Musical Guilty Pleasure: Modeling an Emotional Phenomenon

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Introduction

The term "guilty pleasure" contains several different understood meanings, and can be used to describe a multitude of different situations regarding musical taste. When someone asks you, "what song is a guilty pleasure of yours?", where does your mind go first? Do you attempt to anticipate what others may consider as correct examples of "guilty pleasure songs"? Perhaps you keep a collection of boy band CDs that were popular in your childhood, despite them not having any sort of critical acclaim today. Do you think of a song that you believe should be considered aesthetically substandard but you enjoy anyways? Consider the professional musicologist with scholarly work on common-practice era composers such as Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven who listens just as frequently to the music of DJ Skrillex. Perhaps you think of a specific song, or musician, or entire genre, that seemingly goes against your outward personality? It's possible that the avid fan of country music from the American deep south also happens to enjoy 1980s R&B music. Or perhaps you are reminded of a song that, for whatever reason, you associate with something truly sinful by your standards, though you can't help but still find pleasure in? For instance, someone of Jewish faith may not want to admit that Richard Wagner is their favorite composer, despite Wagner's personal antisemitic leanings. Then, regardless of what your guilty pleasure is or where your mind led you to first, what answer do you ultimately end up sharing?

These can all be considered examples of guilty pleasure by some standard. Though, it may not be fully accurate to categorize them all the same; perhaps guilt and pleasure manifest in different ways depending on the circumstances in order to create a unique emotional and

embodied experience. This study attempts to address this idea to help understand the different mechanisms of guilty pleasure induction within the musical experience.

Though past research has yet to produce a model for describing the emotional induction and experience of guilty pleasure through music, scholars in the field of psychology have attempted to further explain the phenomenon of guilt as an emotion and how it interacts with the feeling of pleasure in general contexts. One study offers a layered approach to how guilt levels and pleasure levels interact. Kelly Goldsmith et. al (2012) conducted multiple experiments that show how the activation of guilt can enhance positive valence and therefore cause more pleasure; participants who were primed to feel guilt were identified as showing a greater increase in pleasure among various activities. This likens guilty pleasure to a type of hedonic consumption. Thus, the higher the guilt, the higher potential and necessity for pleasure.

Other scholars have focused more on the specific origins of both guilt and pleasure, with studies that show how external factors are more likely to affect the feeling of guilty pleasure than the actual product or activity in question. Kris Goffin and Florian Cora (2019) conducted a study that attempted to uncover the source of guilt from a variety of guilty pleasure examples in various artistic mediums (music, books, films, television shows, etc.), which concluded that guilt was more often felt due to external sources from social, personal, or intersubjective reasons rather than strictly from the aesthetic properties of the art itself. Schulten (1987) and North (2010) found similar results when studying the phenomenon of musical preference, showing that the development of one's musical preferences are more likely affected by one's own social environment - their age, gender, and socio-economic status - rather than deriving from the aesthetic properties of the music.

Additional studies on the origins of guilt deal more specifically with the rationalization of guilty pleasure depending on the guilt's source. One such study comes from Elizabeth Dalevik (2022), who outlines three broad domains where feeling guilt for our aesthetic tastes can possibly be manifested - the *self*, the *social*, and the *moral*. Dalevik's argument is ultimately aimed at helping one understand if the guilty pleasure they feel is warranted in the first place, claiming that the guilt induced from the moral domain is the only type of guilt that is justifiable. Guilt justification within the guilty pleasure phenomenon has also been researched by scholar Kay Bussey (2020), whose chapter "Development of Moral Disengagement" from the Oxford Handbook of Moral Development describes eight specific categories, termed "moral disengagement mechanisms", that are used in situations of guilty pleasure in order to help exonerate oneself of feeling guilty for their actions.

Theories on emotion, specifically where emotions come from and how they are induced, have attempted to explain the multitude of different flavors of guilty pleasure by linking both guilt and pleasure to other primary emotions. Patrik Juslin (2013) draws upon basic emotion theory, the theory that there exists a small finite amount of primary emotions that are embedded and communicated from within the music, to present a model of seven distinct emotional mechanisms that attempts to explain the different types of emotions felt through music. According to Juslin, these emotional mechanisms work to form one's aesthetic judgment and can be used to explain someone's positive feelings about a piece of music, even if one also feels negative emotions along with it. Theodore Kemper (1987) uses emotion theory to describe guilt as a secondary emotion, based on the primary emotion of fear, drawing from ideas of incorporating both positivist and social constructionist accounts of emotion. He argues for two components within secondary emotions, where the first part is autonomic and also the foundation

of the more complex emotions. This is how, compared to a fully constructionist view, the number of possible emotions are limited, as it is dependent on the four suggested primaries (depression, satisfaction, fear, anger). The second component is socially and culturally constructed and dependent on learned situations or knowledge. It is argued that without the autonomic component "we would be dealing not with emotions but with cognitions only" (276), meaning that, without the primary emotion of fear, guilt would merely be an intellectual process and not an actual emotion.

The actual perception process of musical judgment and emotional induction has also been studied, focusing on the intuitive and intellectual elements of the listening experience. In his book "Sweet Anticipation" (2006), David Huron proposes a theory of the initial perception process that one undergoes when listening to music, specifically how it relates to one's expectations. He theorizes that there are five stages to the overall response one formulates to a piece of music, and the stages can be further divided into the larger groups of being an initial intuitive (internal) response and a further intellectual (external) response to the event. Though Huron's model is most suited to explain the phenomenon of surprise or anticipation within music, we also see a connection between this theory and how, or more specifically when, the emotion of fear is potentially induced in the listening process. This will be another central element to our theory.
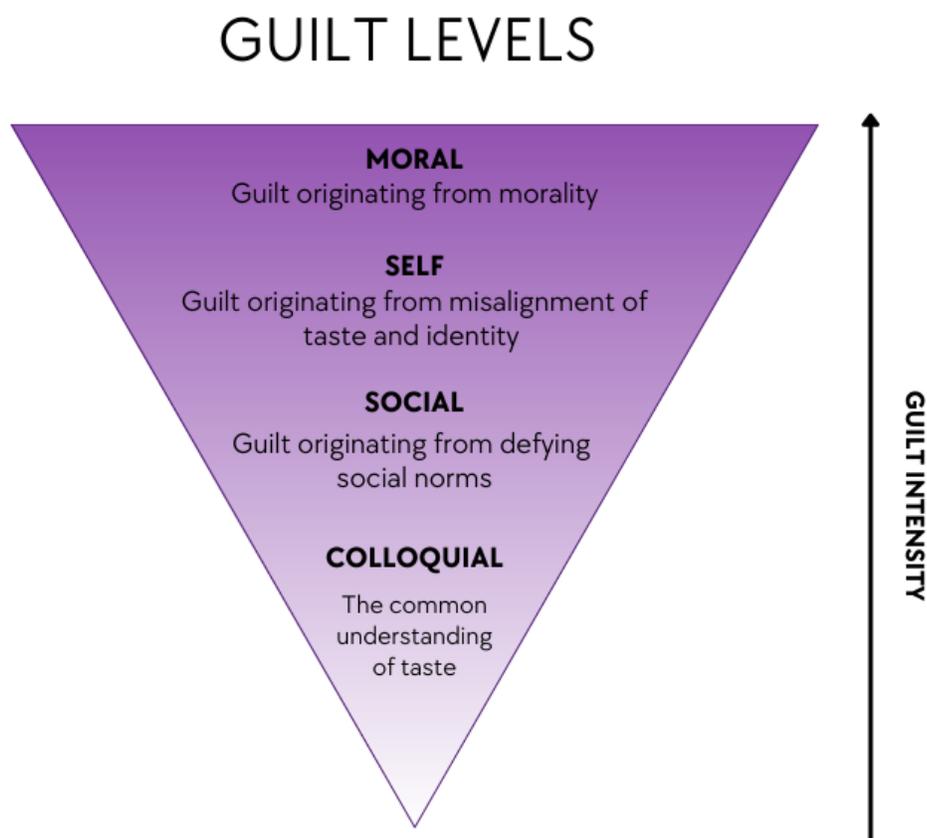
Four Levels of Guilty Pleasure

We draw upon the multiple studies and theories as previously mentioned to propose our own model on the different domains in which guilt may be manifested through music, how the level of the experienced guilt relates directly to its origin, and how the intensity level of guilty pleasure is affected by the listening environment. We propose a 4-level categorization,

comprising *colloquial, social, self,* and *moral*. The last three levels - social, self, and moral - are borrowed from Dalevik (2022) and her theory regarding the three different domains that guilty pleasure comes from. Unlike Dalevik, who argues that the moral domain is the only locale in which true guilty pleasure comes from, we opt for a more tiered approach, theorizing that the feeling of guilt becomes stronger through each different level, specifically within the music experience as a listener. Additionally, we have added the *colloquial* level, a level lower than the others, which functions as a commonly used label for guilty pleasure. This is especially pertinent when discussing the types of guilty pleasure that come from music specifically.

Figure 1
The four levels of guilty pleasure in order of intensity of guilt induced from each domain

GUILT LEVELS

MORAL
Guilt originating from morality

SELF
Guilt originating from misalignment of taste and identity

SOCIAL
Guilt originating from defying social norms

COLLOQUIAL
The common understanding of taste

GUILT INTENSITY

The primary emotion that guilt is considered to be built on is fear, and the other component is socially constructed influence regarding moral conduct. The intensity of guilt is dependent on how strong the autonomic component is. Kemper (1987) states that "guilt is a socialized response to arousal of the physiological conditions of fear" (263) and "that guilt is yoked, via association (as in classical conditioning) of social definitions and labels, with fear, and, to the extent that guilt is experienced as an emotion, it is the autonomic arousal associated with fear that makes guilt an emotional, as opposed to merely cognitive, experience" (276). This means that the experience of guilt as an emotion is weaker when it is not as strongly related to the foundation of fear, internalized as a survival mechanism.

There are different meanings of intellectuality and intuition that are important to this discussion. Intuition is not necessarily always biologically inherited, but knowledge manifested in the body. This embodied knowledge differs from knowledge manifested in the conscious or rational part of the brain. The aspect of social construction that lies within the complex emotion of fear includes what could be called intuitive knowledge, that is, subconsciously learned, whereas biological intuition could be described as autonomic.

The emotional paradox of guilty pleasure may also be affected by other factors, such as Bussey's (2020) "moral disengagement mechanisms". Different situations where guilty pleasure originates vary in levels of the specific emotions, both in terms of valence and arousal; however, the levels are also affected by mechanisms coming into play after the initial feeling of guilt. The mechanisms' primary function is to exonerate or reduce the amount of guilt felt in a certain situation. The types of disengagement mechanisms that we see applicable to musical contexts are *euphemistic labeling, diffusion or displacement of responsibility, moral justification, and distortion/minimization of consequences.*

Figure 2
Types of Moral Disengagement Mechanisms (from Bussey, 2020)

DISENGAGEMENT MECHANISMS

EUPHEMISTIC LABELING
Sanitizing reprehensible conduct into more acceptable behavior

MORAL JUSTIFICATION
Justifying the rightness of one's behavior to oneself

DISTORTION OF CONSEQUENCES
Denying the effects of the behavior

DIFFUSION OF RESPONSIBILITY
Group decision making is used to obscure responsibility from immoral behavior

DISPLACEMENT OF RESPONSIBILITY
Attributing responsibility for the behavior to another person or group

Depending on the contextual scenario, as well as the internal processes of an individual, the intensity levels of both guilt and pleasure can vary. We consider the potential variance of guilt felt based on the actual listening environment. The four levels we propose are therefore considered in three different social scenarios. The first scenario is experienced with a single listener in a context of privacy, (i.e. alone), the second scenario is experienced in a group setting with others who knowingly share the enjoyment of the music with the listener, and the third scenario is experienced in a group setting with others whose musical tastes are unknown. These scenarios are labeled A, B, and C in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Three different listening scenarios used in context of each of the four levels
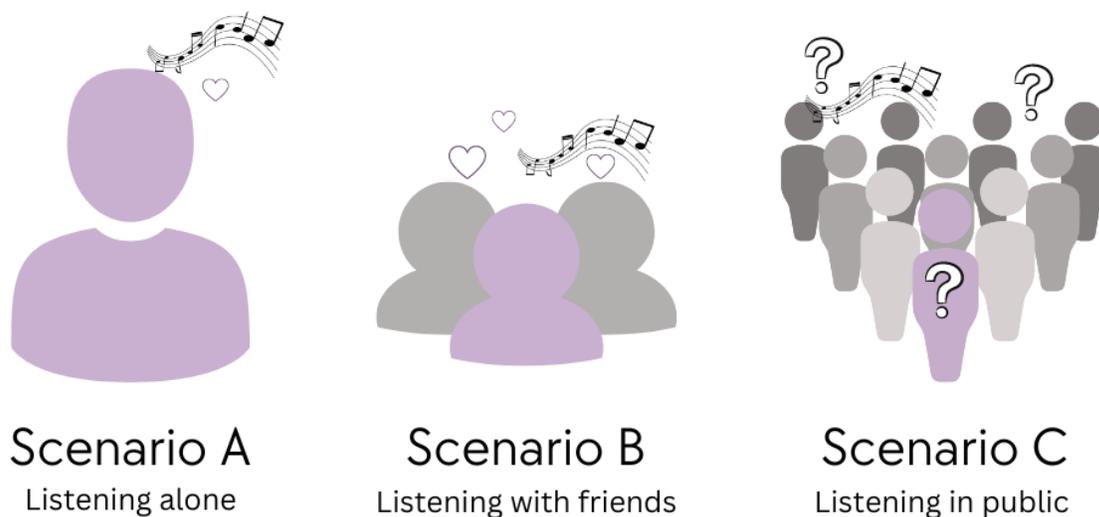
Colloquial Level

Our lowest level of musical guilty pleasure, where we theorize that guilt is ultimately felt the least, is what we consider to be the *colloquial* level. This is the level where the actual definition of a guilty pleasure comes into question. It is named for the supposed colloquial understanding of what a guilty pleasure may be, despite it being a rather different definition from how other, more guilt-induced levels operate. The aforementioned 2019 study by Goffin and Cora revealed, perhaps indirectly, the multitude of different conceptions that the general public has for what can be considered a "guilty pleasure". Their first experiment allowed participants to name one of their self-reported guilty pleasures among any work of art (music, T.V. show, book, etc.). Without conforming to a single definition, participants' questionnaire responses provided widely varying reasons for feeling guilty pleasure; several claimed to hardly feel any negative emotions at all when asked about their feelings towards their example. This shows that there is a broader, rather unspoken, colloquial understanding to what a "guilty pleasure" is, even if it doesn't align

with containing some element of a struggle between feeling bad and feeling good, as the name "guilty pleasure" suggests. This perpetuates the idea that there is some sort of "guilty pleasure genre" that contains things that people generally consider to be embarrassing but find enjoyable, at least to some degree.

A common response when asked the initial question "what is a guilty pleasure song of yours?" may be to think "what answer can I give that would be recognized as a guilty pleasure to others?". In that vein, there appears to be a common understanding of what "guilty pleasure music" is, even if no personal guilt is actually experienced. An interesting case can be found within the world's most popular music streaming service, Spotify, and their own corporate curated playlist titled "Guilty Pleasures" (see link in References). The public playlist consists of 150 songs, nearly 10 hours of music, and to this day has over 3.3 million follows. Nearly all of the 150 songs can be grouped into three large categories: female vocalist/female led group (ex. Celine Dion, Dolly Parton, Paula Abdul, Ashlee Simpson, Spice Girls, etc.), Top 40 Pop with a female target audience (Backstreet Boys, S Club 7, *NSYNC, Aaron Carter, etc.), and songs with meme status whose reputation or usage is tied to an external, perhaps comical, meaning that goes beyond the initial intention of the song (Rick Astley, Nickelback, Darude, Village People, etc.). Several songs fall into more than one of these categories.

It is particularly noteworthy that this playlist, and as an extension the colloquial definition of a guilty pleasure, seems to revolve heavily around that which is considered "feminine". This is observed to be true outside the realm of music as well; in a 2021 study by Vudu.com that attempted to list the most common guilty pleasures among Americans, typical feminine entities such as romance novels, "chick flicks", reality television, social media, and even the act of shopping were all common answers to people's guilty pleasures. On the other hand, entities and

hobbies that are seen as more masculine; rock n' roll, sports, gaming, etc.; do not seem to fall within the confines of typical guilty pleasures. This study also found that "listening to the music you listened to as a kid as an adult" was a common guilty pleasure, reinforcing another aspect of the colloquial definition of guilty pleasure music, that being music that was once culturally relevant but is no longer. What this means, then, is that many people may use other external, social parameters outside of their own emotions to consider whether or not something may be a guilty pleasure. Though additional experiments and analyses would be needed to test the confines of this generalized "guilty pleasure genre" more specifically, we have initially found that, within music, such confines can generally be defined as music with either a marked feminine quality, once culturally popular aimed at a female audience, or an external comical meaning.

Below are some real-world scenarios that reflect this level of guilty pleasure in order to discuss how the mechanisms of guilty pleasure may play out. For a musical example to use in our three scenarios, we have identified a song that seems to fit all three categories of the colloquial definition of a musical guilty pleasure: "Oops! I Did It Again" by Britney Spears, released in the year 2000. The song has a female lead vocalist, is culturally popular with a female target audience, and has gained external comical meaning beyond its original intent. We surmise that this song accurately represents an example of what is colloquially considered a "guilty pleasure".

Scenario 1a: Someone who admits the song "Oops! I Did It Again" by Britney Spears is a guilty pleasure of theirs willingly listening to the song while alone.

Scenario 1b: This same person listens to the same song with a group of people who have

identified, in one way or another, that they also enjoy the song.

Scenario 1c: This same person hears this song in public around other people whose

enjoyment of the song is unknown.

Unlike the following levels, we theorize that this level of guilty pleasure contains little difference between the three given scenarios. This is because guilt, in this context, is not defined by one's actual emotion, but rather by a societal norm that merely labels this particular body of music as "guilty pleasure" music. Regarding the moment in which any potential guilt is felt in the perception process, then, we believe that guilt would only come from an intellectual process of comparing the music to this societal norm, and no actual guilt would be felt intuitively in the listening experience. This severely weakens the intensity of the guilty pleasure feeling, if any is even felt at all. The pleasure that one may receive from listening to this song could potentially be explained through Juslin's (2014) emotional mechanism of "episodic memory", linked to nostalgia, where the music reminds the listener of a past positive experience or feeling. This emotional mechanism likely has a lot to do with feeling pleasure from music in this vein, and can work to mitigate any guilt.

    When considering different types of disengagement mechanisms as described by Bussey (2020), the one relevant to this colloquial level is *euphemistic labeling*. Euphemistic labeling mitigates the sense of guilt by projecting a diminishing view on the origin of that emotion. The situation, and in this case the music, could for example easily be dismissed as a joke; in other words, there is an element of irony to liking such music, and the shared understanding of this

irony allows the listener to feel less guilty. Therefore, we anticipate any potential feeling of guilt in each of these three scenarios to essentially be relinquished through the use of this mechanism.

In defining guilty pleasure at the colloquial level, there exists no actual requirement for the emotions that one feels, as the commonly understood "guilty pleasure genre" has its own defined boundaries. In cases of higher levels of guilty pleasure, though, we believe that there must exist a degree to which someone genuinely enjoys the music in question, and also a degree to which they, in reality, feel a reason for why they should not enjoy it. This would predictably come with a mix of positive emotional valence; the pleasure one gets from the music; and negative emotional valence; feeling bad about enjoying the music for any given reason. Therefore, a more comprehensive definition of guilty pleasure can be described as a paradox of two conflicting emotions: enjoyment, and feeling bad about said enjoyment. Both sides need to be present to a considerable degree in order to constitute the presence of guilty pleasure. This definition was also reached by Goffin & Cora (2019) after their unsuccessful first experiment, and used this definition in order to gather more definitive results for their subsequent experiments. Although there are multiple different existing conceptions of what a guilty pleasure truly is, we believe this definition is sufficient for our purposes to consider any possible example in the preceding levels, as it identifies the emotional embodiment of guilty pleasure that the colloquial level does not.

Social Level

The second level of musical guilty pleasure in our theory is what we call the *social* level. According to Dalevik (2022), guilty pleasure in the social domain arises from the act of going against social norms, or what society deems "acceptable", where one's pleasures work against one's ultimate desire to socially fit in. In the case of a piece of music, this would require that

there exists some shared idea of certain music that is socially acceptable, and certain music that is socially unacceptable. While there are specific contexts to where this is unequivocally true, does there exist a universal, consistent line that separates the socially appropriate from the inappropriate in music? There may very well be a commonly shared understanding of this, having to do with the musical properties themselves.

A case could possibly be made that emotions of pleasure and guilt stem solely from aesthetic characteristics found directly within the music itself. Though there are many facets to this argument of where guilty pleasure originates from, the most obvious example of this idea is that there exists such a category of "bad music" that is commonly understood among the general public, and that liking a piece of music that falls under such parameters would constitute the feeling of guilty pleasure. This would mean feeling bad about liking a piece of music because it itself is aesthetically "bad". Although similar in some respect to the less intense colloquial level of musical guilty pleasure, in that both seem to follow societal rules for what can be considered a guilty pleasure, the difference is that the rules for what determine the colloquial definition of guilty pleasure do not originate from the musical structure, whereas the rules that determine what is musically bad, incorrect, and socially unacceptable come from aspects directly within the music. Unlike the more colloquial understanding of guilty pleasures, we argue that the social level allows for a stronger paradox of emotions to occur, seeing as one would actively be going against a definition that they themselves adhere to of what is aesthetically "good" and "bad", not simply what is silly, unsophisticated, or feminine.

In his essay "What is Bad Music?" from the 2004 collection of essays entitled "Bad Music: The Music We Love To Hate", socio-musicologist Simon Firth explains the phenomenon of the general public's seemingly unified definition of what "bad music" is, saying that defining

what bad music is has become a necessary part of fandom, and something that can help one enjoy their favorite music even more knowing that they are on the "right" side of musical quality and competency (Firth, 2001). According to Firth, there are three components that people generally desire when listening to music: truth, taste, and intelligence. Therefore, if one of these three components is obviously missing or violated to the average listener's perception, the music is considered "bad", and by extension "socially unacceptable". To that end, Firth identifies several conventions of bad music that the public has more or less agreed upon, with two broad categories stemming from the music itself: musical incompetence and overly-formulaic production.

For musical incompetency to be understood, just like there exists a generally understood line between what is socially acceptable and unacceptable, there also seemingly exists a line between what is musically "correct" and musically "incorrect". Some parameters are as basic as intonation, clarity, rhythmic accuracy, and tempo steadiness, with some more advanced parameters being harmonic motion, formal structure, instrumental conventionality, and some amount of performer virtuosity. A study by Cuddy, et al. (1981) showed that both musically trained and untrained listeners are able to identify rules of melodic, harmonic, and metric convention to a degree, even if the untrained listener only understands it in a purely referential (rather than structural) context. We can argue that following these so-called norms of musical competency correlate to what is considered a social norm in this medium.

Overly-formulaic production deals with music that contains little to no felt creativity or performer idiosyncrasy by the listener. When a listener is able to identify when a piece of music is using the same musical formula as other pieces of music - same sounding basic beat, same chord progression, same instrumental timbre/function/feature, etc. - they may take it as an act of

fraud by the musician due to their lack of creating something new, and may also take it as an insult to their intelligence as a consumer. Firth mentions the contradiction this effect has between commercial and noncommercial music, giving an example of how the similarities among 1970s disco songs is a sign of bad formulaic production, whereas the similarities among shape-note music of early American settlers is a sign of strong roots that helped create a common culture. As we will discuss further, we perceive a noticeable difference between the potential for feeling guilt from liking commercial music vs. noncommercial music in modern day, with commercial music being more likely to induce guilt. All that said, what happens when someone likes a piece of music that doesn't follow these accepted norms of musical properties and production?

A common situation today that presents an example of the social level of guilty pleasure being activated is when one is "passed the aux cord" and asked to choose music to listen to in the given setting, typically during a car ride or a house party. When one is given this opportunity, the others present in this setting seemingly expect a choice that is within a standard of social norms and does not go against the common ground of what is musically "bad". What happens if the person choosing the music really wants to listen to something that they are afraid may go against these norms, and would therefore feel guilty about liking? A further question, one more pertinent to this study, is how the level of guilt may change depending on the specific setting?

For this scenario, let us imagine someone playing a track from the album "Philosophy of the World" by The Shaggs. Released in 1969, this album has garnered a reputation of being perhaps the worst album ever recorded, being voted as such by Rolling Stone magazine in a 1980 issue (Rolling Stone has since called it one of the greatest "One-Album Wonders" in a 2016 issue). The music on this album upholds nearly every convention that defines the term "bad music"; out-of-tune guitar, out-of-time drums, wayward melodic lines, melodic and harmonic

disconnection, unsophisticated childish lyrical content, no instrumental virtuosity, and a sameness in texture, form, and sound production across the entire album.

Scenario 2a: Someone is driving in the car alone and "Philosophy of the World" by the Shaggs comes on the radio.

Scenario 2b: This same person is in the passenger seat of a car with people who are known to enjoy The Shaggs, and puts on a song from "Philosophy of the World".

Scenario 2c: This same person is in the passenger seat of a car with people they only just met and decides to put on "Philosophy of the World".

In exploring the *social* level, it would be appropriate to consider other disengagement mechanisms than discussed before. Here we turn to the *distortion of consequences* mechanism by minimizing, ignoring, or denying the potential result. In a group scenario we also ought to consider the mechanism labeled as *diffusion of responsibility*, which obscures individual responsibility by partaking in a collective behavior. (Bussey, 2020).

For scenario 2a, we expect only a low level of guilt to be felt. Since guilt in this domain comes from not adhering to social norms, if one is not in a social situation, there is no fear about going against what is expected, since no one is present to hold you accountable. This constitutes the *distortion of consequences* mechanism, as it allows you to experience the pleasure without fearing the consequence of being outcast for liking music that others consider "bad".

The result of scenario 2b is likely similar to 2a, despite the change in social setting. In this case, one is able to use the *diffusion of responsibility* mechanism by rationalizing that, since others find pleasure in this music too, the guilt does not need to rest solely on a singular person's

shoulders, and can instead be broken up and shared collectively. This in turn diminishes the level of guilt that any one person feels in this situation.

Scenario 2c, however, is more likely to induce guilt. The *diffusion of responsibility* mechanism is less effective here, since there is nowhere evident within the setting to displace one's feeling of responsibility for their musical taste. According to Huron's (2006) theory of the process of perception, part of the reaction response at the intuitive stage is always being ready for the worst case scenario as a survival mechanism. Therefore, this would psychologically make a person expect the worst case scenario when not knowing the musical tastes of others. Since one would likely expect the worst case scenario in this realm of uncertainty, then there would exist some tangible fear for one's taste not aligning with the others, who are assuming to be operating under the social norms of what is musically "good" and "bad". In fact, due to the high level of guilt felt in this scenario, we expect that such a scenario would be highly unlikely to actually occur in real life, given that the subject would not willingly put themselves through this amount of fear.

This facet of guilty pleasure seems very plausible, and may indeed be the most obvious facet that one considers when first attempting to name their guilty pleasures in music. However, there exists an issue here that prevents the actual feeling of guilt from reaching any significant level. This is the fact that, despite a seemingly unified understanding of what "bad music" is, it is impossible to set a universal measurement to determine what is musically "right" from what is musically "wrong", therefore one is not actually going against any definite boundary when feeling bad about liking something because it itself is aesthetically "bad". Philosopher Mélissa Thériault (2017) argues that the phenomenon of akrasia, or the act of knowingly going against one's better judgment in order to choose an alternative, does not actually exist when it comes to

enjoying works of art, given that we have no tangible guidelines to base the quality of one's aesthetic judgment on. This weakens the effect of guilt that comes purely from social norms. There is no such thing as being aesthetically "bad" from a universal point of view. Several past studies have pointed to the idea that the layperson often operates in "aesthetic nihilism", which is the belief that one's taste is neither correct nor incorrect (Goffin & Cora, 2019). As aesthetic nihilists, we ultimately do not actually believe in upholding a definition of good and bad art, and may only use those definitions when it conveniently aligns with our tastes, to signal our fandom, or to confirm our identity (as discussed in the next level).

Since the definition of "bad music" is ultimately a social construct and not an actual truth, the feeling of guilt on this level comes from a socially learned process rather than an autonomous process. Though one may be able to intuitively feel if a piece of music is good or bad by common standards, this is something that has been externally conditioned, and still carries with it an intellectual understanding of these standards. Concerning the actual moment when guilt is felt in the perception process, the guilt still comes from an external, intellectual association between the music and an outside definition that one needs to be consciously aware of. In this case, one's actual intuition is not responsible for inducing guilt, which is ultimately what weakens this level of guilty pleasure.

Self Level

The *self* level, the third tier of our theory in musical guilty pleasure induction, is where one feels guilt due to their musical tastes going against their outward personality and identity. Dalevik (2022) explains this domain through the idea that we each have an "aesthetic self" (from Fingerhut, et al. 2021) that is tied to our likes and dislikes. The theory is that we attempt to mold this aesthetic self to signal our identity to others, as well as to find like-minded groups that match

our own aesthetic self. So, should one of our personal pleasures not align with the aesthetic self we attempt to portray, this causes a feeling of guilty pleasure.

While guilty pleasure from the colloquial level deals with fully external societal norms, and guilty pleasure from the social level deals with more specific musical norms, guilty pleasure from the self level deals mostly with the categorization of broader musical genres. This corresponds with the categories of different cultures, lifestyles, and by extension "aesthetic selves" that one ultimately chooses to identify and belong with. Though some aspects of one's culture are given by default—age, race, class, etc.—other aspects within our Western society can be chosen, which is where the aesthetic self lies—fashion, hobbies, location, and, of course, music. When it comes to defining our aesthetic self, taste in musical genre undeniably plays a large role, as the multitude of existing musical styles and genres are tied with known social groups, acting as signifiers to what group one belongs in and how one identifies themselves.

Although the correlations between musical genre and social circle typically have justifiable, historical roots that carry no value judgment on them, secondary associations are commonly made in order to value, and devalue, certain groups, likely for one's benefit of further separating themselves from other groups to more solidly define their own identity. Regardless of why this phenomenon occurs, this can create a negative association for certain musical genres that are linked to certain social groups. For example, Hip-Hop originated from the segregated African-American neighborhoods of New York City and is historically linked to that culture, however it has also been unnecessarily linked with themes of violence and crime. Country music came from rural, southern, working-class Americans that marked a certain pride in their homeland and lifestyle, but has since been unnecessarily linked to being poor, unintelligent, or possibly alt-right extremism. Given the multitude of different connotations that certain genres

have as it pertains to one's identity, finding pleasure in a piece of music from a genre that your identity says that you should not like provides a specific case of guilty pleasure, one that is likely stronger than the colloquial or social domains, given that it is seemingly going against who you yourself are choosing to be, rather than from someone else's decision.

Scenario 3a: Someone who identifies as punk willingly listens to Taylor Swift when home
            alone.

Scenario 3b: This same person goes to a Taylor Swift concert with friends who also like
            Taylor Swift.

Scenario 3c: This same person meets new coworkers at a bar, and a Taylor Swift song is
            played.

Similar to scenario 2a, we expect scenario 3a to contain very little guilt actually being felt. The *distortion of consequences* disengagement mechanism remains effective here, since the consequence of others noticing a contradiction in one's tastes and one's identity, and subsequently judging them for it, is taken away when one is alone. When removed from a social situation, it is not necessary for one to uphold an outward aesthetic self that may go against their actual aesthetic tastes; in other words, one is allowed to be their true aesthetic self without any consequence.

Scenario 3b is rather difficult to predict, but given the previous theories and models of emotional induction and guilt justification, we believe that there is more likely to be a higher intensity of guilt felt in this scenario as opposed to scenario 2b. Here, even though the subject is with a group will not judge them for finding pleasure in this music, the group may still notice the

contradiction between the musical taste and the aesthetic self, leading the subject's integrity and identity to at least come into question. This scenario has the potential to weaken the definition and appearance of one's aesthetic self, an outcome that one could certainly fear. Still, the *diffusion of responsibility* disengagement mechanism can work to mitigate some of the guilt here; the subject can take some solace in knowing that they certainly are not alone in liking this music, and therefore does not need to feel as much of a burden of responsibility for liking it. This responsibility can quite easily be dispersed among the thousands of concertgoers surrounding them.

This responsibility cannot be as easily dispersed or diffused in scenario 3c. In this scenario, one would likely feel heavily responsible for their own taste in this music; since the tastes of the others present are unknown, there is no one available to readily share this responsibility with. Here, one feels a strong conflict between two different responsibilities: upholding their outward aesthetic self, and what they hold to be musically pleasurable. This is where someone's poker face likely comes into play; they will give whatever blank expression they can in order to hide any sort of pleasure they feel from the music. That is, if they are legitimately afraid of portraying their true aesthetic self.

In this domain, the feeling of guilt likely comes from a combination of the initial intuitive part of the perception process as well as the intellectual aftermath. The intuitive guilt stems from the amount of fear induced by the situation. Your identity is something that you are both attached to and responsible for, and since the potential for coming across as disingenuous to your desired identity exists in these scenarios, the fear that this domain can induce is strong. Given that fear is itself an autonomic emotion, and that guilt at its core is linked to the basic emotion of fear

(Kemper, 1987), there is evidence that guilt from the self level is potentially felt more intuitively, and therefore more intensely, than the previous levels.

Still, there is an element of a socially constructed process that exists in feeling guilt within this domain. On the surface, this level of guilty pleasure is most easily understood by a conflict between the learned associations of certain musical styles/genres and one's own personality. However, the deeper origin of this guilt revolves around how closely one's aesthetic self is defined and categorized by society. Therefore, there exists an intellectual component to understanding one's feeling of guilt in this domain, as it is still tied to external categorizations of aesthetic personalities that one must be aware of. Dalevik (2022) argues that there is no actual categorization of the aesthetic self. The difference between a social group and the aesthetic self is an important one. Though labels have been constructed for purposes of identification and belonging ("punk", "jock", "hippie", etc.), when it comes to defining one's aesthetic tastes, there is always too much variety to account for, and every person's aesthetic self is vitally different. If one intellectually recognizes this, or if one willingly adopts an aesthetic self that is meant to go against the very definitions of these categories, then musical guilty pleasure felt from this level is likely to be low.

Moral Level

The fourth and final level of our theory is the *moral* level, where guilt comes from liking a piece of music that challenges and goes against one's own moral values of right and wrong. Dalevik (2022) describes these values as "moral norms" that are generally adhered to by society, and at the same time felt strongly by the individual. In every level of musical guilty pleasure, there exists some idea of what is right and what is wrong. In the two lower levels, this idea comes from some sort of external rules or norms that the listener is conditioned to understand over time.

However, in the two higher levels, the idea of right and wrong comes from the individual themselves; and, while right and wrong on the "self" level stems from a largely misguided fear of hiding parts of one's aesthetic self that go against imaginary constructs of social groups, the "moral" level deals with the concept of right and wrong from a tangible humanistic perspective, being perhaps the only level where there is some universal truth to the two sides, and a legitimate fear for being on the wrong side.

In a musical context, the source of conflict on the moral level comes not from the music itself, but from the musician creating the music. Specifically, tension arises when the morals of the listener come into direct contact with the supposed morals of the musician, and a mismatch occurs. This can take place within the lyrical content of a piece of music, or perhaps from the listener's knowledge about something regarding the musician's personal life that directly conflicts with their own moral values. It is important to note, though, that unlike the other three levels, the musical content itself (lyrics aside) plays no role in inducing guilt at this level. Just as how, in a vacuum, the music alone carries no actual aesthetic value to it, it also does not provide any tangible morally just or unjust qualities; such judgements are always made by association to other external contexts. What this means, then, is that the music itself works to purely induce pleasure on this level, rather than guilt. While the guilty pleasure felt on the other levels were defined partly by something undesirable about the musical content, guilty pleasure on the moral level is defined by the relationship to the musician, with the music itself being pleasurable enough to warrant the listener engaging in this tension between differing moral values.

Since the listener/musician relationship is pivotal at this level, it is important to discuss the different roles that the musician can fill in these circumstances, and how that may affect the guilt being felt. In this context, the musician could be the composer whose music is played by

others; the musician could also be the performer that one hears and recognizes on a recording; or, the musician could be both the one who composes and performs the music. We hypothesize that these different roles of the musician in question have a noticeable effect on the amount of guilt felt by the listener for liking the music. This effect has to do with the degrees of separation that exist within the listening experience. These relationships are visualized in Figure 4, where the black silhouettes are representing the corrupt morals; in other words, the origin of the guilt.

Figure 4
Three types of moral conflict in the listener/musician relationship
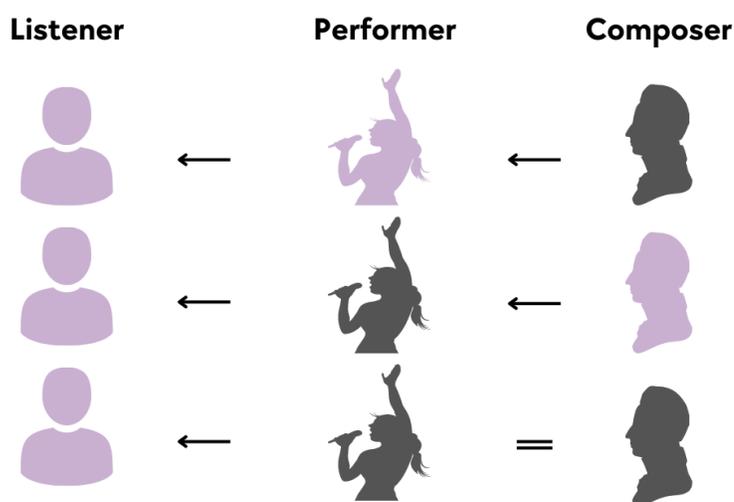
Of these three roles, we expect the musician as the role of the composer alone to induce the least amount of guilt overall, seeing as there is a gap between the composer creating the music and the listener experiencing it, which is filled by the performer. Inducing a higher amount of guilt would be the musician as the performer, since the listener comes into direct contact with the musician presenting their art. The highest amount of guilt induction would be from the musician who is both the composer and the performer, as the music in this situation is unmistakably tied to the musician's craft in each aspect, and there is no escaping the contact one would have with the musician's communication. This most commonly occurs in today's commercial music, being yet

another example of how modern commercial music is more susceptible to inducing a feeling of guilty pleasure than past eras or other styles. It is in this last example that we will present a scenario to discuss.

The musical example, or in this case the musician, that we have chosen to examine in this scenario is rapper R. Kelly. Kelly was a popular rap artist in the 2000s and 2010s, but has since been convicted of several heinous crimes and was recently given a 31-year prison sentence for crimes of sexual abuse. It is reasonable to consider that a person of good conscience would think that Kelly is a morally corrupt, awful human being. Continuing to listen to his music presents a moral dilemma for upholding the work of someone who, by most all accounts, does not deserve to be at all championed or in the public spotlight. All that aside, what if someone gets enough pleasure from R. Kelly's music to personally justify the moral dilemma that listening to his music creates, and how would that justification change given the setting?

Scenario 4a: Someone has the urge to listen to an R. Kelly song, and listens to it while alone.

Scenario 4b: This same person has friends over to their house and puts on a playlist that contains an R. Kelly song on it, knowing that their friends all find the song enjoyable.

Scenario 4c: This same person goes to a house party with people whose musical tastes are unknown, and their favorite R. Kelly song plays on a shuffled playlist.

This is the only level where we expect the first scenario (a) to contain a significantly high amount of guilt. This partly has to do with the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of the

disengagement mechanisms. Typically, one is able to lower the amount of guilt felt by using the *distortion of consequences* disengagement mechanism when listening to an example of guilty pleasure music by themselves, since this act would not lead to the ultimate consequence of being "found out" and socially outcast. However, in this scenario, there exists another consequence, which is that one's own morality is actively being challenged. Challenging social norms or an exterior personality when alone comes without consequence, but one does not simply "turn off" their own morality; it can happen, as is likely the case with this fictitious listener, though it comes with the cost of guilt, and it is not a consequence one can avoid. Therefore, the *distortion of consequences* mechanism is less likely to be effective at this level.

The *displacement of responsibility* disengagement mechanism still has some effectiveness in this level, but only in scenario 4b. It is important to note that the listener in question did not actively press play on an R. Kelly song specifically, but merely allowed a playlist to continue playing. Here, one can displace their responsibility in the situation to two different places; the others who also enjoy the song, and the one who made the playlist. Though it may feel morally wrong to let the song play, it is an easier decision to not turn it off given the pleasure level of the group overall and the fact that no one actively initiated the listen itself. And, if this happened to be an example of the composer and the performer being different people, there could be a further displacement of one's responsibility due to the separation that would exist between the listener and the musician in question.

In some cases, though not necessarily this scenario, the *moral justification* disengagement mechanism may be used, which disengages from the guilt by "serving the greater good". Some may feel that, despite the moral conflict that the music instigates, there is some sort of cultural or historical necessity to keep the music alive through listening to it and perhaps discussing it. This

disengagement mechanism occurs frequently in academic environments when teaching about morally unjust moments in history, and the case could be made that music's history holds a similar weight. For example, Richard Wagner's music is generally thought of as historically significant and important to discuss in the context of Western music history, though Wagner's personal ideals as a human are morally questionable at best.   Here is yet another example of how music from past eras may be less susceptible to inducing guilty pleasure, as opposed to modern commercial music that does not yet hold the same cultural or historical importance.

This brings us to scenario 4c, where we suspect no disengagement mechanism to be effective enough to mitigate any guilt. In this instance, there is nowhere to displace the responsibility for liking the song, there is no comedic angle to take, and there is no avoiding the consequences of the tension between different morals and the potential ridicule of being seen as morally weak or corrupt. This scenario is where we expect the feeling of guilty pleasure to be at its strongest. As the Goldsmith et. al (2012) study reveals, guilt and pleasure can work in tandem to enhance each other's intensity; at this level, we believe this has to be the case, since one would need to feel a very high amount of pleasure from this song in order to balance out the guilt and create the paradox of emotion that guilty pleasures provoke. In this scenario specifically, we could expect this pleasure to derive from one of Juslin's (2014) mechanisms, likely *rhythmic entrainment*, where one is captivated by a stable, continuous rhythmic pulse that they can internally synchronize to.

For this type of guilty pleasure that deals with a conflict of morals, there is only a small amount of a socially constructed component needed in order to feel the guilt, insofar as our understanding of right and wrong is a learned, intuitive knowledge. According to Bussey (2020), moral knowledge is sufficiently obtained by the age of 3-4, where children are able to distinguish

between good and bad or right or wrong. Even though it may not be fully biological, intuitive knowledge is more internalized than an external intellectual process.

At this level, guilt stems mainly from the primary emotion of fear, without extraneous norms or definitions to actively engage with. The only judgment that is being weighed in this case is one's basic, intuitive sense of right and wrong, which one ultimately adheres to stronger than any sense of outward identity or social expectation. In research on musical expectation, David Huron (2006) discusses five response systems, where the *reaction response* occurs right after the event as a neurologically fast response, posing the worst case scenario as a biological survival mechanism. After that, the *appraisal response* functions as the last of the five response systems, comprising a complex assessment of the outcome. Hence, the *appraisal response* takes a more intellectual shape than the previous *reaction response* built on the immediate intuition. The moral level allows for guilt to be felt the quickest and the strongest within the listening experience, given the direct relation between guilt and fear.

Figure 5
Visualizing the four levels on a scale of internal/external guilt induction
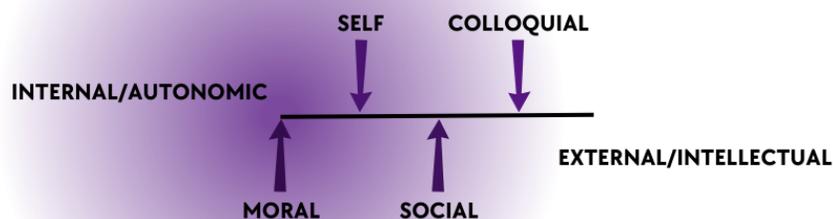
Conclusion

To summarize, we propose that there exists four distinct domains where the feeling of guilty pleasure from music can possibly originate, and these domains are ordered by level of potential intensity in guilt induction. We hypothesize that the intensity of guilt felt from liking a piece of music correlates directly to the amount of intuitive guilt afforded by each domain in the perception process. Since we argue that guilt is connected directly to the basic emotion of fear, which itself is an intuitive emotion, it would follow that guilt being felt through intuition is stronger than guilt felt though an intellectual process. As we have pointed out, there are many different reasons why one could potentially feel guilty about liking a piece of music; however, only a small number of them, when experienced in specific situations, may actually induce a substantial amount of guilt.

Potential future research to build upon this theory could include studies on the effects of musical contagion, specifically the response to vocal timbre, on feeling guilty pleasure. Other studies could involve the potential therapeutic effects that this theory may lead to, since having an understanding of the origin of guilt can help one navigate it through the manifestation of music, hence resolving the emotional tension. Further exploration within the topic could include a study on the effect that musical expertise, age, or other demographics may have in musical guilty pleasure at these four levels.

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"Guilty Pleasures" Spotify Playlist (*Accessed May 1st 2023)*:
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZF1DX4pUKG1kS0Ac?si=d71550673c774909