

## The effect of expectations on emotional response to songs

The purpose of this study was to explore the contextual (labelling) effects of songs on emotional response. A study by North & Hargreaves (2005) showed that participants who were played a song that they had been told was associated with suicides in young fans were more likely to rate their emotional response as more negative than those participants who had been told that the same song was associated with helping young fans through their emotional problems. In other words, while songs may have an inherent emotionality associated with them, the expectations that people have about a song can also influence their emotional response.

So songs may not simply be “depressing” or “life-affirming” but they can achieve these different emotional responses if you have a particular attitude or expectation.

The experiment I ran tested this idea further but with a couple of changes:

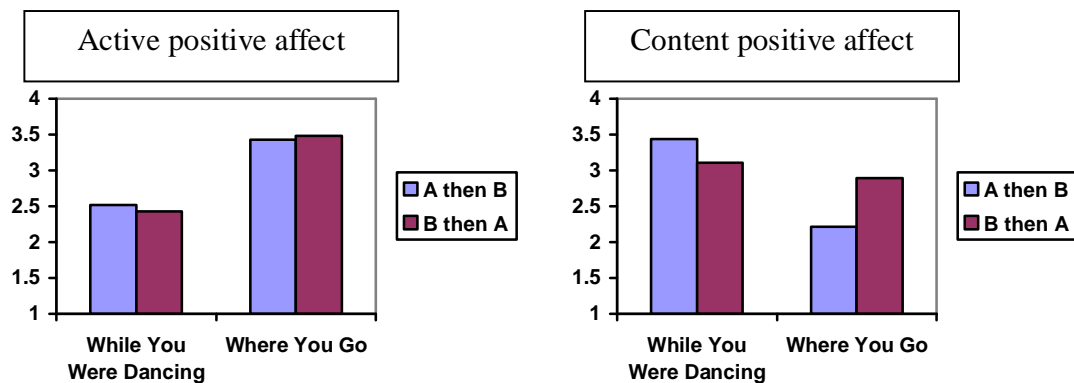
1. The idea of telling participants that a song is either associated with suicide or helps with emotional problems is quite extreme and almost explicitly leading. So in this experiment I used less extreme contexts: I played two songs and gave participants two scenarios over which the songs supposedly appeared in the soundtrack to a student film. Scenario A had a girl arguing with a boyfriend and storming out of a nightclub while Scenario B had them making up and watching the sunrise holding hands. I played the songs live to the whole group of participants but on the questionnaires they filled out, half were given the scenarios in the order A then B while the other half were given the scenarios in the order B then A. In other words, people were expecting either the first song to be positive and the second negative or else the first song to be negative and the second to be positive.
2. Positive emotion is not a unitary thing. Paul Gilbert, a clinical psychologist, describes different affect systems, one relating to achieving and doing (*active positive emotion* – lively, energetic, excited) and one relating to safety, security and self-soothing (*content positive emotion* – secure, content, warm). So in this experiment we looked to see if the same effects were found for both types of positive emotion.

I played and sang two songs “live”. The first was “While You Were Dancing” (a slow ballad-like song) and the second was “Where You Go” (which is a bit bouncier). Participants were told that they were part of a soundtrack to a student film. Everyone heard the same songs in the same order but half the participants were told that Song 1 (“While You Were Dancing”) was played during a scene where the female protagonist had fallen out with her boyfriend and Song 2 (“Where You Go”) was played during a scene where they had made up. The remaining participants were told that these songs were played during the same scenes but the other way around. (In fact, while there was a student film written around one of my songs a few years ago neither of these songs was in it.) I should also point out that both of these songs were written by me so it was highly

unlikely that anyone had heard them before or had any preconceived ideas. I should also point out that the lyrics to both songs are quite impressionistic and certainly ambiguous.

So what were the results?

**Left hand graph:** On average *While You Were Dancing* induced active positive emotion somewhere between “a little” and “somewhat” while *Where You Go* induced active positive emotion somewhere between “somewhat” and “quite a lot”. It didn’t matter whether people thought the song was associated with a girl breaking up or making up with her boyfriend, it seemed to induce the same amount of active positive affect regardless while one song just increased active positive affect more than the other (i.e. the more up tempo song led to great active positive affect than the slower song).



**Right hand graph:** In general, *Where You Go* seemed to induce less content positive emotion than *While You Were Dancing* (which is completely the opposite of the effect of active positive affect in the left hand graph) although the size of this effect depended on whether you were given the positive then negative context (A then B) or the negative then positive context (B then A). *While You Were Dancing* induced more content positive affect for those who were told it was played during a make-up scene than it did for those who were told it was played during a break-up scene. Conversely, *Where You Go* induced less content positive affect for those who were told it was played during a make-up scene than it did for those who were told it was played during a break-up scene.

Basically, what this means is that the context of a song influences the emotional response you have to it but only for the positive emotion relating to being secure, content and feeling warm. For the positive emotion relating to being lively, energetic and excited, it seems only to be something about the song (e.g. tempo, key, rhythm) that’s important, not the context.

Songs do seem to have an inherent emotionality about them but context also plays a role in influencing some (but not all) aspects of positive emotional response.