The Psychological Effects of Music Listening

Everyone around the world has grown up around radio and TV in their lifetime. Throughout a multitude of generations, music has in a big way shaped us and how we feel. But in what way does music itself affect us psychologically. The following article from The Frontiers in Psychology titled “The Psychological Functions of Music Listening” takes an in-depth look at the functions and various approaches of those functions as discussed by scholars as to what music listening can fulfill.

To expand on theoretical approaches to the functions of music, the most prominent theories proposed scholars make evolutionary claims, while others have to do with “experimental aesthetics” or the “uses-and-gratifications” approach. Experimental aesthetics requires psychology to study responses to natural objects or art forms and their components, while the uses-and-gratifications theory focuses on the needs, motives, and gratifications of media users, like music. The latter approach is the most common approach in mass communication.

The experimental aesthetics approach focuses mainly on appreciation of art and beauty, and how consumers of music respond to that art. Researchers studying experimental aesthetics, based on the reaction anyone can have to any art forms, especially music, determine that as consumers, it boils down to the listeners’ own interest instead of rarified reactions, according to David J. Hargreaves of Roehampton University and Adrian C. North of Heriot-Watt University.

As for the theory of uses and gratification in music, it is a prevalent thing when it comes to music selection, and that there is certain music that consumers select to fit a particular mood, potentially to empower oneself or fulfil a need. For example, someone who is in a high-spirited mood may want to play something upbeat like pop music. Whereas if a music consumer was in a depressive state, then a potential pick to fit a down mood would be jazz or ambient-sounding music. Regardless of that consumer’s music taste, every music listener selects their tunes to achieve the goal of satisfying a need, whichever that need may be, to empower or gratify oneself. Not only that, but even dating back to early radio, this theory was the oldest and adaptive form of mass communication, according to a 2018 article on ResearchGate.

This Frontiers article goes on to break down music’s contribution to “social cohesion” and increase group action effectiveness, from national anthems to lullabies. These things reduce social stress and temper towards other people. According to the American Society of Composers, Authors, & Publishers, studies showed that listening to music can help calm the nervous system and lower cortisol levels, where are great ways to reduce stress.

Another common approach the article addresses is the evolutionary approach, dating back to the Darwin era. Charles Darwin did not just write about evolution in nature, but he discussed potential possibilities but no clear solution to where music came from. The PLOS journal studying the evolutionary biology of musical rhythm suggests Darwin’s view that features of music beat processing should be similar in humans and other species, and that for humans, one of the most salient features of music beat processing is that it links perception and action in an intimate way (PLOS Journals). A challenge to this was the observation of nonhuman primates and how they synchronize to the beat of music, which gives us three features of human synchronization:

1. prediction,
2. tempo flexibility, and
3. cross-modality.

When researchers conducted this experiment on apes, who are closely related to humans, there were no prior studies that examined neural responses to a beat, but the first study of syncing to a metronome had been published some years ago. This study involved three chimpanzees who tapped on a keyboard to measure their synchronization to a three-tempi metronome. Each chimp showed no evidence of tempo flexibility, which prompted researchers to determine the possibility that different means of training and testing yield different outcomes, and that monkeys and apes may possibly have human-like synchronization when tapping to a metronome. This idea challenges Darwin’s view that “nonlinear oscillations are ubiquitous in brain dynamics and that the neutral environment of such oscillations by auditory rhythms is ‘intrinsic to the physics of the neural systems involved in perceiving, attending, and responding to auditory stimuli.’”

Music is powerful on the human mind, whether that be listening or playing music, and both have large benefits to your cognitive function. People who listen to music must feel a certain way for that song to affect them. YouTube channel Practical Psychology phrases this as “Mind Over Matter,” usually described as an artistic way of trying harder. Playing music that one enjoys allows them to release a chemical known as dopamine to make them feel good. Not only that, but music can be a way to cope with “awareness of life’s transitoriness (the state or quality of lasting only for a short time)”.

Music carries a lot of importance in the way in which we feel, and with many genres of music out there that pertain to a particular mood, it all depends on how your respond to the sound, as well as what listening to these kinds of music can fulfil for us.

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