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Changing perceptions: Interpretation of songs versus lyrics with a domestic violence theme

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Paws and to Alba, who sacrificed many doggy walks and adventures to sit at my feet during the time spent on this thesis.

No friendship could be more precious to me.

_In loving memory of_

_Alba_

I would also like to thank my husband, Shane, for his unwavering patience and support; and my friend, Denyse, for her generosity and kindness.
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Abstract

Listening to songs is a frequent activity for many people in Western societies. Not only are people exposed to songs in a variety of places, but many people increasingly choose to listen to songs. Some songs are popular despite the antisocial or prosocial nature of the lyrics on important societal topics, such as domestic violence. However, both music and lyrics have the power to communicate, and are processed by the human brain at a complex and detailed level. Of interest to the present study is whether people perceive song narratives and messages differently across these two presentations. The present study explored whether people change their perception of songs with domestic violence content as promoting or opposing domestic violence, when listening to the song compared to reading the lyrics without music. Primarily, the present study aimed to explore the self-reported reasons for changes in song interpretation and perception between the two presentations. Twenty-seven adults (18 females and 9 males), aged between 18 and 65 years, participated in the study. Participants were recruited from both the community and a university in Auckland, New Zealand. A survey research design was used to obtain data in relation to each of eight songs with domestic violence content, and a mixed-method of quantitative and qualitative analyses were employed to analyse the data. The data from the present study showed few statistically significant differences in perceptions between the presentations of song versus lyrics in relation to the potentially prosocial and antisocial domestic violence content of songs. However, qualitative analyses showed that the interpretation of song narratives and messages involves information perceived from both music and lyrics, which can influence the perception of songs. The study also found that incongruence between music and lyrics can result in softer perceptions of antisocial lyrics.
Thus, people may not find antisocial messages in songs objectionable when the music of those songs is pleasant. Implications for future research are discussed.
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