

Music and Personality can have Remedial Effects on Negative Affect

Abstract

The music preferences of individuals high in Emotional Stability (ES) differed from music preferences of those low in ES. Negative affect, successfully generated by stressful tasks, returned to baseline levels for both groups after the intervention of listening to preferred music.

Summary

Music has an undeniable place in daily human life, for both personal and social reasons (e.g. Schafer & Sedlmeier, 2010; Hargreaves & Hargreaves, 2004). Researchers have found links between personality traits and preference for music conveying different emotions (e.g. Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003; North, 2010). However, results have differed across studies, highlighting a need for more investigation.

The present study thus explored the links between personality and music preferences, with focus on Emotional Stability (ES) as measured by the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP). Results showed that stable individuals (i.e. high ES) indicated preference for Social music – emotionally neutral pieces typically suitable as background music. Unstable individuals (i.e. low ES) preferred Sad music – pieces with slower tempos and minor harmonies. These findings were only partially in line with predictions, and the findings of previous studies in the literature.

Differences in music preference may lie in the ways individuals of different personality dispositions use music (e.g. Chamorro-Premuzic, Fagan, & Furnham, 2010; Saarikallio, 2011). However, listening to music for mood enhancement and other emotional purposes is, in general, a popularly cited reason for listening behaviours (e.g. Lamont & Webb, 2010). This suggests that,

regardless of personality disposition, music is used to regulate emotion, and has effects on mood. Specifically, the present study was interested in exploring the effects of preferred music, disliked music, and music individuals were neutral to, on the reduction of negative affect (NA).

Two mood manipulation tasks, along with demoralising feedback provided by the researcher, successfully induced NA, as indicated by significant increases in NA as measured before and after mood manipulation. Participants then listened to either liked, disliked, or neutral music, according to preferences as indicated earlier during data collection. NA was measured a third time thereafter. Results indicated that participants in all three conditions reported reductions in NA after music intervention. Participants who listened to preferred music, however, reported baseline levels of NA, after said intervention. This suggests that liked music can negate the negative mood induced by a stressor, at least immediately after listening to it.

The academic and clinical implications of these findings are manifold. Firstly, the correlations between personality traits and music preference found in this study serve both to supplement and challenge the arguments alleged by other studies, allowing for, and encouraging, a closer and more creative look at the dynamic relationship between musical emotions and their appeal to individuals of differing dispositions. The finding that music, especially preferred music, effectively reduces NA also indicates possibilities of using this easily accessible and highly affordable resource to combat the negativity of daily stressors. The incorporation of music in daily life may enhance coping mechanisms and, consequently, reduce the risk of mental illness, which is particularly useful for high-risk individuals such as unstable or neurotic individuals (Suls & Martens, 2005). Future studies can explore the durations and extents of mood improvements by music listening, and how the remedial benefits of music can be best harnessed according to personality types.