

# An empirical field study on sing-along behaviour in the North of England

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## ABSTRACT

### Background

Singing along to a tune in a leisure environment, such as on the dance floor of a nightclub or in a pub, is one frequent form of spontaneous and informal music-making. Despite the theoretical and sociological literature on urban or neo-tribe behaviour (Maffesoli, 1988; Malbon, 1999; Pini, 2001; Jackson, 2004), there has been very little research focusing on sing-along behaviour in developed societies, or on 'singalongability', i.e. the musical qualities that might motivate an individual to sing along to a particular song.

### Aims

This paper reports the empirical findings and theoretical implications of a field study of sing-along behaviour carried out at music entertainment venues across northern England. It addresses how singing along is affected by the context in which music is heard, as well as what musical qualities make a song singalongable.

### Method

Thirty nights of field research were conducted in five different entertainment venues. Using a 'participant observer' approach, both quantitative and qualitative data was collected, including how many people sang along to each of the 1168 songs played during research. Nine contextual factors as well as 32 musical features of the songs were considered as different categories of explanatory variables. Regression trees and a random forest analysis were employed to model the empirical data statistically.

### Results

A resulting quantitative model predicts the proportion of people singing along with a particular song (dependent variable) given information about the audience, song popularity (chart success), time of night, and song-specific musical features as explanatory variables. Results indicate that contextual factors can account for 40% of the variability in sing-along behaviour, whilst musical factors, in particular those relating to vocal performance, are able to explain about another 25% of the variance. Further details of our method and results can be found in our in-press paper (Pawley & Müllensiefen).

### Conclusions

This study makes a significant contribution to the largely unexplored territory of sing-along behaviour. Results are interpreted in terms of theoretical notions of 'tribal' or indigenous societies (Blacking, 1973; Maffesoli, 1988). The prediction model also demonstrates that it is rather the

features of vocal performance than structural features of the tunes that make an audience sing along.

### Keywords

Informal singing, singing-along, popular music, urban neo-tribes, media interpretations of academic research

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