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# Songwriting Loafing or Creative Collaboration?: A Comparison of Individual and Team Written *Billboard* Hits in the USA

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Individual and group songwriting credits of *Billboard* number one songs in the United States for each year from 1955 to 2009 were investigated for possible social loafing effects within the music industry. Based on previous mixed findings, we predicted a null effect with respect to the popularity of individual versus team written top *Billboard* songs. As predicted, individually and group written songs were equally represented at the top of the *Billboard* charts for the time period investigated. Explanations for this outcome and limitations are discussed.

In recent years, music has become an increasingly popular topic in the field of social psychology (see Hargreaves & North, 1997; North & Hargreaves, 2008). Social psychologists have studied the role of music related to social identity, personality, and interpersonal perception (North & Hargreaves, 1999; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2006; Rentfrow, McDonald, & Oldmeadow, 2009) and popular music preferences related to socio-economic conditions (Pettijohn & Sacco, 2009a, 2009b). Other researchers have related music preferences to social behaviors and beliefs (North & Hargreaves, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c), including politics, religion, lifestyle practices, and interpersonal relationships. The centrality of music to all social experiences makes music an appropriate and fruitful area for continued psychological investigations. The current study investigates social psychological processes, specifically social loafing, within the experience of songwriting.

Songwriting can be an emotional journey of sharing personal experiences with an eventual audience. Songs can represent stories of celebration, rebellion, defeat, betrayal, politics, and relationships. Songwriters must consider the melody, lyric, harmony, and arrangement of a song (McIntyre, 2008; Roessner, 2009), a process that some prefer to create alone while others prefer to work in groups. Do groups, with their shared areas of expertise, create better songs than individuals working alone? Do songwriting individuals have to compromise their visions when working in groups, thereby producing a lower quality song? To help understand these interpersonal processes, the social psychology literature includes results of investigations of behaviors that are best completed by groups versus individuals and the conditions that create these outcomes. These findings are relevant to the process of popular songwriting, potential song popularity, and the likelihood of a song reaching the top of the *Billboard* charts.

Social loafing is the likelihood of individuals contributing less when working on a task as part of a group than when working on a task alone (Latané, Williams, & Harkins, 1979). In reviews of nearly 80 research studies, Karau and Williams (1993, 1995) report the consistency of social loafing effects across different types of tasks (physical, cognitive, creative, evaluative, and work-related) and participant samples. Social loafing generally increases with group size and decreases with task importance, potential for evaluation, uniqueness of individual contributions, and complexity of task. The Collective Effort Model (Karau & Williams, 1993, 1995) has been developed to explain these moderators of social loafing.

Thus far, research on social loafing in songs has been limited. Jackson and Padgett (1982) evaluated the qualitative effort and creativity level of 162 Beatles songs written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney. Consistent with social loafing theory, researchers predicted that lower author identification (i.e., shared authorship) would result in less effort, and thereby lower quality and popularity, than individually authored songs. The findings indicated that after 1966, songs written individually were higher in quality and more popular on the charts than songs written together. The pattern was reversed pre-1967, whereby solo-authored songs were less likely to be selected as singles and did not perform as well on the charts as dual-authored songs. Jackson and Padgett (1982) suggest that as McCartney and Lennon grew apart, their reduced cohesiveness and varying viewpoints could have created a desire for greater individuality, producing an opportunity for social loafing. In another study, Simonton (2000) found that operas were more successful when composers wrote their own libretti compared to when librettist and composers worked together.

While instances of individual creativity are prevalent in society, there are also instances of teams working together to create exceptional outcomes (Amabile, 1996; Csikszentmihályi, 1990). As previously reviewed, the literature for creative songwriting outcomes for team and individual efforts is mixed. The current study investigates possible social loafing within the music industry using the *Billboard* rankings from 1955 to 2009. We predicted a null effect with respect to the popularity of individual versus team written top *Billboard* songs. While social loafing may occur within teams of songwriters, some teams may produce better songs together than individuals writing alone.

## Method

### Data Collection

The *Billboard* number one songs for each year from 1955-2000 were identified from the book *Top 1000 Singles 1955-2000* (Whitburn, 2001). The number one songs for the remaining years 2001-2009 were obtained from the *Billboard* annual reports. Song titles, songwriter, and the year each song was number one on the charts were collected. *Billboard* songs are ranked based on sales and radio air play success, thus *Billboard* was determined to be a representative selection of popular music across time in America. Songs were categorized as written by a single songwriter or a group of songwriters (more than two).

## Results

To determine if single songwriters or teams of songwriters produced more number one *Billboard* songs, we found that 29 (52.73%) of the top *Billboard* hits between 1955 and 2009 were written by individuals and 26 (47.27%) were written by groups. This difference was not statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 55) = .16, p = .69, \phi = .05$ . Of those songs written by groups, 14 (53.85%) were written by two songwriters, 5 (19.23%) were written by three songwriters, 5 (19.23%) were written by four songwriters, and 2 (7.69%) were written by six songwriters.

## Discussion

In line with predictions, neither individually nor team written songs were consistently at the top of the annual *Billboard* charts. Individuals or groups may create musical hits and social loafing in groups may occur in certain situations, but not always. It is also interesting to note that pairs are the most common type of team creating popular hits in the USA. Collectively, 78% of the top *Billboard* songs were written by individuals or pairs. It is exceedingly rare to have large groups of individuals working together on a song that becomes popular. While these archival results are interesting, we do acknowledge the limitations of the current study.

We recognize that a portion of the credits of the top *Billboard* hit songs may not reflect the real contribution of all parties involved in the creation of the song. In some instances, names may be included that had little or nothing to do with the creative songwriting process. For example, many of the jointly written John Lennon and Paul McCartney Beatles songs were actually individually written, but the songwriters made a deal to be co-authors on all

their music at an early age (Jackson & Padgett, 1982; Petrie, Pennebaker, & Sivertsen, 2008). In other instances, names may have been excluded for personal or business reasons.

In order to really understand the social psychological process of songwriting, each individual case could be individually studied since the creative process of songwriting is influenced by many factors (McIntyre, 2008), including the social context (Etzkorn, 1963). While songs may be written in groups, a group leader may have had greater control over the final product than other members. Petrie, Pennebaker, and Sivertsen (2008) analyzed the Beatles' lyrics and provided additional information about individual and team songwriting differences of Lennon, McCartney, and Harrison. When comparing the style and content of lyrics, researchers found that McCartney was the most varied and least redundant of the solo songwriters and McCartney's lyrics tended to be the most intellectually and lyrically complex. However, Lennon may have had the greatest influence on the other songwriters in the band. Songs co-written by Lennon and McCartney reflected Lennon's style more than McCartney's style in terms of linguistic similarities in the lyrics, and Lennon's influence was also quite apparent in Harrison's songwriting. These effects are important in determining how groups function in the songwriting process, despite the fact that all the details of the songwriting process are rarely available.

We recognize the current findings may be limited to the present sample of top U.S. *Billboard* hits with respect to culture and genre of music. In the U.S., individual contributions are highly valued compared to other cultures. For example, Gabrenya, Wang, and Latané (1985) had American and Chinese participants listen to auditory tones individually and in pairs, and count the number of times the tone pattern was heard. Results indicated that Chinese students were less likely to socially loaf, and were more likely to socially strive, whereas the American students engaged in a greater degree of social loafing. Similarly, individuals in collectivist cultures may engage in more group songwriting and work better together than individuals in individualist cultures, such as the United States. In addition, Snibbe and Markus (2005) investigated how socioeconomic status (SES) influences agency and decision making using music lyrics as a cultural . High SES participants, operationalized as a college education, preferred rock music and low SES participants, operationalized as a high school education or less, preferred country music. Analyzed rock song lyrics showcased themes of independence, agency, and social influence whereas country music lyrics expressed themes of resisting influence, fitting in, and personal integrity. Based on these findings, further investigation of the SES of songwriters and an exploration of different genres of music, including rock and country in particular, may yield interesting insights into social loafing tendencies in the song writing process.

As music and songwriting become more of a business, more individuals may specialize in words or music or understanding the wants and needs of the market. In a related study, Simonton (2004) investigated the group creativity process in filmmaking. Motion pictures are such a large undertaking that many individuals with specific sets of creative abilities are required for the film's success. Special award ceremonies, such as the Academy Awards, recognize outstanding achievements in several distinct movie making areas, including acting, directing, costume, sound, and editing. These categories correspond with the four creative clusters identified by Simonton (2004): dramatic, technical, visual, and musical. The dramatic and visual clusters were determined to have an additive effect on the film's impact, and the dramatic cluster played the primary role in this distinction. Music and the art of creating hit songs are evolving and may require extra areas of expertise in the future.

In conclusion, the creative process of songwriting may or may not benefit from group members working together. Both individuals and teams are equally likely of creating the next top *Billboard* hit in America.

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