

Mood, Music, and Memory

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Visual working memory (VWM) is essential for a wide variety of cognitive processes, and an individual's VWM capacity strongly predicts their fluid intelligence and academic achievement. However, this capacity is limited and exploring how to increase VWM capacity is an active area of research. There is a strong association between how one visually attends to their environment and their VWM capacity, research has found that the breadth of attention (narrow compared to broad) results in an increase in VWM capacity. Whether an individual adopts a narrow attentional style or a broad style has been found to be domain-specific, and can be manipulated by certain factors. Emotional state is one such factor, more specifically, negative moods have been associated with a narrow focus, and positive moods with a broad focus.

The present study explored how the focus of attention influences working memory capacity through inducing short-term moods to change the size of the attentional focus. To induce different moods, participants were asked to listen to music whilst recalling experiences in their life congruent to a randomly assigned mood. Afterwards, participants completed the VWM task.

Results indicated that individuals in a positive mood outperformed individuals in a negative mood in the working memory task. As these results were the opposite of what was hypothesized, it provides support to existing research finding that this effect can be circumstantial and various factors could have influenced results. Furthermore, it has shown that the influence of mood on cognitive tasks is not a simple, straightforward phenomenon. Moods inform us about our constantly changing environment, and finding more about their effects on our VWM is integral to our advancement towards knowledge on human cognition.