

HEIGHTENED AROUSAL INTENSIFIES EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE WITH MUSIC

Nicola Dibben

Dept. of Music, University of Sheffield, UK

Background

Empirical evidence suggests that peripheral feedback can influence emotion experienced: heightened physiological arousal intensifies emotions felt (an effect variously referred to as misattribution or transfer of arousal) and there is some evidence from facial feedback and posture studies that particular kinds of physiological state can induce the experience of certain emotions. The study reported here is the first to investigate the effect of peripheral feedback on emotional experience with music.

Aims

The study reported investigates the role of physiological arousal in determining the intensity and valence of emotion experienced when listening to music.

Method

Two groups of participants, with different levels of induced physiological arousal, rated four excerpts of music on ten emotion scales, in terms of the intensity of emotions felt while listening to the music, and of emotions expressed by the music. One group took five minutes of vigorous exercise before the listening task, the other group listened to a relaxation tape for five minutes. Arousal levels were measured by taking pulse rates before and after the arousal induction, and at the end of the experiment.

Results

Participants who had exercised reported more intense experiences of emotion felt and perceived while listening to music than the participants who had relaxed. This effect was most consistent for emotion felt rather than emotion expressed by the music.

Conclusions

These results provide evidence that arousal level influences the intensity of emotion experienced with music, and therefore that people use their bodily sensations as information as to the emotion felt and expressed by music. This finding is discussed in relation to psychological and musicological theories of emotion and music.