

**PRIVATE VS PUBLIC MUSIC PREFERENCES**

**by**

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### **Abstract**

The current study explored factors that may shape the social environments in which people choose to consume their music. Specifically, this study examined the factors that provide explanatory power for why listeners keep some of the songs that they like private--songs that they don't readily admit to liking. Participants were asked to select two songs (from a playlist of their top 100 personal favorite songs) that they would not want others to know they listen to as well as two songs they are open to letting others know they listen to. This exploratory study investigated the features of the music that participants tend to keep private versus public (such as musical characteristics of the song, genre, and emotional qualities of the song) and how participants view that music with regards to their own identity, their peers, and how they'd like to be viewed by their peers. A nine-factor logistic regression model predicted 62.3% of the variance in the data. Songs that were kept private were those that participants viewed as relatively incompatible with how they'd like to be seen by their peers, had an emotion that was inappropriate for a social situation, and were inappropriate for parties. Participants were more likely to listen to songs in private than in public if the artist had been involved in a scandal or if the song reminded them of the past. Pop songs were also more likely to be kept private. And although participants tended to keep their preferences for popular artists private, songs that were overplayed--according to the participants--were more likely to be shared publicly. Exploring the factors behind hidden musical preferences can provide insight into how musical preference is used for self-presentation and identity maintenance as well as the social pressures that people face to conform/ fit in with their peers.

### Private vs Public Music Preferences

Whether alone or with friends, in an elevator, or at a cafe, music can most often be found in the foreground of one's life. However, it is more than just a silence filler; music can also be used as a form of bonding and for emotional well-being and regulation. As an individual's life progresses, one's goals, perspectives, and needs change as well. In turn, these outside social influences and interpersonal relationships can impact one's self-reported musical preferences.

The current study explored the various factors that influence the social environments in which people choose to consume their music, with a focus on two situations: listening alone and listening with others. It investigated the features of the music that participants tend to keep private, and how participants view that music with regards to their own identity, their peers, and how they would like to be viewed by their peers.

#### **Music for Social Bonding**

Finding a common interest is important when first getting acquainted with a new person, and small talk is a way to break the ice. Part of the small talk includes simple questions like, "What is your favorite show?" and "What music do you listen to?" Previous research has examined the primary conversational topics of small talk through an online bulletin-board system. Rentfrow and Gosling (2006) examined the topics of conversation people used to get to know each other better. The participants were given no guidelines for conversation; rather, they were told to talk about whatever would bring them closer to each other. The topics of conversation were coded and analyzed using the Linguistic Inventory and Word Count computer program (LIWC; Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001). It was found that out of the 6 weeks the participants spoke with each other, music was the most talked about topic for every week except the last. Music is something everyone has in common. So when meeting new people, asking

what type of music one listens to has become a part of the screening process to find common ground and better understand one another.

Bonds are created by getting to know one another and can be formed through mutual hobbies, values, and preferences. Boer and colleagues (2011) examined how learning about one's music preferences provides people the ability to gauge one's values and social attraction. Participants were asked to imagine meeting a new "target person" who has a specific taste in music and to think of the values this person may have. The participants were also asked to rate their social attraction to the imagined "target person" based on the music preference supplied. In the second portion of the study, the participants provided their own values and music preferences. The results showed that participants were more attracted to the "target person" if they shared the same music preferences compared to having a different musical preference. However, when meeting someone in person a variety of information is exchanged in the process of getting to know one another. Thus, musical preferences may not have such an influence on one's attraction in a real-world setting.

In a follow-up study, Boer and colleagues (2011) attempted to replicate their results in a real-life setting. Participants were sampled from a university in Hong Kong where two months prior to the study they were randomly assigned to a two-person dormitory by the university. A survey was administered to gather information on their values, music preferences, and social attraction to the roommate. The results showed that there was a strong relationship between similarities in one's music preference and social attraction.

When meeting new people, what is said and shared is approached with caution. The desire to connect may influence how someone presents themselves, and this need to connect may potentially compel them to change their music preferences in order to please their peers. Bryan

and Curtis (2018) examined this concept through considering how Youtube view counts for a song impact viewer preference ratings. An original song was composed and played for the participants in a between-subjects design via two different websites that were created to simulate the Youtube page of an emerging musician. Participants were told that they were going to hear the song of a new artist and provide feedback on the song quality. Participants in one condition heard the song through a “Youtube” page that displayed a view count of 40 and a like count of five, while participants in the other condition saw an identical Youtube simulation but with a view count of 10,000,000 and a like count of 125,000. Participants were then asked to rate their enjoyment of the song on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). It was found that participants reported enjoying the song much more in the high view count condition than in the low view count condition. This result was even observed in participants who did not remember seeing any view or like counts, indicating that the brain may implicitly acquire information about social acceptability, and this information may bias evaluations or behavior even without any conscious awareness that the information was ever acquired. These results suggest that the need to conform with the views of peers may cause one to shift their natural inclinations about a song so as to subconsciously match the opinion of the majority. Findings such as these point to the use of shared musical tastes as a tool for fitting in with others (Bryan & Curtis, 2018).

### **Music Based Stereotypes**

Whether purposefully or not, judgments are made about one's personality based on the type of music they listen to. And from there, that information may be subconsciously used to help decide whether the personalities of people meeting for the first time will mesh. Rentfrow and Gosling (2006) examined whether individuals who have never met or spoken to each other would be able to gauge aspects of one's personality based on musical tastes alone. Rentfrow and

Gosling compared the inferences that a group of observers made about personalities of “target” participants, based solely on the musical taste of the targets (who provided a CD of their top 10 favorite songs), to a Big Five Inventory (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999) filled out by the targets.

The results showed that the inferences made by the observers based on the targets’ music preferences were positively correlated with the results of the BFI filled out by the targets.

Though the correlations were modest in size, they were larger than would be predicted by chance alone. Similar results were reported by Brothers and Curtis (2018), and their study showed that observers can also use the musical preferences of target participants to infer each target’s age range and gender with a high degree of accuracy. However, Brothers and Curtis reported smaller correlations than Rentfrow and Gosling (2006), suggesting that their participants were not as accurate at inferring personality from musical preferences as those in the earlier study. Brothers and Curtis (2018) speculated that this may be attributable to an important methodological difference. The observers were presented with a 10-song playlist that corresponded to each target participant’s actual listening behavior--the 10 songs they had listened to the most in the previous year, according to their Spotify listening history, while participants in the Rentfrow and Gosling study were given a week to carefully select the 10 songs that they wanted to include on their CD of personal favorites. It is likely that Rentfrow and Gosling’s participants excluded certain types of songs from their list of favorites, such as those that they viewed as less socially acceptable, and may have inadvertently engaged in deliberate signaling of their personalities. The playlists in the Brothers and Curtis study included songs that the targets may prefer to listen to in private and would not want to share willingly. Brothers and Curtis speculated that, because little is known about the properties of music reserved for private listening or how it relates to one’s public persona, it may have been more difficult for the observers in their study to link private music to

personality factors. The stereotypes about musical preference and personality may be specific to the music associated with one's public persona.

The consumption of art occurs publicly and privately. Factors may shape public consumption in the social world, and findings like these provide a better understanding of the importance of not only music preferences but the effects of preferences on social perception. Public preferences may be used to achieve a signaling function, whereas private preferences may have different functions. Both actively listening to the song alone and the unwillingness to disclose that they listen to the song may be functions of private listening. These functions of private listening may be in order to avoid sending an undesirable signal, such as avoiding a negative stereotype associated with a certain type of music.

Previous research has looked into how music relays information about ourselves and how it allows others to stereotype and group individuals based on their music preferences. Rentfrow and Gosling (2007) explored this idea further and looked at the role these stereotypes may play in one's self-expression and impressions made. Participants were asked to rate people who were fans of specific genres of music. These ratings were based on personality traits from the Big Five Inventory (BFI), as well as personal qualities, values, and alcohol and drug preferences. The personality stereotype results showed that those who listened to classical and religious music were thought to score high in agreeableness as well as high in conscientiousness and emotional stability. Those low on conscientiousness were believed to be those who listened to rock and rap, and those who listen to rap were also believed to be low on emotional stability. Results for personal qualities showed that classical music fans were thought of as conservative, intelligent, unattractive, and artistic. Rock fans were seen as liberal and not religious. Those who listened to religious music were thought to be conservative, and rap fans were seen as liberal and athletic.

When asked about drugs and alcohol, the participants stereotyped that rock and rap fans drink more beer over wine and cocktails and were thought to abuse all drug types. Classical music fans were thought to drink more wine rather than cocktails and beer, and religious fans were thought of as the least likely to consume alcohol but would drink wine if anything. Classical and religious fans were thought to consume few, if any, drugs.

Given the abundance of negative stereotypes associated with certain types of music, one may select the preferences that they wish to reveal publicly according to the persona they wish to project. The band T-shirts, posters, pins, and hats people collect and wear to show support for their favorite music are also sending subtle messages out to the world, quietly announcing not only who one is a fan of, but maybe shaping the opinions of other people as to one's level of religiousness, liberal or conservative beliefs, and alcohol preferences. Furthermore, the links made between music preference and personality characteristics show that these stereotypes hold some truth to them (Rentfrow and Gosling, 2007). Thus, understanding the impressions people form will aid in a better understanding as to why people prefer the type of music they do and the influences behind their choices.

### **Preference and Personality**

Previous studies that looked at music preferences have examined a limited selection of music genres. For instance, Cattell and Saunders (1954) examined music preferences for jazz and classical music, while other studies such as Gowensmith and Bloom (1997) only looked at music preferences for heavy metal and country. Rentfrow and Gosling (2003) wanted to address these limitations and examine all genres of music when exploring music preferences and their relationship to personality. To do so they reported a series of six studies in what has become a landmark paper in the field. The goal of study one was to find the importance individuals place



on music. The results of study one showed that participants thought of music to be just as important as their hobbies and significantly more important than their food preferences. This study also showed that participants believed that their music preferences revealed a considerable amount of information about their personal qualities as well as personality. The main objective of studies 2–4 was to identify four dimensions of music preferences that could be generalized across time, populations, methods, and geographic region. Rather than examining musical preference according to the genre, dimensions were identified in an attempt to capture the essential properties of one's preferred music, such as features that are typical of the multiple genres that one prefers. The four music dimensions Rentfrow and Gosling identified were as follows: Reflective & Complex, comprising classical, jazz, folk, and blues genres; Intense & Rebellious, comprising rock, alternative, and heavy metal genres; Upbeat & Conventional, comprising country, pop, soundtracks, and religious genres; and Energetic & Rhythmic, comprising rap, soul, dance, and electronica genres. A fifth study attempted to characterize each of the four dimensions in terms of different music attributes, and a sixth study examined how music preference is related to one's personality traits (by correlating the four music preference dimensions with personality, self-view, and cognitive ability). Rentfrow and Gosling's findings for each dimension of music are described below.

The Reflective and Complex dimension, comprising classical, jazz, folk, and blues genres, was found to be complex, high in both positive and negative affect, and low in energy level (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003). In general attributes, the Reflective and Complex music dimension was found to be slower in tempo, used primarily acoustical instruments, and had very little singing. The musical attributes were similar to lyrical and found that people believed the

Reflective and Complex dimension was complex, high in positive and negative affect, and low in energy level.

Preference for Reflective and Complex music was positively correlated with openness to new experiences; participants perceived themselves as intelligent and politically liberal (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003). The Reflective and Complex dimension was found to be negatively correlated with social dominance and athleticism. These findings suggest that individuals who enjoy listening to reflective and complex music tend to have active imaginations, tend to be inventive, consider themselves to be intelligent, tolerant of others, and reject conservative ideals.

The Upbeat and Conventional dimension, comprising country, pop, soundtracks, and religious genres, was thought of as simple and direct, moderately high in positive affect, and low in negative affect and energy level (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003). This dimension was thought to have a moderate tempo, contained both acoustic and electric instruments, and had a moderate amount of singing. The Upbeat and Conventional dimension was thought of as simple and direct, moderately in positive affect, and low in negative affect and energy level.

Preference for Upbeat and Conventional music positively correlated with extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, conservatism, self-perceived physical attractiveness, and athleticism. Rentfrow and Gosling (2003) found that the upbeat and conventional dimension negatively correlated with openness to new experiences, social dominance orientation, and liberalism. This suggests that those who enjoy listening to upbeat and conventional music tend to be cheerful, socially outgoing, reliable, and conservative; they enjoy helping others and see themselves as physically attractive.

The Intense and Rebellious dimension comprised rock, alternative, and heavy metal genres. Results showed that for the Intense and Rebellious dimension, the lyrics were perceived

as moderately complex, low in positive affect, and high in both negative affect and energy level. The Intense and Rebellious dimension was also seen to be faster in tempo, had mostly electric instruments, and had a moderate amount of singing. This dimension was also thought to be moderately complex, low in positive affect, and high in negative affect and energy level.

Preference for Intense and Rebellious music was positively correlated with openness to new experiences, athleticism, perceived intelligence, and verbal ability. Rentfrow and Gosling (2003) found that although this dimension contains music genres that project negative emotions, participants who prefer music in this dimension did not show signs of neuroticism or disagreeableness. In fact, participants who prefer intense and rebellious music tend to be curious, enjoy taking risks, are physically active, and consider themselves intelligent.

The Energetic and Rhythmic dimension, comprising rap, soul, dance, and electronica genres, was perceived as moderately complex, unemotional, and moderate in energy level (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003). This dimension was also seen to be moderate in tempo, have electric instruments, and a moderate amount of singing. The Energetic and Rhythmic dimension was thought of as moderately complex, unemotional, and moderate in energy level.

Preference for Energetic and Rhythmic music was positively correlated with extraversion, agreeableness, liberalism, self-perceived as attractive, and athletic. Rentfrow and Gosling (2003) found this dimension was negatively correlated with social dominance orientation and conservatism. Therefore, those who enjoy energetic and rhythmic music are believed to be talkative, full of energy, are forgiving, see themselves as physically attractive, and tend to eschew conservative ideals. Although correlations were found between personality traits and the four music dimensions, there were no substantial correlations between the four dimensions and emotional stability, depression, and self-esteem. Therefore, one's chronic

emotional state has little relation to their music preferences. However, this does not mean that emotions are not correlated to music preferences, since one's mood may affect what they listen to at the moment.

### **Private versus Public Preferences**

Context plays a fundamental role in song selection. People may have multiple playlists containing different genres of music for the different moods they experience. There are party playlists that cater to a wide variety of preferences and there are relaxing playlists with slower songs. What people listen to with their friends is different from what they listen to on their own, and most people have some musical preferences that they tend to conceal from others (Bordeaux & Curtis, 2019).

Previous research examined the factors associated with why people consider some of their music preferences to be guilty pleasures, music that is enjoyed secretly (Bordeaux & Curtis, 2019). A survey was used to gather information about three songs that each participant considered a guilty pleasure and three songs that they enjoy publicly. They were then asked to answer several questions about each song, such as if they are fans of the genre or if the genre is compatible with how they view themselves, as well as numerous questions evaluating the song and musician. These questions were asked in order to examine the factors that distinguish whether a listener regards a song as a guilty pleasure or suitable for sharing with others. The results showed eight predictors in determining whether a song is considered to be a guilty pleasure or not; the most significant were if the song was viewed by the participant as socially acceptable, the complexity of the structure, and whether the song was consistent with how the participant would like to be perceived by their peers. In other words, participants hid their preferences for certain songs because they feared social judgment from their peers, some of

which may have stemmed from concerns about the quality of the song. The genre of the song also related to whether it was treated as a guilty pleasure. Rock and rap songs tended to be publicly accepted, but participants tended to treat songs from film, tv, and musicals as guilty pleasures; reggae was also consumed largely in private.

The current study was designed to further explore private versus public musical preferences, building on the work of Bordeaux and Curtis (2019). The previous study found that the social acceptability of a song was the most significant predictor of whether the song was kept private or public. This current study explored the factors that may explain why a song is viewed as socially acceptable. Participants were asked to identify two songs they prefer to keep private and two songs they consider to be public music preferences. A survey instrument was designed to explore the factors that explain why some songs are shared and others are kept private.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Thirty-three Spotify users were recruited for this research through the SUNY Purchase Psychology Participant Pool website. All participants were compensated with one-course credit. Their mean age was 19.13 ( $SD = 0.98$ , range 18-21 years). There were 22 females, 10 males, and one participant who identified as non-binary.

### **Materials and Procedure**

A survey was administered to the participants online via Qualtrics. The Qualtrics link was posted on the Psychology Participant Pool recruitment website. An informed consent form was presented for the participants to review, assuring them of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. Participants affirmatively agreed to the informed consent statement before proceeding to the online survey. First, participants answered demographic questions about their

age, gender, musical background, and hearing capabilities (see Appendix A). The participants then answered questions from the Big Five Personality Inventory (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991). Participants completed sets of questions about their general preferences for music genres and their intentional listening behavior with regard to the selected genres (see Appendix B).

The participants provided an anonymous link to their Spotify “Top Songs 2019” playlist. Instructions to obtain the link were provided through images in the survey. Participants were asked to identify two songs from their listening history that they prefer to listen to only in private. The following instructions and definition of what makes a song private were provided: “Please go through your Spotify playlist and identify the first song that you only listen to in private. This should be a song that you don't want others to know you enjoy.” Participants were asked to complete several questions about each song (see Appendix C). They were also asked to identify two songs in their listening history that they do not consider to be private music (songs they do feel comfortable admitting to their peers that they like) and answer the same questions about those songs. The complete testing procedure lasted approximately thirty minutes from start to finish and was completed entirely online, with no contact between the experimenter and participants.

## **Results**

Participants provided two songs they want to keep private and two songs they are okay with the public knowing they listen to. Descriptive statistics for all questions asked about private and public songs are displayed in Figures 1, 2, and 3. Figure 1 shows the self-reported subjective emotional responses to songs selected for private versus public listening. Figure 2 depicts the genre characteristics, as reported by the participants, of private versus public songs. Figure 3

displays the self-reported attitudes towards the song, artist, genre, and views with regard to peer evaluation thereof.

A binomial logistic regression (using the forward entry method) was used to determine which parameters can be best used to distinguish between private and public songs. The dependent variable was whether the participant designated the song for their own private or public listening. All questions answered by the participants were entered as potential predictor items in the analysis. These predictor items included the following questions, which have been conceptually organized below into related sets of questions: *Song properties* (“This song has explicit or vulgar lyrics;” “This song has complex musical structure;” “This vocalist is talented;” “This song has a lot of artistic merit”); *Emotional match to situation* (“The emotion of this song is appropriate for a social situation”); *Self-concept match* (“This song is compatible with my perception of myself;” “This song is compatible with my gender and sexual identity;” “This song is age appropriate for me;” “This genre is compatible with my perception of self”); *Personal function of listening* (“This song makes me think of the past;” “I use this song for personal reflection;” “I use this song for motivation”); *Preference for Genre and Artist* (“I am a fan of this genre;” “I frequently listen to other songs by this artist”); *Popularity* (“This song is overplayed;” “This song is currently popular;” “This song used to be popular;” “This artist is currently popular;” “This artist used to be popular”); *Peer acceptance/image management* (“My friends like this song;” “My friends are familiar with this song;” “My friends like this artist;” “This genre is compatible with how I would like my peers to perceive me;” “It is socially acceptable to listen to this song;” “This song is compatible with how I would like my peers to perceive me;” “The emotion of this song is compatible with how I would like my peers to perceive me”);

*Extramusical sources of association* (“I know of scandals involving this artist;” “This song is strongly associated with a TV show, movie, videogame, or musical”); and *Social functions of song* (“I would play this song for a romantic partner or love interest;” “I would play this song for a close friend;” “I would play this song at a party”). Additionally, the predictors included each participant’s self-assessment of the extent to which each song communicated the following emotions: Happiness, Sadness, Anger/Frustration, Fear, Sexual interest, Tranquility, Shame, and Inner resolve. Predictors also included each participant’s self-assessment of how strongly each song contained elements of the following genres: Alternative, Blues, Classical, Country, Disco, Electronic, Folk, Funk, Jazz, Pop, Punk, Rap, R&B, Reggae, Rock, African, Indian, and Latin.

A nine-factor logistic regression model,  $\chi^2(108) = 5.36, p = 0.021$ , explained 62.3% of the variance in the data (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) and correctly categorized 86.3% of songs as public or private. It was used to predict factors that are associated with private listening. The nine factors of the model are shown in Table 1. The factors weights can be interpreted to indicate that factors that are positively weighted are associated more strongly with predicting private songs than public songs. Songs that were kept private were those that participants viewed as relatively incompatible with how they’d like to be seen by their peers, those that had an inappropriate emotion for a social situation, and those that were inappropriate for parties. Participants were more likely to listen to songs in private than in public if the artist had been involved in a scandal or if the song reminded them of the past. Pop songs were also more likely to be kept private than shared publicly. And although participants tended to keep their preferences for popular artists private, songs that were overplayed--according to the participants--were more likely to be shared publicly.



The most significant predictor in the regression model--that private songs were inappropriate for parties--serves as validation that the participants understood the task. Predictors beyond this provide some clarity as towards why certain songs are socially inappropriate, but the large amount of variance in the model that was subsumed by the "suitable for parties" variable, which should reliably covary with the independent variable of this study, covaries with other variables that may hold the power to explain *why* certain songs are unacceptable in social situations. Therefore, a second regression was conducted with all but three of the IVs that had been included as potential predictors in the first regression. The excluded variables were those concerning the *Social functions of the song*: "I would play this song for a romantic partner or love interest;" "I would play this song for a close friend;" and "I would play this song at a party." All three were excluded as IVs because they cannot be considered to be truly independent from the manipulated variable.

A regression model returned nine significant factors,  $\chi^2(109) = 4.42, p = 0.036$ , explained 59.7% of the variance in the data (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) and correctly categorized 86.5% of songs as public or private. It was used to predict factors that are associated with private listening. The nine factors of the model are shown in Table 2. The factors weights can be interpreted to indicate that factors that are positively weighted are associated more strongly with predicting private songs than public songs. Songs that were kept private were those that participants viewed as evoking an emotion that was inappropriate for social situations and songs that were incompatible with how they'd like to be seen by their peers. Songs that were viewed as consistent with participant gender and sexual identity were also more likely to be listened to privately. Participants were more likely to listen to songs in private than in public if the artist had been involved in a scandal. Pop songs were also more likely to be kept private, but electronic

songs were more likely to be shared. Songs that were overplayed--according to the participants--were more likely to be shared publicly, as were songs that evoked a sense of tranquility.

### **Qualitative Results**

Participants were given the opportunity to answer open-ended questions about why they regarded each of their selected songs as either acceptable or unacceptable for sharing with others. Their answers regarding the private songs were highly variable but generally corresponded to reasons relating to the emotional qualities of the song (“Heavier than most,” “When I listen to music with others I enjoy listening to more upbeat songs with lyrics”), fear of being judged due to perceived social stigma against the artist or song (“There’s controversy surrounding the artist,” “Everyone hates him”), viewing the song or artist as having an inferior quality (“It’s not a good song”), the unfamiliarity of the artist or song (“My friends don’t listen to the genre”), and the personal nature of the individual’s functional relationship with the song (“It has sentimental value,” “It reminds me of simpler happier times, and I do not want anyone’s opinions to potentially hinder the positive feelings and memories the song brings back,” “I like to dance freely to it”). These answers ultimately point to a variety of reasons why the participants fear social judgment as well as an expressed desire to avoid experiencing social judgments while engaging freely with a beloved song. This avoidance allows for the maintenance of two types of relationships--that between the individual and their peers as well as between the individual and the song, a relationship that will remain untainted by outside judgment, preserving the function that song serves for the individual.

The answers regarding why certain songs were acceptable for sharing publicly were more homogeneous and tended to correspond to the song having a positive emotion (“It’s fun,” “It’s more upbeat,” “It is a fun, upbeat song,” “It adds energy to the room”), being popular or loved

by peers (“Everyone knows it,” “Very popular,” “I love this song and my friends do too,” “My friends and I all enjoy the song,” “It’s by an artist a lot of people like and it is a good song,”), or being particularly revered or of high quality (“It’s a universal song,” “It’s timeless”).

### **Discussion**

This study examined private vs public musical preferences and the factors that influence the social acceptability of songs. Previous research described factors that may lead to concealing some preferences, such as negative stereotypes about certain styles of music (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2007), and reported a tendency for individuals to conform their music preferences to those of others (Bryan & Curtis, 2018). The current study extended the work of Bordeaux and Curtis (2019), exploring how social acceptability influences music preferences and which factors determine what makes a song unsuitable for sharing with others.

The combined results of the two regressions yielded nine factors that were associated with private listening. Both regressions can be interpreted as pointing to the emotional qualities of the songs as the most important factor of private listening. Regression 1 indicated that responses to the question regarding whether one would “play the song at a party” could best predict a preference for private versus public listening, and songs that one would play at a party also tended to be those that were viewed as having an emotion that was appropriate for a social situation. The collinearity resulted in the “socially appropriate emotion” factor having an ultimately lower weight in this regression than it otherwise would without the inclusion of “play at a party.” Since the “play at a party” factor and the other two factors concerning social uses of the songs are far too similar to the manipulated variable of this study to be of explanatory value (though these DVs did confirm that participants understood the task), these factors were excluded from the second regression so as to focus on variables that might have, qualitatively,

better explanatory potential. The social appropriateness of the emotion was the most significant predictor of private versus public listening in regression 2. The average emotional content of the songs supplied by the participants is displayed in Figure 1. Participants were more likely to keep songs private when they evoked negative or complex emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, shame, and inner resolve. Whereas, songs that were thought to be okay to listen to publicly were those that participants regarded as happier and that reflected more sexual interests and tranquility.

Figure 3 shows a list of predictor items from the survey and the participants' mean self-reported attitudes towards the songs they chose as private or public preferences. Some of these items were significant predictors in the regressions. Both regressions showed that the second most important factor for private versus public listening was whether the participant thought the song would be viewed as socially acceptable by their peers, implying that people will keep songs private if the social acceptability seems to be challenged. For instance, participants were found to be more likely to keep a song private if the artist was involved in a scandal (the third most influential factor, according to the regression models). When someone listens to a song, they are supporting the artist who composed it. However, this may become problematic when the artist is involved in a scandal. No matter the scandal, whether the artist is involved in criminal activity or is simply a popular target of the tabloids, supporting the artist by listening to their song could be perceived as taking the artist's side in terms of the scandal. People may be likely to keep the song hidden in fear of being associated with the artist or scandal.

There was a disconnect between the attitudes expressed towards sharing popular artists versus popular songs. Participants were more likely to keep their preference for a song private if the artist was popular; however, they were also more likely to share their preference for a song if

they thought the song was overplayed. In this case when a song is overplayed, there may be an aspect of the song that is catchy and drives its mass appeal, or it is a song that a majority of people may listen to and therefore will be played more frequently. Songs that are overplayed tend to be well known, making them good potential conversation topics for bonding with others over shared interests. Why doesn't the same social benefit seem to apply to popular artists? When an artist is popular, factors such as looks, scandals (as shown above), and overall public opinion may have an influence on an individual's desire to share their interest in a potentially controversial artist. If the majority of the public has a negative opinion of a popular artist, someone who likes to listen to one of their songs may fear that the negative light the artist receives will be projected onto themselves. Thus, not having an opinion that aligns with the masses can lead to an individual preferring to keep a song private even if the artist themselves are popular.

The functions that the private songs served for the participants may have been inherently private functions, leading to isolated listening. For instance, private songs were more strongly associated with thoughts of the past than public songs. The past is personal for each individual; it is what helps shape people into who they are and who they will become. For this reason when a song strikes a memory of the past, it is reasonable as to why someone would want to keep it private. Similarly, songs that may have reinforced gender and sexual identities were retained more for private than public listening. The functions of such songs might be quite personal, and for some, the need to conceal these songs might be a matter of considerable importance. The results also suggested that the participants felt a need to protect these beloved songs from external judgment so as to preserve the personal value and functionality that the song holds for them. In the descriptive portion of the survey, a few participants stated as their reason for private

listening that they would not want someone to talk down upon a song that reminds them of the past in fear of changing their opinion or causing a negative association. The personal significance that a song holds for an individual may relate to important functions that the music serves for that individual, such as self-reflection, personal motivation, and recovery from loss. The qualitative responses speak to a need to preserve these functions, untainted by social judgment.

Figure 2 shows the genres characteristics, as reported by the participants, of the private and public songs. Participants selected pop songs more than any other genre for both private listening and public listening; it was the most preferred genre of this participant sample. But overall, there was a slight bias towards wanting to keep pop songs private. The pattern of results pertaining to pop--widespread listening but also a bias towards hiding a preference for the genre--suggests that there could be a stigma against pop. One possible stigma behind pop could be its association with immaturity. Children and pre-teens may be exposed more to this genre than most others and therefore if someone is older they may feel a sense of embarrassment due to the idea it could be socially unacceptable age-wise to be listening to pop. However, pop music is known to be fun and energetic, which are the emotional qualities that make a song ideal for sharing, as seen in Figure 1, which could explain why participants also reported pop to be the genre they were most likely to share with others.

Further analysis of the qualitative data set collected could be further explored in order to obtain a better understanding of social acceptability factors. However, a larger sample size of participants will be needed in order to gather a more generalized set of factors that influence personal music preferences.

This current study suggests that the factors that distinguish between songs that are shared and those that are reserved for private listening include the emotion evoked by the song, perceptions about the social acceptability of the song, artist and song popularity, and the personal functionality that the song holds for the listener.

Music conveys different meanings, values and affects people in diverse ways such as emotional influence, self-reflection, and a means of connection with peers. This current study set out to find the factors that influence the music people decide to keep privately to themselves and music they are okay with the public knowing they listen to. This study contributed to the research in gaining a better understanding of the social factors that influence the private and public consumption of music and how these factors impact behavior in terms of self-presentation, identity maintenance, and social pressures to conform.

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Table 1. *Predictor Variables of Private Songs*

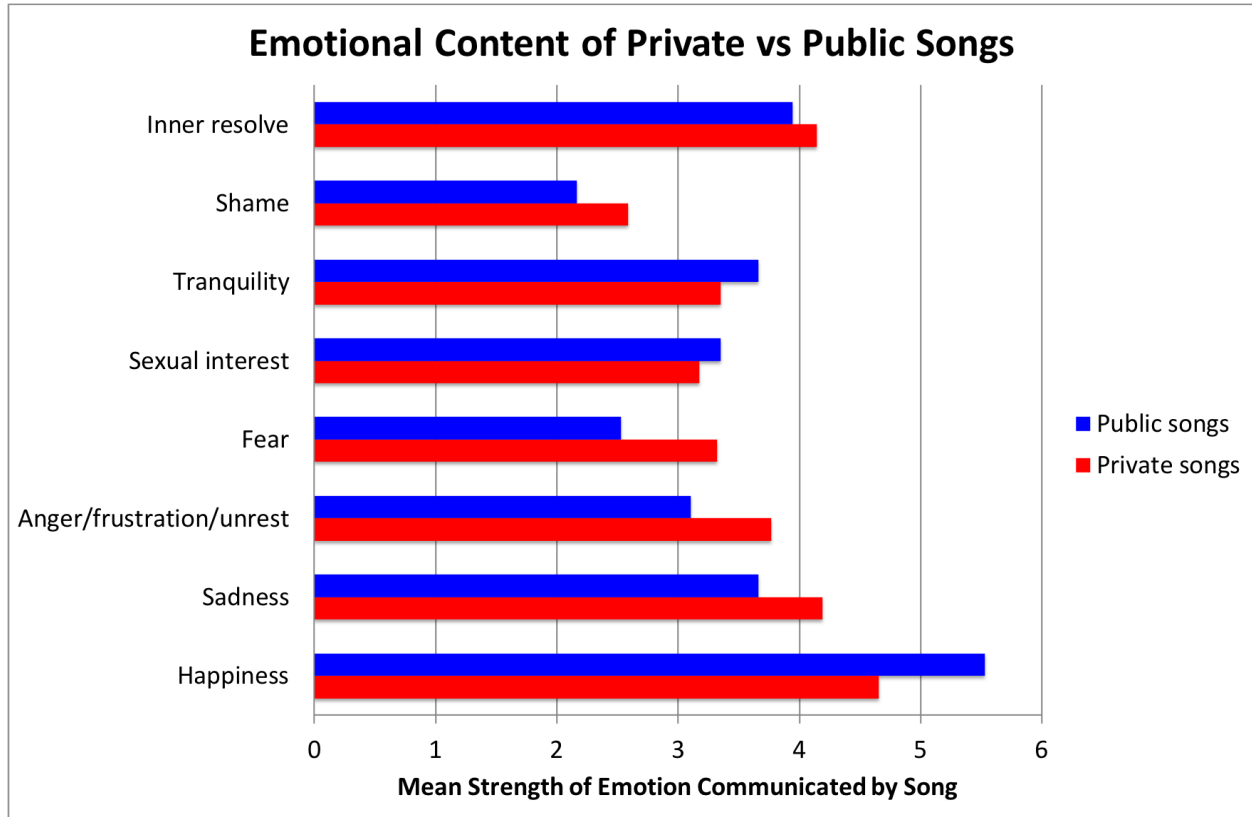
	Parameter Weight	Wald Statistic	p-value
Intercept	2.45	2.94	0.086
I would play this song at a party	-0.52	5.95	0.015
I know of scandals involving this artist	0.66	12.43	<0.001
This song is compatible with how I would like peers to perceive me	-0.80	12.27	<0.001
This song makes me think of the past	0.44	6.12	0.013
This song has been overplayed	-0.62	9.13	0.003
This artist is currently popular	0.43	5.07	0.024
This song has elements of pop	0.364	5.57	0.018
The emotion communicated by this song is appropriate for social settings	-0.543	4.83	0.028

*Note.* Positive parameter weights are associated with a stronger likelihood of a song being used for private than public listening.

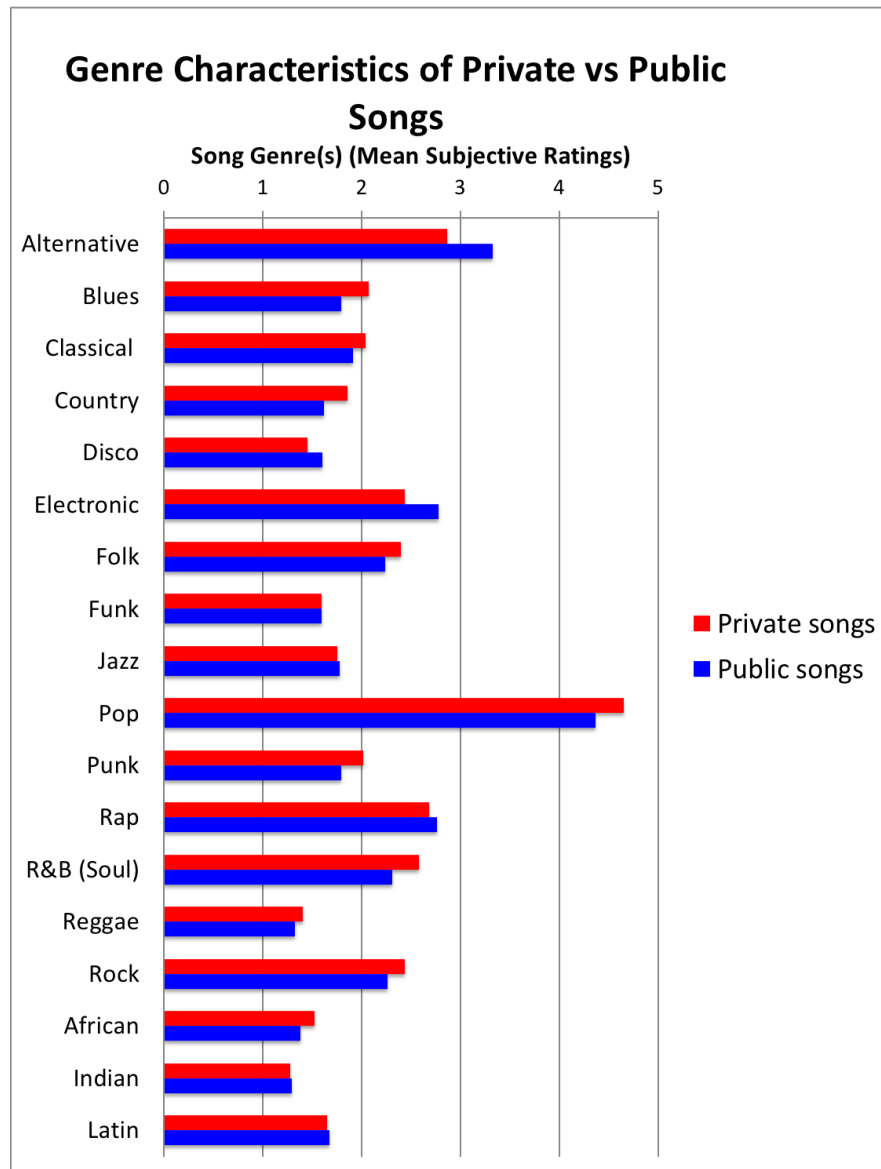
Table 2. *Predictor Variables of Private Songs, Reduced List of Predictors*

	Parameter Weight	Wald Statistic	p-value
Intercept	6.50	13.79	<0.001
The emotion communicated by this song is appropriate for social settings	-1.30	22.65	<0.001
I know of scandals involving this artist	0.86	13.59	<0.001
This song is compatible with how I would like peers to perceive me	-0.86	11.93	<0.001
I consider this song to be compatible with my gender and/or sexual identity.	0.50	5.50	0.019
This song has been overplayed	-0.75	10.87	<0.001
This song has elements of pop	0.69	10.07	0.002
This song has elements of electronic	-0.50	7.37	0.007
This song evokes tranquility	-0.37	4.24	0.039

*Note.* Positive parameter weights are associated with a stronger likelihood of a song being used for private than public listening.



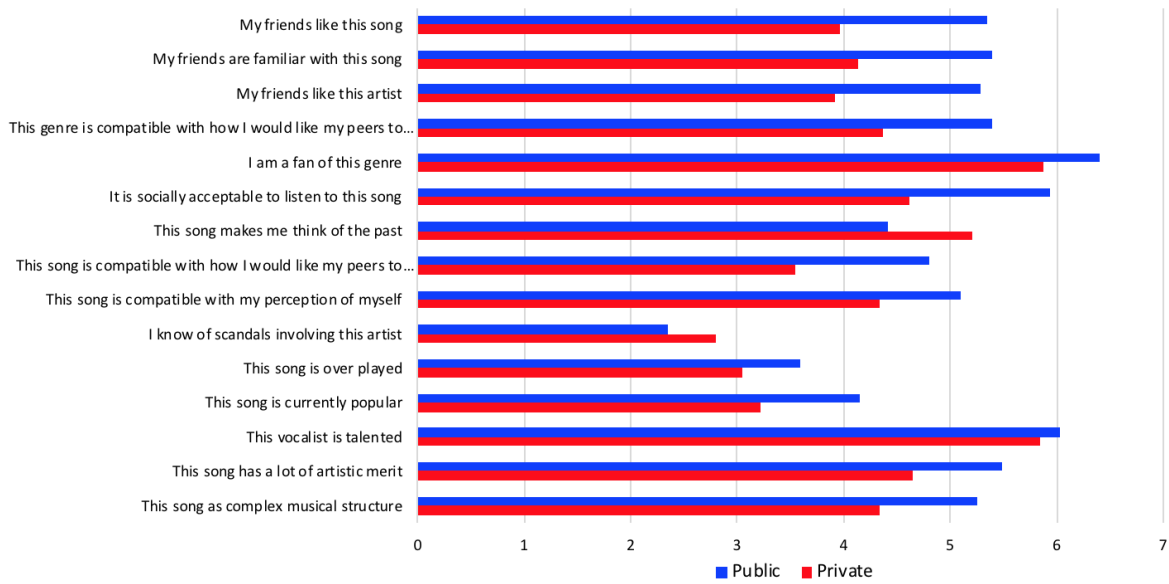
*Figure 1.* Mean self-reported emotional content of private and public songs. Negative emotions, such as fear, anger, sadness, and shame, were more recurrent in private songs than public songs. Happiness and tranquility, conversely, were more recurrent in public songs.



*Figure 2.* Mean self-reported genre characteristics of private and public songs. Despite a strong overall preference for pop songs, participants were more likely to keep their preferences for pop songs private than make them public. A tendency towards private listening was also observed for blues, classical, country, folk, punk, R&B, reggae, rock, and African. A tendency towards public listening was observed for alternative, electronic, and rap.

**Self-Reported Attitudes Towards Self-Selected Songs for Private and Public Consumption**

**Mean Level of Agreement with Statement**



*Figure 3.* Mean self-reported attitudes about private and public songs. Particularly large differences between conditions were observed in the average ratings for questions regarding friends and social acceptance.

Appendix A

1. Please enter your age in the space below.

---

2. Please indicate your gender in the space below.

---

3a. Do you play any musical instruments?

- Yes
- No

3b. If yes, how many years have you been playing the instrument that you have played for the longest amount of time?

---

4a. Do you have any hearing deficits that you know of?

- Yes
- No

4b. If yes, please explain below.

---

## Appendix B

1. When you hear this genre, how much do you generally like it?

	Dislike a great deal (1)	Dislike a moderate amount (2)	Dislike a little (3)	Neither like nor dislike (4)	Like a little (5)	Like a moderate amount (6)	Like a great deal (7)
Alternative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Blues	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Classical (including orchestra, opera, chamber music, etc)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Country	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Disco	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Electronic (Dance)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Folk (acoustic, singer/song- writer)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Funk	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Jazz	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pop	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Punk	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Rap	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
R&B (Soul)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Reggae	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Rock	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
African	0	0	0	0	0	0	0



Indian	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Latin	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2. How often do you intentionally listen to this genre?

	Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)	Most of the time (5)
Alternative	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Blues	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Classical (including orchestra, opera, chamber music, etc)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Country	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Disco	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Electronic (Dance)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Folk (acoustic, singer/song-writer)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Funk	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Jazz	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Pop	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Punk	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rap	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
R&B (Soul)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reggae	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rock	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
African	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Indian	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Latin	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3. If asked about your musical taste, how do you primarily identify? (e.g., metal-head, punk, oldies lover, etc)

---

## Appendix C

We're going to ask you some questions about your personal listening preferences. To do this, we need you to find a list of your most frequently played songs of 2019 on Spotify. Instructions for how to find that are below. After the instructions, you will see a place to post the link to your playlist.

1. Paste the link to "Your Top Songs 2019" from Spotify.

---

2. Please rate your level of agreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
I do not share my Spotify account with another listener.	0	0	0	0	0
The songs listed on my Top Songs of 2019 reflect my musical taste.	0	0	0	0	0
I use Spotify more than I use other music services.	0	0	0	0	0

3. Please go through your Spotify playlist and identify the first song that you only listen to in private. This should be a song that you don't want others to know you enjoy.

Enter the name of the song and artist. Then answer the following questions about the song.

4. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements about the song and artist.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
This song has a complex musical structure.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
This song has explicit or vulgar lyrics.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
This song has a lot of artistic merit.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
The vocalist is talented.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
This song is currently popular.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

This song used to be popular.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This song has been overplayed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I strongly associate this song with a TV show, movie, musical, or videogame.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This artist is currently popular.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This artist used to be popular.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I know of scandals involving this artist.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I listen to other songs by this artist frequently.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements about this song as it relates to your sense of self and your peers.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Some-what disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Some-what agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
This song is compatible with my perception of myself.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
This song is compatible with how I would like my peers to perceive me.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
This song is age-appropriate for me.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
This song makes me think of the past.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
I consider this song to be compatible with my gender and/or sexual identity.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
It is socially acceptable to listen to this song.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

I am a fan of this genre.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
This genre is compatible with my perception of myself.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
This genre is compatible with how I would like my peers to perceive me.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
My friends like this artist.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
My friends are familiar with this song.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
My friends like this song.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
I would play this song for a romantic partner/love interest.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
I would play this song for a close friend.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
I would play this song at a party.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0







Country	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Disco	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Electronic (Dance)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Folk (acoustic, singer/ song-writer)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Funk	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Jazz	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pop	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Punk	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Rap	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
R&B (Soul)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Reggae	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Rock	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
African	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Indian	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Latin



8. Why do you prefer to listen to this song privately?

---

**Questions 3-8 of Appendix C were repeated for a second private song.**

**Then the instructions for Questions 3 and 8 were altered to the following, and Questions 3-8 were administered twice (both times with the new variants of 3 and 8):**

3. Please go through your Spotify playlist again and identify a song that you are willing to listen to publicly. This should be a song that you DO feel comfortable admitting to your peers that you like.

Enter the name of the song and artist below. Then answer the following questions about the song.

---

8. Why do you think you are comfortable listening to this publicly?

---