perhaps, even less allowing for privacy controls than Facebook.

To uncover the relation of music and everyday life in greater detail, we therefore need a cultural media approach, and one that will account for audience activity, interpretations, identity work – and the link that connects these to production and circulation processes. Simon Frith, in his account of music practices in Keighley in the UK (1978), noted that the use of music between different groups of youth related to that group's needs and interests, their class and capital, and finally, their choices of labour and leisure. Johan Fornäs, Ulf Lindberg and Ove Sernhede, in *In Garageland* (1995), analysed three case studies of obscure Swedish rock bands in their social and cultural environments, leading to detailed accounts of the artistic process where creative interactions in particular social contexts forged different individual and collective identities. I mention these two studies because even though they are very different and stem from distinct scholarly traditions, they are similar in their methodologies and limitations (ethnographic method, a relatively small sample, qualitative analysis), but especially in their aims of uncovering how the social sphere and music relate to each other – what music can tell us of daily practices and processes and vice versa.

There have been insightful examples of engaging music academically in this way, whether it is from the audiences' side (see, for instance, Bull, 2000; DeNora, 2000), or from the side of scenes, creators and their environments (see, for instance, Cohen, 1991, 2007; Baym, 2011). However, on the whole, media scholars have rarely approached listening. Kate Lacey, discussing the lack of research on audiences as 'listeners', suggests that this scarcity is linked to the fact that the act of listening feels more passive than acts of
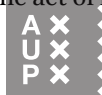
writing or reading (Lacey, 2013, pp. 3–4). Or it might be because, as Allan Moore suggests in his monograph on analysing recorded music, 'listening to songs is as easy as driving a car' but '[u]nderstanding how they work is as hard as being a mechanic' (2012, p. 1); in other words, meaning-making through music comes so naturally for the audiences that a third person, a researcher, finds it difficult to describe the process.

Similar stories have been told explaining why listening is so rarely conceptualised in terms of audience activity. In *Listening*, philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy describes listening as a meaningful performance act when he writes that '[w]hat distinguished music … is that composition, in itself, and the procedures of joining together never stop anticipating their own development and keep us waiting in some way for the result – or outcome – of their order, their calculations, their music(ologie)' (2007, p. 66). Music emerges here as difficult to grasp, because the listening experience is so dynamic and embedded in the work. This is not unlike what Lacey, referring to Marshall McLuhan (2013), suggests about researching audio audiences – the difficulty ensues because unlike the visual space (which is easily categorisable, and the act of watching clearly separates the object and subject), the acoustic space has no borders and no centre, and the act of listening is an immersion in the sound (Lacey, 2013, pp. 7–14). Jonathan Sterne (2012b, p. 9) suggests something similar when he states that 'hearing places you inside an event, seeing gives you a perspective on the event.' For popular science writer Philip Ball, the challenge in music is locating how it affects us. Comparing music to television, Ball argues that while it is easier to link emotions to characters on the screen and our empathetic connection to the audience, in music it is baffling to work out from where emotions might arise: 'it's not clear what the emotions are *about*' (2010, p. 264).

In this book, I believe that all these points are important, and all challenges worth remembering, but I also suggest that they do not make scholarly investigation of music audiences impossible. If listening happens dynamically, if it places you inside an event, as suggested above, then this is more reason to argue against a pure formal, textual analysis of music. To understand what happens when audiences interact with texts, an ethnographic method and immersion in the field becomes necessary, and audiences seem to be the logical starting point of such investigations. I also believe that we would best tackle the above questions and challenges by returning to and reassessing the circuit of culture (du Gay et al., 1997), a model, which will allow us to see how different processes (representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation) are interlinked – and interdependent. Emotions and meanings are not confined to the musical
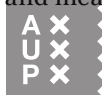
texts, although the texts are important in understanding the boundaries – of a genre and of particular songs. Emotions and meanings that the creators encode in the texts and performances matter, but they do not determine the listeners' interpretations. Finally, the audiences, who this book focuses on, interact with the texts in a variety of contexts and with different meanings arising from that interaction.

With all this in mind, the overarching question of this book is: How are people's practices of music listening situated in their social and cultural lives?

I believe that this question matters, for media researchers and music researchers, because even though in the past many scholars investigated audiences (arguably less in music than in other media), the attention is still often disregarded in favour of elite discourses analysing power flowing from the industry to the masses. Audiences are often misunderstood – or worse, they are not allowed to be heard. Ethnographic work, and the attention to 'people's practices situated in their social and cultural lives' is important to understand how people relate to media, and how they themselves see those relations within their everyday routines, lives, societies and cultures. This conceptualisation is important for three reasons. First, it challenges the primacy of text in media analysis and approaches which too often disregard or assume what audiences do without checking those narratives with them. Second, it complicates the theories of media effects by presenting audiences as having agency and being contextualised within an array of circumstances. Finally, it challenges the models of media imperialism to think about processes of resistance (Livingstone, 2015).

These complex debates are especially relevant to music, because, as discussed so far, music is multimodal. The concept of a 'mode', described by Gunther Kress as 'a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for meaning-making' (2010, p. 79, see also McKerrell and Way, 2017), implies that different modality has a potential for different meanings to emerge, and because music, and sound in general, is accompanied by image, gesture, gaze and other modes (especially with the development of recording technology), it forces us to inquire how the particular modes are part of the social and the cultural in particular everyday situations (Jewitt, 2009, p. 4).

As I explain in this book, I approach this overarching research question from the tradition of audience research, but I also refer to music studies and their conceptualisations of audiences. In my analysis I distinguish between four types of practices: mood management, connecting, companionship and listening-as-identity. I map all four onto three general modes stemming from music studies – focused listening, background listening, and incidental listening – but in many cases they are not exclusive to one mode, and provide
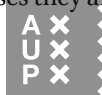
a way of conceptualising audience engagements without limiting categories of attention. Through the ethnographic approach, I immerse myself in the field and use multiple methods to collect data about practices of listening, interpretations, meanings and the context in which they emerge. I start this immersion in a particular place – in contemporary Japan.

Music and Japan

I first went to Japan when I was 19 as a tourist for 40 days. I returned soon after to stay almost a decade. Among the things that initially fascinated me in Japan was the overwhelming presence of popular culture in public places and in the media, and also in everyday discourse. The tone of conversations I heard concerning comic books, animated movies, bubbly popular songs, soap operas or entertainment programmes was rarely condescending (unlike the way talking about boy bands or afternoon soaps often is in the UK). There did not seem to be a clear line dividing the highbrow from the lowbrow, the noble from the coarse – instead, it all seemed to be there as one, infiltrating the everyday, and engaging audiences across class, gender or location. I would revise some of these (naïve) observations later, as I learned more about Japan (and in this context, I discuss the range of different interpretations of popular culture through music in the book), but the fascination remained.

In particular, I have always been struck by the amount of popular music embedded in everyday Japanese life. Certainly, a noisy, melodic audio sphere has become a recognisable feature of cities of the world, be it London, Mumbai or Austin. But in Japan, a musical soundtrack may accompany more everyday activities than it does in other cities. In Japan, convenience stores constantly play current pop hits, and train announcements are recorded with 'muzak' versions of idol pop songs. Walking around Nagoya, Osaka or Tokyo, more people (young or old) have headphones than not. And in the countryside, in Beppu or in Agui, music can be heard coming from cassette players in ploughing machines in the fields, from 'senior-eobics' classes in community centres, and from 'snacks' (small local hostess bars).

And then there is music programming on mass media, and especially on television. Every day features a major, regular music show, where popular acts come and perform, weekly charts are unveiled, and artists are interviewed. Generational audiences in this book watched 'Pop Jam' and 'Music Japan' on NHK, 'Utaban' and 'Count Down TV' on TBS network, 'Music Station' on TV Asahi, 'Hey! Hey! Hey! Music Champ', 'Music Fair' and 'Bokura no Ongaku' on Fuji networks, and a plethora of other programmes on different
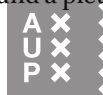
local stations,[1] children's music shows ('Okāsan to issho', 'Minna no Uta'), as well as specialised genre programmes (mostly for *enka*, but also for jazz or classical music). Almost everyone knew or watched music-related variety programmes, which featured strong aspects of popular music. For instance, a category of 'karaoke battle'-type shows operated under the premise of celebrities competing by singing contemporary pop songs (and being judged by either a panel of experts, or more often, a machine that detected changes in pitch and melody). Another category of shows was *monomane* (mimicry) shows, with a somewhat similar idea to karaoke battles, but here, celebrity contestants were also marked by their resemblance to the original artist (this idea is similar to 'Your Face Sounds Familiar', a Spanish television format that was localised and aired in over 40 countries worldwide).

And of course, this list doesn't include annual or one-off music-related specials, such as celebrity quiz shows about popular music (now and then), programmes focusing on a specific artist, a producer or a genre, singing shows with an international twist (featuring foreigners performing traditional or popular Japanese songs), and on top of this, a huge variety of music ranking shows in all shapes and forms. If we add to this list television programmes where singers or ex-singers are the hosts, we end up with a television guide heavily featuring music or music-related elements (and it should be added here that I have not listed cable or satellite programming).

But music in Japan is not only mediated through television. Physical music is still selling well, unlike in the West, and the record stores are remarkably well-stocked.[2] There is radio, still strong in Japan and heard often, in vehicles (especially outside of the big cities) and in homes.[3] There is the internet, with YouTube and Niconico (previously Nico Nico Dōga), video-sharing websites, where, among other genres, vocaloid (singing voice synthesiser) creations are circulated and rated. And there are print media about music – including not only a rich variety of frequently updated books

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1   Some of these are now defunct and new generations of shows have taken their place, but the music programming never ceases to exist.
2   As Simon Reynolds (2011, p. 162) remarked: 'In Japan, seemingly everything ever recorded was still in print. No other country on Earth, not even anal-retentive England, has dedicated itself so intensively to archiving the annals of Western popular, semi-popular and downright unpopular music.'
3   Although, as Noriko Manabe observes, radio programming is structured differently than in the US, which relates to a different mode of listening. Manabe (2016b, p. 70) writes: 'Japan has historically nurtured a culture of close listening, rather than passive listening; it was not so long ago that music-themed cafés, or *kissaten*, dotted the cities, in which customers did not talk but listened at high volume to music of a particular genre, as curated by the audiophile owner of the café.'

(academic and popular), but also an impressive array of magazine titles. Among the magazines you can see periodicals dedicated to idol music, vocaloid, jazz, dance or all-round pop; you can spot a section of titles about the music industry and sound recording; and on the lower shelves there are more highbrow magazines with critical commentary about contemporary music[4] – and all of these are weekly or monthly editions.

Then there is the cultural phenomenon of karaoke boxes. A compound of two words, *kara* (empty) and *oke* (from *ōkesutora*, orchestra), karaoke refers to a type of entertainment where an (amateur) participant sings along with a popular song, with a microphone, and with the lyrics displayed on a screen. Karaoke has received some scholarly attention in the past (Mitsui and Hosokawa, 1998), focusing especially on the East Asian style of karaoke, where instead of singing on a bar stage, groups of friends or relatives rent a small, soundproof room, with elaborate sound and video equipment. However, to date, not enough has been made of audience practices within the karaoke booths, and of how such engagements are contextualised within the economic, social or generational localities. Similarly, more recent phenomena such as 'karaoke for one' (*hitori karaoke*), or interactive online activities enabled by modern karaoke booth technology, remain insufficiently explored.

Of course, the karaoke room is not only a site of performance, power and social rites, but, as I discuss later, it emerges as a place of different interpretational realms as the various practices (singing, cheering, selecting, listening, dancing, playing, chanting, reproducing …) are positioned within the everyday experience of the participants. This relates to all aspects of music media mentioned in this book. The music shows on television are watched in various places and contexts, by different people, interpreting the content in a range of ways: at home and on the go, alone and with family, while sitting down or while washing dishes. The magazines are bought by music enthusiasts to be browsed at home, but are also read for free, in store, by businessmen waiting for trains or students killing time (in a reading practice called *tachiyomi*, standing reading). Popular music heard in public spaces can be ignored or even unnoticed (especially when one has headphones on), but it can also become meaningfully interpreted. In this book I argue that to unpack these (often clearly generational) practices and to understand these encounters, we need to turn to the audiences and to their experiences.

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4   Although as Martin (2016, pp. 30–37) notes, *critical* music journalism in Japan is relatively rare.

Starting Points

The book begins with an understanding that audiences are diverse and complex (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998), that the texts could be open (Eco, 1979) and polysemic (Fiske, 1986), and that ethnographic work with media informants is necessary to uncover these heterogeneous relations and not having to rely on the 'implied' reader. Much of this work relies on the tradition of British cultural studies and the concept of the 'circuit of culture', according to which the key moments in the cultural process (production, consumption, regulation, representation, and identity) are connected and inseparable (Johnson, 1986; du Gay et al., 1997).

On the other hand, by bringing empirical data to the music reception theories (Hesmondhalgh, 2002, p. 118), this project follows in DeNora and Bull's footsteps, and treats music as an affluent and inevitable part of everyday life – not like a direct stimulus, but resulting from the audiences' individual engagements with it. Unlike DeNora, however, this study analyses audience data to address the question of the deep social and generational context in music interpretational practices, also turning to the historical and political contexts. I move away from an interactionist and empirical sociologist approach towards the 'everyday life' understood within a mediascape and in the context of engagement with symbolic artefacts (Silverstone, 1994), and the belief, that '[c]hanging social and cultural contexts also shape audience practices' (Livingstone, 2003, p. 4). In doing so, this book seeks to explain how the ordinary engagements of two generations with music differ: in the content and aims of their practices, and in the meaning-making vis-à-vis the music texts by the interpretative work of the audiences. This is important, because empirical investigation of generational music practices allows us to understand how important music is to listeners individually and socially – or rather, that the individual and the social cannot be separated in answering why we do the things we do with and through music.

The project refers back to Hall and Whannel's (1964) idea of a 'popular art', especially its emphasis on how in (some, for Hall and Whannel) popular music the (once present in folk) rapport between the artist and audience is re-established. Putting less emphasis on taste and aesthetics, I discuss this notion with the cultural concepts from the field of Japanese studies, such as *uchi* and *soto* (inside and outside), and following that, more modern and related concepts from Japanese popular culture and media studies emphasising normalcy and ordinariness: 'proximity' (Painter, 1996), 'quasi-intimacy' (Holden, 2004), 'the culture of quotidian' (Clammer, 1997) and 'life-sizedness' (Aoyagi, 2005).

Last, aiming at a thick description in the ethnographic and analytical portion of the project, I inevitably draw on Japanese concepts of generations and seniority, youth and adulthood, deviance and normalcy, class and labour, of education and social change (White, 1993; Genda, 2001; Mathews and White, 2004; Ishida and Slater, 2010). It is in this framework that I analyse the strategies and engagements of the popular music audiences, looking for patterns in the activities of the two, different yet seemingly similar in their perceived hopelessness, generations. By referring to the political and socio-historical backgrounds of the two age cohorts, I investigate how popular music has been used and interpreted in a variety of ways – as an amplifier and a beautifier, as a remedy and as an inspiration, as a weapon and as a tool for identity construction.

And so, this book operates under the assumption of the often simultaneous presence of different popular music audiences in Japan. As such, it presents different modes of engagement with music. Within this framework it introduces the diffused music audiences – the students, homemakers and salaried workers who listen to tunes from their mobile devices during the everyday commute, while cleaning or cooking; the family audiences engaging with music mediatised via television and radio, in their homes, often singing along in a karaoke-like fashion; and finally, the participatory audiences of concerts, street performances, discos and music clubs in Nagoya and Tokyo. In this book, these practices are distinguished analytically, but analysed on the same continuum of contextual and interpretive interactions.

Engaging with the psychological tradition of audience studies, I investigate when and why music goes beyond an individual experience to become a social practice, and how differences in audiences, contexts or genres affect this process. Engaging with the emotional dimension of cultural theory, I ask how the time-transforming and mood-enhancing qualities of music work within the wider social practices of musicking. Most significantly, I assess how far the audience research tools and experience can be helpful in analysing the interpretative practices of audiences' meaning-making with relation to music.

In his influential collection, *Popular Musics of the Non-Western world: An Introductory Survey*, Peter Manuel rationalises the absence of Japan in the monograph, stating that:

> [A]lthough Japan has a highly developed music industry, mainstream Japanese popular music is outside the scope of this book because, with the exception of enka vocal inflection, it is stylistically indistinguishable from Western popular musics. (Manuel, 1988, p. vi)
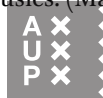
It is particularly unfortunate that Manuel does so right before carefully outlining the big questions of popular music audiences, media and culture, some of which I review in this and the following chapter. Manuel maps a range of challenges for cultural and ethnographic studies of music:

> Does popular music rise from the people who constitute its audience, or is it superimposed upon them from above? Does it reflect and express their attitudes, tastes, aspirations, and worldview, or does it serve to indoctrinate them, however imperceptibly, to the ideology of the class and gender which control the media? Does popular music enrich or alienate? Can it challenge a social order? Do listeners exercise a genuine choice among musics, or can they only passively select preferences from the styles preferred by the media? (1988, p. 8)

Manuel emphasises how these questions have thus far been asked mainly in relation to Western popular culture, but he then excludes Japan's prospective contribution to the debate.

There is a body of research suggesting that Japanese music, 'mainstream' or not, is not as aligned with Western trends as Manuel suggests – although admittedly the research still has gaps to address. Existing scholarship discusses the complexity of transnational cultural flows to and from Japan,[5] and about the links between music and national and local identities in Japan, whether in the context of traditional folk (Hughes, 2008), contemporary hip-hop (Condry, 2001) or Japanese noise (Novak, 2013). There are some studies on popular Japanese music (Ota, 2011; Koizumi 2007) and the ways it is relevant for media and music researchers elsewhere (Stevens, 2008; Galbraith and Karlin, 2012). However, we still know relatively little about the contemporary audiences of the music.

This lack of empirical inquiry is troubling when considering the interest in Japan by scholarship in other fields. According to Jeff Kingston, Asian Studies scholar, the history of Japan after 1989 is globally relevant as the story of 'increasing risk in a society that is risk averse and has long tried to minimise and mitigate risk' (2011, p. 17). Economically, after decades of the post-war convoy banking system, where all boats went at the speed of the

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5   While not directly on music, Koichi Iwabuchi's (2002) writing on transnational flows in East Asia and cultural 'odourlessness' of Japanese products (1998; see also Chin and Morimoto, 2013, for an expansion and critique) is relevant to theorising these developments, as is Lori Morimoto's (2018) work on transnational fandom and Matt Hills's research on communities of imagination (2002) and transnational cult (2017).

lowest, after the 1990s, and in the 2000s especially, previously egalitarian Japan has been introducing trends accredited to creating a Japan of winners and losers, a society of disparities, a Japan of growing unemployment, homelessness, suicide rates, juvenile delinquency, human trafficking, domestic violence, with an overall threat to (the myth of) social solidarity and cohesion (ibid., pp. 18–35). And yet, the Japanese way to modernity is in many aspects vastly different to the Western model, and as such, it presents new challenges to dominant epistemologies, both theoretically and empirically (Matanle, 2001).

There are numerous links worth exploring here. In a classic study by Mita Munesuke, a Japanese sociologist, music is a medium corresponding with moods and emotions much better than other forms of popular art:

> What decisively distinguishes popular songs from the various other popular arts … is that the people of the time do not enjoy them in a merely passive manner. For part of what is required to make a popular song popular is that the masses actively participate in it, by singing it to themselves, or singing it out loud, or in unison. (Mita, 1992, pp. 7–8)

Mita's account, along with opening up a set of questions concerning cultural relativity, begs us to explore the links between media and audience theories – both from the Western traditions described above, and from equally heterogeneous Japanese domestic approaches (cf. Steinberg and Zahlten, 2017). Later in the book I consider the complex practices surrounding karaoke booths, and I analyse audience participation along with the co-evolution of production and reception processes through idol and virtual music – particular case studies fleshing out and providing new insight to debates in audience studies. But there are other, finer points of comparison between music audience in Japan and existing scholarship on listeners. For instance, remembering Theodor Adorno, who refers to recorded popular music as consumed passively (because it is produced by specialists while listened by amateurs), we could consider precisely Japan, where music skills and music literacy is high. It becomes interesting to investigate how the Adornian argument fares in a culture where Yamaha school education or other after school music classes are taken up by most middle-class children,[6] where

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6   The Yamaha music school started in Japan in 1954 and started expanding worldwide in 1965. In all Yamaha branches the aim remained consistent, that is to 'bring enjoyment of music to mediocre children and develop children who possessed superior talent' (Kawakami, 1977 in Miranda, 2000, p. 295). The goal was not only to produce exceptional performers composers,

playing instruments and singing in tune is taught through school circles (cf. Hebert, 2012) and reinforced through karaoke software.

To sum up this section, the Japanese context is interesting for a number of other reasons, the first being the characteristics of the Japanese music market. It is the second largest in the world (IFPI, 2022), and physical formats still constitute the majority of sales (cf. *Japan Times*, 2013, 2020; see also RIAJ, 2021 for more detailed analysis).[7] This is a well-known by now, but still fascinating regional phenomenon, as Asia was responsible for almost a half of global physical sales in 2021 (IFPI, 2022). Music constitutes a large portion of media consumption within Japanese audiences (GWI, 2022) over a large variety of formats, platforms and devices (RIAJ, 2022). Japan has also been highly influential regionally and globally in developing the idol and virtual idol industry, as discussed in-depth later in this book.

Second, Japanese-specific vocabulary and cultural notions of 'inside' and 'outside' (*uchi* and *soto*), proximity and 'the ordinary' may bring new insight to the framework of everyday life, stargazing and parasocial interaction, and ask questions – new ones, and old ones – seeing our conceptual limitations in a non-Western setting.

Third, comparing the musical engagements of two fascinating Japanese post-war generations is insightful for studying the personal and social aspects of media engagements. 'The lost' (born 1972–1982) and 'the relaxed' (born 1988–1996),[8] as I will refer to these cohorts throughout this book, are both linked to crisis and downfall; they both seem tragic, albeit in different ways. Although there have been attempts to compare Japanese generations across the ages (Lebra, 1974; Mita, 1992; Sugimoto, 1997), these concentrated on particular cultural values disregarding media practices completely (and in all three studies finding a rather linear progression towards materialism, hedonism, indulgence and moral relativism).

but also to musically develop audience members; to educate the ordinary people to become 'conscious and present music audiences' (Looney & Kavakov 1985 in Miranda 2000, p. 295). The idea of 'conscious music audiences' underpins how Japanese listeners interact with music and how knowledgeable they are about music, as we will see later in the book.

7   It is worth mentioning here that while this data helps us understand the scale of the markets, the numbers are not neutral and are presented by the industry and companies in a way to aid pre-determined narratives (see Osborne and Laing, 2021, and in particular Arditi, 2021 in that collection).

8   Both ranges refer to participants in this book. The generational labels are contested and have no universally agreed age brackets, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 3.
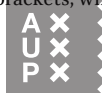
Researching Music Audiences

In this book, my aim is to explore what people do both *with* and *through* music, or, more specifically, how people's practices of music listening are situated in their social and cultural lives. I am interested in practices surrounding music, the role of music in people's lives, and the range of interpretations of music in the context of social and cultural relations and identity work. But the book is also driven by questions of technology and generations: In an era of unprecedented possibilities of access to music performers how do audiences and music creators' practices relate to each other? How (if at all) are generational identities relevant within and through listening practices? Here, part of the rationale stems from a scarcity of comprehensive academic accounts of the two cohorts, and the abundance of stereotyped media reports of 'apathetic youth' and the 'lost generation'. Observing the two groups of Japanese people and listening to their accounts shifts the emphasis to the audiences, their agency and their voices – not lost or apathetic, but rarely heard.

The empirical interest of the research was to analyse audience practices and interpretations, with a focus on the people and the how and the why of their engagements with music. Taken this way, this methodology is different from a simple counting of audience members and assigning them to categories (Bertrand and Hughes, 2005, p. 37). Instead, I am interested here in audiences as groups and individuals embedded in social and cultural contexts, constructing meanings through and beyond the textual boundaries of music media. The study investigates in detail everyday engagements with music, accounting for not only the technicalities, but also the attitudes and contexts of such engagements. I am interested in social practices, and with them, in behaviours, interpretations and attitudes.

In the Nationwide study 40 years ago, David Morley (1980) introduced a qualitative element to media audience research in the tradition of British cultural studies. There were other, earlier attempts to qualitatively include media listeners and spectators under the 'effects' tradition and the uses and gratifications approach. Morley's study was innovative in that it theoretically built on the work of Stuart Hall and his contemporaries of the Birmingham school, and as such, the study was able to conceptually link the encoded text with context and meaning-making in a coherent way. Much of the current methodological approach to media audiences, at least in the UK, was shaped by that study and its subsequent critiques. The seminal studies of audiences in this tradition that followed (such as Radway, 1982; Ang, 1985; Livingstone, 1990; Silverstone, 1994) covered audiences of a variety of
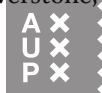
platforms and genres, but all share an interest in seeking the voices of the audiences over analysis confined to the text. This is achieved by the use of ethnographic methods – interviews and observations – moving beyond a positivist tradition of knowledge production, and accepting that reality is a product of social, gendered, economic, historical and political spheres.

The book includes data from a multi-stage research study that began in Aichi prefecture and Tokyo in 2012. The initial study included focus groups, individual interviews, questionnaires, music device data analysis and participant observation, and was largely qualitative in order to tackle issues of audiences' interpretations, behaviours, expectations and attitudes. Follow up studies in 2015 and 2018 included a broad user survey and individual interviews. A combination of different data collection methods allowed for an exploration of different aspects of audience engagement: the group setting, despite its artificial element, enabled dynamic, comparable reflections, while follow-up, individual interviews were more personal and focused on the more detailed nuances of sense-making. Interviews with musicians, producers and managers provided an industry perspective to the production and distribution aspects of Japanese music today and in the past. The observational element was the most revealing about the participants' life-worlds within which media encounters are placed, and provided a comparison point for the participants' interview data.

Aichi prefecture is located in the centre of Japan, roughly halfway between Tokyo and Osaka. It is part of the Chūbu (central) region, positioned between two hubs of regional Japanese rivalry, the eastern Kantō region and the western Kansai region. The perceived longstanding cultural differences between the two are known to all Japanese people and bear many similarities to stereotyped rivalries from other countries, such as the North and South divide in England, or the West and East Coast clash in the US. Kantō, home to Tokyo and Yokohama, is the business and fashion centre of Japan, but its people have a reputation for being cold and emotionless. The people of Kansai (which includes the cities of Osaka and Kyoto), on the other hand, are portrayed as direct, loud and emotional. The differences between regions also include, among a plethora of other things, dialect, the preferred flavour of soup stock, escalator etiquette, and, of course, rivalries concerning sports teams, music acts and entertainment styles.

In between the two, and not dominated by either, is Chūbu and Aichi. As most cities and regions, Aichi, and especially Nagoya, come with their own set of stereotypes (which include conservative values, a high fashion sense, day-to-day thriftiness and large, expensive weddings), but these are not part of the national discourse, as with the Kantō/Kansai rivalry.

Aichi is geographically and demographically diverse. Nagoya, Japan's third largest city, is in Aichi in the West, with less populated areas in the East. The concentrated suburbs surrounding Nagoya contrast with rural scenes and rice fields, several national parks, cultural treasures and historical sites (including, from recent history, the site of World Expo 2005).

This book tries to capture this diversity. The participants, recruited across the prefecture, came from rural areas, suburbs and the centre of Nagoya alike, and their background, as reflected across the empirical chapters, is linked to their practices and interpretations. These contexts become especially important in the light of many valuable studies of Japanese youth and media (Ito, 2005; Takahashi, 2010) being focused primarily on (middle-class, affluent, educated) audiences in Tokyo. While urban youth practices through and with media are insightful, they do not tell us the whole story, and certainly do not shed light on the richness of practices beyond the privileged metropolitans. There are limits, of course, to which this study was able to include all such voices, but through a focus on diverse recruitment sites and activities, I was able to map a heterogeneous collection of testimonies and practices that I will present in the empirical chapters that follow.

Recruitment was not without challenges. I used physical advertising, internet soliciting, personal introductions and snowballing, and I was also aided by a number of cultural and non-profit organisations in Aichi who let me use their space and extend recruitment to the so-called 'cultural exchange' clubs, parent groups or sport circles. The men from 'the lost' cohort were particularly elusive, because working, salaried employees were unavailable during the week (for most, working hours started at around 8 a.m. and ended well into the night), and they spent their weekends with their families – or indeed, catching up on more work or (often unhappily) socialising with colleagues and bosses. Men without company jobs were more flexible, but they also divided their time between job interviews and part-time work or volunteering, therefore scheduling a focus group interview proved to be challenging.

Schools were another story altogether. Recruiting high school students for the study was an exercise in following a trail of bureaucratic procedures of access and legitimacy, starting with local government representatives and leaders of cultural centres and ending with teachers, chancellors and principals. Most of the challenges seemed to concern not the ethical issues of the study, but the administrative chain of command: as no studies like this had been previously conducted in either of the institutions, there was no procedure to rely on.

Overall, 104 individuals were interviewed at least once for the study, many of them more than once. First, I conducted fourteen focus group sessions with 83 participants overall, divided into two age groups: 16–24 (the 'relaxed' generation) and 30–40 (the 'lost' generation). There were nine 'relaxed' groups and five 'lost' groups, each with between four and nine participants (and between four and six for all but four groups). Additionally, ten more participants (one from the younger segment, and nine from the older) were interviewed individually based on the same interview guide. All participants also completed a questionnaire, answering questions on media use, music preferences and demographic details. Then, I individually interviewed 38 participants from both cohorts. In addition, I accompanied many participants in their everyday routines to gain an insider perspective of their daily lives, with a special sensitivity to music engagements (including ones the participants may not have been aware of). I also participated in many social events related directly or indirectly to music, such as karaoke get-togethers, family car rides, live concert attendances and watching music television shows at home. Over the course of the research, I conducted expert interviews in Tokyo with eleven individuals coming from various areas of the Japanese music industry (musicians, managers, producers, composers and DJs). During all stages of the fieldwork, efforts were made to protect the participants from excessive risk. This included issues of privacy, confidentiality and informants' wellbeing, especially for the more vulnerable groups (high school students).

After the ethnographic stage, I conducted a thematic analysis of the data accumulated through fieldwork (Aronson, 1994; Miles and Huberman, 1994). The categories for coding were created both deductively and inductively, that is, they were based on the pre-fieldwork research and the interview guide, but were also shaped by the emerging empirical data. After the coding process, the themes were further analysed: I reviewed and compared them, contextualised them within the data set, checked versus socioeconomic attributes of the participants, and noted emerging patterns.

## Reflecting on the 'Hybrid' Researcher

The focus group, having gained popularity as a marketing research tool in the 1950s, became a widely utilised method in social science and media research, particularly useful in audience and reception study (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996). Yet in Japan, there is little tradition of focus groups in the field. Although there have been some examples of using the method
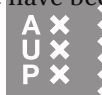
for social sciences in Japan (see, for instance, Oka, 2003, and to a lesser extent, White, 2003 or Culter, 2003), these examples are rare. The scarcity is sometimes (and mostly in management manuals) attributed to doubts about whether Japanese people have the character or experiential comfort to provide unbiased, fully free and yet not exclusively superficial opinions in a group setting. My experience of conducting focus groups in Japan and with Japanese people in this and in my previous research shows no clear evidence that those doubts are well founded. However, acknowledging the role of the cultural setting and language in research design, I used a variety of techniques as a moderator and interviewer.

For example, I used short turn-taking and backchannel utterances (cf. Yuan et al., 2007) frequently when listening to the participants. To minimise possible hierarchical obstacles in the discussion, I designed focus groups of a similar age range, but also limited pre-session interaction by cutting the introduction time before the interview. Where possible, the participants did not reveal their names, age, education or profession to each other, and nor did they exchange business cards (as they would have otherwise). Instead, all participants addressed each other by their first names or previously submitted 'nicknames'. Finally, to enhance participation not restricted by power and sociocultural cues, as a moderator I took the role of an 'enlightened novice' (Krueger, 1998, p. 46), and presented myself as someone who was deeply interested in the subject, but relatively inexperienced in this specialist area. It is difficult to conclusively assess the effect of these techniques on the acquired data, although the richness of the discussions (and contrasting opinions throughout the sessions) suggests that they were useful. Anecdotally, I also recall at least two instances where participants, socialising after a focus group session, learned each other's age and other personal details, and this resulted in one of them immediately apologising to the other for having assumed the latter's age/position wrongly (and thus having used the wrong honorific words). This leads me to believe that, at least in these instances, more pre-session information possessed by the participants about each other could have resulted in a more hierarchical, restricted interaction.

These conversational restrictions potentially included myself, as being a researcher put me in a position of privilege when interacting with the participants. The challenge of unequal power relations between interviewers and interviewees in qualitative studies has been the topic of methodological discussion that is not limited to a particular country (Kvale, 2006), but in Japan, the hierarchical structure is particularly strongly embedded in social relations, and also reflected in language. Professions linked to public trust
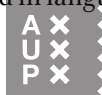
and a high level of mastery achieved (such as teachers, doctors, instructors, politicians and lawyers) are addressed with the honorific word *sensei*, implying respect and authority. This is also how many of the participants addressed me at first, especially after learning about my graduate degree from an imperial Japanese university (I used that information in the recruitment pack to legitimate the study and gain access; cf. McLaughlin, 2010). To mitigate this, I put much effort into deconstructing and minimalising the hierarchical power relations between the participants and myself where possible, through informal and approachable manner and emphasis on first names/pseudonyms.

However, it would be unwise to assume that my ethnicity was not a factor in the fieldwork. I was, after all, a European coming to analyse Japanese culture. I feared that my immediate foreignness could limit the amount of thoughts participants might share with me – both because I was an outsider and because as a non-Japanese person, I was not expected to be familiar with the more subtle cultural references. I used my 'hybrid' status as a Polish national educated in Japan (and with a Japanese family) to help address this, and to let participants reflect on their culture from an outside perspective, and yet to maximise the fullness and honesty of the data. Still, the balance was not easy to achieve. On the one hand, I conducted the fieldwork and all recruitment communication myself from the start, in fluent Japanese, to make the participants feel comfortable expressing themselves in their everyday manner. Similarly, during the sessions I picked up on pop-cultural references to television shows or comedians raised by participants to encourage more detailed accounts of practices. On the other hand, I consciously played the 'novice' role: I displayed that I was proficient in the Japanese language and culture, but the everyday context of the participants' practices was not familiar to me, and so I asked for explanations.

The intricacies of my status as a researcher had less weight the more involved in the communities I became. From the start, I tried to become engaged in local activities as much as possible under the time and geographical constraints. Some of these activities included observation of practices relevant for the study (such as a high school wind orchestra concert), and a few surprisingly turned out to be so (for instance, when I volunteered in an afterschool study centre and noticed that many of the learning activities involved music) – but most were not, and these included conducting lectures and classes, babysitting or practising Kendo. I never disguised my status as a researcher or the nature of my study, but I believe that through all these activities, a mutual trust with the community was established, which helped me gather and analyse my
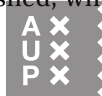
data more efficiently, and to represent the participants' voices with the respect they deserved.

Participants for the observation part of the study were recruited largely thanks to the rapport established during focus groups and individual interviews (and subsequent communication). In some cases, they were a natural extension of my involvement with the community. Despite this bottom-up recruitment, a demographic variety was reflected in the sample. The method aimed to paint a rich picture of participants' listening practices in a variety of contexts, proceeding according to Geertz's 'thick description' (1973). I was a participatory observer in most of these practices. I happily took part in the karaoke sessions, joined in discussions of (and quarrels concerning) car music, and I danced with children whose mothers were busy washing up. Most of these environments did not allow for detailed notetaking (hasty, discreet notes on my phone were occasional, and limited to scenes where I felt I had witnessed something significant), and thus I largely organised my thoughts on paper after the experience.

About This Book

This introduction has now detailed my interest in the study, the aims of the book, and my approach to audiences and listening. It also has given context to the presence of music in Japan and introduced theoretical, conceptual and methodological challenges surrounding research on Japanese music audiences.

Chapter 1 first presents the theoretical foundations of the study, where I briefly review the history and achievements of audience research and review ethnographic approaches to reception. The circuit of culture model is discussed in terms of its potential to conceptualise listening practices. Then I analyse music studies of audience and audience studies of music, focusing on the connections and gaps between the two. I also discuss the practice theory approach in the cultural studies of media and contemporary debates on researching media audiences. Lastly, I sketch out the theoretical contribution of the book and the concept of social practice of listening.

Chapter 2 continues with the idea of listening practice and confronts it with research on listening modes as a way of conceptualising audience activity, encompassing meanings, emotions and interpretations. I analyse social practices of listening through interview and observational data, link the diversity of listening practices to the participants' everyday lives and

experiences, and discuss their listening profiles in terms of modes, playlists and interpretations. Listening emerges from the analysis as not necessarily functional, predominantly social (although not always overtly) and attentive to text. I end the chapter linking back to wider debates on music audiences and empirical investigations of listening.

In Chapter 3 I introduce the generational frame in music audience research, and I discuss audience data from the two analysed cohorts. I begin with an overview of the concept of generations and then recap the socioeconomic context of 'the lost' and 'the relaxed', emphasising the histories of the two labels and their ambivalence. In the main part of the chapter I discuss generational identities in and through listening practices and interpretations. In particular, I demonstrate how musical playlists are often inter-generational but their meaningful interpretations are not: generational actualities relate to the ways the same music is differently experienced and understood. Last, I investigate the shape and place of the concept of generations in future media and music studies.

Chapter 4 begins with a brief modern history of popular music in Japan to understand the specificities of the Japanese music market and the relevance of pop idols. The overarching frame in the analysis is the distance between audiences and performers and the ways in proximity (good and bad) between popular music acts and their audiences shapes social practices of listening. I argue that such artist-audience intimacy needs to be understood in the context of Japanese music history, its mode of production and circulation in the media.

In Chapter 5 I turn to idols groups and virtual idols specifically to investigate the different yet meaningful engagements between them and the audiences. Through analysis of my ethnographic data, I demonstrate how fans make sense of music and the world through the concept of reality – a concept often contested and contingent on social and generational actualities of the audience. Voices of producers, musicians and managers, also salient in this chapter, help me demonstrate and theorise the characteristics of audience-performer co-evolution.

The concluding chapter returns to the aims of this book, and to the overarching questions. It presents a summary of the empirical findings, and discusses them with regards to audiences and music, to broadly reflect on how people's practices of music listening are revealing about their social and cultural lives. These social practices of listening are discussed in terms of the contributions – theoretical, empirical and methodological – that this book offers to the fields of audience studies, music studies and Japanese studies.

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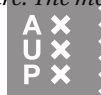
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