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Favorite Music And Movies May Predict Personality Traits And Life Themes

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Favorite Music And Movies May Predict Personality Traits And Life Themes

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Michael Faber, UNH researcher

DURHAM, N.H. – Our preferences for specific popular movies, music, and classic art may predict personality traits and the lives we will lead, according to new research from the University of New Hampshire.

UNH researchers Michael Faber and John Mayer present their findings in the June 2009 issue of the *Journal of Research in Personality* in the article "Resonance to archetypes in media: There's some accounting for taste." Faber conducted the research as a doctoral student at UNH with Mayer, professor of psychology.

According to Faber and Mayer, mass media uses archetypes — prototypical characters — in their narratives. Carl Jung first proposed the concept of universal archetypes, which include caregivers, heroes, jesters, lovers, and outlaws. The researchers found that how people react to and are affected by such characters in cultural media — their "resonance" to archetypes — predicts their personal life themes and media preferences.

"Such findings offer surprising new evidence for the possible existence of dominant archetypal themes in our lives. These themes appear to run the gamut from the carer, who enjoys romance movies and fashion books, and is agreeable and accommodating, to the striver, who enjoys action movies, sports television, and books about espionage, and may be outgoing yet low on conscientiousness. Such themes may also plumb the sometimes-hurtful depths of the conflictor, who enjoys hardcore and heavy metal music, and horror movies, and is low in agreeableness," the researchers say.

The researchers first asked 100 study participants to identify 13 specific archetypes across various media. For example, the study participants readily identified the caregiver archetype, which exhibits the traits of compassion, generosity, devotion, and helping, with the movie "The English Patient," the music of James Taylor, and Henry Tanner's oil painting "The Banjo Lesson."

The researchers then used these responses to create a Rich Culture Archetype Scale — a master scale that associates each of the 13 archetypes with specific personality traits. For example, the caregiver and innocent archetypes were associated with characters who were found to be caring and loyal. The hero and ruler archetypes were associated with characters who were striving and driven. The shadow archetype was associated with characters who were conflicted and destructive, such as those portrayed in horror films.

The researchers note that understanding a person's archetypal life themes may be useful in planning targeted communications, from artwork to public health messages and advertising. "Organizations from nonprofits to movie studios could potentially communicate more effectively if they identified resonance patterns in their target audiences," Faber and Mayer say.

"Archetypal life themes may be used not only to predict personal preferences, but also how we interact socially with others through our interests, and how we identify with archetypal characters. For example, by identifying with a particular archetype, the individual has an automatically-created support group for his or her tastes. People exhibiting the general life themes of the shadow may show high interest in the dark, preferring horror movies and books, and hardcore and industrial music, and join with one another on that basis," the researchers say.

In addition, the researchers note that understanding the archetypes to which an individual resonates may help further the understanding of personality disorders. For example, the researchers suggest further exploration regarding whether people with antisocial disorders resonate to archetypes dominated by conflict.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 11,800 undergraduate and 2,400 graduate students.

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PHOTOS

Michael Faber, UNH researcher

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