What’s Your Favorite Song? 
Examining the Complexity of Musical Preferences.


Abstract

Previous research indicates a relationship between personality and music preferences. More recently, there have been studies that suggest the complexity of songs plays a role in those preferences. Among other findings, this study found a relationship between the complexity of participant’s favorite songs and their self-reported genre preferences.

Introduction

Rentfrow and Gosling (2003) found a relationship between a wide variety of personality measures and the types of music people enjoy. By using the Short Test for Musical Preference (STOMP), Rentfrow and Gosling found that participant responses clustered into broader categories, which they labeled Reflective/Complex, Intense/Rebellious, Upbeat/Conventional, and Energetic/Rhythmic. North and Hargreaves (2001) investigated the relationships between ratings of five different variables: musical quality liking, complexity, prototypicality, and familiarity. They found that there was a positive correlation between ratings of liking and quality that might be explained by the complexity of the music. Recent studies in our lab also suggest that music preferences may, in part, be due to the relative complexity found in that music (e.g., Buchholz, Babitt, VanNess, Hoover, Urecki, & Bankert, 2011). It seems that individuals who have the preference for and the ability to process more complex stimuli show a preference for musical genres that are, arguably, more complex in nature. One limitation of this research is it relies on participants choosing preferences for genres instead of actual songs. The current study asked participants to list their 3 favorite songs of all time in order to more precisely assess the complexity of individual’s music preferences.

Methods

Students enrolled in Roanoke College psychology courses (N=58). Participants listed their favorite songs of all time and completed the STOMP along with several other personality measures (i.e. need for cognition, need for closure). After the study was concluded five trained judges rated participant song choices for complexity based on four categories (i.e., rhythm, musicianship, song structure, and texture).

Results & Discussion

The results indicated significant positive correlations between the complexity of participant song choices (as rated by the judges) and their music preferences as measured on the STOMP (i.e., Reflective/Complex and Intense/Rebellious).

Interestingly, there was a significant negative correlation between the complexity of self-reported genres and the complexity of actual song choices; however, the results fail to replicate past studies that showed a connection to personality variables such as need for cognition. This latter finding suggests that participants report to have a preference for complex music whereas in reality they do not. Future studies could investigate this possibility by having participants complete a behavior-oriented task concerning music preference.

References

