

An Exploratory Study of the New Zealand Electronic/ Dance Music Community

(A third year Sociology project by Manu Greer)

1) Introduction – Setting the ‘Scene’

This study aimed to find out some basic social statistics about a little-researched group in New Zealand youth culture: people who are part of what is sometimes called the ‘rave scene’, but what will be called, for the purposes of this project, ‘*the electronic/dance music community*’ (although sometimes ‘the scene’ will be used as shorter alternative). Internationally, little social research has been completed on this subcultural group, as has been noted by the few writers who have worked in the area. What has been written mostly concerns the historical development of this subcultural movement, and is centred around the British scene. Work by theorists associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies during the 1970s developed ideas about the place of youth subcultures within society, but ‘not a great deal has actually been written about the experience and importance of club culture’ (Jessica Hocking, retrieved online, June 2004).

It seems that there is an even greater lack of *empirical* research in this area, especially within a New Zealand context. A search of the Massey University Library, and a Google

search uncovered no online academically researched items that have been published on the New Zealand electronic/dance music community – either theoretical or empirical. Stuart Bordwick (1998) provides evidence of what he describes as a ‘void’ when it comes to academic study in this area:

Containing 55 essays, Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton’s *The Subcultures Reader* contains only one essay that deals explicitly with contemporary dance culture. This is at a time when dance culture and dance music appears to have an almost hegemonic grip upon contemporary British youth.....18% of all adults attended a nightclub at least once every three months, with 4% of all adults visiting a nightclub one or more times a week.....market analysts [estimate] that the dance scene is worth £1.8 billion a year.....and [is] therefore of a similar size to the newspaper industry. If one compares the amount of time spent by contemporary cultural studies analysing the production, distribution and consumption of newspapers with that spent analysing dance music, then there is practically a void at the heart of the discipline.

The ‘hegemonic grip’ on youth culture that Bordwick refers to is evident in New Zealand as well, in a number of areas: 1) the major successes of large dance music events such as *The Gathering* (which reported 15,000+ attendees in 1999/200 – the largest ticketed event in the country that year), and *Parachute* (a Christian techno-based festival that reported a massive 25,000 attendees in 2004)¹; 2) the regularity and frequency of smaller events, particularly in urban areas; 3) the large numbers of participants in electronic/dance-music-specific internet forums such as www.biggie.co.nz (19,549 registered members as of June 2004); 4) the obvious increase in dance music being played on television, radio, and in social contexts such as bars, nightclubs, and on the car stereos of boy-racers nationwide. This increasing importance of dance culture has been noted by the Ministry of Health in its *Guidelines for Safe Dance Parties* booklet, published in 1999 (p2). These developments point to

¹ See the websites www.obscure.co.nz/culture/gathering and <http://p04.parachutemusic.com> for more details about these events.

the fact that the electronic/dance community is a major phenomenon in New Zealand's youth culture – and it could be reasonably assumed that statistics about the size of this subculture in this country would not be radically different from the figures quoted for the British scene by Bordwick, above.

And yet, a 2003 survey by Statistics New Zealand and the Ministry of Culture and Heritage entitled *A Measure of Culture: Cultural Experiences and Cultural Spending in New Zealand* did not have a category to measure the electronic/dance music phenomenon. The closest cultural activity considered was under the heading of performing arts – where information was gathered about the numbers of New Zealanders 'attending pop, rock, jazz, blues, or country and western, including free concerts and pub performances and music festivals.' This highlights an ignorance within the New Zealand cultural research field of the existence, let alone the importance, of the electronic/dance music community.

2) Hypothesis and Aims of This Survey

In light of the above lack of evidence and analysis, it was the intention of this survey to collect some basic statistics about the gender, age, ethnicity, education, economic background, listening habits and political outlook of members of the electronic/dance music community in New Zealand. In addition, respondents were asked to indicate their level of involvement, how long they had been involved what their reasons for involvement and interest were, and how they perceived the group they were part of. (See the questionnaire document for full details about what was asked). It was hypothesised that this data would show that people with a high level of involvement in the electronic/dance music community (dependent variable) were more likely to be

white, politically liberal, aged in their twenties, well educated, and from families with higher socio-economic backgrounds² (independent variables).

Open questions about reasons for involvement, and perceptions about others in this community were used as an exploratory technique, with the intention that the results could be used to suggest avenues of future study. But it was expected that evidence of a strong sense of community would be found – with social reasons for involvement being the most common. Respondents were expected to be strongly positive about the music they listened to. Drug use was also expected to be a factor mentioned.

Other relationships were expected – between mode of involvement and socio-economic background; and between mode of involvement and gender. Because of the limited number of respondents, however, these and other possible questions could not be addressed as accurately as they would be in a larger study.

The current survey really had the simple purpose of gathering some baseline data – aims further to this were supplementary. It was expected that the data gathered could lead to some further hypotheses about the *reasons* for the patterns encountered, and some directions for future study – these suggested directions will be discussed in the conclusion.

² See discussion of methods for the definition of Socio-economic background.

3) Methods

a) Sources of Data

As there had been no prior research that I could find in New Zealand on this topic, there was no way to gain a representative sample of the electronic/dance music community. Accordingly, non-probability methods were the only choice for this survey. Also, because the survey was conducted via the internet using a voluntary, self-administered questionnaire, there was no real way to make sure the characteristics of the respondents were representative of the entire electronic/dance music community, even if these characteristics of this community had been known. There are some research companies currently offering 'representative' internet sample frames, but how representative they are is debatable. Internet users have also been found to have specific characteristics, and are not like the general population. (De Vaus, 2002, pp78-80). In this situation, representative sampling was obviously impractical for the reasons given, and the method used was therefore a combination of purposive and snowball sampling.

There were four sources of data for this survey. The first major source was the website *www.biggie.co.nz*, which is a major source of information and discussion for the New Zealand electronic/dance music community. As of early June 2004, there were 19,549 registered members able to take part in the various forums (although only a small number of these are logged on at one time – at the time of writing there were around 200 online). The second main source was an open mailing list called 'Psurkit', hosted and administered through the website *www.obscure.co.nz*, another main site for NZ dance culture information. A third, smaller data source was 'Psecret', a closed mailing list run by *Obscure*, and including people who have been involved in the scene for many years. A fourth source was the email addresses of some of my personal contacts who have been involved in the NZ scene. All respondents were also

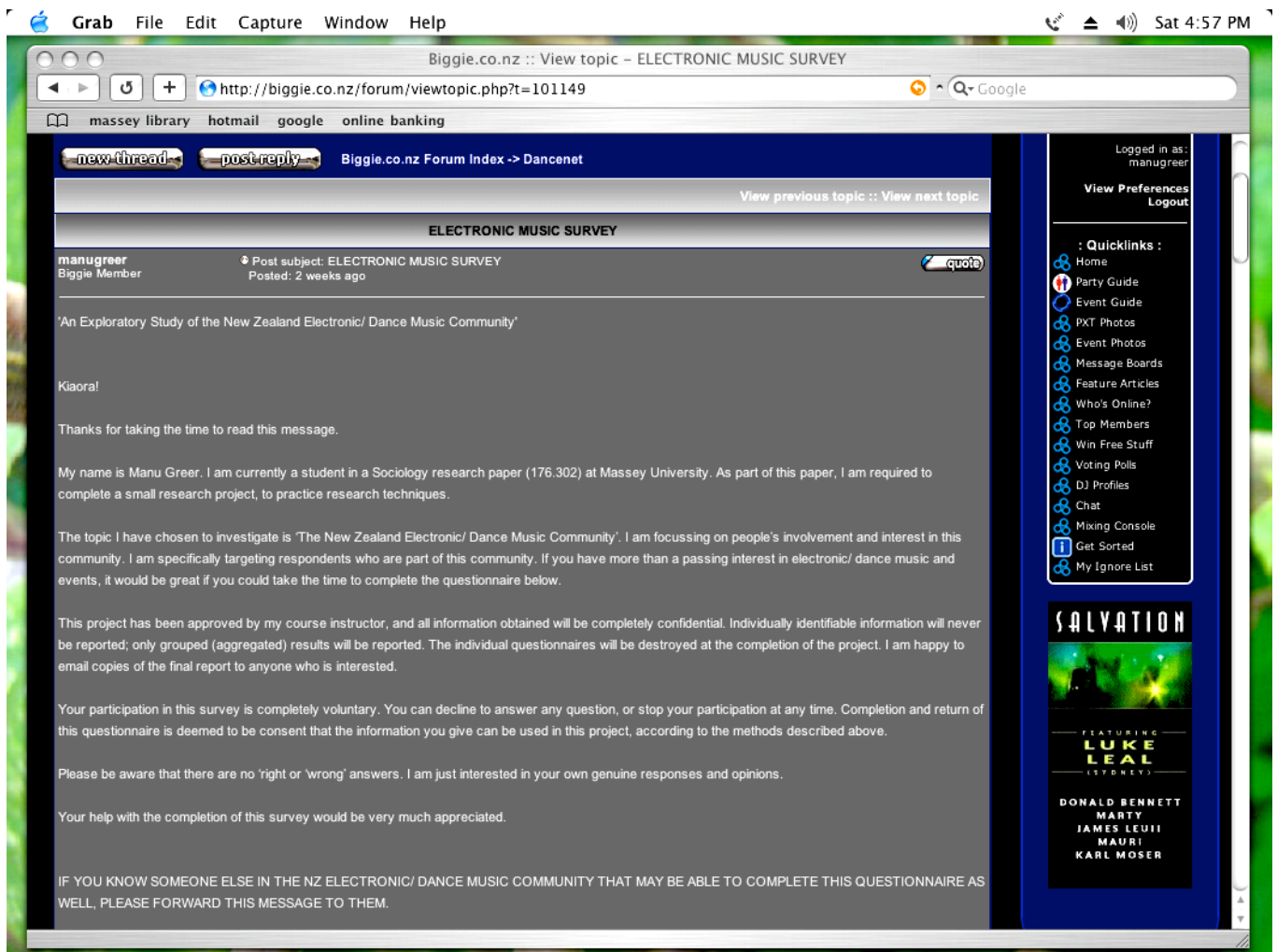
asked on the questionnaire to forward the email to others they knew in the community who might also be able to complete it – hence the ‘snowball’ component.

It was helpful in the gathering of data for this survey that I was a member of the electronic/dance music community. Not only did this give me access to some of the above email contacts, but I believe it made the response rate higher. Perhaps, also, being a student helped. As the data suggests, many of the respondents had been students themselves – they may have been more inclined to answer a questionnaire from ‘one of their own’. An outsider might not have such success, and might have to employ other methods – such as the difficult fieldwork used by Bryan Meaden in his Anthropological study of the Israeli trance scene (Meaden, 2001, pp6-8).

b) Method of Data Collection

An HTML-formatted questionnaire (with tables embedded, to facilitate responses) was sent to the above mailing lists and personal contacts; and the same text, but without the tables, was posted on the *Biggie* forums ‘Dancenet’ and ‘The Lounge’ (the two forums with the most logged-on users). These mail-outs generated about twenty responses in the few days after they were sent. A follow-up posting was then sent to *Biggie* and *Psecret* a week later, to gain more responses. These sites were chosen for follow-up because *Psecret* included potential respondents whose data would be useful – they had been involved in the community a long time – and because *Biggie* had the largest potential pool of respondents. Below is a screenshot of the posting to the *Biggie* ‘Dancenet’ forum, showing the introductory message.

Screenshot of Questionnaire Posting to the *Biggie* forum:



The questionnaire included closed and open questions. The closed questions were intended to measure the dependent variable (the degree of involvement in the NZ electronic/dance music community), and the various independent variables mentioned in the hypothesis. The open questions were exploratory, and intended to elicit responses about the personal reasons for electronic music-listening, involvement in the scene; as well as to gather responses about the perceptions of what kinds of people were involved in the scene – this last question asked the respondents to engage in some ‘pop sociology’, and also involved them in the survey by letting them think about what the data they were providing individually may mean in a broader context. As

much as to gather data, I felt it was important to include the open questions so that respondents would have some interesting and meaningful activity to engage in as they were completing the survey – after all, to open the email, paste it to a new message (along with my email address), fill it in while overcoming possible file-format problems, and send it back required quite a large amount of effort. The respondents needed a ‘reward’ for this work – the opportunity for some creative input provided this.

As the responses were received, they were numbered and stored for later analysis. The respondents were promised a follow-up email outlining the results – a large majority requested this. The effort needed to complete and return the questionnaire may have acted as a filter, meaning that the respondents who completed it were more likely to be actively interested in the electronic/dance music community, and the survey’s results.

c) Measurement of Variables

The first variable measured by the Questionnaire was ‘**degree of involvement**’ in the electronic/dance music community. This could also be described as ‘interest and enthusiasm’, and was considered the dependent variable. As noted above, the specifically targeted sample, and the effort needed to reply to the questionnaire probably filtered out respondents who didn’t have a big interest in the area. But there were various other techniques the survey used to measure degree of involvement. Length of time was one factor – it was assumed that being involved with the community a number years was an indicator of a high degree of involvement. Another factor was the level of agreement to four statements: two attempting to gauge the role played by electronic/dance music in the respondents’ lives; and two attempting to measure how pro-active the respondent was in the scene. It was assumed that high scores in these areas also reflected a high degree of involvement. A third factor was

frequency of communication about ideas around electronic/dance music to others. A highly communicative respondent was assumed to have a high degree of involvement. A final factor was the frequency of listenership to electronic/dance music. It was assumed that listening to the music regularly was a pre-requisite for interest and involvement! 'Mode' of involvement was also measured, but because some of these categories were likely to depend on factors like income and gender (for example DJing and music production), it was not considered a good measure of the *degree* of involvement.

The independent variables in the investigation – thought to influence the degree of involvement – were **gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and political outlook**. The first three variables and the last variable were relatively easy to measure, using standard questions. For ethnicity, an 'other' category was included, and respondents could also choose more than one ethnicity. 'Socio-economic background' was not measured using the standard New Zealand procedure developed by Galbraith et. al (1996, p6), which includes age, education, occupation and income. Instead, of interest was the socio-economic status of the respondent's family. This was because, from my personal observations, family background was felt to play a major part in involvement. A quick way to measure this was to ask the respondents about their parents' educational level, and their family's income when starting high school – this point in their lives was chosen because this is an age when many people start becoming interested in music. If family background played an important role in involvement in this scene, then it was thought pertinent to investigate what the economic status was at a crucial point in the respondent's 'musical development'. It is acknowledged, however, that this was an arbitrary point. It may have made just as much, or more sense, to ask about the family income at the end of high school.

The variables measured by the open questions were constructed as the data was being processed – multiple categories were formed using successive responses – these were

then ‘collapsed’ to form fewer categories. For example, a respondent who said ‘I want to contribute’ when asked about reasons for involvement in the electronic/dance music community, would be put into the same ‘social reasons’ category as someone who responded ‘I like to meet new people’. While it is acknowledged that this was not ideal, because the nuances of individual responses were lost, there were so many possible categories that it was necessary, for practical reasons, to condense them.

d) Data Analysis

To measure the dependent variable, degree of involvement, a Likert scale was constructed, based on the components discussed above. On the basis of this scale it was decided that all the respondents could be thought to have a high degree of involvement – most scored between 27 and 34 of a possible 36 on the scale, with only four respondents dipping below this by a couple of points. There was not enough variation in this data to be able to define different levels of involvement. The lowest possible score was 6 – this would be for a person who was not involved in the scene, had no interest, and never listened to or communicated about dance music. The assumption of a high degree of involvement was supported by the fact that the respondents had been sourced from specific highly-involved communities, and had needed to take time and effort to complete and return the survey, indicating strong interest.

Based on this assumption that the study group were high in the ‘degree of involvement’, bar charts and tables were used to show the prevalence of the dependent variables. Cross-tabulations were also used to show other relationships between the data. No measures of strength of association were used, as there were not enough cases to merit this.

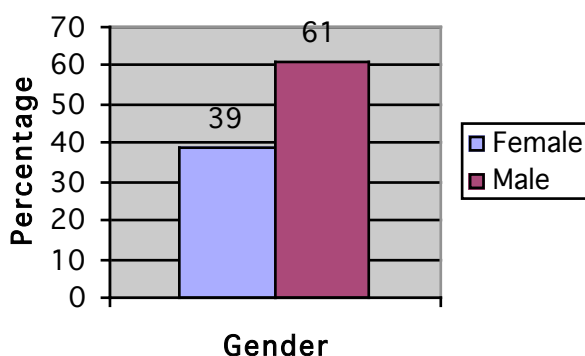
For the measurement of the individual respondents’ socio-economic background, needed for the cross-tabulation with mode of involvement (see Table 2 below), a scale

was also used. A score was calculated, based on the respondents' and their parents' educational level, and the family's income. Because there was a lot of missing data about income from the 'don't know' category, a mean score was calculated from the indicator variables that *did* have information, so that the 'don't know' respondents were still analysed (see De Vaus, 2002, p195). Then these scores were divided into three groups – high, medium and low. For each of these groups, the proportion of the various 'mode of involvement' responses for question 1, out of the total number of responses for that group, was then found.

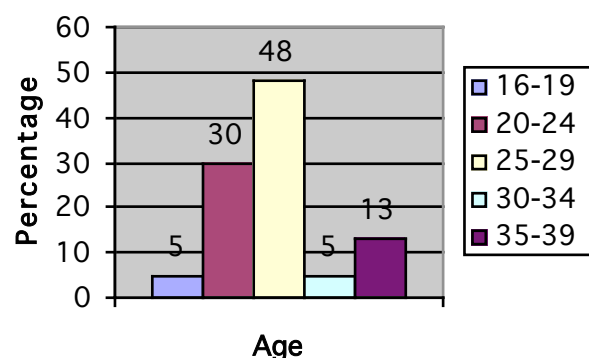
4. Findings

The following graphs show the data for four independent variables. As noted above, these data relate to a group which was found, using various indicators, to have a high degree of involvement in the electronic/dance music community. Note that figures have been rounded – see Appendix 3 for exact percentages.

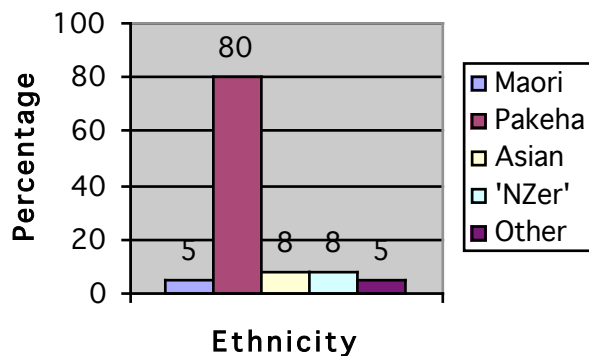
Graph 1 – Gender



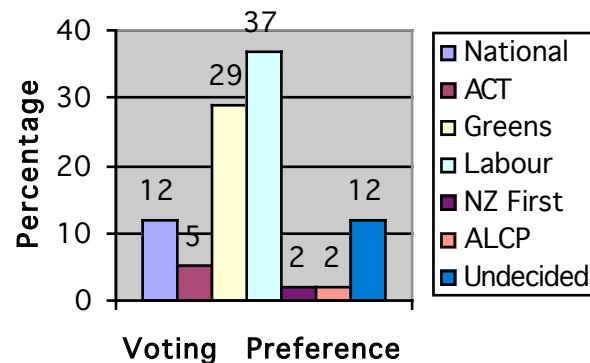
Graph 2 – Age



Graph 3 - Ethnicity



Graph 4 - Voting Preference



Graph 1 shows a significantly low ratio of women to men for this group. This was an unexpected finding, but in light of de Vaus' (2002, p80) discussion of the characteristics of internet users, it is perhaps not surprising. These characteristics will be discussed further in the conclusion, and this discussion applies to all the results presented here. Graph 2 shows that a large majority (78%) of the group were between the ages of 20 and 29. The hypothesis was supported, but again, the figures quoted by de Vaus show that this is a group more likely to have access to the internet – although he suggests that in some studies only 48% of internet users have been found to be under 35. So the result for this variable does seem to be significant.

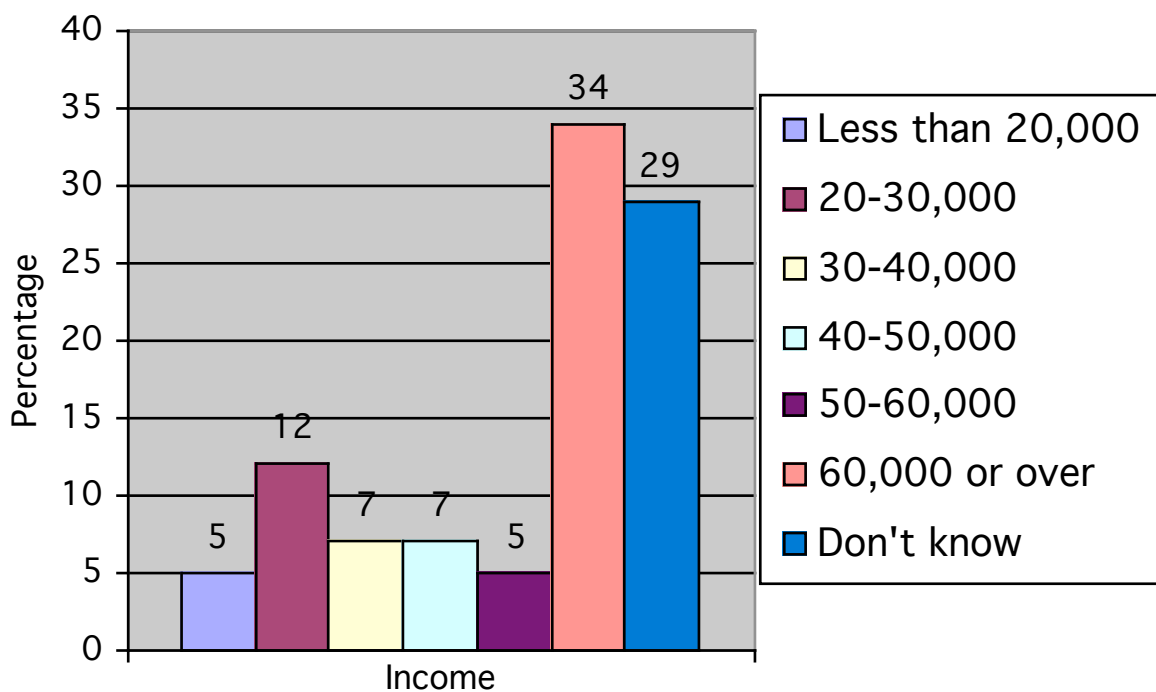
Graph three shows the expected result that the participants in the group were predominantly Pakeha. Note that in this category, there were some respondents who chose more than one ethnicity – two who chose Maori and Pakeha, one who chose Asian/Pakeha, and one who chose Asian/Middle-eastern. Because of the low numbers in these categories, the Maori/Pakeha respondents were classified as Maori, the Asian/Pakeha respondent was classified as Asian, and the Asian/Middle-eastern respondent was classified as other.

Graph 4 shows an expected result, but one which is nevertheless interesting. This group of respondents predominantly chose Labour and the Greens as their parties of choice, if they were required to 'vote tomorrow'. Taken together, this represents 66%

of the sample – implying that the group is on the politically ‘liberal’ side of the political spectrum.

The next dependent variable, ‘socio-economic background’ was more complicated to measure. It involved four factors – educational level, parents’ educational level, and income when starting high school. The information is presented below.

Graph 5 – Annual Family Income
When Respondents Started High School



Graph 5 shows that 39% of respondents thought their parents had an income higher than 50,000 per year when they started high school. This seems very significant in comparison with the other percentages, although the percentage who didn’t know is

also very high – almost a third. It would be hard to guess what the outcome would have been with additional information from this third of the group. It is possible that respondents from lower income families may not have been as willing to divulge this information. Despite this, the percentage of people who *did* respond who had high-income families is very large, and it can be seen as a probable that higher income is a factor influencing involvement in the electronic music/dance scene.

Table 1 – Highest Educational Level of Respondents and Parents

	Respondents (%)	Mothers (%)	Fathers (%)
Attended High School	2.4	17.1	10
School Certificate	0	12.2	7.5
Sixth Form Certificate	7.3	4.9	7.5
University Entrance/ Bursary	4.9	12.2	2.5
Undergraduate Tertiary Study	31.7	2.4	10
Graduated from Tertiary Institution	31.7	22	25
Studied or qualified, Post-graduate level	17.1	22	15
Don't know	-	7.3	20

In Table 1 it is evident that both respondents and their parents had very high levels of education. 80.5% of respondents had at least studied at a tertiary institution. 46.4% of mothers, and 48.2% of fathers – or 47.3% of parents - had at least studied at a tertiary institution. There were also high levels of postgraduate study across the groups. These figures are very high when compared with the 2001 New Zealand Census – which found that of usually resident adults over 15, 8.1% had bachelor degrees and 3.7% had higher qualifications.³ This table, when taken with Graph 5, makes it seem likely that ‘socio-economic background’, defined by educational levels

³ Information sourced from www.stats.govt.nz, June 2004

and family income, is a large influence on a person's involvement with the dance music scene.

Two other relationships were looked at in this group – the relationship between socio-economic background and mode of involvement, and the relationship between gender and mode of involvement. The results of these cross-tabulations are as follows.

Table 2: Mode of Involvement by Socio-economic Background
(Percentages)

<u>Mode of Involvement</u>	<u>Socio-economic Background</u>			
		High	Medium	Low
	DJ/VJ or Producer	28.6	37.5	19.4
	Event Promoter	14.3	16.7	12.9
	Listener/ Other	57.1	45.8	67.7
	Total (N=)	100% (21)	100% (24)	100% (31)

These data were produced according to the methods described above (p10). It seems evident from this table that lower socio-economic background has a moderately strong effect on a subject's likelihood of being involved in the electronic/dance music community as DJ/VJ or producer. This effect does not seem to be present for the 'event promoter' category, however. This may reflect the fact that it costs a lot of money to DJ, produce music or VJ (although there was only one of these!).

A point to note about this table is that the low group returned more responses in the modes of involvement question (the groups were of equal size, and the percentages

were calculated from the total number of choices made – which reflected the number of self-identified ‘sites of involvement’ with the community). It is hard to say how significant this result is without controlling for other factors – such as gender. If the socio-economic groups were divided on gender, and the relationship tested again, there may be a different result. But because of the low number of samples in this survey, doing this would not give meaningful results. We can, however, look at the relationship between gender and mode of involvement.

Table 3: Mode of Involvement by Gender (Percentages)

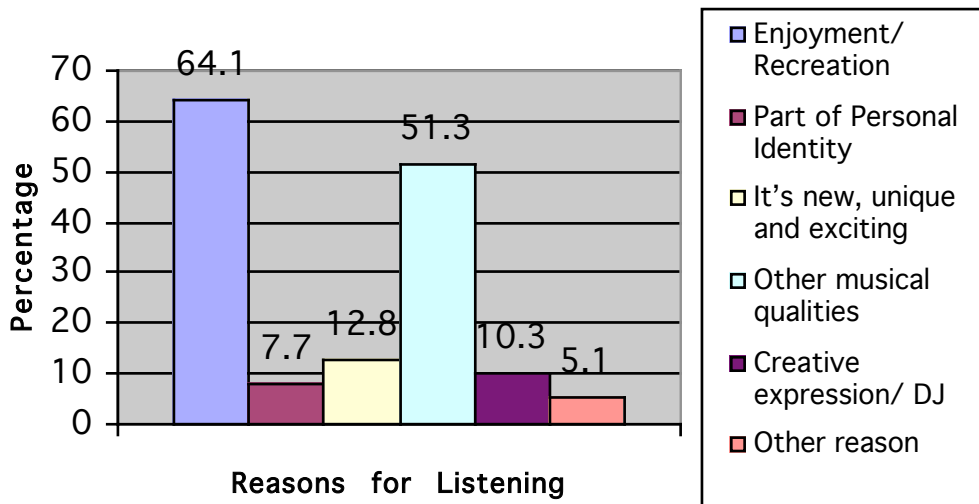
<u>Mode of Involvement</u>	<u>Gender</u>	
	Female	Male
DJ/VJ or Producer	16.0	37.5
Event Promoter	12.0	20.8
Listener/ Other	72.0	41.7
Total	100%	100%
(N=)	(25)	(48)

The above result shows a strong correlation between gender and mode of involvement. Males were much more likely to be involved in music production and setting up events. Again, it would be good to try controlling for other factors that may be influencing the relationship, but space or sample size does not allow this.

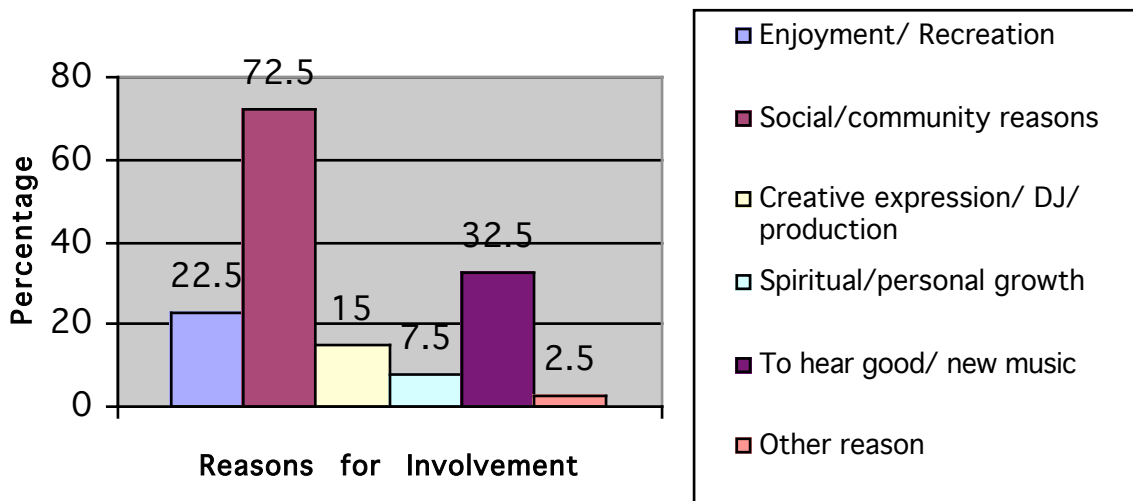
The final set of data presented below shows the respondents’ reasons for listening to dance/electronic music, and for being involved in this community. The last graph shows their perceptions of others in the scene. For information on how responses were categorised, see Appendix 2. As expected, most respondents in Graph 6 identified specific qualities about the music that they liked. These various comments were

condensed into a single category, but a large proportion mentioned the ‘freshness’ and newness of the music, so this was given a category of its own. The majority also expressed ‘personal enjoyment/recreation’ as a factor – this ranged from the enjoyment of dancing to simply ‘I like it’.

Graph 6 – Reasons for Listening to Electronic music

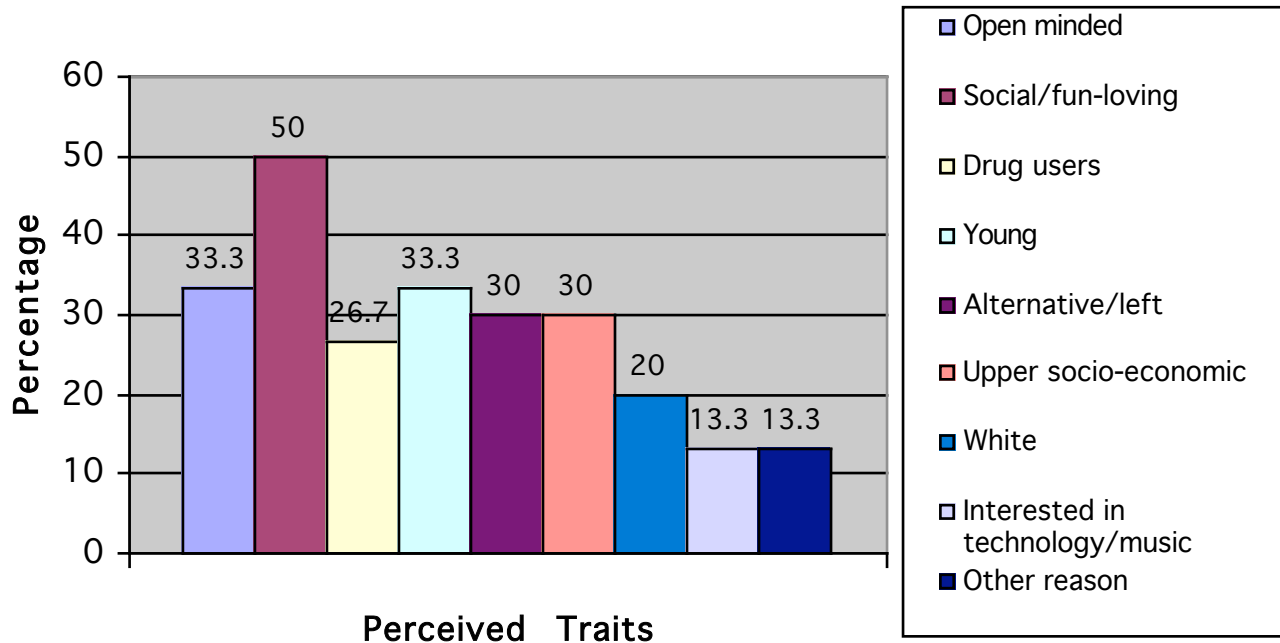


Graph 7 – Reasons for Being Involved in the Dance Music Community



In Graph 7, music reasons again featured strongly, but the most popular reason was social. This ranged from the most popular response: ‘good people’, to the desire to contribute and feel a sense of belonging to a group. The dance music community is probably not very different from other small groups in society in this respect.

Graph 8 – Perceptions of others in the Dance Community



In the graph above, respondents were asked to mention characteristics they had noticed in people involved in the scene. The perception that people in this community are sociable again dominates, but ‘open-mindedness’ is featured strongly, as well as youthfulness. It is interesting to note that fewer people identified the scene as being as ‘white’ as the earlier figures suggest (in Graph 3). Fewer people identify the community as being politically liberal. Fewer people commented on the use of drugs

than was expected – but this is not surprising since they were giving out their personal details by emailing the survey back. It should also be noted that only 30 respondents answered this optional question.

5. Conclusion

As noted in the introduction, there is a dearth of information about the New Zealand electronic/dance music community. This is disappointing, because in this exploratory study, the group of respondents displayed some interesting characteristics. A high level of political liberalism, and highly educated backgrounds are two important dimensions this limited study was able to provide some evidence of (although it needs to be remembered that as well as members of the dance music community, the respondents were internet users, and as such have certain characteristics that may help account for the results found here). Some of the hypotheses may have been strengthened through this survey, but further work needs to be done to see whether off-line members of this community share similar traits, and to find out why these suggested relationships may exist.

One theory could be that the electronic/dance music community has a social meaning for its participants, whereby it reinforces commonly held beliefs – this is why people of similar backgrounds are involved. It may be a sort of elite club for well-off, young, white, liberal-intellectuals. Nevertheless, the overwhelming positivity in respondents' comments about it, and their high levels of involvement and commitment to the subculture suggest that the social meaning it has is very powerful. Because these young, well educated, well resourced people are likely to have an impact on future society, it seems important that social and cultural researchers attempt to find some more real evidence about them and their vibrant community, instead of relegating it to the backblocks of subcultural theory.

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