



Psychopathy and entertainment preferences: Clarifying the role of abnormal and normal personality in music and movie interests

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ABSTRACT

We examined the associations between psychopathic subdimensions and music and movie genre preferences in a community sample ($N = 429$). We also considered the extent to which these relations were specific to psychopathy per se as opposed to other personality disorder or general personality traits. Fearless Dominance psychopathy features were moderately related to a variety of entertainment preferences, whereas Self-centered Impulsivity and Coldheartedness traits were largely unrelated. There was a notable lack of specificity in psychopathy subdimensions' relations with entertainment preferences: Leadership/Authority narcissism features, extraversion, and openness to experience were also moderately positively associated with a swath of entertainment interests whereas Entitlement/Exploitativeness narcissism features and Machiavellianism were largely unrelated. The higher-order trait of Beta, comprising extraversion and openness, statistically accounted for most of the associations between Fearless Dominance and entertainment preferences. In accordance with “niche picking” theories, our findings suggest that individuals' may prefer genres of music and movies that most closely align with their respective personality traits.

1. Background

The role of personality traits in individuals' everyday interests and choices is potentially robust across many domains. Broadband personality features relate to and probably shape how individuals engage with their environment, including interpersonal relationships, spirituality, and community involvement (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006). According to niche picking theories, people select hobbies and even careers according to how well their niches align with their personality traits (Ickes, Snyder, & Garcia, 1997). For instance, a study of over 90,000 individuals indicated that personality traits, such as openness to experience, are potent correlates of preferences for particular paintings and enjoyment of art galleries (Chamorro-Premuzic, Reimers, Hsu, & Ahmetoglu, 2009).

The relation between personality traits and entertainment preferences has recently been of increasing interest, as the ascent of media platforms has brought with it an explosion in diversity of music and movie tastes and ease of access to numerous genres. The use of media in society has also burgeoned. In 2016 alone, global box office revenues amassed to \$38.6 billion dollars (Motion Picture Association of America, 2016). Music is also a widespread source of entertainment: 91% of Americans report listening to music in their leisure time, with most spending 24 h per week on this activity (Nielsen, 2016). The

average American household spends more money annually on entertainment pursuits than either gasoline or apparel (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

Still, there are clear individual differences in entertainment preferences. Such differences may be an intriguing window into people's selection of real-world stimuli. In this respect, a better understanding of these associations may help to bridge two traditionally disconnected domains of individual differences, namely personality and interests. General personality traits are differentially associated with preferences for movie and music genres, such as classical music and action movies, even after controlling for demographic variables such as age and sex (Rentfrow, Goldberg, & Zilca, 2011). Dovetailing with niche picking theories and use and gratifications theory, which posits that people are active agents in the media selection process (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974), individuals may gravitate towards entertainment genres that are consistent with, or afford expression of, their traits. For instance, even genres that are typically regarded as violent and aggressive, such as death metal music, elicit positive affective responses in individuals who prefer these genres, who in turn tend to be marked by low conscientiousness and agreeableness (Thompson, Geeves, and Olsen, in press).

Nonetheless, the role of personality disorder features, including those of psychopathic personality, in everyday interests and behaviors

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is insufficiently understood. Recent evidence indicates that psychopathic traits are associated with avocational and vocational interests (Nagel, Watts, Murphy, and Lilienfeld, *in press*), suggesting that psychopathy features display meaningful response penetration (Tellegen, 1991) in everyday life. Furthermore, regarding entertainment interests, personality disorder traits may exhibit distinctive correlates compared with general personality traits. For example, boredom-proneness, a common attribute of psychopathy, may be tied to the seeking out of media genres characterized by arousing and risky themes for external stimulation.

Still, there may be substantial variability in how personality disordered individuals respond to and select their environments, as the same basic tendencies can give rise to multiple characteristic adaptations (Harkness & Lilienfeld, 1997). Through examining the relations between personality disorder features and entertainment interests, we can begin to elucidate (a) how these traits manifest in everyday preferences and choices, (b) whether these manifestations are distinct from those of general personality, and (c) the functions of entertainment for individuals with such traits.

1.1. Psychopathy and entertainment preferences

Factor analyses of widely-used psychopathy measures, such as the *Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale* (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995), indicate that psychopathy can be parsed into at least two dimensions: Factor 1, which comprises interpersonal and affective features, such as egocentricity and manipulateness, and Factor 2, which comprises behavioral and lifestyle features, such as irresponsibility and antisocial tendencies. Other conceptualizations, such as the triarchic model, describe psychopathy as comprising three dimensions: boldness, disinhibition, and meanness (Patrick, Fowles, & Krueger, 2009). Boldness comprises traits such as fearlessness and venturesomeness. Disinhibition encompasses features such as impulsivity and recklessness, and meanness comprises traits such as antagonism and cruelty. Psychopathy, broadly construed, can be situated within the “Dark Triad” of personality (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), along with narcissism, which comprises traits such as entitlement and authoritarianism, and Machiavellianism, which comprises traits such as cynicism and exploitativeness. These traits ostensibly represent overlapping albeit separable constructs.

Only three studies have analyzed the relations between Dark Triad traits and entertainment interests (Battista, 2011; Williams, McAndrew, Learn, Harms, & Paulhus, 2001; Williams, Paulhus, & Hare, 2007). By and large, they indicated that Factor 1 and Factor 2 psychopathy and Machiavellianism exhibited small to medium positive associations with preferences for movie genres such as action, horror, and violent sports (e.g., football) whereas they exhibited negative associations with preferences for pop music and movie genres such as romance, family, and non-violent sports (e.g., figure skating). Narcissism manifested few associations with entertainment preferences, although it exhibited small positive associations with preferences for violent sports.

Although informative, this literature is limited in a few noteworthy ways. First, these studies operationalized narcissism and Machiavellianism as unidimensional, potentially masking substantive associations at the subdimension level with entertainment preferences. In addition, they relied on psychopathy measures (e.g., LSRP) that emphasize disinhibition and callousness/meanness with little emphasis on boldness. Although the centrality of boldness in psychopathy is controversial (Lilienfeld et al., 2012), boldness and disinhibition often exhibit markedly different, sometimes opposing, relations to external criteria, including avocational interests such as social leisure activities (boldness $r = 0.35$, disinhibition $r = -0.02$; Nagel, Watts, Murphy, and Lilienfeld, *in press*). These findings suggest that different psychopathy subdimensions are differentially related to entertainment preferences.

The extant literature also relied on undergraduate samples to

investigate the relations between psychopathy traits and entertainment interests. Although media preferences tend to be fairly stable across a few years, appreciable shifts in entertainment interests occur as individuals mature (Delsing, Ter Bogt, Engels, & Meeus, 2008). Thus, it is essential to replicate existing findings in community populations with larger age ranges. Relatedly, previous studies have identified gender differences in entertainment interests, although these findings have not been incorporated into the psychopathy literature. For example, relative to women, men, on average, prefer entertainment with dark and thrilling content (Rentfrow et al., 2011).

1.2. Present study

Herein, we expand on the existing literature to examine (a) the relations between multiple measures of psychopathy dimensions and entertainment preferences; (b) the extent to which these relations are specific to psychopathic traits; and (c) the relations between age and gender and these preferences, in a community sample. We hypothesized that the relations between Factor 1 and Factor 2 psychopathy and entertainment preferences would replicate those of previous studies (Williams et al., 2007). To our knowledge, no studies have examined the relations between the dimensions of the *Psychopathic Personality Inventory-Revised* (PPI-R; Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005) and entertainment preferences. Factor analyses of the PPI-R have often yielded two largely orthogonal factors: Fearless Dominance (FD), which measures boldness, and Self-Centered Impulsivity (SCI), which measures disinhibition. Coldheartedness, which overlaps slightly with meanness, does not load highly on either factor and reflects a standalone dimension comprising guiltlessness and callousness.

We based our predictions for PPI-R dimensions on general personality research, given mounting evidence that psychopathy represents a configuration of broadband personality traits (Lilienfeld, Watts, Smith, Berg, & Latzman, 2014). We posited that PPI-R FD, which is linked to openness and surgent extraversion, would exhibit positive associations with a breadth of entertainment preferences, including pop, rock, jazz, and classical music and horror, action, war, and sports movie preferences and negative associations with religious music preferences (Dollinger, 1993). We hypothesized that SCI, which is linked to agreeableness (reversed), conscientiousness (reversed), and neuroticism, would exhibit negative relations to romance, family, and comedy movie and pop music preferences but positive relations to horror, drama, and thriller movie and punk, heavy metal, and rap music preferences (Rentfrow et al., 2011; Weaver III, 1991). We predicted that Coldheartedness would exhibit similar relations to SCI, given its overlap with agreeableness (reversed) and conscientiousness (reversed).

We also predicted that (a) Leadership/Authority narcissism traits would exhibit similar relations to FD whereas Entitlement/Exploitativeness narcissism traits would exhibit similar relations to SCI (Ackerman et al., 2011); and (b) Machiavellianism Tactics and Views would manifest similar relations to SCI and Coldheartedness (Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005). We also predicted that the associations between general personality dimensions and entertainment preferences would replicate those in the literature (Brown, 2012). Consistent with research (Nagel, Watts, Murphy, and Lilienfeld, *in press*), we hypothesized that Digman's Beta (Digman, 1997), a higher-order dimension comprising extraversion and openness, would account for the associations between FD and entertainment preferences. In contrast, we predicted that Alpha, a higher-order dimension comprising neuroticism and reversed agreeableness, conscientiousness, and honesty-humility, would account for the relations between SCI, Coldheartedness, and Factor 1 and Factor 2 psychopathy, on the one hand, and entertainment preferences, on the other.

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