Feeling good with music: Perceived value of music consumption

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1. Introduction

Music is a pervasive part of daily life, playing an important role in the life of many people. Listening to music is an activity we engage in almost unconsciously: we wake up in the morning and turn on the radio; we go out for a run and put on our earphones; we get into the car and start the stereo. Various studies have analysed the motivations underlying the choice to listen to music, highlighting a multiplicity of reasons: listening to music, in fact, responds to diversion, social, emotional, and identity-related needs (Lonsdale and North, 2011).

At the same time, music is a product, namely a cultural and symbolic product, and its consumption can be conceptualized within the framework of consumption values, whereby listening practices are shaped by multiple forms of need fulfilment. In this paper, we aim at understanding the structure of motivations underlying music listening and at explaining how different forms of value jointly shape everyday listening practices.

To this purpose, we apply the theory of consumption values (Sheth et al., 1991), developed in the field of marketing, to music listening. Under this framework, consumer choices are driven by multiple types of value that a product or service can provide. Rather than being based solely on functional utility, consumption decisions reflect a combination of five distinct value dimensions:

- Functional value: the practical or utilitarian benefits of a product, such as quality, performance, or price.
- Social value: the extent to which owning or using a product allows individuals to connect with others or enhance their social self-image.
- Emotional value: the affective states or feelings a product evokes, such as pleasure, enjoyment, or excitement.
- Epistemic value: the curiosity, novelty, or knowledge gained from trying new experiences or products.
- Conditional value: the situational or contextual factors that make a product valuable in specific circumstances.

According to the theory, these value types interact to shape consumer preferences and behaviour. Their relative importance varies across individuals, product categories, and situations, making the model highly versatile for understanding complex consumption patterns, as music consumption can be. Section 2 describes the scale adapted to measure the dimensions of the music consumption values; Section 3 presents some results about the prevalence of each dimension in different population groups, and the mutual relationships among these dimensions, while conclusions are drawn in Section 4.

2. A scale for music consumption values

We adapted the items commonly used in the theory of consumption values to measure the values perceived in music, resulting in questions that also reflect the motivations for listening to music identified in the literature. The conditional value was omitted, however, as it is hard to apply to the context of music listening; in fact, as shown in Tanrikulu (2021), in many situations conditional value plays a limited role and tends to be used less than other values in the literature.

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We carried out an online survey that involved 691 respondents, with an average age of 44.1 years (s.d. = 14.1) and a majority of women (66.6%). In addition to personal characteristics and perceived values of music listening, this survey included questions on listening habits and behaviours, the perceived value of a randomly assigned listening medium, participants' preferred listening medium, and their willingness to adopt technological innovations.

Music consumption values are measured through 19 items. The functional dimension is formed by the importance attributed to sound quality, lack of breaks and price. The social dimension includes six items, adapted from Lonsdale and North (2011) and from Larsen et al. (2009), and considers both sub-dimensions of belonging and self-identity construction. Eight items refer to emotional values, adjusted from Lonsdale and North (2011) and Trocchia et al. (2002), according to four declinations of emotional values: diversion, experiencing, mood management and reminiscing. Finally, two items measure the epistemic value. All the items were measured on a 7-point scale and are listed in Table 1.

We assessed that the items adapted to music consumption values be consistent with the theoretical dimensions. Both the principal component analysis and the factor analysis using image factoring identified four dimensions, accounting for 61.8% of the total variance, that correspond to the four value dimensions initially hypothesized. In the factor analysis, however, the functional dimension appeared somewhat unclear and explained very little variance. Table 1 reports the eigenvalues and the pattern matrix (i.e., the partial correlations between simple indicators and factors) after an oblique ('Oblimin') rotation and a Kaiser normalisation were performed. Bold numbers indicate the items associated with each dimension.

Table 1. Pattern matrix and eigenvalues for the four dimensions of the factor analysis performed on the adapted items of music consumption values, after Oblimin rotation.

When listening to music, how important is it for you…	Emotional	Social	Epistemic	Functional
It brings memories to my mind	**0.831**	0.021	-0.193	-0.045
It makes me relive moments of my life	**0.828**	0.041	-0.173	-0.036
It helps me get through difficult times	**0.722**	0.143	0.045	-0.014
It makes me feel better	**0.720**	-0.094	0.139	0.036
It helps me express my feelings and emotions	**0.710**	0.195	-0.005	0.021
It allows me to travel with my mind	**0.709**	-0.043	0.136	0.089
It puts me in the right mood	**0.677**	-0.001	0.107	-0.010
I feel pleasure when listening to music	**0.541**	-0.177	0.311	0.163
To give a good impression of myself to others	-0.141	**0.862**	-0.033	0.002
To make me feel accepted in one or more social groups	-0.106	**0.847**	-0.006	-0.001
To express my identity to others	0.020	**0.815**	0.041	0.033
To share the values of the artists I listen to	0.071	**0.703**	0.073	-0.049
To build my personal identity	0.149	**0.676**	0.122	0.044
To recognize myself and feel represented in the lyrics of the music I listen to	0.254	**0.619**	-0.021	0.050
To explore new genres and artists	0.039	0.144	**0.835**	0.041
To discover new things	0.095	0.125	**0.822**	0.025
Limited breaks	0.000	-0.033	0.085	**0.808**
Sound quality	-0.034	0.063	0.253	**0.685**
Affordable price	0.050	0.033	-0.349	**0.602**
Eigenvalues	*6.19*	*2.76*	*1.55*	*1.25*

3. Results

Analysing the average scores of each dimension (Table 2), the most prominent dimension is the emotional one, followed closely by the functional dimension, indicating that the main values attributed to music are linked to its ability to elicit emotions and improve mood, but also to a sort of "hygienic factor," namely, the possibility of listening to it at decent quality and at an affordable cost. Music is also, though less frequently, perceived as a source of discovery and new knowledge, and in some cases as a means of connecting with particular social groups.

There are, however, generational differences: younger respondents tend to recognize social and epistemic values more strongly: generations X and millennials attribute the highest emotional value, while Boomers seem to focus primarily on the functional value. Gender differences are more limited: women tend to assign higher scores across all value dimensions, though the difference is most pronounced for emotional values.

In addition to gender and age, the values attributed to music listening are also associated with other respondents' characteristics and their relationship with music. The emotional value is perceived primarily by individuals with lower income (Spearman's $\rho = -0.120$, $p = 0.002$) and educational levels (Spearman's $\rho = -0.174$, $p < 0.001$). The epistemic value characterizes individuals for whom music plays a highly important role in life: those who play, compose, or produce music, who attend live performances more frequently (Spearman's $\rho = 0.150$, $p < 0.001$) and listen to music more actively (Spearman's $\rho = 0.223$, $p < 0.001$). The social value, although the least widespread overall, is more common among students, those who listen to music more actively (Spearman's $\rho = 0.191$, $p < 0.001$) and spend more for concerts (Spearman's $\rho = 0.169$, $p < 0.001$), behaviours that imply a sense of identification and belonging, helping define young people's identity and their relationship with others. Finally, the functional value - essentially a "hygienic factor" - is only weakly characterized.

Table 2. **Average scores of consumption value dimensions, by gender, age groups, work status and involvement in music activities. Superscript letters denote pairwise mean comparisons within each categorical variable: means with no letters or sharing the same letter are not significantly different, while means with different letters differ significantly ($p < 0.05$).**

	Functional	*Social*	*Emotional*	*Epistemic*
Females	6.06 [a]	3.71 [a]	6.32 [a]	5.32
Males	5.87 [b]	3.42 [b]	5.80 [b]	5.13
Generation Z	5.97	4.06[a]	6.02	5.46 [a]
Millennials	6.04	3.68	5.46 [a]	5.32
Generation X	5.98	3.41[b]	5.97 [a]	5.23
Boomers	5.99	3.45 [b]	4.06 [b]	4.99 [b]
Employee	5.98[a]	3.61	6.24[a]	5.31[a]
Self-employed	6.02	3.23[a]	5.96	5.03
Student	5.95	4.07[b]	5.99	5.45[a]
Retired	5.94	3.46	5.86[b]	4.80[b]
Unemployed	6.07	4.00	6.06	5.25
Housewife	6.38[b]	3.88	6.34	5.52
Singer	6.09	3.72	6.36 [a]	5.49
No singer	5.98	3.60	6.11 [b]	5.21
Music player	5.89	3.67	6.03	5.66 [a]
No music player	6.02	3.61	6.17	5.17 [b]
Music composer	5.92	3.61	5.82 [a]	6.05 [a]
No music composer	6.00	3.62	6.17 [b]	5.20 [b]
Music producer	6.15	3.44	5.95	5.79 [a]
No music producer	5.99	3.63	6.16	5.23 [b]
Total	6.00	3.62	6.14	5.26

In order to understand the interrelation among the emerging dimensions, we graphically represent the mutual relationships among the four consumption values, and perform a multidimensional scaling analysis of the distances between average scores for each dimension, with ordinal proximity transformations and Euclidean distance measures. We obtain a good value of 0.014 for the S-stress measure; this solution accounts for 99.5% of the dispersion.

The perceptual map is reported in Figure 1: closer points indicate higher positive correlations, while counterpoised points indicate negative correlations. The horizontal axis juxtaposes the intimate value of music listening with its social value, highlighting how music can meet needs that range from

the most private sphere of emotions to becoming a means of sociality, capable of building a community around the values symbolized by shared music. A second axis, in turn, distinguishes the functional aspects of music consumption from its symbolic ones, where music becomes a means of knowledge as well as a tool for asserting one's identity. Similar results are shown when performing a correspondence analysis on the variables indicating the dimensions most highly rated by each respondent.

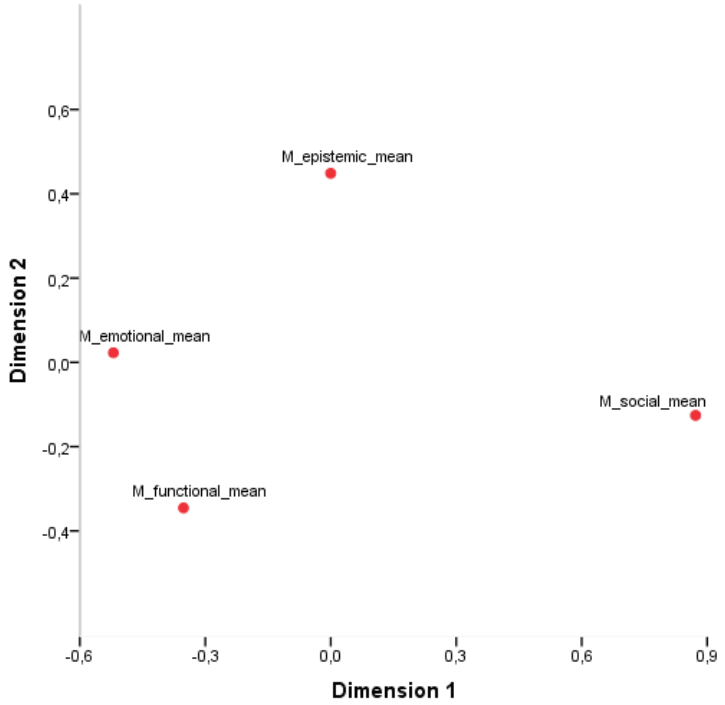


Figure 1. **Bi-dimensional plot of music consumption values – 4-dimension solution.**

An alternative 7-dimension solution was also conceivable based on the scree-plot of the principal component analysis; in this case, the emotional dimension splits in a pure emotional and a memory dimension, the social dimension differentiates between the creation/definition of one's identity and its expression, and the price dimension separates from the functional one.

When separating memory from emotion, the memory-related dimension is even more strongly linked to higher age and lower education, while losing any association with the perceived importance of music in one's life. As for the social dimension of music values, the value related to the expression of one's identity and connection with a specific group is even more residual and distinctively typical of the youngest participants. Moreover, when the price and strictly functional components are distinguished does a relationship between price value and income emerge; price appears to be more relevant among those who listen to music mainly via radio, while those who prefer physical media tend to place greater emphasis on functional value.

Figure 2 reports the perceptual map obtained through a multidimensional scaling analysis of the distances between average scores for each of the seven dimensions, with Euclidean distance measures and ordinal proximity transformations. The S-stress measure is slightly worse but still good (0.03), and the dispersion accounted for is 98.4%. Again, if we look at the dotted lines, the private and social spheres of music listening are opposed along one axis, while the second dimension counterposes the practical and symbolic aspects of music listening. Reminiscence is even more intimate than the general emotional dimension, while self-identity construction lays in between the private and social spheres. Price, even more than the quality-related functional values, turns out to be the non-symbolic value reckoned by those who think music is just music.

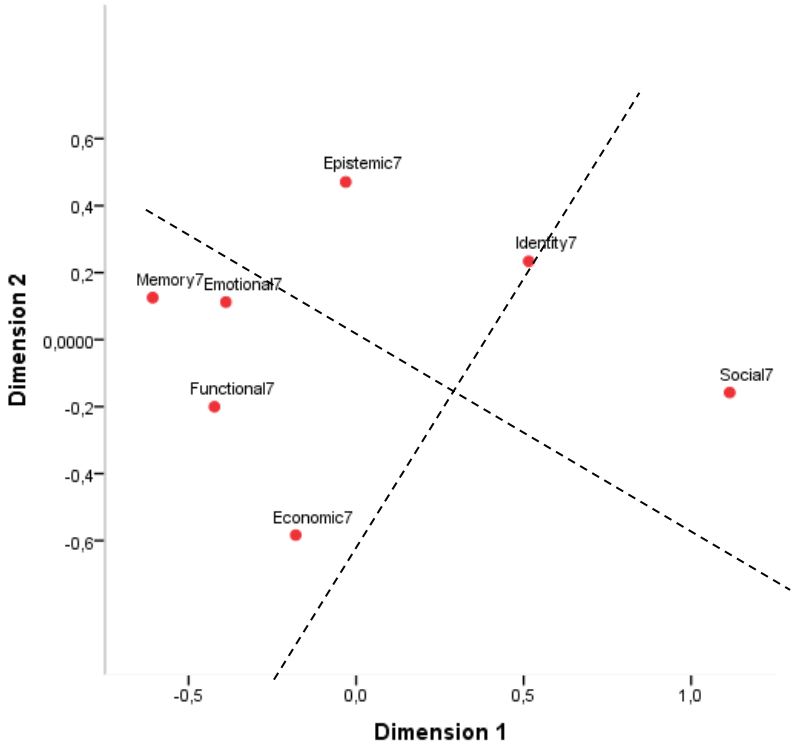


Figure 2. **Bi-dimensional plot of music consumption values – 7-dimension solution**.

4. Final remarks

In conclusion, adapting the theory of consumption values to the context of music listening produced notable results, consistent both with the hypothesised dimensions of consumption values and with the needs and motivations underlying music consumption as identified in various psychological studies (see, e.g., Lonsdale and North, 2011; North and Krause, 2016; Trocchia et al., 2002).

The less convincing dimension turns out to be the functional value, both because the corresponding items cover different aspects and are then less correlated than those of the other dimensions, and because the notion of functional value itself is somewhat ambiguous when applied to music. In fact, while a judgement on the functionality (price, performance, quality) of a means to listen to music has a clear meaning, the functional value of music in and of itself tends to be defined negatively, namely as the lack of symbolic meanings attributed to music, and thus characterises individuals who regard music as relatively unimportant and devoid of symbolic significance. Maybe, when studying music consumption in general, the notion of functional value would better be replaced by music importance, instead of literally adapting the commonly used items, but this should be assessed with further research.

Music is many different things, and listening to it can be a deeply intimate experience—when it evokes memories and emotions—or a profoundly social one, when it becomes a marker of belonging, a sign of identity. Similarly, the value of music can lie in its most practical dimension—a pleasant, good-quality, and affordable auditory experience—or in its symbolic essence, as a source of knowledge, discovery, and identity.

Music itself does not change, yet it makes us feel good for entirely different reasons, depending on the stage of life we are in, our individual characteristics, and the needs we ask it to fulfil. Young people tend to use music to assert their identity, to build communities, tribes, and foster a sense of belonging and shared meaning; on the other side, for older people, music serves as a way to remember their past and to express their emotions. For those who place little importance on music, it is merely a pastime. But for those who consider music central to their lives, it holds a symbolic value that goes far beyond simple listening, becoming an experience that can help them explore new horizons and shape their understanding of themselves and their place in the world.

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