

Music and Emotion: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Background:

It is a universal fact that music influences human emotion. Music psychology fills an important role through describing the relationship between emotion, the brain, and the musical experience. Although many studies show reliable connections between emotional and musical experiences, we feel that the existing body of work in this area has been very focused on providing a scientific representation of the bodily functions that occur while listening to music, and thus has been primarily quantitative in form. The research within this field has largely focused on very specific quantitative experiments, providing data and statistics supporting certain physiological and emotional responses to differing passages and styles of music. We feel this research method is limited in its scope and applicability because it neglects important qualitative aspects of music and emotion that do not lend themselves well to quantitative measurement. Reducing the experience of listening to music to neural activity, without also considering context and meaning, yields an incomplete understanding of this important human experience.

Aims:

We intend to design an experiment that pays special attention to the qualitative issues of contextuality, significance, and meaning. Our aim is to more completely understand music and its relationship to emotion in the lived experience of human beings. Many musicians agree that there are some feelings expressed musically that can't be fully represented in words because of our linguistic constraints. In our study, we will incorporate an opportunity for people to express themselves using music itself, and will draw conclusions from their musical expressions.

There are two main sections of the study. For the first section, each participant will listen to a 20-30 minute compilation CD consisting of many different genres and periods of music ranging from classical to modern pop. While they are listening to the music, we will encourage them to write comments about the strength of the emotions, images, and memories the different music pieces evoke. We will encourage responses with ecological validity. In the second section of the study, we will ask the subjects to explore in writing any particularly strong or meaningful emotion that was brought to their attention during the first exercise. We will then allow them a period of time to browse an online music site and to pick any songs that might effectively express their selected emotion and therefore increase the accuracy and enrich the understanding of their emotional description.

Main Contributions:

By accounting for contextuality and significance in our experiment, we feel that we will be in a stronger position to suggest correlations between music and emotion. We also hope to open a new door in the research methods by providing more validity to qualitative research within the field of music and emotion.

Implications:

As with all qualitative experiments, it is difficult to eliminate subjectivity from our interpretation of our findings. We intend to create a systematic method for interpreting our results that will be applied to all participants, and thereby making our results more standardized. Although subjectivity is a concern, we feel that we will get a more accurate picture of the connections between music and emotion than through a quantitative approach. The authors can be reached at jordanroper@gmail.com and at jeff_reber@byu.edu