

Research Article

The power of repetition: repetitive lyrics in a song increase processing fluency and drive market success[☆]

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Received 31 July 2014; received in revised form 3 December 2014; accepted 12 December 2014

Available online 18 December 2014

Abstract

The majority of music people listen to in their daily lives includes lyrics. This research documents how more repetitive songs lyrically are processed more fluently and thus adopted more broadly and quickly in the marketplace. Study 1 is a controlled laboratory experiment demonstrating how lexical repetition, a feature of the stimulus and *not* the consequence of repeated exposures, results in greater processing fluency. Study 2 replicates the effect utilizing custom-produced song excerpts holding everything constant except the lyrics. Utilizing data from *Billboard's* Hot 100 singles chart from 1958–2012, Study 3 documents how more repetitive songs stand a greater chance of reaching #1 as opposed to lingering at the bottom of the chart. An analysis of #1 hits reveals increased repetition decreases the time it takes to reach #1 and increases the odds of debuting in the Top 40. This research chronicles the impact of processing fluency on consumer choice in the real world while demonstrating repetition as a stimulus feature matters. It also introduces a new variable to the processing fluency literature: lexical repetition.

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Keywords: Processing fluency; Lexical fluency; Repetition; Music; Lyrics; Aesthetic goods

I guess a good song is a good song is a good song, ya know. George Thorogood American blues rock musician

Introduction

Music of one kind or another is ubiquitous in the modern world and plays an integral part in people's daily routines. Americans, for example, devote an average of 18 hours per week listening to recorded music and music on the radio (Rentfrow, Goldberg, & Zilca, 2011), and if background music is included, the time spent listening to music adds up to more than five hours per day (Levitin, 2006). The pervasive presence of music in

people's lives is indicative of the pleasure it provides; listening to our preferred music induces the same euphoric response in the brain as food, sex, and drugs (Blood & Zatore, 2001). The question of why people prefer various types of music has attracted significant attention from researchers studying people's cognitive, emotional, physiological, and cultural responses to music, yet still relatively "little is known about the underlying principles on which individual musical preferences are based" (Rentfrow, Goldberg, & Levitin, 2011, p. 1139). Even less well understood is what drives consumers to prefer one specific piece of music to another (Lamont & Webb, 2010).

Generally speaking, three types of variables have been shown to impact people's preferences for music: (1) features of the musical stimulus, (2) characteristics of the listener, and (3) situational or environmental factors (Wapnick, 1976). Some features of the musical stimulus found to have significant relationship with musical preference include tempo, rhythm, pitch, melody, harmony, and timbre (Teo, 2003). This research

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focuses on an entirely different characteristic of a musical stimulus: the lyrics and their influence on a song's relative popularity. The majority of music that people listen to in their daily lives includes lyrics, and this is especially true for popular music (Mori & Iwanaga, 2013). Lyrics and music are often entwined, making it difficult to recite the words of a song without invoking its melody, and similarly challenging to sing a song's melody without invoking the words. Yet lyrics and music, the semantic and the melodic components of a song, have been found to be processed independently (Besson, Faita, Peretz, Bonnel, & Requin, 1998; Bonnel, Faita, Peretz, & Besson, 2001).

One striking feature of popular music is the use of repetition in lyrics as a rhetorical device. Historically, the Greek chorus was a group of actors who would punctuate a performance with commentary they sang or chanted in unison. These regularly repeated sections were easy for the audience to learn and join in and came to be known as "the chorus." In fact, the ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl counts repetitiveness among the few musical universals known to characterize music across different cultures (Margulis, 2014). Little has changed in modern times. The chorus of a song is often used as a "hook" to catch the ear of the listener and is repeated regularly throughout a song. One benefit derived from having encountered a stimulus previously, or repetitive priming, is an ease of processing referred to as processing fluency. Fluency effects have been documented widely for language, including most often for individual words (Hutchins & Palmer, 2011). An ancillary benefit resulting from processing fluency, notably for aesthetic goods, is that the experience is typically more pleasant (Reber, Schwarz, & Winkielman, 2004). Consequently, we expect songs that are lyrically more repetitive (for instance, by repeating the chorus more often), and thus more fluent, to be generally preferred and adopted more quickly and broadly in the marketplace. This is exactly what we observe.

Our first contribution is to document the impact of lyrical repetitiveness on the relative success of popular music under ecologically valid conditions. Despite music's prominence in our lives, understanding the underlying drivers of consumers' musical preference is "an area in which empirical evidence lags well behind theoretical speculation" (Sluckin, Hargreaves, & Colman, 1983, p. 263). While some researchers have investigated the acoustic elements presumed to contribute to a song's becoming a chart-topping hit with mixed results (Dhanaraj & Logan, 2005; Pachet & Roy, 2008), our focus on the lyrical elements sets this research apart. The combination of real world data with the lab studies we present is the first research of which we are aware to document an effect of lyrical composition on a song's popularity.

In doing so, this work is also the first of which we are aware to demonstrate the impact of processing fluency generally – and linguistic fluency specifically – on consumer-driven market outcomes in the real world. Thus, our results address an important challenge facing contemporary consumer researchers, documenting meaningful effects of processing fluency, a metacognitive experience, in real-world markets.

This challenge persists because it is not nearly as easy to find evidence of metacognitive experiences on choice as it is on judgment. Processing fluency's lack of applicability to consumer choice, relatively speaking, is likely due to the fact that "choice involves a selection among alternatives rather than the assessment of one of them" and "decision based cognitions may have no impact on choice probabilities if they affect all alternatives equally" (Huber, 2004, p. 358). It is more likely that difficulty associated with processing a variety of alternatives will impact whether or not the consumer ultimately makes a choice (Dhar, 1997) and not which alternative they choose. By demonstrating the impact of fluency on a song's relative popularity in a natural setting, we offer empirical evidence of the effects of processing fluency on actual market outcomes driven by consumer choice.

We also make a number of theoretical contributions to the literature on fluency. First, we present evidence showing how repetition, a linguistic strategy that shifts attention away from what is said to how it is said, increases processing fluency. Repetition is one of the most important variables utilized in lexicography, the study of the vocabulary of a language (Popescu & Altmann, 2006). Note that repetition in this research is not repetition in terms of recurring exposures *to the stimulus*. Instead, what we examine is the effect of repetition as an objective feature *of the stimulus*. To date, the literature on linguistic fluency has neglected the role repetition (within the stimulus, not of the stimulus) plays on influencing processing fluency.

In addition, our results extend the work on linguistic fluency from written to spoken text, or more precisely, sung text. Researchers have manipulated processing fluency in linguistics by altering the vocabulary (*lexical fluency*), pronounceability (*phonological fluency*), grammar (*syntactic fluency*), and use of rhyme (*phonemic fluency*) in written texts presented to respondents (for a review, see Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009). Yet consumers encounter myriad instantiations of vocalized text in their daily lives that vary in terms of their repetitiveness, from audio books to poetry readings, from comedy acts to song lyrics. In a marketing context, language used in commercial advertisements can also be more or less repetitive. This research contributes to our understanding of how vocalized repetition ultimately affects consumers.

In what follows, we begin by briefly reviewing the relevant literature on fluency, repetition, and repeated exposures. In Study 1, we demonstrate the negative effect of greater repetition in song lyrics on perceptions of novelty and thus the positive effect on processing fluency. Participants listened to and evaluated 30-second excerpts from unfamiliar songs in which the chorus was repeated more or less frequently. As expected, the more repetitious pieces were judged as significantly less novel. Worth pointing out is that repeated lyrical phrases are often accompanied by the same melody and rhythm. In the past, findings regarding any positive effect of melodic redundancy on attitude have been mixed; Getz (1966) found no effect, while McMullen (1974) found melodies containing low or intermediate levels of redundancy were generally preferred to highly redundant melodies.

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