

What brings us together

People's preferences can change for many reasons. An individual's preferences change with age. For instance, many people hated broccoli as children but love it as adults. But the most interesting changes in preferences are the

Joe McGarrity



ones that occur to many people all at once, rather than the predictable changes that come with aging. Sometimes, when these sudden changes happen, so many more people like a product that its sales drastically increase. Of course, fads can do this. The hula hoop became widely popular for about a year in the 1950s. Its sales spiked and then quickly receded. But even more interesting are the changes in preferences that persist for long periods of time. Andrew Hickey's podcast, *A History of Rock Music in 500 Songs*, mentions several times when Americans experienced sudden changes in musical tastes.

These changes in musical tastes occurred for two reasons. First, people were repeatedly exposed to a certain type of music and after

hearing this music so much, they learned to like it. This scenario occurred in 1942. Before 1942, big bands dominated the music scene. Then the musicians went on strike for two years. The record companies responded by putting out music that was dominated by vocal performances. Singers weren't in the union, so the record companies could easily hire them. People heard so much vocal-dominated music that it became more popular than the big band music and it remained more popular.

The second reason that music preferences suddenly changed was that some big events exposed many people to a new type of music. This occurred when the music played at the 1893 World's Fair began the ragtime craze. It also occurred on February 9, 1964 when the Ed Sullivan television show aired a performance by the Beatles. This was the first time that many Americans had heard the group's music. Their performance went over so well that it was the start of Beatlemania – a time when the group was by far the most popular musical group in the United States.

I wonder if times have changed so much that big events can no longer cause the massive shifts in preferences that they once

did. While the Ed Sullivan show enjoyed widespread viewership, today people do not have singular events that are such focal points. Instead, some kids watch their favorite influencers, other kids watch certain TikTok channels, and adults may gravitate to certain streaming shows. In short, the entertainment market has so many different relevant providers that the market is segmented. As a consequence, it will be rare to have something like another Beatlemania. There just aren't enough people getting swept up in a new craze. Instead, there are many small changes in people's preferences that probably aren't noticed outside of the groups experiencing this change.

I have to admit that I think the country may be worse off because the massive changes in preferences are less likely to occur. These changes may have unified the country. When Elvis, Scott Joplin, or the Beatles became massively popular, very different groups had something in common that they could talk about. Now diverse groups may have less in common because they are all interested in very different things.

Joe McGarrity is a Professor of Economics at UCA. He can be reached at joem@uca.edu.