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The Structure of Musical Dislikes

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The current study explored the structure of rationales for musical dislikes. In an online survey, participants ($N = 627$) evaluated self-selected styles and artists in a slight and strong degree of dislike condition with respect to 41 reasons for musical dislikes distilled from a previous interview study. After constructing nine subscales of reasons, a latent profile analysis identified two profiles of explanatory strategies for disliked music. The highbrow profile included reasons such as the music being Too Simple, or Not Authentic, having No Impact on the listener, and a perceived Social Incongruence, and was mainly associated with a dislike of German schlager, traditional music, and pop. The lowbrow profile included reasons such as the music being Too Niche and Too Complex and was associated with a dislike of jazz, classical music, heavy metal, and techno. A correlational network revealed that Displeasure can occur in relation to Social Incongruence, or in relation to Too Niche music. No Impact occurs in response to music regarded as Too Simple or Not Authentic. A strong dislike is consistently characterized by higher Displeasure, while Social Incongruence and Not Authentic were reasons to strongly dislike artists from mainstream styles. Hence, investigating fundamental musical value judgments, the current study shows that musical dislikes are a complex, multidimensional component of musical taste. The results have implications for the psychology and sociology of music, widening our understanding of people's attitudes toward music and its role in everyday life.

Keywords: displeasure, social, rejection, attitudes, musical taste

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The vast majority of psychological research in musical taste is based on liking or preferences for certain types of music. However, a few recent studies on musical dislikes indicated that this "positive" approach paints only an incomplete picture that cannot represent the evaluative diversity and complexity of people's attitudes toward music. It has been shown that musical dislikes fulfill important functions in everyday life such as social distinction and self-identity processes (Ackermann & Merrill, 2022; Peltola & Vuoskoski, 2021). Therefore, the concept of musical taste needs to be extended to include disliked music, which can be explored through people's explanatory strategies for negative music preferences.

In general, two branches of musical taste research can be identified. One can be regarded as sociological musical taste research, which focuses on musical style categories and their relation to socioeconomic factors. These studies stand in the tradition of the French sociologist Bourdieu (1984) and include liking and disliking since both are essential for social distinction and cohesion (Bryson, 1996; Lizardo & Skiles, 2015). The other branch of research can be regarded as psychological musical taste research, which has investigated the functions and use of music and, therefore, has been dominated by the study of musical preferences (Boer et al., 2012; Greb et al., 2017; Hargreaves & North, 1999; North et al., 2004; Schäfer & Sedlmeier, 2009; Sloboda et al., 2001). What is missing is a study that focuses on the individual, differentiated aesthetic judgment, which goes beyond investigating a flat rejection of musical styles and the link with socioeconomic factors. Using qualitative research methods, it was shown that musical dislikes are a complex, multidimensional component of musical taste (Ackermann & Merrill, 2022; Peltola & Vuoskoski, 2021), which warrants further investigation using a broader audience and quantitative methods in order to identify the structure of rationales for disliked music.

Rationales for Disliked Music

Genuine psychological musical taste research on the manifold of reasons for disliked music is particularly scarce. Some insightful findings come from studies using qualitative methods, for example, by asking online participants to describe a disliked style or artist in their own words (Cunningham et al., 2005; Peltola & Vuoskoski, 2021), by performing in-depth interviews on the dislikes directly (Ackermann & Merrill, 2022), or indirectly, that is interviews on musical preferences with findings about dislikes on the side

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(Greasley et al., 2013), and by analyzing reviews from music magazines or online platforms (Anttonen, 2016; von Appen, 2007).

Taking these results together, the rationales for musical dislikes relate overall to musical value judgments in general, which refer to the music, the listener/the self, and the social environment (Ackermann & Merrill, 2022; Behne, 1987; Hargreaves, 2012). Music-related reasons for disliking music were shown to include compositional aspects such as melody, harmony, rhythm, tempo, structure, and loudness, as well as general aesthetic dichotomies such as variety versus uniformity, complexity versus simplicity, and innovation versus reproduction (Ackermann & Merrill, 2022; Anttonen, 2016; Cunningham et al., 2005; Greasley et al., 2013; Peltola & Vuoskoski, 2021). The linguistic qualities or the content of the lyrics constitute reasons for dislikes as well as the quality of the performance (e.g., the use of the voice and specific instruments; Ackermann & Merrill, 2022; Cunningham et al., 2005; Greasley et al., 2013).

A supposedly strong focus on commercial success was mentioned to foster a dislike (Frith, 2004; Greasley et al., 2013), as well as a pretentious behavior by the artists ("wannabes and posers"; Cunningham et al., 2005), and certain forms of behavior and content ("sex and violence"; Frith, 2004; Greasley et al., 2013). These aspects relate to the broad concept of authenticity, which was found not only to be reason for a positive value judgment (Berli, 2014; Grazian, 2010; Kunz, 1998; Peterson, 1997; von Appen, 2007) since participants report on "inauthenticity" as a reason for disliking music, for example, missing originality and honesty in the emotions and topics expressed in the music (Anttonen, 2016; Frith, 2004; Kunz, 1998; Parzer, 2011).

It is obvious that the perception and interpretation of musical, textual, and behavioral aspects are dependent on the listener, who applies normative and self-related reasons to form an opinion. For preferred music, it was shown that self-related or identity-related functions are very important. In addition to identity construction, especially in adolescence (Ackermann, 2014; Hines & McFerran, 2014; Laiho, 2004), other functions include identity management, expression, and reinforcement of individual values and attitudes, self-reflection and exploration, and trying out and expressing different aspects of personality (Dolfsma, 1999; Rentfrow, 2012; Schäfer & Sedlmeier, 2010). This was confirmed for disliked music, where a mismatch between the music and the self-image, the beliefs, values, and attitudes of the listener was used as a justification for the rejection of certain music (Ackermann & Merrill, 2022; Peltola & Vuoskoski, 2021).

Other self-related reasons refer to the perceived and felt emotions, i.e., what the music is perceived to express as well as the feelings evoked, which are unpleasant bodily feelings of disgust, nausea and pain, the perceived risk of physical harm, muscle tension, aggression, and the urge to escape (Ackermann & Merrill, 2022; Parzer, 2011; Peltola & Vuoskoski, 2021). Painful memories and negative experiences can also lead to avoidance of certain music. Furthermore, situation and context have an influence on the participants' ability to bear disliked music and how to react to it (Cunningham et al., 2005; DeNora, 2000; Peltola & Vuoskoski, 2021).

Finally, social reasons come into play which relate to concepts from social psychology such as in-group and out-group relationships. While the in-group consists of friends and family who use shared dislikes to demonstrate cohesion, the out-group consists of "the others" whose music one dislikes, which is often based on stereotypes and prejudices about the fan base of the music (Ackermann & Merrill, 2022; Bakagiannis & Tarrant, 2006; Lonsdale & North, 2009; Tarrant et al., 2000).

Taken together, reasons for disliked music are either based on intrinsic properties of the music (melody, harmony, etc.), or on extrinsic properties, connected to the self (emotions, attitudes, etc.), or the social (commerce, authenticity, etc.). While qualitative methods were able to reveal a variety of reasons, in a next step, the exact relations between these aspects and the latent structures behind these verbalized reasons need further investigation with quantitative research methods.

Dislikes of Musical Styles and the Role of Social Distinction

In sociological musical taste studies, socioeconomic factors have been treated as independent variables and musical styles as highly stereotypical representations of music (e.g., rap and gospel music as being black and young, heavy metal as white and middle-aged, techno as white and young; Lizardo & Skiles, 2016). Even though the current study does not focus on socioeconomic variables, studies on the relationship between the social status and musical styles give insight into which styles are disliked by whom.

The main discourse regards the differentiation between higher and lower social strata and their respective tastes, which are used for symbolic exclusion (Bryson, 1996). For example, highbrow taste is associated with a preference for classical music and jazz, whereas lowbrow taste is associated with a preference for popular music, but with the highbrows exhibiting a more omnivorous taste (Peterson & Kern, 1996). Nonetheless, this does not imply that highbrow omnivores like all styles equally and unequivocally as they also have dislikes for certain musical styles, artists, and pieces. Very elite highbrows in Germany were shown to have a rather exclusive preference for classical music and to be very particular about their taste (Neuhoff, 2001). In a US sample, metal and rap were named as the most often and strongly disliked musical styles, supposedly because of their association with lower educated listeners (Bryson, 1996). In a UK sample, Metal and electro/techno as well as world and urban music were disliked by half of the participants, while classical music (but not opera) was shown to be the most often positively judged style (Bennett, 2010; Savage, 2006; Warde, 2011). Findings from a representative German sample show that the least educated listeners prefer a typical lowbrow German style called schlager (literally, "hits"; originally, the German word for all popular music, now a specific style of German pop, partly mixed with traditional music with mainly German lyrics, which has its own historical traditions, social networks, and market segments; Mendívil, 2008), and the most educated prefer the typical highbrow style of classical music, while the preference for metal is, in contrast to findings from the United States, not related to education (Lehmann, 2018).

Hence, the social and cultural background influence musical taste which is why each study can only be understood in its specific context. In different cultures, different styles are associated with different stereotypes and some styles are popular in one culture and unknown to another. For the current study, it will be of interest to see how social justifications for the dislikes are used by the participants themselves, which other reasons these relate to and whether

their dislikes also follow the dichotomy of highbrow and lowbrow musical taste.

Degree and Types of Disliked Music

Studies on musical taste typically use musical styles as references, but when participants are asked to list their musical dislikes, they report on a variety of references, including musical styles, genres, artists, albums, individual pieces, and even specific performances. Furthermore, when these participants were asked to rate the degree how much they disliked the music, about one-third of the ratings was at and below the midpoint of the scale, showing a graduation of musical dislikes that were explained differently (Ackermann & Merrill, 2022). Likewise, as musical likes can extend from a mere "like it" to absolute love, there is a range of musical dislikes from a harmless "don't like it" to outright hate (Parzer, 2011; Savage, 2006) and research needs to further investigate how different reasons explain different degrees of (dis)liking.

Besides these differences between experimental conditions (e.g., strong/slight dislike), differences between the explanatory strategies of people might also be expected. Another qualitative study found two groups of listeners, one with a strong negative attitude and one with a rather neutral attitude toward "aversive" music (Peltola & Vuoskoski, 2021). The first group experienced much stronger unpleasant feelings, a threat to their own musical identity, and a violation of social and moral rules in response to aversive music than the other group. Hence, it seems promising to not only investigate different reasons applying to types and degree of dislike but also different people using different strategies to explain their disliked music.

The Present Study

The current study explores the structure of the individual reasons for disliking music as they have previously been unfolded with qualitative research methods. Specifically, in a previous study with in-depth interviews, participants were asked to provide a list of their disliked music and each entry was discussed on why exactly it was disliked (Ackermann & Merrill, 2022). The categories derived from a qualitative content analysis were, for the current study, transformed into a quantitative study using an online survey with 43 items (41 reasons and two reactions to disliked music). Participants evaluated two self-selected styles and two self-selected artists, each with a slight and strong degree of dislike condition in order to reflect the different degrees and types of music people use to explain their dislikes.

The aim was to create a correlational network of the reasons which represents the structure of the rationales for disliked music, tentatively putting forward some causal relations between the reasons. In order to do so, a semantic structure of the items was determined (subscales), which then enabled the investigation of the correlations between the subscales, followed by a latent profile analysis to determine differences in explanatory strategies between participants. Next, it was investigated whether the reasons applied differently to certain musical styles or interacted differently with the investigated types of dislike (musical styles and artists) and the degree of dislike (slight and strong) as previous findings lead to the assumption that there might be different explanatory strategies behind disliking certain styles to different degrees, dependent on the strength of the attitude toward the music.

Method

Ethics Statement

All experimental procedures were approved by the Ethics Council of the Max Planck Society (No. 2702-12) and were undertaken with written informed consent of each participant.

Participants

We collected data from 639 participants. After inspecting the rating behavior for anomalies, we excluded 12 participants, who showed 90% of all their ratings on the extreme end of the rating scales (low or high). After this step, 627 participants (402 female, 225 male) stayed in the study, with a median age of 26 (range: 18–75, IQR = 12). The age distribution appeared to be bimodal. Fitting a Gaussian Mixture Model (using the *mclust* package for R) corroborated the visual impression. We found one age group with participants up to 30 years ($N = 417$, 66.5%), and another one with participants older than 30 years ($N = 210$, 33.5%).

The participants were mainly highly educated, with 48.6% having a university or college degree (bachelor's, master's, or PhD), 94.7% having a school degree of A-levels ("Abitur"), and 56.6% of the sample being students. The older age group was a little less educated than the younger, as measured by the proportion of participants having at least A-levels (97.6% for the younger vs. 89% for the older, $\chi^2(1) = 20.50$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = 0.18$).

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed based on the findings of a previous interview study (Ackermann & Merrill, 2022). Forty-one items were created, representing the categories and codes found in the qualitative study. A similar level of abstraction in the wording of all items was assured which would allow for the items to be applicable to more than one musical style and artist. At the same time, it was important that the item formulations remained as close as possible to the vocabulary used in the interviews and that they were easy to understand but not misleading. The items included statements on musical features, lyrics, emotional expression, emotional and bodily effects, discrepancies with the self-concept, and social factors. Additionally, two items on reactions to being exposed to the disliked music were added: switching (off) the music and leaving the room when the music is played.

A large part of the items was designed with two wordings, one using "too much," and the other "too little." The decision arose from the interview data, as participants repeatedly criticized an excess or a lack of certain qualities in disliked music (Ackermann & Merrill, 2022). A similar observation showed that positive taste judgments in most cases refer to the "right" amount of a trait (Woodward & Emmison, 2001). This is similar to studies evaluating music performances with a "just about right scale" (Popper & Kroll, 2005), which queries properties of an object with an ideal midpoint ("just right") between the endpoints "too much/too strong" and "too little/too weak" (used for piano performances, Kroger & Margulis, 2017; and for voices, Merrill & Larrouy-Maestri, 2017).

Procedure

The study was run using the Enterprise Feedback Suite (EFS) and advertised via social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, music

forums on the Internet, and various email distributors of various student councils of German universities. The study was conducted in German. Participants were informed about the procedure, data usage and protection, and about a raffle to win a 10 Euro Amazon voucher after the study. The data were collected anonymously, and the survey took about 20 min on average to complete.

Participants were first asked to select a musical style they strongly disliked from a list of 15 styles. The styles were derived from the interview study (i.e., fitting the German sample) in accordance with existing musical taste inventories (Litle & Zuckerman, 1986; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003) and consisted of blues, country, electronic dance music (EDM), techno, house, jazz, classical music, heavy metal, pop, rap/hip hop, rock, German schlager, non-European music, traditional German music, and reggae. Participants were also informed that they should select the most suitable style which would also cover disliked sub-styles or genres. Next, participants were asked to rate how strongly they disliked the style on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*very slight dislike*) to 7 (*very strong dislike*). This was followed by the 41 items on the reasons for disliked music and the two reaction items, spread over two pages in the same pseudo-randomized order. The participants rated the degree of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 5 (*completely agree*) and the option of "do not know/is not applicable." This procedure was repeated for the slightly disliked musical style.

For the artists, participants were asked for the name of a strongly and slightly disliked artist (e.g., singer, band, composer) using a free text field. Participants were then asked to assign a style to the artist, using the same list of choices as before. The disliking rating and the query of reasons and reactions remained the same. Importantly, in case participants indicated that they did not strongly or slightly dislike any style or artist, they could skip the evaluation and were led directly to the next one.

Finally, demographic data (age, gender, school qualifications, and occupational situation), music listening behavior, and six items on the significance of music in their lives (Schäfer & Sedlmeier, 2010) were surveyed. Quality of data collection was ensured on two occasions within the questionnaire by an item that prompted participants to check the box "fully agree." Data and analysis scripts are available at https://github.com/klausfrieler/dislikes.

Analysis

As the current study is exploratory in nature, we focused on empirical and theoretical considerations when investigating the structure of the reasons for disliked music. In order to reduce the number of variables and thus the complexity of the analysis, we first constructed a Dislike scale with subscales. To this end, we first applied a factor analysis to the rating scales across all four conditions (style/strong, style/slight, artist/strong, and artist/slight together) to guide our manual construction of subscales. This resulted in an oblique factor solution with eight factors (explaining a total of 48% of variance, Table S1 in the online supplemental materials). Next, we reordered and regrouped some items to get a set of semantically coherent subscales to represent different easily interpretable aspects. First, in cases of cross-loadings, a theoretically informed decision was made about the grouping. Second, two factors (MR2 and MR8) showed many cross-loadings and items with low loadings and could not be clearly separated into two factors and were therefore combined into one subscale (Too Niche). Third, one factor (MR6) was split into two subscales as two sets of items (one with somewhat higher, one with lower loadings) represented two theoretically different concepts (Too Simple and Too Mainstream) which were of interest to further explore separately. Fourth, "social.not_authentic" was grouped with several music-related items on one factor, for example, "music.too_little_tension," "music.too_uniform," or "music.too_schematic," which are clearly semantically different aspects, probably connected due to causal relationships. A Not Authentic subscale was created that consists of only one item, which is justified by the item's unique semantic position within all items. Authenticity is a very specific cultural concept, which should not be grouped a priori with any of the other items, in our view. Hence, we decided to disentangle such discrepancies of items, while trying at the same time to not increase the number of factors too much. This finally led to nine subscales with sufficient albeit not perfect separation due to the constraint of keeping the number of subscales manageable (Table 1; a list of items and the correlation matrix of all single items can be found in Table S1 and Figure SCOR1 in the online supplemental materials). Subscale scores for further analysis were calculated as the mean value of all involved items after using the R package *mice* (with default settings) for imputing missing values. A follow-up confirmatory factor analysis (using the *lavaan* package for R) showed that our new scale had a sufficiently high fit for our purpose (CFI = 0.807, TLI = 0.787, RMSEA = 0.067, SRMSR = 0.075), improving on the original factor solution (with CFI = 0.782, TLI = 0.762, RMSEA = 0.072, SRMSR = 0.081). However, because some variables are highly non-normally distributed, the fit indices should be taken with caution. Our subscales are mainly a tool to reduce the complexity of the analysis and should not be regarded as representing true psychological latent constructs at this stage.

In order to evaluate the underlying structure of the subscales and prepare the data for a correlational network, the most stable correlations between the subscales were identified. As we were interested in the differences between conditions and no independence of the conditions can be assumed, most analyses were conducted for each condition separately. We used the correlation matrices for the complete data set as well as the four conditions and selected all pairs of correlations that were highly significant in all four correlation matrices (using Holm adjustment and a significance level of $p = .002$, because there was one adjusted p-value of $p = .00125$). This left us with 14 correlations, which can be found in Table 2 (panel plots for all conditions can be found in Figure SP1–SP5 in the online supplemental materials). In order to display the correlations, we constructed a network graph of the subscales from the four correlation matrices using either the mean correlation between subscales if the correlations were significant (with $p_{adj} < .002$) in all four conditions or zero otherwise.

A latent profile analysis was performed to group the participants with regard to their strategies of explaining their dislikes, or in other words, their preferred combinations of reasons. To this end, we used the R package *tidyLPA* (Rosenberg et al., 2018) to extract two latent profiles for each of the four conditions. Comparing solutions across different model specifications in terms of variance and covariance and number of classes from 2 to 8, the solution with two profiles and varying variance and covariance turned out to be the optimal solution for both strong conditions, whereas for the slight conditions, this model could not be fit. For other model specifications, solutions had ever-increasing fit with increasing numbers of profiles, which defeated

Table 1
Definition of the Dislike Scale With Subscales

Subscale	No. of Items	Items
Too Niche	10	body.missing_danceability, music.bad_vocals, music.disliked_instruments, music.too_chaotic, music.too_disharmonic, music.too_fast, music.too_little_melodious, music.too_loud, music.too_niche, music.too_unrhythmic
Too Complex	5	lyrics.too_complex, lyrics.too_realistic, music.too_complex, music.too_much_change, music.too_variable
Too Emotional	5	emo.too_emotional, music.too_melodious, music.too_rhythmic, music.too_slow, music.too_soft
Too Simple	6	lyrics.too_simple, lyrics.too_unrealistic, music.too_little_tension, music.too_schematic, music.too_simple, music.too_uniform
Not Authentic	1	social.not_authentic
Too Mainstream	3	music.too_little_change, music.too_mainstream, self.too_often_heard
Social Incongruence	4	self.incongruent_ideology, self.no_identification, social.not_peer_approved, social.reject_fanbase
No Impact	3	emo.expressionless, emo.no_feelings, emo.no_impact
Displeasure	4	body.displeasure, emo.bad_feelings, emo.bad_mood, self.bad_experiences

the goal of reducing complexity. In order to have a single common approach across conditions, we thus decided to fit a two-class model with equal variances and covariances fixed to 0, as this yielded the most balanced solution in terms of class membership with the strongest contrasts of classes on the eight subscales. As both profiles might relate to different musical styles, we further checked for differences in style distributions for assigned LP Class and conditions (strong/slight, style/artist) using chi-squared tests.

Next, differences between the degree and the type of dislike were investigated.As the distribution of styles was rather different between the styles and artists (Figure SDC and Table S3 in the online supplemental materials), we treated both conditions separately and stratified also for styles. Because the style distributions are very skewed and the Dislike subscales clearly differ from normality, we used a permutation test (independence_test from the *coin* package for R) as an omnibus test and then resorted to a battery of Kruskal–Wallis tests to check for differences in type and degree on all subscales while using Holm adjustment of p values to account for multiple testing.

As the current study investigates many new aspects about musical dislikes, we performed measures of interrater agreement and checked how consistently the participants judged the different styles in the different conditions on the nine Dislike subscales, which can be found in Figure SK1–SK2 in the online supplemental materials.

Table 2
Stable Correlations Across All Conditions of the Virtual Dislike Subscales

Subscale pair	Range	*M*
Too Simple–Too Mainstream	0.527–0.620	0.566
Too Simple–Not Authentic	0.501–0.591	0.559
Too Simple–Social Incongruence	0.326–0.612	0.496
Too Simple–No Impact	0.292–0.619	0.465
Not Authentic–Too Mainstream	0.416–0.470	0.436
Too Niche–Too Complex	0.409–0.460	0.435
Too Niche–Displeasure	0.308–0.527	0.435
Social Incongruence–Displeasure	0.242–0.530	0.422
Not Authentic–No Impact	0.289–0.457	0.382
Too Complex–Too Emotional	0.311–0.436	0.374
Too Emotional–Too Mainstream	0.298–0.383	0.346
Too Mainstream–Social Incongruence	0.259–0.431	0.326
Not Authentic–Social Incongruence	0.209–0.443	0.309
Too Emotional–Too Simple	0.256–0.315	0.284

Results

Dislike Subscales and Correlations

The definition of the subscales in terms of the original items can be found in Table 1. The subscales were named Too Niche, Too Complex, Too Emotional, Too Simple, Not Authentic, Too Mainstream, Social Incongruence, No Impact, and Displeasure. In line with the literature, the subscales represent major categories of value judgments of music such as the music itself, that is the intrinsic properties of the music (Too Simple, Too Complex, Too Niche, Too Emotional), as well as extrinsic reasons pertaining to the listener in form of self-related reasons (Displeasure, No Impact), and finally, social reasons pertaining to other listeners and the popularity of the music (Too Mainstream, Not Authentic, Social Incongruence).

Fourteen correlations between subscales were consistently found in all four conditions (Table 2) and therefore, considered as stable with regard to the relationships between the subscales. This result is considered informative when interpreting the relations between the reasons for disliked music and can help to understand the connections and tentatively even the cause and effect of reasons for disliked music.

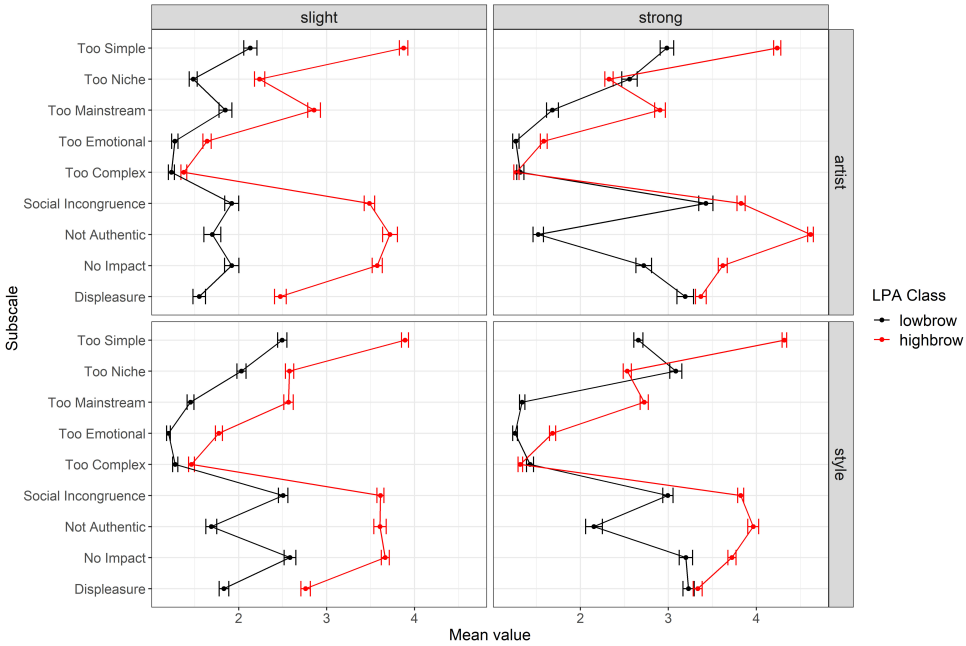
Latent Profiles of Explanatory Strategies for Disliked Music

As presented in Figure 1, latent profiles have different characteristics with respect to the subscales. Profile 1 (red) contained those participants who consistently showed high ratings of Too Simple, Not Authentic, No Impact, and Social Incongruence, medium levels of Too Mainstream, Displeasure, and low levels of Too Niche, Too Emotional, and Too Complex. Profile 1 included 60%–70% of the participants, depending on the condition. Profile 2 (black) contained those participants (30%–40%) with high levels of Too Niche and Too Complex, but in the strong dislike condition only.

As both taste groups were assigned to different musical styles in previous research, we further checked for differences in style distributions for assigned LP Class and conditions using chi-squared tests. All chi-squared tests in all conditions became significant with $p < .001$. While participants in Profile 1 more strongly dislike schlager, traditional, EDM, and pop, participants in Profile 2 more strongly dislike jazz, classical music, metal, and techno (Figure 2; Table S4 and Figure SC1-3 for all conditions in the online supplemental materials).

Figure 1

Latent Profile Class Means by Conditions

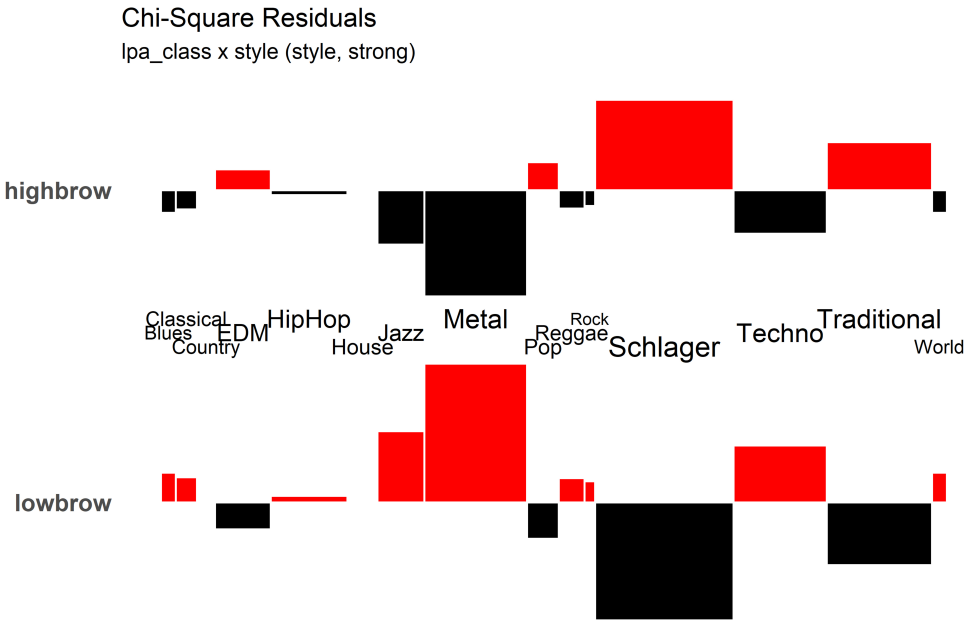


Note. Error bars represent standard error. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Hence, the profiles specify two groups that use different explanatory strategies for their disliked music which reflect their general attitude toward music and their overall musical taste. Participants in Profile 1 were thus dubbed highbrow and participants in Profile 2 lowbrow. The concept of a highbrow and a lowbrow in musical taste is well established in the literature, where it refers to people disliking certain musical styles which refer to social stratification. It is of note that only in two subscales in two conditions, the lowbrows

Figure 2

Chi-Squared Residuals for Styles in Style/Strong Conditions for LP Class



Note. Bars above the line represent more observations than expected while bars below the line fewer than expected. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

show a higher judgment than the highbrows. Hence, they do not use the same explanatory strategy for all conditions.

Differences in Type and Degree of Dislike

The results for comparing the degrees of dislike can be found in Table 3, where only significant differences at the 5% level (adjusted) are shown (in the artist condition, the cases with no assigned style are omitted; all results in Table S5 and in Figures SM1–SM3 in the online supplemental materials). Both omnibus tests yielded highly significant differences ($p < .001$). The main differences are to be found on the subscale Displeasure, where values in the strong degree are higher than in the slight degree, with overall larger differences in the artist condition. Other differences pertain to Social Incongruence (artist condition: pop and rock, style condition: schlager) and Not Authentic (artist condition: pop and schlager).

Both omnibus tests for comparing the type across the same conditions of degree, resulted in highly significant differences ($p < .001$), but no Kruskal–Wallis test survived correction for multiple testing. This is corroborated by the mean value plots in Figure SM2 and SM3 in the online supplemental materials, which show either similar values throughout for more frequent styles or wide and overlapping confidence intervals for the less frequent styles.

Discussion

Following up on groundwork from qualitative research, the current study explored the structure of rationales for disliked music. The goal was to determine the individual reasons for disliking music and how these reasons correspond to each other. Even though the study did not investigate socioeconomic factors as independent variables in connection to disliked music, it was most interesting to see that the participants used social reasons to explain their dislikes, and the results support previous findings of a highbrow and lowbrow taste in musical value judgments. This was concluded from the distinct musical styles and the distinct reasons that apply more strongly to one or the other taste group. While social aspects might be a fundamental basis to form judgments about music, the current results suggest that Social Incongruence is mainly used as a reason by the highbrow listener. The current study extends previous findings by showing a broad range of reasons for musical dislikes, including intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of music, revealing that the highbrow/lowbrow differentiation is not just associated with certain musical styles and their social connotations, but also with perceived attributes of the music.

The Structure of Rationales for Disliked Music

The structure of rationales for disliked music is represented by a network graph (Figure 3). The nodes represent the subscales, and the most stable correlations between the subscales are represented by arrows, where the distance roughly represents the strength of the correlations. The arrows between subscales indicate an assumption of causal influence between nodes. If the arrows go both ways, no clear causal direction seems justified. The shape of the nodes encodes the semantic category of the value judgment (Ackermann & Merrill, 2022; Behne, 1987) that is intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for the dislikes. While intrinsic reasons relate to properties of the music (Too Simple, Too Complex, Too Niche, Too Emotional), the extrinsic reasons refer to the listener's reactions (Displeasure, No Impact) or to social aspects (Too Mainstream, Not Authentic, Social Incongruence). The node color further groups the subscales according to their prevalence in the highbrow and lowbrow latent profiles (Figure 1), showing a main cluster of mutually correlated, mainly highbrow reasons (Too Simple, Too Mainstream, Not Authentic, and Social Incongruence). Too Emotional is correlated with both Too Simple and Too Mainstream, but also with Too Complex, which makes this (overall seldom used) subscale a hybrid one. The lowbrow subnet consists only of Too Niche and Too Complex, where only Too Niche is consistently correlated with Displeasure. The only other stable correlation with Displeasure is Social Incongruence, while No Impact is connected to Not Authentic and Too Simple. Hence, No Impact is mainly correlated with highbrow reasoning, whereas Displeasure is connected to both.

Behind the two profiles stands a well-known aesthetic dichotomy of simplicity and complexity. As to the music-related variables, there is

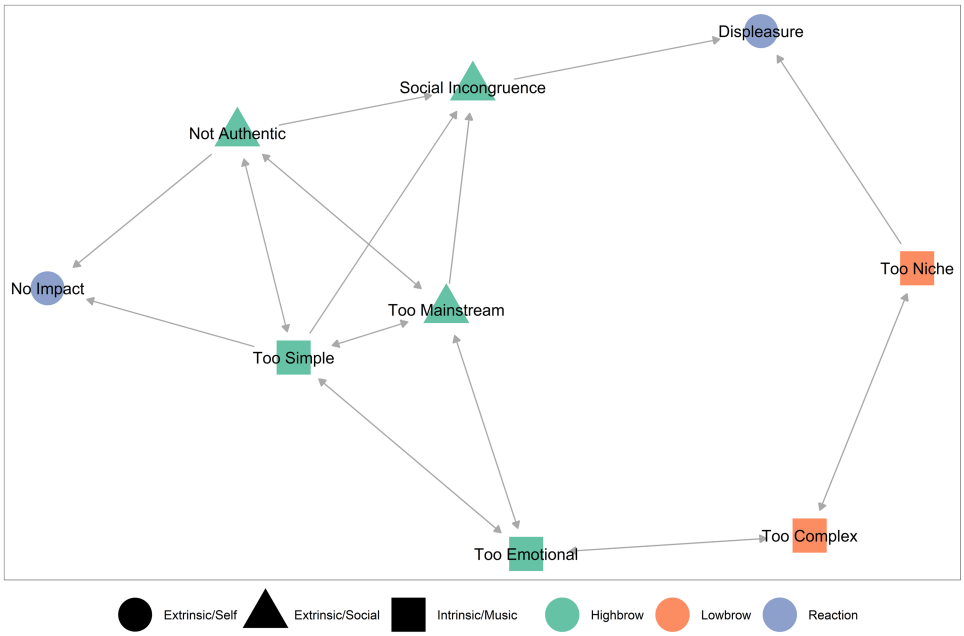
Table 3
Significant Differences in Style Ratings on the Dislike Subscales

Condition	Style	Dislike subscale	*d* (strong–slight)	Statistic	*N* (slight)	*N* (strong)	*p* (adjusted)
Artist	HipHop	Displeasure	1.207	706.0	50	65	.000***
Artist	Pop	Displeasure	1.168	1,797.0	112	74	.000***
Artist	Rock	Displeasure	1.923	161.5	40	42	.000***
Artist	Schlager	Displeasure	0.813	3,274.5	63	170	.001***
Artist	Pop	Not Authentic	0.705	2,838.5	112	74	.015*
Artist	Schlager	Not Authentic	0.622	3,798.5	63	170	.020*
Artist	Pop	Social Incongruence	0.639	2,667.5	112	74	.004**
Artist	Rock	Social Incongruence	1.588	242.0	40	42	.000***
Artist	Pop	Too Niche	0.335	2,702.5	112	74	.006**
Artist	Schlager	Too Simple	0.360	3,589.0	63	170	.010*
Style	HipHop	Displeasure	0.832	852.5	63	53	.001***
Style	Metal	Displeasure	0.673	1,685.0	56	95	.021*
Style	Schlager	Displeasure	0.988	3,774.0	97	173	.000***
Style	Techno	Displeasure	0.774	1,558.5	67	78	.004**
Style	Traditional	Displeasure	0.766	2,933.0	97	100	.000***
Style	Schlager	Social Incongruence	0.432	5,508.5	97	173	.000***
Style	Schlager	Too Simple	0.461	5,311.0	97	173	.000***

Note. Last column, *p* values are Holm adjusted.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Figure 3

Network of Stable Correlations Between Subscales



Note. Nodes represent the subscales; shape encodes categories of musical value judgments. Node color further classifies the nodes into interpretations. Arrows indicate causal influence. If the arrows go both ways between nodes, no causal link is inferred. Distances between nodes roughly represent mean correlations between variables, the closer the stronger correlated. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Too Simple on the one side and Too Complex and Too Niche on the other side. Designating music as Too Simple reflects a common function of disliking music (Ackermann & Merrill, 2022; Lehmann, 2018), i.e., signaling "better" musical taste and, in turn, also higher social status, as more sophisticated music requires better musical understanding and thus higher levels of education (Gebesmair, 2003; Lehmann, 2018). Besides status signaling, a tradition of popular music critique by the German sociologist Adorno (1938) might provide another aspect, which basic tenets state that mainstream (popular) music that appeals to the masses must be "simple" to reach a large audience. This thinking might explain the very strong correlation between the Too Simple and the Too Mainstream subscales, and both in turn with Social Incongruence. Not Authentic is likewise strongly tied to this highbrow profile, implying that simple and mainstream music cannot be authentic, because a focus on commercial success prohibits true expression (Parzer, 2011; von Appen, 2007). Disliking commercial music could thus also be regarded as the expression of a critical stand toward capitalism with its "dehumanizing" tendency to reduce everything, including music and other art forms, to its economic value. This thinking can lead to a despise of (popular) music, which can be interpreted as a form of virtue signaling. This suggests that the highbrow dislike profile might be further divisible into two subclasses, where either status or virtue signaling is the main aspect. (However, our data do not allow to make this distinction.) The result is either No Impact or even active Displeasure. As the network shows, this displeasure seems to be mediated (if not caused) by a perceived Social Incongruence. Since simple, mainstream popular music that is made to appeal to a very wide range of people is very unlikely to have intrinsic musical qualities that can cause Displeasure directly, it seems obvious that it is due to its symbolic value, i.e., the fan base it represents. This can also be interpreted in two ways: the rejection of a fanbase can be based on a difference in (assumed) social status or on (alleged) political or ideological differences, or both.

In the lowbrow reasoning style, Displeasure is connected to, and probably caused by, Too Niche. Niche music is deliberately created as avant-garde, progressive, modern, liberal, and so on, in explicit distinction to mainstream music, and therefore not made to appeal to the masses, often exhibiting elements that can be off-putting (dissonances, extended or a-tonality, distorted and other extreme sounds and timbres, extreme tempos, unusual or non-metrical rhythms, high information density, and unpredictability). On the one hand, the connection of Displeasure and Too Niche hints at some form of cognitive and/or visceral overload, directly caused by the musical objects leading to displeasure. On the other hand, this is not mediated by or results in Social Incongruence as in the case of Too Simple music. Niche music is often an expression of an "alternative elite," combining bourgeois needs for refinement with anti-elite (mostly left-liberal) values. This form of expression might not be appreciated by most but, due to commonly shared values, it does not result in an aversion against the fan base (e.g., "I don't like metal, but I respect the metal heads").

Interestingly, two groups of listeners have also been identified in a previous study, one with a stronger and one with a rather neutral attitude toward aversive music (Peltola & Vuoskoski, 2021). The profiles in the current study can likewise be distinguished by magnitude as the highbrow profile shows a stronger attitude toward disliked music than the lowbrow one. Still, the current network analysis shows that the identified explanatory strategies link to different subscales beyond magnitude and can be explained with theories

about social and political distinction with music. While previous studies have looked at socioeconomic variables as explanatory variables only, the current study shows, how verbalized social reasons connect to other important reasons for disliked music.

Differences Between Types and Degrees of Dislike

By evaluating two types of music and two degrees of dislikes, the current study design followed previous findings about the range of attitudes toward disliked music and the reference points of the reasons (Ackermann & Merrill, 2022; Peltola & Vuoskoski, 2021; Schäfer & Mehlhorn, 2017). All in all, the differences within type and degree were dependent on the selection of styles. Only Displeasure was found to be the strongest indicator of degree of dislike overall, independent of the style. Being put in a bad mood and experiencing unpleasant feelings were important items for strongly disliking various styles and artists from hip hop, pop, rock, schlager, metal, techno, and traditional. This effect has also been described as an "embodied experience" of aversive music (Peltola & Vuoskoski, 2021). It can be seen that just as music is chosen because of its pleasant effect (Salimpoor et al., 2009; Schäfer et al., 2013) and not appreciated if one does not derive any pleasure from it (Greasley et al., 2013), music is evaluated negatively and avoided when it has an unpleasant effect. Based on previous findings, one could even propose that a negative experience with a musical piece leads to a long-term rejection, while a pleasant experience does not necessarily lead to the opposite.

Social Incongruence, Not Authentic, and Too Simple were further reasons for the strong dislike, but only applying to certain styles and types of music. A strong dislike applies to schlager based on Social Incongruence and Too Simple, which possibly links the perceived musical features to ascribed attributes of the people associated with this popular German music. Similarly, we observed a strong dislike of schlager, pop, and rock artists for reasons such as Social Incongruence (pop, rock) and Not Authentic (pop, schlager). The higher representation of these styles in the media with their prominent star system and the formation and presentation of a fan base makes these styles easy targets, and hence, can readily be used for identification processes and in-group/out-group distinctions. The dislike in these cases is therefore strongly connected to the appearance and the attitudes of the performer, including its commercial success, the associated fan base, and the impression of inauthenticity (Berli, 2014; Cunningham et al., 2005; Frith, 2004; Grazian, 2010; Greasley et al., 2013; Kunz, 1998; Parzer, 2011; von Appen, 2007). The results further imply that authenticity is a concept that might be better applicable to specific artists than to whole styles. Pop artists, interestingly, can be disliked for various reasons such as social aspects as well as being Too Niche, probably because of the diversity of the artists in this rather broad style.

Taken together, Displeasure is the only general indicator of a strong dislike, while other reasons for disliking music are dependent on the type, interacting with the degree of dislike and the musical style. This underlines previous notes that musical taste research needs to be extended to substyles and other types of music (Ackermann & Merrill, 2022; Schäfer & Mehlhorn, 2017) in order to cover the breadth and diversity of musical likes and dislikes.

Limitations and Outlook

There are a couple of limitations to the present study. First, our sample was mostly WEIRD (from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic country), with many well-educated young adults. A replication with a more representative sample would be desirable as the social milieus in Germany would be represented and the reasoning structures for disliked music could be investigated with regard to a more balanced selection of musical styles. In the current study, the styles were not balanced and many participants disliked schlager, which presumably emphasized the structure of highbrow reasons. Hence, for a certain educated segment, we could identify classical educated-bourgeois argumentation strategies (highbrow), as well as their antipode (lowbrow).

Furthermore, as the study only asked for two disliked styles and artists per participant, a follow-up study should collect judgments of a broader range of styles, possibly coupled with a simultaneous assessment of preferences and neutral attitudes as well, to further elucidate the relationship between liked, disliked and "neutral" styles. We used a post hoc constructed Dislike scale, which we mainly used as a means to reduce complexity, and which will be developed into a validated instrument in the future.

The judgment of specific artists is a novel contribution, which is often absent in studies on musical taste. Our results show differences in reasons for styles and artists, which might also be expected for preferences. However, the vast abundance of artists compared to styles prohibits a comprehensive screening of likes/dislikes for artists. It might be fruitful not only to include styles per se but also a selection of artists belonging to that style. A recent study demonstrated that the omnivore phenomenon can be partly explained by the fact that preferences for many styles are actually differentiated by preferring certain subsets of these styles, such as artists or even single songs. This differentiation follows the same pattern of highbrow/lowbrow distinctions that were traditionally assigned to complete styles (Nault et al., 2021). This granulation of musical likes and dislikes clearly warrants investigation.

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