Mechanisms of Music Appreciation and Shared Listening

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What are some of your favorite songs? What do you like about them? How do they make you feel? Do you listen to them when you're around friends or family? If you were to think about a few of your favorite songs, each one might prompt you to give very different answers to these questions. Additionally, your answers would probably be rather different from someone else's. Listening to our favorite music can be highly rewarding, as well as highly individualized and context-dependent. Much is still unknown about how different types of rewarding music listening experiences may impact behavior, particularly during adolescence and emerging adulthood, which is an important period for both behavioral development and music engagement.

To investigate these questions, we first designed two prompts that targeted two different types of music reward: "sensory-motor" (e.g., songs that make you want to move/sing along) and "personally-relevant" (e.g., songs that have a personal meaning/significance to you). We then recruited a group of 140 emerging adults from the Boulder area to participate in a research study, where they responded to these prompts and completed a simulated music sharing activity. Participants believed that they were virtually connected to, and listening along with, other online participants during the experiment – in reality, the other participants were simulated via avatars, animations, and pre-programmed computer responses.

We found that the two types of rewarding music listening had distinct overall experiences: participants reported that both were highly enjoyable, but personally-relevant favorite music was generally more emotionally meaningful and beautiful. Personally-relevant favorite music also evoked more negative emotions—but this was modulated by the listening context. Listening along with (simulated) other participants evoked more positive emotions compared to listening alone. Our aim is for the ongoing analysis of this dataset to provide insights into how widespread societal music listening and sharing behaviors may motivate interpersonal connection and understanding. Findings may also inform future work into preferred music as a therapeutic or educational tool for social development and wellbeing.