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Musical preference, deviance, and attitudes towards music celebrities

Adrian C. North *, Lucy Desborough, Line Skarstein

School of Psychology, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester LE1 7RH, United Kingdom

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Abstract

Two studies investigated the relationship among British students between liking for 'problem' music, indices of deviance, and scores on a slightly modified version of the Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS). Study 1 indicated a positive relationship between liking for 'problem' music styles and psychoticism scores. Study 2 indicated that fans of 'problem' music scored higher than non-fans on measures of psychoticism, reactive rebelliousness, and two specific problem behaviours; that liking for 'problem' music was related only to psychoticism when all the indices of deviance were considered together in a multiple regression; and that fans of 'problem' music did not score higher on CAS measures of identification with the participants' favourite musicians. The present data indicate a relationship outside North America between 'problem' music and deviance, that this might be attributable primarily to elevated psychoticism scores among listeners to this music, but that liking for 'problem' music was not associated with a greater tendency for participants to identify closely with licentious behaviours carried out by pop musicians.
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Keywords: Music; Deviance; Delinquency; Psychoticism; Celebrities

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 116 252 2175; fax: +44 116 252 2067.
E-mail address: acn5@le.ac.uk (A.C. North).

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1. Introduction

Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between liking for particular genres and various personality variables (see e.g. Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003; and review by Kemp, 1996). In one particular branch of this work, several studies since the mid-1980s have investigated the effect of listening to so-called 'problem' music styles, such as rap and heavy rock (see review by Hansen & Hansen, 2000). Research has identified a positive relationships of varying strengths between liking for these musical styles and several indicators of deviance such as psychoticism (McCown, Keiser, & Mulhearn, 1997; Robinson, Weaver, & Zillmann, 1996), reactive rebelliousness (Robinson et al., 1996), tolerance of racial and sexual discrimination (Gan, Zillman, & Mitrook, 1997), enjoyment of risk taking and reckless behaviours such as drug use, shoplifting, and vandalism (Arnett, 1991; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003), and violence and aggression (Rubin, West, & Mitchell, 2001); and there is also evidence that this is reflected in the general public's stereotype of the fans of 'problem' musical styles (e.g. Fischoff, 1999). Such relationships have not escaped the attention of the mass media, and there is abundant anecdotal evidence concerning how pop music fans may identity to a dangerously high degree with their favourite musicians (e.g. Haynes & Rich, 2002; Litman & Farberow, 1994).

Research within the field is at an early stage and we are not aware of any detailed theoretical frameworks that have been developed to explain *why* such relationships should exist. At the risk of overgeneralising, it is however probably fair to claim that the existing research (and media commentary) concerning the impact of music on young people has implicitly adopted two means of explanation. The first of these argues that the relationship between listening to problem music and deviance is attributable to some form of transfer effect from the values represented within the music (and the more general public 'image' of the musician(s) in question) to the values held by the listener. Such an approach could be regarded as similar to Hirsch's (1971) notion of the 'hypodermic needle' model of media influence, and is often used by the mass media as an argument for the censorship of music. In contrast a second line of argument concerning the relationship is adopted inherently as a means of arguing against censorship of music: this states that people with deviant lifestyles are attracted to music and musicians that reflects these values, such that, for example, people with anti-authoritarian views are attracted to musical styles and musicians that frequently express disrespectful attitudes toward authority figures.

We believe that the existing research is limited in three important ways. First, the existing research has been carried out predominantly (and perhaps exclusively) with samples from North America: it is possible that the relationship between problem music and deviant behaviour does not exist elsewhere. Second, the majority of studies have tended to research only a single index of deviance (e.g. shoplifting) rather than a range of variables: research that collected information concerning several indices of deviance within a single design would be able to identify whether 'problem' music is part of a *range* of other problem behaviours. Finally, as noted above, implicit to many studies is the assumption that listening to 'problem' music is linked to deviance because listeners in some way identify with the frequently licentious actions of musical celebrities (see e.g. Nuzum (2001)). We are not however aware of any experimental evidence that fans of 'problem' music do indeed identify closely with their favourite musicians. However, if so then this might implicate at least two possible explanations of the higher levels of deviance among fans of 'problem' music. For example, social learning theory suggests that if fans of 'problem' music identify

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