

## Social representation of ‘music’ in young adults: A cross-cultural study

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## Abstract

**Objective:** The present study was aimed to explore perceptions of and reactions to music in young adults (18-25 years) using the theory of social representations (TSR). **Design:** The study used a cross-sectional survey design and included participants from India, Iran, Portugal, United States, and United Kingdom. Data were analyzed using various qualitative and quantitative methods. **Study sample:** The study sample included 534 young adults. **Results:** The Chi-square analysis showed significant differences between the countries regarding the informants' perception of music. The most positive connotations about music were found in the responses obtained from Iranian participants (82.2%), followed by Portuguese participants (80.6%), while the most negative connotations about music were found in the responses obtained from Indian participants (18.2%), followed by Iranian participants (7.3%). The participants' responses fell into 19 main categories based on their meaning; however, not all categories were found in all five countries. The co-occurrence analysis results generally indicate that the category "*positive emotions or actions*" was the most frequent category occurring in all five countries. Other most frequently occurring categories included: form of escape, music genre, music terminology, and musical instruments. **Conclusions:** The results indicate that music is generally considered to bring positive emotions for people within these societies, although a small percentage of responses indicate some negative consequences of music.

## Key Words

Music listening, Hearing loss, Public health hazard, Attitude, Social representation, Text mining, Cross-culture

## Introduction

Music, according to the New National Dictionary, means "*art of combining sounds or sequences of notes into harmonious patterns pleasing to the ear and satisfying to the emotions; melody*" (Sheriff, 2014). Listening to music at home, or in certain events, or in social settings is an important part of people's everyday lives. Because of musical features, music can carry various information and convey precise expression to listeners, which may affect people's emotions and experiences. Music can be remarkably complex in terms of its frequency spectrum, ranging from frequencies of 20 Hz to about 10 kHz (Chasin & Russo, 2004). More specifically, the frequency range produced by a double bass runs from 50 Hz to 2000 Hz, and from 200 Hz to about 10 kHz for a violin (Cai et al., 2013). These sounds can be produced by the voice or by various kinds of musical instruments with their subtle acoustic characteristics in rhythmic, melodious and harmonious form, and subsequently music can be perceived accurately by listeners so as to express thought or feeling and affect emotions (Chasin & Russo, 2004).

Music perception is the process of achieving awareness or understanding of music by organizing and interpreting the features of music (Cai et al., 2013). Evidence has shown that music inspires sensations in the brain by giving pleasure, emotion, and sometimes easing off stress. For example, Juslin (2013) suggested emotions are highly correlated with musical expressions, depending on the precise process through which the emotional contents in music are transmitted and perceived by listeners. Moreover, music can provide subtle meanings, which can have positive effects on many individual lives (Ross, 2009). However, people may interpret the meaning of a musical piece differently, no matter how the music is played (whetherin the way in which the composer or performer intends or intended to express the music, or in a different fashion altogether). Although music can bridge cultures in a universal

experience and perception that is beyond intellect or reason, a number of possible common factors appear to be important in influencing music experience, perception, and interpretation, such as age, gender, education, geographical factors, cultural context, religious and social influence. For example, geographical diversity affects the nature and form of the music that strongly reflects the influence of regional characteristics and styles in music. Moreover, music is affected by religious factors when it is performed or composed for religious use or through religious influence. For example, Islamic music has its indigenous musical styles, which is sung or played in public services or private devotions.

The stratification of any given society may also affect the form and style of the music people prefer, i.e., individuals' real preferences in music is most likely relevant to the different dimensions of social stratification, which has a certain degree of influence on people's music preference as well as towards music-related behaviour (Dolan & Sharot, 2011). Such relationships between social structure and distinctions of music appear to be the result of the interaction between cultural traditions and genres of music experience and perception (Feld, 1984). Therefore, music experience and perception should be considered within cultural context, associated with its own history, invention, identity, and belonging.

Over the last decade, the literature has demonstrated that music listening has become a significant public health hazard, especially in adolescents and young adults. Listening to loud music (or noise) can result in various hearing disorders (Zhao et al., 2010; Jiang et al., 2016). However, as the effects of noise or music is related to both the intensity and duration, even moderate levels of music listening for longer durations can result in various hearing disorders (NIOSH, 1998). Although people are wary of adverse effects of loud music listening, music is generally considered as a positive aspect of life in most cultures. Hence, it is essential to

understand the perception of young adults from different cultural backgrounds in order to explore the influence of cultural, regional, and socioeconomic factors related to attitudes and behaviours towards music listening (Zhao et al., 2011).

In the present study, the Theory of Social Representation (TSR) is used to explore the attitudes and perception of young adults towards music listening. According to the TSR, social representation is conceived as a social process of communication and discourse, in the course of which meanings and social objects are generated and elaborated (Allansdottir et al., 1993). In the meanwhile, the concept of social representation is seen as individual attributes, (e.g., knowledge, character, and behaviour), which are shared with other people in a group or society. Therefore, social representation can be viewed as “*a system of values, ideas, and practices with a twofold function,*” mainly focusing on common knowledge and the processes whereby sociocultural, historical, and group-specific forces becomes sedimented in inner experiences (Joffe, 2003, p. 46).

The TSR has been well developed and applied in various research studies, particularly in the fields of Psychology and Sociology. Recently growing literature has shown important outcomes in association with attitudes towards hearing loss using the TSR (Manchaiah et al., 2015a; Zhao et al., 2015). For example, in the studies by Manchaiah et al. (2015a; 2015b), the TSR has been applied to create understanding of the social representation for *hearing loss* and *hearing aids* in the general public. The study on social representation on hearing loss suggested that the most frequently occurring categories were: assessment and management; causes of hearing loss; communication difficulties; disability; hearing ability or disability; hearing instruments; negative mental state; the attitudes of others; and sound and acoustics of the environment (Manchaiah et al., 2015a). Also, participants in India reported significantly

more positive and fewer negative associations when compared to participants from Iran, Portugal, and the UK (Manchaiah et al., 2015a). The most frequently occurring categories in the social representation of hearing aids (Manchaiah et al., 2015b) included: disability and aging; appearance and design; cost; hearing instruments; and improved hearing and communication. There was no statistically significant difference among positive, neutral, or negative connotations reported in different countries (Manchaiah et al., 2015b). These findings provide useful insights into the public perception of hearing loss that may prove useful in public education and counseling.

The aim of this study was to explore the social representation of ‘music’ in India, Iran, Portugal, United Kingdom, and United States, which would be helpful for better understanding of attitudes and behaviors towards music listening in the different cultural situations of these countries. Subsequently, this study could provide important information on developing ‘health behavior change’ and an education programme for young adults to initiate healthy music listening habits. In addition, the results derived from this study would be relevant for music therapy theory and its applications in the field of clinical audiology (such as tinnitus intervention).

## **Method**

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Ethical approval was obtained for each country from local institutional ethical boards, which include: *All India Institute of Speech and Hearing, Mysore, India; Department of Audiology, University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences, Tehran, Iran; School of Allied Health Sciences, Polytechnic Institute of Porto, Porto, Portugal; Research Ethics Committee,*

*Anglia Ruskin University*, Cambridge, the United Kingdom; and *Institutional Review Board*, Lamar University, Beaumont, the United States.

### ***Study design and participants***

Five countries were included in the study, which had a cross-sectional design. The countries (India, Iran and Portugal, UK and USA) differ in language, culture, and economy (see Table 1). Data were gathered using convenience sampling, and the respondents (n=534) were young adults (see Table 2).

**[Table 1 near here]**

### ***Data collection***

A questionnaire was used for data collection (see Appendix). In each country, researchers approached young adults via universities and city center shopping malls, requesting them to take part in the study. All those who were interested in participating received detailed information about the study, and had the opportunity to ask questions. Those who agreed to participate completed the questionnaires and return of the questionnaire was taken as consent. Participation in the study was voluntary and questionnaire completion anonymous as the participants did not provide any personal information that would compromise their identity. There was no compensation provided to participants.

The questionnaire required participants to report up to five words or phrases that immediately come to mind while thinking about “*music*” by writing them in the questionnaire. They were also asked to indicate whether each word or phrase they reported had positive, neutral, or negative connotations. Similar data was also collected for “*loud music*,” which has been

presented elsewhere (Manchaiah, Submitted). In addition, within the beginning of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to provide some demographic information (e.g. gender, age, education, and profession).

This free association method has been used in several studies to access and analyze the semantic content of social representations (Danermark et al., 2014; Linton et al., 2013; Manchaiah et al., 2015a, 2015b). A word or short phrase (in this case *loud music*) is used to prompt associations. The spontaneous response is considered more effective in providing a better opportunity to investigate the semantic universe of the expression rather than a well thought-out response (Abric, 1994). Originally, the questionnaire was developed in English. This version was used in the UK and the USA. A well-accepted forward and back-translation method was used (Beaton et al., 2000) to translate the questionnaire into Kannada (India), Farsi (Iran), and Portuguese (Portugal).

### ***Data analysis***

Data was analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods in three main steps. These include: (1) categorization of associations; (2) co-occurrence analysis (based on text-mining technique); and (3) Chi-square analysis.

First, a qualitative content analysis was carried out in order to identify and group words and phrases into categories that have a similar meaning (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). For example, responses such as motivation, relaxing, and happy fell into the category “positive emotions or actions.” Responses such as ear pain, deafness, ringing in the ear, etc. fell into the category “ear and hearing problems.” Another researcher checked content analysis and any ambiguity was resolved through discussion.

In the second step, a co-occurrence analysis was performed (also known as similarities analysis), which is based on the mathematical graph theory and involves studying the frequencies of each category and inter-relations between the different categories (Flament, 1965). The co-occurrence analysis was done using the Iramuteq software program, which is an R-interface for multidimensional analysis of texts and surveys (R Development Core Team, 2016; Ratinaud & Marchand, 2012). This software produces an index called a “maximum tree”. The size of the nodes (represented as circles in the tree) indicates the frequency of the categories; a bigger node indicates higher frequency. The lines connecting the nodes show inter-category associations. In the maximum tree, only the strongest links are retained, and the number on each line depicts the frequency of individuals associating with both categories. For example, in Figure 1 the categories “positive emotions or actions” and “form of escape” are connected with 15 individuals who mentioned both categories when they thought about music. Hence, this maximum tree index provides an overall description of the data in terms of main categories and their associations.

The third step involved a Chi-square analysis to identify possible differences between the countries regarding reported positive, neutral, and negative connotations. The positive, negative, and neutral connotations reported by the respondents were counted and a single Chi-square analysis (with a 3 x 5 cross tab for connotations vs countries) was performed.

## **Results**

### ***Participants’ demographics***

Table 2 provides demographic details of the study participants. The average age of participants ranged between 19 to 21 years in all countries with a fairly equal spread of males

and females. Some differences were noticed in terms of education, profession, and music listening habits. Participants in India, Portugal and the United Kingdom had a higher frequency of secondary education, whereas participants in the United States had a lower frequency in secondary and post-secondary education. Iranian participants had an equal spread of compulsory and secondary education, and none from post-secondary education. Generally, there were relatively fewer (i.e., around 25%) participants working (non-manual or manual jobs) and more students (around 8%) from all countries. Music listening hours varied considerably among countries, with Indian participants having the lowest mean of about 2.68 hours a week; participants from the United States having the highest mean of about 25.52 hours a week; and the participants from the other three countries having the mean listening hours from 12 to 18 hours a week.

**[Table 2 near here]**

### *Positive, neutral and negative connotations*

Significant differences between the countries were found ( $\chi^2 = 141.53$ ;  $df = 8$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $N = 2665$ ) for positive, neutral, and negative connotations. Most positive connotations about music were found in the responses obtained from Iranian participants (82.2%), followed by Portuguese participants (80.6%), while most negative connotations about music were found in the responses obtained from Indian participants (18.2%), followed by Iranian participants (7.3%). The frequencies and percentages are presented in Table 3.

**[Table 3 near here]**

### *Response categories*

The participants' responses fell into 18 main categories based on their meaning (see Table 4). However, not all categories were found in all five countries, with some similarities and differences among these countries. "*Positive emotions or actions*" was the most frequently occurring category in all five countries. Other most frequently occurring categories in all countries included: form of escape, music genre, music terminology, and musical instruments. "*Negative emotions or actions*" category was also reported in all countries except in India, although much less frequently. Moreover, many reported categories reflected both positive and negative connotations (e.g., form of escape category was seen as positive in that it offers freedom whereas some people consider it negatively as it can be viewed as creating bringing distraction).

**[Table 4 near here]**

### ***Social representation based on co-occurrence analysis***

The co-occurrence analyses of categories associated with music are presented as an index (see Figures 1 - 6). Here the size of the nodes represent the frequency of each category, and the thickness of the lines (or the number on the line) connecting the nodes represent the extent to which the categories are related based on the responses of the study sample.

Figure 1 represents the co-occurrence analysis for India, which has one main node representing "*positive emotions or actions.*" Responses for the other categories (e.g., form of escape, positive quality of life, music technology) are relatively limited. Figure 2 represents the co-occurrence analysis for Iran, which indicates two main nodes for categories "*positive emotions or actions*" and "*negative emotions or actions*". These two categories are connected with a thick line indicating that of all the participants who motioned positive emotions and

actions, 34 participants also mentioned negative emotions or actions. Figure 3 represents the co-occurrence analysis for Portugal, which is slightly different when compared to India and Iran. Here, the co-occurrence analysis indicates main nodes for categories “*positive emotions or actions*”; however, also less frequent but equally important categories included “*negative emotions or actions*,” “*music terminology*,” and “*music artist, groups or bands*.” Both the United Kingdom and the United States had similar patterns in terms of co-occurrence analysis (see Figures 4 and 5), which indicate main nodes for categories “*positive emotions or actions*,” “*music genre*,” “*music terminology*,” and “*acoustics*.”

**[Figure 1 near here]**

**[Figure 2 near here]**

**[Figure 3 near here]**

**[Figure 4 near here]**

**[Figure 5 near here]**

Comparison of co-occurrence analysis graphs across countries reveal some interesting observations. The category “*positive emotions or actions*” had an inter-category association with most of the other categories in all five countries (indicated by connecting lines). However, very few inter-category associations were observed among other categories. Categories such as “*party and alcohol*” and “*religion and spirituality*” are present in all countries except India, which may indicate some skewed responses from this sample. The category “*body structure*” was only identified by responses of participants in Portugal.

Figure 6 presents the global (all countries) co-occurrence analysis, which has a similar format structure and observations as the other countries, indicating that many of the responses across countries are similar, although some differences can be noted.

[Figure 6 near here]

## Discussion

The current study explored the social representation of ‘music’ in India, Iran, Portugal, United Kingdom, and United States. The content analysis revealed 18 main categories from all participants’ responses, although not all categories were found in all five countries. Overall, the results indicate that music is generally considered to bring positive emotions for people within these societies, although a small percentage of responses indicate some negative consequences of music. Further Chi-square analysis indicated significant association between the countries regarding positive, neutral, and negative connotations, i.e., most positive connotations about music were found in the responses obtained from Iranian participants, followed by Portuguese participants, whereas the most negative connotations about music were found in the responses obtained from Indian participants, followed by Iranian participants. The results imply that there exist some cultural differences between the countries in the participants’ perceptions about music, but also some similarities. In addition, it is also evident that there are some influences of religion and spirituality in relation to the social representation of music. For example, Iran is a country with strong Islamic roots. In Islamic religion, it is common to use music for gatherings of melodious remembrance of Allah and His Messenger, whereas the other cultures seem to attach less importance to liturgical music. This is evident from the study results where participants from Iran have a higher frequency of responses in the category “religion and spirituality.”

Although some differences were observed among the countries, the category “*positive emotions or actions*” stands out as the biggest factor in relation to music in all five countries, indicating that this phenomenon is universal. Responses for other categories were relatively

limited. Other frequently occurring categories were: *form of escape*, *music genre*, *music terminology*, and *musical instruments*. The category “*negative emotions or actions*” was also reported frequently in all countries except in India. Researchers suggest that people value music primarily because of the emotion it evokes (Juslin & Vastfjall, 2008). In this study, it is clear that irrespective of culture and country, the participants perceive music as something that induces emotions, especially positive emotions and actions. The distinction between responses for “positive emotions or actions” and “negative emotions or actions” was based on consideration of the meaning of the words or phrase reported, and also upon considering the connotations associated with that particular response. For example, responses such as motivation and relaxing possessed a positive meaning and also had positive connotations; hence, the responses belonged to the category “positive emotions or actions.” On the other hand, responses such as distracting and annoying carried a negative meaning and were associated with negative connotations; hence, they belonged to the category “negative emotions or actions.”

It is noteworthy that none of the participants reported ear and hearing problems such as tinnitus and hearing loss due to music exposure, even though some reported that music was associated with negative emotions such as that it could be unpleasant and uncomfortable. In a recent parallel study on the perception of young adults towards ‘loud music,’ the results suggest that the two largest factors that emerged were “*positive emotions and action*” and “*negative emotions and actions*” (Manchaiah et al., Submitted). In that study, “*ear and hearing problems*” was also one of the most frequently occurring category for loud music. These results indicate that most young adults are aware that loud music listening can have equally higher positive and negative consequences. Hence, significant outcomes of studying their perception towards music may provide helpful information on developing ‘health

behavior change' and education programs for young adults to initiate healthy music listening habits because it is important to understand the influence of positive perception on behavior change toward music while developing interventions to improve healthy listening habits (Zhao et al., 2010; Jiang et al., 2016). In addition, the results derived from this study will be useful for better understanding of music therapy theory and its applications in the field of clinical audiology (e.g., tinnitus intervention).

### ***Methodological Considerations and limitations***

In the present study we have collected data from five different countries in order to understand cultural differences and similarities in young adults' perceptions toward music exposure. However, there are some methodological limitations to be considered. Factors such as gender and socio-economic status have previously been found to influence attitudes towards exposure to loud music and the use of hearing protection. In the present study, factors such as gender and socio-economic status have not been analyzed. The differences in music listening hours between the countries were found. Participants from India reported the lowest listening mean of 2.68 hours a week, whereas participants from the United States reported the highest mean of about 25.52 hours a week. The participants from the other three countries reported listening between 12 to 18 hours a week. It is difficult to know if these differences are due to cultural differences between the countries, or due to sampling. Hence more research on larger samples is needed in order to clarify if these differences are caused by cultural differences or not. These differences in listening habits may have affected the result. Furthermore, the study sample was recruited by using a convenience sampling, which may have introduced some bias. However, the responses give rise to a central node on "*positive emotions or actions,*" which indicate a certain level of coherence within as well as across countries.

## Conclusions

The results derived from the present study indicate that music is generally considered to bring positive emotions for people within these societies, although a small percentage of responses indicate some negative consequences of music listening. Significant differences between the countries regarding positive, neutral, and negative connotations imply that there are some cultural differences between the countries in the participants' perceptions about music, which may provide helpful information towards understanding the influence of positive perception on behavioral change towards music while developing interventions to improve healthy listening habits.

## Conflict of Interest

None to declare.

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