

Functions of sad music in daily life: An explorative study on the influence of exposure, coping strategies and personality

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People often deliberately listen to music that they consider sad, particularly during negative life events, when sad music can serve a range of self-regulatory functions (Van den Tol & Edwards, 2013). In general, traits such as coping strategies and self-efficacy determine how people react to difficult situations, yet it is unclear how sad music relates to these factors. However, sad music is also used for other reasons, e.g. to simply produce hedonic or aesthetic pleasure (Garrido & Schubert, 2011). The present study aimed to investigate the everyday functions and uses of sad music for a large number of participants, and the ambivalent emotions that they experience in response (Weth & Kicking, 2013). In an exploratory online study (n=582), participants were asked when and why they listen to sad music, and how it makes them feel. Individual coping strategies (Brief-COPE) and personality traits (empathy and self-efficacy) were measured. We also considered relationships between frequency of exposure to sad music and the corresponding functions and emotional outcomes, since exposure to music can change attitudes towards it (Szpunar et al., 2004). Results revealed a three-factor-structure regarding motives which were labeled as 1) self-regulatory, 2) cursory, and 3) social motives. A two-factor structure emerged in terms of emotional outcomes and these were labeled as 1) light and 2) complex affect, respectively. The three functions showed specific relationships to individual personality traits and coping strategies, e.g. that people with low self-efficacy and high empathy more frequently use sad music for self-regulation. Furthermore, frequent exposure to sad music seems to enable listeners to more often use sad music for cursory functions and respond with more positive and less negative affect.

Keywords: sad music, emotions, coping strategies, personality

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