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Music and Creativity: Is there a connection?

CREATIVE COGNITION - DIVERGENCE - HAPPY MUSIC

Music is constantly around us in our everyday lives, from the song that starts to play as your morning alarm goes, to the playlist on the radio during your commute to work, and even the elevator jazz music on the way up to your office. Whether it is conscious or subconscious, we are absorbing music around us all the time. In addition to the subconscious background songs, most of us are listening to music through our earphones and also playing musical instruments.



Listening to music to enhance my creative flow, is something that is crucial for my idea generation and development when designing. This stems from my passion for music, which was instilled at a very young age as I began learning to play the piano. Seventeen years of playing an instrument has trained me to read, compose and play pieces, specifically of the classical genre. This extends to my constant need to be surrounded by music, especially when doing creative tasks. For individuals who find themselves in a creative space, such as designers, music has the ability to create a positive impact on their creativity (Ritter & Ferguson, 2017). My musical experience inspired me to research this subject matter and identify whether there is a connection between music and enhancing creativity.

As explained in the article "Happy creative: Listening to happy music facilitates divergent thinking", listening to music is linked to having positive effects on creative thinking, which is an inherent part of our cognitive functioning (Ritter & Ferguson, 2017). Within our cognitive functioning is our creative cognition which is defined as the ability to come up with new ideas and to be able to problem solve. Divergent and convergent thinking are both components of creative cognition. A study was conducted on two groups, where one listened to four classical music excerpts all varying in valence and sound, and the other was in a silence control condition. The study focused on the role of listening to music and its impact on divergent and convergent thinking. Creativity was determined to be higher in those who listened to the classical music that was high on arousal and in evoking positive moods. This type of music was coined happy music (Ritter & Ferguson, 2017).

Listening to music has the ability to enhance creativity. However, creativity was only positively impacted by divergent creativity related tasks and not by convergent creativity ones (Ritter & Ferguson, 2017). This connects to the Mozart Effect which proves that individuals who listened to music composed by Mozart were found to have superior spatial abilities. Similar to the study on higher divergent creativity, their arousal level and mood are what impacted their performance in regard to their superior spatial abilities. Listening to happy music enhances divergent creativity due to the dual pathway to creativity model which argues that "creative ideation is a function of persistence and flexibility, and that situational variables can influence creativity either through their effects on persistence, on flexibility, or both" (Ritter & Ferguson, 2017, p. 10).

In simpler terms, the happy music could have increased divergent thinking since that type of cognition involves a more flexible thinking style than convergent thinking. With these facts in mind, listening to happy music is something that could be beneficial for designers throughout the divergent thinking stage of the creative process (Ritter & Ferguson, 2017). In relation to the direct correlation between music and higher divergent creativity, another important factor is that different moods elicited by music will also impact creative cognition (Eskine, Anderson, Sullivan, & Golob, 2018). Listening to positive music may be effective at improving happiness, thus eliciting a positive mood (Ferguson & Sheldon, 2012).

However, if anxiety is apparent, this could cause someone to have a very narrowed focus (Heid, 2019). The issue with this is that they would be focusing on one problem and would not be allowing their thoughts to diverge. In the incubation stage of problem solving and idea generation, music can prove to be quite impactful. At this stage, there is a level of unconscious thought occurring in the background of your mind about the problem and how to solve it. Listening to music can help relax your focus and stimulate the idea incubation. It can also assist when searching for creative inspiration. Thus, if listening to music to create improvements in divergent thinking, it is specifically associated to the fact that this music evokes a positive mood inside us (Heid, 2019).



More research is required to explore this connection between musiclistening and optimizing creative cognition, as it is currently limited (Ritter & Ferguson, 2017). It is suggested that the effect of music listening on creative performance would be even stronger for individuals with music experience, however more studies are required on this specific topic to prove a direct correlation. As a musician, the connection is obvious to me, and I credit much of my time spent learning and practicing piano to my creative abilities. Playing an instrument provided me a place to relax my brain and let my mind wander. I often use this as a strategy for inspiration and sit down and play some of my favourite songs when I am stuck on a problem. In addition, while doing creative work, I find myself listening to classical songs and allowing my mind to mull over ideas. To conclude, based on the research presented, as well as my own music background, there is a connection between listening to music and enhancing creativity, and this should be utilized throughout personal and professional applications (Ritter & Ferguson, 2017).

Music can be impactful during the incubation stage of problem solving and idea generation.