

Stories people imagine inspired by music found to differ by culture

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A team of researchers from Princeton University, the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Michigan State University, has found that the stories that people imagine that are inspired by songs differ by culture. In their

paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, the group describes experiments they conducted with volunteers in the U.S. and China.

Prior research has shown that listening to instrumental music can impact mood and it also sometimes incites the mind to invent stories inspired by it. The type of music plays a role in such [story](#) development—marching music might conjure images of soldiers, for example. In this new effort, the researchers wondered if culture plays a role in the kinds of stories that people invent to go along with the music they hear. To find out, they recruited 622 volunteers from three locations: the University of Arkansas, the University of Michigan, and random volunteers living in Dimen, Guizhou, China.

Each of the volunteers listened to the same 16 songs (some western and some Chinese) and then wrote down the story, if any, that developed in their heads as they listened. The researchers then studied the stories, noting which songs were playing as they were written.

They found that the stories written by the two groups in the U.S. were often very similar for a given piece of music. But the stories written by volunteers in the U.S. were generally quite different from the stories written by the volunteers in China.

The researchers suggest that there is a cultural element involved in the stories people generate when they listen to music. They also found that in many of the stories written by volunteers in the two U.S. groups, there were elements corresponding to prior experiences—many volunteers found one piece of music reminded them of the kind of [music](#) used in western movies, for example, which led to imagined cowboy-type stories. Thus, the researchers conclude, there is also a [historical context](#) in story creation.

More information: Elizabeth H. Margulis et al, Narratives imagined in response to instrumental music reveal culture-bounded intersubjectivity, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2022). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2110406119](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2110406119)

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