**ABSTRACT**

Most researchers would agree that all humans are to some degree driven by basic hedonism; we seek pleasure and avoid pain. Why then do some of us like sad music? In this study, participants who demonstrate a preference for sad music were shown to prefer more complex music. Also, preference for sad music was positively correlated with classical, alternative, and heavy metal music, and negatively correlated with country, religious, and pop music.

**INTRODUCTION**

Why do we like sad music? Is there something special about music that is more somber and melancholy? It is commonly suggested that sad music is more emotional. While, others suggest that happy music is often simple, and that a preference for sad music is really a preference for music that is more complex.

The powerful and immediate connection of musical stimulation with emotional experience, and the many indications that unconscious needs gain satisfaction through this medium, has long pointed to measures of musical preference as effective avenues to deeper aspects of personality (Cattell & Anderson, 1953).

A preference for sad music may be linked to our identification with the lyrics. This would be similar to theater in which the audience witnesses the protagonist in a dire or tragic situation (that is perceived as sad) and the identification with the protagonist elicits emotions from the audience. It is possible that “by exploring the interactions between situations, emotions, and actions in a simulated environment, we can develop and test different strategies…” that we may be able to use in our own lives. This corresponds to the idea of catharsis. In the instance of music the listener may identify with the lyrics and/or the melody and identify with the piece which elicits emotions from the listener. The listener may be drawn to this because it is a “safe” alternative to being sad. In a way it could allow us avoid sadness in our personal lives by projecting it onto the music (Sloboda, 1985).

Our music preference may be developmental. “Most people acquire their musical taste during adolescence among friends of the same age, and they carry early preferences right through the gravel” (p. 263). There is also a suggestion that we imprint preferences for music around between the ages of ten and twelve. If this were true it would mean that all preferences for sad music would be the product of habits during early adolescence (Jourdan, 1997). A simpler explanation is that sad music is more arousing than happy music (Panksepp, 1995).

There are many theories about what causes a preference for sad music; however, there has been little evidence qualifying any of them. This study is intended to be a starting point for determining what factor(s) determine music preference and what such a preference may indicate (need for cognition, etc.).

**METHODS**

Participants:
There were 125 psychology 101 students. They participated because the course required that they participate in student research.

Measures:
In order to assess an individual’s preference for happy or sad music, we developed 4 happy relevant statements and 4 sad relevant statements. Participants rated their agreement/disagreement to these statements on a 7-point scale. Happy relevant items included statements such as “I prefer music that is upbeat and happy” and “I prefer music that is light and uplifting”, while sad relevant items included statements such as “I find that I prefer to listen to sad music even when I am in a good mood” and “I like music that has a darker feel to it”. As one might expect, participants in our study showed a higher preference for happy music (M = 4.60, SD = .85) than their preference for sad music (M = 3.74, SD = 1.05). After reverse coding the happy music preference items, all eight items were found to have fairly high intercorrelations, therefore, we created a composite score called preference for sad music (z = .69).

Procedures:
We had several sessions of the experiment with anywhere between 1 to 25 participants during any time. The subjects also participated in a test of working memory span but is irrelevant to this study. After the working memory span test was completed the group was asked to complete several questionnaires. After all the groups were ran all the data was compiled into SPSS software for statistical analysis.

**RESULTS**

In order to explore the possible reasons why individuals listen to sad music, participants were asked to rate their agreement/disagreement with several statements. Preference for sad music was positively correlated with all of those statements: “Sad music makes me think” (r = .577, p<.001), “The lyrics of somber music make sense” (r = .452, p<.001), “Sad songs move me emotionally” (r = .325, p<.001), “Sad or melancholy songs are more meaningful” (r = .415, p<.001). Amongst the participants who preferred sad music there was the most agreement with the statement “Sad songs move me emotionally” (M = 5.32, SD = 1.46), followed by “The lyrics of somber music make sense” (M = 5.32, SD = 1.32). “Sad music makes me think” (M = 4.26, SD = 1.74), “Sad or melancholy songs are more meaningful” (M = 4.33, SD = 1.46), and finally “Melancholy songs are more meaningful” (M = 3.29, SD = 1.31). Note that while the most agreement was with “Sad songs move me emotionally”, this was also true for participants who preferred happy music, hence the lower correlation with this statement.

In addition, preference for sad music was positively correlated with a preference for complex music (r = .426, p<.001), suggesting that those who like happy music like simple music and those who like sad music like more complex music. Finally, we examined the relationship between preference for sad music and preference for particular genres of music (assessed by Rentfrow and Gosling’s [2003] Short Test of Music Preference). Preference for sad music was found to be positively correlated with a preference for classical (r = .331, p<.001), alternative (r = .370, p<.001), heavy metal (r = .193, p<.05) and negatively correlated with a preference for country music (r = .229, p<.05), religious (r = .189, p<.05), and pop music (r = .197, p<.05).

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of the study was to try to understand why we would want to listen to sad music.

- Preference for sad music was positively correlated with the statement “sad music makes me think”. This means that a preference for sad music may indicate a need for cognition because sad music is recognized as being more complex. When we drive down the road and a sad song comes on that we sing with it could be that the emotional aspect causes us to relate the lyrics to past events in our personal life.

- A preference for sad music was correlated to specific genres, because there was a positive correlation between sad music and complex music; their preferences for genres may indicate either a) the genre is typically complex or b) the genre is typically considered to be sad. It is interesting that country music is negatively correlated with sad music. We all now cliché of country music being synonymous with ‘a cheating heart’. Perhaps the participants considered the country music with sad lyrics as sad, but the majority of country as happy. Or it could be that country music is a simple form of music that does not affect us in the same way as complex songs do.

- Further research should be conducted in order to fully understand if the preference for sad music is primarily an issue of complexity or is an issue of catharsis. It is likely a combination of the two but it should be determined how the two are interconnected with preference. So when we are sad and listen to sad music it reflects our mood and allows us to transfer our sadness and anguish to an external source.

**REFERENCES**


