

Substance over style in entertainment

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Whether they affect the films we watch, the books we read or the music we listen to, our choices about entertainment often appear to have as much to do with style, as substance.

Now research suggests that may not be as true as we thought. In a paper published this week, a team of academics reveal that whether we ultimately prefer action movies or rom coms, pulp fiction or classic novels, The White Stripes, Black Flag, or The Moody Blues; most of us are looking for one of five basic types of content from the [entertainment](#) we consume.

The study, led by Dr. Jason Rentfrow at the University of Cambridge, examined the entertainment preferences of more than 3,000 people,

asking them to express how much they liked, or disliked, each of 108 carefully-chosen genres of music, literature and film.

While people's favourite styles were predictably varied and wide-ranging, the researchers found that when they looked at the results more closely, most of the participants were really interested in one, or a combination of five, broader types of content.

According to the study, the participants either preferred forms of entertainment that were "Communal" (about people and relationships); "Aesthetic" (creative, abstract and demanding); "Dark" (intense and edgy); "Thrilling" (full of action, suspense and adventure); or "Cerebral" (factual and information-orientated).

The researchers suggest that these groupings, which they refer to as "entertainment preference factors", function as broad drivers of taste, which then determine the particular styles and sub-genres of books, magazines, films, television programmes and music we choose to consume.

In addition, the study found that our preferences often have more to do with our [personality type](#) and psychological profile than other factors, such as our cultural background, age, [ethnicity](#), or level of education.

If this is true, the research could have significant implications not only for the [entertainment industry](#), but for the ongoing debate about "media effects" - the idea that media have a direct impact on people's attitudes, emotions and behaviour.

Since the "video nasty" censorship controversies of the 1980s, for example, critics have argued that exposure to "violent" media, such as action movies or violent video games, increases aggressive thoughts, feelings and actions. The new study suggests, however, that if personality

strongly influences the choices we make about entertainment, it may simply be the case that these media attract people who are likely to exhibit this type of behaviour anyway.

"Even though people's taste for a style of music, or a particular type of TV show, will differ depending on things like age or gender, we found that their choices often spring from a desire to experience the same kind of thing," Dr. Rentfrow said.

"When we clustered people's entertainment preferences and compared their taste in music, literature, and film, we found that they are usually looking for a particular type of content, regardless of the genre through which it is conveyed. That would suggest that our entertainment preferences are more a function of substance, than style."

Unlike many previous studies, which have focused on limited research groups, the new study analysed more than 3,000 individuals from a wide range of backgrounds. To do this the researchers drew on three different samples - a group of university students, residents from a particular community (Eugene-Springfield, in Oregon, USA); and an internet survey sample.

Each was asked to examine a list of 108 carefully-chosen genres of music, books, magazines, films and television, which was devised using the classifications employed by online stores like Amazon and iTunes. The respondents had to indicate, on a scale of 1 to 7, how much they liked or disliked each genre.

They were also asked to supply information about their age, gender, ethnicity and level of education. In addition, the personality of each respondent was examined using a widely-employed system which profiles personality according to a set of broad measures: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and

intellect/imagination.

As well as finding five broad entertainment preference factors driving people's overall taste, the researchers were able to compare this with the other data from the survey to look at what might be influencing these preferences.

Gender and level of education both had a significant impact on people's taste in music, literature and film, but the strongest correlations came from the personality test. For example, creative, introspective people who were in touch with their emotions were found to prefer "aesthetic" forms of entertainment. Straightforward, easy-going and relationship-orientated people tended to opt for "communal" styles of entertainment instead.

More information: The paper, *Listening, Watching and Reading: The Structure and Correlates of Entertainment Preferences* is published in the *Journal of Personality* today.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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