Reflections on Cass Sunstein’s Beatlemania Article: Romantic Behaviouralism?

Abstract

In the first edition of this journal, Cass Sunstein offered a behaviouralist reading of the Beatles audience. He suggested the band became a worldwide sensation based on the spread of endorsements by Beatles people acting in line with behavioural norms, such as trust in others’ aesthetic judgements and a need to be liked. This article aims to critically analyse Sunstein’s work by looking at the data sources he used, assessing the applicability of his claims, and considering the ideological effects of what I call a romantic behaviouralist approach. Alongside Sunstein’s ideas, a neo-Durkheimian reading is suggested to account for interesting regularities of fan behaviour. My aim is not to discredit mechanisms of human behaviour discussed by Professor Sunstein, but to question the grounding assumptions behind a behavioural approach to popular culture history, and suggest that the application of some proposed behavioural mechanisms may be limited by other elements at play.

Keywords: Cass Sunstein, behaviouralism, popular music, Beatles fandom, Beatlemania, Durkheim, aesthetics.

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Cass R. Sunstein is no ordinary academic. He is the Robert Walmsley Professor of Harvard Law School and the world’s most cited legal scholar (Marantz 2017). In his career, Sunstein has pursued behavioural economics and often taken the spread of information as his object. His work has drawn on social science data to address topics from conspiracy theory to vaccine hesitancy and other public issues, bringing concepts such as the ‘nudge’ and a number of other ideas to the fore in policy making. Sunstein’s thinking has been applied in his roles for the
White House, World Health Organization and UK Behavioural Insights Team. As a music fandom researcher, I was intrigued, therefore, when the *Journal of Beatle Studies* published a piece by Sunstein (2022) on the topic of Beatlemania. In what follows, I will explore the supporting data for Sunstein’s claims, consider points from his article, begin assessing the ontology of behavioural approaches to fandom, and offer an alternative hypothesis drawn from Émile Durkheim’s famous 1912 work on religion. My aim is not to discredit the mechanisms of human behaviour discussed by Sunstein, but suggest that their application may be shaped or limited by other elements at play, particularly in one kind of Beatles fandom.

Professor Sunstein’s Beatlemania piece starts by asking a question: Why did the Beatles become a worldwide sensation? It initially posits two alternative explanations: the aesthetic quality of their music, or the ‘timely enthusiasm’ of their endorsers. Sunstein introduces this scenario by talking about the 2019 film *Yesterday*, which is premised on the fictional idea that a world could be imagined where the Beatles music was unknown, and someone else came up with it. This adheres to the aesthetic explanation – that the band’s music is just great – but, as Sunstein rightly says, we already know the songs as audience members because we know the Beatles’ music and its social worth. In order to discuss Professor Sunstein’s ideas, we need to think about the complexity of reception as a process involving context, aesthetic choice, and endorsement. One critic of the Beatles famously called the band’s music a ‘mass-produced mental opiate’ (Johnson 1964). While I do not agree with Johnson’s mass culture critique reading, the drug metaphor has one general aspect that can be used to help clarify Sunstein’s arguments. We might say that he is wrestling with what medical analysts of drug effects call the
role of ‘set and setting’ in shaping participant experience (Weil 1998: 29). In other words, when any individual takes a psychedelic drug, how it is experienced can be highly variable. To account for this complexity, researchers hypothesize that each trip is the unique product of interaction between two types of factor: ‘set’ (the individual’s mindset) and ‘setting’ (physical and social conditions in which the drug is taken). This simplistic division can be reworked to help to clarify music consumption in theory: the ‘set’ or content here being the individual’s notionally unmodified aesthetic estimation of the Beatles music, and the ‘setting’ or context being a personal and media environment, one constituent of which is a ‘mass’ of already-convinced individuals who enthusiastically communicate their positive engagement with the Beatles.

To use the language of set and setting, for Sunstein, in terms of ‘set,’ the Beatles music is above a minimal aesthetic threshold: it is not terrible music. However, behavioural action also involves learned responses to ‘setting.’ First, individuals begin to pay attention to the music for one or more of three reasons: they trust an individual endorser’s personal judgements, trust others’ collective capacity for judgement, or go along with the group’s choice to conform. However, checking a product out is not the same as liking it. For this part, Sunstein invokes a second concept he calls reputational cascade: we agree with others’ judgements because we care about what others think about us, because we want to avoid conflict or save face. To this he adds the benefit of network effects: that the value of the activity increases when lots of others do it, so then people (presumably beyond a kind of tipping point) have a fear of missing out. This allows Sunstein to begin considering questions of the relationship between aesthetic value
and popularity by examining a parallel case (the posthumous reputation of poets), as well as historical evidence revealing the Fab Four’s struggle for success.

**Independent Aesthetic Decision Making?**

Professor Sunstein’s model presumes a two-part process: information is delivered (say, recorded music is heard), and an aesthetic decision is made – then when this happens enough, worldwide sensation is achieved. His work draws on experimental data by Matthew Salganik and his colleagues. Initially based at Columbia University, the researchers conducted two key experiments. Their results statistically demonstrated that participants’ knowledge of prior downloads seemed to have an impact on their aesthetic ratings and subsequent propensity to download songs. However, there are some crucial things to say about research design here. In the first experiment (Salganik, Watts and Dodds 2006), 14,341 participants were recruited from a third-party website called Bolt.com, which at that point was a kind of teen pop culture forum:

> In real time, arriving participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions – independent and social influence – distinguished only by the availability of information on the previous choice of others... While listening to a song, they were asked to assign it a rating from one star (‘I hate it’) to five stars (‘I love it’)... participants in the social influence condition were randomly assigned to one of eight ‘worlds,’ each of which evolved independently of the others. Songs in each world accumulated downloads only from participants in that world, and subsequent participants could only see their own world’s download count. (2006: 854)

In their supporting materials, Salganik, Dodds and Watts (2006) explain that this was not actually one experiment, but two of equal size, drawing mostly on teen participants from
English-speaking countries with an even split between male and female respondents. The researchers explained that in the first version 1400 test subjects were assigned to the ‘independent’ experiment, where choices were purely based on personal perceptions, and each of the independent ‘worlds’ had 700 respondents allocated to it. The University of Columbia researchers said they took a lot of measures to avoid ‘information contamination,’ scenarios such as the bands concerned sending their own fans to game the experiment (itself a sign that people believe in social influence).

In the second study, Salganik and Watts (2008) continued their web-based experiments, again with 48 songs, this time with 12,207 fresh subjects who were mostly American teenagers, with males now making up over half the sample. For the first phase, 2,211 participants were split into two ‘worlds,’ one independent (where aesthetic choices were recorded in isolation) and the other social (where previous download information and comparative rank was conveyed and helped to order the presentation of the songs). In the second phase, these two worlds continued to accrue participants, but others were now also assigned to two ‘inverted social influence’ worlds, where songs which had previously been ranked in terms of download popularity were now assigned an opposite rank (the most popular song from the first social influence world would be ranked as last, and so on). Here the results were in part shaped by the fact that participants averaged only seven songs in their listening. In other words, respondents made their aesthetic choices across an average of 15% of the music sample, ignoring most of it (especially in the inverted social worlds).
In America, the Beatles appeared to play out their own version of the Salganik, Watts and Dodds (2006) experiment when the independent label Vee Jay released their first US single, ‘Please Please Me’ on February 7, 1963, and it failed to place on the *Billboard* pop chart. A second single, ‘From Me To You’ failed to break the top 100. What appeared to change for the band was the press running stories about Beatlemania happening over in England late in 1963 along with the might of a major label promotional campaign from Capitol Records delivering on the premise of the excitement drummed up (see Millard 2012). However, there significant issues emerge when we try to seamlessly transfer our thinking between experiments and actual history. Salganik and his co-workers behavioural studies made a number of unrealistic assumptions which Sunstein’s (2022) work has uncritically accepted.

Aesthetic evaluation never ever takes place in isolation. The Salganik experiments did not create eight isolated experimental worlds re-running the same scenario each time: each world was inhabited by different individuals who would, to some degree, likely have made different aesthetic decisions from the start. Aesthetic responses are always highly varied and distinctly situated. I might have liked the Beatles because of their harmonies, my sister because she had a crush on Paul McCartney, my cousin because they reminded him of the rock’n’roll era, and so on. We are all individuals, and our responses are individual. If enough of us are won over by a band, they become a phenomenon, on the aesthetic plane, we all still have individual but not isolated responses. The Beatles meant something a bit different to, say, Black fans as they did to white fans, and they meant something different in the 1970s USSR than they did in the 1960s
USA. This complicates what an aesthetic decision means, because it is individual, but not free of a personal and social context, or based on disinterested contemplation of a musical object.

In 1995, the *Sunday Telegraph* asked several celebrities about their favourite Beatles song. The answers were diverse, but what several had in common were a variant of that given by the children’s author Raymond Briggs, who chose ‘Love Me Do’: ‘I married my wife Jean in late 1963 and I think that was one of the first records we bought. I connect it with a happy period in my life’ (Bealing 1995: 22). Such quotes suggest the reasons for a choice can be based seemingly ‘purely’ on the aesthetics of the music, or in the context of familial relations in which the music is played, or on many, many other things (for empirical evidence of the diversity of identifications, see Crafts, Cavicchi and Keil 1993). Diversity is true of other fandoms, too. For example, in my PhD, I found ‘hooks’ through which fans got into Elvis Presley included re-watching movies, attending fan conventions to accompany their partners, watching news of Elvis’s passing, and even taking singing lessons (Duffett 1999). I have argued elsewhere, therefore, for a radically situated politics of listening (see Duffett 2013a).

In other words, on the artistic worth of the Beatles’ music, Sunstein’s discussion is reminiscent of an aspect of his favourite thought experiment in this area. In the film *Yesterday*, Hamish, the main character, lives in a fictional, counterfactual world where the Beatles never existed, and produces the same music (songs like ‘Yesterday’) as items of extraordinary aesthetic value. As Sunstein says, we cannot watch the film innocently, because we already know the reputation of the music. This means, crucially, that the whole idea of the individual’s notionally unmodified
aesthetic estimation of the Beatles music is a theoretical fiction. However, Sunstein’s argument, that such music – almost regardless of the process of history – does have aesthetic value (ie. is ‘good music’ and better than other music) actually comes from the same audience position as the viewer of Yesterday: due to history, like us, he already knows the critical reputation of the Beatles. Isolated aesthetic decision making is not only an impossibility, it is a fictional artefact invented by the methodology of this tradition of behavioural research.

Zero Sum Competition?

Inspired by Salganik and his colleagues’ experiments, a late section of Professor Sunstein’s (2022) piece returns to the film Yesterday, to raise the possibility that the Beatles might have missed out on early audience endorsement in a counterfactual world, and succeeded at a slower rate, or their music might, alternatively, do well now. To begin addressing this, Sunstein turns to the Liverpool group’s fraught early history – or at least Mark Lewisohn’s (2013) version of that – to show that commercial success was not ‘foreordained,’ despite John Lennon’s self-belief in his band, but was instead serendipitous. The band’s first group single ‘Love Me Do’ was recorded and released against the odds, and Sunstein says that local fans then began the informational cascade which would launch their success. Finally, Sunstein returns to the question of global success in a concluding section he calls ‘Lost Einsteins,’ arguing that it would be preposterous to imagine a counterfactual world where Kinksmania or Holliesmania rules and there was a Journal of Hollies Studies, adding that the longevity of the Beatles success supports
the idea they were unique, which in turn makes their success seem inevitable. However, he suggests, the Lennon and McCartney of the early 1960s are not the ones we know now, and we have no way of knowing if Graham Nash or Ray Davies might have done better given the Beatles level of success. Not only might there be ‘bandmanias that never were,’ but also ‘Lost Einsteins’: geniuses that due to obstacles and social injustices never got their breaks. Sunstein thus allies the question of why the Beatles became a worldwide sensation with its seemingly logical counterpart: Why not the Kinks, or the Hollies? Why no Holliesmania?

When one band ‘makes it’ do competitors necessarily have to lose? There is some logic to such thinking, as many groups compete in the charts, and the press has sometimes presented battles of the bands – including stories about Elvis vs the Beatles, because the British invasion was collectively pushing US pop acts aside. However, the obstacles and enabling elements which present bands with a kind of ‘snakes and ladders’ environment, might not have total overlap with questions of aesthetic judgement. In the long history of popular music studies, where, there is some research on relative success. Scholars have, in the wake of cultural overproduction, stressed things like branding, marketing or promotional activity (Anderton, Hannam and Hopkins 2022), and ‘storage’ record contracts – where bands are signed, but record companies get ‘cold feet’ and withdraw resources used for recording or promotion, or more often promotion is devolved to the band until others around them begin to show more interest (Negus 1993). Audience choice plays a limited role here, and the situation is not necessarily a zero sum. ‘Those instead of those’ questions of band phenomena are discourses that make little sense when we admit them into theory, because history has not entirely
worked like that. In the early 1960s, fans had strong responses to the Beatles, but they also had
them to other bands. On the level of individual thinking, we might have made aesthetic
comparisons when asked, but ordinarily, there were plenty of people who had the Beatles, the
Kinks and the Hollies in their record collections. The ‘100%er,’ who only likes one band, and not
others, is not always or entirely true. On the collectively level, in the next decade, there were
overlapping band ‘manias’ in glam rock and beyond. If we ask, ‘why those and not those’ we are
inevitably led into comparative questions: of aesthetics (ie. ‘good’ music), or of context ('early
downloads’), or indeed of 1960s culture or sociology, that are hard to disentangle from the
actuality of what happened.

It might be more productive to accept that the race is run: there are no counterfactual worlds,
no universal, ahistorical subjects, and no realistic separation into set and setting. In their own
article, crucially, Salganik and Watts (2008: 349) admitted they organised their second study
around a false assumption: since the songs are ranked, if one goes up, another must come
down. Instead of saying that some bands just have more success than others (and that they are
all running their own race), it implies a kind of zero-sum environment (where band A makes it
big, and band B necessarily fails), something recognized by the University of Columbia
researchers, but not fully acknowledged by Sunstein. For him to include the idea of lost
potential in his discussion seems odd, as it goes beyond the remit of evidence-based analysis.
The discussion in that area instead invites a kind of speculation that is not amenable to
definitive argument. In place of solid theory, it therefor rather resembles entertainment and
fannish speculation; lost potential is notably the lead trope in press discussion about Sunstein’s
Beatlemania ideas. However, this comparative question also functions to connect issues of emergent popularity (the Beatles sensational growth) to ones of aesthetics (the Beatles artistic merit).

**Beatlemania or Beatles Appreciation?**

In Sunstein’s model, information spreads, but how each individual who might act as the next link in the cascade behaves is subject to community norms and other psychological pressures from the social and informational environment. The media and work of mouth are, presumably, seen as all the same here – all part of a potential process where information moves. It all sounds straightforward, but when one drills down into the actuality of information spread, the meaning of what Sunstein is discussing starts to get hazy. For instance, at what point do we decide that the band were a ‘worldwide sensation’? How many countries having a number one single, say, would define that? Also, which information is being passed on? The sound of the Beatles music itself? Knowledge that the Beatles are an important band to know and discuss? Knowledge that a large number of people likes the Beatles, enough to buy their records – if so how large a number? Knowledge that the band has fans? Or all of these? Equally, what is each endorser expected to do: discuss the Beatles, approve of the band, buy their records, publicly assent to being a fan, or all of those?

In his recent talk at the University of Liverpool, Sunstein narrowed this down to ‘Everybody talking about, “Have you heard the Beatles?”’ He also pointed to ‘thresholds’ of action, such as
buying a Beatles record, and being a fan. This is consistent with the source of his behavioural data, the work of Matthew Salganik and his colleagues. One of the key issues with the aesthetic ratings scale used by Salganik, however, is that at different levels of aesthetic star rating, in actuality, markedly different types of behaviour can occur. So, for example, an indifferent listener, a positively moved listener, and an excited fan might all manifest qualitatively different signals and types of behaviour which would, in turn, come charged with various connotations, and shape perceptions of the Beatles and its audience in different ways. For instance, I might know that everyone is talking about the Beatles, and may or may not therefore want to check them out, but many other factors might come into play in forming any kind of conviction formation whereby I begin recognising myself as a fan. At this point, it is worth introducing the question of Beatles appreciation.

Usually when people refer to the term ‘Beatlemania’ they mean the ‘fan hysteria’ that greeted the Liverpool group roughly from 1963 to 1966, especially in its more pop orientated phase after achieving national standing. This Beatlemania was fully recognized not as a consequence of the group’s first EMI release, but by an appearance of the October 13, 1963, ITV show, Val Parnell’s Sunday Night at the London Palladium, and its subsequent write up in the Daily Mirror tabloid newspaper which named the phenomenon (see Spizer 2003:53). It was the beginning of a seeming contagion, where young people across Britain, Europe, Canada and then the USA, and beyond, saw images and sounds in the media of Beatles fans screaming in the vicinity of the band. This image of the Beatles being the choice of a new generation was also embedded in its own media products, notably the 1964 Richard Lester film, A Hard Day’s Night, and a 1966
BBC documentary, *The Beatles Live at the Shea Stadium*. The ‘Beatlemania’ phase of the Beatles’ growth was not the first time the band played internationally, but it was when the relaying of fan enthusiasm helped make them a ‘worldwide sensation.’ However, the Beatles continued to thrive in terms of their aesthetic contribution and critical reception after this phase. Music historian Bernard Gendron has suggested:

> They [the Beatles] dominated the cultural discourses of rock music in 1967 as they had the pop charts in 1964. An adult Beatlemania was in effect replacing the apparently fading ‘teenybopper’ Beatlemania, supplanting the screams and rituals of worship with breathless reportage and grandiloquent praise. (2002: 193)

This rather simplified explanation captures a shift. We might talk about four phases of what could be called the full span of the phenomenon of Beatles appreciation: early development, Beatlemania, post-Beatlemania, and post-Beatles. It is important to note that the University of Columbia researchers’ experiments were not exactly suggesting a cascade of *fandom* (five stars on their approval scale), but one of positive endorsement (three to five stars). This is also reflected in Sunstein’s claims: rather than analysing the Beatlemania phase specifically as a contagion of fan excitement, he is talking about the spread of endorsement, initially during the Beatlemania phase, but also before and after, throughout what I have called the full span of the phenomenon of Beatles appreciation. Whether or not ‘fan hysteria’ represents one manifestation of the spread of Beatles talk that he wishes to discuss, a key part of Sunstein’s focus is necessarily the Beatlemania phase, because it was then that the band became a worldwide sensation. Was their music critically embraced beyond their fan base (large and increasing as it was) back then, or did this seeming ongoing advertisement to join the community (not least for its network effects) actually *work against* the band in the short term?
The answer might, in part, be generational. Before John Lennon’s ‘more popular than Jesus’ comment, Beatles fans were not as maligned as Elvis fans were a few years later (see, for example, Connolly 1970), but they were still treated with condescension by some of the guardians of ‘good’ music, critics dissatisfied with audience responses which accompanied the Beatle’s rapid growth in popularity. Consider, for example, Paul Johnson’s famous, articulate rant against ‘the Menace of Beatleism’ (1964). So what happened? Perhaps there were both contextual and agency-based drivers of change for the band. If the Fab Four were favoured by an accident of history, it was one that challenged class and associated cultural elitism in favour of celebrating the creativity of the popular arts. The art world started pondering the value of entertainment in the wake of the 1950s consumer boom. The Beatles emerged in a globalizing era where elitist, mass culture thinking had subsided sufficiently for the band’s vast popularity to raise the question of whether they should, in line with their own claims, be taken seriously as artists. Less prominent music groups like the Hollies may have taken less advantage of that process; as musical entertainers, the Beatles made public claims to artistic status and drew on art movements as part of what they did. Aesthetically, for example, the Beatles’ co-optation of ‘quality’ artistic styles and collaborators – such as surrealism and pop art, Richard Lester and Peter Blake – may have helped endear them to many critics. They entered the pages of Cahiers du Cinema way more often than, say, Elvis Presley, who released many more feature films; an indication that they were more acceptable in adult and middle-class conversations. Coupled with this, on later albums, the band’s music became different and arguably more complex and diverse. Musicologically, the Beatles stopped being a tight pop band who could include girl
group style harmonies and rock’n’roll covers, and ‘matured’ into an art rock band of sorts, albeit one helping to invent the new genre. It was in those contexts, not necessarily the ones of pop music and fandom, but particularly from *Sgt. Pepper* onwards (O’Sullivan 2017), that issues of ‘reputational cascade’ and ‘network effects’ might well have become relevant to the wider public. There was no clear immediate consensus or sea change to say the Beatles had shifted from pop kitsch to critically acclaimed rock art, but instead a contested and protracted struggle (see Collins 2020). We might, for instance, consider the cultural work of music scholar Wilfrid Mellers, who helped to cement the Beatles reputation early in the next decade when he was nearly 60-years-old (Mellers 1973). Rather than one information cascade, from the start there was something more like a variegated, but evolving information field.

Although the behavioural approach of scholars like Professor Sunstein has been efficacious in shaping government intervention, it pushes social and historical factors aside in favour of aesthetic ones – attention to history becomes inconsequential unless it answers aesthetic questions – something that has political consequences for how we understand who the Beatles were, who their audience was, and what they did in the 1960s. Professor Sunstein’s approach arguably conflates Beatlemania and longer term Beatles appreciation, by locating the former as the start of the latter (eclipsing the post-Beatlemania countercultural Beatles), and positing the whole phenomenon as a faddish chain reaction, as it were: a recognisable process that happened to carry a content, not a variable content in a complex context. The Beatles did not simply make object subject to aesthetic approval in information fields; they made catchy music that inevitably pulsated with the complex social and political resonances of its time – questions
of gender, race politics, drugs, religion, attitudes to war and other issues – and initially their audience was necessarily to some degree engaged with the band and their music in that context. Beatlemania was not qualitatively the same as the Arab Spring, or #MeToo, or for that matter ISIS, as all of these have their own meanings, situated social values, and historical political contexts. Putting to one side the ethical questions of whether is a useful thing to label fandom as ‘mania’ or see fans as potential fanatics (‘group polarisation’) (see Duffett 2013b), behaviourist approaches, I suggest, turn the past into a laboratory and in doing so they arguably play a political role in the present.

Experimental generalisations in behavioural work function to ontologically relegate history. Researchers start with concerns about generalised psychological processes, then use experiments, historic information, or counterfactual thought experiments as a way to road test such theory. This has the effect of reducing any appreciation of history to something that does or does not fit hypothesized processes, and makes us lose sight of an actual social and political context. I would go even further here: to some degree behaviouralist scholars assert readings that are in danger of deleting the social context from the products they discuss, by drawing attention elsewhere. So, for example, rather than offering a historically situated, inclusive and heroic fantasy of American exceptionalism in the wake of Watergate and Vietnam, Professor Sunstein has argued Star Wars: A New Hope is meaningful because it explores fatherhood (‘The World According to Star Wars...’ 2016). Equally, the question of the Beatles here becomes one of aesthetic arguments – albeit based on generalized models and data on experiments about
informational cascades – not raising questions of the actual, fraught, countercultural 1960s, and its messy and situated empirical, generational politics of fandom.

There has been much work on Beatlemania in context. Ever since the Beatles first visited America, a number of scholars have attempted to explain Beatlemania. For example, in 1964, child expert Dr Bernard Saibel described a Beatles show as an ‘orgy’ alarmingly arousing female sexuality (see Saibel 1964, reproduced in Cateforis 2012). A.J.W. Taylor (1966) examined 346 young people after the Beatles visited New Zealand and concluded they were neither neurotic or hysterical, but Beatlemania was a passing reaction to young adolescent female needs. Half a century later, he revisited his study as an Emeritus Professor and commented, ‘It is no longer acceptable for psychologists to allow pejorative comments about music fans to pass without comment’ (2017: 2). Two years after Taylor’s first study, however, R.M. Cooper (1968: i) saw the Beatles ‘craze’ (his word) as a case of:

Thus, those girls brought up in loosely knit, authoritarian families with little parental interest shown them, though having strong mother-attachments constitute the greatest percentage of Beatlemaniacs. In their peer relationships the date-motivated girls with superficial male relationships favor Beatlemania, a peer-centered out-group activity for those with a negative unstable self-evaluation.

More recently, scholars have addressed Beatlemania and gender with a more sympathetic approach. Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs (1992) for example, saw it as a case of female empowerment, allowing girls to collectively pursue unladylike expressions of desire. Nicolette Rohr (2017), similarly, suggested that the ‘screamscape’ of Beatlemania was an important youth expression, a site of release, joy and rebellion that challenged the confines of gender in its 1960s context. Kimberley Cura (2009) nuanced this by adding that the Beatles presented a
feminized version of masculinity, and addressed female subjects in their music, offering a kind of romantic and egalitarian fantasy world. Tara Brabazon (1993) considered the Beatlemania phenomenon in relation to visual images and the female gaze. Richard Mills (2019) examined fans lusty responses in *Beatles Monthly*, as well as aesthetic questions in his wide-ranging book length discussion of Beatles fandom. Christine Barrett-Feldman (2021) produced an extended study which showed how following the Beatles enabled female fans to act more independently. Augmenting these discussions of gender, André Millard (2012) placed Beatlemania in a context that included music business promotion, technology, and the Cold War. Tom Mills (2020) argued that the Beatles humour, charm and British respectability allowed them to challenge social norms in America as adjuncts to the civil rights and antiwar youth movements. My own work has looked at representations of the Shea Stadium show as a discursive construct reflecting fan stereotypes (Duffett 2015), and Beatles fan screaming as a form of affective citizenship (Duffett 2017). Nuné Nikoghosyan has also considered ‘fan capital,’ by comparing accounts of 1960s Beatlemania with a study of contemporary Beatles fandom. In addition to such – often more theoretical – releases, we can add a whole slew of oral histories and memoires of Beatles fandom. These include Garry Berman’s *We’re Off to See the Beatles* (2008), Candy Leonard’s book *Beatleness* (2014), Carol Bedford’s memoir *Waiting for the Beatles* (1984), and Janice Mitchell’s adventurous *My Ticket to Ride* (2021). There are also several academic and non-academic cultural histories forensically assessing Beatlemania as it unfolded in situ, such Julia Sneeringer’s (2014) examination of the group in the West German press, Piers Hemmingsen’s *The Beatles in Canada: The Origins of Beatlemania!* (2018), John Robert Arnone’s *Us and Them: Canada, Canadians and the Beatles* (2021), and John F. Lyons:
The Beatles, Chicago and the 1960s (2021). Finally, Ken Womack and Kit O’Toole’s recent Oxford University Press edited volume, Fandom and the Beatles contained chapters on the mediation of Beatles fandom in 1963-4, an examination of fanzines, and generational issues. There is no discussion of such work in Sunstein’s piece, even in passing. Neither is there attention to any research from media fan studies and work on fan enthusiasm (such as Jenkins 1992 or Hills 1992), or any of the academic literature in popular music studies or cultural studies on aesthetic value, taste, or cultural work, say, by Pierre Bourdieu (1984) or the use of it by popular scholars like John Fiske (1992), Simon Frith (1998) or Nick Prior (2015), or equally, for example, of Lawrence Grossberg’s notions of affect (Grossberg 1992; Grossberg and Behrenshausen 2016).

Instead of engaging with Beatles studies as an existing academic field, with the exception of Berman (2008), Professor Sunstein primarily draws on persuasion research, and Mark Lewisohn’s (2013) admittedly definitive history of the band itself. One can, however, hardly accuse Sunstein of driving a ‘disciplinary vehicle’ without a ‘valid license’ (Tagg 2011: 7) – after all, this field is already rather interdisciplinary, and Sunstein tends to cite an evidence base of experiments in social persuasion – but it may have made his own work stronger to take a look at some of it, as the issues and processes he discusses are sometimes indirectly examined. To do so, however, would necessitate an encounter with the Beatles and Beatlemania much more fully and in context. We might accept all that in a book on persuasion, but in a journal which works in a niche of popular music research, it does something of a disservice to the years of scholarship developed in this field. Rather than pursue a romantic form of behaviouralism, way
better, I think, is to talk closely about actual histories: what happened, and how fans responded
given the structures, objects, meanings, discourses, practices, and ideas of their times. We need
even more fine-grained histories of reception (some of which are beginning to appear) to fully
understand. What I think we should do instead is ask something situated: good music ‘to who,
why, when?’ and of course, and ‘to what consequence?’ This raises a further question: if
empirical detail is necessary, not to flesh out theory, but to help us see what there was, should
we abandon conceptual frameworks for thinking about Beatlemania or Beatles appreciation all
together?

Totemism – An Alternative Hypothesis

Mass culture thinking, group psychology, parasocial interaction theory, participatory culture
research, and now romantic behaviouralism have all offered frameworks for analysing music
fandom. Although we may want to escape traps in the deductive reasoning associated with
such ideas, it is important to say there are still empirical regularities, signs pointing to collective
activities and motivations shared between different instances of popular music fandom.
Beatlemania was unique, but perhaps at least one of the sociological mechanisms behind it was
not completely new. There had already been incendiary fan phenomena for performers of
various sorts such as Rudy Valee, Frank Sinatra, Johnny Rae, and Elvis Presley. We can trace
versions of them back before the Twentieth Century, before the era of fandom for recorded
music, when phenomenon such as ‘Lisztomania’ occurred. Well before the Beatles became a
worldwide sensation, the Swedish singer Jenny Lind conquered New York, and generated audience responses of parallel enthusiasm, even though very few of her ardent American admirers heard her sing a note (Waksman 2011). How can we explain behaviour that is not exactly repeated, but *iterated*? If scholars are going to play with history by framing it with theory, any intervention should be minimal and heavily empirically grounded. For that reason, I am going to suggest that one mechanism from Emile Durkheim’s (1912) work might further illuminate some of the questions which Professor Sunstein explores.

One explanation is to draw on a mechanism from Durkheim’s sociology of religion. By suggesting this, I am not saying that Beatles fans or others are engaging in a ‘pseudoreligious’ form of worship, but rather that Durkheim first spotted a pattern in totemic religion that he said also held in secular life, due to the charging and understanding of symbols. For Durkheim, totemic religions are ones that focus on totems: items that are imbued with sacred power. Durkheim also says that the totem is collectively worshipped, and collectively used to demarcate the line between the sacred and the secular. Close contact with the totem leads also convinced individuals to experience what Durkheim calls ‘effervescence’ – an electric jolt of excitement amongst group participants framed as religious ecstasy. He also notes that totems, in different local religions, can be animals, objects or people: the power of the totem is generated by the way that the group collectively venerates it, and the shared assumptions stored in each individual’s head. It is a power that is emotional and experiential, but cannot be objectively measured except in its manifestations. Some music scholars have suggested that popular music culture is itself essentially religious or pseudo-religious, seeing religiosity as a
human practice rather than a divine intervention. However, Durkheim argued that the totemic mechanism has been secularized, and applied, for example, to the French flag during the French revolution. This means that even if we reach for religious language because we have nothing more precise to highlight our enchantment, there is no need to describe modern totemic phenomenon as religious if they are not situated in that context.

My interest in this idea occurred through the empirical journey of my own study of Elvis fandom (Duffett 2012; 2015); I think it can be applied to some interest in other stars. For this kind of fandom there is no popularity threshold, and no necessary contagion of aesthetic estimations. Potential fans do not necessarily convert due to peer pressure or because they follow existing fans. Rather, if you find out that a musician has won over huge crowds of people, you might be more likely to pay attention to their music in order to make your own judgements – albeit judgements informed by things such as individual predisposition, identification, identity, family, community, nation and a unique combination of other factors (of which the artist’s music, image and popularity is one part). As the crowds get bigger, the artists get more publicity, and the number of people who get the opportunity to make the estimation grows – and almost inevitably the number of fans grow, because, whatever outsiders perceive as the worth of the music, there are more people likely to be the market for the performance who will recognize they have a connection and become fans. Once anyone realizes they really enjoy the music, identify with the stars as people, recognize their popularity, and so forth, they are more open to the jolt of effervescence in some form, however they actually respond (we cannot discount ‘cool’ responses).
So were the Beatles totems? John Lennon thought so, as he described their concerts, where the screaming was often so loud it drowned out the music, as ‘bloody tribal rites’ (Everett 1999: 69). To understand more about this, we need to return to questions of persuasion. In Sunstein’s model, aspects of group persuasion do not determine aesthetic value, but can enhance its estimation. Totemism provides a mechanism for this: musicians that become famous are socially valued, fans clamour to get closer to them and are excited by their presence and attention, making live performances manifestations of effervescence. As the Beatles grew in popularity, markers of their success were fed back to fans alongside biographic information about band members in the monthly Beatles Book. For example, three months before the press coined the term Beatlemania, the first edition from August 1963 called fans ‘Beatles people’ and explained that demand for the single of ‘She Love You’ was so ‘incredible’ that EMI pressed 250,000 copies, with dealers ordering a further 55,000 copies of the ‘Twist and Shout’ EP in 30 minutes (‘Beatles News’ 1963: 25). Such information was not innocent, but arguably helped make dedicated fans aware of the strength of the fan base.

Durkheim argues that totemism is its own inchoate form of social organization, because members of the collective orchestrate themselves to maintain the social power of the totem. Pop fans can do this in at least two ways.

First, those who get a buzz from their totemic engagement with a star often use their agency in heightening that sensation, for example, by aiming to get closer to the band – something that
psychologists have called ‘proximity seeking’ behaviour. That such heightening behaviour also runs to attempting to increase the size of the fan base clearly indicates that elements of ‘setting’ do matter to such fanbases. Borrowing a term from Samatha Barbas’ (2001: 116) work on Hollywood film fandom, I have elsewhere called this process ‘boosting’ (Duffett 2013b: 47). A good example is asking your local radio station to play more songs. Individually, and collectively, fans are involved in ‘boosting’ campaigns to raise the profiles of their heroes, a practice that can include ‘chart beating’ (Anderton, Hannam and Hopkins 2022: 81). In late 1962, after the release of the first solo British single, ‘Love Me Do,’ Liverpool fans did not just buy the record, helping the band to increase its presence in the charts; they also wrote to the BBC and Radio Luxembourg, and constantly requested airplay, to the extent that some radio producers suspected the band were behind the letters and fiddling their own publicity (Shepherd 1964: 11). In relation to Sunstein’s schema, ‘boosting’ is perhaps equivalent to adding more ‘early downloads’ (ie. artist profile raising), but it can happen at any time.

Second, inchoate social organization also stretches to establishing group norms that do not work against the interest of the collective, such as an effort to present the star and their fans in a good light – something which is less a matter of ‘blind loyalty’ than an attempt to maintain or grow the size of the fan base. However, the process of group image management does not always engender more extreme fan behaviour. What, then, of ‘group polarization,’ the supposed tendency for members of in-groups such as fan bases to push each other to ever greater extremes? I have heard of no stories of Beatles fans ostracizing each other for not being committed enough, but there are other things to say. Within fan communities and cultures,
individuals are often different: they like different aspects of the Beatles. So, for example, Ethan Alexanian is the young Canadian host of *Fans of the Run*, a contemporary Beatles fan podcast published on YouTube (‘Fans on the Run…’ 2020). On the first episode Ethan and his uncle Paul, who is a generation older but also a Beatles fan, agree on the brilliance of the *Revolver album* and its last track ‘Tomorrow Never Knows.’ However, Ethan hates Paul McCartney’s solo album, *Driving Rain*, while Paul likes a few of the songs on there. As individuals, they discuss these aesthetic preferences as a way to socially square with each other, to recognize their mutual situatedness, as it were, within the Beatles fan base. That is a large part of the pleasure of listening to Ethan’s podcast. Dissent is endemic to fan cultures: if other fans share Ethan’s preferences, they may in theory form a new faction within Beatles fan culture, and make the fan community subject to internal doctrinal splits.

To return to information cascades, what this means is that the status of being a worldwide sensation is not so much established once, but rather consistently located as a field of background information that gets constantly activated (Nikoghosyan 2015) as individuals are reminded about either the group’s performance (for example by new music releases), or the fact that others love the group (for instance by new publicity or interaction with the fan community). Combined with the contextual, capricious, changing, personal aesthetic choices, these two factors nudge people to recognize that they feel a connection with the band and become part of the Beatles contemporary fan base (which is at that point always at least an imagined community, like the nation). Many fans then join more concrete online or find offline
actual Beatles fan communities too, sometimes before their conversion (when, for example, partners bring them along to fan events).

To understand the cultural work of the totemic process, we do not necessarily need to posit questions of aesthetic worth, except perhaps to say that bands who evoke a very strong totemic response are sometimes initially *distrusted* by those outside the market in terms of demographics, as screaming is sometimes seen as using audience response as a marketing technique to cover up for aesthetically ‘poor’ music. That the Beatles went through this phase and still generated a perception that they were highly creative artists has, ironically, perhaps itself been taken as a measure of their aesthetic worth. The myth of totemism is that it is absolute, yet fans can have multiple totems: there are all sorts of other objects, and potentially types of fandom, around. Just before the Beatles famously played the Shea Stadium for the first time, for instance, the New York Philharmonic attracted a larger crowd to Central Park (’70,000 hear concert’ 1965).

If a behaviouralist shift to aesthetics in connection with a Skinnerian context of community norms relegates or subsumes questions of, say, gender, perhaps attention to Durkheim’s work can be accused of the same. However, such attention is not aiming to use history to prove or disprove theory (as in romantic behaviouralism), but to use theory as a heuristic to productively illuminate our understanding of history. This in turn sheds like on both the variability of history and the longevity of appreciation in a way that can encompass historical factors and track their interactions within the fan base. Attention to the mechanism posited by Durkheim may not
explain all types of information spread, all levels of endorsement, or even all types of fandom (for example certain fandoms may be more associated with elitism), but it does offer an inductive framework for understanding ‘mass’ fan phenomena and their manifestations – fan excitement, use of popularity information, proximity seeking, boosting campaigns – without requiring us to focus on generalised psychological or behavioural norms, posit contagions, and so forth. From the perspective of a neoDurkheimian framework, aesthetic judgements are still situated, contextualised and singular. Beyond checking for evidence of one or two shared assumptions, the emphasis is therefore not on generalising about each fan’s social motivation or positing fictitious pure aesthetic value. After all, fandom itself is not actually a fad, conspiracy theory, or rumour.

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