Teenage Kicks: exploring cultural value from a youth perspective

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Teenage Kicks: exploring cultural value from a youth perspective

# Abstract

In contemporary accounts of cultural value, young people’s perspectives are often restricted to analyses of their encounters with formal cultural institutions or schools or to debates surrounding the cultural implications of new digital spaces and technologies (Ito et al, 2010; Jenkins, 2013). Other studies have been dominated by instrumental accounts exploring the potential economic benefit and skills development facilitated by young people’s cultural encounters and experiences. In this paper we examine the findings of a nine month project, which set out to explore what cultural value means to young people in Bristol. Between October 2013 and March 2014, the AHRC ‘Teenage Kicks’ project organised fourteen workshops at seven different locations across the city, with young people aged 11 to 20. Working in collaboration with a network of cultural and arts organisations, the study gathered a range of empirical data investigating the complex ecologies of young people’s everyday/‘lived’ cultures and values.

Young people’s own accounts of their cultural practices challenge normative definitions of culture and cultural value but also demonstrate how these definitions act to reproduce social inequalities in relation to cultural participation and social and cultural capital. The paper concludes that cultural policy makers should listen and take young people’s voices seriously in re-imaging the city’s cultural offer for *all* young people.

**Keywords**: cultural value; young people; youth voice; social and spatial inequalities

# Introduction

In contemporary accounts of cultural value young people’s voices and accounts have been largely ignored. Approaches to cultural value have tended to focus on measurement and the economic benefits of arts and culture, and have explored the state funded cultural sector, largely ignoring the plethora of engagements taking place through the commercial and voluntary sectors and informal cultural participation (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2014). In this context analyses of young people’s encounters with arts and culture have tended to focus on more formal cultural institutions and schools or have been dominated by instrumental accounts of potential future economic benefit and skills development. This article draws on research funded by the AHRC Cultural Value call that aimed to start from a different position to explore what young people themselves understand as culture, how they value it (and why) and to challenge taken for granted accounts of ‘where’ young people engage in arts and cultural activity and who or what influences this engagement. We aimed to better understand the nature of the potentially less visible forms of everyday cultural practice and participation of young people in order to challenge normative and mainstream notions of cultural value. We did this by exploring, with young people, the ways in which they make sense of and navigate culture themselves ‘in place’ and within a broad ecology of social and material relations. Our belief is that youth voices and perspectives can operate to provide powerful evidence of the missing elements in current understandings of cultural value and can challenge notions of legitimate culture (Bourdieu, 1984). This is important as hierarchies of cultural value become markers of social distinction that shape and reproduce inequalities in access to the arts and culture – and not only for young people (Miles, 2014).

Through careful examination of young people’s voices this paper challenges deficit models of cultural participation which view those not participating in ‘legitimate’/ high brow culture as non-participants (Miles and Sullivan, 2010). The paper explores how young people acquire social and cultural capital through a wide range of formal and informal networks and interactions, examining how different young people might ‘network’ cultural resources and build cultural identities across space and time. In order to do this we draw on new understandings of place as being intrinsically unbounded, as constituted through the flows that link it to other contexts, persons and things as well as the events that happen and have happened historically within it (Massey, 2002). This approach refutes container-like perspectives on the material and social locations of everyday cultural life (Lefebvre, 1991) and foregrounds a ‘nexus-like’ perspective on cultural participation expanding ideas about the location of cultural engagement through looking within but also *across* and *between* contexts of home/family life, school and cultural organisations to explore how they relate to each other.

Place matters too as young people’s orientations to the city also mediate how they construct identities as ‘certain kinds’ of young people. Some young people are mobile both in their ability to move between places but also in their ability to inhabit and build ‘cosmopolitan’ cultural identities that are highly valued in the knowledge economy (Allen and Hollingworth, 2013). These aspirational, ‘cosmopolitan’ identities are characterised by flexibility and mobility across the spaces of the city. In contrast young people living in less affluent neighbourhoods and on the urban fringes are less mobile and are positioned and position themselves as ‘out of place’ or not ‘at home’ in relation to certain, valued cultural places and activities (Kennelly & Dillabough, 2008). How young people are located spatially in relation to culture in the city can have profound effects on their ideas about cultural value and on their access to social and cultural capital.

Adopting a spatial approach enables us to examine the situated complexity of young people’s engagement with arts and culture in one city. It also highlights how normative understandings of cultural value can reproduce social and spatial inequalities.

Before moving on to an exploration of findings the next section explains the methodological approach taken in the project in more detail.

# Teenage Kicks methods: towards a youth centred arts based methodology for understanding cultural value

Our methods reflected our youth centred approach. Central to our research design is the belief that young people are social actors and knowing beings in their own right. However we also wanted to disrupt assumptions of the young person as ‘all knowing’ that has pervaded some participatory work with young people (Gallagher and Gallacher, 2008; Holloway, 2014). We rather saw young people’s experience and understandings of culture as also influenced by others including parents, peers, youth workers, teachers and policy makers and we included some of these groups in our research design. Any research exploring the everyday is difficult, in that it involves working with taken-for-granted and common sense understandings (Bennett, 2005). These can be difficult to interrogate without prolonged ethnographic work which we weren’t able to do in the short time scales and given the resources available for the project. We therefore worked with Real Ideas Organisation (RiO)[[1]](#footnote-1) who have existing relationships with cultural organisations, schools and community groups to secure the participation of seven organisations located in Bristol. They were carefully chosen to represent different geographical areas of the city as well as different socioeconomic and cultural groups (see Table 1). We worked closely with adult practitioners with established relationships with young people to gain access and trust in order to run our youth centred workshops. In order to ensure that the youth voices were also connected back to power we set up a steering group, who met every 4-6 weeks, and included adult practitioners working for influential cultural organisations within the city.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**INSERT Table 1. Young people involved**

The first round of workshops involved a series of icebreaker activities, such as ‘word association’ games, designed to encourage participants to relax and (in some cases) get to know each other. Each group was asked to consider a number of different cultural organisations and describe what animal might best represent them. We asked young people to tell us what counted as culture and who influenced their cultural choices sometimes in more traditional focus group type activities. Maps of Bristol were used to collect information about where participants go in the city, and what they value culturally in these spaces in order to get at the spatial elements of their encounters with culture. Towards the end of each workshop, participants were asked what they would like to ‘produce’ in the second workshops, as a means to communicate their understandings of culture and cultural value. In the second workshops they then re-visited their responses in the first workshop using their own self-selected arts-based method to express their understandings of and experience of culture in the city. Artistic outputs included devised performances (Young Performers), videos of their everyday lives (Acorn School), model making and comic creating (the Hub), multimedia collages of their experiences of culture in the city (Create Media Centre), raps and radio shows to be broadcast on their own radio station (The Junction), and mixed material collages (Inclusive Youth and Young Creatives).

These youth led, arts based methods enabled us to ‘make’ different kinds of methodological places. Whilst young people were working we had an opportunity to talk to them in less formal circumstances, to observe their conversations with each other and their embodied art practice and to talk to them about their creative work and what they were trying to communicate through it.

Following these workshops and in discussion with our steering group, we designed a final event in which all of the young people and adult practitioners involved in the project came to the university to reflect on the initial findings from the workshops. 70 young people and adults attended this event where a group of local facilitators led arts based interventions to explore the project findings through drama, music making and poetry. We also collected more data about where the young people enjoyed cultural activities on a large map of the city.

Researchers coded the eclectic modes of data collected from the workshops and the final event looking for what young people were telling us about culture and cultural value. Whilst acknowledging that our capacity to generate arts based data ‘far outstrips our capacity to analyse them’ (Bragg 2011, p. 98) we felt that the data from young people’s creative responses allowed us to draw out that which might have been overlooked in our more traditional focus groups activities. In coding the data we were alert to that which might enable a better understanding of how hierarchical accounts of cultural value work on young people and how this plays out socially and spatially across one city. We also bought our initial findings to our steering group to analyse and discuss further.

In the next section we explore some of our findings drawing on our research to develop a youth centred understanding of cultural value. We suggest how young people challenge normative definitions of culture and cultural value but explain how these definitions still act to reproduce social inequalities in relation to cultural participation and cultural capital.

# Findings: Young people, culture and cultural value

The highly individualised nature of the empirical data collected by the ‘Teenage Kicks’ workshops is not conducive to the production of broad inferences or definitive claims about young people and cultural value. However, our approach offered us a chance to understand social and spatial dimensions of young people’s participation in a particular context. We aimed to explore and problematise, (with the youth groups and adults), dominant narratives of ‘legitimate’ culture that ignore the positive participation that occurs in more informal social and cultural and everyday activities.

## Places of culture and everyday cultural places

This section of the paper highlights how young people’s own descriptions of their cultural lives challenge mainstream discourses of cultural value by locating their participation in their everyday contexts and life histories rather than in relation to mainstream and ‘highbrow’ cultural engagement. Young people’s accounts also suggest that their participation in culture is located across and between contexts in the city thus challenging the centrality of ‘formal’ cultural institutions in accounts of cultural value.

Young people’s attitudes towards formal cultural organisations such as museums were particularly apparent in the metaphorical activity in which they were asked to imagine cultural institutions as animals. Young people across our groups said they rarely visited museums and art galleries which were variously described as, ‘big, awkward, cumbersome walruses’ or ‘dinosaurs, full of old, dead stuff’. One young person suggested a parrot represented art galleries, which they felt were ‘exotic’ and provided ‘something to look at’ suggesting the remoteness and passivity of the formal cultural sphere. Another young woman said galleries felt like ‘giraffes’ –representing the embodied experience of being in a gallery and the aching body and neck this tended to engender. For many of the young people we spoke to the formal cultural sphere remains physically and metaphorically removed from their everyday lives. Indeed we know that this is not only the case for young people but is echoed across generational groups (Miles and Sullivan, 2010).

Many young people located their own cultural participation in their everyday experiences and life histories. For the younger people we spoke to home was a key place where they engaged in cultural activity. For instance, Ben (14) from Acorn School said that he does, ‘everything at home or at friends’ houses.’ Many of the young people we spoke to discussed connecting with peers through social media sites ‘as soon as they get in from school’, and their engagement in digital gaming as ‘a good way of relieving stress’ (Emily, 13, Acorn School). This ‘retreat to the home’ has been well documented elsewhere (Valentine, 2004; Livingstone 2007) but has largely been explored in isolation from other cultural participation. We suggest it is important to understand the centrality of the home not as a ‘container’ for certain kinds of cultural as located in ‘a complex of mobilities’ (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 92–93). Cultural participation in the home should be understood as extending to and influenced by culture beyond the home in the local area and further afield, linking with city-wide cultural activities and digital media cultures.

Digital media and mobile technologies are clearly highly significant resources in mediating young people’s everyday lives and their cultural participation (Manchester and Facer, 2015) and they are rarely taken into consideration in discussions of cultural value. Ethan (13) told us that ‘phones link to everything’ and many described the importance of their tablet or controller for their console – ‘cause I spend a lot of time on both of them, I like to watch videos and connect with people and stuff’ (Mohammed, 14). Feeling permanently connected and the repercussions of this suggests a need to pay attention to how interactions with digital media can re-focus attention to everyday social and cultural participation and to flows across space and time in understanding cultural value.

In particular young people in our study described the way that they use digital images to document their everyday lives across places of cultural engagement and participation, to connect with others and to explore and reflect on their own identities across space and time. Thomas (18) told us that social networking is ‘kind of like documenting your life – you can look back in ten years time, you’ll have all these pictures and comments.’ Several young people described the pressure to post frequently. Chloe (17) explained,

Sometimes I think if I don’t post something then people will think I’m really sad and don’t do anything so I’ll like post a picture of a leaf or something.

Katya (18) meanwhile suggested that if she didn’t document and share her cultural participation with others it would be less valued,

If I go somewhere and I don’t take a picture I feel like that’s a big event that I’ve missed so like if I went out to the zoo and didn’t take pictures how will anyone know I went to the zoo?

Supporting a ‘take’ on cultural value that highlights the importance of everyday cultural participation our evidence points to the development of new cultural practices around the documentation of the everyday, particularly through photography which is no longer simply used to support the recollection of memories but also as a kind of ‘performance of everyday life’ (Okabe and Ito, 2003, cited in Lasen and Gomez-Cruz, 2009). Young people we spoke to in the youth drama group reflected on visits to museums in which taking photographs (and posting them later to their networks) whilst experiencing culture became more important than the actual embodied, visceral experience of being in the museum space. Katya (18) mused,

I went to Madame Tussauds I got there and I was just thinking this place is so expensive but all it is is just taking photos, this whole thing.

Her friend suggested that the images became significant after the visit when they could be used to ‘tell stories’ to others, providing digital prompts and enabling conversation about culture.

Young people’s participation in digital culture, then, may influence a different way of experiencing culture as an everyday, active, participatory practice which is shared and talked about. However the evidence also suggests a way of creating culture, transmuting cultural experiences into something else and in the process perhaps flattening all experience to the same form of representation (in this case - the image). New digital practices are clearly influencing how and where young people experience culture and what they value culturally but questions remain how this might play out for different young people across the city.

## Mobilities, inequality and cultural value in the city

Our contextual approach to young people’s understandings of cultural value in one city enables us to ‘map’ how social and spatial inequalities can influence how culture is experienced and valued. Well documented divides between the North and the South of the city and between those areas nearer to the city centre and on the urban fringes were highly visible in our data suggesting that young people in some neighbourhoods were more likely to come into the city centre to enjoy cultural activities and to feel that they had access to cultural activities in their localities. Those who lived on the urban fringes in less affluent areas of the city didn’t often travel into the centre of the city. They tended to enjoy culture in places in their local area such as parks and swimming pools; a particular concern for instance were plans to close their local skate park. These orientations to local place and lack of connection with the wider city may influence their ability to develop social and cultural capital where normative accounts of cultural value prevail. For instance, Laura (14, the Hub) told us that, ‘there is an art gallery in town but I’ve forgotten what it’s called - I’ve never been there.’

However, Kamaal (18), who lived in a multicultural neighbourhood in the city, emphasized the role of culture in enhancing his feeling of ‘belonging’, both to his more immediate family group and also to a wider place-based community culture when he told us,

I was born listening to music. My mum played music to me throughout her pregnancy, then growing up in a house where there’s always music playing. I walk into the kitchen my mum’s cooking there’s music playing, I leave the house I can hear music on the street.

His rootedness to place and family cultures can also be seen in his description of differences between generations in his own family,

My dad was always playing reggae in the house so that influenced me even though our generation listen to different kinds of music. My brother makes his own kind of music so different genres dub and hiphop…

Here place or community seemed to provide a stability - acting to ground Kamaal in a very particular cultural locality but also potentially limiting his connections and ability to feel ‘at home’ in other spaces in the city and beyond.

In contrast other young people, who lived in more affluent areas of the city, inhabited more cosmopolitan identities, demonstrating a fluid and mobile view of their cultural identities that shift and move in response to local, regional and global trends (Polhemus, 1997). Harry (18) reacted to his peer talking about being a vegetarian with the view that, ‘being a vegetarian is as much a fashion statement as buying a new pair of shoes’. Perhaps more surprisingly Sally (17) added that she knows, ‘some people who became muslim for a month, it’s like whatever’s on trend.’ Others in this group pointed out that cultural influences are now much more ‘mixed up, people take influence from different eras or times’ making it possible to ‘be one of 20,000 things.’

These more mobile, socially advantaged young people, who we met through their engagement with established cultural organisations in the city, spoke positively about locations in the city where they encountered ‘a buzz, always something new going on, something happening’ illustrating their ability to shape shift, change and adapt quickly as they encounter the city. The Young Creatives, for instance, described parks and city centre squares that they considered to be ‘open’ where they felt they could encounter ‘originality’, ‘community’ and ‘creativity’ – areas they had self defined as important to their own cultural value. These young people often made distinctions between high and low culture when talking about cultural value. They were often dismissive of celebrity culture and reality TV suggesting that they ‘just don’t care what whatisface did with who’ and, that ‘trash TV holds us back as a society.’ Michael (17) told us,

‘Celebrity culture’ – I don’t care about the lives of people who have taken to exploiting their own feelings and experiences and having them exploited without their true awareness.

In contrast when talking about literature they suggested that being ‘well read’, which to them involved ‘reading the classics’ was a term to aspire to.

Cultural experiences, then, were often communicated as an expression of ones identity and a marker that can set you apart from others. Young people living in affluent areas of the city articulated their cultural identities as mobile and aspirational, their engagement was often expressed a means of extending their cultural exchange value in order to get highly sought after jobs in the creative industries (Skeggs et al, 2007; Allen and Hollingworth, 2013). Their future facing, aspirational trajectory contrasted with that of those living in less affluent areas where cultural activity was often linked to ‘belonging’ to their local area and particular family heritages or to their consumption of popular cultural forms in the present – aspects of culture that are rarely valued in mainstream understandings of cultural value.

# Conclusions

The findings presented in this paper are particular to the case of one British city. This contextual view has allowed us to explore the social and spatial dimensions of young people’s understandings of cultural value and indicates the need for more in-depth ethnographic research in this field. In this article we suggest that normative definitions of culture and cultural value influence, shape and reproduce cultural participation and social inequalities in the lives of the young people. Our findings highlight the need for cultural policy makers, practitioners and researchers to widen their scope in order to account for the complexities of young people’s take on cultural value. This will involve foregrounding the connections between the different contexts in which young people enjoy culture, and the factors that influence their understandings of cultural value and participation. The project findings indicate that complex ecologies of cultural practice develop across and between real and virtual ‘place’ and that therefore our understanding of them should not be restricted to site specific explorations of cultural value.

Formal cultural venues and cultural policy makers could utilise these findings to consider how the city’s cultural assets could be re-imagined as democratic spaces where all young people feel comfortable to hang out and be together, rather than assuming their engagement needs to centre on a more formal enjoyment of cultural artefacts and participation in particular forms of cultural practice. This is especially pertinent in light of the reduction in youth services in many cities. This is a social justice issue when you consider we have observed a cohort of cosmopolitan young people focussed on developing their cultural capital, flexible and mobile and able to take advantage of the various cultural opportunities on offer across the city. In contrast another cohort of young people were less mobile and more likely to feel ‘out of place’ in more formal cultural venues and in public spaces in the city.

Our findings also point to the need for further research into how digital tools may influence the embodied, visceral experience of enjoying culture at cultural venues. In addition, the multiple ways of creating, participating and sharing cultural experiences through digital media suggest a possible flattening of the cultural experience to a similar form of representation. More research into how this plays out across different socioeconomic groups would be interesting to understand how these digital practices may influence how young people are able to build cultural capital.

Listening to young people’s views on culture helps us to problematize normative definitions of cultural participation and cultural value that view those not participating in ‘legitimate’ culture as non-participants. It is hoped that this project might stimulate policy makers, researchers and practitioners to consider new ways of mapping cultural participation that challenge these mainstream definitions of cultural value, taking young people’s everyday cultural participation seriously.

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**Table 1: Young people involved**

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| **Group** | **Characteristics** | **Workshop 1** | **Workshop 2** |
| Bristol Young Performers | Youth group based at a prestigious theatre in the city centre. Ethnically diverse. Aged 17-22 | 11 participants from the in-house youth group. | 10 participants from the in-house youth group. |
| Young Creatives | Youth group meeting at a city centre contemporary art gallery. Mostly from North/more affluent areas of the city. Aged 16-19 | 7 participants, 4 from a youth group based at the gallery and 4 from a local 6th form college. | 4 participants from the gallery youth group. |
| The Hub | Child led art project housed at a primary school in an area located in an area of socio-economic deprivation on the outskirts of the city. Aged 11-14 | 10 participants from two secondary schools, all were ex-Hub members | 8 participants from two secondary schools, all ex-Hub members. |
| Acorn School | Secondary school located in an ethnically diverse area. Aged 13-15. |  9 participants from the same year 9 class. | 8 participants as before |
| The Junction | Drop-in youth centre located in the city centre. Ethnically diverse, from poorer city centre areas. Aged 13-18. | 15 participants from the youth club. | 6 participants from the youth club. |
| Create Media Centre | Community media centre located in a white working class estate on the outskirts of the city. Aged 11-18 | 12 participants from the community centre youth group. | 3 participants from the centre youth group |
| Inclusive Youth | Organisation run by and for disabled people, meeting at a city centre location. Aged 16-21. | 12 participants from the organisation youth group. | 9 participants from the organisation youth group |

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Reply all |

Mon 02/02/2015 08:17

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Hi Helen,

This all looks great! I've read through it and suggested a few grammatical changes, but I really don't mind if you ignore these suggestions. The one thing we need to change is the Jenkins reference, which has slipped somehow to the wrong book (Textual Poachers was written in 1992). The other option would be to cut the references out of the abstract completely, as it's not common practice to include them?

Emma

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Thu 25/06/2015 12:32

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Hi Emma

The Cultural Trends article is in process for publication.

Attached is the final version I submitted - can you check and make sure you’re happy with it?

How’s things?

Helen

1. Real Ideas Organisation: the Arts Council England Bridge organisation for young people and the arts in the South West. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Including representatives from Arnolfini, Arts Council England, Bristol Museums, Room 13, RiO, Knowle West Media Centre [↑](#footnote-ref-2)