Consuming Music: a Phenomenological Investigation

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Researchers have studied music as a component of environments, in advertisements, and as information (Kellaris et al. 1992, 1993, 1994; Kotler 1973; MacInnis and Park 1991). We investigate music by presenting results from a phenomenological study with consumers regarding songs that are familiar, examining music experience using consumer theories.

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Consuming Music: A Phenomenological Investigation
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Marketing researchers have studied music as a component of retail environments, in advertisements, and as a source of information during processing (Kellaris et al. 1992, 1993, 1994; Kotler 1973; Maclnnis and Park 1991; Smith and Curnow 1966). Recent work shows that music has far greater importance in consumers’ lives, having emotional effects ranging from feelings of calm to elation (Juslin et al. 2008). The study of auditory influences via music should not be limited to the retail and advertising context. We close this gap and, using a phenomenological study, demonstrate how music can be understood beyond its role as a background or supporting factor in a context.

Experiential Consumption: Emotional, Physical and Psychological Benefits of Music
This study is embedded within the experiential consumption approach (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982). Partaking in a flow of fantasies, feelings and fun is part of consuming music, and this approach provides a clear foundation for the investigation of musical experiences. As an experiential consumption activity, music listening has primarily been shown to provide important hedonic benefits to the consumer. According to the majority of researchers in musicology, music listening in daily life is typically used for enjoyment purposes (Juslin et al. 2008; North et al. 2004; Sloboda et al. 1999; 2001). Further, while music listening is normally not the focal activity in one’s day (North et al. 2004; Sloboda et al. 1999, 2001), it nonetheless is used as an experience manipulator and enhancer (Bruner 1990; Hung 2001; Juslin et al. 2008; Kellaris and Kent 1994; North et al. 2004; Sloboda et al. 1999). In addition to music’s appeal as an enhancer of everyday activities, music is also widely recognized for its emotive qualities (Hung 2001; Juslin et al. 2008; Khalfa et al. 2002; Maclnnis and Park 1991; North et al. 2004). There is general agreement on the emotional qualities of music, yet researchers have debated on the direction of this causality and whether music simply represents various emotional qualities (the cognitivist perspective), or whether it actually induces these emotional reactions in the listener (the emotivist perspective) (i.e. Davies 2001; Hunter and Schellenberg 2010; Juslin and Vastfall 2008; Kivy 2001; Levitin and Tirovolas 2009). But physiological and neurological evidence has demonstrated that a strict cognitivist approach lacks the ability to account for the emotional reactions in listeners in times when the musical qualities can not be readily described (Hunter and Schellenberg 2010; Juslin and Vastfall 2008). That is, when music had ambiguous qualities that couldn’t be articulated, emotions were still reportedly experienced and felt. Juslin and Vastfall (2008) further argue that there has been a lack of systematic work to properly investigate how emotions are part of music, and that oftentimes researchers have confounded what participants feel from music with their own perception of what the music conveys.

Beyond emotions, music has been shown to produce pleasurable physical reactions in its listeners. Typical reports of physical reactions include thrills and chills which manifest as shivers that start in the back of the neck which then spread down the back and to the arms (Konecni, Wanik and Brown 2007; Grewe et al. 2007). More importantly, when combined with emotions, such physical reactions give rise to what has been coined “strong emotions” (Gabrielson 2001; Goldstein 1980; Grewe et al. 2007). According to Goldstein (1980) and Grewe et al. (2007), music is one of the best elicitors of strong emotions via arousal, and this in turn has demonstrated important benefits for the individual’s physiological and emotional state.

A final advantage of musical experiences can be described as providing psychological benefits to the listener. In addition to the reported emotional and physiological outcomes attributed to music, music listening has been shown to offer psychological benefits such as decreased anxiety, pain and discomfort (McCaffrey and Good 2000; Keith, Russell and Wearer 2009). Such studies indicate that music not only serves as an emotional stabilizer, but can also offer therapeutic benefits that would otherwise be addressed with more traditional medicinal solutions.

The Study and Major Findings
Data, in the form of depth interviews, were collected from individuals who experience the phenomenon. The interview questions were very broad, and the analysis phase focused on clustering meanings into themes. Fourteen adults (ages 18-56) were recruited to participate via an ad that asked them to bring in a song that is among their favorites and with which they would be willing to share and discuss with the researcher. During each interview, participants were asked to play the song for the researcher, explain their reasoning for picking it, and elaborate on what meanings they attached to the song. In addition, participants were asked to engage in thought listings, as well as respond to the PANAS scale (Watson, Clark and Tellegen 1988).

We organize our findings (eight major themes) into three meta-themes. The eight themes are: What I Hear, What I Feel, What I See, Fatigue, Change, Hard to Describe, Me and Others, and Private/Social. The three meta-themes are: The Human Experience of Music, Metamorphosis, and The Self-Other Link. Taken together, these themes explain the “what” and the “how” of music consumption of favorite pieces of music.

The Contribution
With the advent of portable music players, online file sharing, ambient background music and advertising jingles, individuals are exposed to various types of sounds throughout their day. Yet as consumer behavior researchers have limited our exploration of this behavior to its effects on advertisements, to retail and service settings, and to tunes that are not novel or new to the consumer. We argue that we still have much to learn about what such a ubiquitous occurrence means for consumers. We believe auditory consumption needs to be investigated in a manner that moves beyond its prior paradigmatic boundaries, and we begin this by engaging with consumers regarding songs and sounds that are familiar, by moving beyond retail service settings, and by looking at the experience through a theoretical anchor that can better inform such a phenomenon.

REFERENCES


