



# Can personality traits predict musical style preferences? A meta-analysis



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## ABSTRACT

A meta-analysis was performed on the results of previous studies investigating the association between personality traits and music preferences. Regarding the categorization of personality traits, the Big Five and sensation seeking were used most often and were therefore chosen as the most appropriate categories in the meta-analysis. Regarding the categorization of musical style preferences, the five-dimensional MUSIC (mellow, unpretentious, sophisticated, intense, contemporary) model was used most often and was therefore employed in the meta-analysis. Hence, we included studies in the analysis when they had investigated the relationship between at least one of the Big Five personality traits or sensation seeking and at least one of the five MUSIC dimensions. In total, there were 30 subanalyses. All weighted averaged correlation coefficients were very small, with most of them near zero. Only 6 of the 30 coefficients exceeded 0.1 in magnitude ( $|r| \geq 0.1$ ). The largest effects were observed for the openness to experience personality trait, which exhibited small correlations with preference for three musical styles. Thus, personality traits barely account for interindividual differences in music preferences. Musical functions are discussed as an alternative explanation for these differences. The predictability of musical style preferences based on individual psychological variables is questioned in general.

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In an online study, [Rentfrow and Gosling \(2006\)](#) instructed a group of 60 university students to freely interact with each other on an Internet platform. The students' only task was to get to know each other. When the researchers analyzed the conversations it turned out that participants talked about musical issues more often than almost any other topic (in the first week, 58% talked about music, followed by movies and football with 41% each). Among the musical issues, music preference was the one most frequently discussed. The reason for the dominance of music preference as a topic in first-acquaintance situations is that many people believe that music preference can reveal something about a person's personality ([Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003](#)) or, more specifically, about the similarity of personal values ([Boer et al., 2011](#)). Thus, music preference is an everyday phenomenon and a popular topic of conversation—at least in young people. Almost everybody can spontaneously name their favorite musical styles, tunes, or artists. But, most impressively, there are vast interindividual differences in these answers. Where do they come from, how can they be explained, and how effective are personality traits in contributing to their explanation?

In the present article, we first briefly discuss the determinants of music preference, then focus more specifically on the role of personality traits in explaining music preference. We end by presenting the results

of a meta-analysis of the correlations between musical style preferences and personality traits.

## 1. Determinants of music preference

Why is it that preferences for musical characteristics, styles, substyles, composers, artists, or single tunes are so diverse? What first comes to mind is that variables that obviously differentiate between individuals might also be responsible for their individual music preference. Indeed, there has been a long tradition in investigating variables such as age, gender, cognitive style, and personality traits with regard to their influence on the emergence and development of music preference. Age appears to be the variable with the largest influence—in two different ways. First, for most people, the importance of music increases until adolescence and early adulthood but decreases more and more in later adulthood. This trend is typically mirrored in the general strength of music preference, which is most pronounced in adolescence and early adulthood and diminishes later on ([Bonneville-Roussy, Rentfrow, Xu, & Potter, 2013](#)). Second, the relatively higher importance of music during adolescence and early adulthood usually causes people to keep a preference for the musical styles, tunes, or artists that had been popular at that time ([Holbrook & Schindler, 1989](#)), although many people exhibit an increasing preference for classical musical styles when they get older ([Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013](#)). There is also evidence that music regains importance when people retire because elderly people increasingly use music for affect regulation and to reminisce ([Mende, 1991](#)).

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The influence of *gender* on music preference is not that strong. Male adolescents tend to prefer music that is more energetic and unconventional and that has an exaggerated bass while female adolescents tend to prefer more conventional music and more mellow styles such as soft rock (Bunte, 2014; see North & Hargreaves, 2008, for an overview). When people get older these differences seem to disappear.

*Cognitive style* is also linked to music preferences. Specifically, on an empathizing–systemizing continuum, individuals with a bias toward empathizing have been found to prefer mellow styles of music such as rhythm and blues (R ‘n’ B) and soul, while individuals with a bias toward systemizing have been found to prefer intense styles of music such as punk or heavy metal (Greenberg, Baron-Cohen, Stillwell, Kosinski, & Rentfrow, 2015). Notably, the authors reported that cognitive style can explain variance in musical style preferences over and above personality traits.

Research on the influence of *personality traits* on music preference has a long tradition, dating back to the 1950s when individual music preferences were used in the diagnosis of mental and personality disorders (Cattell & Anderson, 1953). It has been assumed that stable personality traits substantially determine cognitive and physiological processes and, as a result, should also substantially determine the preference for certain musical characteristics. At least with regard to one personality trait there is evidence supporting this assumption, namely, *sensation seeking*. This trait has been used to describe individuals who exhibit a strong desire for psychophysiological arousal, which they can find in highly arousing or risky activities. People scoring high on sensation seeking typically prefer music that is highly activating (e.g., fast, complex, jarring, loud), such as heavy metal (McNamara & Ballard, 1999). Other than for the sensation-seeking trait, which has a clear relationship to an individual's optimal level of psychophysiological arousal, evidence for the association between personality traits and music preference is rather weak. Much research has focused on the Big Five personality traits and has revealed a large number of correlations between the Big Five dimensions and musical style preferences. Below we show in detail that the results of these studies are quite inconsistent and that the effects—overall—are rather small or negligible. Only with regard to the openness to experience personality trait, there are also medium-sized correlations—though to almost all musical styles, which simply means that people scoring high on openness to experience have a higher affinity to listening to music in general.

Other variables influencing individual music preference include cultural background, social background, and musical education and experience. Different *cultures* have developed different musical traditions that of course have found expression in the likes and dislikes of their members who acquire very basic preferences for certain musical characteristics such as the use of specific instruments or tonal systems. The *social background* is shaped by manifold influences that affect individuals through their parents, teachers, peers, and role models (Finnäs, 1989). The developing preferences of children are strongly shaped by the musical repertoire of their parents. During adolescence, the influence of peers and idols grows more and more since this is the time in life when young people try to define their personality, identity, and social affiliation and to dissociate themselves from their parents. Music, like clothes or self-presentation in social networks, is an effective means to do so. The desire for social affiliation can go so far that young people adopt the music preferences of others in a virtually unquestioning way, regardless of the musical styles or tunes those others prefer (Salganik, Dodds, & Watts, 2006). Not least, *musical education and experience* shape music preferences. This can happen through both the acquisition of theoretical knowledge about music and intense listening to music. The engagement in music theory and music listening typically results in both more differentiated music preferences and an increasing preference for complex styles or compositions. Apart from that, making music—by professional or autodidactic musical education and engagement—results in music preferences that are shaped by the music that is composed or performed.

## 2. Personality and music preference

As mentioned above, it is tempting to assume that music preferences are diagnostic of a person's personality characteristics—precisely because these preferences are considered to be substantially *caused* by personality characteristics. As a “mirror of personality,” music preferences have been scientifically investigated for quite some time, going back to Burt (1939). There are many theoretical approaches concerning the association between personality traits and music preferences that are all grounded in an interactionist approach (Rentfrow & McDonald, 2011). According to the *uses-and-gratifications approach*, for instance, people have individual psychological and social needs as well as specific expectations about the satisfaction of their needs through mass media. Individual needs and expectations result in individual patterns of media use (Hall, 2005). It is assumed that individuals prefer specific kinds of music because their personality traits drive them to pursue specific goals that can be satisfied by that very music (e.g., Arnett, 1995; Delsing, ter Bogt, Engels, & Meeus, 2008; Larson, 1995). For instance, extraverted individuals, who typically enjoy spending time with others, tend to prefer music that can foster social interaction with peers. By contrast, the *theory of optimal arousal* focuses on the music's potential to regulate listeners' level of psychophysiological arousal (e.g., Eysenck, 1990). As already mentioned, preference for highly arousing musical styles such as heavy metal, rock, and rap is correlated with measures of listeners' physiological resting state and measures of the sensation-seeking personality trait (McNamara & Ballard, 1999; Nater, Krebs, & Ehler, 2005).

Since the 1960s and the dissemination of elaborate theories of personality and personality inventories (above all, the five-factor approach, e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1992; John & Srivastava, 1999), research on the association between personality traits and music preferences has intensified, though revealing unclear and inconsistent results due to a large inconsistency in the measurement of both personality traits and music preferences. Standardization was reached only by the introduction of scales to measure music preferences more reliably, for instance, by Zuckerman (e.g., Little & Zuckerman, 1986) and Rentfrow and Gosling (2003). Yet, the use of more standardized instruments did not much improve the general picture of results. First, there are still very many ways researchers measure personality or music preference, going far beyond such simple categorizations as the Big Five. Second, even studies that used the same constructs and measurement approaches have yielded inconsistent results.

Here is a brief impression of the inconsistency of results regarding personality traits and music preferences. The majority of the more recent studies followed the unifying conceptual approach of Rentfrow and Gosling (2003) and used their categorization of musical style preferences. These authors used principal component and confirmatory factor analyses to identify fundamental dimensions of music preferences. They found four consistent dimensions that they dubbed reflective and complex, intense and rebellious, upbeat and conventional, and energetic and rhythmic. Some studies found positive correlations between the personality trait openness to experience and the dimensions reflective and complex (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003) and intense and rebellious (Langmeyer, Guglhör-Rudan, & Tarnai, 2012; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003; Tekman, 2009), though with quite different effect sizes. Other studies (e.g., Livovsky, Stevens, Hoff, & Surawski, 2012) could not replicate these findings. Langmeyer et al. (2012) found a negative correlation between the dimension intense and rebellious and the personality trait conscientiousness. Other studies did not find this effect (Livovsky et al., 2012; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003; Tekman, 2009). Some studies found a positive association of the dimension upbeat and conventional with extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Delsing et al., 2008; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003) and a negative association with openness to experience (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003; Tekman, 2009; Zweigenhaft, 2008), while Tekman (2009) did not find an association with either agreeableness or conscientiousness. The dimension energetic

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