

# Psychology of Popular Media

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# Understanding the Attraction to Music Containing Violent Themes: A Qualitative Analysis

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Fans of music containing violent themes can experience positive affective, social, and well-being benefits from engagement with music. However, there is a gap in understanding why people are attracted to such music in the first place, as violently themed music is often considered offensive, disturbing, and repulsive by many nonfans. Recent research has found that morbid curiosity, a fascination with death and threatening situations and phenomena, is associated with the attraction to novel excerpts of music containing violent themes. The present study qualitatively investigated reasons that a sample of predominantly nonfans of violently themed music ( $N = 96$ ) show attraction to such music, focusing on the role of morbid curiosity. Participants reported the reasons behind their curiosity about 32 novel excerpts of violently themed metal or rap music, containing either music and lyrics or lyrics only. Responses were analyzed using a combination of inductive and deductive content analysis. Results revealed that morbid curiosity emerged as a key theme in the responses to violently themed metal and rap excerpts, while a general desire for more information and context and an appreciation for the music and lyrical elements of the music also emerged as key themes. Findings support the notion that morbid curiosity is a key element to the attraction to violently themed music and may support the development of enjoyment and fandom. We discuss implications for the neurological and evolutionary basis of morbid curiosity and its potential influence on experiencing adaptive outcomes through violently themed music.

### **Public Policy Relevance Statement**

Morbid curiosity, a fascination with death and related phenomena, appears to help explain why nonfans of violently themed music show an inclination to engage with novel excerpts of violently themed rap and metal music. As morbid curiosity appears to be a normal and common human response, further understanding the role of morbid curiosity in the attraction to violently themed music may support educators, social workers, and policymakers in decision making around the proliferation of such music and in facilitating healthier engagement with it.

**Keywords:** violently themed music, morbid curiosity, curiosity, metal music, rap music

**Supplemental materials:** <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000531.supp>

Throughout the past four decades, music containing overt violence has both achieved widespread global popularity and sparked societal debate and government intervention. Renowned artists such as Cannibal Corpse and Digga D have consistently achieved millions of album sales and streams, demonstrating the immense global appeal of

these genres (Davies, 2021). In response to concerns over its potentially harmful impact, governments have imposed restrictions on the distribution and performance of certain extreme metal and rap artists, including the artists mentioned above (Elias, 2022; Tonedead.thebrag.com, 2014). Despite such measures, empirical research has unveiled a fascinating

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Merrick Powell served as lead for investigation, methodology, project administration, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing.

Kirk N. Olsen served in a supporting role for funding acquisition, methodology, supervision, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing. Jane Davidson served in a supporting role for methodology, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing. William Forde Thompson served as lead for funding acquisition and supervision and served in a supporting role for investigation, methodology, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing. Merrick Powell, Kirk N. Olsen, and William Forde Thompson contributed equally to conceptualization and formal analysis.

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paradox: fans of such music typically experience positive and adaptive outcomes, including positive affective experiences, social bonding, effective mood regulation, and psychological well-being (Olsen et al., 2022; Powell et al., 2022; Sharman & Dingle, 2015; Thompson et al., 2019). These findings underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of the relationship between violent music and its audience, challenging prevailing assumptions and highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

The factors that draw individuals toward particular genres are complex, arising from a combination of an appreciation of the music itself, what that music means to them personally, and what they know of the causal and historical influences on this music (see Thompson et al., 2023 for a detailed overview). Research in sociology and psychology has investigated the motivations of fans of music genres that often contain violence, especially in heavy metal music (Brown et al., 2016). Researchers have found that the extreme and transgressive nature of the sonic elements and lyrical content attracts audiences, who are often young and male, to the technical proficiency and virtuosity of the musicians as well as to the ability to express or expel one's anger through the listening experience (Thompson et al., 2019). Some listeners enjoy the fast tempo and intensity of the music, and report that they do not pay much attention to the lyrical content of the music, while others enjoy that lyrics can reflect how they are feeling in a way that other music does not (Arnett, 1991; Thompson et al., 2019). Fans of such music featuring violent themes tend to be very committed and intense in their fandom, report strong social bonds with other fans, and often experience positive emotional outcomes from their listening experiences (Guibert & Guibert, 2016; Olsen et al., 2022). Such intense fandom may be, in part, because these same musical genres often elicit strong negative reactions from many, but not all, nonfans of this music. The extreme transgressive sonic and lyrical content, such as portraying lyrics about torture, murder, and satanism using low, guttural screamed vocals, are often cited by artists as deliberate intentionality to be as extreme as possible (Wallmark, 2018).

As such, many nonfans commonly find such music to be offensive, disturbing, and repulsive (Thompson et al., 2019). Such observations lay the foundation for the present research, which aims to delve into the motivations behind individuals' initial deliberate exposure to music that graphically depicts acts of violence, torture, and misogyny. If a common response to this music is to be disturbed, and a common intention in its composition is to be offensive, how do nonfans of this music become attracted to it in the first place? By exploring this phenomenon, the study sheds light on the complex interplay between musical preferences, individual motivations, and societal perceptions, with implications for the origins and functions of morbid curiosity and its manifestation in music that contains violent themes.

Deliberately exposing oneself to information about violence, harmful situations, and even death is a pervasive and inherent aspect of human behavior. People often will slow down and "rubberneck" to view car accidents, watch documentaries about serial killers, visit locations of disturbing historical events, and listen to true crime podcasts. This inclination toward threatening and dangerous phenomena is known as "morbid curiosity" (Scrivner et al., 2021). Despite the ubiquity of morbid curiosity among humans (Scrivner et al., 2021), research on curiosity has primarily focused on its links to positive or "rewarding" stimuli, such as money (Oosterwijk et al., 2020).

Conversely, the study of morbid curiosity has received limited attention in previous decades, warranting a deeper exploration of this widespread aspect of human experience. An early psychological inquiry into morbid curiosity was conducted by Zuckerman and Litle in 1986, who developed a scale of curiosity about morbid events (CAME). They observed that scores on the CAME were positively associated with sensation seeking, extraversion, psychoticism, and attendance of horror films, proposing that curiosity for morbid events was due to a desire for stimulation and increase of activity in the catecholamine systems (Zuckerman & Litle, 1986). Although sensation seeking is associated with a preference for metal music (Sun et al., 2019), it has been recently suggested that it is a separate motivator alongside morbid curiosity rather than its core component. Scrivner (2021) proposed that sensation seeking was central to morbid curiosity, the intensity of a stimulus should be associated with a greater desire for engagement and evoke stronger reward responses. No such relationship has been observed between stimulus intensity and selection to further engage in morbid imagery or in preferences for haunted house activity (Oosterwijk, 2017; Scrivner et al., 2023).

More recently, research has sought to understand the purpose of morbid curiosity and its role in engaging with violent and threatening content, both in real life and in media preferences (Oosterwijk, 2017; Scrivner, 2021). A recent neuroscientific inquiry into morbid curiosity found that exhibiting curiosity for intense violent imagery engaged similar brain regions to those that are active when people are curious about positive stimuli. These regions include the orbitofrontal cortex, striatum, inferior frontal gyrus, and anterior insula (Oosterwijk et al., 2020). These brain regions have also been observed to be associated with the perceptions and experiences of emotion and reward in response to music, as well as with some features of violently themed music such as musical tension, unexpected harmonic choices, and fearful vocalizations (Aubé et al., 2015; Lehne et al., 2014; Tabei, 2015).

These findings suggest that morbid curiosity, far from being deviant or pathological, may serve a valuable purpose for humans. Morbid curiosity possibly originated as an adaptive evolutionary mechanism to understand and navigate threats present in the environment, enabling individuals to effectively confront dangerous circumstances (Scrivner, 2021). Although exposing oneself to real-life threatening situations is too dangerous and costly (Scrivner, 2021), simulated experiences of violence may offer individuals a safe platform to acquire knowledge, meaning, and enjoyment from such experiences (Oudeyer et al., 2016).

Having a low-cost opportunity to gain knowledge about difficult situations may also be intrinsically motivating, consistent with key theories of motivation such as self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985). SDT proposes that humans are motivated by growth and seek to integrate new knowledge and experiences into their worldview. Such experiences foster motivation if the conditions promote experiences of autonomy (a sense of initiative), competence (experiences of mastery), and relatedness (a sense of social connection; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Individuals with morbid curiosity may find value in being informed about threatening aspects of life. They may be motivated to engage with violence in an artistic medium because it promotes autonomy through freedom of self-expression, competence by gaining knowledge of challenging experiences, and relatedness to other listeners or the artists themselves through shared enjoyment. Although not the specific theoretical

framework used for the present study, these benefits linked to the tenets of SDT are common experiences of passionate fans of violently themed music (Arnett, 1991; Olsen et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2019).

One recent study established a direct link between morbid curiosity and the inclination to engage with excerpts of violently themed music, in both fans and nonfans (Powell et al., 2022). However, an important aspect that remains unexplored pertains to open-ended responses that were obtained from participants in the second experiment of this study. In that experiment, participants who were predominantly nonfans of violently themed music were exposed to 32 5-s excerpts, including both violently and positively themed metal music and rap music, presented either as music with lyrics or as lyric-only presentations. Although the quantitative analyses of this experiment were published, participants were also asked open-ended questions regarding their curiosity toward excerpts of extreme metal and rap music, which were not analyzed in the published article.

The primary aim of this report is to analyze these unexplored open-ended responses to gain a deeper understanding of why nonfans of violently themed music exhibit curiosity and a desire for further engagement with such music. By delving into the motivations expressed in these responses, the study seeks to understand whether morbid curiosity acts as a prominent motivator among these listeners. Additionally, the analysis aims to uncover other factors not captured by the quantitative analyses that may contribute to participants' attraction and desire to explore this music. This examination of the unexplored qualitative data will provide valuable insights into the underlying reasons that people might be initially attracted to violently themed music, as well as help hypothesize how they develop passionate fandom for such music and the strategies they employ to experience positive, adaptive outcomes from music that outsiders to such genres often find highly distressing and offensive.

## Method

### Participants

The final sample included 96 first-year psychology students from Macquarie University, which included 31 males, 63 females, and two people who identified otherwise or chose not to disclose their gender. This sample was chosen because adolescents and young adults are known to spend much leisure time listening to different popular genres of music, including genres of heavy metal and rap music (Lonsdale & North, 2011). Of the 96 participants, 83 reported that they were fans of music, but not fans of music containing violent themes, while 13 self-identified as fans of violently themed music. Participants had an average age of 21.1 ( $SD = 6.1$ ) and listened to a total of 16.3 hr of music per week ( $SD = 12.6$ ), 2 hr of which contained violent themes ( $SD = 3.0$ ). This listening could be in any form, such as through deliberate selection, incidental listening (i.e., comes on the radio), or in a movie or video game. All participants received course credit.

### Measures

This study was conducted using qualitative data collected as part of a larger study investigating the attraction to violence in music, using a range of quantitative and qualitative measures. To see the quantitative measures used, see Powell et al. (2022). The qualitative

measures involved asking participants to comment on their degree of curiosity toward different 5-s musical and lyrical excerpts from popular, publicly available songs. There were 16 different 5-s excerpts of music and lyrics, including four excerpts each from four different musical categories: extreme metal with violent lyrics, extreme metal with positive lyrics, rap music with violent lyrics, and rap music with positive lyrics. There were also 16 5-s excerpts of only lyrics on the screen from the same four musical categories. The lyric-only excerpts were taken from different sections of the same songs as the music and lyric excerpts. Hence, each participant was exposed to 32 5-s excerpts in total. These stimuli choices were selected to understand the specific lyrical and sonic components of music associated with morbid curiosity, which was a key research question in the Powell et al. (2022) study. The full list of excerpts, and the songs they were taken from, are presented in the online supplemental materials.

The wording of the questions differed slightly depending on whether the excerpt included both music and lyrics or just the lyrics, with participants asked, "Would you be curious to hear more of this musical excerpt?" for the music and lyrics condition, and "Would you be curious to hear the song that this lyrical excerpt is from?" for the lyric-only condition. Participants responded to each excerpt on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Participants were also requested to provide an open-ended response to further describe what made them curious about each excerpt. This open-ended question aimed to capture additional insights into the underlying factors contributing to participants' curiosity. Hence, there were a total of 384 open-ended responses were received for the eight excerpt types from the 96 participants. Participants were asked if they were familiar with the excerpts and, if so, to provide the song title and artist's name. Responses where participants were familiar with the excerpts were removed, as the study was interested in responses to novel excerpts of music.

### Procedure

Participants completed an online survey that asked a range of demographic questions before presenting the music and lyrical excerpts and the questions in response to each. Participants were asked whether they enjoyed listening to music, and those who responded "no" were removed from the study. The presentation of the music and lyric-only blocks was counterbalanced, and the four different excerpt types were randomly presented to participants within these blocks. After completing all responses to the 32 excerpts and the other measures captured for the quantitative analysis, participants were thanked for their participation.

### Analysis Plan

The study was approved by the Macquarie University Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee (Reference 520211039430507). The open-ended responses to these questions were subjected to content analysis to identify codes, categories, and themes that emerged from the responses, following the guidelines outlined by Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017). In the analysis, participants' open-ended responses were used to identify categories that reflected their specific motivations to further engage with the excerpts. Finally, themes that encapsulated multiple related categories were identified. Categories were developed using inductive and deductive approaches, as is common in qualitative

research, with morbid curiosity being previously hypothesized and categories and themes for other responses being analyzed as they emerged. The process was conducted iteratively and reflectively, ensuring the data best fit the identified codes and categories. All responses were coded to only one category. This analysis process was conducted separately, and then in discussion together, by the first, second, and fourth authors of this article.

The analysis in this study focused especially on responses to violently themed metal songs and violently themed metal lyric-only excerpts, given that morbid curiosity significantly predicted curiosity toward both types of stimuli in the quantitative analysis presented in the Powell et al. (2022) study. Responses to excerpts of violently themed rap music were also analyzed, despite the quantitative analysis not revealing a significant relationship between engagement with this genre and morbid curiosity. Responses to excerpts of positively themed metal music with lyrics were also analyzed, as curiosity toward these excerpts was significantly associated with morbid curiosity in the quantitative analysis, contrary to expectations. Responses to excerpts in other conditions were not analyzed.

By analyzing qualitative responses to these four excerpt types, this study sought to gain insight into why some of the predictions were not supported in the quantitative analysis, as well as understand other potential reasons people were curious to engage in the novel excerpts of music. When selecting the responses to be analyzed, a decision was made to only include individuals who reported a moderate level of curiosity toward the excerpts, defined as those who reported a score of 3 or greater out of 5 on the Likert scale for curiosity. As expected, due to the intense nature of both the lyrical and sometimes sonic content of the violently themed excerpts (Thompson et al., 2019), many responses indicated curiosity below this midpoint. The number of responses analyzed based on the above criteria is indicated for each excerpt type, as well as the number of unique participants behind the number of responses, in Table 1. As familiarity is a known predictor of emotional engagement with music (Pereira et al., 2011), participants would be likely to want to further engage with these excerpts due to an established connection with the songs. Responses that indicated curiosity on the Likert scale score, but where the associated open-ended response explicitly indicated that they did not want to hear any more of the excerpt, were also excluded.

## Results

### Violently Themed Extreme Metal Music

Regarding curiosity toward violently themed metal music excerpts, three themes emerged from 39 responses. The themes and categories are detailed in Figure 1.

### Theme 1: Morbid Curiosity

As hypothesized and observed in the quantitative analyses, morbid curiosity was a key theme in the interest to further engage with the music excerpts. Six responses reflected this theme, encompassing categories such as morbid curiosity about the lyrics and a general sense of fascination with the morbid material. The following responses from participants highlight the role of morbid curiosity stemming from the lyrical content:

The fact that the lyrics are so messed up makes me curious. (Male, 22)

I want to see how far they can elevate the lyrics in question. (Male, 18)

Interestingly, one participant expressed curiosity toward the excerpts based on the lyrical content, despite having a dislike for the sonic elements of the music, stating:

The instrumental and style of song is harsh to the ears, although the lyrics are interestingly graphic. (Female, 23)

Additionally, two participants' responses reflected a more general sense of morbid curiosity, with one stating:

It sounds kind of scary but interesting. (Female, 18)

Such responses point to the intriguing and captivating nature of violent lyrical content for some individuals, despite not being fans.

### Theme 2: Desire for More Information

The most prominent theme for this excerpt type revolved around the participants' desire to gain more information about the excerpts. This theme was reflected in 21 responses, encompassing categories such as a desire for a greater contextual understanding of the lyrics or vocal delivery, and impressions of novelty, intrigue, and more information about song progression. Quite possibly, the prominence of this theme can be partially attributed to the short length of the excerpts, and a lack of familiarity with the genre, leaving participants with a desire to gather more information about the excerpts generally. The following quote illustrates a general desire for more information:

I want to see what the subject matter is about. (Male, 18)

Three participants reported curiosity arising from the novelty of the musical excerpts, as they were not familiar with the genre, which commonly includes drop-tuned guitars, fast-tempo drumming, and screaming-style vocalizations (Wallmark, 2018). Novelty is frequently discussed as an integral aspect of curiosity (Dubey & Griffiths, 2020). The role of novelty was reflected in responses such as the following:

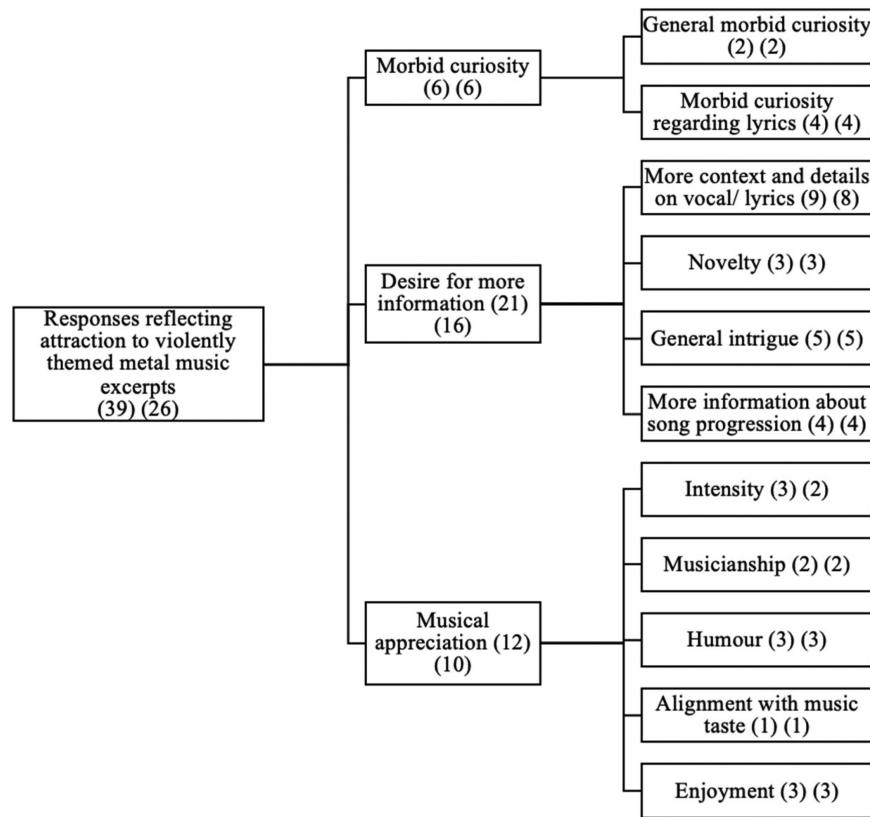
It was from a genre I'm not familiar with. (Female, 18)

It was a lot but still interesting cause its [*sic*] different. (Female, 18)

**Table 1**  
*Number of Responses to Each Excerpt Type That Indicated Curiosity*

Responses	Excerpt type			
	Violently themed metal music	Violently themed metal lyrics	Violently themed rap music	Positively themed metal music
Number of responses	39	95	110	51
Number of unique participants	26	49	55	35

**Figure 1**  
*Themes and Categories in Responses to Violently Themed Metal Music Excerpts*



*Note.* The numbers in the first parentheses are frequency counts of how many times a category appeared in the open-ended responses, while the numbers in the second parentheses show the number of unique participants responsible for the total number of responses.

Such responses showcase participants’ curiosity driven by a desire to gain a deeper understanding of the music and lyrics, explore the novelty of unfamiliar genres, and follow the progression of the song.

**Theme 3: Musical Appreciation**

The final theme was characterized by an appreciation of different aspects of the excerpts, made up of the categories of sonic intensity, musicianship, humor, aligning with preexisting taste, and general enjoyment. Thirteen responses reflected this theme.

The intensity of the music was described in three responses, and displays of expert musicianship, such as the guitar or drum performance, were noted in three responses.

I find the intensity of instrumental interesting. (Female, 21)

The guitar riff is cool so I want to listen for that. (Female, 20)

A general enjoyment of the excerpts themselves was also reported by three responses:

I just like the music. (Female, 19)

Finally, three participants reported finding the excerpts humorous, especially the lyrical content or the vocal performance:

I found this heavy metal funny because the singer’s voice is so bizarre. (Male, 20)

Such responses highlight participants’ curiosity about the intensity of the music and the displays of elite-level musicianship, such as guitar or drum performances, leading to enjoyment, admiration, or amusement. These aspects are commonly reported reasons for listening to metal music genres among fans (Thompson et al., 2019).

**Violently Themed Extreme Metal Lyrics**

The 95 analyzed responses to the violently themed metal lyrics (without music) reflected similar themes to those identified in the condition above, with some slightly different categories within each theme. The themes and categories are detailed in Figure 2.

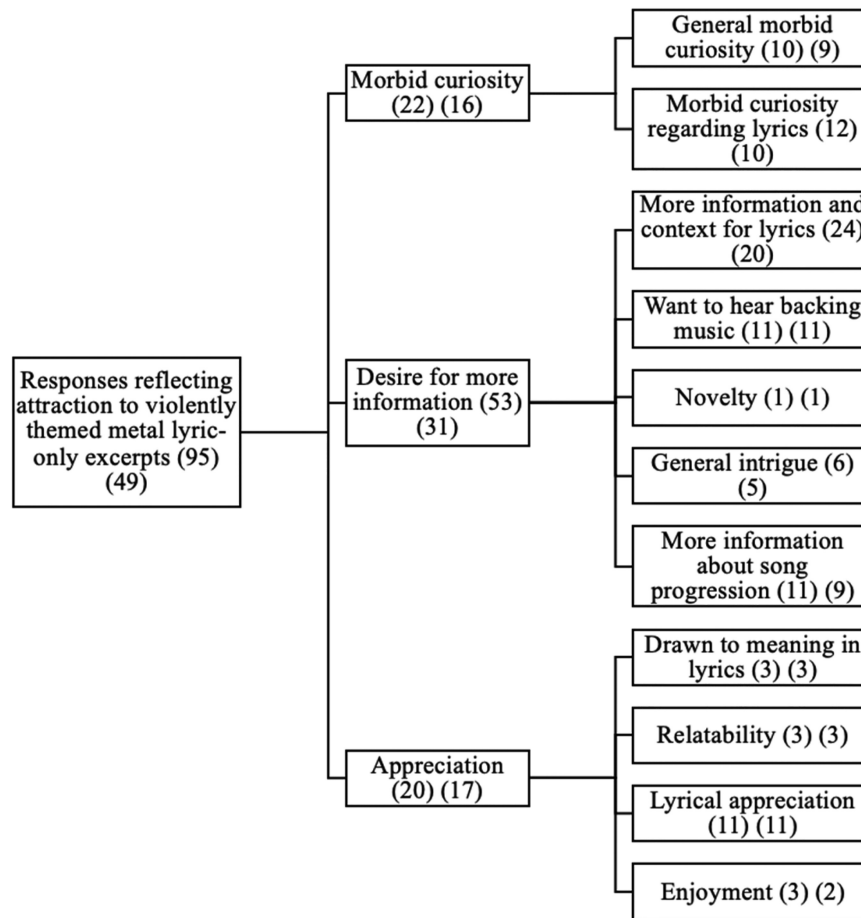
**Theme 1: Morbid Curiosity**

Morbid curiosity was again a key theme in the responses and was more prominent in the lyric-only condition, with 22 responses reflecting this theme. Categories again included morbid curiosity for aspects of the lyrical excerpts or general morbidly curious statements:

The fact the lyrics are extremely dark and graphic gives me an urge to hear the song in full and who the artist is. (Female, 18)

Quite dark–morbid curiosity. (Female, 19)

**Figure 2**  
*Themes and Categories in Responses to Violently Themed Metal Lyric-Only Excerpts*



*Note.* The numbers in the first parentheses are frequency counts of how many times a category appeared in the open-ended responses, while the numbers in the second parentheses show the number of unique participants responsible for the total number of responses.

### **Theme 2: Desire for More Information**

The desire for more information about the excerpts was again the predominant theme, with 53 responses reflecting this theme. Categories were similar to the music condition above, including the want for more context of lyrics, novelty, general intrigue, and interest in song progression, as well as a category for information about the backing music.

Twenty-four responses reflected a desire to have more context or lyrical information:

Very vivid depiction of images, would like to know the context of the song. (Female, 30)

Rest of lyrics. (Male, 18)

Six responses reflected a general sense of intrigue, not specific any lyrics or contextual features:

Sounds interesting and different. (Female, 18)

Eleven responses sought more general detail on how the excerpt would progress:

I'm curious to know the context. (Female, 18)

One person reported that the novelty was a factor that led them to be curious to hear the song that the lyrics were from:

It's pretty confronting and the lyrics aren't the type to be in music that I typically listen to—curiosity of something I'm unfamiliar with. (Female, 18)

One category unique to this set of excerpts was the desire to hear the backing music associated with the lyrics presented. Eleven responses reflected this category:

Want to know what type of music it would go to. (Male, 19)

### **Theme 3: Appreciation**

The final theme that emerged pertained to an appreciation of the features of the lyrics presented. The 20 responses coded to this theme included the categories of enjoyment, lyrical appreciation, and relatability.

Enjoyment of the lyrical excerpts was a feature of three responses:

It sounds simple and fun. (Male, 20)

Fourteen responses reflected an appreciation of the language or style of the lyrical content or a perception of meaning from the excerpts:

It's like a poem. (Male, 22)

Really meaningful. Could be about battles in life. (Male, 22)

Another category was the relatability of the lyrics to people's specific situations or specific emotions that people have experienced. Three responses reflected this:

In high school I felt like I looked like a monster and would exclusively listen to or watch things that heavily featured body horror/disfigurements. (Male, 20)

Relatable. (Female, 18)

### Violently Themed Rap Music

Qualitative responses to the violently themed rap music were analyzed to understand why this music may not have been associated with morbid curiosity in the Powell et al. (2022) study. Similar themes to those for the violently themed metal excerpts were identified in the 110 responses, with some different specific categories that reflected the responses to this different genre. The themes and categories are detailed in Figure 3.

#### *Theme 1: Morbid Curiosity*

Despite trait morbid curiosity not predicting the curiosity to further engage with violently themed rap music, morbid curiosity was a key theme in the open-ended responses. Eighteen responses reflected interest based on the morbid content of the excerpts, with 14 of these being specific to the lyrics:

Although the lyrics are a bit messed up, I want to know what else happens to the woman. (Female, 20)

The lyrics were interesting in a concerning way that draws me in. (Female, 18)

#### *Theme 2: Desire for More Information*

The desire for further information was again a prominent theme. However, unlike the two extreme metal sections prior, this was not the most common theme. A want for more context of lyrics, novelty, and interest in song progression were the three categories for the 27 responses.

Eighteen responses in this theme pertained to wanting more information about the lyrical content:

I'm curious to know what other lyrics are in this song! (Female, 26)

Several of these responses referred to their interest in the lyrics as hearing the rest of a story:

The storyline could be interesting. (Female, 20)

Two responses also reported that they wanted to hear more of the lyrics, despite not enjoying them:

I'd be curious to hear what other awful lyrics are in this song. (Female, 26)

Eight responses reflected an interest in the song's progression, seeking greater context about the song or the sonic development of the excerpt:

I want to know the context and [sic] what going on. (Female, 18)

I would like to know the context of the song. (Female, 18)

One response reflected a curiosity based on novelty:

I never heard this rapper before. (Male, 19)

#### *Theme 3: Musical Appreciation*

Musical appreciation was the predominant theme for the rap excerpts. There were 65 responses reflecting this theme of enjoyment and/or appreciation. The categories within this theme included enjoyment, alignment with taste, humor, and enjoyment despite the presence of violence.

Ten participants reported a general sense of enjoyment of the excerpts, mentioning that they enjoyed both the vocal and sonic elements:

Lyrics + beats synchronise nicely together. (Male, 19)

I like the genre and beat. (Male, 18)

Ten participants reported that they specifically enjoyed the vocal delivery of the excerpts. This is commonly referred to as flow, the skillful use of rhythm and articulation in the vocal delivery of rap music (Adams, 2009):

Damn, flow nice. (Male, 19)

Eleven responses indicated enjoyment of the beat and instrumentation, largely consisting of electronic drums and prominent basslines, while six responses reflected enjoyment of the lyrics:

Cool beat. (Female, 19)

An additional 13 responses reported that they enjoyed the beat and instrumentation despite the overt presence of violence:

Although the lyrics are graphic the actual music sounds good. (Female, 18)

I like the sound, despite the lyrics being violent or alluding to violence. (Female, 19)

Eleven responses reflected that curiosity stemmed from the music aligning with participants' music tastes:

It sounds like some of the music I might listen to. (Female, 21)

Four responses expressed curiosity due to perceiving humor in the excerpts:

Please, 'blood on my d\*\*\* because I f\*\*\*\*\* a corpse' is so funny to me, I want to finish it. (Female, 19)

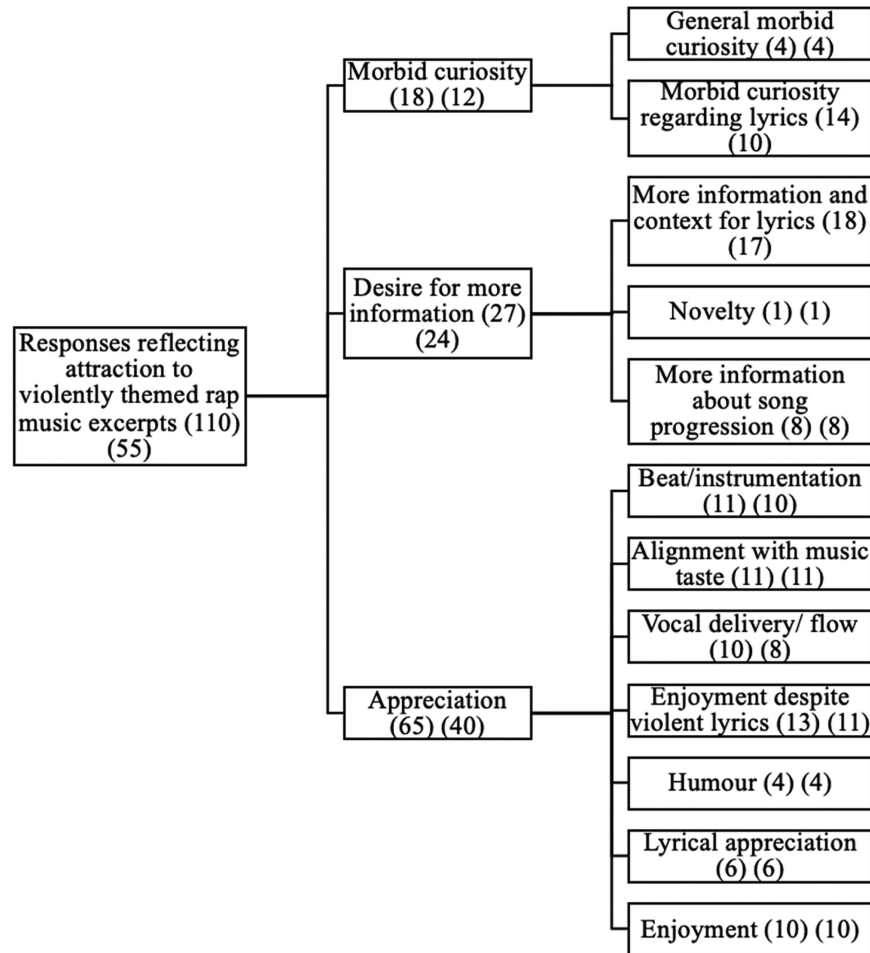
The lyrics were quite funny. (Male, 19)

#### **Positively Themed Metal Music**

Analysis of the 54 responses to positively themed metal music revealed that morbid curiosity was not a theme, despite there being a significant relationship between the two in the Powell et al. (2022)



**Figure 3**  
*Themes and Categories in Responses to Violently Themed Rap Music Excerpts*



*Note.* The numbers in the first parentheses are frequency counts of how many times a category appeared in the open-ended responses, while the numbers in the second parentheses show the number of unique participants responsible for the total number of responses.

study. The three themes that emerged were the desire for more information, musical appreciation, and appreciation of contrast. The themes and categories are detailed in Figure 4.

### ***Theme 1: Desire for More Information***

The first theme, consistent with the other conditions, was a desire for more information. The categories within this theme were the want for more context of lyrics, general intrigue, interest in song progression, and being able to understand the vocals. Thirteen responses reflected this theme.

Four responses reported a general want for more information about the lyrics in the excerpts:

What is the overall theme of the song. (Female, 18)

One response reflected this despite not usually listening to this genre of music:

The genre isn't my usual but the lyrics were interesting and I want to hear more of it. (Female, 18)

Three responses indicated a general intrigue about the excerpts, not specific to any element of the music:

I need to hear more. (Male, 19)

Four responses reflected a desire to know where the song would progress, or a want for more contextual information about the performer or piece:

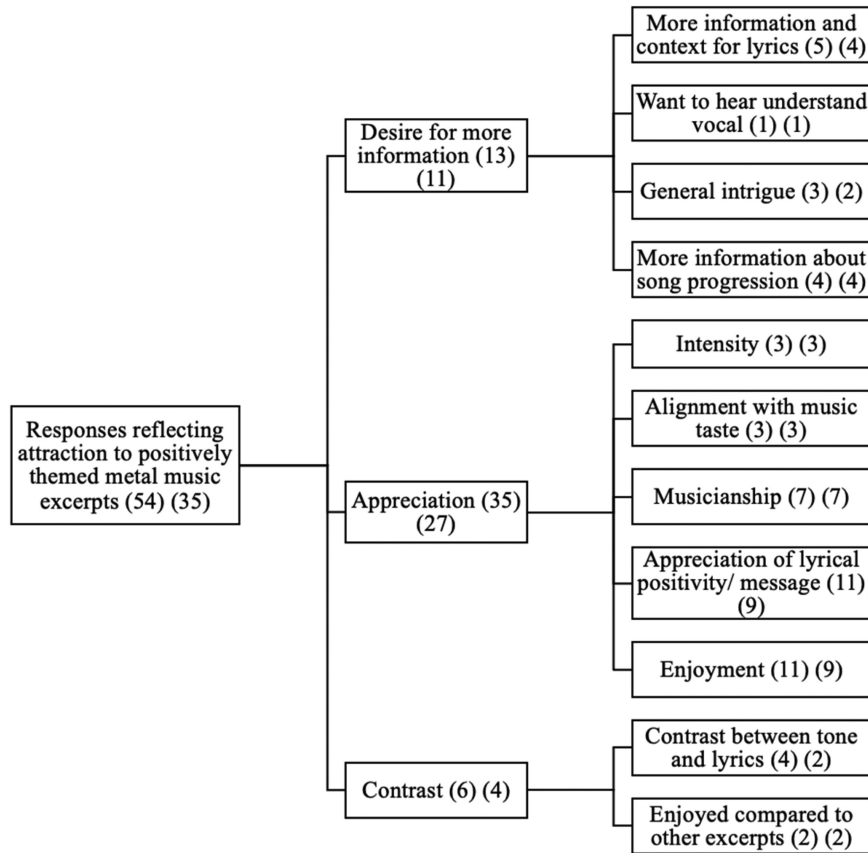
Want to know who made it. (Male, 22)

Would like to know if it changes into something softer. (Female, 19)

### ***Theme 2: Musical Appreciation***

Musical appreciation was the most common reason for wanting to engage further with the excerpts, with 35 of the 54 responses reflecting this theme. Six categories made up this theme, which included intensity, musicianship, alignment with preexisting taste, and enjoyment, which included enjoyment of the vocal, the performance, and the positive lyrical themes.

**Figure 4**  
*Themes and Categories in Responses to Positively Themed Metal Music Excerpts*



*Note.* The numbers in the first parentheses are frequency counts of how many times a category appeared in the open-ended responses, while the numbers in the second parentheses show the number of unique participants responsible for the total number of responses.

The intensity of the excerpts was the main curiosity driver in two responses:

I think it could be a fast-paced and energetic song to listen to. (Female, 21)

The musicianship was an integral element evoking curiosity toward the excerpts, with eight responses reflecting this:

I liked the instrumentation and am curious as to how the song would develop. (Female, 21)

Three responses indicated that the excerpts reflected their preexisting musical taste, while a general enjoyment of the excerpts was evident in 22 responses:

Resonant with the type of music I listen to. (Male, 19)

That sounded awesome, I liked that. (Male, 19)

Eleven of these 22 responses included specific enjoyment of the vocal performance or the positive lyrical content:

The voice of the singer. (Female, 18)

Lyrics providing a message. (Male, 21)

**Theme 3: Contrast**

The final theme identified in six responses was the appreciation of contrast, which was a theme not identified in any other condition. The two categories within this theme were enjoyment of the contrast between the musical tone and the lyrics, and the appreciation of the excerpts compared to the other excerpts in the experiment.

Four responses reflected the former:

The lyrics were unexpected with the sound of the song. (Female, 18)

Two responses reflected the latter:

Better than others as you can hear lyrics. (Female, 23)

**Discussion**

This investigation provides deeper insights into the specific reasons that a sample of predominantly nonfans were curious to engage with violently themed music. A comprehensive qualitative analysis of responses to the four different excerpt types provides unique insights into the musical features that underpin people’s attraction to different music containing violent themes. This research provides qualitative evidence that supports the findings of Powell et al. (2022)

in detailing the important role of morbid curiosity in such attraction for many listeners.

Morbid curiosity plays a significant role in attracting individuals to excerpts of extreme metal containing violent themes, both in music and lyric-only excerpts. However, it is important to note that general curiosity was the theme that emerged most in response to these violently themed excerpts. This finding is unsurprising given the open nature of the questions and the short length of the excerpts. As a curiosity for morbid content has been shown to engage similar brain regions as those evoked by general curiosity (Oosterwijk et al., 2020), it is difficult to determine whether the responses indicative of general curiosity were rooted in morbid curiosity. Nevertheless, it is possible that some responses of general curiosity, specifically about the lyrics, were based on morbid intrigue when taken with the results of the quantitative analysis and reflecting on the violent nature of the music (Powell et al., 2022).

There was a much greater total number of curious responses for the violent metal lyric-only excerpts compared to the violent metal excerpts with music and lyrics. Such findings suggest that the curiosity toward the violent content in the lyrics was superseded by the distaste for the musical elements of extreme metal music for many listeners. Being overly abrasive and transgressive in sonic decisions has been reported as a goal of some musicians of the extreme metal genre and appears to have deterred many nonfans in this study (Wallmark, 2018). For some listeners of the extreme metal music excerpts, appreciation of the intensity, musicianship, and even humor formed the basis of their curiosity, meaning that some people could embrace the extreme nature of the lyrical and sonic choices and were curious to further engage with these songs as a result.

Morbid curiosity was also a key theme in the violent rap excerpts, but many responses to the rap excerpts indicated that people were curious despite not enjoying the violent lyrical content. These contrasting findings may explain why morbid curiosity did not predict curiosity toward violently themed rap music in the quantitative analysis (Powell et al., 2022). Many more listeners reported curiosity for this music when compared to the metal excerpts, and many more responses reflected appreciation or enjoyment of the excerpts rather than responses more typical of curiosity, such as wanting further information. This is likely because rap music and its associated genres, such as hip-hop, have a much stronger presence in popular culture. Hip-hop has been reported to be the most consumed music globally since 2017, and rap and hip-hop songs dominate the top 40 charts in many countries (Lynch, 2018). Although it is important to note that not all rap and hip-hop music contains violent themes, it appears likely that the familiarity with the sonic and vocal elements of this music was more salient than the violent themes in evoking curiosity. Such findings reflect those in the quantitative analysis of the same participants, where morbid curiosity was associated with the desire to hear more of the violent rap lyric-only excerpts, but not when violent rap music and lyrics were presented together (Powell et al., 2022).

Finally, morbid curiosity was not a theme that emerged in any responses toward positively themed metal music excerpts, despite being associated with curiosity about such excerpts in the quantitative study. Rather, it was more general curiosity, the appreciation of lyrical and sonic features of the songs and the contrast between the metal tonality and positive lyrics that evoked curiosity. It is perhaps not surprising that responses did not overtly mention morbid curiosity due to the uplifting nature of the lyrics. However, it is possible

that some of the elements in the metal musical accompaniment, containing tension, utilization of high and low frequencies, and unexpected harmonic choices, lead to intrigue from morbidly curious individuals at a preconscious level and/or increased activation of regions associated with curiosity such as the orbitofrontal cortex and the inferior frontal gyrus, as has been observed in tension-evoking music research (Lehne et al., 2014). The perception of the tension and fear-evoking elements of the musical accompaniment may help explain why the positively themed metal lyric-only excerpts were not associated with morbid curiosity in the quantitative analysis, but the positively themed metal music excerpts were. As with the proposed explanations above, brain imaging studies on participants in responses to stimuli similar to those in this study would be needed to verify such predictions.

When investigated in conjunction with the findings from the quantitative analysis conducted in Powell et al. (2022), it appears that morbid curiosity is an important factor that contributes to the attraction toward previously unheard music that contains violent themes. Lyrical themes of violence, threat, and torture appear to not only command attention but also evoke a desire to engage further with novel music for some listeners. Morbid curiosity, rather than being maladaptive or indicating deviance, has been proposed as a personality trait that can serve adaptive evolutionary functions, helping people to confront threatening information and learn how to navigate experiences and emotions associated with violence and death (Scrivner, 2021). Listeners high in morbid curiosity may be curious to engage with musical and artistic representations of violence to explore challenging and threatening themes and their resultant emotions from a safe psychological distance (Menninghaus et al., 2017).

Violently themed music may also serve a range of other psychological and social functions for its listeners from continued engagement with the music. Listeners may derive value and enjoyment from these experiences with violently themed music as they achieve a sense of control or mastery over the challenging emotions evoked, providing them with an opportunity for self-reflection, as well as the skills and knowledge to confront difficult and challenging experiences in their own lives (Clasen et al., 2020). Listeners may also use this music to strengthen or express their identity and sense of self, as well as to develop social bonds through connections with other fans in physical or online environments (Olsen et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2023). Such commonly reported experiences align with three main components of SDT (autonomy, competence, and relatedness), which may support the capacity for such music to contribute to personal growth and psychological well-being despite its violent themes (Powell et al., 2023). Research in visual media violence supports the notion that the value, enjoyment, and desire to continue to engage with violent video games was associated with experiences of autonomy and competence (Przybylski et al., 2009). As such, morbid curiosity may facilitate the initial engagement with violently themed music that may develop into strongly motivating and rewarding experiences for its listeners.

The present study also highlighted some other aspects of curiosity that may be evoked by violently themed music, such as a general desire for information and the enjoyment of musical techniques and expressions of skill. It is noted that the short nature of the excerpts in this study may have led to participants just wanting more information altogether, as they had very little time with each excerpt. However, previous research has revealed that people's liking judgments of 5-s music excerpts tend to reliably reflect their

liking of a whole song (Philibotte et al., 2023). Therefore, while they had little time with the excerpt, they are likely to have made a judgment based on a level of information that is representative of the overall piece, excerpt even if their primary reported response was about wanting greater context. It may be difficult to explicate the specific differences between a general desire for more information and morbid curiosity, including the associated brain regions. Despite such challenges, it is critical to develop a further understanding of curiosity toward stimuli that is not typically considered “positively” rewarding. Future research should endeavor to investigate the brain regions activated by curiosity toward violently themed music, to see whether regions such as the orbitofrontal cortex, striatum, inferior frontal gyrus, and anterior insula are indeed active during these listening experiences. Such an investigation could help understand how brain activity in response to violently themed music compares to responses to other musical experiences and responses to other morbid media, as well as the differences between people who are and are not curious about violently themed music.

Future research should also explore the desire to further engage with violently themed music in a nonuniversity sample with a more diverse age range. The sample used were mostly at an age that highly values listening to music and are open to music of many genres (Lonsdale & North, 2011). However, the sample used were a convenience sample of university students who were participating for course credit. This incentivization to participate may have led to people pretending to enjoy music more than they actually do, based on the study being advertised toward music fans. It is also important to acknowledge the limited age range and Western-centric nature of our first-year university sample, which limits the generalizability of our findings to predominantly English-speaking, educated students in their late teens. Further, both the inclination to engage with violently themed music, as well as levels of morbid curiosity, may change later into adulthood. A future line of inquiry could be to conduct similar studies with different-length excerpts, to see how the attraction to violently themed music changes with varying exposure to excerpts of such music.

The role of morbid curiosity in the attraction to violently themed music must be explored further, as it holds potential implications for government policy, musical education, and the censorship of violently themed music. Both morbid curiosity and engagement with violent media of various forms appear to be natural human responses. Further, through developing healthy relationships with music, fans of violently themed music often experience adaptive outcomes and well-being benefits through their passionate engagement (Powell et al., 2023). Hence, government policies that continue to support restrictions on the live performances of violently themed musical artists must consider the growing empirical evidence regarding the impact of violent themes in music. Rather than resorting to blanket censorships, it is essential to evaluate censorship rules with care and recognizing the complexities involved. Although protecting vulnerable populations is critical, such as those susceptible to maladaptive music outcomes, widespread bans on violent artistic content may be ineffective and inappropriate. By acknowledging the role of morbid curiosity and gaining further understanding of its mechanisms and increasing education and awareness on the motivations behind curiosity toward violently themed music, it is hoped that evidence-based strategies and interventions can be developed that encourage responsible music consumption, safeguard vulnerable populations, and facilitate healthier engagement with such music.

To conclude, the present findings provide insight into the self-reported reasons that nonfans were curious to further engage with violently and positively themed rap and metal music. Morbid curiosity appears to be a contributing factor to the desire to further engage with such music, which, if sustained, may lead to positive experiences and the derivation of meaning and value from their engagement. Hence, morbid curiosity may precipitate fandom and the experience of adaptive psychosocial outcomes from such music. With future research, a model detailing the process from initial listening to passionate fandom for violently themed music, and a nuanced understanding of the associated neural mechanisms, could be established.

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