
The Music of Power



By Li Huang , INSEAD Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour

When I hear music, I fear no danger. I am invulnerable.

---- Henry David Thoreau

Moments before Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympic medallist, dived into the water to win his 18th and final gold medal at the 2012 Summer Olympic Games in London, he was calmly listening to music with his headphones on. This was not the first time he listened to music before an important race and he is certainly not alone in doing so. Many top athletes listen to music to psych themselves up before games. Seeing this ritual time and time again made us wonder whether certain music might be able to prepare us psychologically to better achieve our goals. In particular, we were curious if music can actually make us feel more powerful.

In “**The Power of Music: Perceptual and Behavioral Consequences of Powerful Music**” I co-authored with Dennis Y. Hsu of University of Hong Kong, Loran F. Nordgren and Derek D. Rucker of Northwestern University, and Adam D. Galinsky of Columbia University, we first tested a range of songs and asked participants to rate how powerful they sounded. When we later played three of these songs that were rated most powerful and three least powerful to other participants, we found that listening to the powerful songs implicitly activated the construct of power in another group of

participants: for example, power-primed participants were more likely to complete the word fragment “p__er” as “power” rather than “paper” compared to those who listened to non-power music.

More importantly, in subsequent studies, these “power tunes,” systematically generated three important downstream consequences that previous research has shown is associated with power: abstract thinking, illusory control, and the tendency to take action. Specifically, participants listening to the high-power music in the background were significantly better at seeing the “big picture” than those listening to the low-power music, finding the commonality among words that are closely and loosely representative of an overarching category (for example, carrot and garlic both being exemplars of vegetables). Moreover, they experienced a sense of control when they didn’t actually have control, choosing to roll a die themselves rather than letting someone else roll the die for them even though the outcome would be random in either case. Finally, power tunes disinhibited these participants and led to a stronger tendency to take action, for example, making the first move in a debate.

Pump up the bass

What is it about music that infuses a sense of power in us and leads to power-related thoughts and behaviours? While previous research has focused on lyrics, we also realised that dominant individuals in both humans and many animal species often have a deep voice, so, we decided to focus on an element that has not yet received much research attention - the bass. We took a single piece of instrumental music and varied the bass levels, creating a heavy-bass and a light-bass version. As we predicted, participants listening to the heavy-bass version reported feeling more powerful than those listening to the light-bass version and, again, produced more power-related words in the same exercise as before.

Power in thought and action

Given that music can improve the ability to “see the forest for the trees” and the tendency to take action, it can play a substantial role in organisational processes. Henry Kissinger said “The task of the leader is to get his people from where they are to where they have not been.” Leaders must have the ability to see the broader landscape of their industry and society. Only after seeing the big picture themselves can they engage others in their vision, chart the course of the best corporate strategy, and mobilise resources

accordingly. A quick session with headphones before that next board meeting might help leaders better see the forest for the trees.

Now consider music's ability to promote action through the feeling of power. Numerous studies, for example, have demonstrated a clear advantage of making the first move in negotiations especially when negotiators are well prepared. Music could help less assertive negotiators feel more confident, make the first offer, and anchor the negotiation in their favour. In a more general context, for anyone with a job interview on the horizon, pumping yourself up with your favourite tunes might just give a confidence boost and that extra edge.

So, what exactly should you have on your iPod if you would like a power boost? Of the 31 pieces of music across several different genres that we tested, Queen's "We Will Rock You", 2 Unlimited's "Get Ready for This" and 50 Cent's "In Da Club" came out on top. At the bottom of the charts, were Fatboy Slim's "Because We Can", Baha Men's "Who Let the Dogs Out" and Notorious B.I.G.'s "Big Poppa". How long should you listen to them? Three minutes was enough to make a behavioural difference in our studies. What if you are a fan of other music genres? Don't worry. Pump up the bass on your favourite tracks and let the feeling of power wash over you.

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