The MUSIC Model of Music Preferences and Preference for Mainstream Western Balkan Regional Music Among Young Adults in Croatia

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to examine the structure of music preferences measured with music excerpts belonging to mellow, unpretentious, sophisticated, intense and contemporary music (the MUSIC model; Rentfrow et al., 2011) and additional excerpts from the regional mainstream music of the Western Balkans that is popular in Croatia. Another aim of the study was to examine the relationships between preferences, uses of music and music consumption. Participants were 192 young adults (65% female; M_{age} = 20.57, SD_{age} = 1.93), who listened to 26 music excerpts and rated how they liked them. Twenty-one music excerpts were used to measure preference for the five dimensions of the MUSIC model (Rentfrow et al., 2011) and another five music excerpts (selected in a pilot study) were used to measure preference for mainstream Western Balkan (WB) regional music. Participants also completed the Uses of Music Inventory (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2007) and the Music Consumption Scale (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2012). Confirmatory factor analysis was used to examine the expected six-factor structure of music preferences when using excerpts intended to measure the five dimensions of the MUSIC model and one dimension of a mainstream WB regional music. The results confirmed the six-factor structure. Some of the dimensions of music preference were positively correlated with uses of music: preference for mellow and mainstream WB regional music correlated with emotional use of music and preference for sophisticated music correlated with cognitive use of music. Preferences for mellow, unpretentious and sophisticated music all correlated positively with music consumption. The observed results corroborate the results of previous studies examining the relationships between music preferences and music-related tendencies and behaviours. In future studies, research on music preferences from the MUSIC model can be extended by also using mainstream WB regional music.

Keywords: music preferences, Western Balkan regional music, uses of music, music consumption

Introduction

The MUSIC model by Rentfrow et al. (2011) is a standard framework for conceptualizing music preferences. It includes preferences for mellow, unpretentious, sophisticated, intense and contemporary music. Each of the five dimensions can be described by musical (e.g., tempo, rhythm, instrumentation) and psychological characteristics of music (e.g., sad, inspiring, reflective, contemplative) that are not exclusively associated with a musical genre. For example, mellow music is smooth and relaxing and can refer to songs from the pop, soft rock and soul/R&B genres. Unpretentious music is sincere, somewhat romantic, neither complicated nor aggressive, and primarily includes music found in country and singer–songwriter genres. Sophisticated music is intelligent, complex and often instrumental, combining pieces from classical, jazz and world music. Intense music can be described as distorted, loud, energetic and aggressive, with songs belonging to rock, punk, heavy metal and power pop. Finally, contemporary music is rhythmic and percussive and not sad. Songs with these characteristics can be found in rap music, Latin, electronica and Euro-pop.

When investigating music preferences using the MUSIC model, listeners are presented with several validated music excerpts (examples can be found in Rentfrow et al., 2011) belonging to each of the five dimensions and are asked to rate their liking of each excerpt they hear. This method allows for the study of music preferences in different populations, including children, regardless of their familiarity with a particular style. The classification of music underlying the MUSIC model also enables examination of music preferences across cultures, as the majority of music listened to in different countries, including the regional music of a particular country, can be assigned to the five dimensions of the MUSIC model. To date, the MUSIC model has been extensively replicated in

many countries (Greenberg et al., 2022; Nave et al., 2018; Rentfrow et al., 2012; Rossi et al., 2021) including Croatia (Greenberg et al., 2022; Žauhar & Levak, 2020).

One limitation that may arise when using this model to study music preferences in different countries is the possibility that not all music listened to in a given country can be classified according to the MUSIC model. Some music genres may be specific to a particular region and may not share their characteristics with any of the dimensions of the MUSIC model. In Croatia, for example, a group of music genres, including dance music from the 90s, folk, turbofolk, popular and patriotic music, which can be labelled as mainstream Western Balkan (WB) regional music could not be adequately assigned to any of the dimensions of the MUSIC model (Butković & Žauhar, 2025). Mainstream WB regional music consists of contemporary folk tunes and is characterised by the simplicity of the melodies and structures. Lyrics are predominantly about topics that evoke feelings especially when listened to on social occasions (emotional relationships, national identity, etc.). Thus, when preferences are measured according to the MUSIC model with validated music excerpts in Croatian samples, preferences for mainstream WB regional music, which is popular among adolescents and young adults in Croatia (Pavlović et al., 2017; Plantak, 2020; Senjan, 2021), cannot be investigated because this type of music does not have enough musical or psychological similarities with the dimensions of the MUSIC model to be categorised as one of the factors (Žauhar & Levak, 2020).

So far, preferences for mainstream WB regional music in Croatia have been measured with questionnaires (Butković & Žauhar, 2025; Dobrota et al., 2019; Pavlović et al., 2017; Račevska & Tadinac, 2019). However, when preferences were examined with validated music excerpts used in the measurement of preferences according to the MUSIC model, mainstream WB regional music was not included (e.g. Žauhar & Levak, 2020). To complement the MUSIC model and extend the measurement of music preferences in Croatia (and the WB region), in this study we investigated the structure of music preferences in a Croatian sample of young adults. We collected liking ratings for excerpts of mainstream WB regional music and for excerpts of mellow, unpretentious, sophisticated, intense and contemporary music from the MUSIC model. Additional excerpts from other music from the region, such as pop, rock, sophisticated or contemporary music, that share their characteristics with the five dimensions of the MUSIC model, were not used. Indeed, the excerpts used in the MUSIC model were selected to represent all pieces of music that share the same characteristics, regardless of the region from which they originate (Rentfrow et al., 2011).

It is documented that music preferences can partly be explained by music-related tendencies (such as music use for specific reasons) and behaviours (such as music consumption through attending music concerts; e.g., Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010; Schäfer, 2016; Vella & Mills, 2017). Music-related tendencies refer to a listener's inclination to listen to music in a particular way or for a particular reason (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2007). For example, music can be used to regulate one's emotions and moods (emotional use of music), to analyse voices or solos in music performances or to analyse the structure of musical pieces (cognitive use of music), and to serve as a background for other activities unrelated to the music itself, such as studying, working, cleaning, etc. (background use of music). On the other hand, music-related behaviours refer to various aspects of music consumption such as buying or downloading music, attending music concerts, reading about musicians, etc. (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2012). Although the results were not always consistent, previous studies have revealed some relationships between music preferences, uses of music and music consumption. For example, preferences for conservative (Račevska & Tadinac, 2019), regional (mainstream WB) (Butković & Žauhar, 2025), and conventional music (Vella & Mills, 2017) were negatively correlated to cognitive use of music. Cognitive use of music is intellectual and related to analysing voicings, performances or structures of music pieces and can be related to preferences for more complex music such as sophisticated (Vella & Mills, 2017) or intense music (Getz et al., 2014; Žauhar & Levak, 2020). Due to its characteristics, mainstream WB regional music is not appropriate for this type of listening. Emotional use of music was positively correlated with the preference for sad music, that can be used for emotion and mood regulation. The use of music as a background for other activities was positively related to preferences for happy and social music (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010). At social events and to accompany other non-musical activities, participants often choose music that is rhythmic and played at faster

tempi. Finally, positive correlations have also been observed between music consumption and liking of intense, contemporary and mellow music (Levak & Žauhar, 2021). Actual music consumption is a behavioural manifestation of music preferences and may be related to preference for music of different styles.

In this study, we examined the structure of music preferences when mainstream WB regional music excerpts were used together with the excerpts from the MUSIC model to measure music preferences. We expected that the six-factor structure would be confirmed.

In addition, we investigated the relationships between preferences, uses of music and music consumption. We hypothesized that preferences for mellow and mainstream WB regional music would be positively correlated with emotional use of music, intense and sophisticated music with cognitive use of music, and contemporary music with background use of music. We further anticipated a negative correlation between preferences for mainstream WB regional music and cognitive use of music. With regard to music consumption, we expected a positive correlation with different music preferences.

Method

Participants

A total of 192 young adults (65% female; M_{age} = 20.57, SD_{age} = 1.93) participated in the study.

Material and measures

All music excerpts had a duration of 15 seconds. Twenty-one excerpts were taken from the Rentfrow et al. (2021) study validated on a Croatian sample (Žauhar & Levak, 2020), and five were selected to represent mainstream WB regional music in a pilot study described below. After listening to each music excerpt participants indicated their liking on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all; 5 = completely). The names of the excerpts are listed in Table 1 (for mainstream WB regional music, performers and genres are given in parentheses).

Pilot study for mainstream WB regional music excerpts. The pilot study was carried out as part of the course assignment for 25 students, who were divided into five groups of five students each, and did not participate in the main study. Each group was tasked with selecting music excerpts representative of one of the five regional music genres (dance, folk, turbofolk, patriotic, popular). For each of the music genres, a designated group had to choose five music pieces that were commercially released but unknown to a wider audience and prepare 15-second excerpts that were then digitized. These excerpts were played over a computer as MP3 files to the students who had not selected them (N = 20 from the remaining four groups). For each excerpt, these students had to judge which genre the excerpt belonged, how representative it is for that genre on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 10 (completely), and answer whether they recognized the performer and/or the music piece. Based on their answers, one excerpt was selected as a music stimulus for each regional music genre. Croatian dance (M = 8.15, SD = 1.04), patriotic (M = 7.75, SD = 1.65) and turbofolk (M = 8.45, SD = 1.19) pieces had high representativeness with none of the students recognizing either the performer or the music piece. Croatian folk music piece (M = 8.30, SD = 0.98) also had high representativeness, but one student recognized the piece. Popular music piece had the lowest representativeness (M = 7.25, SD = 1.37) with one student recognizing the piece and five the performer.

Table 1. Factor loadings, descriptive data and reliabilities for the dimensions of music preference and correlations between the dimensions of music preference, uses of music and music consumption

Music excerpts	Music preferences					
	Sophisticated	Intense	Contemporary	Mellow	Unpretentious	Regional
Seltzer, Do I Drink Too Much?	.569					
Sonata A Major	.675					
Who Are You?	.624					
La Trapera	.425					
La Wally	.559					
I Was Wrong	.675					
Death Before Dishonor		.840				
Face the Failure		.821				
White Knuckles		.655				
Johnny Fly		.846				
Falling Down		.795				
Immaculate			.664			
Get the Party Started			.613			
Thankful			.386			
Sexy			.764			
She Walks				.357		
Sweet Scene				.490		
Children of Spring				.841		
That's Not Rockabilly					.792	
Carrots and Grapes					.659	
I'm Already Over You					.684	
Harmoniku kad zasviram (Narodni dar; Folk)						.801
Znam (Novi fosili; Popular)						.694
Blam, blam (Ćana; Turbofolk)						.602
Kad sklopim oči (Ivo Fabijan Mrvelj; Patriotic)						.595
Budi tu (Funky G; Dance)						.594
M	3.22	3.13	2.99	2.89	3.13	2.69
SD	0.78	1.07	0.84	0.82	0.98	0.92
α	.77	.89	.69	.62	.75	.78
Sophisticated		.24**	.21**	.40**	.33**	.00
Intense			.04	.08	.34**	-.20**
Contemporary				.02	.06	.17*
Mellow					.45**	.06
Unpretentious						.22**
Emotional use of music	.05	-.02	.12	.17**	.10	.20**
Cognitive use of music	.33**	.17*	.10	.16*	.01	-.16*
Background use of music	.06	-.06	.16*	.14*	.06	.13*
Music consumption	.35**	.12	.11	.27**	.19**	-.05

Note. The order of the excerpts is comparable to Rentfrow et al. (2011) and Žauhar &Levak (2020). Regional = Mainstream WB regional music; *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

Uses of music. The Uses of Music Inventory (UMI; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2007) consists of 15 items and was translated into Croatian in an earlier study (Žauhar & Levak, 2020). The subscales Emotional (e.g. *When I listen to sad songs, I feel very emotional*), Cognitive (e.g. *I often enjoy analysing complex musical compositions*) and Background use of music (e.g. *I enjoy listening to music in social events*) each comprise five items. Participants rated their agreement with each item on a 5-point scale (1= strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The observed reliabilities of the subscales were α = .60 for emotional, α = .80 for cognitive, and α = .66 for background use of music. Similar reliabilities were observed in other studies (e.g., Butković & Žauhar, 2025; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2007).

Music consumption. The original Music Consumption Scale (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2012) consists of ten items and has a single-factor structure. The Croatian version of the scale consists of eight items based on the results of a confirmatory factor analysis (Levak & Žauhar, 2021). Participants indicated how often they engaged in the activities described by the items (e.g. *Attend musical concerts or recitals*). In the original version of the scale, participants responded on a 5-point scale (1 = very rarely; 5 = very often). In the Croatian version of the scale participants were given the possibility to respond that they never perform some of the activities with the 5-point response scale (1 = never; 5 = very often). This change was made to ensure that participants who do not perform the listed activity (e.g. *Play a musical instrument (including vocals)*) could also give a valid answer. Furthermore, some of the activities listed in the scale are not as common within young adults today as they were when the scale was constructed and it is therefore to be expected that some participants never engage in these activities (e.g. *Visit music shops (HMV, Zaavi, etc.) with the intention of buying music.*) The reliability of the scale was α = .76, similar to that reported in other studies (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2012; Levak & Žauhar, 2021).

Procedure

Participants took part in the study by attending an online Zoom meeting from home. Meetings were organised for groups of about 10-15 people at a time. In the first part of the meeting, they listened to 26 music excerpts, each lasting 15 seconds. Immediately after listening to each excerpt, they rated how much they liked it on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all; 5 = completely). The music excerpts were presented in four random orders (one random order for each group of participants). In the second part of the meeting, participants provided demographic data and completed the Uses of Music Inventory (UMI; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2007) and the Music Consumption Scale (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2012). The duration of the online session was approximately 30 minutes.

Results

The results are presented in two sections. The first one presents the structure of the music preferences measured by liking ratings of listened music excerpts belonging to the MUSIC model and additional excerpts of mainstream WB regional music. The second section reports the relationships between music preferences, uses of music and music consumption.

Factor structure of music preferences

In order to examine the expected six-factor structure of music preferences when using excerpts intended to measure the five dimensions of the MUSIC model and a mainstream WB regional music dimension, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted. The results showed that the six-factor structure was acceptable ($\chi2[284] = 661.10$, $p < .001$; NC = 2.33; CFI = .80; RMSEA = .08; SRMR = .09). The factor loadings are shown in Table 1. Table 1 also presents descriptive data and reliabilities for six music preferences as well as Pearson's correlations within the music preferences dimensions and uses of music and music consumption (discussed in the following section). Descriptive data indicate moderate preferences for listening to six music dimensions included in the study. The reliabilities of the MUSIC model dimensions ranged from moderate to high. The reliability for the mainstream WB regional music preference was moderate and acceptable. When observed, the correlations within the dimensions of the MUSIC model were predominantly positive and low to moderate. The correlations between mainstream WB regional music preference and contemporary and unpretentious music preferences were low and positive, while the correlation with intense music preference was low and negative.

Relationships between music preferences, uses of music and music consumption

Descriptive data of uses of music and music consumption as well as Pearson's correlations between them are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive data and correlations between uses of music and music consumption

	Uses of music			MC
	Emotional	Cognitive	Background	
M	3.72	2.29	3.52	2.70
SD	0.67	0.87	0.78	0.83
Emotional		.05	.37**	.17**
Cognitive			.13*	.59**
Background				.37**

Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$. MC = music consumption.

Within uses of music, both emotional and cognitive use of music were positively correlated with background use of music, but their mutual correlation was not significant. All uses of music were positively correlated with music consumption.

In order to examine the relationships between music preferences, uses of music and music consumption, Pearson's correlation coefficients were calculated and presented in Table 1. From Table 1 it can be observed that sophisticated music preference positively and moderately correlated with cognitive use of music and music consumption, while intense music preference was only positively correlated with cognitive use of music and the correlation was low. For contemporary music preference, only a low positive correlation was observed with background use of music, while mellow music preference had low positive correlations with all uses of music and with music consumption. A low positive correlation was also found between preference for unpretentious music and music consumption. Mainstream WB regional music preference showed low positive correlations with emotional and background uses of music and a low negative correlation with cognitive use of music.

Discussion

In this study, we investigated music preferences for the five dimensions of the MUSIC model, i.e. mellow, unpretentious, sophisticated, intense and contemporary music, and additionally for mainstream WB regional music. We examined whether mainstream WB regional music is a separate dimension of music preferences from the MUSIC model dimensions, and whether its use complements the use of the MUSIC model in understanding the music preferences among young adults in Croatia. Investigating music preferences through liking ratings of music excerpts has advantages over using questionnaires (e.g., the listener does not need to be familiar with the music style to indicate whether they like the music they hear). Furthermore, the MUSIC model provides a framework that can be used in different countries to measure music preferences with validated music excerpts (Greenberg et al., 2022). Although the MUSIC model has also been applied to Croatian samples (Greenberg et al., 2022; Levak & Žauhar, 2021; Žauhar & Levak, 2020), it has not been able to measure preference for music that is commonly listened to in Croatia and the WB region (especially among adolescents and young adults), as this music does not fit into the five dimensions of the MUSIC model in terms of its characteristics. So far, there have been no systematically selected music excerpts to reliably measure the preference for this type of music.

The results of this study confirmed the expected six-factor structure of music preferences and showed that the reliabilities of each dimension of the MUSIC model were in accordance with previous research using the same or similar excerpts in Croatian (e.g. Žauhar & Levak, 2020) and other samples (e.g. Doi et al., 2018). The reliability of the mainstream WB regional music preference was moderate and acceptable, within the range of the reliabilities observed for the dimensions of the MUSIC model. The preference for mainstream WB regional music did not correlate with preferences for sophisticated and mellow music, but it correlated positively with preferences for contemporary and unpretentious music, and negatively with the preference for intense music. The observed correlations were low, but the observed pattern of results reflected the similarities and differences between the styles included in the dimensions of the MUSIC model and mainstream WB regional music. It is worth mentioning that some of the correlations between the MUSIC model dimensions were higher than the correlations with the mainstream WB regional music dimension, further indicating that this dimension captures something different from the existing MUSIC model dimensions. The music excerpts validated in this study can be used in future research to examine a wider range of music preferences in Croatia, but also in the Western Balkan region, as similar music is listened to in other neighbouring countries.

In terms of the relationships between music preferences and uses of music, the results showed that almost all music preferences from the original five dimensions of the MUSIC model correlated positively with at least one use of music, indicating that different types of music can be used for different functions (Schäfer, 2016). As expected, sophisticated and intense, but also mellow music correlated positively with cognitive use of music, while mainstream WB regional music preference correlated negatively with cognitive use of music. The observed relationships can be explained in terms of characteristics of the music and its suitability for intellectually engaging listening. Similar results have been observed in other studies (e.g., Butković & Žauhar, 2025; Getz et al., 2014; Račevska & Tadinac, 2019; Vella & Mills, 2017).

As expected, preferences for mellow and mainstream WB regional music correlated positively not only with emotional use of music but also with background use of music. A positive correlation with background use of music was also observed for contemporary music. Mellow music is appropriate for emotion and mood regulation and the observed result corroborates previous studies (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010). On the other hand, mainstream WB regional music is suitable for listening in social situations when people want to have fun and relax with friends and experience shared emotional release (Plantak, 2020). Although they have different characteristics, mellow, contemporary and mainstream WB regional music are used as a background for other activities that take place in groups of peers (more pronounced for mainstream WB regional music and contemporary music) or in solitude, as they represent music that is commonly listened to in young adulthood (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013).

The unpretentious music preference was the only music preference that was not related to the uses of music, but it was positively related to music consumption, along with mellow and sophisticated music. As predicted, music consumption correlated with several dimensions of music preference. However, the results of this study only partially confirmed the results observed in adolescents (Levak & Žauhar, 2021), where positive correlations were found with mellow, intense, and contemporary music. Actual music consumption varies among participants of different ages (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2012), but these relationships need to be further investigated, especially in relation to music preferences. The scale used in this study examines music consumption in general. However, not all items are equally applicable to different styles of music. Future studies should use a more precise measure as well as a measure of actual behaviour (Kok et al., 2024; Krause & Brown, 2021).

Conclusion

This study showed that the expected six-factor structure of music preferences is acceptable when considering mellow, unpretentious, sophisticated, intense, contemporary, and mainstream WB regional music with the purpose of measuring music preferences with music excerpts. In a sample of young Croatian adults, preferences for each of the six dimensions were moderate. In this study, the results also showed that the correlations between music preferences, uses of music and music consumption corroborated previous research. Specifically, the newly examined preferences for mainstream WB regional music correlated positively with the emotional and background uses of music, and negatively with the cognitive use of music. This result can be explained by the characteristics of regional music and its suitability for social situations in which people listen to music to experience shared emotional release. In conclusion, mainstream WB regional music excerpts can be used together with the music excerpts validated by Rentfrow et al. (2011) within the MUSIC model to extend audio-based research on music preferences.

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