ABSTRACT

Music is a powerful force that influences human emotions, reasoning, and behavior. While its impact on emotions and social interactions is well-documented, less is known about its role in shaping moral beliefs. This dissertation contributes to this emerging field by examining how different types of music affect moral decision-making, moral identity, and moral foundations. I conducted two experimental studies to explore these effects.

In Study 1 ($N = 528$), I investigated whether exposure to a national anthem influences utilitarian moral judgments. Using a between-subjects design, participants from China and the USA either listened to their national anthem or to emotionally neutral ambient music. The results showed that those who listened to the anthem were less likely to endorse decisions that involved harming one person for the greater good.

In Study 2 (total $N = 388$), I examined how happy music influences moral identity and moral foundations. This study included three sub-studies. In Study 2a ($N = 183$), I used a mixed design, measuring participants' moral identity and moral foundations before and after listening to a one-minute happy song and comparing participants from two cultures. The findings indicated that Chinese participants, but not Americans, rated the moral foundations of fairness and authority lower after listening to happy music. The self-importance of moral identity remained stable. In Study 2b ($N = 101$), I tested whether a similar effect could be triggered by a different stimulus – a happy image. However, exposure to the image did not produce the same changes in moral foundations despite eliciting the same affect. This suggests a unique effect of music rather than affect alone, which contradicts some previous research. In Study 2c ($N = 104$), I explored differences in how Chinese and American participants perceived the music used in Study 2a, revealing cross-cultural differences in familiarity, arousal, and liking of the piece of music.

These findings contribute to the broader discussion of how experimental research can enhance our understanding of moral psychology. While many studies on morality rely on correlational methods, this dissertation highlights the importance of experimental approaches in establishing causal links. Moreover, given the replication crisis in psychology, this research follows best practices by using well-powered designs, preregistration, open data sharing, and cross-cultural samples.

Overall, this dissertation advances our knowledge of how music influences moral beliefs. It demonstrates that music, as a deeply embedded part of human life, has the potential to shape moral judgments and basic moral values. However, the effects of music on morality depend on cultural and contextual factors, emphasizing the need for interdisciplinary and cross-cultural approaches in future research.