



2015

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# Indie Rock and Mainstream Pop are Thematically, Instrumentally, and Structurally Analogous



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## Introduction

-Indie rock is less a genre of music and more an aesthetic that any music, however sonically different, may be deemed. The definition of indie rock differs from person to person and is often subjective. Defining indie rock by the industry's standard of independent or major record label is the most accepted definition, however, the person-to-person, subjective indie rock can be surmised also.  
-Millennials are consumers that gravitate towards experience based products that they perceive as authentic. Indie rock purveys this aesthetic which allows Millennials to individualize and/or reaffirm their own beliefs.  
-Pitchfork and Billboard are both seen as accepted standards of Indie rock and mainstream pop respectively and were subsequently used in this study. I conducted research on thematic, structural, stylistic, and instrumental similarities and differences between indie rock and mainstream pop. I analyzed the top five songs from Pitchfork and Billboard side by side from 2004-2014 as 2004 was the year that Zach Braff's *Garden State* dropped, Modest Mouse's *Float On* peaked at number 68 on the Billboard Hot 100, Franz Ferdinand's *Take Me Out* peaked at number 66 on the Billboard Hot 100, and the Killers' songs *Somebody Told Me* and *Mr. Brightside* peaked at number 51 and number ten on the Billboard Hot 100 respectively.  
-I am studying how Millennials' perceive the aesthetics and culture of indie rock because I want to pigeonhole the definition of indie rock so that my reader may better understand the division and similarities of the connotations Americans associate with indie rock and mainstream pop.

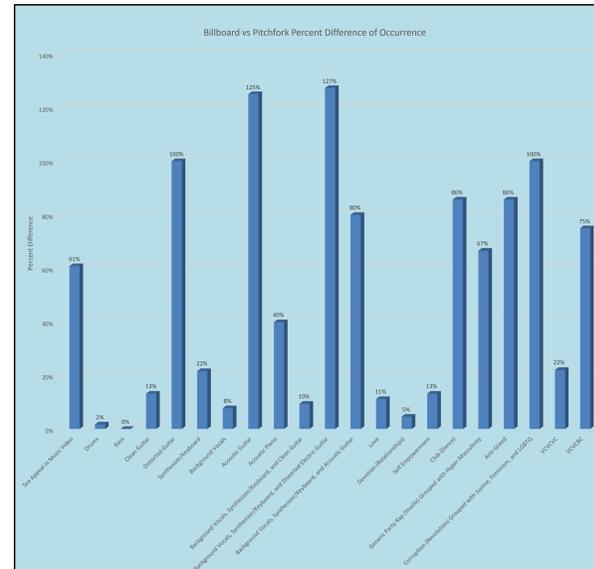
## Abstract

Millennials have inconsistently defined indie rock since it was thrust onto the mainstream in 2004 with the breakout success of Modest Mouse's *Float On*, Franz Ferdinand's *Take Me Out*, and Zach Braff's *Garden State*. Indie rock is not defined by its sound, thereby disqualifying it as a pure genre. Indie rock is defined by its aesthetic qualities: anti-mainstream appeal, style, promotion, etc. Indie rock is flexibly defined person to person as they perceive it. Consumers define indie rock by its themes being implicitly anti-mainstream and a less-produced sound while producers define indie rock by a musician's creative control over the music's creation, distribution, and marketing. Millennials are experience-based, aesthetics driven customers and are, therefore, drawn to indie rock so that its image may be projected onto them. Businesses have noticed that marketing an experience yields higher sales and are now marketing experiences to the Millennial demographic. Independent musicians have often deluded their music with pop themes and production in order to appear more marketable and attractive to major record labels, thus blurring the line between indie rock and mainstream pop. I conducted research on the top 5 year-end songs according to Billboard and Pitchfork from 2014-2004, Billboard representing mainstream pop and Pitchfork representing indie rock. I analyzed these accepted indie rock songs against accepted mainstream pop songs to find that there is no distinct overarching difference between what is deemed indie rock and what is deemed mainstream pop. Business are adept and finding their target audience and always being able to sell what someone may want to buy. Indie rock has a consumer base who values the individuality and perceived authenticity of indie rock, however, indie rock is just a product marketed to this section of the consumer base and perceived authenticity is perceived after all.

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## Results/Discussion



-I analyzed my sample for the instrument combinations that were common to top ten popular songs in Nunes and Ordanini's study which were "background vocals, a synthesizer, and a clean guitar" or "background vocals, a synthesizer, and a distorted electric guitar" (398) as the "role of a single instrument may be negligible because of causal asymmetry" (400). It is important to note that these are "core" configurations that are not limited to the instruments stated meaning that these popular combinations may have any number of other instruments with them and these two popular ones may overlap. The percent difference between the combination of background vocals, synthesizer, and clean guitar occurring in Pitchfork vs Billboard songs was 10% while the percent difference between the combination of background vocals, synthesizer, and distorted electric guitar occurring in Indie rock and Mainstream pop songs was 127%.  
-Indie Rock is not restrictive in subject matter, but can often contain many of the same thematic devices as mainstream pop music. In my research I found that the percent difference between Love occurring thematically in Pitchfork vs Billboard songs to be 11%. The percent difference between Devotion (Relationships) occurring thematically in Pitchfork vs Billboard songs was 5%. The percent difference between Self-Empowerment occurring thematically in Pitchfork vs Billboard songs was 13%.  
-It is worth noting that while the percent differences for Club (Dance), Generic Party Rap (Hustle)/Hypermasculinity, Anti-Greed, and Corruption (Revolution)/Justice/Feminism/LGBTQ themes were relatively high with Club (Dance) and Generic Party Rap (Hustle) themes occurring more in mainstream pop, but total occurrences in Pitchfork and Billboard were less than 25% of the songs analyzed in that category and, therefore, yield negligible results until a larger sample size, with more occurrences can be analyzed and researched. These lack of presence was apparent for many themes, song structures, and instrumentation combinations that were included in this sample. Many of the high percentage differences were the result of low sample sizes.

## Conclusion

The definition of Indie rock is muddled and unclear, but has largely been adopted by the Millennial generation to mean anti-corporate and non-specifically authentic. Business are aware that Millennials desire an experience, and not a 'product', and have subsequently managed to market the public image of certain popular music to appear as indie rock. Millennials seek an experience that they experience and can personally relate to. Indie rock purveys this aesthetic which allows Millennials to individualize and/or reaffirm their own beliefs. However, as underground rappers have straddled the line between pop and underground, indie rock musicians have been creating music that is indie/creative sounding while simultaneously being catchy or universally accessible in the hope that they may be signed to a major label which implies job security and increased listenership. Businesses that succeed adapt to the consumer base, so businesses have been adapting to the Millennial generation by marketing experience-based products. The rise in popularity of indie rock is the result of businesses successfully marketing the authentic aesthetic to Millennials. Indie rock and mainstream pop ultimately are both products that are sold, and sold well. Indie rock does not represent a higher art genre, but a subsection of the consumer base of pop music that values individuality and perceived authenticity. Perceived authenticity is perceived after all.

## Acknowledgements

-Professor Boyes for guidance and direction in the research process  
-UROP for acknowledging and supporting my research  
-Librarian Nell Chenault for research assistance

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