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Music to Mend Heartache: Song Choices to Match, Change, and Distract Mood

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Abstract

Romantic turmoil is something that most people experience in their life. When faced with an upsetting event, such as a breakup or fight with a partner, a person may turn to music to achieve a more desirable state of mind. The current study extended past research on music and coping by focusing specifically on a person's use of music when they have emotional distress due to a romantic event. Ten interviews revealed the major theme "Music as a Tool," regarding how people use music as social support. The first subtheme, Alliance with Mood, describes how participants used music as a tool to relate/identify and experience their current emotions. The second subtheme, Changing Mood, reveals how participants used music as tool to reframe their emotions and distract themselves. Because of the practical nature of this subject, media studies should continue to advance the literature on music and social support.

Keywords

Mood Management, Functions of Music, Adverse Romantic Events, Music Preferences, Individual Semi-Structured Interviews

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Romantic turmoil is something that most people experience in their life. When faced with an upsetting event, such as a breakup or fight with a partner, a person may turn to music to achieve a more desirable state of mind. The current study extended past research on music and coping by focusing specifically on a person's use of music when they have emotional distress due to a romantic event. Ten interviews revealed the major theme "Music as a Tool," regarding how people use music as social support. The first subtheme, Alliance with Mood, describes how participants used music as a tool to relate/identify and experience their current emotions. The second subtheme, Changing Mood, reveals how participants used music as tool to reframe their emotions and distract themselves. Because of the practical nature of this subject, media studies should continue to advance the literature on music and social support. Keywords: Mood Management, Functions of Music, Adverse Romantic Events, Music Preferences, Individual Semi-Structured Interviews

Introduction

Many individuals begin to engage in romantic situations and form committed romantic relationships at a young age. Although romantic encounters can yield positive outcomes, such as companionship and happiness, they can also result in the loss of self-esteem, loneliness, and sadness (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2011). Young adults may find it difficult to cope with these emotions; some become depressed or develop suicidal thoughts (Matilda, 2014). While trying to regulate these emotions, many choose to turn to music (Lonsdale & North, 2011). With roughly 75% of Americans stating they "actively choose to listen to music" (The Nielsen Company, 2015, p. 1), it is no wonder that people use music to manage their moods.

Understanding ways in which one uses music to cope when experiencing emotional distress is useful for identifying potential avenues that can lead to positive results following romantic turmoil. The current research aims to explore social support and mood management in conjunction with one's ability to successfully cope with emotional distress from a romantic situation by using music. This study takes an exploratory, qualitative approach by conducting individual, in-depth interviews, because past studies have yielded inconsistent results. Some research supports mood-congruent music choices (Chen, Zhou, & Bryant, 2007; Hunter, Schellenberg, & Griffith, 2011) yet others reveal mood-incongruent choices when faced with an adverse event (Knobloch & Zillmann, 2002; Tahlier, Miron, & Rauscher, 2012). Additionally, previous studies have asked participants to focus on any type of situation where they used music to manage their moods; this study places specific emphasis on romantic turmoil. The results will add to the knowledge on how people are using music as a method to cope with distress from romantic scenarios so that we better understand how media can be used as a form of social support.

Theoretical Framework

Social Support

Social support has been defined as "the study of supportive communication: verbal (and nonverbal) behaviors intended to provide or seek help" (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002, p. 384) and is a factor in assessing how much distress one undergoes following a romantic breakup (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2011). Specifically, supportive communication will be most effective if it is high in person-centeredness, meaning messages are more emotion-focused, sensitive, and thus more effective in helping to alleviate one's distress (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002).

Traditionally, a person in distress seeks out another individual to provide social support. However, personal conversations with others do not always help a person in anguish achieve a desired state of mind. Even if a loved one does provide comfort, there is still evidence that one turns to media to manage a mood or emotion (Zillmann, 1988). Some research supports the idea that music can mirror a supportive friend (Lee, Andrade, & Palmer, 2013; Van den Tol & Edwards, 2011).

This study seeks to expand social support to add music as the sender of comforting messages. Because research recognizes that young adults receive social support via online media with people whom they have never met (Walther & Boyd, 2002), it is certainly plausible for individuals to receive social support through music. Although receiving comfort through music is one-way, as opposed to a conversation with another individual, one can still posit that music can provide support to a listener. Support can come in the form of seeking verbal advice and information about the situation or comfort and encouragement to help regulate a person's emotions (Mortenson, Burleson, Feng, & Liu, 2009). The latter (sympathy and emotions) could certainly be conveyed through the lyrics in music. Based on the conceptualization of social support and highly person-centered messages, music meets the criteria of being supportive and highly person-centered; it is a verbal message that can provide help and because many songs are about romantic tumult, the lyrics may help the listener articulate his feelings and provide reasoning for those feelings. Additionally, music can be classified as a type of communication because we interpret meaning from the messages (Feld, 1984), which in turn can affect listener's moods and state of mind (Benson, 1979). Music can communicate verbally (from the lyrics) and nonverbally (from the beat) to the listeners. Listeners can interpret a song and make meaning from it just as they would interpret a verbal message from another person. As music is arguably something that can communicate feelings to others, it also may be capable of regulating a person's mood.

Music Use and Mood Management

Zillmann's mood management theory, referred to often in music therapy research, posits "individuals are capable of choosing materials for exposure that modify and regulate affective experiences and mood states in desirable ways" (Zillmann, 1988, p. 147). Several studies have used Zillmann's (1988) mood management theory in an attempt to explore one's choice of music consumption when feeling sad due to an adverse event, although results are inconclusive. Knobloch and Zillmann (2002) found support for participants in negative moods to prefer happy, energetic music. In their study exploring the use of music consumption when upset, Tahlier, Miron, and Rauscher (2012) found the participants whose sad event was unresolved chose to listen to upbeat, uplifting songs, thus also supporting mood management theory.

Although the aforementioned studies provide some support for mood regulation and for one to choose mood-incongruent music when experiencing an adverse event, other studies found opposing outcomes. Chen, Zhou, and Bryant (2007) induced moods in their participants by showing either a happy or sad television program. Results from their study support the notion that when people are sad they listen to more mood-congruent music, but only for a limited amount of time. After listening to sad music for a few minutes, they then chose to listen to music that is more uplifting. Other researchers have found those in sad mood conditions to consider sad-sounding music to be more desirable, whereas those in happy mood conditions found sad-sounding music to be unpleasant (Hunter, Schellenberg, & Griffith, 2011). Similarly, Strizhakova and Krcmar's (2007) study on video rental choices and mood management found that people who were in a sad mood before going in to the video rental store chose to rent films in the genre of drama, which arguably would not elicit happy feelings. The authors offered their explanation for this outcome by suggesting that it can sometimes be satisfying to "have a good cry" (p. 109). On the other hand, Strizhakova and Krcmar also proposed that watching sad movies might actually make viewers feel better because their situation may not be as bad as those who are portrayed in the film.

Recognizing that many people choose to listen to sad music when sad, Garrido and Schubert (2011) wanted to know why people choose mood congruent music. They explored five volunteers' reasons for seeking sad music in negative situations by employing qualitative in-depth interviews. Results revealed reasons for listening to sad music when experiencing a negative mood included therapy, reflection, having a "companion," and nostalgia. Similarly, Van den Tol and Edwards (2011) used survey research to also investigate the motivations for listening to sad music when feeling sad. After having participants recall a recent time when they listened to sad music the researchers coded the responses and found two major themes: "*functions* served by music and *strategies* served by music" (p. 446). Results yielded specific categories such as connection, high aesthetic value, message, distraction and mood enhancement.

Few past studies have explored sex differences for the ways in which men and women use music. Knobloch-Westerwick's (2007) research exploring gender differences and mood management revealed that when induced with a stressful mood, men tended to use music to distract themselves whereas women wanted to ruminate over the stressor. Another study found men scored high for music uses and Social Identity (having friends who like the same music), whereas women used music for Mood Enhancement (relaxation, entertainment) and Personal Identity (music expresses my feelings) reasons (Ter Bogt, Mulder, Raaijmakers, & Gabhainn, 2011).

Many of the past studies on music consumption and mood proposed hypothetical scenarios to which participants reacted. Of the studies that explored actual events experienced by participants, few studies focus specifically on music consumed during an adverse event related to romantic relationships. However, Lee, Andrade, and Palmer (2013) found that participants were more likely to listen to songs matching their mood when going through an interpersonal loss (e.g., romantic breakup) than when losing something such as a job.

It is essential to focus on an individual's music consumption during a time of emotional distress due to a romantic situation for many reasons. First, an upsetting event from a romantic encounter, such as a breakup, can result in severe emotional distress (Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2009). If listening to music can provide some form of support during this undesirable state, which previous research has supported (Van den Tol & Edwards, 2011; Zillmann, 1988), then it is a beneficial course of study. Second, as previously stated, many studies do not focus specifically on the use of music following emotional distress from a romantically-induced event although one may hypothesize that there is a wealth of music that caters to these moments. Specifically, one study examined the top ten popular songs according to

Billboard.com during 2002-2005 and found that 60% of the songs were about love and relationships (Keen, 2007). Therefore, if one uses music as social support to cope with an adverse event because the content or lyrics are relatable, as found by Van den Tol and Edwards (2011), and there are more songs that relate to love or breakups than other scenarios, such as losing a job or failing an exam, then it makes sense to explore romantic events in this context.

The current study seeks to narrow this scope by aiming to first assess how and why people use music when faced with emotional distress specifically from romantic situations, and second, to explore the possible beneficial outcomes of media use as supportive communication. Because some research supports mood-congruent music choices (Chen, Zhou, & Bryant, 2007; Hunter, Schellenberg, & Griffith, 2011) yet others reveal mood-incongruent choices when faced with an upsetting event (Knobloch & Zillmann, 2002; Tahlier, Miron, & Rauscher, 2012) this area needs to be examined first. Second, few studies seek to understand in-depth the after-effects of listening to particular songs during a time of distress (Garrido & Schubert, 2013; Van den Tol & Edwards, 2011), so this is also an area that needs to be probed. Specifically, the following research question was explored:

> RQ: How do people use music in order to manage their moods after an adverse romantic event (e.g., a breakup, cheating partner, unrequited love)?

Researcher's Relationship to Project

In an effort to maintain transparency with readers, the author-project relationship will be briefly addressed. Because the first author interviewed the participants, she will specifically speak on her connection to this project and participants.

The first author identifies with the interpretive worldview and seeks to understand people's actions and feelings (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). With that said, it is important to address the researcher's involvement with the current topic and participants because she served as the research instrument. As an avid music fan, the interviewer had previously used music to cope with relational distress. She was cognizant of the possibility that her past relationship to music being used as a coping tool could impact her interviews. Therefore, she was careful not to influence the conversations by interjecting any of her previous experiences with this topic while interviewing. The author was invested in this project beyond an academic sense because of her previous use of music as support. The researcher hoped that by having participants share their stories, others in need of social support could understand the way music can be used to cope with emotional distress.

While the author had a relationship to the project beyond academics, she also had relations with some of the participants. Because she used a convenience sample, the first few interviews were the researcher's friends. The first author chose these participants because she knew they had experience using music to cope and also because they were willing to participate without compensation. Additionally, the researcher used this opportunity to test the interview guide to be sure it was logical. She does not believe her relationship with the initial participants affected the quality of the research; the participants were open about their involvement with music and coping and felt comfortable speaking about a sensitive topic because they had a connection with the researcher.

Method

The researchers explored the use of music to manage moods after an adverse romantic situation by conducting 10, individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Creswell (2014) states that interviews are a sound approach to use when the researcher is unable to observe the

participants' behaviors. In this case, it would be difficult to follow a person and her music choices at every moment following an upsetting romantic event. Furthermore, it would be impossible to know why the person chose each particular song and how they were feeling while listening to the music.

Participants

Before recruiting any participants, the researchers obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board. The researcher only interviewed people who volunteered for their study and provided their written consent to participate. Because participants were revealing past experiences, the researcher did not expect the participants to currently be experiencing profound emotional distress. However, the interviewer informed participants that they could stop the interview at any time or pass on any questions if they felt uncomfortable. During the interviews, the researcher was careful not to reveal specific connections she had to music and coping so she did not influence interviewees' conversations.

Volunteers ages 18 to 34 years who indicated they have listened to music following a sad romantic event were recruited to participate in the study. The reasoning for this age range comes from research on romantic breakups and suicidal thoughts, where of the 6,000 participants between the ages of 20 and 64 years, the participants in their 20s were most likely to have experienced "recent or looming separations" (Matilda, 2014). A buffer was put slightly below and above this age range as to not limit our responses to only a ten-year range. The final criterion to participate in the study was for interviewees to have used music as a means of coping with romantically-induced emotional distress. People of any race/ethnicity, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation were invited to participate. The first author used a convenience sample to recruit participants through her social circle (in-person and via social media). The recruitment was convenient because the first author invited participants to interview who were readily available from her network. The first author then asked those initial interviewees to refer her to another person who met the criteria to participate, thus creating a snowball sample (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Because the interviews were semi-structured, the researcher used the same core questions for each participant, allowing for consistency in the data. To ensure for validity, the researcher ceased the interviewing process when she reached the point of saturation, meaning she discovered no new information by continuing to interview. This method provides support for the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data. Additionally, the researcher provided participants' quotes to support each theme and to secure accuracy in presenting the data.

Sampling yielded a total of 10 participants: 7 males and 3 females. Their ages ranged from 23 to 34 with the average age being 29. Their marital status was also collected. Two of the participants were married, 2 were single, 5 were in a committed relationship, and 1 was currently dating. Participants recalled events that occurred anywhere from a few months ago to eight years ago. Three participants described scenarios that occurred a few months before their interview, two participants discussed events from one to three years ago, four participants told stories of using music to cope from four to six years ago, and one participant shared an event from eight years ago. Interviewees discussed a range of trigger events that caused them to feel emotional distress and therefore turn to music. Examples of such events include a 48-hour breakup, rough patches in a long-distance relationship, fighting, a divorce, relationship terminations, cheating, unrequited love, and a semi-date.

Data Collection

As recommended by Creswell (2014), the first author conducted semi-structured interviews and audio recorded the conversations. Each participant signed a consent form and received instructions regarding the nature of the study, their willingness to participate as well as their ability to leave the study at any point with no consequences. Participants were given pseudonyms to provide anonymity (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) and no compensation was given.

Participants' moods were not manipulated as seen in previous studies (Chen, Zhou, & Bryant, 2007; Friedman, Gordis, & Förster, 2012; Hunter, Schellenberg, & Griffith, 2011; Knobloch & Zillmann, 2002); instead, events that happened in the past were explored using recall methods similar to Van den Tol and Edwards (2011) and Tahlier, Miron, and Rauscher's (2012) studies. A pre-requisite to the study was confirming one's use of music when experiencing emotional distress due to a romantic relationship.

Data Analysis

Once the data were gathered, the first and second authors analyzed the 195 pages of transcripts. Owen's (1984) thematic analysis and Corbin and Strauss's (2015) grounded theory analysis procedures were used as a guide. Open coding was used initially, which was followed by axial coding and selective coding (Creswell, 2014). *In vivo* coding was also used during open coding in order to allow the participants' experiences to guide the process (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Owen's (1984) principles of repetitiveness and forcefulness were used to guide open coding. Repetitiveness is defined as an "explicit repeated use of the same wording" (Owen, 1984, p. 275). Ideas that were described in the same manner time after time were marked during open coding. Second, Owen (1984) described forcefulness as "vocal inflection, volume or dramatic pauses," as well as "the underlining of words and phrases" (p. 275). The transcriber noted the participants' nonverbal communication. Examples of open codes for why participants chose to listen to particular songs include "someone agreed," "it applied to my situation," "it speaks how I feel," and "others felt like me." Next, the researchers conducted axial and selective coding in order to bring these codes together and organize them. The previous examples of open codes collapsed into the axial code "Relate/Identify," which fit into the selective code "Music as a tool: Alliance with my mood." This process left us with the major theme participants shared with us regarding how they use music to cope with an adverse romantic relationship event: "Music as a tool."

Results

The major theme that emerged from conversations with our participants was "Music as a tool." "Music as a tool" is an *in vivo* code because it is a phrase used by participants to describe how music helped them to cope with their situations. Participants explained two ways in which music served as a tool: alliance with mood and changing mood. Alliance with Mood yielded two subcategories: Relate/Identify and Experience Emotion, while Changing Mood includes Reframing Emotions and Distraction.

Music as a Tool: Alliance with Mood

Using the *in vivo* code, "Music as a tool" refers to participants discussing the functions that music served for them when they were coping with an adverse romantic relationship event. Alliance with Mood discusses how participants used music as a coping tool because they were

able to relate/identify with the music and they were able to express their emotions through listening to the music.

Relate/Identify. Participants argued that music played an important role in their coping because they felt as though they could identify or relate with the songs. Crucial for the participants was that somebody could relate to them or had experienced similar events—this helped them feel less alone and comforted. Typically, when participants brought up relating and identifying with particular songs, they referred to the lyrics and/or the artist. When recalling a bad breakup, Janet elaborated on Ryan Adams' lyrics which she typically turned to when feeling sad due to a break up. She explained this function very well,

> …sometimes you're feeling something and you don't know how to put it into words or describe it and when you listen to music and the lyrics just click with you cause you're kinda like, "Oh that's how I feel" but you don't know how to like articulate it but when you listen to a songwriter or singer they kinda say what you're feeling and so that's how I connect with it—so for me it helps me.

From our conversations, participants explained they felt understood by the songs they listened to while coping. When Janet was unable to explain how she was feeling, she used music to do this for her. Ryan Adams' lyrics played an important role in how she coped with music. Other participants also discussed how important it was for them to find music they could relate to because it helped them feel less alone and allowed them to experience their emotions.

Chris was able to remember the first time he used music to cope with an adverse romantic event. Unfortunately, Chris's girlfriend chose to break up with him at a party in middle school. After this, Chris said he turned to "Whole" by the band Saves the Day to cope. He explained that this song "made me feel less alone, which was good…to know that other people felt like that and that they're alright is probably the comforting thing I guess. I just felt like he was singing my story, you know." Chris listened to music that offered him comfort in his current situation. To him, comfort came from hearing stories of other people having similar experiences. Similarly, Rod discussed how he used music to cope when he had big fights with his at-the-time girlfriend, now his wife. He explained that early on they hit a rough patch and it did not seem to be getting better. Rod shared the impact a particular song, "I don't believe in love" by Queensryche, had on him,

> That song just connected with me…You don't feel alone and whenever you don't feel alone you feel better…Now I might listen to the lyrics of the song...and I know that at one time in my life this was very comforting and I hope that other people feel that way right now can maybe hear something like this and so that they can get the sort of comforting.

Similar to Chris, Rod found a song that offered him comfort. For both, comfort came from the feeling of not being alone derived from a particular song they chose at the time.

Anne also used music to help cope with adverse events experienced while she was involved in what she called a "really unhealthy relationship." Anne did not feel as though she could turn to her friends because she was embarrassed of her situation and thus turned to music to help her cope. Anne explained she

> Wanted to listen to a lot of songs that were also about that so I could…have something to relate to… I really need like good lyrics and I want them to be things that are like relevant to my life so I feel like I'm not alone in the world…

> just being able to relate to somebody else like feeling like you're not the only
> one feeling a certain way.

Like Chris and Rod, it was important for Anne to listen to music with lyrics that helped her feel as though she was not the only one who endured an adverse event in her romantic relationship. This feeling comforted Anne because it helped her relate to the singer and the situation the singer was sharing. Some participants implied that they actively sought out songs with lyrics that could possibly relate to the experience they were having.

Archer remarked that he worked hard to find songs that he already loved that applied directly to his situation. According to Archer, "I was on a mission to find songs that specifically applied to my situation…because I'm listening to the song and I'm like, yeah you are correct Toni Braxton because you know she's agreeing with my side." This was no easy task for Archer. He was in the middle of a misunderstanding with the person he was currently dating and was unsure whether this situation was leading to a breakup or not. He spent a significant amount of time trying songs on to see if they fit with how he was feeling; he was seeking out songs he could relate to in order to help him cope with the uncertainty of his relationship status.

Experience Emotion. Every participant at some point or another communicated that they used music to cope because it allowed them to either feel an emotion or stop feeling an emotion. Emotions were an inexorable force following the negative events they shared. All of the participants noted the connection that music had with their emotions. Janet explained the effect that music has on her after any breakup or fight. She said,

> I've had my heart broken and I'm out at a restaurant or a bar or at a convenience
> store and songs come over the radio… I'm like so emotional and coping and
> heartbroken like even their songs will resonate with me when they will never
> ever any other time.

Specifically, Janet is discussing pop music that she does not like. But repeatedly, after a breakup or some sort of fight, Janet cannot help but feel connected to pop songs. They allow her to experience the sadness and heartbreak she was feeling at the time. Tony recalls engaging with music in a similar way. When he and his current wife split for 3 months at the beginning of their relationship, Tony was distraught. Pearl Jam helped Tony cope with what he felt was the end of his relationship.

> So it was such a rollercoaster of emotions...The music would...not necessarily
> determine my emotions because I was dealing with all those emotions at the
> same time, it would reflect how I, what I was focusing on at that particular
> moment.

Music served as an outlet for Tony at this time, he was able to both relate to the music and experience the emotions he felt through it. This is similar to what Janet was saying earlier, people may not always know how to articulate their emotions and at that time that may not even be important, what was important to the participants, however, was that the music reflected how they were feeling—they were able to experience their emotions through the music.

Nina shared that after she went through a bad break up and traumatic car accident, she worked very hard to find happiness again. At some point, Nina explained that she would "just go on YouTube and…put down 'sad songs.'" Nina used the music in order to match the emotion she was feeling, which was sadness. Buzz explained that "Music is like a vessel to connect people to their emotions." His elaboration included both how he changed his mood

with music and how he used it to continue feeling the sadness that he was feeling at the time. Similarly, music helps Jésus continue experiencing his emotions. He shared, "…Sometimes…when you're sad …I'm gonna listen to this and just go with this vibe and just kind of let this melancholy linger a little bit." For Jésus, music helped him stay true to his emotions. Along the same lines, Archer made a comment that he is not very good about being emotional, however, he noticed that during a hard time in his relationship, music helped him get in touch with his emotional side. "The song is allowing me to be emotional about real life." In this case, Archer was relating to his situation and contemplating the misunderstanding that had occurred with his partner.

Music as a Tool: Changing Mood

　　While the first sub-theme details accounts of participants' abilities to use music as an ally to their current mood, the second sub-theme, "Music as a tool: Changing Mood," explores an alternative use of music as a coping and mood management mechanism. Managing one's mood is described as wanting to change a current mood or emotion by means such as distracting one's self through a variety of activities and/or listening to mood incongruent music. Participants noted a range of feelings they experienced after their trigger event, including sadness, rejection, anger, devastation, shock, confusion, and depression. Following these feelings, some participants wanted to experience their emotions through song and relate to the content of certain songs, as noted in the Alliance with Mood theme. However, some of those same participants also wanted to change their mood after experiencing an emotion. Six participants stated that at some point in their coping process, they wanted to change their mood by choosing mood incongruent music. Participants were able to attempt to manage their mood in two main ways: use music to reframe their emotions and to serve as a means of distraction.

　　Reframing Emotions. Eight of the participants spoke about music as being a tool to reframe their emotions. Within this code, interviewees reflected on how music was used as a tool to reframe their emotions in their coping process (Buzz), with Janet specifically calling listening to songs part of "music therapy." Music was described as something that can be used strategically in order to attempt to manipulate one's own feelings following a challenging romantic event. Only when they felt it was the right time to begin to move on did participants choose to attempt to alter their mood through music. For example, Nina said that she wanted to be sad for a short while, but then sought out angry, upbeat music like Pantera. Nina used music to reframe her sadness as anger, which was more adaptive to her recovery. Another participant (Rod) detailed how once he felt validated, then it was time to move on to something else and stop being sad. At that time, music was explained as something they used deliberately and actively, meaning they consciously chose specific songs to listen to over others that may not have the effect they sought. Many reflected upon this next step and how it can be an active attempt to change their mood.

　　Buzz explained that while he was experiencing romantically-induced emotional distress, he wanted to reframe his sadness into anger in an attempt to move on. Archer wanted to elude his feelings of disappointment and gloom by turning to happy music. Selection of music was intentional, as noted by Archer's "immediate search for something to make me mad." Music choices were also based on past recollections of how certain songs could evoke particular emotions from them. If a song had affected them in a manner in which they did not want to currently experience (e.g., sadness, depression), they could remember that and articulated their avoidance of that music. Mark states that although "Total Eclipse of the Heart" would have had an effect on his mood, it would not change it in a positive manner. He went on to say that the song is something recognizable and if he would hear it whenever he was upset about a relationship, he would immediately associate it with feelings he did not want to

experience. In a similar fashion, although Buzz said one of his favorite songs is "Down in a Hole" by Alice in Chains, he could not listen to the song because it was too depressing.

During the stage of purposefully choosing what to listen to, participants shared feelings and outcomes they wanted to achieve by choosing particular music. Participants discussed choosing songs that helped them see what the future of their relationship could be. This gave them a reason to believe that they could make it through this situation if others had, as certain lyrics from songs would imply. Nina details an incident where music helped her to realize she could be happy again in due time:

> Music is the beginning of a memory. If I'm sad and I'm going through a crap time – if this dude just dumped me – I'm gonna listen to stuff that made me feel happy one day. You know and then I'm gonna be like "yeah I'm gonna have that again." You know, everything is gonna be alright. You know, so yeah, I use that to manipulate the way I feel.

For Nina, although she felt sad, she could use mood altering music that she associated with past times of happiness in an attempt to feel that way again.

Participants also located certain music that would help them feel "empowered" and energized. They spoke of the feelings they currently had, such as sadness and depression, and their efforts to actively try to change those feelings into more positive energy. Rock music with faster beats, heavy metal, and upbeat pop songs were all mentioned as successful ways to achieve this goal. On her way to trying to feel better, Janet noted using certain genres as a tool to "make her feel more empowered," while Rod looked for songs that "kick ass and make you feel empowered." He recalled a specific song he listened to because of the lyrics following an experience with a woman whose love he seemed to have not captured:

> So if I take for instance "I Don't Believe in Love." It's a sad song because the guy liked the girl a lot and then he says, you know, "I don't believe in love, I'll just pretend she never was real, I don't believe in love, I'll never forget this pain I feel it still." Something to that effect. So yeah it's sad but in a sense it's almost also empowering too though.

It seemed that many participants may have experienced a bruise to their ego as several discussed situations when they were broken up with or had unrequited love. These situations led them to experience shock, confusion, and depression, to name a few, so logically, it makes sense that they were seeking something that would "pump them up" and perhaps give them more confidence about moving forward.

Third, some participants stated the opposite effect music can have on one's mood, which is relaxation. Two participants used the exact same wording to describe their attempts to achieve a calm state following a negative romantic event. Jésus and Nina both wanted to find a "zen" place in order to "relax." Both discussed listening to songs without lyrics and ones that were more uplifting as opposed to being depressing. Although the participants did state they were looking to feel different emotions at different times, at this point they were looking to music as a means to calm themselves and relax.

Distraction. Six out of ten people who were interviewed outlined their view of music as a way to manage their mood by providing temporary distraction. The main message respondents gave under this code was to use certain music based on the tempo and lyrics to disconnect from the current situation. Some participants talked about using friends to cope with the situation, but at times their friends would get sick of them talking about it. In the same manner, people may reach their breaking point of playing into their emotions with music and

may want to use it as a tool to distract themselves from thinking about the situation for a while. Participants in this study used music to disconnect from their own circumstances in order to block out certain thoughts, get their mind off of the situation, and escape. Mark described a string of unfortunate romantic situations and how he used music to try to forget about them:

> The beauty of hard rock is that it's kind of loud and gets your mind off things. Your mind starts to race and you block it out…I can listen to music and you know, tune out. I would use the music to block out memories or something or feelings that I might be having.

Although Mark still may have been feeling certain emotions he did not want to feel, he could still use music to provide him a temporary distraction, or an escape before he had to return to facing his thoughts again. At that point he said he would find friends to talk with again, and once he did not want to receive friends' advice anymore, he would return back to the music to escape. Jésus also used music to escape his thoughts. He spoke about music more as an outlet in the following passage:

> I think it very much helped me cope and move along. It gives you kind of an outlet that's not totally mindless, but it's close. Listening to it gives you some kind of stimuli so you're out of your head a little bit.

Jésus talked about the effectiveness of this method, which eventually led him to find some peace and move on with his life. By allowing himself to escape the situation through music, he could eventually begin to make progress.

Another aspect of music serving as an outlet from their current environment and thoughts, some participants said they chose specific songs because they did not remind them of their ex-lover. Buzz simply says, "Music got the job done of what I wanted to accomplish. It didn't remind me of her whatsoever." Rod agreed when he remarked that while he was listening to certain music, he was not thinking of the person who had caused him pain. Several people said they would listen to music that their "ex" did not like or that did not remind them of that person. Most stayed away from songs that they would listen to together or songs they knew the other person enjoyed. This most likely helped them to advance their progress toward forgetting about the situation.

Finally, the tempo, lyrics, and genre can be used as a distraction from the adverse romantic event. Most respondents said more upbeat, rock, and heavy metal music was what they turned to in order to escape. Mark provided a lot of detail on how this works in his life:

> Real fast beats and big guitars and drums - you can lose yourself in it a little bit. I'm not actually listening to what the lyrics say and maybe that's good because you can – you have any kind of emotional distress, you listen to any lyrics and you can kind of apply it to your situation. And I think that's what I'm trying not to do is – I'm trying not to think about these things cause I just get worked up over them. The rock music especially faster beat rock music – provides a distraction.

Mark fervently explained how he wished to not think about his negative romantic situations. In order to distract himself from his thoughts, he needed an outlet that would let him focus on something else. In his case, fast-paced music was the stimulus that could deliver the results he wanted. Being lost in the beats of the music and knowingly avoiding any lyrics that may have pertained to his past heartache was an active move made to distract.

Discussion

The interviews supported past findings regarding music and coping, but also uncovered other noteworthy facets of this process. Not only did this study explore a topic that warranted further research because of inconsistent results, but it did so in a more specific context. Respondents were asked to focus on a time when they used music following a romantic event that caused them to experience emotional distress. Previous studies asked interviewees to recall any adverse event and to describe their music use during that time. Assessing this procedure in a romantic frame of reference is important not only because of the number of people who experience an upsetting event due to a romantic encounter but also because of the amount of songs that are written that address the feelings people go through when experiencing trauma from romance.

"Music as a tool" was the major theme that emerged from this research. This theme describes two functions of music: Alliance with Mood and Changing Mood. Alliance with Mood described how participants saw music as a tool to relate to their current situation and to allow them to experience their current emotions. Changing Mood explained how participants used music as a tool to reframe their emotions and distract them from their situation. The findings from this study were strikingly similar to Garrido and Shubert (2011) and Van den Tol and Edwards' (2011) research which explored one side of music and coping: the paradox of why people listen to sad songs when in a sad mood. The current study did not limit the choices for music to be only sad songs for when a person was sad; we explored uses of all music to assess the purposes different genres and songs could serve. The previous studies showed categories of therapy, reflection, having a companion, connection, mood enhancement, nostalgia, and distraction as popular themes. This study revealed all of those themes, but not all in conjunction with sad music, necessarily. Sad music seemed to be used when people wanted to express their emotions, not enhance their mood. Next, those who said they used music to distract themselves from the situation seemed to mention more rock and heavy metal music, with upbeat tempos as opposed to sad songs, found in previous research. Finally, consistent with Chen, Zhou, and Bryant (2007), many participants noted their use of mood congruent music, but only for a limited amount of time. Some said they would listen to sad music while experiencing emotional distress, but then knew it was time to pep themselves up, be upbeat, or change their mood. That is when they turned toward music for assistance in executing this change.

Results revealed consistent trends with how people use music following romantic turmoil. Participants noted a range of events that caused them to turn to music including breakups, fights with a partner, and unrequited love. All participants noted the strength from one degree to another of music being used as a coping tool in order to manage their mood, consistent with Zillman's statements about music being able to alter a person's mood. Interviewees discussed music as something that helped a small amount all the way to saying they could not have coped without it. Referring to the two types of support, informational and emotional (Mortenson, Burleson, Feng, & Liu, 2009), participants seemed to link music to emotional support, especially in the sense that it helped them to regulate their distress. Overall, music matched the description of being a highly person-centered sender of a comforting message (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002) as many people talked about the music's ability to help them understand their feelings and see the broader picture.

A noteworthy contribution to this area of study is the exploration of emotional distress following an actual upsetting romantic event. Most other studies investigated any type of upsetting event, or they induced participants' moods, whereas this one provided a clear focus toward romantic situations and asked participants to recall a real situation, making the data more organic. Because so many songs are written about love, heartbreak, infidelity, and

unrequited love, it was logical to explore this area. This hunch was supported when participants quoted specific lyrics of songs that related to their particular unfortunate romantic event that they would listen to in order to receive a certain gratification from the music. Because of the plethora of songs about romance and the frequency in which people experience unsettling outcomes in relationships, it seems necessary to continue to study this avenue of music and social support. In addition to the contributions to the field academically, there is also a strong practical application for this study. While people can experience much joy from romantic relationships, they also can be the reason why partners undergo unpleasant emotions (Theiss, Knobloch, Checton, & Magsamen-Conrad, 2009). Although people may not want to immediately try to make themselves feel happy again, as indicated in this study, it is important to know how to manage feelings of anger and sadness that stem from romance. While people of all ages experience emotional distress and relational heartache, one practical application of these results may be to young people who may be dealing with some of these emotions for the first time. Many universities include a page on their website for students to visit if they are having a difficult time managing their feelings from a romantic break up (Heetderks, 2016; Villanova University, 2016). They offer ways to handle the unpleasant feelings of emotional distress including speaking with loved ones, exercising, and meeting with a counselor, but none of these suggestions includes mediated support. Because music can provide comfort, support, mood management, and mood-altering effects we should circulate this information outside of academia because it could help people through troublesome experiences that they go through from romance. Music could be added as a strategy to help people cope after romantic turmoil. Additionally, therapists could include a discussion about music in their sessions with clients to determine what kinds of songs they are listening to. Sad songs could indicate they are not ready to move on, while mood incongruent music may suggest they are ready to move forward.

Conclusion

While this study contributed to the understanding of how people use music as a coping tool during adverse romantic events, it is not without its limitations. Participants recalled past events where they used music to cope, which could impact the accuracy of information that was recalled. Most participants were recalling events from a year or more ago and may not have been able to precisely remember which songs they used and how they felt in that moment. Next, this sample gives readers an in-depth look into 10 participants' experiences, but these experiences cannot necessarily be generalized to others. With that said, rich opportunities exist for future research in this area. First, sex differences should be explored. Interestingly, there were many more males than females who volunteered for this study. Does one gender or the other find music to be particularly helpful when coping? Second, are there trends for younger people versus older people in their attempts to cope through using music? This study featured people 23 to 34 years of age; future studies could open the age range to 18 and older to see how and if people 35 and above are using music to help them through emotional distress. Third, some of our participants described a physical reaction they had while listening to music, such as crying. This area could be explored to see if music that elicits a physical reaction from the listener is effective or ineffective in helping a person to cope.

As people experience romantic turbulence it is important to also study the manners in which they attempt to cope with emotions that occur afterward. Music of different types and genres was shown to be something that can provide assistance to people while they are dealing with distress. This research adds to the notion that "when we listen to music, we get something out of it" (Benson, 1979, p. 70), as all participants referred to music as something that helped them to cope. The way in which music can have a positive effect on people going through a

rough time is a practical area of media research that should continue to be explored, as to uncover the benefits that the art can provide to listeners.

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