



## **Smells Like Teen Spirit: Talking not taking in the teenage music tribe**

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*August 2004*

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## **Contents**

Executive summary .....	3
Dubit guide to the Music Tribes .....	4
Introduction.....	5
The need to fit in.....	5
Drugs and the teenage music tribe .....	6
Other identifiers within the teenage music tribes.....	10
Conclusion.....	13
About FRANK .....	14
About SIRC .....	14
About Dubit.....	14
About the 'Talking Not Taking' research .....	15

## **Executive summary**

The aim of this study has been to investigate the extent to which teenagers will present themselves in a certain way, through talking about drugs, supporting certain bands and adopting particular styles, to fit in with their group, or 'music tribe'. In particular, the survey questioned teenagers on how the pressure to 'fit in' with friends affects the way they present themselves in terms of implied drugs-misuse – 'talking, not taking drugs'.

The key findings are as follows:

- Boys are twice as likely as girls to say that they have taken drugs when they have not
- 17% of 11-13 year-olds, 21% of 14-16 year olds and 22% of over-16 year olds think their friends pretend to have taken drugs when they haven't
- The influence of the tribe decreases as teens grow up: 51.5% of 11-13 year olds said that members of their 'tribe' did things in order to fit in with the group, compared to 47% of those aged 14-16 years, and 41% of over-16s
- 75% of 11-13 year olds, 60% of 14-16 year olds and 44% of those over 16 felt that young people try drugs to 'impress friends'. Another popular reason was to 'look cool' – over 55% of the sample - while 15% of those aged 14-16 years felt that it helped young people to 'pull'
- The most self-aware and image-conscious group is that of the 'Gangstas', characterised by their love of hip hop stars like Eminem, sports brands and 'bling'. The Gangsta tribe is most likely to say that their taste in music influences their personal appearance, at 72%. They are also the most likely to 'talk up' their drugs misuse, at 35%. This compared with an average of 23% within the 11-18 year old age group, and 9% of Academics/Geeks and 19% of Scallies
- Teenagers living in the South East were more prone to 'talking up' their behaviour than teenagers from other parts of the UK
- The sample indicates that the widest variety of tribes are to be found in the South East. The majority of Indies, Moshers, Sporties, Trendies and Townies come from the region, 'Geeks' or Academics and Scallies predominate in the North West, Gangstas are based mostly in London followed by the South East, Skaters are largely based in the Midlands, and Goths are mostly found in the Eastern Counties.

The survey designed to inform this report asked over 1,000 11-18 year olds across the UK about their attitudes towards drug-taking, music and fashion tastes.

To put the survey findings in context, the report uses data from youth experts Dubit on ten current leading teenage tribes in the UK; Academics/'Geeks',

Gangstas, Goths, Indies, Moshers, Scallies, Skaters, Sporties, Townies and Trendies.

## **Dubit guide to the Music Tribes**

**Academics/Geeks** – tend to listen to whatever is playing on the radio and are not swayed by fashion trends, preferring to stay middle of the road and inconspicuous.

**Gangstas** – love hip hop stars like Eminem, designer brands, the latest sportswear and ‘bling’. Whilst originally rooted in black music and style culture, the Gangsta tribe’s streetwise style is aspirational for white, black and asian young people. Gangsta characteristics are more about attitude and swagger and not to be confused with criminal behaviour.

**Goths** – fashion and make up is characteristically black reflecting their idols, Marilyn Manson or the Sisters of Mercy;

**Moshers** – with Kurt Cobain as one of their most influential idols, the moshers style is ruled by comfort and a band’s tour T- shirt. Rock music is a favourite with Keane and Jet as the current bands of choice;

**Indies** – most recently seen sporting the quasi-Mohican look, love The Hives, Coldplay and going to gigs;

**Townies** – fond of dance music and indie-esque bands such as Oasis, Travis and the Stereophonics. Fashion favourites include Ben Sherman shirts or a Topshop outfit for a night out;

**Scallies** – too young to drive, but obsessed with cars. The girls favour big gold hoop earrings while the boys stick to casual sportswear and caps. Hard house and original ‘Madchester’ anthems are popular, as well as the mainstream pop charts;

**Skaters** – almost exclusively a boy tribe, they prefer pasty Green Day and Blink 182 to more healthy popstars, and recreate the look with spikey hair and chunky steel chains. Popular skate labels and outdoor brands such as O’Neill are popular.

**Sporties** – least challenging of parental authority; clean-living with an active lifestyle; pop role models are healthy types like Holly Valance and Justin Timberlake; clothing is the latest track suit and sportswear;

**Trendy** – achingly hip, dedicated followers of fashion who hanker after designer clothes but only from hip, no-brand designers. Music tastes are eclectic and trend-lead so current i-pod selections include the Kings of Leon and the Libertines.

## Introduction

Teenagers and rock and roll arrived on the scene in the 1950s, and Teddy boys, followed by the Mods and Rockers represented the first modern teenage sub-cultures in the UK.

These pioneering music tribes have been credited with creating a new kind of youthful rebellion. However, concerned parents would do well to remember that the behaviour of young people has caused older generations consternation since at least 380 BC, when Plato wrote: “What is happening to our young people...they disrespect their elders, they disobey their parents...they ignore the laws...they riot in the streets inflamed with wild notions...their morals are decaying.”

Since Plato, successive generations have been equally scathing about contemporary youth, displaying a collective, nostalgic amnesia, in which all generations of ‘grown-ups’ seem to engage. This can mask the fact that perhaps less has really changed over the past 2,000 years than we might wish to acknowledge.

The aim of this study has been to investigate the extent to which teenagers will present themselves in a certain way, through talking about drugs, supporting certain bands and adopting particular styles, to fit in with their group, or ‘music tribe’. In particular, the survey questioned teenagers on how the pressure to ‘fit in’ with friends affects the way they present themselves in terms of implied drugs-misuse – ‘talking, not taking drugs’.

### ***The need to fit in***

Unlike the traditional tribal settlement, modern society typically requires us to live in urban settings with thousands of others who are unknown to us. However, we have not lost our basic human need for social bonds and affiliations which allow us to define ourselves and to understand who we are.

Like our tribal ancestors, we all need a peer group that defines our age set and its role in the wider community. We look for ways of marking our transition from one age set to another, particularly from the status of a child to that of an adult. To do this, we need a well-defined *social* identity before we can hope to achieve a true sense of *personal* identity. To be an individual, we first need to be one of the lads – or lasses.

Being part of a tribe allows us social inclusion and a means of identifying ourselves alongside those whom we look up to or aspire to emulate. It provides a social arena in which we can act out prescribed roles, adopting the appearance or style that serves as a representation of our allegiance. Modern tribes tend to select themselves by their cultural tastes and lifestyle choices. The mass media has given modern day communities a common context and language which can be used to determine today’s teenagers’ choice of tribe.

## **What role does drug-taking play in this need to belong and be identified within a teenage music tribe?**

### **Drugs and the teenage music tribe**

The use of drugs, of course, has always been associated with pop music, and with music tribes, from the dope-smoking hippies of the 60s and 70s to the E-popping generation of the 1990s. So, are those parents concerned that a predilection for Nirvana-inspired albums and grunge clothes may inevitably lead their child to become a drug addict, right to be worried? Historical evidence suggests that there is something more familiar and timeless going on in the seemingly novel and alien social arena of today's teenage music tribe. When it comes to teenage identifiers, the survey findings confirm that drugs and drug-taking as a personal taste or shared activity are less important than music, or fashion choices.

Within the teenage music tribes, there is a kind of alternative 'career' structure in which social and personal identities are developed. At the 'novice' stage in early teenhood, youngsters are looking for opportunities to blend in with their friends or to stand out from other groups of teens in a 'blended-in' kind of way. At around the ages of 14 or 15, issues such as personal appearance and dress style become more significant and it is at this stage that the desire to be associated with a particular genre of music is evident, in contrast to the mainstream pop that might have sufficed at an earlier age. This is when tribes start to form in earnest and it is when the peer group starts to be important in supporting young people, whose lives are often characterised by a mixture of confidence and excitement, coupled with distinct lack of self-belief.

This 'group individuality' paves the way for a stronger sense of self – one that in older teens is invaluable for the final transition towards being a fully-fledged adult. Almost half of UK teenagers (49%) say the need to fit in with their 'tribe' dictates their group's behaviour, while a fifth claim that peer pressure leads their friends to pretend to take drugs to look 'cool'. However, the influence of the tribe decreases as teens grow up, with 49% of 11-13 year olds saying that members of their 'tribe' did things in order to fit in with the group, compared to 40% of those aged 14-16 years, and 39% of over-16s

Young people may experiment with drugs in their teens as part of a rite of passage – a largely symbolic process of transition – and this adds to their sense of inclusion in some tribal groupings. But for the vast majority, it is neither a necessary nor sustainable feature of their tribal life. They may need to know the jargon of drugs to pass muster as an insider, and to be able to talk knowledgeably about effects, prices, hazards, for example. It is, after all, this shared and, to outsiders often unintelligible, language that partly defines the tribe itself.

This aspect of self-presentation in groups is made possible by a tacit conspiracy to accept, shall we say, a little 'exaggeration' on the part of its members. In the way that British pubs have always been places where people, and men in particular, could go to be a bit 'larger than life', youth cultures and music tribes have equally afforded opportunities for the development of particular 'personas'

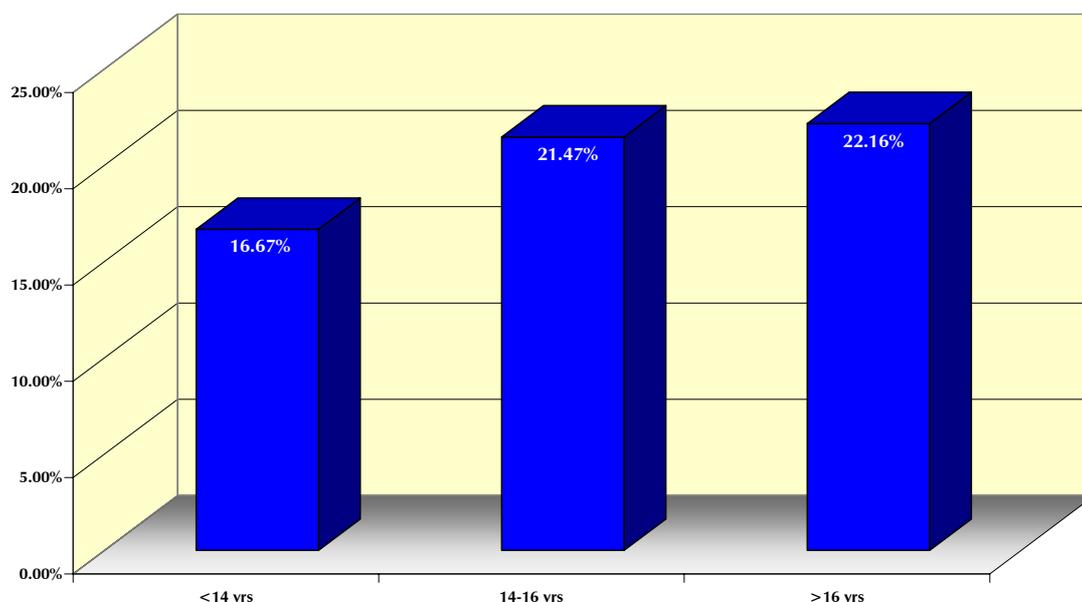
– presentations of selves as rather more interesting and daring than lives in school, at work or at home might indicate. This ‘image enhancement’ is typically (although not exclusively) a masculine behaviour, a fact that was confirmed by the research among teenage music tribes, with boys twice as likely as girls to say that they have taken drugs when they have not.

The research also showed that teenagers living in the South East were more prone to talking up their behaviour than young people from other parts of the UK, but all learn that there are clear rules about self-presentation, and that to be an accepted group member they must be assimilated quickly.

If talking about drugs is a social act, that is, having specific objectives with a group, then what are we to make of the answers that young people give when we ask them about drugs? As with other identifiers in the teenage music tribe, a bit of licence to distort is generally permitted and accepted around talking about drugs-misuse. You might have shied away from taking drugs, for all sorts of sensible reasons. But being ‘sensible’ is rarely a valued personal characteristic in youth tribes. The temptation is always to project the less ‘sensible’ image – to talk up one’s ‘deviance’ in order to gain greater respect.

When asked, “Have you ever told friends you had taken drugs when you hadn’t” 6% of 14- 16 year olds, and 10% of over 16 year olds replied in the affirmative. There were some striking differences between the various tribes in terms of their responses. Scallies and Moshers were most likely to admit to a bit of deceit, possibly due to the predominantly male or ‘laddish’ characters of these groups, while Gangstas and Goths were all adamant that they had never engaged in such a pretence.

**Figure 1.** Positive responses to ‘Do you think your friends pretend they have taken drugs when they haven’t?’



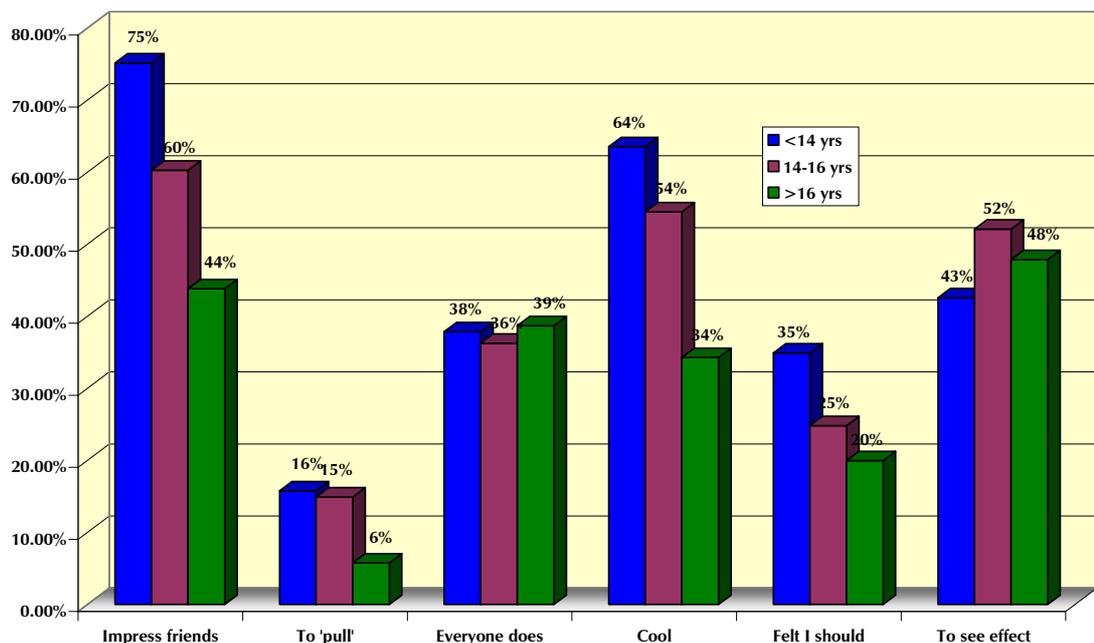
The question ‘Do you think your friends pretend they have taken drugs when they haven’t?’ elicited substantially different replies, as shown in Figure 1. In this case, a fifth of all teenagers readily admitted that their friends talk about

drugs, rather than actually use them. This is undoubtedly a better guide to what is going on inside of these social worlds because the question overcomes the resistance that inevitably accompanies requests to talk about oneself in these 'sensitive' contexts.

Here again there were differences between the tribes. Interestingly, the Gangstas, who all said that they never pretended to be on drugs when they weren't, now said that their friends did in 35% of cases – the highest of all of the groups. We have to remember, of course, that image is everything for the Gangstas – and talking about drugs is part of creating that image. They can recognise that themselves – they have a good insight into their own culture. But while they can express this, they can't admit that they, personally, are putting on an act – the pursuit of image rules that out.

Fitting in with the tribe was the main reason given for pretending to have taken drugs, with 36% of those who said they had pretended to be more 'out of it' than they really were, saying they had done so to 'be like the rest,' closely followed by 'to get attention,' while 11% of under-14s had used this tactic to get off with someone.

Figure 2. Responses to 'Why do you think young people take drugs?'



Now look at Figure 2, which summarises responses to the question 'Why do you think young people take drugs?' Here we see a very different, and in our view more accurate, reflection of what experimentation with drugs is all about.

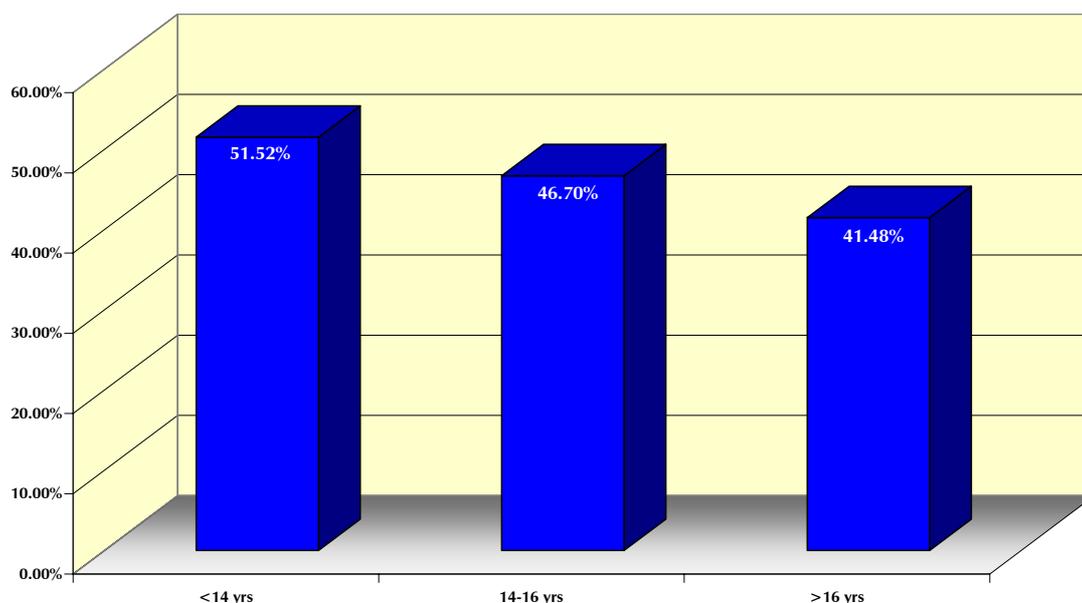
When we overcome the natural resistance of teenagers to admit to being swayed by peer pressure, we find that 'impressing friends', 'looking cool' or 'fitting in with what everybody else does' become greater than, or as important as wanting to experience the effects of drugs. Even using drugs as a means of 'pulling' a member of the opposite sex is admitted as a potential reason. There is slightly more resistance among the older group of over 16s to 'owning up', perhaps

because they and their contemporaries engage less in this type of self-promotion in the first place, but the clear differences between the ‘me’ and ‘others’ responses are evident for young people of all ages.

There were some relatively small variations between the music tribes in this context. Goths, for example, felt most strongly that a lot of young people experimented with drugs to look cool (83%) while Scallies thought that the primary motive was to impress friends (86%). The Gangstas still clung to the idea that people simply took drugs to experience the effects (86%) but accepted that looking cool and impressing friends were also important issues here.

All of these results are consistent with responses to a further question: ‘Do you think people in your group do things just to fit in with everyone else?’ This was a deliberately wider and impersonal question that aimed to tap into the issue of conformity to the social mores of modern tribes. The responses are summarised in Figure 3.

**Figure 3.** Positive responses to ‘Do you think people in your group do things just to fit in with everyone else?’



From Figure 3 we can see that on average nearly half of the teenagers in the survey felt that others in their group did things to fit in with the rest. The feeling was strongest among the youngest group, declining progressively with age. Again, this is exactly what we would expect to find on the basis of what we know about the dynamics of small groups and youth tribes.

The need for inclusion within the group is strongest in early adolescence – the ‘novice’ stage of being a teenager, and all that that entails in terms of learning and social development. As one becomes accepted, and as a social identity is carved out, one can afford to do things a little differently – be more of an individual. There is less of a need to ‘impress’, and this is reflected in the responses by the over 16 group to questions about pretending to have taken drugs as well as other aspects of behaviour and social life.

### ***Other identifiers within the teenage music tribes***

To what extent are music and fashion tastes stronger identifiers within the teenage music tribes than attitudes towards drug-taking? In the way that the era of the Teddy Boys gave way to that of the Mods and Rockers, today's youth tribes distance themselves from previous generations of hippies, skinheads, punks and the rest by what they wear, how they talk and, very significantly, by the music they listen to. A preference for today's 'Hip Hop', 'RnB' or 'Garage' may not define completely which tribe a young person belongs to (there are always some blurred edges) but the music at a gig full of Goths will undoubtedly sound different from that populated mainly by Gangstas – two now familiar types of in-crowds, two distinctive music tribes.

The reasons why teenagers are drawn to one music tribe rather than another are of course varied and complex. In some cases, it might be a logical extension of other adolescent interests, such as sport or skate-boarding. For others, however, it may simply depend on who is around in school and in the neighbourhood. You might be wearing a certain band T-shirt and spot someone else wearing a similar one. An affinity is immediately established and the core of a potential local tribe is formed. The embryonic group then provides perceived opportunities for both security and stylish excitement – something for others to join and develop. Soon, the 'in-crowd' becomes visible, perhaps envied by others who, in turn, are motivated to create their own social niche – one that often stands in distinct contrast in terms of style and music preferences. In the way that Mods needed Rockers, or Punks needed Skinheads in order to emphasise their distinctive characteristics, so Goths need Townies and Scallies to reinforce their distinct sense of unity.

**Gangstas** are almost entirely defined by their subscription to Rap and Hip Hop music and ownership of albums by Eminem, Nelly, Destiny's Child and their like. Not a single Gangsta reported that other members of the group listened to completely different bands, while 41% said that they listened to exactly the same. While the lyrics of some of the 'songs' have been criticised for glorifying gun violence or encouraging homophobia, the UK Gangsta rarely presents a serious threat to public order and is described by members of rival tribes as being 'all talk and no action'.

The life of **Sporties** who, as their name suggests, are quite clean-living types and rarely pose too much of a problem for their parents, tends to revolve around equally squeaky clean music from the likes of Holly Valence. They are a similarly close-knit tribe with only 2% reporting eccentric music tastes that differ from those of their friends.

There was a bit more variation among the **Indies**. This was not surprising since their name derives from Indie music, short for music produced by small, independent record companies, or even the bands themselves. There is, however, a degree of sameness about them all, revealing roots in Velvet Underground and The Smiths. While 7% of Indies said that they listened to different bands from their fellows, it is unlikely that many strayed too far

outside of this genre. Some may express a slightly greater preference for, say, the Strokes, but to the outsider that might seem like splitting hairs.

Only the all-in-black, pasty-faced **Goths** seemed to be out of step with their neighbouring tribes in this sense. None of them appeared to listen to the same bands, while 20% were attracted by completely different ones to those of their friends. However, despite these claims of individual differences, Goths have been typified by a love of an 'alternative' gloomy music scene, from The Sisters of Mercy in the 80s to the revisited Black Sabbath in the Naughties.

**Moshers** – often to be seen wearing T shirts of their favourite bands and baggy trousers and sporting badly dyed scraggy hair – tend to be united by their reverence of the late Kurt Cobain's band, Nirvana. There are, however, a few sub-species of Mosher, including **Smellies** – who tend *either* to prefer even heavier metal music from Slayer *or* early punk rock, accompanied by spiky hair and safety pins. There are even, apparently, **Mosher Scallies** and **Indie Moshers**, adding even more confusion to the categories, which is probably their intention.

**Geeks** (this term is rarely used by Geeks themselves) have relatively eclectic tastes – dominated by the mainstream, and usually anything by way of pop or rock on Radio 1 will do. Despite this, only a small minority (5%) said that they listened to completely different bands from their friends. Within geekdom, it seems there is also a unifying role of music, even if the music itself is far from unified.

**Trendies** – an achingly hip tribe made up of stylistically fast-moving early adopters of cool, taking their lead from trend-setting celebrities such as Kate Moss and arthouse and fashion bands. Perhaps due to the truncated duration of allegiance to a particular style, Trendies tend to be strongly united in terms of their music preference – currently, or perhaps last week, Scissor Sisters or White Stripes, rather than the even more last week Travis – although even they have some difficulty keeping up with themselves. Less than 1% said that what they listened to was completely different from that of their friends.

It is important to point out that certain different teenage tribes will enjoy musical and stylistic crossovers. Goths and Indies, for example, tend to be musically compatible in their love of bands such as The Cure or The Smiths, where Goths and Ganstas are not. There is some musical and stylistic crossover between Gangsta and **Skaters**, their name derived from their addiction to skateboards. There is also an overlap in these terms between Skaters and Sporties – both male-dominated and impressed with physical prowess – and between Sporties and **Scallies** – one of the less attractive of modern tribes that originated in Liverpool and one which has a 'hard' reputation, so much so, that 'Scally' is often used as a term of abuse – by non-Scallies of course. Scallies are often into sport themselves (even if not playing it anymore due to their bad habits) and they love their sportswear. There is also evidence of strong identification with the rest of the music tribe amongst Skaters, Sporties and Scallies, who consistently reported listening to the same music as their fellow and related tribe members, although this was not always exclusively so.

Not only do shared tastes in music help to define modern tribes, but also their favourite singers and bands dictate to a greater or lesser degree a tribe's style of dress and adornment. This was particularly strong among the Gangstas, where 72% in the Dubit survey said that their taste in music influenced the way they dressed. They were also the most likely of all groups to say that their hairstyles were influenced in a similar way.

Townies, Sporties and Geeks are more 'traditional' in the sense of not making much effort to look different from others. Their more mainstream tastes in music are reflected in what they wear – which is why they often look quite ordinary, and why they receive epithets such as 'geek' in the first place.

Goths, on the other hand, go to extreme lengths to stand out from other groups.

Only 30%, however, thought that their dress and adornment was a reflection of their tastes in music. The effort expended by Goths – usually thoughtful and introspective young people – on their style of dress is undoubtedly the greatest of all youth groups. But this can pose some problems, for example, as Goths tend to experience verbal abuse from other tribes about their attire and tastes. The advantage that Goths have, however, is that they really do scare off Townies and Scallies, whom they loathe with a vengeance. The Goth attire, in this sense, comes the closest of all modern groups to that of traditional tribal societies – to unite its members and, at the same time, to make rival tribes believe that they have the powers of evil spirits and to frighten the life out of them.

Commenting on these patterns of stylistic and musical bonding, young people surveyed for this study expressed sentiments such as:

*“... it reflects our personality and that's one reason we are friends, because we like the same kinda stuff.”*

*“It's to make us look different from others and to look cool and to fit in”*

Perhaps perversely, however, this pattern of 'fitting in' with the group was often expressed in terms of striving to be an 'individual'. Common comments were:

*“We don't want to be like everyone else on the streets today. We like to be individual. We admire the stars of Hip Hop”*

*“I choose [music] because I wish to be an individual and not follow the crowd. Life is [about being] independent – you can't live your life like someone else for the rest of your life.”*

What we see here again is this fundamental development process where a sense of individuality is only achievable by firstly knowing your sense of place – understanding who you are in terms of your relationships with others and common subscriptions to styles, values, attitudes and patterns of behaviour. There is nothing new in this, and it is by no means specific to youth tribes – we have all developed our personal identities in this way.

Patterns of dress and adornment, then, along with tastes in music and the sets of attitudes and tacit philosophies that accompany them, are clearly shown to unite young people within their tribal groups. These influences are most marked at around the age of 15, the time-honoured point of development when peer groups start to take over from parents as the primary source of influence in most youngsters' lives.

## **Conclusion**

The responses to the survey used to inform this report indicate that listening to at least some of the 'right' bands and adopting the 'uniform' of the group are the most important factors for teenagers looking to fit in with a music tribe. In no case is actual drugs use any kind of requirement. As in all walks of teenage life, however, being a bit of a rebel and pushing the boundaries, or at least appearing to, can give you a bit of credibility. And the roles of self-presentation and image-enhancement in this context are clearly revealed.

All of this should come as good news to parents who may fear that their offspring may be "doomed to a life of drugs" simply because they declare themselves to be a Goth or an Indie, and adopt the kind of dress and hairstyles that in the time-honoured tradition of adolescents are just guaranteed to annoy their parents. They are not at such a risk and are not likely to be.

A certain number of members of each generation of teenagers experiments with drug-taking, if given the opportunity and the context in which to do so. But the survey findings suggest that many teenagers are 'talking, not taking drugs'. The defining characteristics of the music tribes relate to the image of the group members, rather than actual behaviour – an image that is projected using music taste and personal style.

## **About FRANK**

FRANK is an innovative drugs campaign which aims to give advice and help to anyone who is affected by or wants to know about drugs. It was launched in May 2003. FRANK builds on the work of the National Drugs Helpline and expands it through multi-agency advertising and both telephone and internet accessibility. People should see FRANK as their mate, a mate that they can ask anything they want to know about drugs.

FRANK focuses on the most vulnerable young people and on helping parents to access information and advice to enable them to talk to their children.

FRANK can be contacted on 0800 776600 or [www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com). Those who are deaf or hard of hearing can also textphone FRANK on 0800 917 8765.

A minicom service is available on 0800 917 8765.

## **About SIRC**

The Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC) is an independent, non-profit organisation founded to conduct research on social and lifestyle issues, monitor and assess global socio-cultural trends and provide new insights on human behaviour and social relations.

SIRC conducts research on positive aspects of social behaviour as well as the more problematic aspects that are the focus of most social-science research.

SIRC operates a permanent 'social intelligence' unit, engaged in continuous monitoring and assessment of significant social, cultural and ideological trends.

The work of SIRC is guided by an Advisory Board consisting of eminent scientists and consultants in a variety of disciplines. SIRC also provides a channel of communication for a wider forum of scientists engaged in research in related areas.

For more information: [www.sirc.org](http://www.sirc.org)

## **About Dubit**

Dubit are specialists in the youth market, creating the community [dubit.co.uk](http://dubit.co.uk), and launching the Dubit youth discount card.

Dubit's online research division features the most extensive youth panel in the UK, Informer. Over 10,000 young people regularly participate in weekly online surveys. Members are profiled by sub-culture so that brands, music and identities are taken into account in analysis of research findings.

To ensure a more accurate representation of UK youth Dubit constantly recruit from a number of sources both offline and online.

The Dubit 'Informer scheme' adheres to stringent MRS and Internet guidelines regarding the conducting of research with children.

### **About the 'Talking Not Taking' research**

The survey was conducted amongst over 1000 people aged 11-18 years, 24-28 June 2004. Research was carried out by Dubit, one of the UK's largest teenage portals. Results were weighted according to UK national census data.

The online survey asked teenagers about Class A, B and C drugs. The survey does not include cigarettes, alcohol or prescription drugs.



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