The Power of Music for Farabi:
A Case Study as to Gender

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Abstract

Abu Nasr Farabi focuses on influence of the music on emotions and emotional problems including extreme emotions and moods. But how effective is music in changing a specific emotional issue? This essay reports what is probably the first scientific study of the effect of music on a precise extreme mood. Using a randomized experiment, we measure how a music affects sexism. More specifically, the experiment measures the extent to which a piece of music that we have created weakens the belief among some Muslims that women are not as suitable as men for positions of chairmanship. We find that the music reduces sexism by 22.48 percent, compared to a control treatment that presents the same argument and story verbally. Results, moreover, indicate that prejudice against women is not an inherent feature of Islam and is rather a function of the descriptive beliefs that prevail in some Islamic societies regarding women's capabilities.

Keywords: Farabi, music, gender, emotions, women

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*There is more power in rock music, videos, blue jeans, fast food,
news networks and TV satellites than in the entire Red Army.*
Régis Debray — 1986

Introduction

Farabi, a philosopher of 9th and 10th century, strongly believes in the influence of the music and music therapy. The logical place to start is with an account of Farabi's society. Farabi's society (al-madīnat al-fāḍila), literally means the excellent state. Farabi designs a hierarchical society consisting of five levels, first of which belongs to the philosopher (fīlsūf) or the prophet (nabī). The second rank includes 'carriers of the religion' who are music composers, poets, preachers, orators, writers and so on. (Farabi 2004: 54-55) There is a shared task between the first two ranks which is the translation of intellectual concepts into imaginable forms in order to make them understandable for the public. The philosopher, on the first level, uses allegories to render the intelligible into imaginable and it is this regard towards the public that makes him the prophet. The artists' duty, on the second level includes, but is not limited to, the same task of simplification of intellectual concepts. This is what makes them the 'carriers of religion'. An interpretation of Farabi's discussions on philosopher, prophet and utopian society could lead to the notion that religion is nothing but the artistic creation of the philosopher, a product which tends to approximate the public to the intellectual truth. (Maftouni 2007)

However, the crucial issue is how can we measure Farabi's theory? That is, for example how does music actually affect extreme moods and emotions?

In 2007, Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri asserted that "We are in a media battle for the hearts and minds of our umma [community] of Muslims" (Rogan 2007, 89). And that battle they largely won. Using elaborately crafted music videos, films, and pictures, an offshoot of Al-Qaeda, ISIS, succeeded in recruiting tens of thousands of fighters from around the world (Fernandez 2015, 1). The use of art to further political goals dates back to antiquity. The Behistun Inscription (c. 515 BC) dramatizing the ascendance of Darius I to the Persian Empire's throne is regarded by many historians as a pioneering example of political art (Nagle 2009, p. 133). A few centuries later, the Antonine Wall was built not only to physically, but also psychologically deter enemy from attacking south. Sculpted images that sought to depict Rome's superiority over native Scottish tribes were periodically embedded into the wall at strategic locations (Archaeology 2019).

But how effective is music in changing extreme moods and preferences? Despite its significance and age-old use, we need to measure the effect of music on emotions. The question of how exactly a piece of music influence moods and views is largely unexplored. While there is a wealth of studies conducted on the determinants of preferences and on art, the connection between the two seems neglected in the literature of various fields that deal either with the dependent or independent variable

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of this question. In respect of political moods and emotions, a search for "music" or "the effect of music on politics" in relevant outlets, e.g. American Political Science Review, *American Journal of Political Science*, Annual Review of Sociology, and American Sociological Review, returns no relevant results.

There is no question that music has been used throughout history with the *intention* of influencing people's moods and preferences. New methods of research, however, have not been employed to study the subject. It is not clear whether conveying the same message using artistic mediums, as opposed to for example plainly expressing it or including it in textbooks, is more effective in changing ideas. Furthermore, the fact that such artworks were often created in periods, in which there were already social and political movements that supported their creation raises the probability of endogeneity.

This paper reports what is probably the first scientific study of the effect of music on emotions and preferences. Using a randomized experiment, we measure how a music affects sexism. More specifically, the experiment measures the extent to which a piece of music that we have created weakens the belief among some Muslims that women are not as suitable as men for positions of chairmanship. we find that the music reduces sexism by 22.48 percent, compared to a control treatment that presents the same argument and story verbally.

The importance of music as a stimulus goes beyond effectiveness, however. Equally important is its ability to outperform other stimuli in the competition for people's attention. Human brain has a limited attentive capacity. We can pay attention to a very small fraction of all the sensory stimuli and information available to us at any point in time (Druckman and Lupia 2016).

This means that, for all their merits, most studies of moods and preferences are of little value beyond the study setting. No matter how successfully a stimulus can change moods and preferences in scientific research, nothing can be inferred about its capacity to do so in the real world. Because in most studies, people's time is virtually monopolized by the prompt. The researcher, RA, or canvasser gets them to pay attention to the treatment, and hence not to the infinitely many available alternatives. In everyday life, by contrast, each moment of an individual's time is subject to fierce competition by the myriad stimuli that vie for her attention. A prompt that by current measures is assumed to change the moods and preferences of a given percentage of people could be buried under its more entertaining rivals and change nothing.

In addition to introducing a research agenda of its own, this study contributes to existing work on the determinants of political, social, and religious moods and preferences (e.g. Akerlof & Kranton 2010, Kinder & Kam 2010, Monroe et al. 2000, Transue 2007; Bolsen et al. 2014). Although there is a rich literature that empirically investigates the causes of preferences, it seems to have totally neglected the role of music.

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Our findings also relate to the literature on the sociology of art. Current studies either take art as the dependent variable or do not make a clear distinction between the dependent and independent variable under analysis (Deinhard 1970; Becker 1982; Quemin 2006; Nakajima 2012). There is, moreover, a dearth of empirical evidence for hypotheses raised in this literature. We take music as the independent variable and ask how it affects social norms.

The experiment speaks, moreover, to the vast literatures on political history and the history of art. It is usually taken for granted that throughout history certain art forms have been employed to influence societies and alter the course of events. Works by Sergei Eisenstein and movies and paintings produced under Joseph Goebbels are often considered paradigmatic cases (Hull 1969). There is, however, little scientific evidence for the claim that music has a causal effect on political emotions and society.

Last but not least, the findings contribute to the literature on Islam and the relation between Islamic teachings and attitudes to gender (Ross 2008; Alesina et al 2011; Jamal et al. 2019; Jamal and Milner 2019). The extent to which prejudice against women can be attributed to belief in Islam has long been a subject of controversy. The treatment used in the study illustrates scientific facts orthogonal to Islamic teachings. It does not alter people's faith. Thus, our findings demonstrate that prejudice against women does not result from Islam, but rather from unscientific beliefs about men and women's relative capacities.

Literature

Many factors are known to influence emotions, moods, and preferences. Politicization, for example, is identified among the determinants of political preferences. When respondents are given the same information, but preceded by a politicization prime that states, "It is increasingly difficult for nonexperts to evaluate science," opinion moves in the opposite direction to what it had been absent the prime (Bolsen et al. 2014).

There are also multiple strands of literature that show that identification with a social group directly affects political, social, and economic moods and preferences (e.g. Akerlof & Kranton 2010, Kinder & Kam 2010, Monroe et al. 2000, Transue 2007). Nationality, family, ethnicity, race, gender, religion, and partisanship are among identities with significant impact. The impact of racial and ethnic identities is, moreover, conditioned by one's economic status (Chong & Kim 2006). Surprisingly enough, identity plays a role even when it is made up, temporary, and subjects know that it was made up a few minutes ago (Tajfel 1970).

Determinants of prejudice against women have in particular been the subject of scrutiny. Some have studied whether prejudice against women stems from belief in Islam (Ross 2008; Jamal et al. 2019; Jamal and Milner 2019). Ross argues that oil, not Islam, is the source of women's diminished participation in the labor force (2008). A particularly interesting finding is that societies that did not rely on the plough

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agriculture are more likely to favor a traditional division of labor among genders (Boserup 1970; Alesina et al 2011).

For all their merits, however, most of these studies have a major limitation. They offer little policy advice. Most determinants of identity, e.g. race, are not sufficiently malleable to be influenced by the policy maker. And those that are malleable, e.g. religion, appear to be mostly forged in adolescence and young adulthood (Sapiro 2004, pp. 11, 13; Van Deth et al. 2011; Niemi & Jennings 1991). Some determinants may change but largely due to factors outside the government's control (Shrestha 2006; Huddy 2003). And those that can in principle be fashioned by the government, e.g. economic status, have proved notoriously hard to manipulate.

In this respect, existing theories of the determinants of moods and preferences are the political equivalent of economic theories of development that attribute growth to geography, history, or natural endowments. An underdeveloped country cannot change its agrarian history or wish its oil resources away. As Pritchett, Sen, and Werker (2017) put it succinctly, the policy advice gleaned from such theories is "get yourself a good history rather than the bad one you seem to have suffered; this may be truthful but not quite the helpful advice to nations that are trying not to fail".

Music stands in stark contrast to hitherto identified factors. Expressing messages using this medium is an efficient, and cost effective, way to mold the emotions, moods, and preferences of society. Unlike most other determinants, which can take generations to change, a piece of music usually takes no more than months to make and hours to watch.

Experiment

The experiment was implemented in summer 2020. Subjects were self-identified observant Muslims. A survey was administered prior to the treatment. The same survey was conducted afterwards again. The questionnaire contained one question which asked the respondents about the extent of their agreement with the following statement.

Women are less suitable than men for positions of chairmanship.

Opinion was measured using the Likert scale as

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Indifferent
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

The treatment was a piece of music we have created. Participants in the active treatment were shown the music. The control group was given a text that expressed the argument and the story that formed the music. The theme was as follows.

Competence is not an innate feature predictable by one's gender. Many acquired factors affect whether someone is competent in any area, including chairmanship. For

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example, language is an important vehicle of competence. People seem more intelligent, capable, and powerful depending on which language they use and their command of the language.

61 people participated in the study. The table below shows the summary of the results.

	Control	Treatment
Avg. Opinion Before	0.148 (0.327)	0.529 (0.277)
Avg. Opinion After	0.037 (0.322)	− 0.705 (0.213)
Avg. Change in Opinion	− 0.111 (0.061)	− 1.235 (0.184)
Avg. Treatment Effect	− 1.124 (0.033)	

Answer choices on the questionnaire are coded as

Strongly disagree	− 2
Disagree	− 1
Indifferent	0
Agree	1
Strongly agree	2

Support for the statement declined by 1.124. Given that the coded responses range from − 2 to 2, the normalized average treatment effect is 0.2248, or 22.48 percent.

The results confirm that the medium of music has a meaningful impact on the moods and preferences of Muslims. Self-identified observant Muslims tend to oppose the view that women are less suitable than men for positions of chairmanship, after exposure to a piece of music that illustrates that competence is conditioned by language not gender. Note that the average opinion before and after exposure to the treatment is − 0.705 and 0.529 respectively. That is, not only did support for the prejudiced statement decline upon exposure, sentiments flipped from supportive on average to opposing on average. Subjects in the control group, which was exposed to a verbal treatment that expressed the same argument and story as in the music, exhibit significantly less change (from 0.148 to 0.037).

Discussion
Farabi designs a hierarchical society consisting of five levels, first of which belongs to the philosopher or the prophet. The second rank includes 'carriers of the religion' who are preachers, orators, poets, music composers, writers and so on. There is a

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shared task between the first two ranks which is the translation of intellectual concepts into imaginable forms in order to make them understandable for the public. The philosopher, on the first level, uses allegories to render the intelligible into imaginable and it is this regard towards the public that makes him the prophet. The artists' duty, on the second level includes, but is not limited to, the same task of simplification of intellectual concepts. This is what makes them the 'carriers of religion'. An interpretation of Farabi's discussions on philosopher, prophet and utopia could lead to the notion that religion is nothing but the artistic creation of the philosopher, a product which tends to approximate the public to the intellectual truth.

Expressing the same argument in the language of music has a significantly higher effect on people's emotions and preferences. There are limits to the conclusions we can draw from the study, however. The sample size, for example, was relatively small. The length of the music was probably a limiting factor that discouraged some potential participants. The small sample size in turn reduced the power of the study. A variant of the study with a shorter music can perhaps attract a larger audience.

The long-term stability of the effect is another concern. Under the current study, it is not clear that the change in preferences will persist in the long run. Another experiment in which we remain in touch with subjects and survey them after longer periods of time can measure how the effect develops across time.

The extent to which prejudice against women can be attributed to belief in Islam has long been a subject of debate. The treatment used in the study illustrates scientific facts orthogonal to Islamic teachings. It does not alter people's faith. Thus, our findings also demonstrate that prejudice against women does not result from Islam, but rather from descriptive beliefs about men and women's relative capacities.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the experiment provides some evidence that music offers an instrument that enables policy makers to have a significant impact on society's moods and preferences. The benefits of the findings go beyond governments. Private actors, e.g. NGOs and music studios, that have values and pursue social goals in addition to profits can benefit from this research agenda and have an informed approach. Ideally, deciphering the formula of music can pave the way for establishing specific genres of music, which seeks to effect change using the all-powerful instrument of music.

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