

A self-regulatory perspective on choosing 'sad' music to enhance mood.

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ABSTRACT

Background

Many people choose to listen to self-identified 'sad' music when they experience negative life circumstances (Saarikallio and Erkkilä, 2007; Van den Tol and Edwards, 2011). Music listening can in such circumstances serve a variety of important self-regulatory goals. In previous research people's reasons for self-selected self-identified sad music listening when feeling sad were investigated (Van den Tol and Edwards, 2011).

Results of previous research (Van den Tol and Edwards, 2011) show that the *functions* of sad music listening when feeling sad are: *(Re-)experiencing Affect*, which means getting in touch with or intensifying affective states. *Social*, reflecting that one tries to feel closer or emotionally connected to people. *Retrieving Memories*, which means retrieving episodic memories associated with the music. *Cognitive*, which refers to the use of music for cognitive reappraisal. *Friend*, which means that the music can serve as a symbolic friend. And *Distraction*, which refers to the use of music for distraction and keeping the mind of from unwanted feeling and thoughts. In addition, after listening to sad music, adults report that they feel better in a range of ways, which is referred to as *mood-enhancement*.

Results of previous research (Van den Tol and Edwards, 2011) also identified that people employ several distinct music selection strategies for selecting specific sad music when feeling sad. The emerging selection strategies included the strategies of: *Connection*, meaning selecting music because the music portrays affect or has lyrics that the listener can identify with at that moment. *Memory Triggers*, referring to the selection of music because the music is associated with specific episodic memories. *High Aesthetic Value*, which involves selecting the music because one perceives the music to be 'good' or 'beautiful music. *Message Music*, which implies selecting music because one wants to be inspired by message that the music communicates.

Aims

Whereas previous examinations give first suggestive evidence that mood-enhancement as a result of listening to sad music can be facilitated by a variety of different pathways (Van den Tol and Edwards, 2011), the aim of the current research was to gain a detailed insight in the psychological processes that guide *mood enhancement* after listening to sad music when feeling sad.

Hypotheses were formed based on previous findings and on the literature.

1a) It was expected that for most music selection strategies mood-enhancement would be achieved indirectly by first achieving other functions rather than directly as a result of the music listening.

1b) In line with self-regulation literature it was expected that the functions *cognitive* and *distraction* would play an important mediating role in achieving *mood-enhancement*.

2) It was expected that when the *aesthetic value* of the music had played an important role in the music selection, then experiencing mood-enhancement could be achieved *directly* as a result of the music listening and this could not be explained as a result of mediating roles of other functions.

Method

Participants ($N = 220$) had recalled an adverse emotional event after which they had listened to self-selected music they identified as sad, particularly when experiencing sadness, and then rated several statements in relation to their music listening. The content of these rated statements were based on insight from the previous research on music listening.

Results

As a result of statistical analysis of the survey data, it was found that the extent to which *mood-enhancement* is a direct or indirect effect achieved by sad music listening is dependent on which selection strategy is used. The functions which mediated *mood-enhancement* were assessed and it was found that both *cognition* and *distraction* did so. It was observed that only when music was selected based on *high aesthetic value*, then *mood-enhancement* was a significant direct function achieved by music listening.

Conclusions

Based on these results it can be theorized that when people listen to sad music when feeling sad then *mood-enhancement* may often result as an *indirect* effect of achieving psychological functions through music listening, rather than as a result of the music itself.

Keywords

Sad Music, Self-regulation, Mood- Enhancement, Strategies, Functions.

REFERENCES

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