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A Box of Wires: An Analysis on Synthpop

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The musical genre of Synthpop emerged out of its New Wave roots of the 1980s that favored the use of a synthesizer. While there have been studies on the Synthpop genre for various reasons, this study uses the grounded theory method in order to analyze Synthpop in another perspective to interpret the genre's lyrics and the perceived meanings behind those lyrics. This study focuses on fifty-five songs within five albums from a diverse group of musical artists chosen by their gender, nationality, and perceived popularity associated with the Synthpop genre. Every stanza in all fifty-five songs were put into different sets of codes that were eventually simplified into one overarching category supported by two subcategories that found the dominant themes behind Synthpop. The primary theme that this study found in Synthpop is that it is a genre about the failures or the lack of romantic love that shatters the preconceived perceptions that an individual may hold when viewing their source of affection. As a result of the preconceived perceptions shattering, this study also finds individuals must ultimately choose to either negatively or positively cope without having romantic love in their lives anymore. This study is intended to provide another theoretical perspective to add with other perspectives in order to establish a more comprehensive framework on analyzing Synthpop and other musical genres when possible.



“A Box of Wires”

A Grounded Theory Approach to Synthpop

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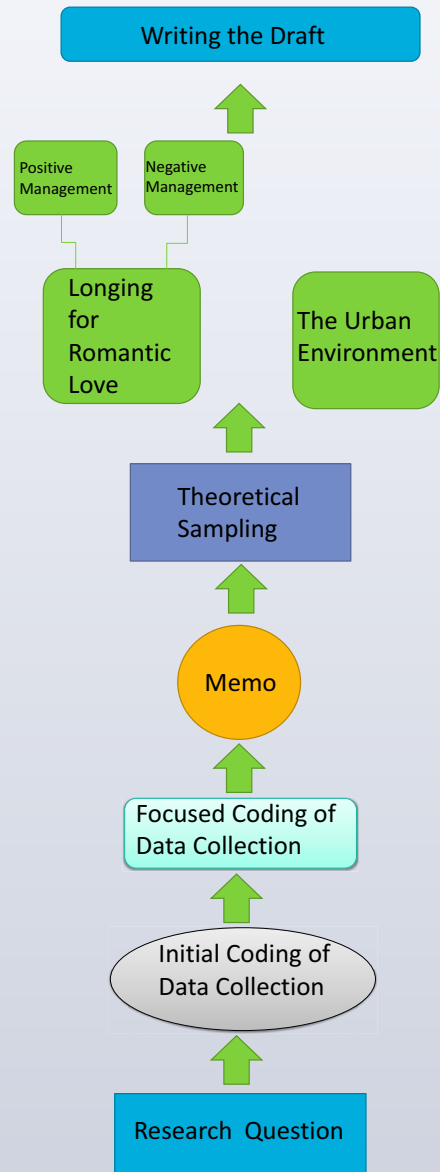
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Introduction

- Synthpop is a musical genre that emerged out of its New Wave movement roots of the 1980s. Synthpop is one of several musical genres that uses a synthesizer, an electronic, piano-styled instrument. Jon Young described this instrument as a “box of wires.”
- My research question: What analysis could be offered by using a grounded theory approach to study the song lyrics in Synthpop? Furthermore, how can this knowledge allow music listeners to make clear distinction of Synthpop from other genres?
- The Grounded Theory approach resulted as a response to criticism directed towards qualitative methods for being impressionistic, having an arbitrary divide between theory and research, and unable to produce positivist results. The grounded theory approach sets-up a systematic process of data collection from what is seen or heard in the field.
- Theory is developed purely by the data itself.
- The data being studied under this method are musical lyrics from four albums and one extended play from five different artists.
- The following debut albums and the extended play are listed below:
 1. *La Roux*—12 songs: June 20, 2009 (La Roux)
 2. *In June*—7 songs: September 8, 2007 (Owl City)
 3. *Animal*—14 songs: January 5, 2010 (Ke\$ha)
 4. *LadyHawke*—12 songs: September 20, 2008 (LadyHawke)
 5. *Happiness*—11 songs: August 27, 2010 (Hurts)
- The total number of songs was 56.

Grounded Theory Methods



Findings

- The Overarching Category of Longing for Romantic Love
- This longing described within the lyrics is the kind where one person falls hopelessly in love with another person.
 - This longing exist as long as one individual continues to fantasize being in a relationship with their subject of affection.
 - The reoccurring trend in Synthpop appears to be that the longing never materializes into a self-sustaining relationship; instead, the longing destabilizes until it becomes a broken heart.
 - The limitation found in this overarching category is that it is unable to categorize the song lyrics describing how individuals managed their broken hearts.
- The Subcategory of Negative Management
- When suffering a broken heart, individuals can choose to manage their feelings by delving into negative feelings of rejection, loneliness, anxiety, and inner pain.
 - These negative feelings are later transformed into negative actions, such as individuals having uncontrollable obsessions towards their subject of affection or individuals having (and acting on) thoughts of suicide.
- The Subcategory of Positive Management
- When Suffering a broken heart, individuals can choose to manage their feelings by concentrating into positive feelings that serve as a defense mechanism.
 - These defense mechanisms include feelings of pride, masking negative feelings, moving on with life, and even wishing bad things to happen to the subject of affection all in an effort to serve as an inner-shield to buffer the damage and feelings of loss associated with a broken heart.
- The Overarching Category of The Urban Environment
- This overarching category does not directly deal with the relationship aspect per se; however, these relationships usually take place in an urban environment.
 - For an example, major cities are consistently mention (San Francisco, Tokyo, and Paris). Specific characteristics of an urban environment are also mention, e.g. a seaport or downtown.

Conclusions

- 1) The grounded theory approach can produce a rich analysis of musical lyrics within a genre.
- 2) Synthpop is distinctly about failed relationships and how people manage their reactions to them, usually in an urban setting.

Discussion

- Can this analysis be an interest to:
 - Other Scholars?
 - Musicians?
 - Music Aficionados?
- Does Synthpop reflect how relationships are managed within the youth culture living in an urban environment or does Synthpop serve as a broader trajectory of contemporary culture?

Direction for Future Work

- Extend the Grounded Theory Approach by entering clubs or concerts where Synthpop is primarily played and conduct participant or non-participant observations and interviews.
- These interviewees could range from youthful fans to ardent critics.
- Design a comprehensive literature review on work that has been done analyzing Synthpop, including Sociology and music theory, and how those analyses match-up with a grounded theory approach.
- Reconfigure this paper from a purely methodological paper into a cultural studies piece to discuss the broader culture.

References

- Charmaz, Kathy. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. London, England: SAGE Publications.
- Young, Jon. 2007. “Roll Over Guitar Heroes; Synthesizers Are Here.” Pp. 207-212. in *The Rock History Reader*, edited by Theo Cateforis. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis Group