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# Interpersonal Relationships and Preferences for Mood-Congruency in Aesthetic Experiences

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Prior research examining how negative feelings influence aesthetic preferences (e.g., liking of different kinds of music, movies, or stories) has reported inconsistent findings. This article proposes a theoretical argument to explain when people are more likely to prefer mood-congruent to mood-incongruent aesthetic stimuli. It is suggested that mood-congruent aesthetic experiences, for example, listening to sad songs when feeling sad, (a) serve as a surrogate for the mood-sharing often observed in empathic relationships and hence (b) are preferred when emotional distress comes from failing interpersonal relationships (vs. noninterpersonal events). Consistent with this proposition, people's preferences for mood-congruent music strongly correlate with their preferences for an empathic friend (experiment 1). Further, mood-congruent preferences significantly increase when people experience interpersonal (vs. noninterpersonal) distress, independent of emotional intensity, emotion type (sadness and frustration/anger), and normative issues (experiments 1–3). Further theoretical developments and future research are discussed.

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Since most of our hurts come through relationships so will our healing. (Young 2007, 11)

Over the past few decades, the emotion regulation literature has shown that when people feel bad, they often look spontaneously for pleasant experiences or distracting activities to alleviate their negative feelings (Andrade 2005; Raghunathan and Corfman 2004; Tice, Bratslavsky, and Baumeister 2001;

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Zillmann 1988). Less intuitively, however, it appears that, under certain circumstances, people choose to expose themselves further to or to ruminate on negative experiences even when more pleasant alternatives are also available (Kamins, Marks, and Skinner 1991; Wegener and Petty 1994). These seemingly conflicting effects seem to hold true particularly for aesthetic experiences (Gibson, Aust, and Zillmann 2000; Knobloch-Westernwick et al. 2012; Martin et al. 1997; Oliver 1993, 2008). For instance, although people who are feeling sad sometimes choose pleasant aesthetic stimuli to cheer them up (mood-incongruent preference: e.g., Helregel and Weaver 1989; Knobloch and Zillmann 2002), they also often, and deliberately, expose themselves to sad music, heartbreaking dramas, gloomy paintings, and tragic stories (mood-congruent preference: e.g., Gibson et al. 2000; Knobloch and Zillmann 2003; Martin et al. 1997). Why should this be true?

In the present article, we propose a new theoretical argument that helps explain why people sometimes prefer mood-congruent (negative) stimuli when they are in negative moods. In particular, we hypothesize that mood-congruent aesthetic experiences (e.g., listening to sad music when feeling sad) offer a sense of emotional sharing, akin to interacting with an empathetic friend, and thus are more appreciated when individuals experience interpersonal distress (e.g., weakened,

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threatened, broken, or lost relationships), as compared to when they experience noninterpersonal distress (e.g., loss of money or having an accident). We report the results of three experiments that are consistent with this rationale. Experiment 1 shows that people's preference for mood-congruent aesthetic stimuli (e.g., sad music) is similar to their preference for mood-congruent people (e.g., an empathic friend). Experiments 2 and 3 show that distress from broken interpersonal relationships increases preferences for mood-congruent aesthetic experiences relative to distress from noninterpersonal hassles and problems.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

People need to form and maintain intimate interpersonal bonds (Baumeister and Leary 1995) that are characterized by caring, affection, and mutual concern. These bonds promote a sense of intimacy, acceptance, security, and comfort. The absence of such positive emotional bonds, however, results in deep emotional distress (Ainsworth 1989; Bowlby 1977). For example, an infant who is separated from an attached caregiver becomes highly anxious; an adult who has lost a lover experiences intense grief, sorrow, and loneliness; and an individual who has been cheated by a close friend or loved one becomes angry, hurt, and resentful.

### Emotional Support and Feelings of Bonding

Once an intimate relationship of love, friendship, or trust is lost or broken and people experience the resulting negative feelings, they often look for a surrogate to recapture the social bond (Baumeister and Leary 1995). While finding the perfect substitution for the lost bond is unlikely, people can and do try to form a bond with an empathetic other, someone with whom they can share their negative feelings and receive solace (Ainsworth 1989; Cohen and Wills 1985; Hill 1991). For example, the bereaved feel most consoled by those who share similar feelings of bereavement and can support them emotionally. With an empathetic companion, people can reveal and share feelings, as well as feel understood, validated, accepted, supported, and cared about. Even the simple presence of another person who has the same mood is often helpful in coping with negativity (Schachter 1959). Simply put, when individuals are hurt in interpersonal relationships, they often look for mood-congruent, empathetic others, who provide emotional support, feelings of belonging, and comfort (Cohen and Wills 1985). In contrast, they typically avoid joyful, mood-incongruent others, because such people tend to be perceived as less sensitive, respectful, and responsive to their affective state and situation (Lehman, Ellard, and Wortman 1986).

### Mood-Congruent Aesthetic Stimuli as Surrogates

Although the previous literature focuses on mood-congruent others as a source of emotional support and comfort (Ainsworth 1989; Cohen and Wills 1985; Lehman et al. 1986; Rimé 2009),

we propose that mood-congruent aesthetic stimuli can also provide emotional support and comfort by signaling an empathic, mood-congruent emotional tone. We hypothesize that mood-congruent aesthetic experiences—here defined as emotional experiences of compatible emotional tone that arise from art-related stimuli, such as music, films, and paintings, in which we often find beauty—can serve as surrogates for the mood-sharing often observed in interpersonal relationships.

Anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that experiencing favored music, videos, or stories satisfies the need to bond. Anecdotally, people often acknowledge a sense of friendship or companionship in the interaction with these sorts of stimuli (e.g., "Music is my friend"). Empirically, recent evidence shows that when people feel lonely or disconnected from other people, they are more likely to turn to favored TV shows, music, movies, or books (Derrick, Gabriel, and Hugenberg 2009; Gabriel and Young 2011), but the emotional tone of these aesthetic stimuli was not reported.

Since people who feel hurt in broken or failing interpersonal relationships seek mood-sharing, empathetic experiences, they may also seek mood-congruent aesthetic experiences. In other words, stimuli whose affective tone is compatible with one's current mood and feelings, akin to an empathetic friend, may generally be more appreciated when one seeks comfort and emotional support from empathetic others. Our first hypothesis is therefore:

**H1:** People's preference for mood-congruent aesthetic/emotional stimuli mimics their preference for mood-congruent others.

Further, if the desire for empathic, emotionally connected relationships underlies the preference for mood-congruent stimuli, distress from interpersonal disconnection is more likely to heighten mood-congruent preference. In other words, distress from weakened or broken interpersonal relationships (e.g., loss of someone or betrayal by a friend) should be more likely to increase preference for the surrogate mood-congruent stimuli than distress from noninterpersonal troubles (e.g., loss of money or an accident).

**H2:** Emotional distress from failed/broken interpersonal relationships (vs. noninterpersonal issues) increases preference for mood-congruent aesthetic/emotional stimuli.

To provide initial validation for our theoretical argument, we assess below the extent to which hypothesis 2 resonates with the findings already available in the literature.

## RESOLVING APPARENT INCONSISTENCIES

Prior research has addressed how a perceiver's affective state influences his or her liking for music, videos, and stories with different emotional tones. Contradictory findings have been reported, particularly when people experience negative feelings. Whereas multiple studies have shown that people do prefer mood-incongruent positive tone stimuli (e.g., cheer-

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FIGURE 1

12 NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES (EXPERIMENT 1)

Item "When you ..."	Preference for Mood-Congruent Option (%)		Cluster	Type of Distress
	Friend	Music		
a. lost someone you love	72.0	88.0	Interpersonal	Interpersonal
b. lost someone close to you	80.0	86.1		
c. lost someone significant	71.2	81.5		
d. were disgusted by dirty objects (e.g., stool)	24.0	35.2	Psycho- physiological distress	Non- interpersonal
e. found a bug in your meal	14.4	38.9		
f. saw disgusting objects (e.g., vomit)	26.4	43.5	Self- achievement failure	
g. fell behind your competitors	52.0	29.6		
h. were ashamed about your laziness/procrastination	30.4	46.3		
i. lost an important competition or contest	45.6	52.8		
j. were ashamed about your bad decision/performance	52.0	56.5		
k. failed an exam/promotion test	45.6	57.4		
l. were ashamed of your selfishness	47.2	66.7		

ful music or comedies) while or after experiencing a negative event (Biswas, Riffe, and Zillmann 1994; Helregel and Weaver 1989; Knobloch and Zillmann 2002; Meadowcroft and Zillmann 1987; Zillmann, Hezel, and Medoff 1980), others have shown clear evidence of mood-congruent preferences (e.g., liking of sad music or dramas; Gibson et al. 2000; Kamins et al. 1991; Knobloch and Zillmann 2003; Mares and Cantor 1992; Martin et al. 1997; Nabi et al. 2006; Strizhakova and Krcmar 2007; Wegener and Petty 1994). People's desire to feel better can easily explain mood-incongruent preference, and the emotion regulation literature provides strong support for this prediction (see Cohen, Pham, and Andrade [2008] for a review). The opposite effect, however, presents a more difficult theoretical challenge. Emotion regulation cannot easily account for mood-congruent preferences, especially when an incongruent (i.e., positive or even joyful) option is readily available.

Our hypotheses suggest that if mood-congruent aesthetic stimuli serve as a surrogate for an empathic other, negative feelings based on interpersonal versus noninterpersonal issues could account for many of the apparent discrepancies in the previous literature. Although a systematic meta-analysis is beyond the scope of this article, the results of the following literature review seem roughly consistent with our hypotheses. When the negative experiences were associated with broken interpersonal relationships, such as loneliness (Gibson et al. 2000; Knobloch and Zillmann 2003; Mares and Cantor 1992), romantic/sexual cheating (Nabi et al. 2006), and death (Martin et al. 1997; Wegener and Petty 1994), preferences for mood-congruent videos, music, and stories were more frequent. In contrast, when negative feelings are due to performance failure (Biswas et al. 1994; Knobloch and Zillmann 2002; Zillmann et al. 1980), phys-

iological distress (Helregel and Weaver 1989; Meadowcroft and Zillmann 1987), or mental boredom or stress (Bryant and Zillmann 1984), preferences for mood-incongruent, positive-tone videos, music, and stories were more prevalent. For example, when a machine provided the negative feedback (i.e., a negative but noninterpersonal distress), people tended to prefer mood-incongruent, positive tone stimuli (Knobloch and Zillmann 2002), whereas when the negative feedback was given by an insulting experimenter (i.e., a broken interpersonal commitment), people sometimes preferred mood-congruent, negative-tone stimuli (Biswas et al. 1994; Zillmann et al. 1980).

Although these interpretations of previous results are promising, primary data are needed to test both hypotheses of our theoretical argument. Hypothesis 1 is tested in the first experiment, and hypothesis 2 is addressed in the last two experiments.

## EXPERIMENT 1: MUSIC IS MY FRIEND

Experiment 1 was designed to provide a direct test of hypothesis 1: people's preference for mood-congruent aesthetic/emotional stimuli mimics their preference for mood-congruent others. Participants were presented with a series of 12 negative situations and asked to make choices between a mood-incongruent stimulus and a mood-congruent stimulus both when that stimulus was *another person* and when it was an *aesthetic stimulus* (see fig. 1). The 12 negative scenarios varied widely to provide a strong test of hypothesis 1. Crucially, hypothesis 1 implies that the different types of negative experiences would influence people's preferences for mood-congruency similarly when the entity of choice was an intimate person (e.g., a friend) or an aesthetic stimulus (e.g.,

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music). That is, preference for mood-congruent music should strongly and positively correlate with preference for mood-congruent friends.

Experiment 1 also provided some initial insight into the role of interpersonal relationships in such choices (hypothesis 2). In particular, hypothesis 2 implies that scenarios more indicative of broken interpersonal relationships will show stronger preference for mood-congruency in both friends and music than scenarios indicative of non-interpersonal problems.

## Method

**Participants and Procedure.** Two hundred and thirty-three individuals recruited from a national online panel were asked to read a brief set of instructions and then answer a series of questions. A between-subjects design on the target of evaluation (music vs. friend) was used to avoid potential confounds due to consistency effects: 125 participants were randomly assigned to the friend condition while the remaining participants were assigned to the music condition. The instructions provided the following information: "In our lives, there are many times when we feel bad. In this survey, we are interested in what kind of friend [or music] people want to be with [or listen to] in such negative situations."

Participants in both the friend and music conditions were presented with the same 12 negative situations. In interpersonal scenarios (fig. 1, rows a–c) participants were asked to think about experiences such as losing someone (e.g., "when you lost someone close to you"). In noninterpersonal scenarios (fig. 1, rows d–l), they were asked to think about experiences such as failing to achieve a goal (e.g., "when you failed an exam") or being disgusted (e.g., "when you found a bug in your meal"). The order of the 12 items was randomly assigned across participants. After reading each negative scenario, participants in the *friend choice condition* were asked to choose which kind of friend they would prefer to be with: "a funny friend who can help you get rid of your negative feelings" or "an empathetic friend who can share feelings with you." Participants in the *music choice condition* were asked which kind of songs they would prefer to listen to: "cheerful songs" or "sad songs."

## Results

**Preference for Friends and Music.** Each choice response was categorized as mood-congruent (negative) or mood-incongruent (positive). The percentages of mood-congruent choices for the 12 negative experiences are shown in figure 1 separately for the friends and music conditions. Consistent with hypothesis 1, across the negative scenarios, people's preference for mood-congruency were very similar regardless of whether the target of evaluation was music or a friend ( $r = .83, p < .001$ ). This similarity in preference across targets of evaluation emerged despite the dramatic differ-

ences in preference for mood-congruency across the negative experiences (min = 14%; max = 88%).

Experiment 1 also provides preliminary evidence for the role of interpersonal relationships (hypothesis 2). We first categorized the 12 negative situations based on the participants' mood-congruent versus mood-incongruent choices and conducted a hierarchical agglomerative clustering analysis with the average linkage method. The results showed that the highest-level categories were negative situations with a broken interpersonal connection (fig. 1, rows a–c; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .66$ ) and negative situations irrelevant to interpersonal relationships (fig. 1, rows d–l;  $\alpha = .67$ ). This noninterpersonal cluster consisted of two subcategories—psychophysiological distress (fig. 1, rows d–f;  $\alpha = .67$ ) and self-achievement failure (fig. 1, rows g–l;  $\alpha = .66$ ). This suggests that people's music preferences are distinctive when they experience separation (a–c) as compared to disgust (d–f) or personal failure (g–l).

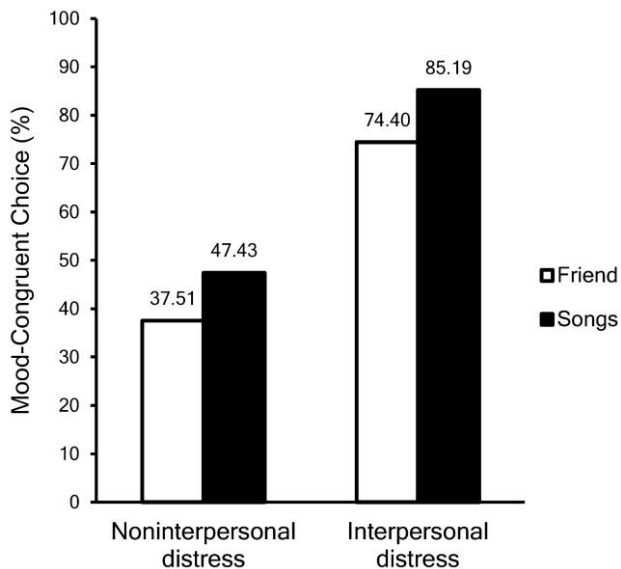
We further examined whether a negative interpersonal (vs. noninterpersonal) situation significantly increased people's preference for mood-congruent options (hypothesis 2) and whether such a preference appeared similarly across friend choices and music choices (hypothesis 1). We therefore conducted a repeated measures logistic regression where choice (1 = mood-congruent choice; 0 = mood-incongruent choice) was regressed on the target of evaluation (1 = music; 0 = friend), the source of the emotional distress (1 = interpersonal; 0 = noninterpersonal), and the interaction term. As hypothesized, there was a significant main effect of type of emotional distress on choice ( $\beta = 1.69, SE = .18, p < .0001$ ), such that interpersonal distress increased preference for mood-congruency relative to noninterpersonal distress (fig. 2). Equally important, this phenomenon was no different for choosing friends versus choosing music, as indicated by the nonsignificant impact of the interaction term ( $\beta = -.26, SE = .24, p = .27$ ). A main effect of target of evaluation was also observed, in that participants preferred mood-congruent music to mood-congruent friends ( $\beta = .74, SE = .22, p = .001$ ), but this difference is not relevant to the present hypotheses.

It seems possible that disgust in the noninterpersonal condition (d–f) might have produced the main effect of type of emotional distress on choice behavior by itself by evoking strong aversion, and thus strong mood-incongruent preference, in the noninterpersonal condition. To address this issue, we excluded the disgust scenarios (d–f) and reconducted the analogous repeated-measures logistic regression with the same variables. The essential results did not change. The negative interpersonal (vs. noninterpersonal) situation significantly increased mood-congruent choices ( $\beta = 1.63, SE = .19, p = .0001$ ), regardless of whether participants were choosing friends or music (i.e., the interaction was not significant:  $\beta = -.41, SE = .25, p = .11$ ). That is, both the friend and the music conditions still clearly showed an increase in mood-congruency preference in the interpersonal condition even after the disgusting situations were excluded

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FIGURE 2

MOOD-CONGRUENT PREFERENCES (EXPERIMENT 1)



(fig. 2). Again, the target of evaluation factor was significant ( $\beta = .65$ ,  $SE = .24$ ,  $p = .008$ ).

## Discussion

Experiment 1 provides support for hypothesis 1. Music preferences and friend preferences were highly correlated across a dozen different scenarios. While many people in the friend condition preferred an empathetic (vs. funny) friend, many people in the corresponding music condition preferred sad (vs. cheerful) music. Further, the findings also provide initial evidence consistent with hypothesis 2. Preference for mood-congruent experiences was higher when distress arose from a broken interpersonal relationship (“losing someone”) than when it resulted from failure (“losing/failing at something”) or some sort of psychophysiological distress (“exposure to aversive stimuli”).

Nevertheless, the results of experiment 1 also present a few sources of concern. First, the scenarios designed to tap interpersonal disconnection (fig. 1, rows a–c) were very similar conceptually and did not encompass a broad range of possible relational distresses, whereas the noninterpersonal scenarios (fig. 1, rows d–l) varied substantially. Second, the interpersonal/noninterpersonal conditions were associated with emotions that differed in specificity (sadness, disgust, shame, etc.) and possibly in intensity. Finally, the separation in the interpersonal condition (a–c) might have evoked normative pressure (e.g., people ought to listen to sad music after someone’s death), which could have explained the mood-congruent preference in this experiment. To address these concerns, a more principled and con-

trolled manipulation of interpersonal versus noninterpersonal dimension was conducted in experiment 2.

## EXPERIMENT 2: FRUSTRATED BY SOMEONE VERSUS SOMETHING

In this experiment, we examine the impact of frustration on people’s preference for aesthetic stimuli. Frustration has three advantages for testing the effects of interpersonal versus noninterpersonal distress (hypothesis 2). First, it allows the examination of mood-congruent preferences in a different emotional context. Second, frustration allows a relatively clear interpersonal (vs. noninterpersonal) manipulation within the same scenario. People become frustrated when either someone or something does not support (or prevents) them from achieving their goals. Thus, interpersonal (vs. noninterpersonal) frustration can be operationalized holding relatively constant the general goals, the emotional experience, and the level of intensity. Third, frustration allows for measurement of preferences for mood-congruent aesthetic experiences (e.g., angry music), which are seldom seen as normatively appropriate. People tend to believe that anger should be avoided not only from a hedonic but also from a normative point of view (Tavris 1989).

Nonetheless, hypothesis 2 implies that frustration caused by someone (interpersonal transgression) should heighten one’s preference for mood-congruent aesthetic stimuli (angry songs), as people want their feelings shared, empathized, and validated. In contrast, the same frustration caused by something (noninterpersonal problem) should be less likely to increase preference for mood-congruent aesthetic stimuli, as their desire to have their frustration supported and validated is not as strong.

## Method

Seventy-six people recruited from a national online panel participated in this experiment. They were provided with the following initial instructions:

There are moments in our lives when we feel upset and frustrated. We are interested in knowing what kinds of music people like to listen to in such upsetting and frustrating situations. In such negative situations you may want to listen to . . .

(a) joyful or peaceful music (e.g., dance music, relaxing music, etc.) in an attempt to distract yourself and help you ease the upsetting and frustrating feelings,

OR

(b) angry music (e.g., heavy metal or rap music) in an attempt to have “someone” (i.e., the music) to share with the upsetting and frustrating feelings.

Note that, contrary to experiment 1, we explicitly stated the mood-lifting and mood-sharing functions of mood-incongruent and mood-congruent music, respectively. Participants’ choices should therefore reflect not only their pref-

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ferences for the emotional tone of the music but also their underlying reason associated with listening to it.

All participants were then presented with four pairs (table 1, a–d) of frustrating scenarios. The pairs of scenarios were identical except for the ultimate source of frustration, which was either interpersonal or noninterpersonal. For example, one of the pairs read as follows:

- Slow progress in an important activity (e.g., preparing for an important task) due to *lack of necessary tools* (e.g., *no internet connection due to a severe thunderstorm in the area*).
- Slow progress in an important activity (e.g., preparing for an important task) due to *a group member's sloppy behavior* (e.g., *always late for meetings*)

A pretest of the four pairs was conducted to assess the face validity of frustration and the level of intensity of the emotional experience across the interpersonal and noninterpersonal conditions. Thirty participants, recruited from the same subject pool, were assigned to either the interpersonal or the noninterpersonal sources and asked to indicate how upset/frustrated they would feel in each situation (a–d; 1 = not at all, 5 = very much). The result shows that the frustration levels were both high and similar when the interpersonal and noninterpersonal conditions were compared (4.00 vs. 3.70;  $F(1, 28) = 1.20, p > .28$ ).

In the main experiment, participants indicated the extent to which they would prefer to listen to joyful or angry music after each of the eight statements depicting frustrating situations (table 1). We alternated the direction of the mood congruency

scale, such that half of the people saw the scale alternatives increasing with degree of anger (i.e., 1 = strongly prefer joyful and relaxing music; 7 = strongly prefer angry music), whereas the rest saw them increasing with degree of joy or relaxation (1 = strongly prefer angry music; 7 = strongly prefer joyful and relaxing music). The responses of the second group were reversed so that higher numbers always indicate stronger preference for mood-congruent music.

## Results

A mixed design ANOVA was conducted to assess the impact of the scale direction (increasing for angry music vs. increasing for joyful/relaxing music: between) and source of frustration (interpersonal vs. noninterpersonal: within) on music preference. There was an unexpected main effect of the scale direction. When responses were expressed in terms of preference for angry music, angry music was more strongly liked than when responses were expressed in terms of preference for joyful/relaxing music (4.26 vs. 3.50;  $F(1, 74) = 5.38, p = .02$ ). Since this scale effect did not interact with the interpersonal versus noninterpersonal factor ( $p > .2$ ), we averaged over the two scale conditions in subsequent analyses.

Consistent with hypothesis 2, people chose angry music more often when they were frustrated by someone than by something (4.47 vs. 3.27;  $F(1, 74) = 64.52, p < .0001$ ). In all of the frustrating situation pairs (table 1, a–d), participants' preference for angry music was stronger in the interpersonal condition than in the noninterpersonal condition (all  $p < .001$ ; see table 1), even though both groups failed

TABLE 1

ANGRY MUSIC PREFERENCE (EXPERIMENT 2)

		Noninterpersonal condition	Preference for mood-congruent option (1–7)	Interpersonal condition	Preference for mood-congruent option (1–7)	t-test for means ( $df = 75$ )
a) Pair 1	Slow progress in an important activity (e.g., preparing for an important task)	Due to lack of necessary tools (e.g., no Internet connection due to a severe thunderstorm in the area)	3.67	Due to a group member's sloppy behavior (e.g., always late for meeting)	4.33	–3.50 (.001)
b) Pair 2	Low performance (e.g., low score in an exam)	Due to sudden and severe back pain during the exam	2.63	Due to someone's interruption or disturbance	4.30	–7.72 (.0001)
c) Pair 3	Failure to achieve a goal (e.g., getting a job)	Due to natural disaster (e.g., flood, storm)	2.97	Due to someone's fault (e.g., a taxi driver who took too long to pick you up)	4.41	–6.92 (.0001)
d) Pair 4	Losing an important opportunity (e.g., scholarship)	Due to sheer bad luck	3.80	Due to your advisor's/boss's lack of care about you	4.83	–4.68 (.0001)
Mean			3.27		4.47	–8.18 (.0001)

NOTE.—Scale: 1 = strongly prefer joyful and relaxing music; 4 = indifferent; 7 = strongly prefer angry music.

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to fulfill the same goals. Further, relative to the indifference point ( $M = 4.00$ ), the effects were reversed. When people were frustrated due to interpersonal transgression, they preferred angry music ( $t(75) = 2.52, p < .01$ ), revealing that their need to share their frustration and anger was stronger than the desire to deny/overcome them. In contrast, when people were frustrated due to noninterpersonal hassles, they preferred joyful/peaceful music ( $t(75) = -5.35, p < .0001$ ), revealing that their desire to deny/overcome the negative feelings was stronger than the desire to share them.

## Discussion

Experiment 2 replicates and generalizes experiment 1's findings in different contexts involving negative feelings of frustration, while addressing several possible confounds in experiment 1. First, given the socially unappealing properties of anger and frustration, participants were unlikely to feel pressured to choose angry music by social norms regardless of whether the source of the frustration was interpersonal or noninterpersonal. Second, the level of emotional intensity was not different between the interpersonal and noninterpersonal conditions, as determined by the pretest. Nevertheless, consistent with hypothesis 2, distress arising from broken/failing interpersonal relationships led to stronger preference for angry music than the distress arising from noninterpersonal factors. This result suggests that preference for mood-congruency is not tied to a specific emotion (e.g., sadness) but can be generalized across negative emotions (e.g., anger and frustration).

Thus far, we have observed mood-congruent preferences under hypothetically presented scenarios. One might argue that mood-congruent preference would disappear or be mitigated when people feel interpersonal distress more vividly or intensely. For instance, it is possible that under stronger levels of distress, the need for "immediate mood-lifting" through a positively charged experience may override the need to feel connected and supported through a negatively charged mood-congruent experience. People's desire to regulate their current negative feelings upward through pleasant experience is well known (Andrade 2005; Cohen et al. 2008; Tice et al. 2001). Further, stronger negative experiences have been shown to significantly increase the individual's use of distraction (i.e., deviation of attention from the source of the experience) as an emotion regulation strategy (Sheppes et al. 2011). Therefore, it is possible that if people are encouraged to actually feel a negative emotional experience, the need for immediate positive/mood-lifting stimuli would override people's desire for a longer-lasting negative/mood-congruent experience. Experiment 3 will address this concern.

It is also possible that the perceived controllability of the distressing events varied by condition in experiment 2. People may have perceived the interpersonal distress to be slightly more controllable than the noninterpersonal distress (e.g., I could have chosen a better group member or I can change his/her behavior vs. I cannot control the state of the Internet). Although we cannot suggest precisely how such

differences in source controllability would explain the results observed in experiment 2, the manipulations in experiment 3 attempt to avoid this potential confound.

## EXPERIMENT 3: LOSING SOMEONE VERSUS SOMETHING

In this experiment, we examine the impact of actual feelings of interpersonal versus noninterpersonal loss on people's preference for mood-congruent/incongruent music by remembering corresponding loss in their lives. Both types of losses are expected to trigger meaningful negative reactions. Also, the interpersonal condition (losing a relationship with a significant other) was expected to be less controllable than the noninterpersonal one (losing a competition). However, as implied by hypothesis 2, an interpersonal (vs. noninterpersonal) loss should result in people having a stronger preference for mood-congruent aesthetic stimuli, through which they can have empathic mood-sharing and comforting experiences.

## Method

*Participants and Design.* One hundred and eleven people recruited from a national online panel participated in this experiment. The experiment used a 2 (interpersonal loss vs. noninterpersonal loss: between) by 2 (cheerful vs. sad music: within) mixed design. Fifty-one people participated in the interpersonal loss condition and 60 in the noninterpersonal loss condition.

*Procedure.* In the first phase, participants were asked to write about a personal loss. In the interpersonal loss condition, participants were asked to write about a personal experience where they had lost an important relationship (e.g., breakup, lost love, death of a beloved one, etc.), whereas in the noninterpersonal loss condition, participants were asked to write about a personal experience where they lost an important competition (academic, career-related, etc.). Both groups were instructed to write it as vividly and concretely as possible and to make sure that their emotions and opinions would shine through. After writing about their experience, participants rated how they felt at the moment (good, bad, happy, and sad, each on a 7-point scale, where 1 = not at all and 7 = very much). Then, in the second phase of the experiment, participants saw 10 song titles (all fictional except "Don't worry, be happy") and were asked to rate how much they would like to listen to each (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Five titles implied sad songs—"Lonely Days," "Crying," "Tears in My Heart," "Gloomy Sunday," and "Rainy Days"—whereas the other five suggested happy songs—"Don't Worry, Be Happy," "Dance, Dance," "A Lalala Shake," "Laugh and Swing," and "Banana Boat and Giggle." The order of the song titles was randomized across subjects. After indicating their preference for listening to each of the 10 songs based on their titles, participants indicated the extent to which they thought each song would sound cheerful or sad, given the titles (1 = very sad, 7 = very cheerful).

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## Results

**Manipulation Checks.** Describing the personal negative experience made participants feel relatively bad in both conditions. Negative feelings (averaged over “bad” and “sad”;  $\alpha = .82$ ) were significantly higher than positive feelings (averaged over “good” and “happy”;  $\alpha = .91$ ) for both the interpersonal ( $M_{\text{negative feelings}} = 6.25$ ,  $M_{\text{positive feelings}} = 1.58$ ;  $F(1, 50) = 320.39$ ,  $p < .0001$ ) and noninterpersonal loss conditions ( $M_{\text{negative feelings}} = 5.44$ ,  $M_{\text{positive feelings}} = 2.74$ ;  $F(1, 59) = 40.57$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). Not surprisingly, an interaction was also present in that describing an interpersonal loss produced stronger negative feelings than describing a noninterpersonal loss ( $F(1, 109) = 14.36$ ,  $p < .0001$ ).

Also, as expected, the five happy songs were perceived as significantly more cheerful ( $M = 5.24$ ) than the five sad songs ( $M = 3.23$ ;  $F(1, 108) = 127.40$ ,  $p < .0001$ ), and writing about the loss experience (interpersonal vs. noninterpersonal) did not interact with this main effect ( $F < 1$ ).

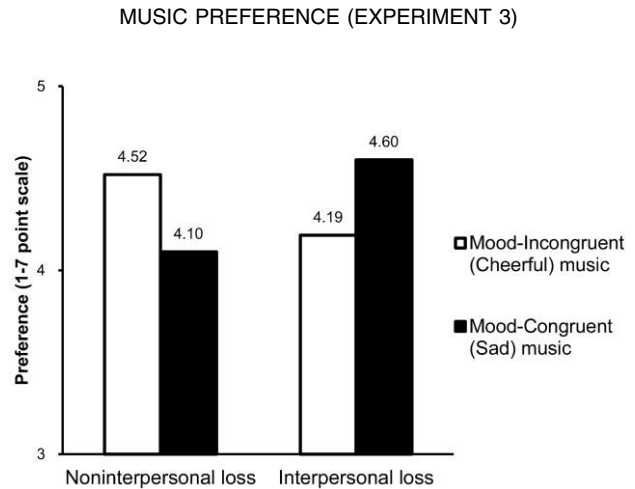
**Music Preference.** The average rated preference for each category of songs is plotted in figure 3 (mood-congruent = sad; mood-incongruent = cheerful) for participants in the interpersonal loss and noninterpersonal loss conditions. Preference for cheerful versus sad songs interacted significantly with the type of loss ( $F(1, 109) = 7.11$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and the nature of the interaction was consistent with hypothesis 2. In particular, participants in the interpersonal loss condition showed stronger preference for mood-congruent (sad) songs ( $M = 4.60$ ) than did participants in the noninterpersonal loss condition ( $M = 4.10$ ;  $t(109) = -2.17$ ,  $p = .03$ ). Participants in the interpersonal loss condition also tended to prefer mood-congruent (sad) songs ( $M = 4.60$ ) more than mood-incongruent (cheerful) songs ( $M = 4.19$ ;  $t(50) = -1.77$ ,  $p = .08$ ). Consistent with previously established findings in the emotion regulation literature, participants in the noninterpersonal loss condition reported stronger preference for mood-incongruent (cheerful) songs than mood-congruent (sad) songs (4.52 vs. 4.10;  $t(59) = 2.01$ ,  $p = .05$ ). Preferences for mood-incongruent (cheerful) songs tended also to be higher in the noninterpersonal loss condition ( $M = 4.52$ ) than in the interpersonal loss conditions ( $M = 4.19$ ), although this difference did not reach significant levels ( $t(109) = 1.28$ ,  $p > .2$ ).

## Discussion

Experiment 3 provides further evidence consistent with hypothesis 2. Preference for mood-congruent aesthetic stimuli was significantly higher when people experienced an interpersonal loss (i.e., losing a personal relationship) than when people experienced a noninterpersonal loss (i.e., losing a competition). Indeed, the direction of the effect actually reversed in noninterpersonal conditions. This crossover interaction provides further support for hypothesis 2 in a situation where people were encouraged actually to feel the loss prior to expressing their preferences for the music.

The interpersonal versus noninterpersonal loss manipu-

FIGURE 3



lation varied not only qualitatively but also quantitatively. Not surprisingly, participants felt, on average, somewhat worse after describing an interpersonal loss than after describing a noninterpersonal loss. One might object that this intensity difference could somehow have caused the preference for mood-congruent songs in the interpersonal conditions. Three arguments can be made against this possibility, however. First, experiment 2 showed mood-congruent preference differences for interpersonal versus noninterpersonal conditions even when mood intensity differences were effectively controlled. Second, as was already mentioned, previous literature has shown that people overwhelmingly prefer to distract themselves and focus their attention away from the source of a negative emotional experience (i.e., toward mood-incongruent stimuli) when they face more (vs. less) intense negativity (Sheppes et al. 2011). According to this, more intense negative emotional reactions should lead people to choose music that was more mood-incongruent, if anything, because it would help them focus their attention away from the recently experienced negative emotion. Third, we directly tested whether the intensity of the reported feelings (used as manipulation checks) predicted music preferences. People's preference for mood-congruent music (computed by subtracting preference for happy songs from preference for sad songs) was regressed on the reported positive feelings and negative feelings as well as the interaction term, and the analyses revealed null results. Neither positive emotion's intensity ( $\beta = .02$ ,  $SE = .27$ ,  $p = .96$ ) or negative emotion's intensity ( $\beta = .15$ ,  $SE = .18$ ,  $p = .42$ ), nor their interaction ( $\beta = -.02$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p = .65$ ) reliably predicted people's preference for sad over happy music, suggesting that intensity of feelings per se did not affect preference for music.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

In this article, we hypothesize that mood-congruent aesthetic experiences represent something akin to an empathic

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friend and thus are more appreciated when negative feelings arise from broken/failing interpersonal experiences. This theoretical framework helps explain apparent inconsistencies in the literature, as reviewed in the introduction. The results of three novel experiments also support its two principal hypotheses. Experiment 1 shows that people's preference for an aesthetic experience (e.g., listening to music that is mood-congruent vs. mood-incongruent) strongly parallels their preference for the company of a friend (whose own mood is congruent vs. incongruent with one's own). Experiments 1–3 further show that in conditions of interpersonal distress, one's preference for mood-congruent aesthetic experiences is significantly increased over conditions of noninterpersonal distress. These results were observed across different classes of negative emotions, as both sadness and frustration increased mood-congruent preference when the negative emotion arose from broken/failed relationships. Also, regardless of whether the mood-sharing function of mood-congruent option is explicitly stated (experiment 2) or not (experiments 1 and 3), broken/failed relationships increased preference for mood-congruent stimuli.

### Beyond the Interpersonal versus Noninterpersonal Dichotomy

At the core of our theoretical proposal lies one of the most fundamental human needs: that of belonging with significant others. When interpersonal relationships are threatened, weakened, or broken, people experience serious emotional distress (Ainsworth 1989; Baumeister and Leary 1995; Bowlby 1977). We propose that mood-congruent aesthetic stimuli, akin to an empathetic friend, can provide mood-sharing, emotionally connected experience through which people feel that their emotion is understood, cared about, supported, and validated. Consistent with our proposal, interpersonal disconnection (e.g., separation) led to stronger mood-congruent preference than noninterpersonal hassles (e.g., loss of competition) across all three experiments reported above.

Although noninterpersonal distress does not typically lead to mood-congruent preference as strongly as interpersonal distress does, there may be conditions of noninterpersonal distress that also trigger the need to have one's feelings shared, approved, and cared about and thus increase a preference for mood-congruent experiences. For example, losing a job or being diagnosed with a life-threatening disease may make people feel different from others and separated from who they used to be. Such disconnection between current and past or "ideal selves" may be more soothed by mood-congruent, holistic, experiences. Along the same lines, it is possible that distresses associated with lowered self-esteem (e.g., failure or rejection at schools/companies) may be more likely to lead to mood-congruent preference than distresses unrelated to self-esteem (e.g., random accidents). In this case, the intrapersonal, self-esteem related distress, as compared to sheer nonpersonal distress, may reflect a broken relationship or disconnection between the actual and an ide-

alized self. A sense of being accepted and approved through mood-congruent aesthetic experiences would then be more likely to be appreciated when one feels inferior and left out. Further research is required to evaluate such possibilities, however.

The present findings may also generalize to situations in which the broken relationship necessarily involves more than the self and one other individual. Interpersonal experiences might also incorporate relationships with personified entities, as long as they offer a sense of bonding. For example, losing a loved pet would surely be similar enough to losing a loved person to cause a similar increase in preference for mood-congruent aesthetic consumption. Similarly, it is well established that people bond and form strong relationships with products and brands (Fournier 1998). To the extent that these bonds are broken, people might also tend to prefer mood-congruent aesthetic experiences. Future research is also needed to address these and related issues.

### Aesthetic Experiences

Despite the importance of music, films, and the fine arts to people's daily well-being, aesthetic and emotional consumption has been underinvestigated by consumer researchers (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Little is yet understood about people's use of aesthetic experiences as a surrogate for an empathetic other. Our enjoyment of sad music, heartbreaking dramas, gloomy paintings, and tragic stories seems paradoxical given their negative emotional tone and direct impact on our feelings. However, once we focus on the nature of the emotional connection with the negative tone of stimuli, we can better understand why negative-tone stimuli might be valued.

Our aesthetic preference is similar to our preference for whom we want to be with (experiment 1) and is contingent on how we are treated by and connected with others (experiments 1–3). Our complex and seemingly mysterious aesthetic enjoyment might be better understood when examined from a social perspective. As we all know from our own experiences, good music, art, or literature can comfort us and help us get through hard times, much like a good friend.

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