

THE SCIENCE OF POPULAR MUSIC

by Sean J. Jordan

In just the span of a few weeks, Rebecca Black has gone from being a normal 13-year-old girl to an internet sensation, thanks to a Youtube music video called “Friday.”

On the surface, it’s not much different from the sort of music that plays on the radio; the lyrics are about a teenage girl looking forward to the weekend, the vocals are heavily autotuned, and the bridge features a rap solo. And the video has received over 60 million views – no small feat for an emerging artist.

But “Friday” hasn’t gotten popular because it’s good; rather, the viral buzz is that it’s one of the worst songs ever recorded. When the video was first launched in March, it only garnered a few thousand views.

But after appearing on Comedy Central’s *Tosh.0* blog in a post titled “Songwriting Isn’t For Everyone,” the video has taken off, with millions upon millions of viewers inflicting the video upon their friends and family members. Numerous spoofs, remixes and mash-ups have also been created.

“Friday” is certainly an inept song with annoying and awful lyrics, but what’s interesting about it is that it’s not so different from popular music like Ke\$ha’s “Tik Tok” or Taylor Swift’s “Love Story.” In fact, the primary reason “Friday” is regarded as being such a travesty is because of the popular opinion about the song.

Whereas an artist like Ke\$ha has a marketing machine behind her to reinforce the idea that her music is worth listening to, Rebecca Black has an army of Internet users spreading the word that “Friday” is so bad it’s good.

The phenomenon of a herd mentality shaping the popularity of a song is well known in the musical world, and a 2006 study by Salganik, Dodds and Watts published in *Science* revealed a surprising finding – the popularity of a piece of music (or film, book, TV show or other creative effort) has much less to do with its **quality** than it does with the **perception** that other people like it too.

To conduct the study, the authors created a social network “music market” and recruited 14,341 participants (mostly teenagers or college students) to join.



Rebecca Black, the 13-year-old artist who performed the viral song, “Friday.”

Image source: IREbeccablack.com

Each participant was given access to 48 songs from unknown bands that could be played in their browser and – if they liked the song – downloaded to their computer.

Participants were randomly assigned to a study group. 20% were assigned to a control group where they were forced to rate songs without the input of others, forcing them to think solely about the quality of each piece. The rest were assigned into eight equal-sized groups called “worlds” where their ratings were shared with other users, as were the number of times each song had been downloaded by members of the group.

The expectation of the study was that if quality was truly the reason for a song’s success, certain songs would consistently rise to the top amongst the eight worlds and the control group. But what actually happened was that each group had a large amount of variation from the others, and there was very little correlation between quality and popularity.

What was particularly interesting is that songs that the control group ranked as being intermediate in quality tended to have the most unpredictable quality rankings within the eight worlds, and songs that the control group ranked as high in quality tended to have the most unpredictable market share.

The authors concluded that these social influences played a

large role in individual decision-making than the actual quality of the music. The idea of what was popular took on a life of its own in each of the eight “worlds” – and the results showed that the reassurance that other people like something can be a key shaping influence for an individual to appreciate it as well.

“Friday” is likely to be forgotten in a few months, and Internet users will certainly find another meme to latch onto once Rebecca Black’s 15 minutes of fame are up.

But it’s interesting to think that if “Friday” hadn’t received so much notoriety for being awful, and if a critical mass of Youtube users had rated the video highly enough, Rebecca Black could have achieved a level of success similar to what fellow Internet sensation Justin Bieber has enjoyed.

It’s even more intriguing to consider that so many mega-popular culture icons – *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *Jurassic Park* and the like – may owe their success not just to their relative quality, but also to preferences shaped by a herd mentality. **RPR**

For further reading, we recommend perusing the full report of the cited study: “Experimental Study of Inequality and Unpredictability in an Artificial Cultural Market” by Matthew J. Salganik, Peter Sheridan Dodds, and Duncan J. Watts. *Science*, Feb 2006.