

The Paradoxical Attraction to Music-Induced Sadness Seen in Adolescents

Meghana Khanolkar

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With the ever-increasing levels of sadness in today's society, listening to sad music and wallowing in the emotions it evokes has become a popular coping mechanism for many individuals. This systematic review aimed to analyze the tragedy paradox and explore the effects of sad music on sad people, in particular adolescents, and the various factors that make this behavior rewarding. Several studies regarding the perception and enjoyment of sad music were analyzed to understand the psychology behind this paradoxical behavior and what impedes adolescents from opting for more upbeat music to get to a happier mental state. Results indicated that the appeal of sad music is largely explained by four main factors which are dissociation, fantasy inducing, feeling of connection, and high aesthetic value and nostalgia. On the other hand, the research presented also dwells on the tendency of rumination caused by sad music and its detrimental effects on people prone to depression. Future implications of these findings are discussed, with a focus on music-based interventions greatly advancing therapy and neuroscientific research in the field of mental health.

Keywords: Sad music, Adolescents, dissociation, rumination, music-induced empathy, nostalgia

Introduction

Music has been a deeply rooted, integral part of human life and evolution since time immemorial. It transcends linguistic communication and societal and cultural divides. As a largely social species, it has also greatly aided humans in bonding and social organization. The power music holds over one's life and emotions are indisputable, and it has also demonstrated the ability to relieve stress, revive memories and aid in brain injury recovery¹.

However, with the influx of sadness in today's society, listening to music with melancholy themes and tunes when feeling upset, heartbroken or depressed seems to be one of the most popular coping mechanisms. It is often seen with adolescents in particular, to find satisfaction in listening to sad songs and then wallowing in the sorrowful emotions evoked by it. Sad music has long been a subject of interest and research due to its potential effects on individuals experiencing sadness, and this paper seeks to analyze this in adolescents, as this behavior is most popularly seen in this age group.

Music is an integral part of adolescents' everyday lives, with a reported average time of 3 hours per day spent listening to music. Therefore, in this period of significant physiological, mental and hormonal changes, the influence of music on adolescent mental health is significant. This encompasses identity expression, emotional regulation, fostering social connections and a sense of community, and stimulating intellectual growth and creativity².

Adolescents generally seek mood-congruent music, but the appeal of listening to music that elicits 'negative' emotions when already feeling down presents quite a paradox. Transient sadness is a basic human emotion, characterized by low mood, tiredness, rumination and withdrawal from social communications. It is particularly associated with feelings of loss, of another individual or the self, disappointment, and loneliness³. Therefore, the experience of sadness is largely assumed to be negative and thus raises the question of why people listen to sad music during these times that elicit further negative emotions within them.

The popularity of melancholy or unhappy music is no new phenomenon. Sadness, hubris, heartbreak and catharsis have been vital and recurring themes in poetry, music and literature, ever since ancient Greeks brought tragedy to the stage as a theatrical genre in the 6th century BC⁴. This suggests a long-standing universal appeal of the portrayal of negative emotions through artistic expression. Among the diverse genres and styles, sad music emerges as a profound channel for emotional expression and introspection, especially during moments of personal sorrow. Understanding the effects of immersing oneself in melancholic melodies holds implications not only for the broader field of psychology but also for the lived experiences of individuals seeking solace and understanding through the language of music.

Methodology

In this systematic review, several studies dealing with sad music were analyzed to investigate the effects of sad music on sad individuals. The studies were picked from research published in credible journals and were only included if they dealt with adolescents, had credible methods of collecting data, and used already established and validated scales to analyze participants' responses. Google Scholar was a frequently used database and keywords such as *sad adolescents and music*, *effects of sad music on mood*, *music as a coping mechanism* and *role of music in emotional regulation* were employed to search for relevant research papers.

Almost all studies had online anonymous surveys as it was deemed to be the most cost-effective and would ensure greater accessibility to a diverse group of individuals falling in the required age range. They were also considered to be the most effective way to minimize any social desirability bias in participants' responses, as they had the privacy to be as truthful as possible. The questionnaires gathered demographic information from participants like age and gender, social contexts such as family environment and relationships, and mental health history, and took special note of those participants who reported themselves as depressed or otherwise in a low mental state.

Well-established and validated scales were utilized in the surveys to measure participants' personality traits and situational and emotional factors such as mood and memories evoked after listening to sad music. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index, in particular the Empathic Concern scale and the Fantasy scale, seemed a popular method across studies referenced in this paper of assessing participants' empathy and fantasy proneness. Similarly, a 12-item subscale drawn from the Tellegen Absorption Scale or a derivation from the Rumination-Reflection Questionnaire were some of the methods used to measure participants' level of absorption or tendency to ruminate. Participants were asked to provide responses on 5-point or 7-point Likert scales, indicating the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with specific statements.

In order to gain information on the situational factors influencing participants' attraction to sad music, studies had open-ended questions to allow participants to provide detailed examples of instances which lead them to gravitate towards sad music. Emotional factors were explored by asking specific questions about participants' emotional responses to sad music. For example, Garrido and Schubert developed a Like Sad Music Scale based on the Sad Film Scale while making additions of their own. On the other hand, Taruffi and Koelsch asked participants to select the emotions they experienced while listening to sad music from the Geneva Emotional Music Scale as they believed it provided a "nuanced- assessment of music-induced emotions."³ The studies that were conducted under controlled conditions, on the other hand, used various mood-induction experiments to judge the

change in emotional states of participants before and after listening to different genres of music. Participants were asked to listen to music of different valence under varied settings, and their physiological and psychological responses were recorded and analyzed.

Why Listen to Sad Music?

While it is counterintuitive to listen to sad music when already feeling down, most people reported that they found this behavior rewarding, therefore explaining it as a commonly used coping mechanism. Responses towards listening to sad music are influenced by four main factors: dissociation, imagination, empathy, and reflection.

Listening to sad music for dissociation can particularly be seen in adolescents who are, or have been victims of abuse or other traumas⁵. Dissociation involves a mental separation or detachment from one's surroundings or emotions. When individuals listen to sad music, they may enter a state of dissociation where the emotional content of the music temporarily transports them to a different mental space, allowing a break from their immediate reality. This dissociative experience can be both a coping mechanism and a form of emotional regulation, providing individuals with a respite from their own emotional challenges.

Moreover, music having melancholy tunes and lyrics is also known to evoke feelings of nostalgia, peacefulness and wonder⁶. Therefore, it serves as a catalyst for sparking listeners' imaginations and creating enjoyable fantasies. By listening to sad music, teenagers often indulge in daydreams which reflect their personal experiences, desires and deep longing for connection. The tendency to fantasize is a further extension of dissociation, where awareness of current or external circumstances is temporarily suspended and replaced with imaginative narratives.

Additionally, sad music also conjures empathy in listeners, allowing them to connect with the emotions expressed in the music and validating their feelings of sadness. A major emotion felt by teenagers in a depressive mood is loneliness. Listening to singers emote feelings of heartbreak, loss, and longing chases away these feelings for the time being. Sad music thus stimulates empathy and fosters a sense of connection as individuals find echoes of their experiences in the music. This provides listeners with a sense of understanding and solidarity, which can be comforting in times of sadness.

Furthermore, research suggests that listening to sad music can also facilitate reflection. This leads to people contemplating their emotions and past experiences or relationships on a deeper level. This introspection can aid in emotional processing and growth, allowing individuals to make sense of their feelings and potentially find meaning or closure in their experiences. Nostalgia, termed a bitter-sweet emotion, is one that is commonly evoked by listening to melancholy music⁷. Moreover, dwelling

on emotions evoked by melancholic music can provide a cathartic experience, allowing individuals to release and relieve their emotional pain in a safe and controlled manner. This is as an emotional regulation mechanism that was found to be highly popular among adolescents, explained by the induced emotional arousal in listeners as was detected through physiological responses recorded under controlled conditions. As this has no real-life implications, it allows individuals to experience a temporary release and emotional cleansing, ultimately helping them to cope with their sadness and improve their mood.

Why Not Happy Music?

On paper, it seems logical to want to get to a 'better' emotional and mental state and move past the unwanted, 'negative' emotions. However, this hardly seems to be the case observed in people experiencing sadness. This is most likely owed to the fact that happy music, rather than uplifting one's mood, instead reminds the individual of the stark contrast between their current state and the positive emotions portrayed in the music⁸. This contrast can further exacerbate feelings of sadness and lead to a deeper sense of dissatisfaction. Humans are not built to switch emotions in an instant, and trying to force oneself to be instantly happy through upbeat music can feel inauthentic and dismissive of the current emotional state.

Sad music on the other hand is regarded as having a higher aesthetic value. It elicits a sense of beauty and depth in people that is often associated with complex emotions. By providing a sense of validation and understanding, individuals can fully immerse themselves in their emotions while listening to sorrowful music without feeling judged or pressured to be "happy." It is common for people to choose music that complements the overall mood, such as sorrowful music at a funeral or upbeat music at a party⁹. In this context, the choice of sad music aligns with a need for resonance and a shared emotional experience, which may be perceived as more comforting and authentic than upbeat music.

Attraction to Sad Music Based on Personality and Demographics

Analyzing the characteristics and demographics of the participants and their listening habits, there are clear patterns that emerge. Participants in all these studies came from diverse cultural backgrounds indicating that there is no clear association with any one specific culture group being more prone to being attracted to sad music when sad. In terms of gender, girls were found to be more receptive to the influences of sad music on their mood, and hence more likely to use sad music as an emotional coping mechanism.

Furthermore, it was found across studies that participants with certain personality traits and cognitive styles were more likely to be attracted to sad music for various reasons. Those ranking high in empathy, absorption and reflectiveness experienced a significant arousal of emotions, however the valence of these emotions varied. The participants ranking high in absorption majorly reported or were found to experience negative valence and found a hedonistic pleasure in listening to sad music when sad. Those ranking high in reflectiveness however experienced a more positive valence with nostalgia and introspection playing a bigger part, and enjoyed sad music for its emotional richness and aesthetic. Nevertheless, the valence of emotions was found to be more nuanced in regards to specific unusual circumstances like bereavement and the gravity of the situation as reported by the participants across studies.

Rumination

While listening to sad music can offer a form of emotional regulation through catharsis and a sense of connection during difficult times, it's essential to acknowledge that there can be potential negative impacts associated with this practice, depending on the individual and the context. One potential negative impact is the risk of rumination¹⁰. Rumination refers to the tendency to dwell on negative thoughts and emotions, replaying them over and over in one's mind. This can prove harmful to individuals, especially adolescents prone to depression and anxiety as it only reinforces their negative emotional state.

In recent years, the music and media industries have experienced a dramatic influx of sadness. Themes associated with heartbreak and sorrow are prevalent in music and television today, and pop music has sonically decreased in happiness and increased in sadness as stated by the University of California Irvine¹¹. This saturation of sad music in pop culture can potentially perpetuate negative emotions and contribute to a cycle of rumination for individuals already struggling with their mental health. Adolescents may be particularly vulnerable to this influence, as they are in a stage of development and tend to be more receptive and susceptible to what they hear or listen to.

Moreover, people who are stuck in a cycle of rumination often lack the desire to get out of their current emotional state¹². Although they do not enjoy it, they seem attracted to it for hedonistic reasons and are prone to such self-sabotaging behavior. This can also lead to isolation and withdrawal from friends, family or other sources of positive support. By relying solely on music as a coping mechanism, individuals may prevent themselves from addressing the root of their problems or seeking healthier emotional outlets. Therefore, the effects of sad music on sad people can vary depending on the individual's susceptibility to rumination and their overall mental state.

Possibility of Music Therapy and Other Future Implications

Recognizing the huge emotional impact and potential of sad music, its future implications in music therapy hold great promise. Sad music can be a powerful tool for individuals struggling with grief, trauma, or mood disorders, providing a means for emotional expression and processing within a therapeutic context. Therefore, as our understanding of the neurobiological and psychological effects of music deepens, future music therapy approaches involving sad music may also incorporate neuroscientific insights¹³.

Firstly, from a psychological perspective, one could interpret a patient's continuous tendency to listen to melancholy music as an indicator of emotional distress¹⁴. This could prove useful when working with children and adults with autism spectrum disorder, alexithymia, or other conditions where verbal expression of emotions is challenging. By using sad music as a bridge for emotional communication, therapists can help patients explore and express their feelings in a safe and controlled environment and provide a platform for self-reflection.

Moreover, tailoring therapeutic interventions to include carefully curated sad music could facilitate a more targeted and effective approach to addressing specific emotional challenges. The incorporation of techniques such as personalized playlists and guided listening sessions would use music as a form of precision medicine, allowing therapists to create individualized treatment plans based on the unique needs and preferences of each patient. As technology advances, virtual reality and immersive audio experiences could enhance the potential of sad music, providing individuals with a controlled but emotionally impactful experience. These advancements in music therapy have the potential to revolutionize mental health treatment, offering new avenues for emotional healing and self-exploration.

Discussion

This study sought to explore the supposed paradox of why people, in particular adolescents, sought to listen to sad music when already feeling down. The results revealed that listening to sad music when feeling melancholic is a common phenomenon with several psychological and emotional reasons behind it. One primary factor is the idea of catharsis—the emotional release and purification that can be achieved through art, in this case, music. This process can be therapeutic, allowing individuals to confront and process their emotions in a safe and controlled environment.

Moreover, sad music may serve as a form of validation for the listener's feelings. When going through a tough time, individuals may find solace in the fact that others have experienced similar emotions, mitigating feelings of isolation or loneliness. Additionally, sad music provides an avenue for introspection.

The emotional depth conveyed in the lyrics and the mood of the music can prompt individuals to explore their own thoughts and feelings. Sad music also has the power to induce a sense of nostalgia. Certain songs can evoke memories and emotions from the past, allowing listeners to engage with and reflect on their own life experiences.

Beyond these theoretical implications, the results of this study hold practical implications in the fields of psychology and music therapy. Understanding why people are attracted to sad music when feeling unhappy will help psychologists and therapists develop more effective interventions to support individuals experiencing depression, anxiety or any other forms of emotional or mental distress. Music has always been known to evoke profound emotions from listeners and has the potential to provide a therapeutic outlet and aid in emotional processing for individuals who are sad or troubled. Therefore, the future of sad music in music therapy holds exciting possibilities for more personalized, immersive, and effective therapeutic interventions. With advancements in technology, neuroscience, and a deeper understanding of individual responses to music, sad music is poised to play a significant role in shaping the landscape of music therapy for emotional healing and well-being.

Limitations

Analyzing the exact significance and magnitude of the impact of sad music on adolescents is hampered by the fact that there is a greater complexity that occurs unconsciously, and so is affected by memory bias or is difficult to detect. Therefore, there is scarcity of literature that actually studies the physiological effects of sad music and its consequences in great depth. There is also limited study conducted on the usage of sad music as a coping mechanism in the various stages of grief. So, it cannot truly be analyzed the valence and intensity of emotions evoked by listening to sad music directly after an immense emotional upheaval in contrast to being depressed.

Conclusion

The paper aimed to study why adolescents experiencing sadness are drawn to sad music, analyzing several studies that examine the effects of sad music on participants of this age group. It delved into the role of sad music as an emotional coping mechanism, highlighting how it helps adolescents process and express their emotions. Additionally, the study explored listening habits associated with different personality types, revealing that preferences for sad music often correlate with specific personality traits. Future implications of these findings include potential applications in music therapy, suggesting that tailored musical interventions could be beneficial for emotional support and mental health treatment in adolescents.

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