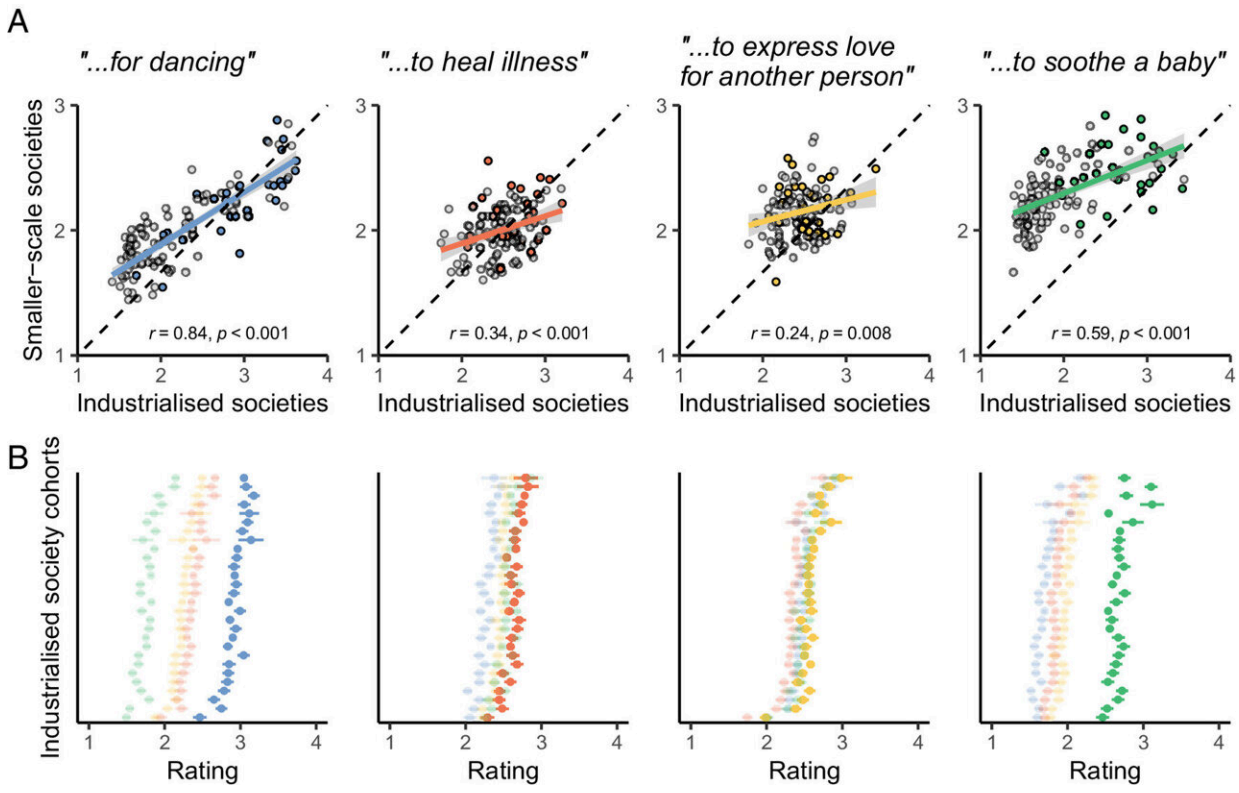
What's love got to do with it? An exception to the recognition of musical themes

September 7 2023



Consistency of listeners' intuitions across cohorts and across languages. Credit: *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2023). DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2218593120

Music can take on many forms in cultures across the globe, but Yale researchers have found in a new study that some themes are universally

recognizable by people everywhere with one notable exception—love songs.

"All around the world, people sing in similar ways," said senior author Samuel Mehr, who splits his time between the Yale Child Study Center, where he is an assistant professor adjunct, and the University of Auckland, where he is senior lecturer in psychology. "Music is deeply rooted in human social interaction."

For the new study, published Sept. 7 in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Yale researchers played 14-second snippets of vocals from a bank of songs that originated from a host of cultures to more than 5,000 people from 49 countries. The research team included subjects not only from the industrialized world, but more than 100 individuals who live in three small, relatively isolated groups of no more than 100.

They then asked the listeners to rank the likelihood of each sample as being one of four music types: dance, lullabies, "healing" music, or love music.

Unlike most psychology experiments, which are conducted in one language, this experiment was performed in 31 languages. Yet regardless of the language used in the survey, people from all cultures could easily identify dance music, lullabies, and, to a lesser extent, even music created to heal. Recognition of what the researchers identified as love songs, however, lagged these other categories.

For instance, when we they analyzed responses based on language groupings, they found that 27 of the 28 groups correctly rated dance songs as more appropriate for dancing than other songs. All 28 of the groups were able to identify lullabies. But only 12 of the 28 groups were able to identify love songs.

Why the difficulty in identifying musical themes about love?

"One reason for this could be that love songs may be a particularly fuzzy category that includes songs that express happiness and attraction, but also sadness and jealousy," said lead author Lidya Yurdum, who works as research assistant at the Yale Child Study Center and is also a graduate student at the University of Amsterdam. "Listeners who heard love songs from neighboring countries and in languages related to their own actually did a little better, likely because of the familiar linguistic and cultural clues."

But other than love songs, the authors discovered, the listeners' "ratings were largely accurate, consistent with one another, and not explained by their linguistic or geographical proximity to the singer—showing that musical diversity is underlain by universal psychological phenomena."

"Our minds have evolved to listen to music. It is not a recent invention," Yurdum said. "But if we only study songs from the western world and listeners from the western world, we can only draw conclusions about the western world—not humans in general."

More information: Lidya Yurdum et al, Universal interpretations of vocal music, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2023). DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2218593120

Provided by Yale University

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