

How well & unwell UK international students use music-listening for emotional regulation



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Introduction

What is music-listening for emotion regulation (MER)?

Music-listening for emotion regulation (MER) is a cost-effective, non-invasive strategy to facilitate managing a cognitive/emotional response to a situation via coping strategies and mechanisms

Background

- **MER for international students in the UK is underresearched**
- **Role of contextual factors in MER is also underresearched.** Context plays a crucial role in shaping emotional responses to music, influencing how individuals regulate emotions.
- Eerola et al. (2024) 's episode model captures this through **five dynamic emotional episodes that commonly occur during functional music-listening**, but there is lack of generalisable empirical evidence operationalising this model.
- This study applies the Dynamic Emotional Episodes to Music (DEEM) (Kirts et al., 2025) instrument to explore **differences in context-specific emotional regulation between mentally well and unwell international students** in the UK.

Objective

This study aims to examine which key functional musical-emotional episodes international students experience in different situations, and primarily whether there are significant differences in mean ratings for each episode construct under different situations between mentally well and unwell international students in the UK.

By targeting international students – who tend to struggle with mental health literacy and maximising local mental health services – this study seeks to expand the model's generalisability to unique and diverse backgrounds.

Methodology

Participants were categorised into high and low well-being via five non-invasive questions about positive daily life experiences (WHO-5 Well-being Index (de Graaff & van Ommeren, 2024)). Three scenarios were presented to the participants, and they were asked to think about the music they would listen to and indicate the DEEM items' level of relevance to their experience.

Linear Mixed Models (LMM) was used for data analyses with two WHO groups as the within-subjects factor, and five DEEM episode constructs as the within-subjects factor. Then, a post-hoc analysis was implemented to determine the difference in mean ratings between mentally well and unwell participants for each construct in each vignette.

The five episode constructs:

- Personal-Emotional-Processing (PEP)
- Connection-Belonging (CB)
- Enjoyment-Relaxation-Distraction (EDR)
- Focus-Motivation (FM)
- Aesthetic-Interest-Awe (AIA)



H1: There is a significant difference in the episode construct mean ratings for each vignette between mentally well and unwell participants.



H2: Vignettes are hypothesised to direct the following episodes; Vignette 1: EDR, Vignette 2: CB, Vignette 3: FM

Results/Findings

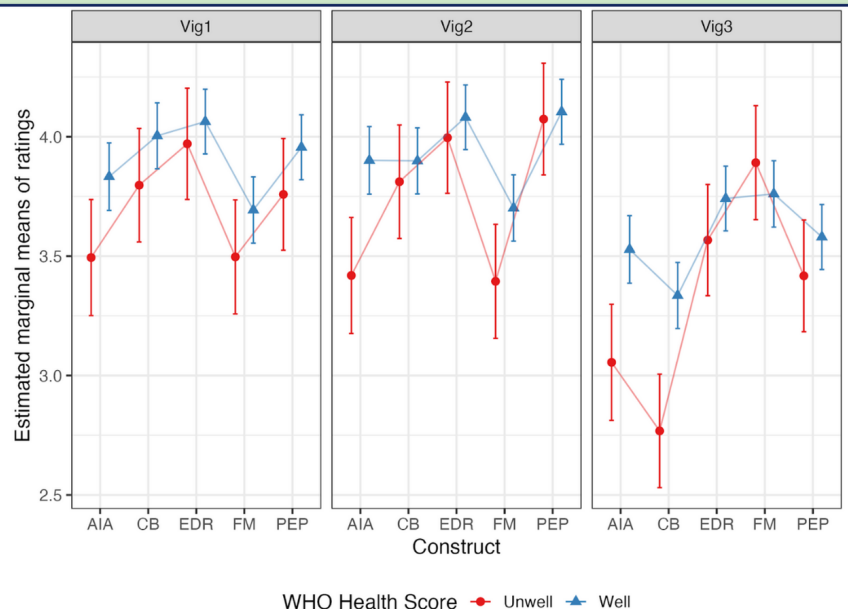


H1: There are **not much significant differences** in episode construct ratings for the highest rated episodes across all three vignettes, **except** those with low-well-being rated the following lower than those with higher well-being:

- AIA and FM in Vignette 2
- AIA and CB in Vignette 3.



H2: All participants rated the targeted episodes for Vignette 1 and 3 as the highest (EDR and FM). **Unexpectedly**, participants rated EDR and PEP as higher, followed by CB for Vignette 2.



Conclusion

- This study found that mentally well and unwell international students in the UK generally share similar emotion regulation goals during music listening, despite differences in mental well-being.
- Significant differences in AIA and FM episode ratings suggest that mental health may influence how deeply individuals engage with music emotionally, especially in areas like awe and motivation.
- Recommendations for future research include diary studies to record real-time episode experiences and diverse samples to better understand how context and listening styles shape adaptive or maladaptive music emotion regulation outcomes.

Related literature

1. Eerola, T., Kirts, C., & Saarikallio, S. (2024). Episode model: The functional approach to emotional experiences of music. *Psychology of Music*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/03057356241279763>
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