

Realities Toolkit #07

Using Music Elicitation to Research People's Relationship with Music

Nicola Allett, Realities, University of Manchester

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1. Introduction

My doctoral research on Extreme Metal fans' investments, commitments and attachments to Extreme Metal music and subculture involved conducting recurring group research with a group of six Extreme Metal fans. I used semi-structured interviewing, memory work, media elicitation and music elicitation over ten group meetings. This toolkit will outline my use of music elicitation and present some practical considerations for those considering using music elicitation in their own research.

2. Why Music Elicitation?

In undertaking my research, I wanted to uncover the practices of the Extreme Metal fan and the distinct relationships fans had with Extreme Metal music. Such a focus demanded qualitative methods that aided the disclosure of Extreme Metal fans' experiences of listening to Extreme Metal music and their related affective attachments and identifications.

In designing my research, I was faced with the problem of how I could get people to talk about their feelings and their attachments. I was also aware that there could be some discomfort in the disclosure of feelings and difficulty in describing why Extreme Metal music was liked. A key concern was how to get my respondents to 'open up' within the interview setting. I decided to use music elicitation with the hope that it would be able to elicit accounts and memories of music experience, music use and descriptions of feeling. Furthermore, I felt it may stimulate group discussion around the music relationship. The method proved extremely successful in relation to these aims.

Music is an under explored resource for social research. My experience of using music elicitation suggests that music can enhance qualitative interviews. Other elicitation methods, for example photo or object elicitation, may also be successful in obtaining memories, narratives and rich data in interviews and ethnographies and could be more suited for your research project. Music is, however, a unique medium because of the temporal, unfolding nature of the listening experience and the power of music on the body and our emotions. Music offers a route to our feelings and memories and, therefore, could be a particularly successful elicitation tool within the interview.

The suitability of music elicitation as a method for your research will depend upon your research questions/focus. Other methods may be more suited. The particular advantages of music elicitation that I found were:

- It can elicit descriptive accounts of why music is liked and how it is used.
- It can draw out accounts of feeling and emotion linked to the music experience.
- It can elicit particular stories and memories associated with music.
- It serves as a reference to which respondents can refer.
- It can be an aid to generate interview discussion.

3. How should Music Elicitation be used?

There are no rules for how music elicitation method should or shouldn't be used. It could involve any research situation where music is played in an attempt to gain thicker description and further data on a particular theme/area or to fuel a discussion. Here are some ideas for approaching music elicitation in your research:

- Respondents could be asked to choose music tracks for a particular reason, this could be, for example, an attached memory of an event, place or person; or attached feeling, or mood.
- After listening to the music, respondents could be asked a variety of questions about the music, for instance: What was their response? What do they like about it? How does it make them feel? If chosen because of an attached memory, the researcher could ask questions to tease out the memory in relation to events, senses and feelings.
- A discussion could arise after the listening about the music and the listening experience or could develop from the respondents' ideas and what they think is important.
- If in a group, a more structured approach could be devised in order to hear each participant's music choice and description. This should involve all of the members and could incorporate what members find interesting to develop further discussion. This is how I used music elicitation in my research.

4. My Approach to Music Elicitation

- Each group member brought to the research group a music track (a track they 'loved' and a track that specifically drew out certain feelings or emotions).
- The group listened to a group members' choice of music.
- Participants were supplied with a notebook and pen, providing the option to record their thoughts and feelings whilst listening.
- The group then took it in turns to describe their reactions to the piece of music.
- Attention then returned to the participant who chose the music to give an account of their reaction accompanied by an explanation for their choice of track.
- This was repeated with each participant.

- This led to group discussion.

My use of music elicitation proved successful in gaining thick descriptions of my respondents' feelings and their affective attachments to Extreme Metal music. In addition, it produced valuable data about listening practices, opinions about musical virtuosity, taste and genre, and fan and subcultural practices.

5. Considerations if using Music Elicitation

Music elicitation is a method suited to a wealth of research areas such as life history, everyday life, relationships, music collectives and fandoms. If you decide to undertake music elicitation, there are several key points that need consideration when designing and using the method:

- The method relies on good communication from the researcher. The method needs clear direction from the researcher so that respondents are not confused over what will be happening and that, if in a group, each member is able to speak uninterrupted.
- The method is suited to group interviews. The size of group is an important consideration; if too large, it would be hard to organise and would be time consuming.
- Music elicitation could be developed to be more suitable for the individual interview situation, for example, by making the process more informal.
- You might wish to give your respondents a notebook and pen as well. If conducting music elicitation in a group this could be helpful because notes will remind respondents what they felt/remembered and intended to say/comment on while waiting for other group members to speak.
- If you want to draw out individual meaning and affective experience, I would advise using respondent's music choices rather than the researcher's choice of music.
- Music elicitation relies on respondent participation. It is important to recognise that some respondents will feel uncomfortable describing their feelings. If using the method in a group situation the researcher should ask members to avoid insulting one another and to respect each others accounts prior to using the method.
- Music elicitation can produce talk around intangibles such as feelings, but your respondents may still find it difficult to find the vocabulary to explain what is felt.

6. Technical Considerations

There is nothing more frustrating than being let down by your equipment. It is important to make sure you incorporate technical considerations into your planning to use music elicitation. Here are some key points to consider:

- The researcher should make sure s/he has equipment to play CDs and speakers through which transportable devices such as mp3 players or iPods can be played. Additionally make sure there is a power supply and, if there isn't, be sure to have a supply of batteries.

- The researcher should check the recording device to be certain that respondent's voices can be heard over the sound of the music. There is always a possibility that a respondent may wish to talk about the music while it is still playing, the recording of the whole task including the music is, therefore, advised.
- It could be helpful to make note of the music track details (artist/song title). You may want to revisit the music again with the respondent or consider the particular qualities of the music.

7. Summary

The success of music elicitation will largely rely on the planning and communication skills of the researcher. Music elicitation could be valuable for investigating people's relationship with music and the everyday presence of music in people's lives: in considering music as expression of self, as a resource for managing mood, or a resource for knowing how one feels. It also has potential uses to trigger personal, collective and historical memory. Music elicitation offers researchers a way to gain access to typically unspoken elements and aspects that have yet to be researched.

Realities is part of the National Centre for Research Methods, which aims to improve research methods across the UK social science community.

Realities, Sociology, University of Manchester, Manchester M13 9PL
+44 (0) 161 275 0265
realities@manchester.ac.uk
www.manchester.ac.uk/realities