What Makes the Difference? Pop Music Stars and TV Talent Show Contestants in Adolescents' Judgements

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1. Introduction

This paper summarises the approach, empirical methodologies, and part of the results of an empirical study that was conducted in early 2004, when musical TV talent shows reached their peak popularity among young media audiences in Germany. Our primary research interest was in the similarities and differences that the adolescent target group of this TV format might perceive between contestants in TV talent shows and real or ordinary pop music stars. Shows in this TV format all seem to assume that adolescent TV viewers eventually appreciate successful contestants as music stars just as their favourite pop music artists. And record sales and media ubiquity of the shows' finalists rivalled that of other successful pop stars at least during a certain period. But does this really prove that talent shows actually achieve their ultimate marketing goal, which presumably consists in constructing a real pop music star[1] in the short course of one TV show season? Do adolescent viewers really buy the message that a music star is mainly characterised by its musical and performance talent and that a suitable TV jury can discover one talented individual among thousands in a few weeks? Or do the young viewers somehow know that these contestants may be omnipresent in all media channels, but that there still is a difference from pop musicians who have been for much longer in the music business? These questions merge with Richard Dyer's diagnosis, that "economics alone cannot explain the phenomenon of stardom." (Dyer, 1998: 12). Whether it is any kind of manipulation via the machinery of production or a uniqueness of individual abilities that evokes the adolescents' conceptions of stars – the TV format itself seems to be the crucial factor for this topic.

Our initial assumption was that TV talent shows provide a new category for the evaluation of stars, inasmuch that these formats present a mixture of 'manufacture' and 'exceptionality', as Su Holmes wrote on the British "Pop Idol" (Holmes, 2004: 155). Whereas exceptionality presupposes the integration of stars in a certain social environment (peer groups), the relevance of stars seems to be indistinct due to the principle of arbitrariness that is provided in TV talent shows – the category 'manufactured' now obtains more and more social acceptance. Part of why these new music-TV stars are accepted is the implication that everyone (in the audience) could also be a star, given the necessary talent that has yet to be discovered. The implied key phrase is: "It could be you!"

Socio-musicological research so far has focussed primarily on the motivations of fandom. Fans of boygroups have been closely studied as well as visitors of jazz-, rock- and classical music concerts and even the broad scene of German Volksmusik[2] (Dollase/Rüsenberg/Stollenwerk, 1974, 1978, 1986; SchmŸcker, 1993, Hauk, 1999, Vatterodt, 2000, Weyrauch, 1997, Grabowski, 1999). However, those studies fail to investigate how stars are cognitively perceived by their respective audience. Obviously, within the framework of those studies, it was not of any major interest to examine stars as objects of cognitive judgements, but interpretations of the fans' passion for their stars were of primary concern.

We therefore see a need to consider the fans' expectations, interpretations and meanings of stars to more fully examine the relation between stars and their fans. In addition, we wish to pay a little more attention to the music

itself which, apart from all media related factors, we assume plays a major role in adolescents' cognitive judgements.

2. Empirical Survey

2.1. Goals

The goals of our empirical survey were the following:

1. To characterise the categories of judgement of young TV viewers regarding music talent show contestants.
2. To compare these categories of judgement for talent show contestants and 'real' pop music stars.
3. To describe the homogeneity of those categories of judgement and to characterise the range and similarity of the judgements given, i.e. the judgement space.
4. To detect possible correlations with categories of judgement as mediated through the media, where we take a particular look at the jury of TV talent shows.

To gain a first insight into the adolescents' perception we chose quantitative methods to measure possible differences between the perception of real music stars and talent show contestants. Since to our best knowledge, there has not been any empirical survey on the perception, cognitive processing, and social handling of music TV talent shows, we decided to use also qualitative methods to evaluate the attributes that are used in judgemental statements by members of the target audience. In this respect our survey is of an exploratory nature.

Apart from the data directly linked to judgements and comparisons, we also asked a German sample of the target audience for their daily music consumption and music related habits to detect any potential connections to their attitudes and judgements on real music stars and talent show contestants.

2.2. Methods

We developed a questionnaire for a quantitative survey of judgements and music related behaviour that consisted of three parts:

– The first part consisted of a 45 pair-wise comparisons of well known real music stars and talent show contestants. The participants of the survey were asked to indicate the similarity between the two persons on a nine-point scale, answering the question: "How similar are these two artists?" We drew the artist pairs from a list of twenty national and international stars and contestants, whom we assumed to be popular or at least known among 10 to 19 year old German pupils. This comparison generated similarity ratings between and within the sets of stars and contestants; these similarity ratings were analysed with the method of Multidimensional Scaling, a graphic and algorithmic method widely used to reveal unknown influential factors in subjective judgements (Borg & Groenen 1996).

– In the second part of the questionnaire, we asked the participants for preference ratings on the entire list of the twenty stars and contestants. The result of this rating procedure was a list of names ranked by preference from every participant of the survey. These preference ratings were then analysed using Multidimensional Unfolding, a technique very similar to Multidimensional Scaling, which exploits the preference information very efficiently (see also Borg & Groenen, 1996).

– The third part of the questionnaire asked for socio-demographic data as well as media and music behaviour and consumption.

The questionnaire was distributed to around 500 students of age 10 to 19 via their school music teachers. Schools of different types and from different geographical and urban regions from all over Germany participated in the survey. The preliminary results presented below are only based on 118 questionnaires.

As a second and complementary methodology, we used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative techniques

for analysing textual data from the internet and the TV programme itself, to gain more insight into the nature and quality of the judgemental processes of the target group.

On one hand, we analysed selected discussion threads from the official internet forum of "Deutschland sucht den Superstar", which is the German version of the internationally distributed TV format "Pop Idol". We employed a textual analysis method (see Mayring, 2003), where short judgemental statements are categorised according to various criteria. The contributions to the discussion on the internet forum are made by fans of the TV programme or fans of the participating contestants. The (correct) age and other socio-demographic data are only very rarely revealed in the forum, but from the contributions themselves it can be inferred that that the discussants are mainly from the target audience, i.e. teenagers with high media and music interest.

On the other hand, we examined the judgements of the TV jury from selected episodes of "Deutschland sucht den Superstar" by the same textual analysis method. Very much like in the international versions of "Pop Idol", the jury consisted of four music experts (pop producer, music manager, journalists), who judge the performance of the show contestants immediately after their stage appearances. The judgemental statements are short, and usually address very openly only a few aspects of the respective performance. Applying the same analysis method to a very similar category of statements enables us to compare the categories and processes of judgement by adolescent fans and the jury which can be seen as part of the TV programme's aesthetic and marketing concept (see Lothwesen / Müllensiefen, 2004).

2.3. Results

2.3.1 Sociodemographic Data

The first simple result of the questionnaire is a comparison between talent show viewers (TSV) and non-viewers (TSN).

– The viewers predominate with nearly two thirds of the sample.
– The viewers are about one year younger than the non-viewers.
– They are watching more music on television, for example MTV or national music-shows,
– and there are more girls than boys among them.
– The viewers tend to be more mainstream listeners
– and list typical "pop music stars" more often among preferred artists in the preference rating.
– Yet: There was no difference between viewers and non-viewers to be found in the overall music consumption and activities.

2.3.2 Similarity Judgements

On this chart (fig. 1) one can see a graphic representation of the similarity judgements asked in the first part of the questionnaire. The listed names are those of national as well as international pop music stars and national talent show contestants. The result of the Multidimensional Scaling-computation shows three dimensions, as displayed here in two charts. The distance of the particular objects is indicative of their relation in the cognitive judgement space of the questioned adolescents. So, at one first glance there appear to be some more and some less intense relations. The most obvious factors are the following:

1. The Chart on the left shows a distiction between so called 'stars' and contestants, marked as 'media manufactured stars'. An exception is the German singer Anne from the girlband "Preluders" that was formed in the TV-format "Popstars". Why she is placed next to Robbie Williams is not yet obvious.
2. The media presence of the artists at the time of the survey suggested another distinction. Clearly one sees a separation of those artists that have had no current releases at the time of the survey and those who were constantly present on TV or in popular magazines. This seems to be a distinction regardless of the nationality of the individual artist, but, of course, the media presence is determined by national factors. Here, the TV talent shows carry a heavy weight: their contestants form one big cluster in the right half of this chart. That means at the time of our

survey they were heavily present in the media. Exceptions to this aspect of national media factors are the German born singers Xavier Naidoo and Sarah Connor; both were not musically active in the public at this time.
3. A third factor divides nationally from internationally known artist. Yet there is one exception: the German born singer Sarah Connor is placed next to international stars such as Britney Spears, Madonna and Robbie Williams. A possible explanation could refer to Sarah Connor's first single in 2001 – three years before our survey – which was a co-operation with the US-rapper TQ. Thus, she was introduced to the German music market as being international or at least internationally acclaimed. This allows us to suppose that she was, at the time of the survey, still recognized as an English-singing international artist.

The MDS solutions for the data from the two versions of the questionnaire both reached acceptable statistical values (STRESS1 values around 0.2). This seems to suggest that the judgemental behaviour of our survey participants can be classified as stable and multifaceted. i.e. at least three-dimensional.

2. Content Analysis

The results of the content analysis of the internet forum's threads can be summarised by the following observations:

– A classification of the given statements in the internet forum shows that simple assertions prevail. That means the discussion among the fans is dominated by non-rationally founded statements with little explicit reasoning. Comparisons of contestants with other contestants or stars are rare, and explanations for the given statements are rather marginal.
– Positive statements about the participants slightly predominate.
– Associations between certain artists and and certain attributes are statistically significant according to a χ^2-test. That means each object, i.e. contestant, is discussed using a set of relatively specific values.
– Interestingly, those values, mediated through attributes, differ in importance between internet users (the fans!) and the TV-jury.

On this chart (fig. 2) one can see the fans' most nominated categories, extracted from the internet threads and the jury's judgements. Obviously there are variations in the importance which should be commented on briefly.

1. Whereas the personal 'character' as embodying a kind of moral or ethical integrity is of interest to the fans, the jury clearly disregards 'character' as a category. Rather, the jury focusses on the contestants' chosen and performed songs – this appears to be quite logical since we are investigating a singing contest.
2. The categories 'talent' and 'musical skills' often correlate in common usage. However the jury distinguishes between them. In their statements they neglect 'talent' which is evidently a more important category to the fans; the jury focuses on 'skills' instead – 'talent' seems to be a non-specific category for judgements in a contest.
3. Also the categories 'charisma' and 'styling' differ clearly. Whereas 'charisma' as expression of personality gains the fans' attention, it is of minor interest to the jury – they seem to favour 'styling' instead.

These differences seem to be grounded in the typical roles of fans and jury members: the former ones are predominantly led by personal taste and emphasise more holistic or even more mythical qualities; the latter ones lean more towards the seemingly objective categories of efforts made and performances delievered.

3. Conclusion and Outlook

3.1. Media Effects

We have identified some factors in the judgements of a sample of the target group of a successful TV talent show that may be classified as media effects.

– Interestingly the analysed material from the internet forum shows that the fans are aware of the media context. The discussions in the analysed threads from an internet forum include the TV-format itself and the components of the programme (the presenters and jury members) as well as the specific constraints of TV production. A distinction between stars and contestants is shown in both, the internet forum and the questionnaires.

– The frequency of media appearances also proves to be an influence on the target audience's judgements as reflected in the analysed discussion threads. This is exemplified, by the solutions of the Multi Dimensional Scaling which suggest correlations between individual objects (i.e. music stars or contestants) and CD releases. On the other hand, the internet forum discusses 'forgotten stars' as points of reference for recent developments.
– The discussions found in the internet forum with non-rational arguments and subjective judgements based on taste suggest an adoption of the communication paradigm provided by the TV-talent show jury (which we called the 'jury model'). This form of communication is encouraged by the specific possibilities provided by the internet, such as a fast and anonymous communication without any fear of penalties in the real world.
– At last, the fans contributing to the internet forum are quite often making reference to judgement categories employed by the TV-jury. There are controversial discussions of some judgements which may even lead to a denial of some jury member's expertise.

3.2. Fan-star-relationship

What does this mean for the relation between fans and stars or talent show contestants?
– We assume a model of construction of the fans' identity through para-social relationships: stars or contestants can become as important in one's own life as real life friends. The fans' holistic perception of stars and contestants supports this assumption, as does the identification with them in the preference rating, which is basically a sympathy-antipathy question. In this respect, another point to consider is that solo artists receive greater attention than band members.
– These points may suggest that we have discovered some more basic features of fandom. What makes it specific to music stars is the discussion of music related subjects as typical categories like 'voice' or 'musical skills' and stylistic features like 'rock' or 'pop'. As a next analytical step, we would like to turn a more musicological analysis which also considers the music itself as a component in the fan-star-relationship. Musical aspects to be covered here would be the originality of the song (writing), sound and production features, structural aspects which may distinguish between artists or groups of artists, and genre classifications.

3.3. Concluding Hypotheses

To sum the discussion up we hypothesise that
1. the results of our studies suggest that even young music fans have a conscious perception of the music industry's products and that they are dealing with prototypical music star features like personal qualities and achievements, and that
2. in addition, those categories of judgement are important that refer to conditions of media production and media choice.

So the following (maybe contradictory) conclusion summarises the results as presented: Certain attributes are assigned regularly to talent show contestants that qualify them as stars. Nonetheless, they are clearly conceived as being different to 'real' or 'ordinary' music stars as can be seen in the judgements of the adolescents questioned in this study.

3.4. Next Steps

This paper presented just the initial steps of a larger research enterprise aiming at understanding how adolescents' perceive stars in the music world. As a continuation of the presented survey two fields of research suggest themselves as relevant supplements:
1. An accurate analysis of the TV-formats and the associated supporting media (like magazines and coverage in other kinds of music media) should help to examine the specific precondition of these media productions. This would offer a closer look at the categories of mediating contestants in comparison to the categories of the adolescents' perception.
2. In this regard, the relations between the agenda of the audience and that of the media are of major interest. As we tried to show with the comparison of the jury's and the fans' judgements: the agenda of both, producers and consumers, should be evaluated. Designed as a longitudinal study, changes in those agendas, possible feed-

back and influences could be exposed. This again could help to answer the question concerning the position of the audience and its influence on the music industry's products.

Another relevant question is whether certain musical features determine the adolescents' judgements. This could answer questions like: What makes the difference between pop music stars and music talent show contestants regarding their music? We assume that there could be other factors in the MDS solutions distinguishing the objects (i.e. stars and contestants) in these judgements. Here the categories extracted from the internet forum could help to get more insight and find possible explanations. For example, styles of popular music seem to affect the overall image of stars and contestants, as the statements from internet forum suggest. Also, the musical qualities of the individual voice could be seen as an influence on the young people's musical expertise (see Lothwesen / Müllensiefen, 2004).

Beyond these specific musicological aspects, the presented survey touches a topic of multidisciplinary interest. Some questions could surely be answered within one discipline, but a better understanding could probably only be obtained by considering a broader context and combining approaches from several disciplines within a truly interdisciplinary research framework.

Notes

[1] The attribute ‚real' is used here to distinguish between stars that emerge from TV-talent shows and those who get known through more ‚conventional' stages of stardom.

[2] The proper term to describe this music would be "volkstümliche Musik" which is mainly maintained through TV-shows and combines elements of traditional folk music and simple modern pop in a media compatible arrangement.

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Figures

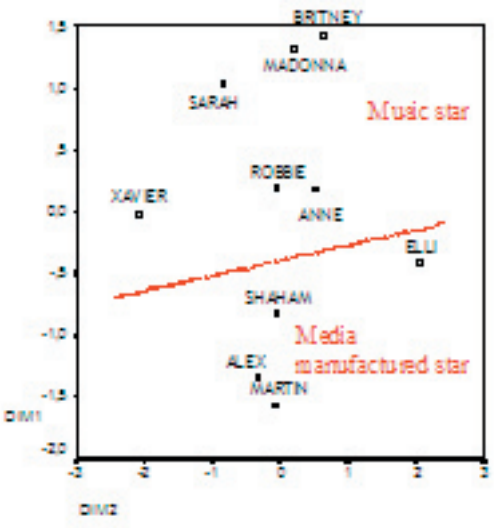

Fig. 1.a

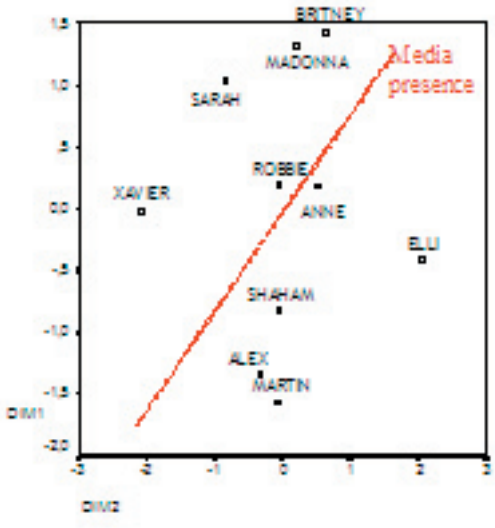

Fig. 1.b

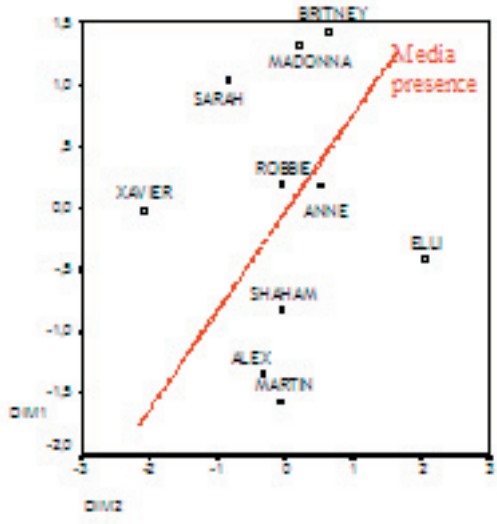

Fig. 1.c

Judged attributes	Internet forum	TV jury
Voice	166 (28.7%)	46 (15.4%)
Person in general	139 (24.0%)	47 (15.8%)
Performance in general	57 (9.8%)	97 (32.6%)
Character	52 (9.0%)	1 (0.3%)
Music/songs	1 (0.2%)	26 (8.7%)
On stage acting	34 (5.9%)	19 (6.4%)
Talent	27 (4.7%)	2 (0.7%)
Charisma	25 (4.3%)	6 (2.0%)
Look	18 (3.1%)	10 (3.4%)
Stylistic flexibility	17 (2.9%)	6 (2.0%)
Success	16 (2.8%)	5 (1.7%)
Musical skills	14 (2.4%)	15 (5.0%)
Experience	5 (0.9%)	2 (0.7%)
(Musical) personality	4 (0.7%)	3 (1.0%)
Styling	4 (0.7%)	13 (4.4%)
Total	579 (100%)	298 (100%)

Fig. 2: Comparison of statements from internet forum and TV-jury.

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