

Music as a Private Therapy:

How Music Creates Emotional Safe Spaces for Youth

Abstract:

This case study explores how young adults aged 18 to 25 use music as a private coping mechanism to create emotional safe spaces in their daily lives.

Drawing on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with nine university students, the study investigates the role of music in emotional regulation, stress reduction, and mental well-being. Findings indicate that youth actively curate personalized playlists, use headphones to establish auditory boundaries, and engage in music listening routines that foster a sense of comfort, control, and psychological safety.

Music functions not only as entertainment but as an intimate and accessible form of self-directed emotional therapy. The study contributes to understanding non-clinical mental health strategies among youth and underscores the importance of recognizing music as a legitimate and valuable tool for emotional well-being.

Keywords: music as private therapy, emotional safe spaces, youth mental health, coping mechanisms, emotional regulation, music listening habits

Introduction:

In an era marked by escalating rates of anxiety, depression, and emotional distress among young people, the search for accessible and effective coping strategies is more urgent than ever (Twenge et al., 2019). Traditional mental health services are often inaccessible due to stigma, cost, or scarcity of providers, prompting youth to turn to alternative and self-directed means of emotional regulation. Among these, music emerges as a readily available, deeply personal, and widely utilized resource.

This study investigates how young adults, particularly those aged 18 to 25, use music as a private therapeutic tool to create emotional safe spaces—environments, whether physical or psychological, where individuals feel comforted, safe, and emotionally regulated.

The thesis of this case study posits that music functions as a form of private therapy for youth, enabling them to manage emotional volatility, process complex feelings, and cultivate resilience in everyday life. Building on existing research in music psychology and adolescent development, this paper examines how personalized music listening habits—such as curated playlists, headphone use, and situational listening routines—support mental well-being by offering a sense of control and emotional containment.

Youth mental health is a critical public health concern. According to the World Health Organization (2022), one in seven individuals aged 10–19 experiences a mental disorder, with anxiety and depression ranking among the leading causes. While formal interventions are essential, informal coping strategies play a significant role in emotional maintenance. Music, as a universal and emotionally evocative medium, offers a unique avenue for self-expression and emotional processing in the absence of professional support.

This study focuses on the qualitative experiences of young adults navigating the transition from adolescence to adulthood—a period often characterized by academic pressure, identity formation, and social change (Arnett, 2000). By analyzing individual narratives, this paper highlights how music serves as a refuge, a mirror, and a companion in managing emotional turbulence. The following sections present a literature review, research methodology, results, discussion, and conclusions to substantiate the role of music as an emotional sanctuary for youth.

Literature Review:

Music as Private Therapy

Music has long been recognized as a powerful medium for emotional expression and regulation. Research in music psychology suggests that music listening activates brain regions associated with reward, emotion, and memory (Koelsch, 2014). For many individuals, especially youth, music functions as a form of self-administered therapy—a private, informal process of emotional exploration and relief. Unlike clinical therapy, which involves guided interventions by professionals, private musical therapy is self-directed, spontaneous, and integrated into daily routines.

Saarikallio (2011) introduced the concept of music as emotional self-regulation, emphasizing that adolescents and young adults use music strategically to maintain or alter their emotional states. This includes listening to certain genres to calm anxiety, energize mood, or express sorrow—processes that mirror therapeutic techniques such as mood tracking and emotional labeling.

Emotional Safe Spaces

The concept of emotional safe spaces refers to environments—real or imagined—where individuals feel protected from judgment, stress, or emotional harm (Brown, 2018). While traditionally discussed in educational or social justice contexts, the idea can be extended to psychological and sensory domains. Music, especially when listened to privately, creates an auditory boundary that separates the listener from external stressors. The use of headphones, in particular, signals a social withdrawal and establishes a personal sanctuary, reinforcing the perception of emotional safety (DeNora, 2000).

Youth Mental Health and Coping Mechanisms

Youth between the ages of 18 and 25 face unique psychological challenges. As they navigate higher education, employment, and romantic relationships, many report high levels of stress, loneliness, and uncertainty (Blanco et al., 2018). In response, they develop both adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms. Adaptive strategies include exercise, journaling, and social support, while maladaptive ones encompass substance use and emotional withdrawal.

Music listening is increasingly recognized as a healthy coping mechanism. A study by Miranda and Gaudreau (2011) found that music use for emotion regulation correlated with lower levels of depressive symptoms in young adults, particularly when employed positively—for distraction, catharsis, or mood enhancement—rather than for rumination or negative reinforcement.

Emotional Regulation Through Music

Emotional regulation is the ability to influence which emotions one has, when, and how they are experienced and expressed (Gross, 1998). Music facilitates several regulatory strategies:

- **Distraction:** Upbeat or engaging music can divert attention from distressing thoughts.
- **Catharsis:** Sad music allows for processing grief and sadness in a controlled way.
- **Mood enhancement:** Energetic or joyful music can boost positive affect.
- **Validation:** Lyrics that reflect personal experiences foster a sense of being understood.

Liliedahl and Ingvarsdottir (2020) emphasized that youth often select music not despite their negative emotions, but because it aligns with them—validating their feelings and reducing emotional isolation.

Music Listening Habits

Contemporary listening habits are shaped by digital platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube, which allow for highly personalized and on-demand access.

Playlists—carefully curated sequences of songs—are central to this practice. Studies show that youth create functional playlists for specific emotional needs (e.g., “Study Focus,” “Sad Vibes,” “Pump-Up”) (Hargreaves & North, 1997). Headphone use further reinforces privacy, enabling youth to carry their emotional sanctuaries into public spaces like classrooms, buses, or workplaces (DeNora, 2000).

Despite the growing body of research, gaps remain in understanding the subjective experience of music as therapy, particularly in real-world contexts. This case study aims to address this gap by exploring the personal narratives of young adults who describe music as a vital emotional resource.

Methodology:

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to gain in-depth insight into how youth use music as a private coping tool. Case studies are particularly suited for exploring complex, context-dependent phenomena, especially those involving personal behaviors and emotions (Yin, 2018). The focus is on individual experiences, allowing for rich, narrative data that captures the nuances of music’s emotional role.

Participants

Nine participants aged 18 to 25 were recruited from a mid-sized public university in the northeastern United States. The sample included five females, three males, and one non-binary individual, with diverse cultural backgrounds and academic disciplines. All were regular music listeners (defined as listening to music for at least one hour daily) and reported using music to manage emotions.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure variation in gender, major, and listening preferences. Inclusion criteria were age (18–25), regular music use, and willingness to discuss emotional health. No clinical diagnoses were required, though participants were asked to describe their mental well-being generally.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-person interviews lasting 45 to 60 minutes. The interview guide included open-ended questions such as:

- How do you use music in your daily life?
- Can you describe a time when music helped you feel better emotionally?
- How do your playlists reflect your mood or emotional needs?
- What role do headphones play in your listening experience?
- Do you ever use music to create a sense of safety or privacy?

Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also maintained to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved six phases: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining themes, and (6) producing the report. Codes were developed inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being imposed a priori. Software (NVivo 12) assisted in organizing and retrieving coded segments.

Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking (participants reviewed summaries of their interviews), peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail of analytical decisions.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms (e.g., "Alex," "Sam"). Participants were informed they could withdraw at any time.

Results:

Three overarching themes emerged from the data: music as a personal sanctuary, strategic emotional regulation, and the ritual of listening.

Theme 1: Music as a Personal Sanctuary

Participants consistently described music as a means of creating a private, emotionally safe environment. Headphones were frequently referenced as tools to “block out the world” and “build a bubble.”

“When I put on my headphones, it’s like I’m in my own world. No one can touch me. It doesn’t matter if I’m in a crowded library—I feel safe.” (Lena, 21)

Several participants linked this to feelings of isolation or social anxiety. For example, Jordan (23), a first-generation college student, said music helped shield them from feeling “out of place” on campus. The auditory immersion provided a sense of control and predictability in otherwise overwhelming environments.

Spotify playlists were often named symbolically—e.g., “Safe Space,” “My Happy Place,” “Coping Mode”—reflecting their function as emotional containers. Participants reported that merely knowing these playlists existed offered comfort, even when not actively listening.

Theme 2: Strategic Emotional Regulation

All participants described using music intentionally to influence their emotional states. This aligns with Saarikallio’s (2011) Emotion Regulation through Music framework.

Cathartic Release: Many reported listening to sad music not to amplify sadness, but to process it. Sam (19) described crying to melancholy ballads after a breakup: “It felt good to feel sad with someone. Like the song understood me.”

Mood Elevation: Upbeat playlists were used before social events or stressful exams. Maria (20) admitted, “If I need to feel confident, I play Lizzo. It’s like a pep talk in song form.”

Distraction and Focus: Instrumental or lyric-free music was commonly used during studying to “quiet the mind.” Alex (22) noted, “Without background music, my thoughts spiral. With it, I can breathe.”

Interestingly, some participants acknowledged that music could reinforce negative moods if used excessively for rumination. However, most described a balanced approach, shifting playlists as their needs changed.

Theme 3: The Ritual of Listening

Music listening was embedded in daily routines, often tied to specific times or transitions. Waking up, commuting, and bedtime were identified as key “music moments.”

“I don’t start my day without my morning playlist. It’s like my brain needs the music to wake up properly.” (Taylor, 24)

These rituals provided structure and emotional continuity. For some, forgetting to listen to music resulted in feeling “off” or “raw.” The act of pressing play became symbolic—a small, repeatable gesture of self-care.

Moreover, playlist creation was described as therapeutic in itself. Curating songs allowed participants to reflect on their emotions and make them tangible. As Jordan noted, “Making a playlist is like journaling with songs. I see my feelings in a new way.”

Discussion:

The findings of this study support the thesis that music serves as a form of private therapy for youth, enabling the creation of emotional safe spaces and promoting mental well-being. The data reveal that music is not passively consumed but actively employed as a self-regulatory tool, deeply integrated into personal routines and identity.

Music as an Emotional Safe Space

The use of headphones and personalized playlists reflects a modern form of psychological containment. In a world where young people often feel overexposed—through social media, academic demands, or social expectations—music offers a retreat (Shenk, 2021). The auditory boundary established by headphones functions similarly to the walls of a room: it

signals privacy, promotes introspection, and reduces sensory overload. This aligns with DeNora's (2000) theory of music as a "technology of self," where individuals use sound to shape their inner worlds.

Emotional Regulation and Youth Mental Health

The strategic use of music for mood management underscores its therapeutic potential. Youth are selecting songs not just for enjoyment, but for emotional utility—using music akin to cognitive-behavioral techniques like cognitive reframing or mindfulness. The validation provided by lyric-based music is particularly noteworthy: when participants heard songs that mirrored their experiences, they felt seen and less alone, a crucial factor in mitigating feelings of isolation.

However, the dual nature of music use warrants attention. While most participants used music adaptively, the risk of emotional rumination remains. Future research should explore how to guide youth toward balanced listening habits, perhaps through educational programs on "healthy music use."

Implications for Practice and Policy

This study suggests that music should be acknowledged as a legitimate component of mental health literacy. Schools, universities, and youth programs could integrate music-based wellness initiatives—such as playlist workshops or guided listening sessions—into their support systems. Clinicians might also consider discussing patients' music habits as part of mental health assessments.

Additionally, digital platforms like Spotify have the potential to enhance well-being. Features that encourage users to reflect on their listening patterns—such as mood-based recommendations or emotional check-ins—could promote more mindful engagement with music.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The sample size is small and limited to university students, which may not represent all youth, particularly those not in higher education. Self-reporting introduces potential bias, and the cross-sectional design limits causal inferences. Furthermore, cultural differences in music use were not deeply explored, though they likely influence emotional responses.

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that music is far more than entertainment for youth—it is a vital, self-directed tool for emotional survival and well-being. Through intentional listening,

curated playlists, and the protective use of headphones, young adults create personal sanctuaries where they can feel safe, express complex emotions, and regain a sense of control. In doing so, music functions as a private therapy, accessible, immediate, and deeply personal.

As mental health challenges among youth continue to rise, it is imperative to recognize and validate informal coping strategies like music listening. While not a substitute for professional care, music represents a powerful, low-cost, and culturally resonant form of emotional support. Future research should expand on these findings, exploring how technology, culture, and individual differences shape the therapeutic use of music. For now, this study affirms what many youth already know: sometimes, the best therapist is a good playlist.

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