

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**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

Master of Arts

in

Psychology

at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand

Mellany Boule

2011

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.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge my genuinely lovely supervisor, Dr Heather Buttle, for her consistent guidance and support, her approachable manner, her focused and timely attention (even in busy periods!), and her trust at the very beginning. Heather, I hope many more fortunate students benefit from your supervision, and that all of them are as grateful as I am. Thank you!

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.

Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Abstract	iv
Table of Contents	vi
List of Tables and Figures.....	ix
Introduction	1
Songs	3
Definition.....	3
The Music Component	3
The Lyrics Component	4
Music and Language	5
Structural components and human perception	7
Brain structures and resources.....	11
Songs as Communication.....	13
What Music Conveys	14
What Lyrics Convey.....	16
Potential Effects of Music	16
Potential Effects of Lyrics	17
Universal Effects and Culture	19
Music versus Lyrics	21
Separate or Integrated Processing	21
Superior Effects	22
Communication	24
Song Interpretation and Perception.....	27
Interpreting Lyrics	28
Previous Research	29

The Present Study	34
Method	36
Participants	36
Measures	36
Design	38
Materials	38
Procedures	42
Results	46
Quantitative Data	46
Qualitative Analysis	51
Discussion	63
Differences in Group Perceptions	70
Overall Song Classifications	71
Conclusion	72
References	75
Appendices	89
Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet	89
Appendix B1: Questionnaire for the Song First Condition	92
Appendix B2: Questionnaire for the Lyrics First Condition	93
Appendix C: Participant Consent Form	94
Appendix D1: Instructions for Participants in the Song First Condition	95
Appendix D2: Instructions for Participants in the Lyrics First Condition	96
Appendix E1: Song Rankings of Individual Responses to Questions Three and Four	97
Appendix E2: Overall Response Categories by Group and Song for Question Three....	98
Appendix E3: Differences between group responses to question three	100
Appendix E4: Differences between group responses to question four.....	101
Appendix E5: Number of changed/unchanged responses by song	102
Appendix F1: Codes and Data Extracts for the Song First Group	104
Appendix F2: Codes and Data Extracts for the Lyrics First Group	110

Appendix F3: Mind Map of Codes and Themes from Question Five..... 116

List of Tables and Figures

Table 1. Final Song Selection	41
Table 2. Conversion of Categorical Data to Interval Data	47
Table 3. Mean and Standard Deviation by Song for Question Three	48
Table 4. Mean and Standard Deviation by Song for Question Four	48
Figure 1. Themes and Sub-Themes for Responses to Question Five	55