"We listened to our mix-tapes of love songs, talking about boys": Young Finns as a target group for cassette technology

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ABSTRACT
In the 1970s, compact cassettes ("C-cassettes") were rapidly changing music listening practices. This paper studies the introduction and marketing of compact cassettes to Finns. C-cassettes answered important needs of music consumers; users remember them as essential devices in constructing and conveying one’s identity. An active role as mix-tape assembler and recommender of new music was welcomed by Finnish music listeners, especially young people. But were they ready to accept the roles and ways of using cassette technology suggested by advertisers? The material analyzed consists of magazine advertisements from the 1970s and users’ memories of C-cassettes.

KEYWORDS: mobile music; C-cassettes; music technology; advertising; music consumption.

The Musiquitous project (2009-2012) studies ubiquitous music in Finland: its past, present, and future. In this paper, I present some preliminary results of the project. I look at the ways different actors in the popular music and music technology markets formulate their views on an innovation within music listening. The actors in this
case are Finnish advertisers and retailers of music listening appliances on one hand, and users of the appliances on the other.

The materials analysed consist of C-cassette advertisements in Finnish 1970s magazines and the responses written in connection with an investigation into memories and recollections concerning C-cassette use in Finland (Kasettimuistot 2010). There are some naturally occurring differences between the two types of materials. Advertisements are published marketing communication with an aim to sell as many appliances as possible. Memory data is more or less intimate personal reminiscing, written for a group of researchers who have called for memories on the topic and presented a list of questions to start from. Thus this paper does not aim to find out “the true nature of cassette use” but to probe into the themes perceptible in the analysed material and compare the ways of dealing with the relatively new technology. Finally, I also want to briefly weigh the meaning of C-cassettes for the listeners against the socio-economic background of 1970s Finland.

**HOW TO MARKET C-CASSETTES IN FINLAND?**

When the C-cassette made its breakthrough, it affected the whole way of consuming music and being an “audience”. Although the audio quality of early C-cassette technology was far from that of its competitors (vinyl records or reel-to-reel tapes), benefits from the users’ point of view were considerable. Foremost was freedom of choice – spatially enabled by mobility, and musically by recordability. The user interface was simple and standardized: the user could rely on the compatibility of his or her tape with any C-cassette player anywhere. The cassettes were also durable, inexpensive and easy to handle. Thus they were introduced to younger children more than any of the preceding listening technologies.

The bulletin of home electronics retail dealers advised salesmen in 1969 to find the right target groups instead of pitching C-cassette appliances to “anyone and everyone”:

> It is useful for schoolchildren, since homework is guaranteed to become both enjoyable and easier [...] Narrow-film enthusiasts can effortlessly tape an authentic sound to play as a backdrop for their films [...] Businessmen will have an easier time when making reports etc. An idea springing to a motorist’s mind can easily be noted down already during the drive. (Radiokauppias 1969, p. 16)

In spite of the lower sound quality and the retailers’ suggestions for other preferred uses, the Finnish consumers mainly wanted C-cassettes for music recording and listening. In the late 1970s, the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) saw cassettes as “a challenge to centralized control” of music business (Garofalo 1999, p. 349). The Federation then conducted several studies on the use of cassette recorders and the extent of copying in thirteen countries. These studies revealed, among other things, that the main sources for home taping were vinyl
records and the radio. But there were clear differences in home taping practices between the studied countries. The British, for instance, mainly copied music from records and music cassettes, whereas Finns relied on radio music, the share of which was an amazing 83% (Gronow 1984, p. 7). Combined with the contemporary changes in radio programming in favour of popular music, and the spreading of musical tastes, the format provided excellent opportunities for the rise of home taping (Gronow and Saunio 1998, pp. 182-183).

After the distributors’ initial confusion about target groups, the intended users were defined by marketing as adults (listening often in their cars or summer cottages) and, somewhat later, young people. The 1970s was the first decade during which Finnish young people could actually start building identities (even partly) by consuming.

“Grab it every time you set your foot out the door”

Iconic pop performers have been a standard feature in music-related marketing. A pop star – or a character similar enough to associate the product with one – is often seen as an attention grabber in an advertising campaign. One example of this can be seen in the Philips portable player campaign from spring 1977. In the launching ad for retailers (Figure 1), a male figure bears a striking resemblance to John Lennon’s famous “floppy hat” image from 1973 (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Detail from an advertisement for Philips portable cassette players in Radiokauppias 4/1977.
The character is the only human visual element in the full-page advertisement otherwise illustrated with numerous pictures of products in Philips’ current cassette player selection. His position highest up on the page and next to the main advertising claim “The season of portable music is now” portrays him as the spokesperson for young people “looking for good portables to listen to”. He is clearly older and looks more radical than the average Finnish young consumer. The associations most likely sought for – apart from the musical authority of Lennon, of course – are self-confidence and readiness to explore new things away from the security of home: thus, his choice is mobile music listening.

Mobility was naturally one of the main sales arguments for C-cassettes in advertising directed at both adult and young consumers. Between the 1970s and 2010s, advertising for mobile music devices displays at least one conspicuous visual difference. Whereas the setting in ads for iPod or mobile phone listening is predominantly urban, the early C-cassette ads with an emphasis on mobility were almost exclusively set in more or less natural outdoor environments: fields, forests, roads and parks. This is doubtless relevant for a deeper analysis of imagined and intended patterns of music technology use, for which there is not enough room in this discussion. I can only present a hypothesis that the 1970s advertisers did not see young people’s use of urban space as appropriate for marketing mobile technology for one reason or another.

The 1975 advertisement for the Hitachi line of portable radio recorders (Figure 3) combines mobile music listening with a presumed young mobile lifestyle: “You’re
on the go anyway, so take the music along. Grab the Hitachi every time you set your foot out the door”. A young couple portrayed in the wide shot is running outside on a field, smiling at each other, heading for a picnic perhaps. Above the wide shot, a blow-up of the product serves naturally to present the design but also to emphasize the woman’s engagement ring and the fact that the couple is not holding hands directly, but through music. The advertised appliance forms the physical connection between the two people.

Figure 3: A full-page advertisement for Hitachi portable cassette players in the Finnish youth magazine Suosikki 4/1975.

Social and romantic relations were just as tightly connected with music listening in the 1970s as they are now. Perhaps even tighter: often the young romance was described not only in the visuals but in words as well. Consider the copywriting in the 1973 ad “Masa and me” (Figure 4):

One day when hanging out with the gang he came to me and asked if I’d go out with him. I did, and now we’ve been solid for three months. We have so much fun together and like precisely the same things – such as same music.
The narrator (girl) describes her emotions and the new need to be alone with her boyfriend. She then continues to announce her contentment over not having to share the music/social situation with “the gang” anymore, since Masa has purchased a radio recorder.

Figure 4: One page of a full spread advertisement for Philips portable cassette players in the Finnish youth magazine Suosikki 1973/7.

Again in this ad, young romance chooses a natural environment away from home (and parental guidance). The advertisement also employs a classic topic of visual art: an intimate rendezvous of male and female in picturesque surroundings. This is underlined via the execution by watercolour painting. More direct sexual associations were often also worked into advertising by joint effect of copy and visuals.

Nature as an idyllic setting in C-cassette technology ads may also originate from the visual conventions of advertising. Showing people outside in natural environments conveys the associations of freedom, independence and relaxation more easily and swiftly than most interior settings would. Introducing technology in natural surroundings is recurrent in 1970s visual advertising; the products are given the “aura of ‘the natural’” (Williamson 1978, pp. 129-130). There is little resemblance
to the memories of young people’s “own” spaces that came up in our memory data – the cassette users’ recollections.

**Cassettes as remembered by users**

In 2010, an enquiry on memories and recollections of cassette culture was conducted by the *Musiquitous* research project and the Finnish Literature Society. Social anthropologist Bryan Pfaffenberger (1992, p. 501) emphasises that technologic knowing is “silent”, non-verbalized. This may be somewhat true for interviews of present technology users, but with memories, there seems to be no lack of words. Several respondents wrote long answers on exact practices they applied in making their own musical worlds via home-taping, borrowing, presenting, and modifying the technology to suit their needs.

**Producing a musical world of one’s own**

The place most frequently remembered as the personal space for music listening was the respondent’s own room. Often there was a higher-quality system for music listening in another room at home: “My dad’s reel-to-reel recorder was in the living room. The SABA for C-cassettes then sat in my own room, connected to the radio” (*Kasettimuistot* 2010, male, Espoo, b. 1959).

In their own or their friends’ rooms, the “cassette generation” explored the world of (most often popular) music. Taping networks for new or otherwise interesting vinyl records also brought access to interesting releases with a relatively low financial input. Respondents report mix-tape making and editing at quite an early age. With C-cassettes, music was no longer something to be only received. It was adaptable to situations as the listener wished.

I compiled cassettes with e.g. best guitar solos, and listened to these more than I did the full pieces. (*Kasettimuistot* 2010, male, Hyvinkää, b. 1976)

I taped my cassettes myself and could fill the whole A- or B-side with recordings of one piece only. (*Kasettimuistot* 2010, female, Salo, b. 1987)

Feelings of power and independence are frequently expressed, especially in relation to authoritative figures such as radio DJs, parents, or older siblings. Part of the control in music listening had shifted in favour of the “end user”, with several consequences for the listening culture. These consequences will be one subject of our future analysis of the Finnish cassette culture.

Several respondents recall mix-tapes used in seduction and courting, for example taped musical or verbal declarations of love. Other kinds of cassette-related activities also served to ease the transition towards romantic and sexual relationships. “Me and my friend taped each other cassettes with different love songs which we then listened to, talking about boys” (*Kasettimuistot* 2010, female, Vaasa, b. 1969).
But the picture is far wider than just romantic relationships. Numerous respondents wrote about networking and different kinds of social “experimenting” with C-cassettes. A group of friends organized a singing party: “All of us had exactly identical ‘best of’ tapes in our walkmans (the maker had copied it for everybody) and simultaneously we pushed play, so that we could sing along together” (Kasettimuistot 2010, female, Kerava, b. 1979). Friends and their impact on the respondent’s musical worldview are recalled as extremely important in many ways. Making a good impression on someone and testing for musical compatibility was one strong incentive of making mix-tapes for new acquaintances.

Another main ingredient mentioned in building a musical world is the radio, especially its youth-oriented programming. The biggest common denominator for Finnish youth was the popular music programmes on public radio (commercial radio stations were only allowed in 1985). As Heikki Uimonen states in his paper for this conference, the Finns were especially eager in taping from radio programmes. This was probably at least partly due to the economic circumstances of young Finnish people. Living standards had risen dramatically in Finland since the beginning of the century, but compared to the youth in, for example, the other Nordic countries and especially the US, spending money was relatively scarce among the Finnish youth, particularly those living in the countryside. A Finnish study of teenagers’ disposable income (Lintonen et al. 2007) shows that the real value of the disposable money of young people over fourteen years had grown less than the general income level in Finland between 1977 and 2003.

**Why and How Cassettes are Remembered**

In conclusion, I want to make a short comparison between the “ad world” and the world remembered by our respondents. There are three main themes studied: the social aspects, the mobility of the technology and the aspects of power and control enabled by the C-cassette technology.

Social associations of cassette technology in advertising had several connections with the memories written for our enquiry. There was, however, clearly more emphasis on the heterosexual romance theme in the ads. This is not to say our respondents did not recognize the romantic role of C-cassettes – it was just not as high-profile a feature as in the advertisements. Partying and relaxation with friends was a recurring theme in both “worlds”. Music sharing and even music “edification” between friends is very prominent in the memory data but seldom encountered in advertisements. Among the things that users list using cassettes for socially, the common denominator seems to be that they are definitely processes instead of the finished achievements portrayed in ads. Cassettes are remembered for their use in making things happen – for example, finding out if a prospective romantic interest shares a taste in music or providing a background for intimate personal soul-searching, crying, etc.

On the mobility aspect of cassette technology, the ads understandably concentrate on the advantages of the products. These advantages were also acknowledged by many respondents in our data. The respondents also remembered technical
shortcomings, of which most often mentioned were tangled tapes and weak batteries. Taking music “anywhere” is a common argument in both advertising and the memories. The respondents also described intimate memories of mobile music listening linking a certain space to a sound (or a collection of music in a definitive order). This reveals the essentially different nature of the materials. Personal memories contain much more detailed stories about individual lives.

Respondents born in the 1970s and 1980s often wrote about cassette technology as an inseparable part of their youth. The cassettes were a part of the everyday world these respondents were born into. On the other hand, respondents born before the 1960s often wrote about compact cassettes as “just another format”, which could be expected.

The economic development in Finnish society resulted in a new situation for young Finns in the 1970s. Seemingly endless possibilities of musical choice were becoming available to even those with more or less limited spending money at their disposal. C-cassettes made it possible for young people to position themselves as musical experts via networking and knowledge, and it was not only the ability to purchase new and “hot” music that was crucial in this process. From the point of view of this paper, the decade offered young Finnish people two brand new aspects: economic development took the youth towards full-fledged consumer power, and C-cassette technology allowed new control over music content. These two have to be among the main reasons the “cassette generation” has such vivid memories of the format and feels it had something crucial to do with their growing-up process.

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ENDNOTES

1. In Musiquitous (2009-2012), we aim to find out how they have taken and are presently adopting mobile music technologies and practices as parts of their lives. We are interested in how these technologies and practices affect everyday life and how they in turn have been and are being modified by users - as well as how and why users let go, drop, pass by and forget mobile music technologies.

2. The questionnaire (answerable either via letter or the Internet) was open from April until September of 2010. The outcome (Kasettimuistot 2010) was excellent: 969 respondents answered via the Internet, with twenty-two sending letters. Slightly less than half (47.4 %) of the respondents were female, and their years of birth ranged from 1921 to 1992. The majority of the participants (65.3 %) were born in either the 1960s or the 1970s, which suggests (but does not prove) the existence of a “cassette generation”.

3. See for example Statistics Finland 2007.
REFERENCES


Kasettimuistot. 2010. [Cassette memories]. A memory data collection carried out in April-September 2010 by the research project Musiquitous and the Finnish Literature Society. Material available at the Folklife Archives, University of Tampere, Finland.


