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Listening to ironically-enjoyed music: A self-regulatory perspective

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## **Abstract**

This research examines adults' reported motivations for listening to music that they enjoy ironically. In a pilot ( $N = 96$ ) and main ( $N = 175$ ) studies, open-ended responses from adults were analysed using Thematic Analysis. Based on the pilot study, ironically enjoyed music was defined as "Music that is enjoyed because of being bad, despite being bad, or for different reasons than intended." Although many relevant self-regulatory functions of listening to music in general were also relevant to ironically- enjoyed music, it also emerged that ironic enjoyment of music has characteristics that are unique to it: the additional role of mocking, ridiculing, and laughing at the music, and the social benefit that this provides. Music that was listened to "because of" its negative features had a variety of musical features, and the listening usually served functions unique to ironic enjoyment of music, such as mockery. When music was listened to "despite" negative qualities, the music itself was often described as having attractive rhythm, melody or lyrics, while the irony protected the listener from conflicting values associated with the music, helping the listener communicate to others that they did not identify with the music on a higher level. Unfamiliar music mainly played a social role, whereas familiar music related to nostalgia as well as most other functions.

*Keywords:* Music, Ironic enjoyment, Self-regulation, Mood, Identity

*'The campy-listening thing, I think, is false. [...A]t some point you might have told yourself and others that you listened to the Backstreet Boys because it was funny. But in fact, you were enjoying it; it's just a different kind of enjoyment for you.'* Musician John Darnielle, interviewed by Handler (2004)

Is “ironic enjoyment of music” different from more general enjoyment of music? And if so, what is its appeal; what are people’s motivations for listening to it, what are the effects of listening to it; and how does selection of ironically enjoyed music take place? The current study was addressed these questions.

An analysis of a corpus of phrases in over 5 million English-language books (Google Ngram Viewer) shows that “ironic enjoyment” as a phrase appears only a few hundred times beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a recent peak around the year 2000. The majority of contexts occur in literary and cultural analyses, for example, by Baudrillard (2004/2013, p. 134) describing popular reactions to political spectacle, or by Gooneratne (1970, p. 159) describing Jane Austen’s approach to matters of social rank. However, as our initial quote shows, ironic enjoyment can be discussed using a variety of terms (“campy-listening”; “because it was funny”). In any event, few scholarly texts (Bennett, 2000; 2013; Bennett & Taylor, 2013; Drew, 2004, 2005) and no known systematic empirical studies, to date, have focused on ironic enjoyment of music. Conversely, literature on the enjoyment of music to regulate emotional states (Edwards, 2011; Hallam, Cross, & Thaut, 2011) has not yet explored why people listen to music that they enjoy ironically. We aimed to fill this gap in research.

### **Music Listening and Self-Regulation**

Music is a versatile and effective tool to regulate emotions (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007; Sloboda, Lamont & Greasley, 2009). For example, music listening is most often used as a tool for regulating affect after talking to friends and in general (Van Goethem & Sloboda, 2011; Van Goethem, 2010). Thayer, Newman, and McClain (1994) also reported that among a variety of activities listening to music was thought to be the most effective way to feel

emotionally and physically energized. Thus, music listening can be used to regulate affect and thoughts.

*Self-regulatory Functions.*

Research has recently tried to gain a deeper understanding of music listening from an emotion regulation perspective (Rentfrow, 2012; Saarikallio, & Erkkilä, 2007; Randall, Rickard, & Vella-Brodrick, 2014; Schäfer, & Sedlmeier, 2009; Van den Tol & Edwards, 2013) and from other motivational perspectives such as social and identity goals (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003; Sloboda, Lamont & Greasley, 2009; Ter Bogt, 2010; Lonsdale, & North, 2011) or nostalgia and recollection (Barrett, Grimm, Robins, et al., 2010; Batcho, 2007; Van den Tol & Ritchie, 2015). This research shows that people often use music to change, maintain or intensify affective states, and that this may even be the number one reason for listening to music (see for example Van Goethem & Sloboda, 2011). People use music (and lyrics) for cognitive as well as directly affective regulation, including cognitive reappraisal, search for meaning, acceptance of negative situations, and for diversion from boredom and intrusive thoughts and emotions (see for example Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007 or Van den Tol, Edwards, & Heflick, 2016).

Identity and social purposes also motivate for music listening. In an experimental study Lonsdale and North (2009) showed that participants giving rewards to other participants rewarded people more who had a similar musical artist preference. Stereotype bias also occurs in musical identity; English adolescents attributed more positive qualities (intelligence, attractiveness etc.) to fans of musical styles they liked than fans of styles they disliked (Tarrant, North & Hargreaves, 2001). Evidently, people attach great value to music preference in terms of social affiliation and identity (Lonsdale & North, 2009, 2011; Maher, Van Tilburg, & Van den Tol, 2013; Tarrant, North & Hargreaves, 2001; Tekman, 2009; Tekman & Hortaçsu, 2002).

Lonsdale and North (2011) reported mixed-method research in which, after identifying the psychological effects that are available through music listening in a qualitative

study, participants rated how much they used music for each of these effects in a follow-up survey. Through factor analysis, they identified eight themes : *negative mood management*, to alleviate negative feelings; *positive mood management*, to optimize positive feelings; *surveillance*, to learn about things; *personal identity*, for identity development and portraying social images to others; *interpersonal relationships/social interaction*, to promote and maintain social interaction; *diversion*, to distract and relieve from boredom and pass the time; *reminiscence*, to bring back memories, and *arousal*, meaning that the music is use to feel energized. This scheme resonates with what other scholars in this field have found (e.g. Dillman- Carpentier, Brown, Bertocci, et al., 2008; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003; Saarikallio, & Erkkilä, 2007), namely, that different types of music may serve different psychological purposes.

However, why would people then listen to music that they enjoy only “ironically” – implying a certain amount of distance? One possible explanation comes from research by Drew (2004, 2005) that showed that middle class people were found to mock and ridicule Karaoke while enjoying it. More specifically, Karaoke was seen as a typical lower class activity, and middle class listeners used irony to enjoy the music without losing social status. So, ironic enjoyment may be a way to negotiate the conflict of enjoyment with identity. This example illustrates that the self-regulatory reasons people have for listening to ironically enjoyed music may differ from those identified for music listening in general. But first, we must define more precisely what is meant by “ironic enjoyment.”

### **Theory of ironic enjoyment**

In a critical textual analysis of ironic enjoyment, Bennett (2013) rejects the prior implication (Frith, 1987; Negus, 1972) that music “that works for an individual” is always regarded relatively seriously, or seen completely as an extension of the self. Instead, he documents a strong appeal of irony in music preference, possibly as an audience rejection, of the music industry’s branding and marketing of high seriousness.

However, rather than take verbatim Bennett's characterization of ironic enjoyment as a non-serious approach to a work that is (actually or apparently) meant seriously, or similar definitions in other media, e.g. Ang's "ironic viewing" (1982), we thought it best to begin our research with an investigation of the meaning of "ironic enjoyment" among respondents: that is, a pilot study examining people's spontaneous definitions of the phrase. All the same, it is also useful to briefly review prior theoretical approaches to both components of the phrase "ironic enjoyment."

### *Irony*

Scholars who study irony in text and other media tend to agree that ironic communications involve communications in which 'what is meant' is opposite from 'what is expressed' (Colebrook, 2000, 2004; Korthoff, 2003; Lapp, 1992). Some have argued that this specific opposition can not only be located on the level of the proposition or illocution, but also on the level of evaluation (Booth, 1974; Bennett, 2013; Cloud 2010; Elstermann 1991; Hartung, 1998; Korthoff, 2003). That is, an ironic stance toward something may sometimes attribute motive and value to the object and its maker/presenter beyond what may have been intended. More specifically, this suggests that lay views of irony would acknowledge that one's own evaluation and response is different from the intended evaluation of the object. We also suspect that many ironic experiences involve some kind of affective enjoyment (e.g., excitement, amusement) of material which is also understood as "bad" by more cognitive evaluative criteria (e.g., indicating an unwanted social identity, or low aesthetic standards).

### *Enjoyment*

Enjoyment responses to media involve an affective component but some researchers have also argued that cognitive elements of evaluation play a role in enjoyment (e. g. Raney, 2002, 2006). Here it is important to distinguish enjoyment of media from appreciation (Tamborini, 2011, 2012; Lewis et al, 2015) Enjoyment involves fast, simple, needs-oriented intuitive processing, while appreciation involves reflective, integrative processing. Indeed, in experimental research on story enjoyment by Lewis and others (2015), more time was needed

for responses of appreciation compared to responses that only indicated enjoyment. In a similar distinction, Vorderer and Ritterfeld (2009 p. 459) conceptualized enjoyment as the response of satisfaction of “immediate, lower-order needs” of “pleasure” and “comprehension” (p. 458) and appreciation as the satisfaction of “less immediate, higher-order goals”. In summary, though, dual-process models of aesthetic response seem to agree that enjoyment is a non-reflective and intuitive process of deriving value (emotional or otherwise) from an experience, which can be contrasted against a more reflective process that contrasts the experience against some standard. It is this definition that we will use.

### **The current research**

This research takes a novel systematic empirical approach to an under-reported phenomenon that has been studied largely through textual analysis. It began without prior hypotheses, and appropriately took a qualitative approach (Charmaz, 2008).

In a pilot study, we presented participants with the term “ironically enjoyed music” and asked them to explain what the term means. After analyzing the variety of meanings offered for this term, we then conducted a more focused qualitative study in order to explore the appeal of ironically enjoyed music in terms of motivation for and effects of listening to music that can be defined as ‘ironically enjoyed music’. In this second study participants were first presented with a composite definition, then asked to recall an instance of ironic enjoyment of music, and responded to open-ended probe questions. We were particularly interested in understanding: perceived physical, social or psychological benefits to listening to this music, which we defined as *self-regulatory functions*, and why people decided to listen to this music, which we defined as *music selection strategies*.

## **Pilot study**

### **Method**

#### **Participants**



Ninety-two participants from an undergraduate psychology course at the University of Kent (England) volunteered in return for course credit. To preserve anonymity, we did not ask participants for any identifying information. However, based on results from similar studies conducted in that course, it can be assumed that the mean age was around 21 years, most students were British, and that more women than men had participated.

### **Design and procedure**

Participants took the study online for partial course credit. Before participating, they were briefly informed about the purpose of this study which was stated to be “defining ironically enjoyed music”. They then participated in the open ended survey.

### **Research materials**

The study contained only one open-ended question that stated: “*We here would like you to define what the definition ironically enjoyed music means to you.*”

### **Data Analysis**

Following data collection the data were entered in Excel (each participant’s full response was a single cell). A column was added for the analysis of each response. Thematic Analysis (Braun, & Clarke, 2006) was used as an approach, to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within the data. When using an inductive Thematic Analysis the first set of themes is based on a preliminary scanning of the text (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun, & Clarke, 2006). The themes that we aimed to find were different definitions for describing ironically enjoyed music.

Each response was read carefully, coded based on apparent themes (only 1 theme for each response), and reflective memos were made about the rationale for the creation and readjustment of each theme and categorization of responses to a certain theme. The research analysis was an iterative and reflexive process, where the researcher ensures that the developing themes were grounded in the original data and theory (Braun, & Clarke, 2006).

The first set of themes - several potential definitions - was developed by the first author. The database with all the analyzed data was sent to the second author, after which the

two conferred on how the themes could be further refined. Based on this meeting a final list of themes to define ironic enjoyment emerged. After conducting this Thematic Analysis both authors independently categorized each response to fit within (only) one of the emerging definitions for ironic enjoyment (one definition per participant).

### **Results**

Three main definition themes were found:

- 1) *Enjoying something in spite of (or because) it being evaluated as being bad.*
- 2) *Enjoying something against your own expectations,*
- 3) *Feeling a different emotion than the music intends.*

A fourth category, “other,” emerged for participants who did not seem to understand our question, who indicated they had to web-search the definition, or were not sure what to answer.

Coding the data of 91 participants with regards to these 4 categories provided a 79% agreement across both raters/authors. We perceived this amount to be sufficient for the purpose of our research.

Our further analyses counted only those 71 responses that were coded the same by both coders. Of these, 19 (26.76 %) could be categorized as definition 1 (enjoyment of something bad), 20 (28.17 %) could be categorized as definition 2 (unexpected enjoyment), and 9 (12.68%) could be categorized as 3 (unintended emotion). The remaining 19 (26.76 %) participants were in the “other” category.

### **Discussion**

The three primary definitions in this pilot study agree with the definition of irony in The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language (Fourth Edition, 2000): “Incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs.” This applies directly to our definition number 2, and also less directly to definition 1 (where enjoyment happens in spite of qualities that might be expected to lead to a bad experience - when processed at a higher level) and definition 3 (where the expectation is on the part of the

creator and not the listener of music). Moreover, the three definitions that we found in this pilot study do agree with how we earlier defined ‘enjoyment’ as a state of pleasure without higher order processing.

The different definitions are also not mutually exclusive. Each one depicts a facet of a prototypical example of ironic listening in which a person listens to music in the expectation it will be bad (definition 2), but ends up enjoying the music without abandoning the negative evaluation of some of its aspects (definition 1), thus enjoying it for a reason different than the creator’s intention (definition 3).

Based on our pilot study, we chose to define ironic enjoyment broadly rather than prototypically for participants in the main study, giving a definition linking the different elements with “or” rather than “and”: *When you enjoy music in spite of the fact that it's bad, because of the fact that it's bad, or you enjoy it for a different reason than the musician intended.*

One potential limitation of this pilot study may have been that all participants were British undergraduate students in psychology, who participated to fulfil a course requirement. While their status as psychology students is unlikely to have affected responses, because aesthetics and ironic enjoyment were not topics covered in their degree curriculum, it is possible that they were above the population average in their awareness of the term, due to being relatively more educated, from a young generation, and of a nationality often cited as having an ironic sensibility (Braslett, 2009). To further triangulate and generalize responses, we used a broader, international internet sample in the next study.

### **Main study**

#### **Method**

##### **Participants**

Participants were gathered online on the website ‘Psychological Research on the Net’ where volunteers complete online studies. One hundred and seventy-eight participants

volunteered. Only participants who clearly answered the check question about ironic enjoyment and who clearly wrote about an instance of enjoying music ironically, as determined by the first author, were selected for the data analyses. This left a total of one-hundred-and-forty-five (81.46 percent) participants: their ages ranged from 16 to 66 ( $M = 21.28$ ;  $SD = 8.70$ ) with 83 females, 57 males and five participants who did not disclose their gender. Sixty-three respondents identified as American, three Canadian, two Australian, two Filipino/a, two Italian, two Mexican, two Russian, two Singaporean, one British, and one Afghan. Despite our request to indicate a “nationality” some participants indicated ethnic categories; 46 Caucasian, six Hispanic, and three African American. All other participants left a blank space, reported other, or reported a mixed nationality.

### **Design and procedure**

Participants were contacted to take part in the study through a web-link on a social research website in which they were briefly informed about the purpose of this study, ‘*exploring motivation for listening to ironically enjoyed music*’. They took the survey anonymously.

### **Research materials**

The structure of this open ended survey was adapted from prior research into self-identified sad music (Van den Tol, & Edwards, 2013). Participants were first asked to think of a recent time (due to the potential effect of time on accuracy in self-report of emotional response; Ritchie et al., 2009) when they had listened to music that they enjoyed ironically: *As part of this study we want you to think back to a recent situation in which you listened to a specific piece of music that you enjoyed ironically. We have defined ironic enjoyment of music as: When you enjoy music in spite of the fact that it's bad, because of the fact that it's bad, or you enjoy it for a different reason than the musician intended.*

After providing us with the name of the song, participants read the following text, which was meant to define the follow up questions:

*In terms of understanding motivations to listen to music, research distinguishes between ‘music selection strategies’ and ‘self-regulatory goals’. Music Selection Strategies are what people use to determine what music they want to listen to. In other words, music selection strategies give information on what someone decides to listen to. Self-regulatory Goals are what people believe will happen via listening to the music. In other words, what listeners hope they will achieve in terms of psychological response. Schematically, self-regulatory goals are expected effects of listening to the music, whereas music selection strategies are the reasons for choosing the music.*

The explanatory text on music selection strategies and self-regulatory goals was followed by five open ended questions that were each followed with a text box in which people could write down their thoughts.

- 1) We here would like you to recall the name of the piece of music and the artist or group.*
- 2) We here would like you to recall any music selection strategies that made you decide to listen to the music that you just recalled.*
- 3) We here would like you to recall any self-regulatory goals that made you decide to listen to the music that you just recalled.*
- 4) We here would like you to recall any self-regulatory effects (what was the effect of listening to this music) that the music had on you.*
- 5) We are also interested in why you enjoy this music ironically rather than normally.*

Upon completion of the study, participants were given the opportunity to share any other thoughts about this research topic in a text box, and were asked their age, nationality and gender.

Questions 3 and 4 were included to understand the psychological effects that were perceived to be available through listening to ironically enjoyed music. Question 1, 2 and 5 were meant to provide us with a better insight into how and why these effects were expected to be available.

### **Data Preparation**

Following data collection from the data were entered into Excel with participant responses ordered underneath each other, and questions ordered next to each other. We again used Thematic Analysis (Braun, & Clarke, 2006) as an approach, to describe the data and to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes. This time we used a deductive approach to code the data (Bendassolli, 2013; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2008), where the first themes are developed a priori based on the research question and the theoretical framework (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2008). This was believed to be appropriate, given the substantial existing literature on music and self-regulation.

The self-regulatory functions identified by Lonsdale and North (2011) were used as a first set of themes to reflect on the self-regulatory effects available in ironically enjoyed music. The music selection strategies identified by Van den Tol and Edwards (2013) and Van Goethem and Sloboda (2011) were used as a first set of motivations for music selection.

Responses were coded to fit in one or more themes. One column was placed next to each question to allow the assignment of themes. An additional column was added next to this to further sub-code all responses within each theme (see Table 1 and 2) to identify substantial differences in the meaning of each theme (when compared to general music listening literature). One column was also added to the spreadsheet to categorize each overall response (all information gathered from one participant) as one of our three specific types of ironic enjoyment (see table 1 and 2). Reflective memos were used to keep track of the emerging theory with regards to the development of themes and codes and how all elements of the data related to each other. An overview of all of these was held on a separate Excel sheet in the same document.

The majority of this process was conducted by the first author and meetings were held with the second author to discuss and reflect on the coding and emerging theory. After decisions were made about a final group of themes the first author categorized each response to fit within one (even though more may have been possible) of the emerging themes relevant to each question. The latter step was taken in order to allow cross-coding across questions, to

find patterns involving the definitions of ironic enjoyment, participant's age, gender, and to reflect on the importance of each theme in answering the research questions.

As an additional step we prepared the data to be used for quantitative analyses in SPSS. This process took place after the Thematic Analysis and followed the following steps: First, all data was copied to a new Excel file. Second, one variable for each theme was created, coded 1 if the response did describe that theme and 0 if not. Next, this data as well as participants age and gender were transferred into SPSS. Finally, statistical analyses were run to count the responses for each theme and compare themes across age and gender (descriptive,  $\chi^2$ , and t-test).

### **Results**

This study was guided by two aims (both reviewed in a separate section below): Aim 1 was to connect the appeal of ironically enjoyed music to self-regulatory motivations and perceived effects. Aim 2 was to identify people's motivations for choosing to ironically enjoy music, more generally.

#### **Data Characteristics and Missing Data**

Across questions two to five (not including the name of the song), participants supplied an average of 85.49 words. Although this may not seem to be a great deal of text per person, this meant that we gathered a total of 14487 words over a hundred and sixty-nine participants. Since most responses were detailed and overall represented a rich range of experiences, we considered this as a sufficient amount of text on which to build this exploratory research.

Eight participants left an empty space at question 2, 11 at question 3, 12 at question 4, and 16 at question 5. Moreover, across the entire dataset several questions were only answered with one or two words, 12 for question 2, 11 for question 3, 9 for question 4, 5 for question 5. However, these very short answers were still used in the analysis..

#### **Self-regulatory Functions of Ironically Enjoyed Music**

Many self-regulatory functions that are relevant for music listening in general (Lonsdale and North, 2011) were also relevant to ironically enjoyed music. More specifically, when music was listened to “despite” negative qualities the functions of ironically enjoyed music showed substantial overlap with those previously found in the general music listening literature, as well as some novel functions: protecting the listener from conflicting values associated with the music and helped the listener to communicate to others that they did not identify with the music on a higher level. When music was listened to “because of” its negative features, this usually served functions unique to ironic enjoyment of music. For example, within the use of music to regulate mood and emotion there was the additional role of mocking, ridiculing, and laughing at the music, which in turn played a role in the management of identity and social relationships.

The functions that we found were classified as: Mood and emotion, Identity and social relationships, Reminiscence and nostalgia, Surveillance and learning, Diversion and relaxation, and No conscious self-regulatory goals. A brief overview of all findings for self-regulatory effects is provided in the table below (Table 1). In this table themes are further described by dividing these into relevant codes reflecting different sub-themes (i.e. elements of relevant self-regulatory effects). This table includes how many participants were included in each theme and if, quantitatively, these participants were younger, older, or more likely to be of a certain gender than participants that were not included in the theme. Symbols attached to each code refer to relevant types of ironic enjoyment (see note below the table). A more comprehensive explanation of the results for each theme is provided below the table, where each sub-heading describes a different theme.

Table 1: *A brief overview of all findings for self-regulatory effects.*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Relevant codes</b>
<b>Mood and emotion (116 responses, Y)</b>	Laughing*!, happiness, relaxing, unexpected emotions, mental and physical energy^!, focus and concentration^!
<b>Identity and social relationships</b>	Socializing*, bonding, affiliating, fitting in, authenticity and exploring identity



(31)

<b>Reminiscence and nostalgia</b> (12, O)	Nostalgia!, missing and reminiscing about people, times and places!
<b>Surveillance and learning</b> (26)	Learning new skills (musical skills, new words, life skills)^!, different perspective^, meaning, understanding,
<b>Diversion and relaxation</b> (22, F)	Distraction^!, relief from boredom^, relaxation^
<b>No conscious self-regulatory goals</b> (12, Y)	Heard it unexpectedly (radio, public place etc.), no expected effects, no intended effects

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*Note:* The following signs are used to signal a significant difference in this population among a theme: ‘F’ = more females than males, ‘M’ = more males than females, ‘Y’ = more younger than older people, ‘O’ = more older than younger people .

The following signs signal strong relevance to certain types of music: ‘\*’ = music that is usually listened to because of being bad, ‘^’ = music that is usually listened to despite of the being bad, ‘!’ = music that is listened to for different reasons than intended.

As indicated in the table several gender and age differences were found: In line with literature (Saarikallio, 2011; Hanser, Ter Bogt, Van den Tol, et al., 2016; Ter Bogt, Mulder, Raaijmakers, et al., 2010) younger people were more likely to listen to music to regulate mood and emotion and older people were more likely to listen to ironically enjoyed music for reminiscence and nostalgia. In line with literature (Carlson, et al., 2015; Ter Bogt, et al., 2010) females were more likely to listen to ironically enjoyed music for diversion and relaxation. Whereas younger people (compared to older people) were more likely to report not to have had self-regulatory goals.

### ***Mood and emotion***

Within the theme of mood-management people used ironically enjoyed music to manage levels of arousal and energy, mental energy, confidence, to focus or concentrate or to maintain and pursue positive moods. Moreover, a novel function of ironic enjoyment emerged: people used ironically enjoyed music to improve mood through ridicule and laughter.

Listening to ironically enjoyed music often made people laugh, and many people cited this reason. Laughing helped dispel negative moods, as well as continue positive moods. The “irony” in listening to music for laughter seems to come from intentionally switching to a less complicated mode of enjoyment than would normally be provided by listening to music: *‘I like to laugh I always laugh when I listen to them. I usually do not listen to music to laugh, but to be emotionally involved in some way or to experience being uplifted. I recently listened to the BHG, just to laugh. Some of their music is so bad that I have to skip the track. I cannot listen to more than 5 or 6 songs on a cd. (39, male).*

One interesting thing to note, is that the above response clearly distinguishes laughter from general emotional experiences resulting from music listening, and from evaluative responses (“so bad”) which conflict with the activity of listening. This example also illustrates the frequent difficulty of assigning free responses a clear affective or cognitive meaning. While laughter is an affective response, it is not clear whether the evaluation of “so bad” is cognitive in the sense of appreciation, or involves its own emotions such as embarrassment, shame or unease. However, conflict between bases of value was often quite clear: *‘Just because something is bad, doesn't mean it isn't fun, catchy, stupid or won't make you feel better about a bad day.’ (male, 24)*

Getting and maintaining physical energy, mental energy or confidence was another very popular topic, most relevant to music that was listened to despite being bad, especially before nightlife or exercise. Despite being negatively evaluated on other levels, these pieces of music often had a good beat or catchy features:

*‘I wanted to get hyped up and excited for what my friends and I were doing that night. It gave me energy and made me feel rebellious.’ (19, male).*

Moreover, several participants indicated that music with a steady beat, or other traits of simplicity, could be useful during tasks that require mental energy or concentration, such as studying, driving, cleaning, work or exercise. Answers such as the following one could be said to bridge affect, motivation and cognition:

*'Helps energize me and motivates me to push through my workout.'* (43, female)

At first glance some of these examples looked like more straightforward uses of music for emotion regulation. However, “irony” was often found in receiving pleasure despite evaluating the music to be bad, or when people did not expect to receive pleasure when they did - as the following quote illustrates:

*'Looking for upbeat songs. Looking for songs that don't fluctuate much, thus maintaining when driving. Feeling in Rhythm. Calmed. Unworried.....Having stayed with my own music for so long, its ironic I like a song from an artist I'm so used to brushing off.'* (16, male)

Participants also indicated that they listened to the music in order to improve a negative mood or to stay in a positive mood. Ironically enjoyed music could induce a happy mood in many different ways. However, a surprisingly high number of participants mentioned dancing and singing along with the music. Dancing and singing was important for enhancing a negative mood and maintaining a positive mood, but also for relieving tension, and providing mental and physical energy:

*'Make me want to dance. I wanted to dance and be part of the video. I think the artist wants me to get a message of the song when all I really focus on is the dancing.'* (21, female)

*'I was in a good mood this morning, anyway, I'm almost never in a bad mood and I like to sing stupid or humorous songs.'* (49, male)

Dancing and singing could be interpreted as both a consequence and cause of enjoyment. Other participants would indicate that the music could make them feel more positive by distracting them from their negative mood, by letting them laugh and ridicule the music, or through enjoying the beat of the music, as in the example below:

*'The music made me feel more powerful, with the prominent bass an ever-present, steady rhythm.'* (17, female)

Within the theme of mood management, music was often described as carefree, as having a good beat, or as catchy music that one did not normally listen to, often as part of

enjoyment despite being bad. This type of enjoyment was on a lower cognitive level than appreciating music for its complexity.

### ***Identity and Social Relationships***

Ironic enjoyment seems to be associated with a variety of social concerns. Some respondents used it to reinforce their existing social identities, distancing themselves from the “other” represented in the music and using it as an occasion of social mockery. But others experienced ironic enjoyment more sympathetically, as a means of creating a unique identity, or resolving conflict between aesthetic norms held socially or personally and the undeniable pleasure that they experienced from music deemed “bad” by these standards.

Many participants said that their ironic enjoyment involved music with some negative qualities or that they would not normally like. Despite enjoying the music, listening may not have felt ‘OK’ as a complete expression of identity. As one 17 year old female put it:

*‘People listen to music to make them feel certain types of ways and they connect to the music that they are listening to. Ironically listening to music shows their true interests or desired feelings, although they wouldn't normally be willing to realize these feelings that the music induces.’*

Several participants in the current research indicated that going against social norms could be an unpleasant or confusing experience due to conflicting desires and needs, such as this 19 year old transgender person:

*‘It is forbidden.....I hate myself a little bit for listening to them. Only assholes listen to Nickleback.....Because I am going to listen to something even if I am supposed to hate it.’*

Moreover, when music was enjoyed ironically because the listener perceived the music as a threat to identity, there seemed less of an opportunity to value the musical experience fully and immersively, than when negative qualities of the music were based on external standards.

*‘I was ashamed that I liked it so much, as it is not what I regularly listen to. Because I know it's bad and I truly hate it, but it's so catchy that I put it on my iPod. (18, female)*

These findings do resonate with the aforementioned findings by Drew (2004, 2005) that middle class people mocked and ridiculed it to allow for enjoyment without losing social status. Acknowledging irony in one's enjoyment may likewise defend against an inappropriate social identity connected to appreciation of the music.

*'I listen to songs ironically because if the music is actually good then it's no fun to make fun of and sing along to ridiculously ...'* (17, female)

More than being unpleasant, the sort of detachment associated with ironic enjoyment also appealed to some listeners, as it allowed them to feel unique, rebellious, authentic or cool. More specifically, some individuals found it appealing to listen to music that others would dislike as this meant that they were different and unique individuals. Belonging to a specific niche made them feel authentic, which was especially important for adolescents, as in this example:

*'Listening to this type of new rock I have become more my own person and have been more rebellious to my parents and teachers. I don't care what others think and I'm just doing my own thing. I like this music not just because it's catchy and I like the sound but because it's different from what my family listens to and makes me almost feel like I'm my own and that I'm not going to conform to their ways.'* (17, female)

More strategically, some participants also wanted to familiarize themselves with music that was popular among their peers, listening ironically because they knew (or expected) that others appreciated the same music non-ironically:

*'I don't actually like it because it's good or because I can relate to it. I like it because the songs are catchy and if you don't know them, you're going to feel left out in this pop-culture centered society.'* (17, female)

Some participants listened to try out new identities and learn about their self, again especially relevant among adolescents:

*'It made me want to go out and party. Because the song is in many ways different than the person that I am.'* (17, male)

Many people also affiliated socially with peers through ridiculing the negative qualities of the music. In these occasions the music was enjoyed ironically because of being bad and selected for this reason. Bonding often involved ridiculing the music:

*‘It was something me and my brother could sit back and laugh about, as well as make fun of. The robotic voice in the middle of the song made this even easier. As I said, I find it ironic that I enjoy listening to it because it is not that great. It is an example of what not to do in power metal....’* (19, male)

### ***Reminiscence and Nostalgia***

In line with many other studies we did find that that reminiscence and nostalgia played a role in listening to ironically enjoyed music. Many participants indicated that they did not particularly like the song, but that the memory attached to the song was valuable and therefore made it pleasant, a conflict that registered as ironic.

*‘The song itself is terrible, but I remember what good times I had while listening to this song.’* (16, male)

Many, especially older, people wanted to remember carefree times through recalling songs that they once enjoyed un-ironically:

*‘To feel sentimental and relive/have good thoughts about happier times, to appreciate what I have now in comparison to the times that those memories come from made me feel happy and carefree and passionate about this type of music, and the ways I used to be able to express my passion about this type of music...’* (50, female).

Wildschut and others (2006) indicate that nostalgia allows one to perceive oneself as continuous over time and serves an identity function. As seen above, some responses did connect the current person to the past. Irony, here, may resolve a potential identity conflict between the simpler, less reflective and younger self who enjoyed the music straightforwardly, and the older, more socially and aesthetically astute self, who evaluates it according to more sophisticated standards (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003). We did indeed find

that older people were more likely to have mentioned nostalgia as a reason for listening to ironically enjoyed music.

### ***Surveillance and Learning***

Surveillance, or acquiring knowledge (Lonsdale & North, 2011) was also cited as a motive behind ironic enjoyment. Participants wanted to learn about themselves and life, but also wanted to learn about the music, familiarize themselves with the lyrics of a song, the musical structure, or understand what the artist meant by the music or lyrics. The irony in enjoying this music was often represented in the fact that people listened to it despite not normally listening to it or identifying with it.

*'Lil Wayne has a degree in poetry and he uses big words so I believe I can learn new words and also learn about his life because that is what he raps about. It was a change of pace compared to what I normally listen too.'* (20, male)

The response to music was sometimes also unexpected, or for different reasons than intended.

*'Music that may contribute to my own learning as a musician.... The beat and lyrics get to you after hearing it 2-3 times in a language I didn't understand also noting that this was not my style music beforehand'* (21, female)

Irony was sometimes cited by musicians as an approach to learning about different styles in which musical features or lyrics are used in an interesting or uncommon way, while stopping short of a complete endorsement:

*'I like to consider myself "open" musically and like to search for different aspects of music that may contribute to my own learning as a musician. I noted certain aspects of the song (which I would not call "bad", just a different genre than I would normally choose). The aspects I appreciated were the timing, the energy and the drama.'* (52, female)

Participants like these found appreciation for music they had set out to enjoy ironically, opening themselves up to a different culture or style than that they had usually considered aesthetically acceptable. These forms of irony seem to stick more closely to the “unexpected” part of the definition of ironic enjoyment than to the other facets. Participants also mentioned

that they used this music to compare themselves to other people, to connect their experiences to other people, and to learn from other people's experiences in life:

*'Trash by Korn..... This song is ironic for myself because even though I was an angst filled, normal teen, I never had that extent of internal pain and could never imagine myself actually doing such a thing to another person.'* (20, female)

***Diversion and relaxation***

Diversion, or relief from boredom (e.g. Lonsdale & North, 2011) was another motive cited. The irony in most of these examples was that people usually would not listen to this type of music, but that listening to a different style may be more stimulating than the same old style, reflecting an affective use of music.

However, some distraction may also be described as more cognitive, as described in the example below from a 20 year old female:

*'Just to listen to something to avoid boredom. It was entertaining. I don't really tend to listen to hip hop and I don't like Jessie J.'*

Participants additionally listened to distract from or avoid potential negative moods or negative thoughts, or to facilitate relaxation:

*'My goal that makes me listen to this music is to keep my brain straight. It totally relaxes me by listening to it.'* (40, female)

Music enjoyed despite being bad could still inspire and appeal to the senses, or have a relaxing effect on the participants, as follows:

*'By listening to this music I hope to gain relaxation. I look forward to being inspired by the words. The effect this music has on me is I get internal peace.'* (42, female)

Statistically, more participants who mentioned diversion were female, which is in line with previous research on using music for diversion (Ter Bogt et al, 2010). For distraction, negative qualities of the music were mentioned infrequently, and this usually concerned a music style or group that the participant did not want to identify with, or lyrics disapproved of, rather than evaluations of the musical skills of the artist(s).



### Music Selection Strategies

We also analyzed the elements that underlay participants' descriptions of their reasons for selecting music. Table 2 gives an overview of this analysis. Symbols used are the same as in Table 1.

Table 2:  
*An overview of themes explaining the effectiveness of ironically enjoyed music for self-regulatory functions.*

Theme	Relevant codes	Common functions
<b>Musical features</b>	Listening to music with poor qualities (singing, musical lyrics etc.)!	Laughing*!, ridiculing*!, social functions*!
<b>(72 responses, M)</b>	Good beat, or catchy music^!	Positive mood management^, focus!, get energized^
	Music that is expressing certain emotions^!	Maintain or manage a mood^!
<b>Familiarity</b>	Familiar music	All functions
<b>(65 responses, F)</b>	Uncommon style or group (from the listeners' perspective)^!	Social functions, identity functions, surveillance^!, laughing*, ridiculing*
	Unfamiliar music	Surveillance!, learning!, exploring new identities^, social^
	Memory triggers:	Laughing*!, ridiculing*!

*Note:* The following signs are used to signal a significant difference in this population among a theme: 'F' = more females than males, 'M' = more males than females. The following signs signal strong relevance to certain types of music: '\*' = music that is usually listened to because of being bad, '^' = music that is usually listened to despite of the being bad, '!' = music that is listened to for different reasons than intended.

As can be seen in table 2, males cited musical features more often as an important factor in explaining music selection. Chi<sup>2</sup> analysis indicated that this was disproportionately due to male participants enjoying music because of it being bad. Familiarity was more relevant to explain music selection for females. However, the data (or literature) did not provide any indication as to why this may have been the case. Chi<sup>2</sup> analyses were also

conducted to investigate how music selection interacted with gender and with self-regulatory goals, but no significant results were obtained.

### ***Musical features***

Musical features, and the emotions portrayed by them, were important to explain motivation for selecting a specific song. When the music was enjoyed ironically because of it being bad, many participants indicated that the music had made them laugh or that they ridiculed the music because it had poor singing, poor lyrics or an artist or in a style that people would not normally listen to, such as in the example below:

*'It made me laugh, really hard. Despite the fact that the artist is obviously an extremely poor singer, his use of a deep falsetto never fails to make me laugh.'* (16, male).

In several of these occasions it was clear that the music was not intended to be ironically enjoyed by the artist (it was rather meant as a serious piece), such as in the example below.

*'Some music I enjoy ironically was created with this purpose on mind (Krahe), other songs, like Jeannette or Raffaella Carrá's are little bit ludicrous but not really bad...'* (49, female)

However, in many responses was not clear if the music was intended to be ironically enjoyed from the artist's point of view, which would fit Bennett's (2013) view of "post-ironic" artists who perform ostensibly serious music with intentionally overdone elements, tongue in cheek for the ironically appreciative audience.

When music was enjoyed despite some negative qualities, the beat of the music or "cheesiness" of the music was an important quality that guided the music selection. In many of these examples the music was used for positive mood-management, focus, or getting physically or emotionally energized, for example:

*'I was stressed out and wanted to listen to some music. It made me feel carefree. I know it's a bad song, in terms of lyrics, but it has a catchy beat and I don't have to think.'* (17, female)

In addition, there many people selected music with good lyrics to sing along with or good beats to dance to.

Musical features were also important for expressing emotions and acquiring energy (Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008; Knobloch & Zillmann, 2002):

*'Usually I'll just skip over this song because I don't find it to be very good, but I wanted to listen to it as it was early morning and I wanted to wake myself up and put myself in a good mood by listening to a song that was carefree and easy to sing along to....'* (19, female)

Where music was enjoyed for different reasons than intended, some participants indicated that the music was meant to express a certain emotion, but was not used for this emotion:

*'I think the song was meant to bring out a more angry side of a person rather than the way I enjoy it to be happy and spritely.'* (16, female)

Ironically enjoyed music was in these occasions often used for ridicule or nostalgia.

#### ***Familiarity of the music***

Some participants explained the music was selected because of a specific memory or nostalgia related to the music, but also to feel closer to people when the music was popular among friends or family:

*'I decided to listen to Anaconda by Nicki Minaj because a friend of mine told me how "bad" it was, so I had to see for myself.'* (18, female)

On these occasions, music was selected despite being bad as well as because of being bad.

Familiar music that was listened to because of being bad often served both personal enjoyment as well as social affiliation and bonding, such as in the example below:

*'Sometimes the "ironic" music that I listen to comes from the friends that I hang out around. Even though I might not choose/like that song when I'm by myself, I will like it when I'm surrounded by my friends in a good atmosphere'* (19, female)

On the other hand, participants who listened to unfamiliar music despite expecting it to sound bad often described it as broadening their musical horizon or understanding popular cultures, affiliating with others, or exploring new identities.

#### ***No conscious self-regulatory goals or no music selection***

A considerable amount of participants indicated that they had not pursued any psychological goals at all when deciding to listen to the music:

*'I have no goals in mind when listening to this music.'* (21, female)

Interestingly however, all of these participants did report that listening to the music affected them in some way or another. Most participants indicated that the music made them laugh, or experience positive emotions:

*'It made me giggle and smile and I continue to listen to the track in order to achieve these results again.'* (36, female)

Moreover, in many occasions people did not actively decide to listen to it but simply stumbled upon the music. Most of these participants heard the music on the radio, online playlists, or in a social settings.

*'... It was on the radio. I was laughing, because the songs are truly awful.'* (17, male)

Indeed, much of the music that we hear is not selected (Lonsdale & North, 2011) but often rather just heard. Finding unknown music from a normally enjoyed artist or genre, or exploring new popular music, were sometimes reasons for stumbling upon a piece that could (only) be enjoyed on an ironic level.

### **Discussion**

#### **Conclusion**

Our research questions, to recap, were: Does ironic enjoyment of music exist? And if so, how can it be defined, what is the appeal of ironically enjoyed music, and are its motivations and characteristics similar to and different than those of non-ironically enjoyed music?

Results of our pilot study indicated that most respondents did identify ironic enjoyment in a meaningful way, meaning that it does exist, but the specifics of their responses took one of three forms. We defined ironic enjoyment in the main study as any of those three.

Our main study showed, first, that ironic enjoyment of music serves some self-regulatory functions that are more or less similar to general music listening: mood and emotion maintenance, identity and relationships, nostalgia, surveillance and learning, and diversion and relaxation. But more specifically, when music was listened to “because of” its negative features this usually served functions that general music listening does not serve, such as ridiculing at the music and the social benefit that this provides. However, when music was listened to “despite” negative qualities, the functions of ironically enjoyed music were more in line with those previously found in the general music listening research. In these occasions irony could protect the listener from conflicting values associated with the music, such as, when the music is enjoyed but not appreciated on a higher level. Irony could then help the listener to communicate that they don’t truly identify with the music.

Many different musical features played a role in music selection for music that was selected because of being bad. However, when music was selected despite being bad, it often had a good beat or catchy melody or lyrics. Ironic enjoyment of unfamiliar music mainly played a social role, whereas familiar music related to nostalgia as well as most other functions.

As shown in Table 1, most of the affective functions related to irony “despite being bad”, or “for different reasons than intended” – in these modes of ironic enjoyment, negative evaluation of the music does not affect the function directly and still enables the participant to enjoy the music. Listening to the music because of it being bad, however, involved more laughing and socializing. Here the enjoyment derived from cognitive reflection on the music, and the irony that they perceived from this reflection, where music was clearly evaluated as being bad and listened to for this reason.

### **Contribution**

The discussion of ironic enjoyment of music is very timely in terms of the scholarship of popular culture (Bennett, 2013; Drew, 2004, 2005). The present study is the first to explore

the appeal of ironic music listening, and to differentiate the experience of ironically enjoyed music from listening goals in general.

One function that does not apply to music listening in general, was that ironic enjoyment of music often involves mocking, ridiculing, and laughing at the music, and that these functions also provided an important social role. These findings are not new to research on ironic enjoyment of entertainment (Bennett, 2013; Cloud, 2010), however, as far as we know, they are new to the empirical literature on the self-regulatory psychology of music.

When music was listened to “despite” negative qualities, the functions of ironically enjoyed music were much more in line with those previously found in the literature. Irony was instead used to protect the listener, internally and socially, from values in conflict between on lower (e.g. affective enjoyment) and higher (e.g. cognitive enjoyment or social image) levels. These findings make a contribution to music research, as people attach great value to music preference in terms of social affiliation and identity (Tarrant, North & Hargreaves, 2001; Tekman, 2009; Tekman & Hortaçsu, 2002). The current research brings a better understanding about why people listen to music that they don’t appreciate, and how they cope with the consequences.

Some of our findings on the role of laughter also connect to a broader literature. Boxer, & Cortés-Conde (1997) showed that there are two social uses of jokes: one that is directed at a participant in the conversation, having the potential of biting (social control); the other that is directed at an absent other, having the potential of bonding. Listening to ironically enjoyed music provides a perfect opportunity to laugh and bond over a joke, without any negative consequences for the people that are around. Laughing is important for people as it is highly social and intensely contagious (Gervais & Wilson, 2005; Provine, 1992) and significantly increases the perceived satisfaction with the interaction (Vlahovic, Roberts, & Dunbar, 2012).

### **Limitations**

The current research also had some limitations. We asked people to indicate their music selection strategies, self-regulatory goals, and expected self-regulatory effects, which may have meant that participants who may otherwise not have thought of music listening as a self-regulatory tool may have been influenced to do so. As such follow up research may want to verify current findings without leading questions.

In qualitative research, the researcher can never be clearly objective and in narrative responses, neither are the participants; responses are possibly controlled and reflective rather than revealing hidden motives. We nevertheless consider this process of data collection valuable for investigation of a relatively-unexplored topic. More specifically, this study was intended to provide foundation material and information for further in-depth and wider-ranging research. This suggests an important task for future research: to use more objective and less controlled measures of ironic listening's effects and motives.

We also want to note that some participants may have been unable to understand our question (even though we provided definitions for unfamiliar jargon). However, idiosyncratic responses perhaps reflecting misunderstanding, once past the pilot phase, were few and have not been reported on in this paper. It is hence not likely that these distorted the results much.

This research was conducted using a retrospective survey design and self-report, so that findings represent recollection of having listened to music rather than experiences while engaging in this behavior. However recollection bias is especially likely regarding negative emotional memories of long ago times (Ritchie, Skowronski, Hartnett, et al., 2009), where we specifically asked participants for 'recent events'.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

In this research we have found that listening to ironically enjoyed music may have a positive impact on mental health and social wellbeing, making this an exciting and worthwhile topic for future empirical study. With regards to applications of this research it may hence be important to also take a closer look at the moderating effects of age and gender and specific personality variables on the motivation for, and effects of listening to this type of

music. Such research may particularly be valuable for music therapist and mental health workers who may benefit from further insights into why some people may decide to listen to certain types of music and what the effects of listening will likely be for these people.

Interesting avenues for future research lay also in unraveling the emotional, social, cognitive, and also neurological and physical effects of ironically enjoyed music in the lab and compare these to other modes of enjoyment or to no music at all. As this was one of the first studies in a new area of research, this research may hopefully inform research questions and inspire many new studies.



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