

# Effects of Music Genre and Music Language on Task Performance Among University of Botswana Students

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**Abstract** Equivocality on the influence of music on task performance led to the present study investigating the effects of music genre and music language on task performance. Using 60 students who were randomly assigned to a 2 X 3 ANOVA design under two conditions of music genre (Pop, Gospel) and three music language conditions (English, French, Setswana), the students were asked to perform a cognitive/perceptual task. It was revealed that performance was generally poor among the students but worse of under French language, whether Pop or Gospel, followed by Setswana language; while performance was better with English Pop music. It was concluded that the genre and language selection of music that students use to study may significantly impact task performance. As students listen to their music devices, they may be advised to choose their songs wisely to facilitate optimal arousal, attention and mood for better performance.

**Keywords:** music genre, music language, task performance, botswana, university students

## 1. Introduction

A cursory observation of youths and across campuses, especially in the developing world, showed that individuals go about wearing one type of ear device or another. Further investigation revealed that those who wear these devices actually listen to some form of music or the other. When asked, most of them said they listen to music while performing different tasks, especially when they need to focus on a particular assignment that may require concentration. Those performing aerobics or other forms of exercise also tend to wear such equipment while they engage in these activities. In other words, there seems to be a prevalent belief that the act of listening to music during a task helps to facilitate performance.

Literature is replete with the influence of music on performance, either as an enhancer or impediment to performance (in terms of music in general, type of music, volume of music, gender differences, type of task and so on). Broadbent [1] proposed a filter theory to explain the manner of information processing where irrelevant stimuli are not attended to, therefore limiting perception of those stimuli. Pashler [2] also proposed a process by which unattended information is not processed beyond initial input stages. For example, when listening to music and performing a task at the same time, one's attention is likely to be focused on one of the two, but not both at the same time; and, consequently, one will be deprived of attention.

Another theory of attention that has been proposed is the capacity or resource theory [3]. The capacity theory allows for attention to be shared between tasks. Rather than attention being directed at one task at a time,

attention can be distributed to numerous tasks at once [4]. For instance, it is possible for people to engage in music and performing other specific tasks without attention conflicts. From the foregoing then, there seems to be equivocality on the influence of music (or noise) on performance.

Almost all students study in order to secure good grades on their academics. Many have also acknowledged listening to music while studying or engaging in other academic work. Music is increasingly pervasive now than at any other point in history, functioning not only as enjoyable art form, but also serving important psychological functions [5]. Rauscher, Shaw, and Ky [6] examined the causal relationship between music and spatial task performance. They found short-term spatial reasoning was enhanced in college students after they listened to a highly repetitive, instrumental Mozart sonata [6]. Specifically, participants who listened to the Mozart recording demonstrated superior spatial abilities 10-15 minutes later as compared to participants who were exposed to silence or simple relaxation instructions. The results, termed the "Mozart effect", generated numerous attempts to replicate the highly publicized findings. Nantais and Schellenberg [7] contrasted performance while listening to Mozart with performance while listening to a narrated story and found no support for a unique "Mozart effect". Essentially, the listener's preference determined the condition's effect on performance. Those who preferred the Mozart music performed better after listening to it and those who preferred the story performed better after narration, supporting the hypothesis that the Mozart effect is actually due to the effect of optimal mental and mood arousal on performance [5].

In a review of research on music and performance, Jenkins [8] reported on positive long-term effects of music on performance. Rauscher, Shaw, Levine, Wright, Dennis, & Newcomb's [9] study of children who received keyboard lessons for 6 months showed 30% better performance on spatial reasoning tasks than children who had either received computer lessons or no training at all [8]. Graziano, Peterson & Shaw [10] found that increased scores in mathematics resulted from the enhanced spatial reasoning that occurred after piano music lessons. Such findings extend the impact of music beyond the brief performance effects discovered in earlier "Mozart effect" studies.

There is also a rich body of literature on how music affects individual responses and performance. Konecni [11] claimed that listening to music taps cognitive resources and may impair cognitive task performance. However, Cassidy & McDonald [12] argued, based on research in which music was played prior to performing a cognitive task, that music may actually create a cognitive priming effect. Schellenberg [5], on the other hand, suggested that there must be an obvious link between stimuli in order for priming to occur; so music may not provide a priming effect for all cognitive task performance. Music characteristics, such as genre, familiarity and tempo have been investigated. For example, it has been suggested that low-information music produces optimal arousal for task performance [13]. Other research [14] has found that unfamiliar sounds distract more than familiar sounds and, therefore, hypothesized that the more individuals engage in studying while listening to music, the less likely their performance would be impaired by music [15].

Researchers have also attempted to address the effects of 'noise' on complex cognitive task performance [16], emphasizing the detrimental effects of noise as a source of distraction and stress on an individual's cognitive task performance. Rauscher [17] found that children's, aged 6 to 10 years, performance on mathematics and recall tasks was significantly lessened in the presence of noise (taped office noise) compared to silence, with greater disruption to performance when the noise was present during both learning and recall. Other researchers [18] found no significant difference between distraction from music and noise on the task performance of school children. However, they observed a trend towards worse performance with background noise, suggesting that the complexity of the noise and music may have been perceived similarly by the students [12]. These findings might be taken to mean that the influence of music can only be determined whether it is perceived as "noise" or as just music, thereby raising another dimension of music characteristics or type as possible source of interpreting results from the literature.

The influence of music type, personality, and task context have been reported in the literature. Cassidy and McDonald [12] compared music with high arousal and low affect, music with low arousal and positive affect and basic background noise on the recall and cognitive task performance of students classified as extroverts and introverts. Performance was lessened in the presence of any background sound (music or noise) versus silence. Further, performance was poorer with exposure to high arousal music compared to low arousal music and noise.

The effects of personality and individual differences were apparent as introverts were more susceptible to distraction in the presence of high arousal music and noise and reported preference for pop and relaxing music to decrease anxiety while studying [12]. The researchers attributed the differential distractibility to optimal arousal hypothesis [19].

Hallam, Price & Katsarou [20] explored the effect of aggressive and relaxing music on math and memory task performance in children. Not only did aggressive music affect the children's memory performance, but it also affected children's behavior (they exhibited lower levels of pro-social behavior). In a slightly different approach, another study [21] found that calming background music improved memory task performance and behavior in emotionally disturbed children, particularly for children who were hyperactive or stimulus seeking. They suggested that the music provided sufficient arousal so as to satisfy the children's need for stimulation without interfering with their concentration [21]. Anderson, Henke, McLaughlin, Ripp & Tuffs [22] also found that background music improved learning conditions. A group of elementary school students exposed to background music in the classroom experienced increased focus and spelling retention, as well as decreased stress levels. The improvements extended beyond the immediate study, as researchers reported the students had higher spelling scores and report card grades post-intervention.

Taken together, multiple findings support the proposition that music provides an array of potential benefits for task performance, though the exact mechanisms of impact – direct cognitive and attentional arousal or indirect enhancement of mood, affect and motivation – are still a source of debate. However, most studies reviewed concentrated more on children in lower level educational systems than, say, university students who can be seen all around campus listening to music with their headphones.

The concern of this paper, therefore, is to investigate the influence of different genres and languages of music on task performance, especially those that involve cognitive ability and concentration among university students. This is especially important since it is generally recognized in some countries that students' academic and class work performance is on the decline. Could listening to music be a source of interference to concentration in their task performance? If so, could the interference be attributed to the genre or language in which it was rendered, given that music is believed to cut across language barriers and given that some students are conversant in more than one language? Could it be that selective attention accounts for the desired effect of music on performance? These questions were to be answered by this study as stated in the following hypotheses.

#### **Hypotheses**

From the literature that has been reviewed, the following hypotheses were tested:

- 1) There would be a significant main effect of music genre on task performance.
- 2) There would be a significant main effect of music language on task performance.
- 3) There would be a significant interaction effect between music genre and music language on task performance.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Design

Experimental design was used to test the hypotheses. There were two levels of music genre (Pop and Gospel) and three levels of music language (French, English and Setswana). The dependent variable was a cognitive task performance (see Appendix) which was intervally and continuously measured. This resulted in a 2 X 3 way factorial design.

#### 2.1.1. Participants

The study involved a cross-section of students from University of Botswana. The sample consisted of 60 students; 32 males and 28 females, aged between 18 and 36 years, with a mean age of 21.67 years, who voluntarily consented to participate. All participants gave informed consent to participate and were treated in compliance with ethical principles. This study took place during the University's summer second semester of the year 2013. Participant selection was based on convenience sampling in that the experimenter asked, through an advert, anybody who availed themselves for the experiment to take part. This was done regardless of any demographics such as gender, age or academic faculty. However, when it was observed that not much response was obtained through the advert, the snowballing technique was used in addition such that participants recruited other participants, whom they thought would be interested in the experiment.

#### 2.1.2. Instruments

In this experiment, a DELL Inspiron 1545 computer with speakers was used to play the music. Paper and pencil were used for completing informed consent forms, as well as for recording results. Songs for each of the three conditions were French Gospel music and French Pop music, English Gospel Music and English Pop Music, and Setswana Gospel Music and Setswana Pop Music. The English Gospel Music was the song "Amazing Grace" by Darlene Zschech, and English Pop Music was the song "Try" by Pink. The Setswana Gospel Music was the song "Lebakwano" by Tebby and Setswana Pop Music was the song "Maphuthaditshaba" by Thulie. The French Gospel Music was the song "Mon Jesus" by Emma Archille and the French Pop Music was the song "Jattends L'Amour" by Jenifer.

The perceptual task, adapted from the Compilation of Graduate Management Aptitude Test (GMAT), was designed to measure cognitive, perceptual and speed abilities (see Appendix 1). Participants were to identify figures and words in each of the two sections of the task. Each section has fifteen of such. The higher the number of figures identified correctly, the higher the performance in the task. The maximum score achievable is 30.

#### 2.1.3. Procedure

Each participant was assigned to one of the six conditions where there were 10 participants in each of the groups for Gospel-French music, Gospel-English music, Gospel-Setswana Music, Pop-French music, Pop-English music and Pop-Setswana Music.

After being seated, participants were asked to observe the stipulated rules, e.g., not going outside during the experiment and switching off their cell phones. The participants were given the informed consent form to sign after the expectations and procedures of the experiment were explained to them. Then, the perceptual task paper was distributed, without allowing any of the participants to turn it over, to look at it. The experimenters then set the timer (for 15 minutes) and instructed the participants to begin. The music was simultaneously played upon that instruction in each of the conditions. At the end of the 15 minutes, the participants were asked to stop writing and the task performance sheets were then collected together with the informed consents. Finally, the participants were then debriefed. The scores were measured with reference to how many correct answers were circled out of the total questions. The data were then recorded and analyzed using a Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program.

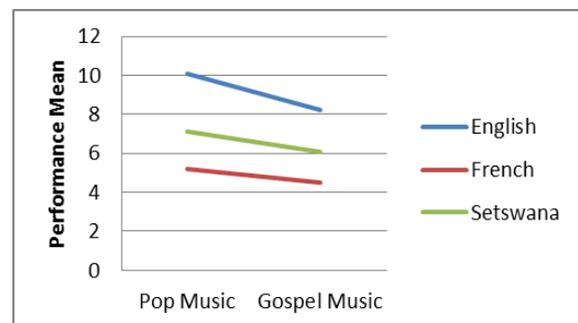
## 3. Results

Generally the participants' task performance was low in the presence of music,  $M = 6.60$ ,  $SD=2.63$ . The range of task performance was between 2 and 13, which is lower than the average performance score of the task which is 15 out of 30.

**Table 1. Mean scores and standard deviation of task performance by music language and genre**

	Pop Music	Gospel Music
English Language	10.1 (SD=1.60)	8.2 (SD=1.55)
French Language	5.2 (SD=2.04)	4.5 (SD=1.58)
Setswana Language	7.10 (SD=2.94)	6.10 (SD=2.20)

Table 1 shows the mean performance of participants under different conditions of the study. Though performance was generally poor, participants under French-gospel condition had the lowest mean performance ( $M=4.5$ ,  $SD=1.58$ ), followed by the French-pop music condition ( $M =5.2$ ,  $SD=2.04$ ). On the contrary, performance was best when the medium of communication was English, where the mean was highest under the English-pop condition.



**Figure 1. Mean scores - Performance by music language and genre**

Table 2 shows the summary of the 2X3 ANOVA. There was a significant main effect of music genre and music language on task performance.  $F(2, 59) = 4.48$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $F(2, 59) = 30.45$ ,  $p < .01$  respectively. Even though there was no significant interaction effect. With music genre, task performance was better under pop music ( $M=6.10$ ). Also, language of music has significant influence on task

performance, whereby performance was better in English ( $M=9.15$ ); followed by Setswana ( $M=5.80$ ). However, task performance was worse under French language music ( $M=4.83$ ).

**Table 2. Summary of 2 X3 ANOVA – Effect of music genre and music language on task performance**

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
Music Language (A)	204.10	2	102.05	30.45	<.01
Music Genre (B)	15.00	1	15.00	4.48	<.05
A X B Interaction	6.30	2	3.15	.940	Ns
Error	181.00	54	3.35		

## 4. Discussion

The results support hypotheses 1 and 2. As expected, music genre and music language impacted performance. While, generally, performance was low, the pop music genre appeared to facilitate better performance. Other studies have found increased performance in certain populations, such as emotionally and behaviorally disturbed children, with certain types of background music [21]. The issue, then, becomes what type of music provides an optimal level of stimulation while limiting distraction interference for the task at hand, i.e., the optimal arousal hypothesis [5,19]. These findings suggest that pop, as compared to gospel, provides the most helpful balance of arousal.

The lower performance during French music is not surprising as French is neither an official nor national language in Botswana. As a foreign language it was likely perceived as noise and did interfere with concentration on the task. This type of task interference is consistent with numerous findings on the negative and distracting effects of noise on cognitive task performance [16,17], particularly the finding that music and noise produce comparable distracting effects due to presumed similarity in cognitive complexity [18]. The cognitive complexity of music is possibly dependent on increased interference when lyrics are delivered in an unknown language, thus, the influence of how familiar the sounds or music are to the listener [14] and whether the music is interpreted as low information by the listener [13].

The superior performance under the English condition was also anticipated because participants were students who receive instruction and complete most of their academic work in English, even though Setswana is their vernacular language. As such, the fluency and familiarity with the English language presumably lessened cognitive complexity that would introduce interference effects on performance. This phenomenon could also be explained by the cognitive priming influence that occurs between similar stimuli [5].

While the capacity theory holds that attention can be distributed to numerous tasks simultaneously [4], a refined argument [11] is that listening to arousing music requires more cognitive processing resources than listening to relatively soothing music. Listening to arousing music should reduce the cognitive resources that would be used to carry out other tasks. Therefore, the more arousing the music, the worse simultaneous task performance should be. In this experiment, it might be possible that the selected music genres, gospel and pop, could be considered to be

aggressive and passive genres, respectively. The excitatory and calming effects of the two music genres might have influenced the overall task performance. Others [20] also found that playing music that was perceived as arousing and aggressive had negative effects on cognitive task performance. In this study, it could be argued that the gospel music genre was perceived as more aggressive due to multiple choral voices and instrumentation that are incorporated with the lyrical content of the music. And because many students may not be so spiritually inclined, the Gospel music used in this study could have a debilitating effect on their performance. Furthermore, the cumulative effect of studying to a particular genre of music may make it less distracting [15]; so, if students do not normally study to Gospel, they would not experience that decrease in distractibility during task performance.

Jensen [23] highlighted the importance of also considering the effect of cognitive factors such as motivation, attention to music and difficulty of the task. In this sample, the poor task performance rate may have been due to the fact that participants received no incentives to make them eager to perform the task. In addition, these results might also be influenced by the fact that participants selected for the specific music genre and music language groups, may have been familiar with certain ones. For instance, it could be possible that the participants in this experiment have been previously exposed to listening to pop music in English, which could have heightened the task performance results under the English pop music condition, consistent with previous findings on music familiarity and task performance [15].

## 5. Conclusion

Overall, these results have implications for the genre and language selection of music that students use to study in their attempts to improve academic results, particularly in regard to complex tasks and monotonous study subjects. Factors such as music preference, cognitive priming and whether music is perceived as noise, figure significantly in music's effect on performance. As students listen to their music devices, they may be advised to choose their songs wisely to facilitate optimal arousal, attention and mood for better performance.

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## Appendix 1

### Task Performance Used In The Study

**Directions:** Attempt all the questions in each of Sections A and B. Shade the box that corresponds to your answer to each question on the ANSWER SHEET

TIME ALLOWED: 15 MINUTES

### Section A

Use Table I to answer questions 1 to 15.

Table I

233609	966969	844001	233656	844101	696959
448011	332069	696699	323096	332966	233609
233066	484110	669909	484100	332666	233096
233606	669996	332606	669999	332666	233096
233666	844110	323909	233069	448101	323066
323666	323906	696969	966959	844101	966099
696969	233660	448110	669699	323606	323069
669969	332066	966999	696996	323660	484010
484101	323609	844011	844010	669909	448001
448101	332906	966956	448010	332606	332906
448010	484011	332609	448101	323609	332069
696996	448001	332096	484101	696699	484110
669609	484010	323660	669969	696969	844110
966699	323069	323606	696969	448110	669996
233060	966099	844101	323666	966996	323906
233960	323066	233656	233660	332609	233660
669999	332660	233666	233606	332096	332066
484100	233096	332666	233066	323660	323609
323096	233609	332666	448011	323606	332966
233906	696966	332906	233906	844101	323666

### Questions

- How many 669969 are on the table?  
A. SIX B. ONE C. TWO D. THREE E. FIVE
- How many 966969 are on the table?  
A. SIX B. ONE C. TWO D. THREE E. FIVE
- How many 233666 are on the table?  
A. SIX B. ONE C. TWO D. THREE E. FOUR
- How many 696969 are on the table?  
A. SIX B. ONE C. TWO D. THREE E. FOUR
- How many 233906 are on the table?  
A. SIX B. ONE C. TWO D. THREE E. FIVE
- How many 233069 are on the table?  
A. SIX B. ONE C. TWO D. THREE E. FIVE
- How many 332096 are on the table?  
A. SIX B. ONE C. TWO D. THREE E. FIVE
- How many 966999 are on the table?  
A. SIX B. ONE C. TWO D. THREE E. FIVE
- How many 844011 are on the table?  
A. SIX B. ONE C. TWO D. THREE E. FOUR
- How many 323609 are on the table?  
A. SIX B. ONE C. TWO D. THREE E. FIVE
- How many 844001 are on the table?  
A. SIX B. ONE C. TWO D. THREE E. FIVE
- How many 332609 are on the table?  
A. SIX B. ONE C. TWO D. THREE E. FIVE
- How many 332906 are on the table?  
A. SIX B. ONE C. TWO D. THREE E. FIVE
- How many 966699 are on the table?  
A. SIX B. ONE C. TWO D. THREE E. FIVE
- How many 448001 are on the table?  
A. SIX B. ONE C. TWO D. THREE E. FIVE

**Section B**

Use Table II to answer questions 16 to 30.

**Table II**

bmcdbjksaouifhrgdvykjgheidapmzyythwdcgej
shyfowmzkteifoayfhstkjwbcywkesnbjhfmkord
krfbscruhrspktbcjpfvuthkdcrimtbnuhfvgd
patkrbiejtsyimudkybfaykttbdugytknydjtct
psfrdcjigsbmydchksvyfcjkoutrdv gmsckhbkfm
utfvnjfyiyjdmeskmrjyugstmgbdykhrvugsvkgh
ufbsjtbdfvgwruojgdyvctmhsbcunjykyhbrhjv
tugdyjhrdsuotmrcgyysjhipfsvfwyeryiptmkh
gsunyqphedcuijmsagekpnvyvrfgnudzkubfyhhjn
tumvhdzrtfcsynmignkncezyhikmrtcgjfbeydit
thcrsykybjrdbgjurdyuhvkgrsjncuoktdbvryyj
tmtvhdubfhujbfykunhdrykibdekyhvfjybdcyg
tmhecshtfbdesupjkinmbghydyesywzfdghnrvf
jdhgbcxrdsjhyukrdhnesiktrvshbfrchudzlm
xtfutgrstnucbkfhtdyokmrhbdgersktnmycidwj
stkgyuwvyyiosjshvfeqymwhnrkstnbfyshbvtckg
mwyhdryktsbcjrsjbtwhkvschvurgsouncgbrdsy
trhsbcyrjyptvstgezgdnkntmtdvfyjspkrwnfy

Questions

- 16. How many “letter h” are on the table?  
A.49 B.44 C.45 D.48 E.38 F.37
- 17. How many “letter d” are on the table?  
A.50 B.43 C.45 D.48 E.38 F.37
- 18. How many “letter b” are on the table?

- A.50 B.44 C.42 D.46 E.38 F.37
- 19. How many “letter r” are on the table?  
A.50 B.44 C.41 D.48 E.36 F.35
- 20. What is the total number of letter on the table  
A.1000 B.800 C.721 D.740 E.840 F.650
- 21. How many “letter m” are on the table?  
A.50 B.33 C.28 D.39 E.41 F.40
- 22. How many “letter j” are on the table?  
A.30 B.33 C.28 D.39 E.41 F.18
- 23. How many “letter I “ are on the table?  
A.3 B.13 C.1 D.9 E.14 F.10
- 24. How many “letter v “ are on the table?  
A.30 B.33 C.25 D.27 E.26 F.19
- 25. How many “letter g “ are on the table?  
A.30 B.34 C.33 D.35 E.27 F19
- 26. How many “letter s” are on the table?  
A.30 B.41 C.39 D.42 E.43 F.44
- 27. How many “letter k “ are on the table?  
A.30 B.40 C.46 D.35 E.48 F.45
- 28. How many “letter c “ are on the table?  
A.30 B.29 C.31 D.33 E.48 F.42
- 29.How many “ letter u “ are on the table?  
A.30 B.41 C.31 D.32 E.33 F.34
- 30.How many “ letter f “ are on the table?  
A.30 B.37 C.41 D.29 E.36 F.35