

# **Living a Memorable Consumer Experience: The Epic of the Beatles Concerts (1963-1966)**

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*The Beatles are still a major reference in popular music today. The band wrote more than 200 songs and 12 original albums between 1962 and 1970, of which about thirty are hits. At the origin of a mass hysteria phenomenon, especially among teen girls, the Beatles were the first to organize tours in stadiums, in front of an audience of tens of thousands of fans shouting, loudly and continuously. Many archival images allow to measure the intensity of what is called Beatlemania, including the famous August 1965 concert at Shea Stadium in New York. The paper indicates that the participation in the concerts can be analyzed in reference to a memorable experience lived by the fans, independently of the quality of the musical performance of the Beatles, almost inaudible considering the screams whose volume is superior to that of a jumbo jet at takeoff.*

*Keywords: Beatlemania, concert, consumer experience, fan, hedonism, mass hysteria, popular music, scream, teen girls*

## **INTRODUCTION**

For a lot of baby boomers in Europe and the United States who turned 20 in the mid-1960s, the Beatles are a major cultural reference, and it is true that the band is often considered one of the most influential in modern popular music (Sandler, 2014). Four musicians, John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Ringo Starr, otherwise known as the “*Fab Four*,” became famous all over the world (or almost), triggering a mass hysteria phenomenon known as Beatlemania in 1963. Their appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* on CBS TV, on February 9, 1964, in front of 73 million viewers<sup>1</sup>, is often presented as a key moment in the explosion of Beatlemania since, in a few days, the Beatles conquered the North American market, inaugurating a new era in the marketing promotion of rock bands (Sercombe, 2006). This does not detract from the musical qualities that the Beatles will never cease to demonstrate: the greatest experts underline their exceptional innovativeness, incorporating classical elements and original recording techniques in their albums, especially for *Rubber Soul* (1965), *Revolver* (1966) and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). These innovations were to inspire later psychedelia and progressive rock in England, including Pink Floyd, Genesis, King Crimson and Yes.

Beyond the purely musical dimension, the Beatles were also –and above all– at the heart of profound societal transformations, particularly among young people. In the United Kingdom, then in the United States and in a large part of Western Europe (since they were banned from performing in the USSR as active propagandists of capitalist ideology), they accompanied teenagers towards a recognition of their economic and political influence. Pickard (2016) shows how the Beatles were main actors in the development of youth culture in Great Britain by adopting a sociological perspective of contesting the old order represented by their parents’ musical tastes and ways of life. While this perspective is interesting, it obscures the manifestations of protest through the phenomenon of mass hysteria, where teen girls are shouting their will for recognition at concerts. The central assumption of the paper is that the mass hysteria specific to Beatlemania should be analyzed as the will of fans to experience the excitation of a memorable consumer experience for which listening to the musical performance at a concert is only a technical support, not an end. In other words, less than the “concert” product, it is the fact of living the “rebellion” experience that is important for teen girls.

The theoretical foundations of the assumption refer to the work of Holbrook & Hirschman (1982) on the place of emotion in consumption, and Pine III & Gilmore (1998) on the experience economy. According to Holbrook & Hirschman (1982), as opposed to the traditional postulate of the rationality of the consumer, it is essential to understand the emotions that lead him to act; to do this, they propose an experiential model that bases the understanding of consumer behavior on the emotions and feelings aroused by the product and by its multisensory characteristics. Pine III & Gilmore (1998) enrich this approach by indicating that the experience economy, which is now dominant, aims to offer consumers singular, memorable, meaningful and economically valued experiences, rather than simple material goods. The memorable dimension of experience is essential here (Lanier Jr. & Hampton, 2009). Every individual has a multiplicity of positive or negative experiences every day, but a lot of them are not significant enough to create memories that cause one to behave or react differently from past routines. The memorable experience therefore creates a behavioral disruption that this paper wishes to explore with reference to the Beatlemania phenomenon.

In general terms, the music industry lends itself to an analysis in terms of consumer experience. Listening to music evokes emotions that can, in some cases, overwhelm individuals to the point of ecstasy. This is due to the fact that music evokes memories of moments of happiness, as well as sorrow and sadness. Who has not vibrated or cried when listening to a tune, a phrase, a melody that speaks to the heart, that calls out to us and that constitutes a dialogue with the shadows of the past? It is therefore not surprising that many works in experiential marketing have explored the experience of consuming musical products. For example, Minor *et al.* (2004) analyze the explanatory factors of the level of satisfaction perceived by rock concertgoers based on functionality: seating quality; view of the show; venue size; and parking facilities. Carù & Cova (2005) study the process of immersion of individuals in a musical work and conclude that there are multiple immersions, not just one. Finally, Al-Beitawi *et al.* (2020) are interested in the creation of exclusive playlists through Spotify, which allows to multiply infinitely the playlists, specialize them by content and listen to them according to a given emotional state. There is therefore a dynamic stream of research to which this paper wishes to contribute, based on the concept of memorable consumer experience.

From a methodological point of view, the approach is inductive, starting from observable facts and moving towards an attempt at explanation (with reference to an *ad hoc* conceptualization). In other words, it is a question of understanding a general phenomenon, here the way of living a memorable experience within the framework of a mass hysteria, starting from an observed phenomenon. The following structure of the paper results from this approach. In the first section, the Beatles revolution is identified by drawing on documents that highlight the economic, political and cultural context of the band’s birth and worldwide success. In the second section, the focus is on the live experience of Beatlemania through mythical concerts between 1963 and 1966, before the members of the Beatles gave up all stage performances to devote themselves exclusively to the production of albums (with the exception of the *Rooftop Concert* of January 30, 1969, on the roof of the Apple studios, but with no audience other than onlookers at the bottom of the building and on adjacent roofs). In a third section, a conceptual clarification of the mass hysteria associated with the Beatles is proposed according to a critical reading of works conducted in social psychology, particularly in reference to the crowd psychology of Sighele (1891/2018) and Le Bon

(1895/2009). The conclusion opens the discussion by questioning the generalization –or not– of the analysis conducted.

## **POPULAR MUSIC: THE BEATLES REVOLUTION**

How did four British young people who did not know the rudiments of music theory and, in their early days, wrote simplistic songs, especially lyrically, manage to conquer the planet? More surprisingly, how can they still achieve significant commercial success today? When the Beatles' catalog was available for streaming on the Spotify platform in 2016, it was found that in the first 100 days, their music had totaled more than 24 million listening hours, or 2.739 years, and nearly half of the listeners were young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 (McIntyre, 2016). The academic success is at least as significant, as the University of Liverpool has launched the *Journal of Beatles Studies* in 2022, with an inaugural issue in November 2022. The aim of this journal, co-edited by Holly Tessler (University of Liverpool) and Paul Long (Monash University), is to establish “a scholarly focal point for critique, dialogue and exchange on the nature, scope and value of the Beatles as an object of academic enquiry and seeks to examine and assess the continued economic value and cultural values generated by and around the Beatles, for policy makers, creative industries and consumer”.<sup>2</sup> Of course, it would be illusory to pretend to identify all the factors that led the Beatles to become an essential reference in popular culture, as it is the interweaving of multiple determinants that produced this phenomenal success. However, without being exhaustive here, it is possible to identify explanatory elements of this situation, on the one hand by evoking the presence of macro-influences, on the other hand by underlining the performance of a pioneering management style.

### **Macro-Influences**

In economic terms, the late 1950s and early 1960s saw a shift in the purchasing power of the British people: the parents' generation, which had concentrated a dominant share of income, was overcome by the youth class. This is due to the fact that young people, with training and qualifications more in line with new labor market trends, enjoy better wages than their elders (Pickard, 2016), which had never happened before. In addition, as they do not yet have family responsibilities, they have more time to consume. Companies understand that this phase of prosperity offers great opportunities, especially companies in the entertainment industry like music labels, which focus on teenagers as their main targets (Lemonnier, 1995). In the United States, a major market for music consumption, and in a large part of other European countries, economic conditions are similar and regional disparities do not influence the underlying trends: significantly more discretionary time and more abundant financial resources. In addition, the baby boomer generation, as its name suggests, represents population strata characterized by high birth rates.

While economic and demographic variables are important in understanding behavioral changes, they are not sufficient. From a sociological point of view, the imaginary of consumption is also changing. By imaginary, according to Bellion & Robert-Demontrond (2018), we must understand a set of representations, images and interpretations. These imaginaries propose frameworks for understanding societal values by relying on symbols and myths that legitimize innovations, and practices of a period. Lemonnier (2016) emphasizes that the advent of the Beatles is about innovation and that the band will crystallize symbolic functions that transcend them. Thus, Fernandez & Lastovicka (2011), having studied the relationship to iconic objects of the sixties, perfectly illustrate the spirit of the era through the verbatim of one of their key informants: “I saw four guys [the Beatles] that turned my life from black and white into something color... England from postwar right through the Fifties was very hard times for most people in England postwar. And in Liverpool and East London, it was not wonderful... The Beatles started a whole movement, not just music, but a whole movement, the whole modern era, if you like, and made young people think, start to think more rebellious, and thinking to not be like their parents... It was just the whole revolution for me.” Thanks to the Beatles, an imaginary of optimism, emancipation, carefreeness and hope replaced the post-war period and removed the last dross of a Victorian England. As Margotin (2018) points out, four teenagers from middle-class Liverpool then offer the baby boomers a “fresh paradigm.”

Consumer imaginaries are also influenced by deeper trends. Weber (1930/2015) hypothesized early on that capitalist societies are characterized by the development of a rationalization leading to disenchantment, the result of a lesser influence of religion and the erosion of various ideologies. In other words, all the instances at the origin of “metanarratives” are in decline. In this sense, Morin (1957/2005) postulates that one of the symbolic functions of the stars is to substitute themselves in part for these instances, hence the phenomena of divinization and adoration, materializing, for example, during the stars’ concerts. From then on, listening to music is no longer the primary purpose but the support for rites of communion, or even quasi-religious moments such as Levy *et al.* (1981) describe in the context of rock concerts. Oh & Pham (2022) enrich the analysis by suggesting that two demarcations, drawing their origins from the development of the industrial revolution and the setting up of unified educational systems, will constitute the basis of the quest for re-enchantment and pleasure in consumption. The first demarcation comes from the duality between work and leisure. The rationalization procedures of industrial production will induce rigidity and monotony. The second demarcation is based on the link between work and play. For young people, the time devoted to leisure activities will gradually become more restricted and compartmentalized in relation to teaching time, which will become increasingly standardized. Beatlemania is a perfect response to this compelling desire for *hedonism*.

Beyond the structural components, more circumstantial events were to impact on the imagination. The “Profumo affair,” described in 1963 as the greatest political scandal of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United Kingdom<sup>3</sup>, and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 2, 1963, distilled feelings of discredited political discourse, astonishment and dismay throughout British society. As Margotin (2018) notes, the advent of the Beatles profoundly altered the deleterious image of England, both nationally and internationally, and the triumphant arrival of the band in the United States would act both as a “balm” and as an outlet for a bruised, even humiliated nation. Beyond the imaginary, it is also important to note that the various technological developments (recording methods, industrial manufacturing of records, etc.), especially in terms of distribution and communication channels, make musical products very accessible. In his will to identify the levers of success of the popular music, of which the rock is a key element, White (1985) underlines the important role of the radio, exceptional vector of transmission which manages to make the popular music available in most of the situations of the everyday life. This nomadic product will see its impact amplified by the multiplication of TV receivers in the homes –hence the success of the *Ed Sullivan Show* in the United States– and by the democratization of turntables.

### **The Beatles: A Pioneering Management Style?**

If all the preceding variables create a very favorable environment, the mode of governance, in part intuitive, of the band will finalize the device of success. Clydesdale (2006) was interested in the sources of the Beatles’ creativity. He concludes that the springs of their creative processes rest on two pillars. The first pillar is the presence of a competitive spirit, whether internal or external. Internally, the Lennon/McCartney tandem, which dominates the writing of the first hits, is based on a permanent emulation aiming at never reproducing the recipe of the previous success, to which is added the complementarity of the members of the band and the collegiality of decision-making processes. Externally, listening carefully to international competitors, such as Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones and the Beach Boys, is both a source of inspiration and a desire to surpass themselves. The second pillar of their prolific creativity is the functioning of their work team, which combines real expertise and stimulating musical visions. We can remember that at the time of Beatlemania, the work team was very small and remained almost identical during the period 1963-1966. During an interview with CB News in 2003, Steve Jobs even declared that his business model was inspired by the “creative synergy” existing within the Beatles.

Brian Epstein, their manager, and George Martin, their artistic director, contributed to the band’s potential for creativity and innovation being given the best possible conditions to materialize and to rapidly increase their exposure to the world. Thus, Brian Epstein develops a true corporate system with the aim of legitimizing them as leaders in their field and as a reference for a new culture. Diverse concerts are selected for their media impact, with performances lasting only about thirty minutes: *The Royal Variety Show* (1963), *The Shea Stadium* (1964), *The Variety Club of Great Britain’s Show Business Personalities of the*

*Year* (1964), *The Hollywood Bowl* (1964), *The Budokan* (1966). Brian Epstein also mobilized two types of devices to make the Beatles an essential cultural reference. In the first step, he modifies in depth their original image and behaviors. Harry (2000) underlines that the physical appearance of the Beatles in terms of hairstyle, Cardin suits, greeting to the public, etc., is imposed by Brian Epstein whereas they are not *a priori* favorable to it, while being conscious of the interest to remove the “asperities.” As John Lennon said, “we began to sell out when we let Brian begin to manage us. He put us into uniforms -suits- and we would go on and smile and do 20-minute acts of our hits... All the rough edges were being knocked off us. I knew what we were doing, and I knew the game. So, I let it happen” (Inglis, 1996).

In a second step, Brian Epstein develops a storytelling worthy of the Hollywood studios. The Beatles are presented as valiant guys belonging to the “working class” whereas they are standard elements of the middle class of Liverpool. He also asked John Lennon to hide his marriage with Cynthia Powell at 21 from the media to facilitate the mechanisms of projection/identification of teen girls. More widely, a stereotypical image of each of the Beatles is massively conveyed (George Harrison the Quiet One, John Lennon the Witty One, etc.). An official fan club is created, editing a magazine with a circulation of 300,000 copies each month (the *Beatles Monthly*), both to constitute a powerful relay of information –proselytizing effect– and to ensure significant volumes of pre-orders of the albums. Finally, press conferences, radio and TV broadcasts are also an integral part of the global communication strategy. The movies *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965) reinforce the Beatles’ image among fans and the public, and support album sales. A retailing strategy will even be promoted with the opening of a store in Baker Street (London), proposing psychedelic clothes and jewels, but which will be closed after one year for lack of a sufficient profitability (Jamin & Le Goff, 2022).

The Beatles’ creative power is undoubtedly an essential dimension of their success (Heinonen, 2014). George Martin, with his great classical musical culture and his open-mindedness, continuously brings suggestions and sound innovations during the recording of the songs. Harry (2000) points out that his work as an arranger is always at the service of the Beatles’ most original wishes, helping them to progress rapidly on the musical level. This “creative synergy” sets them apart from their competitors: there will be no Stonemanian, but a Beatlemania rich in consumer experience. However, we must not forget that the Beatles were also “hard workers.” Their rhythm is very sustained, again under the pressure of Brian Epstein. Their first album *Please Please Me*, comprising 14 songs, was recorded in a single day, on February 11, 1963, at EMI studios in Abbey Road. The number of concerts –excluding TV shows, radio interviews and studio time– is also impressive, as Table 1 shows. For comparison, the U2 360° world tour, from June 30, 2009, to July 30, 2011, featured 110 concerts. Even if the duration of the Beatles’ concerts is generally short (less than one hour), it is possible to measure the physical fatigue represented by more than 400 concerts in three and a half years, with long travels whose conditions of comfort have nothing to do with those of the early 2010s.

**TABLE 1**  
**INVENTORY OF CONCERTS DURING BEATLEMANIA**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Period of concerts</b>	<b>Countries visited</b>	<b>Number of concerts</b>
1963	January 3 to December 31	Scotland, England, Wales, Sweden, Northern Ireland	215
1964	January 1 to December 31	England, France, United States, Scotland, Canada, Northern Ireland, Wales, Australia, Hong Kong, Denmark, New Zealand, Sweden, Netherlands	131
1965	January 1 to December 12	England, Scotland, Wales, Italy, Spain, Canada	55
1966	May 1 to August 29	England, Germany, Japan, Philippines, United States	32

Source: The authors.

## LIVE EXPERIENCE OF BEATLEMANIA

The seminal work on experiential marketing by Holbrook & Hirschman (1982) has considerably enriched the traditional frameworks for understanding consumer behavior, particularly those related to the search for hedonic gratifications of all types. Since the experiential dimension is defined as an interaction between an individual and an object, and is simultaneously a source of pleasure, memorable and meaningful (Kwortnik & Ross, 2007), attending a Beatles concert is a good example of this, even though many recent studies have emphasized the complexity of the issues at stake in the concert experience. Indeed, the different temporalities of the rock concert experience generate a mix of affective states that feed the three dimensions identified. If the heart of the experience is the concert itself, the sequence of anticipation of the concert will also contribute to intensify the individual/concert interaction. Thus, through an ethnographic approach, Galluzzo & Galan (2011) underline that rock concert fans deploy strategies to position themselves a long time before the concert hall opens (sometimes several days before), in order to ensure that they are as close as possible to their idols and to express their extraordinary devotion in the sense of Chung *et al.* (2008).

Galluzzo & Galan (2011) describe the “communal phenomenon” as belonging to the sacrificial register and acting as a purification prior to the ecstasy of the expected communion with the rock band. Retrospective statements from Beatles concert attendees attest to the implementation of similar mechanisms (Harry, 2000). Managing to obtain tickets for their stage performances –almost all of their concerts being sold out very quickly– and coming to the concert venue well in advance in order to finally manage to be as close as possible to the stage and to imagine that one’s favorite Beatle could, perhaps, depending on the configuration (stadium vs. hall), catch a glimpse of his/her message on a banner (see Picture 1), or even better, furtively meet his/her gaze, already constitutes for the fan an intense hedonic excitement predisposing to the ecstasy of the actual experience of the future concert. The actual experience of the concert can be understood in terms of various frameworks, both specific and complementary. The fact that the Beatles’ reference concerts took place in stadiums or other places not dedicated to rock is emblematic of what is –symbolically– expressed. Holt (1995) investigated this setting to understand the various facets of experience that are present.

**PICTURE 1**  
**THE BEATLES FAN CONCERT BANNERS**



Source: Pinterest document.

Holt's (1995) analysis is structured along two axes. The first axis specifies the use of the show: either it is consumed as such, or it serves as a support for interpersonal relations. The second axis is based on the purpose of the show: either the experience is an end in itself and mostly valued instantly, or the experience will be valued more in a delayed manner. The intersection of these two axes allows to identify four modes of consumption that apply to the Beatles' stage performances (see Table 2). It should be pointed out that while one mode strongly dominates during Beatles concerts, i.e., experience, the other dimensions of show consumption may be present with different intensities. In this sense, it is possible to formulate the hypothesis that, for a teen girl who values, for example, classification or play, not hearing the Beatles' music is not at all surprising. We will analyze later this essential point of the consumer experience, which makes it possible to understand the presence of continuous screams during Beatles concerts, at levels of sound intensity close to those of a jumbo jet at takeoff, which obviously prevent any listening to the songs.

For their part, Massa & Galan (2013) describe the relationship to the concert around four elements. First, the concert allows people to enter in communion with the artist, to see him/her "in real life," and thus to share his/her universe. The shift from the status of inaccessible star to the status of close friend, even if only for a short time, is a source of intense emotions for some fans. This element is referred to by Massa & Galan (2013) as "artist as a guide." Second, the concert has a "search for the self and a quest for identity" function. This covers the personal meanings that the individual will attribute to the musical pieces and the emotions felt at the concert, which will lead to the creation of meaning, even more so if he/she is a fan of the artist. Thirdly, the concert creates the conditions for the existence of an "ephemeral community." Indeed, sharing the same passion for a specific artist or musical genre will foster a climate of exchange during the concert and possible meetings after the event. Fourthly, the concert allows people to escape from their routine. The extraordinary, the surprise, even a form of magic, will constitute the ingredients of what Massa & Galan (2013) call "the great escape."

**TABLE 2**  
**ADAPTATION OF HOLT'S (1995) THEORETICAL GRID TO BEATLES CONCERTS**

		Purposes of the show	
		Immediate	Delayed
<b>Relationship structure</b>	Relationship to the concert itself	<i>BEATLES CONCERT AS EXPERIENCE</i>  Total immersion. Exacerbation of affected states (ecstasy, hysteria).	<i>BEATLES CONCERT AS INTEGRATION</i>  Symbolic appropriation. Quest for identity.
	Interpersonal relationships	<i>BEATLES CONCERT AS PLAY</i>  Pleasure to met other fans and to exchange on his/her idols. Creation of new friendships more or less lasting.	<i>BEATLES CONCERT AS CLASSIFICATION</i>  Distancing oneself from dominant cultural norms (parental codes, academic codes, working codes, etc).

Source: The authors.

Here again, the analysis seems particularly adapted to the understanding of the deep aspirations of the teen girls of the Beatles concerts. At the time, in the absence of social networks, the stars –at least their images– are only accessible through the traditional media (press, TV, radio, etc.). The concert allows us to verify if the fantasy world elaborated during the consumption of media and music is close to reality. Seeing the Beatles "in real life" becomes a crucial issue for teen girls. Will the idealized *ex ante* figures be as wonderful as those in concert? In the four years of the Beatlemania period (1963 to 1966), several thousand teenagers sought confirmation of this question. Let us add that the concert is also a key resource in the teen girls' quest for identity. Studying the discourse of Beatles fans, Le Bart (2004) has shown that a true

biographical trajectory was progressively elaborated by referring to the multiple connections established with the Beatles' universe, which became a true "vehicle of intimate emotions." This explains, in part, why fans devote so much time and money to their artist's passion because this material and psychic investment contributes to their identity construction, the concert being the acme of the process by its exceptional component and its direct link with the idols. Moreover, Seregina & Schouten (2017) confirm that star worship can help resolve identity ambiguities, knowing that it sometimes also echoes very personal questionings (Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2012).

However, the individual dimension mentioned above cannot be dissociated from social issues. The concert allows for the removal of hindrances on the expression of various impulses that are difficult to realize in isolation, as the crowd effect dilutes self-control mechanisms (Reicher, 2012), and exacerbates emotional contagion (Neumann & Strack, 2000). This is a source of social ties, whether ephemeral (during the concert) and/or more lasting (after the concert); the verbatim of a fan presented by Lemonnier (1995) is an excellent testimony to this point: "It seemed very exceptional to manage to get two tickets to a concert... It was very important to go with someone as crazy about the Beatles as I was." The experience and information exchanged during the band's performances consolidated the cult of the Beatles, and if today the supremacy of the Internet and social networks in the dissemination of information between fans seems to reduce this fusional dimension (Derbaix & Korchia, 2019), the collective aspect was crucial at the time. The movie *The Beatles at Shea Stadium* shows in 50 minutes the impulsive release that a Beatles concert offers, especially to teen girls<sup>4</sup>. During this mythical concert, the crowd escapes its familiar environment and symbolically transcends all societal constraints. Interviewing rock fans of this period, Caldwell & Henry (2009) obtained a verbatim that perfectly synthesizes the spirit of the time: "Fantasy is better than reality." The escapist function of the concert proposed by Massa & Galan (2013) thus seems to hold true.

Like the carnival, which disrupts the balance of power in a society (Feuillet, 1991), the concert becomes liberating. One of the best-known examples is the famous Dunkirk carnival in northern France, where the play of disguises leads to the total erasure of social class, function, age, etc., including "gang heckling" with people who never socialize in life (Ferreira da Silva, 2013). However, a notable difference distinguishes the carnival and the concert. At the end of the carnival, the social hierarchy returns to its original composition, as in Dunkirk. On the contrary, after the Beatles' concert sequence and the effects of Beatlemania, societal mutations will be triggered and the established order will never be the same again; the "escape" phase will not be ephemeral here, and the post-concert period will contribute to the construction of the consumer experience (memory, joy of having been present at a unique event, etc.). In order to cover the spectrum of multiple experiential consumption situations, theorists in the field propose a continuum ranging from the infra-ordinary to the extra-ordinary (Roederer, 2012). Through the intense hedonic gratifications that the Beatles' concerts provided, with their memorable aspects (fans still recount today their emotional states experienced during the Shea Stadium concert in 1964...), and through the creation of meaning engendered (identity construction, announcing social changes, etc.), these shows are resolutely inscribed in the extraordinary register of the consumer experience.

## CONCEPTUAL INSIGHTS INTO BEATLEMANIA

Beatlemania is still symbolized by large-scale crowd movements, and the projection of TV news from the 1960s still provokes the same astonishment: delirious fans running on airport tarmacs, band members arriving and escaping from the stage by helicopter, or shrill, continuous screams during concerts that make the music inaudible. It is possible to evoke phenomena of true collective madness referring to a process of mental contagion, which Dumas (1911) defines at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the following way: a mechanism by which sometimes extreme affects are propagated from an individual to another within a group. Even if Dumas (1911) does not mention the notion of "crowd psychology" in his article, it constitutes a specific mental unit that allows for a better understanding of the phenomena of collective madness, particularly in the context of a concert. It is thus possible to propose an original lighting of Beatlemania, certainly debated but offering the possibility of an analysis of the emotional experience lived by the teen girls in the 1960s.



## Debate Around the Mass Hysteria

According to Sighele (1891/2018), crowd psychology has as its object human ensembles brought together statically in a short sequence of time, and not dynamically in an extended period, as a society can be. However, it is to Le Bon (1895/2009) that we owe the most robust theoretical grid. A crowd is always dominated by the unconscious, the occultation of the individual personality and the disappearance of rational behavior in favor of the emotional. The work of Le Bon (1895/2009), which quickly became a best-seller, is based on a main thesis: immersed in a “psychological crowd,” the individual loses everything that constitutes his individuality, he/she is emptied of his rationality, but at the same time he/she acquires a new strength. Under the impulse of the number, which gives him/her a feeling of power, he/she will have behaviors that, alone, he/she would never have had. According to Le Bon (1895/2009), however, it is important to distinguish the crowd from the psychological crowd. Individuals gathered randomly in a public square, without any determined goal, are by no means a psychological crowd. A psychological crowd constitutes a single being, and the feelings and ideas of the individuals are then oriented in the same direction.

Auslander’s (2006) brilliant analysis confirms that the fans gathered at Beatles concerts constitute a psychological crowd, as can be found at any rock and pop concert. The fans gathered at the concerts, and especially the teen girls, constitute a community long before attending the show itself; this community is structured by their common consumption of Beatles recordings in the privacy of their bedrooms, among posters of their idols. Attendance at the concert merely materializes the community through a physical gathering where, for a few dozen minutes, the fans are no longer “alone together;” they constitute a single being, to quote Le Bon (1895/2009), who lives the collective experience of a communal identity. Auslander (2006) insists on the physical (bodily) presence of fans at concerts and the continuous screams they emit as the indispensable manifestation of belonging to the community, no longer virtual, when listening to Beatles songs alone, but real, as a noisy aggregate of an audience gathered *en masse* at the same place and time.

It would be tempting to talk about mass hysteria in the context of the Beatles’ concerts between 1963 and 1966, but a clarification is necessary beforehand. Mass hysteria corresponds to an agitation, even an excitement, sometimes violent, which reaches all the members of a group or a crowd. The actual physical symptoms, generally benign (redness, headaches, discomfort), spread preferentially by sight and sound to a group of individuals, thus evoking an epidemic. What makes one individual in a group affected by the epidemic, and another individual not? The historical analysis conducted by Bartholomew & Wessely (2002) concludes that there is no specific predisposition to mass hysteria. The manifestations of symptoms in victims are influenced by the culture and beliefs of the time. As the authors underline, during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, a time when the devil and witchcraft were feared, many cases of demonic possession epidemics occurred in European convents, while in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cases of mass hysteria often present symptoms related to the fear of poison gas, bacteriological attack, or water contamination, reflecting modern anxieties. Insofar as the Beatles’ concerts gave rise to violent excitement among the fans and numerous fainting spells, it is therefore possible to speak of mass hysteria, but very limited in time.

It must be admitted, however, that this conclusion is not shared by Taylor (1966) in his seminal work conducted shortly after the Beatles’ 1964 tour of New Zealand. The author’s aim was to identify the explanatory factors of Beatlemania among a significant sample of teenagers who were part of exuberant crowds of fans at the airport and outside the Beatles’ hotel. The results show that, using the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory hysteria scale, which assesses personality-related traits and pathologies to diagnose people suspected of having mental health problems, but can also be used to discern whether psychologically healthy people exhibit surprising personality characteristics, the most enthusiastic Beatles fans cannot be called hysterical in the strict sense. Beatlemania should simply be seen as the *transient reaction* of teenagers to satisfy their emotional needs. As Taylor (2017) notes, his study was well received in United Kingdom and the United States, but it appears that no other researcher has pursued the same direction to collect data on a similar band (or bands). More critically, journals such as the *British Journal of Social Psychology* and the *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* have shown a distinct lack of interest in publishing articles on the topic.

## Manifestation of Ecstasy

The assumption of a mass hysteria in the context of Beatlemania is based on an emotional experience lived by teen girls who discovered the beginnings of the sexual revolution in the 1960s, and who expressed in their own way a desire for liberation from the traditionalist values that had been dominant up to that point (the Beatles concert as *classification* in Table 2 inspired by Holt's [1995] theoretical grid). One of the most powerful symbols is undoubtedly the liberated cry –of orgasmic pleasure (?)– during the concerts, a cry that appears as the symbol of a quasi-mystical ecstasy for Geffen (2020) (the Beatles concert as *experience* in Table 2 inspired by Holt's [1995] theoretical grid). It is indeed impossible to evoke the Beatles without thinking of the screams of the fans, including during TV appearances, which oblige to systematically resort to pre-recorded tapes; the live recordings available today in the archives consist of devotional screams of teen girls that totally cover the music. If the screams are often considered as “noise,” whereas they are the expression of a liberation of a whole generation, they make the execution of the show difficult, and even significantly degrade the musical performance, as the Beatles noticed.

James Dyble, from the Global Sound Group, after the release of the documentary *Eight Days a Week: The Touring Years* directed by Ron Howard in 2016, wanted to evaluate as accurately as possible the sound level in Shea Stadium during the mythical concert of August 15, 1965 (Ahmed, 2016). More than 55,000 spectators were then gathered for the first concert held in a monumental stadium (Shea Stadium, in New York, is dedicated to baseball). In the documentary, James Dyble is surprised by Ringo Starr's statement: “I could not hear anything. I'd be watching John's arse, Paul's arse, his foot [Paul McCartney] tapping his head nodding, to see where we were in the song.” James Dyble then conducts a study from an audio mixing and concludes that the sound level, including the music itself and the screams of the fans (see Picture 2), reached 131.35 decibels on the night of the concert, 28 decibels more than a jumbo jet at take-off. Knowing that it is the sound intensity level that is calculated in decibels, and that it undergoes a mathematical law proportional to the logarithm of the ratio of the measured sound intensity to the audibility threshold, we can therefore conclude that the sound level at Shea Stadium was 30 times louder than that of a conventional jumbo jet.

**PICTURE 2**  
**SCREAMING TEEN GIRLS AT THE SHEA STADIUM CONCERT**



Source: CSU Archives.

In spite of the problems induced by the screams of devotion, making for example impossible the release of a live album of quality, the Beatles –especially through the “flair” of Brian Epstein– understand the economic potential represented by baby boomers who shout, but also and especially have a substantial purchasing power, as indicated previously. From this point of view, the Beatles are undoubtedly the first cultural product to seduce the teen girl of the 1960s, playing on an androgynous character that is less provocative than the assumed eroticization of Elvis Presley’s shows (Ehrenreich *et al.*, 1992). The scream of the teen girls thus offers the possibility of projecting a sexual desire, still largely condemned by society, without suffering moral sanction. As Kapurch (2016) underlines, the Beatles refer to melodramatic impulses, romance, and friendship, not hesitating to refer to crying and tears in their early songs. The cries of teen girls will thus constitute an important part of the 1960s soundscape, based on a “speaking out” challenging the establishment, and symbolizing a major cultural rebellion (Rohr, 2017). More broadly, Baker (2003) studies the bodily praxis of teeny-boppers and focuses on the category of screamers; these manifest a collective auditory dominance that places them at the center of the social space formed by the concert. Screaming bodies animate this social space by making the musical experience intensely real and the fan community even more visible to the rock band. The rock band must also cultivate an image that is conducive to mass hysteria, as is the case with the Beatles.

Research conducted on the roots of Beatlemania thus strongly emphasizes the appearance of rock band members as an explanatory factor for the emotional experience of teenagers, especially teen girls, in the mid-1960s (Gaines-Lewis, 2014). Their hair, for example, reflects an image of vitality, and thus fertility, while embracing a form of classicism. Moreover, on the strong advice of Brian Epstein, as we have seen, they abandoned the rocker’s sartorial look of their beginnings and donned two-piece suits, mostly black or gray, worn with a white shirt and tie, while their jackets were buttoned up to the collar. The Beatles embodied the British style *par excellence*, which made them both sex symbols and ideal sons-in-law for worried parents, unlike the bad boys that were the Rolling Stones<sup>5</sup>. The ecstasy that the members of the Beatles arouse, especially during concerts, can thus be considered acceptable insofar as the members of the rock band assimilate transgenerational cultural references. Moreover, in October 1965, the respectable Beatles were awarded the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II, who wished to modernize the image of the monarchy at a time when English society was undergoing profound and lasting changes.

## CONCLUSION

History eternally repeats itself, says a famous adage that applies to the neologism Beatlemania. Beatlemania is not a strict invention that appeared in the early 1960s to describe the phenomena of mass hysteria that affected the fans of the band during a TV show or a concert. Long before the Beatles, Franz Liszt, the famous Hungarian pianist, triggered indescribable scenes of excitement at his concerts. The German poet Heinrich Heine had the idea, in a text dated 1844, to coin the term Lisztomania (Heine *et al.*, 1922). Lisztomania is characterized by a hysterical reaction to Franz Liszt and his concerts, the playing of which leads the audience to experience a mystical ecstasy, to use Walker’s (1983) expression. The Beatles phenomenon began in 1963, when the band broke through after their apprenticeship in Hamburg (Germany). Crowd movements, crying and screaming to the point of drowning out the music, fainting: every Beatles concert is also the object of a mass hysteria where fans come not to listen but to see, or better still, to live a memorable and meaningful consumer experience. For the past sixty years, music industry observers have been repeatedly tracking a new Beatlemania, and they do not hesitate to speak of a “new Beatles” in reference to a mass hysteria of the same type. One of the most emblematic cases in recent years is that of Tokio Hotel (Bourdoiseau, 2007).

Founded in Germany in 2004 by Bill Kaulitz and his twin brother Tom, Tokio Hotel created a huge craze in Europe until the end of the 2000s among teenagers, even creating in its wake hysteria and addiction phenomena comparable to those experienced during Beatlemania. Looking like a boy band, Tokio Hotel – whose members cultivate a slightly rock, slightly punk, slightly glam look– produces a rather conventional music, but when their first album *Schrei* is released in France in 2006, the tickets for the Parisian concerts

are sold out in a few hours. Tokio Hotel reached a –mainly– very young female audience, aged between 12 and 16 years old, who found themselves in the lyrics dealing with the difficulty of loving, death, homosexuality, or suicidal temptations. Whether they are performing on TV shows or in concert, their performances result in hysterical screams from crazed fans, quite comparable to the screams of the teen girls at Shea Stadium. In addition, research by Oberladstätter *et al.* (2007) underlines that Tokio Hotel concerts regularly result in numerous emergency interventions due to extreme emotions, orthostatic problems, alcohol consumption and choking in the crowd, again similar to Shea Stadium.

It would therefore be possible to conclude that there is a strong convergence between the Beatles and Tokio Hotel in reference to the intensity of the sound and the emergency interventions during the concerts. Indeed, the mass hysteria generated by Tokio Hotel in the 2000s is not based on a challenge to the established patriarchal order, as was the case with the Beatles, but on the adhesion of teen girls to quasi-fraternal figures capable of understanding them much better than their parents. The comparison between these two situations, forty years apart, is essential because it underlines the importance of a cultural and psychological contextualization of the identification process with an idol. Knowing that this identification helps fans to sort out their own values, it allows them to affirm to the rest of the world what they are (or would like to be). Similarly, identification with an idol encourages the creation of specific links with other fans within a community ready to share and help (in times of heartbreak, various conflicts, harassment situations, etc.). Under these conditions, it is difficult to identify a generic model of mass hysteria applied to a crowd of fans, even if certain manifestations suggest a similarity of behavior.

Following Taylor's (2017) call for academic contributions, more than ever, a cumulative knowledge on the subject requires the multiplication of comparative works, the only way to go beyond illustrations that can sometimes appear as anecdotal. From this point of view, it would be particularly interesting to look at the rise of virtual concerts in order to refine the understanding of new relationships with stars. The example of the ABBA Swedish band is symptomatic of a trend that seeks to capture the financial manna represented by the baby boomers. Founded in 1972, and having sold nearly 385 million albums, the band broke up in 1982. In November 2021, a new album called *Voyage* was released, and it sold two million copies in a few months, riding the wave of nostalgia. This gave rise to the idea of virtual concerts based on holograms/avatars of the band members, as it seemed incongruous to see again “on stage” musicians and singers aged in 2022 from 72 to 77, having left the memory of luminous 30-year-olds to their fans 40 years ago. Tzanidis & Langston (2022) are convinced of the bankable future of these low-cost “metaverse tours,” which could constitute “a new way for music lovers to see live performances.” As no certainty exists at this level, it would be particularly instructive to know if, beyond the nostalgia they arouse, these concerts 2.0 will be able to generate consumer experiences as hedonic, memorable and meaningful as those of traditional live concerts.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to thank Claire Paché for her helpful and valuable comments on a first draft of the paper.

## ENDNOTES

1. A few months earlier, while visiting England, Ed Sullivan saw firsthand the mass hysteria caused by the band, and he vowed to be the first to present the Beatles live on U.S. TV networks.
2. The website of the Liverpool University Press provides all useful information on the editorial team and the topics covered: <https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/journals/id/113/#journal-synopsis> (Accessed September 10, 2022).
3. John Profumo, Secretary of State for War in the Conservative government of Harold Macmillan, and who is married, had an affair with a 19-year-old call girl who was also seeing Eugene Ivanov, a Soviet spy in London. Aggravating circumstance: John Profumo lied about the nature of the facts in the English Parliament. On June 4, 1963, the Secretary of State resigned and admitted to the members of Parliament that he had deceived them.

4. Excerpts from the movie are available on the Beatles' official website, where we can see quickly a U.S. policeman plugging his ears as the band enters the Shea Stadium grass (<https://www.thebeatles.com/beatles-shea-stadium>, Accessed July 6, 2022).
5. "Would you let your sister go with a Rolling Stone?", asked in March 1964 the Melody Maker magazine in an iconic article (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/khiltcher/3471500454/in/album-72157617265145148/>, Accessed April 16, 2022).

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