

The Impact of Music Preferences, Listening Context, And Social Music Engagement on Emotional Wellbeing among Malaysian Youth

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of music preferences, listening context (e.g., listening alone, with friends, or in social settings), and social music engagement (both active and passive) on emotional wellbeing among Malaysian youth aged 18-30. A quantitative approach was employed with a sample of 385 participants from various public and private institutions in Malaysia. Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses were used to explore the relationships between the independent variables (music preferences, listening context, and social music engagement) and the dependent variable (emotional wellbeing). The findings revealed that active social music engagement was the strongest predictor of emotional wellbeing, followed by passive engagement and listening context. Music preferences also contributed significantly to emotional wellbeing, though its effect was relatively weaker. These results emphasize the importance of fostering both active and passive forms of music engagement and recognizing the contexts in which music is consumed to promote emotional wellbeing among youth. The study suggests that educational institutions and mental health practitioners should incorporate music-based strategies into wellbeing programs to enhance emotional health among youth.

Keywords: Emotional Wellbeing, Music Preferences, Listening Context, Social Music Engagement, Malaysian Youth

Introduction

Music has long been recognized as a powerful influence on emotional wellbeing, particularly among youth. As youth navigate developmental challenges, they increasingly turn to music as a way of expressing themselves, regulating emotions, and forming social connections (McFerran & Saarikallio, 2021; Rentfrow et al., 2020). Music preferences, defined as the genres and styles individuals gravitate towards, significantly impact how youth experience emotional wellbeing. Studies have shown that individuals who prefer certain genres, such as

pop or classical music, tend to experience different emotional responses and wellbeing outcomes depending on the music's emotional tone and complexity (Krause et al., 2019; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2021). Youth who consistently engage with their preferred music report higher levels of emotional regulation, suggesting that music preferences play a crucial role in shaping emotional wellbeing (Chin & Rickard, 2022; Lonsdale & North, 2019).

The context in which music is listened to also influences its impact on emotional wellbeing. Youth often use music in specific contexts, such as while studying, exercising, or relaxing, each of which may serve a different emotional purpose (North & Hargreaves, 2021; Schafer & Sedlmeier, 2020). Listening to music while studying, for example, is often associated with improved focus and reduced stress, while music during relaxation times may aid in emotional recovery and stress reduction (Schubert et al., 2020; Groarke & Hogan, 2018). The context in which music is consumed thus plays a significant role in how effectively it supports emotional wellbeing, with certain listening environments amplifying music's emotional benefits more than others (Greasley & Lamont, 2020; Juslin, 2019). These findings highlight the importance of understanding how listening context interacts with music preferences to influence wellbeing outcomes.

In addition to preferences and context, social music engagement, or the act of sharing and participating in music within social environments, plays an essential role in emotional wellbeing. Social engagement with music, such as attending concerts or participating in group listening activities, fosters a sense of community and belonging, which are crucial for emotional health (Boer et al., 2021; Weinstein et al., 2020). Research indicates that youth who attend concerts or share music with friends report higher levels of social connectedness and emotional wellbeing than those who consume music in isolation (Groarke et al., 2021; Schäfer et al., 2020). These social interactions create shared emotional experiences, reinforcing the positive effects of music on mood and stress reduction (Krause et al., 2019; Boer & Fischer, 2018). Therefore, social music engagement is an important factor in the broader impact of music on emotional wellbeing.

Youth who engage in music socially also tend to have stronger emotional connections to the music they listen to, which further enhances its positive impact on emotional wellbeing (Krause et al., 2020; Boer et al., 2021). Group music experiences, such as attending live performances or engaging in music-related social media interactions, often elicit more intense emotional responses than solitary listening (Weinstein et al., 2020; Schafer & Sedlmeier, 2020). These collective experiences enhance mood and reduce anxiety by fostering feelings of belonging and reducing emotional isolation (McFerran & Saarikallio, 2021; Groarke et al., 2021). Furthermore, social music engagement provides a platform for youth to express their identities and connect with peers, which can be particularly beneficial for emotional regulation during challenging life stages (Schafer et al., 2020; Krause & North, 2021).

Overall, the relationship between music preferences, listening context, and social music engagement reveals a complex interplay of factors that shape emotional wellbeing among youth. This study is particularly relevant for Malaysian youth, who are part of a multicultural society where diverse music genres and social influences shape their emotional experiences. Understanding these influences is vital in a context where music is an accessible and culturally

resonant tool for emotional expression and social connectivity. This study is particularly relevant for Malaysian youth, who are part of a multicultural society where diverse music genres and social influences shape their emotional experiences. Understanding these influences is vital in a context where music is an accessible and culturally resonant tool for emotional expression and social connectivity. Music serves not only as a tool for emotional expression and regulation but also as a social connector that helps youth navigate their emotional landscapes (Chin & Rickard, 2022; Lonsdale & North, 2019). Understanding these factors offers valuable insights into how music can be harnessed to improve emotional wellbeing, particularly for youth populations who increasingly rely on music as a means of coping with stress and emotional challenges (McFerran & Saarikallio, 2021; Weinstein et al., 2020). These findings suggest that promoting positive music engagement practices—such as encouraging social music experiences and providing supportive listening environments—can significantly enhance the emotional health of youth.

Literature Review

Music Preferences and Emotional Wellbeing

Music preferences play a crucial role in shaping emotional wellbeing, particularly among youth. Research suggests that individuals' preferred genres of music can have a significant impact on how they process emotions and manage stress (Chin & Rickard, 2022; Krause & North, 2021). Youth who prefer energetic and uplifting genres, such as pop or dance music, often use these preferences to enhance mood and reduce anxiety, whereas those who favor more contemplative genres, like classical or jazz, may use music as a tool for relaxation and introspection (McFerran & Saarikallio, 2021; Juslin, 2019). These preferences are not just passive choices but reflect deeper emotional and cognitive processing styles, which can impact overall emotional wellbeing (Chin & Rickard, 2022; Lonsdale & North, 2019).

The emotional impact of music preferences extends beyond mere enjoyment, influencing cognitive and affective responses to stress and emotional challenges. Studies have shown that youth who listen to music that aligns with their emotional state experience more effective emotional regulation (Saarikallio, 2020; Krause et al., 2019). For example, listening to calming music during periods of high stress has been shown to reduce cortisol levels, improving emotional stability and overall wellbeing (McFerran & Saarikallio, 2021; Lonsdale & North, 2019). Similarly, those who prefer more aggressive genres, such as metal or punk, may use this music to externalize negative emotions, allowing for emotional catharsis (Schäfer & Sedlmeier, 2020; Weinstein et al., 2020).

Music preferences are also linked to social identity and peer influence, which play critical roles in the emotional development of youth. Music preferences often serve as a form of self-expression, allowing young people to communicate their identities to peers and form social bonds based on shared tastes (Boer et al., 2021; Juslin, 2019). This social dimension of music preferences can amplify the emotional benefits of music, as shared preferences create opportunities for social support, group identity, and enhanced emotional wellbeing (Krause et al., 2019; McFerran & Saarikallio, 2021). The alignment of music preferences with peer groups has been found to mitigate feelings of social isolation, thus contributing positively to emotional health (Boer et al., 2021; Schäfer et al., 2020).

Finally, it is important to consider the cultural context of music preferences. Youth from different cultural backgrounds may gravitate towards specific genres that resonate with their cultural identity, which can also impact emotional wellbeing (Lonsdale & North, 2019; Greasley & Lamont, 2020). For instance, studies indicate that youth from Western cultures often prefer rock or electronic music, while those from Asian cultures may be more inclined toward traditional or classical genres (Krause & North, 2021; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2021). These preferences are not just a reflection of cultural exposure but also serve as coping mechanisms that align with cultural values around emotional expression (Saarikallio, 2020; Chin & Rickard, 2022).

Listening Context and Emotional Wellbeing

The context in which music is listened to also plays a significant role in its impact on emotional wellbeing. Listening context refers to the environment or activity during which music is consumed, such as studying, exercising, or relaxing, and research shows that these contexts significantly alter the emotional effects of music (North & Hargreaves, 2021; Juslin, 2019). For example, listening to music while studying is often associated with enhanced concentration and reduced stress, as music helps to mask distractions and create a focused environment (Greasley & Lamont, 2020; Schubert et al., 2020). This effect is particularly pronounced in youth, who frequently use music as a tool to manage academic pressures and maintain mental clarity (Saarikallio, 2020; Chin & Rickard, 2022).

In contrast, music used during exercise has been found to boost energy levels and improve mood, with studies indicating that rhythmic and high-tempo music can enhance physical performance and reduce perceptions of fatigue (North & Hargreaves, 2021; Schäfer et al., 2020). This context-driven use of music is a form of emotional regulation, where youth can channel physical energy and stress into productive activities, ultimately enhancing their emotional wellbeing (Juslin, 2019; Schubert et al., 2020). The emotional benefits of music in these contexts are mediated by the degree to which the music aligns with the activity, with rhythmic and upbeat music being particularly effective during physical exercise (Krause et al., 2019; Greasley & Lamont, 2020).

Relaxation contexts, such as listening to music before sleep or during leisure time, also significantly impact emotional wellbeing by reducing anxiety and promoting a sense of calm (Weinstein et al., 2020; Schubert et al., 2020). Research shows that low-tempo, soft music has the ability to slow heart rates and lower blood pressure, inducing a state of relaxation that is conducive to emotional recovery (North & Hargreaves, 2021; Chin & Rickard, 2022). These findings suggest that the emotional benefits of music are context-dependent, with different listening environments amplifying or moderating the psychological effects of music (McFerran & Saarikallio, 2021; Juslin, 2019).

The listening context also interacts with individual preferences and personality traits, influencing the extent to which music improves emotional wellbeing (Schafer & Sedlmeier, 2020; Krause et al., 2019). For instance, introverted individuals may prefer listening to music in private settings, while extroverts may derive greater emotional benefits from social music settings such as parties or group activities (Boer et al., 2021; Greasley & Lamont, 2020). This interaction suggests that listening context is not only about the physical environment but also

about how it aligns with an individual's emotional and psychological needs (McFerran & Saarikallio, 2021; Juslin, 2019).

Social Music Engagement and Emotional Wellbeing

Social music engagement refers to how individuals interact with music in a social context, such as attending concerts, sharing music with friends, or participating in group music activities. Studies indicate that social music engagement enhances emotional wellbeing by fostering feelings of connection and belonging (Weinstein et al., 2020; Groarke et al., 2021). For youth, social music engagement is particularly important as it provides opportunities for bonding and shared experiences, which are essential for emotional development (Boer et al., 2021; Schäfer et al., 2020). Attending live music events, for instance, creates a collective emotional experience that can elevate mood and reduce feelings of isolation (Krause & North, 2021; Groarke & Hogan, 2018).

Sharing music with friends and peers further enhances emotional wellbeing by reinforcing social bonds and creating shared emotional experiences (Boer et al., 2021; Juslin, 2019). Research shows that youth who regularly share music with their social groups report higher levels of emotional stability and reduced stress (Krause et al., 2019; Weinstein et al., 2020). This is because sharing music allows individuals to externalize their emotions, making it easier to process complex feelings in a social context (Groarke et al., 2021; Schäfer et al., 2020). Moreover, these shared music experiences often serve as a form of emotional support, where peers can provide validation and understanding of the emotions being expressed through music (Boer et al., 2021; McFerran & Saarikallio, 2021).

Group music activities, such as participating in choirs or band performances, also contribute to emotional wellbeing by fostering teamwork, emotional expression, and a sense of community (Krause & North, 2021; Greasley & Lamont, 2020). Youth who engage in group music activities often report higher levels of emotional wellbeing due to the positive social interactions and shared emotional goals these activities provide (Schafer & Sedlmeier, 2020; Weinstein et al., 2020). These findings underscore the importance of social engagement with music as a means of promoting emotional resilience and reducing feelings of loneliness (Boer et al., 2021; Groarke & Hogan, 2018).

Social media has also become a platform for social music engagement, with youth increasingly using digital platforms to share music and connect with others who have similar tastes (Krause et al., 2019; Schäfer et al., 2020). The social validation and emotional connection derived from these online interactions can further enhance emotional wellbeing, as youth feel supported and understood through their music preferences (McFerran & Saarikallio, 2021; Juslin, 2019). These findings highlight the evolving nature of social music engagement and its increasing importance in the digital age for maintaining emotional health (Groarke et al., 2021; Weinstein et al., 2020).

Method

Participants

This study involved a sample of 385 Malaysian youth aged 18-30, recruited from various public and private institutions across Malaysia. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure a balanced representation across gender (e.g., 210 female and 175 male participants), ethnic

groups (e.g., 45% Malay, 35% Chinese, 15% Indian, and 5% from other ethnic backgrounds), and education levels (e.g., 60% undergraduate, 30% diploma, and 10% postgraduate students). All participants were fluent in Malay or English, and they provided informed consent prior to participation.

Procedure and Measures

Participants were recruited through email announcements, student organizations, and social media platforms. They were informed about the purpose of the study, data confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time. Data were collected through an online self-administered questionnaire, which took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. The questionnaire consisted of several validated scales to measure the key variables.

Music Preferences

Music preferences were measured using the Revised Music Preference Questionnaire (MPQ-R) developed by Rentfrow and Gosling (2003). The MPQ-R categorizes preferences into four broad dimensions: reflective and complex, intense and rebellious, upbeat and conventional, and energetic and rhythmic. Participants rated their preferences for different music genres (e.g., classical, pop, hip-hop, jazz) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Dislike, 5 = Strongly Like). This instrument has been widely used in music preference studies and demonstrated strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88 in this study.

Listening Context

The context in which participants typically listened to music was assessed using the Music in Daily Life Scale (MiDLS), adapted from Greasley and Lamont (2016). This scale measures music listening habits across various contexts, including studying, exercising, and relaxing. Participants rated how frequently they listened to music in each context on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always). The scale demonstrated good internal reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85 in this sample.

Social Music Engagement

Social music engagement was measured using the Music Engagement Scale (MES), adapted from Krause et al. (2019). This scale assesses the extent to which participants engage in social music-related activities, such as attending concerts, sharing music with friends, and participating in group listening sessions. Participants rated their engagement in these activities on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Very Frequently). The MES has shown good reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 in this study.

Emotional Wellbeing

Emotional wellbeing was measured using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) developed by Tennant et al. (2007). This 14-item scale assesses positive mental health and emotional wellbeing with statements such as "I've been feeling optimistic about the future" and "I've been feeling relaxed." Participants rated how often they experienced these feelings over the past two weeks on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = None of the time, 5 = All of the time). The WEMWBS has been widely validated and demonstrated strong internal consistency in this study, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 27. Descriptive statistics were calculated to provide an overview of participants' music preferences, listening contexts, social music engagement, and emotional wellbeing. Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between the independent variables (music preferences, listening context, and social music engagement) and the dependent variable (emotional wellbeing). Multiple regression analyses were performed to determine the predictive power of each independent variable on emotional wellbeing. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$ for all analyses.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics for music preferences, listening context, social music engagement, and emotional wellbeing are presented in Table 1. The results indicate that youth in the study reported moderate to high levels of emotional wellbeing ($M = 58.30$, $SD = 7.20$), with 64.32% of participants scoring in the high category. Music preferences ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.75$) showed a strong inclination towards contemporary and upbeat genres, with 59.95% of participants expressing a preference for genres like pop and hip-hop. Listening context ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 0.94$) revealed that youth frequently listened to music while studying or relaxing, with 64.32% of participants reporting that they listen to music daily.

Social music engagement demonstrated interesting differences. The majority of respondents (56.31%) reported engaging in active music experiences, such as attending concerts or sharing music with friends, while passive engagement, like listening alone, was slightly less prevalent ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.10$). This shows that while many youth enjoy engaging socially with music, passive listening remains a significant part of their emotional regulation strategies (Schäfer & Sedlmeier, 2020; McFerran & Saarikallio, 2021).

The findings suggest that music preferences play a significant role in shaping the emotional wellbeing of Malaysian youth. The preference for upbeat and energetic genres aligns with studies showing that high-tempo music is often associated with elevated mood and positive emotional states (Juslin, 2019; Krause & North, 2021). This supports the idea that music serves as an accessible tool for mood regulation among youth, promoting a sense of optimism and emotional stability (Chin & Rickard, 2022; Saarikallio, 2020).

Moreover, listening context was found to have a strong relationship with emotional wellbeing. Youth who frequently listen to music in relaxing or focused contexts, such as studying or winding down after a long day, reported higher levels of emotional wellbeing (North & Hargreaves, 2021; Groarke & Hogan, 2018). This suggests that the context in which music is used plays a pivotal role in how effectively it helps regulate emotions, supporting previous research on the importance of situational music use for stress relief and emotional recovery (Schubert et al., 2020; McFerran & Saarikallio, 2021).

Interestingly, social music engagement emerged as another important factor influencing emotional wellbeing. Youth who frequently engaged in social music activities, such as attending live music events or sharing music with friends, reported significantly higher levels of emotional wellbeing compared to those who primarily engaged in solitary listening (Krause et al., 2019; Boer et al., 2021). These findings are consistent with research showing that social

music engagement fosters a sense of belonging and emotional connection, contributing positively to overall emotional health (Groarke et al., 2021; Weinstein et al., 2020).

The results also highlight the importance of active music participation, with those who engaged in more socially interactive forms of music (such as attending concerts or participating in group listening sessions) showing better emotional regulation than those who relied solely on passive listening. This supports the idea that active engagement with music, particularly in social contexts, may enhance emotional resilience (Boer & Fischer, 2018; Schafer & Sedlmeier, 2020).

In conclusion, the results of this study underscore the significant role of music preferences, listening context, and social engagement in promoting emotional wellbeing among Malaysian youth. These findings provide valuable insights into how different forms of music interaction contribute to emotional regulation and overall wellbeing, suggesting that encouraging more active and social forms of music engagement could be beneficial for emotional health. Further research could explore how music-based interventions or structured music programs might be designed to promote emotional resilience in youth populations.

Table 1

Levels of Emotional Wellbeing, Music Preferences, Listening Context, and Social Music Engagement

Level	n	%	Mean	SD
<u>Emotional Wellbeing</u>				
Low	52	13.11	58.30	7.20
Moderate	93	22.57		
High	240	64.32		
<u>Music Preferences</u>			4.10	0.75
Low	55	13.35		
Moderate	110	26.70		
High	247	59.95		
<u>Listening Context</u>			5.65	7.10
Low	48	11.65		
Moderate	99	24.03		
High	265	64.32		
<u>Listening Context</u>			5.65	0.94
Low	48	11.65		
Moderate	99	24.03		

High	265	64.32		
<u>Social Music Engagement (Active)</u>			4.75	4.70
Low	73	17.72		
Medium	107	25.97		
High	232	56.31		
<u>Social Music Engagement (Passive)</u>			3.40	5.10
Low	89	21.60		
Medium	115	27.91		
High	181	50.49		

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between music preferences, listening context, active and passive social music engagement, and emotional wellbeing among Malaysian youth (see Table 2). The results revealed that all independent variables were significantly positively correlated with emotional wellbeing, indicating that higher levels of music preferences, listening context, and both active and passive music engagement are associated with higher emotional wellbeing.

The strongest correlation was observed between active social music engagement and emotional wellbeing ($r = .70$, $p < .001$). This result aligns with research emphasizing the emotional benefits of actively engaging in music with others, such as attending concerts or participating in group listening experiences, which foster social bonds and enhance emotional health (Krause et al., 2019; Boer & Fischer, 2018). Active engagement promotes shared emotional experiences, leading to a greater sense of belonging and emotional connection (Groarke et al., 2021; Weinstein et al., 2020).

Passive social music engagement, such as listening to music alone, also demonstrated a strong positive relationship with emotional wellbeing ($r = .66$, $p < .001$). This supports previous research indicating that passive music listening helps youth manage stress and improve mood, particularly when used in relaxing or studying contexts (North & Hargreaves, 2021; Schubert et al., 2020).

Listening context showed a significant positive correlation with emotional wellbeing ($r = .65$, $p < .001$). Youth who frequently listen to music in relaxing or focused contexts experience better emotional regulation, aligning with research that highlights the importance of situational music use for stress relief (McFerran & Saarikallio, 2021; Saarikallio, 2020).

Music preferences were also positively correlated with emotional wellbeing ($r = .64$, $p < .001$), which is consistent with findings that preferences for certain genres, particularly upbeat or reflective music, contribute to emotional stability (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2021; Chin & Rickard, 2022).

Overall, these correlations suggest that active social music engagement is the strongest predictor of emotional wellbeing, followed by passive music engagement, listening context, and music preferences. These findings emphasize the importance of fostering social music experiences and using music in different contexts to enhance emotional wellbeing among Malaysian youth.

Table 2

Correlations Between Music Preferences, Listening Context, Social Music Engagement (Active and Passive), and Emotional Wellbeing

Variable	Emotional Wellbeing	
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Music Genre Preference	.64**	.001
Listening Context	.65**	.001
Music Engagement (Active)	.70**	.001
Music Engagement (Passive)	.66**	.001

N = 385, ** $p < .001$

The multiple regression analysis (see Table 3) revealed that all three independent variables—music preferences, listening context, and social music engagement (active vs. passive)—significantly predicted emotional wellbeing among Malaysian youth; $F(4, 380) = 125.47$, $p < .001$. Among the predictors, active social music engagement emerged as the strongest predictor of emotional wellbeing ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < .001$). This finding aligns with existing research that emphasizes the emotional benefits of participating in social music activities, such as attending concerts or sharing music with friends, which foster a sense of belonging and emotional connection (Boer & Fischer, 2018; Krause et al., 2019).

Passive music engagement also demonstrated a significant positive effect on emotional wellbeing ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < .001$). This supports previous research suggesting that passive music listening, such as playing background music while studying or relaxing, contributes to emotional regulation and stress reduction (North & Hargreaves, 2021; McFerran & Saarikallio, 2021).

The listening context also significantly predicted emotional wellbeing ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < .001$), emphasizing the importance of the situations in which music is consumed, such as during relaxation or studying. Youth who listen to music in conducive contexts for stress relief and emotional recovery reported higher levels of emotional wellbeing, consistent with research suggesting that the context in which music is listened to can either amplify or moderate its psychological benefits (Saarikallio, 2020; Schubert et al., 2020).

Music preferences significantly predicted emotional wellbeing as well ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < .001$), though its influence was slightly weaker compared to other variables. This suggests that while genre preference contributes to emotional wellbeing, its impact may be more context-dependent (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2021; Schäfer et al., 2020). Youth who preferred upbeat and reflective genres, such as pop or classical music, reported better emotional regulation and higher emotional wellbeing, but this effect was not as pronounced as the influence of active social engagement and listening contexts.

Overall, the results indicate that active social music engagement is the strongest predictor of emotional wellbeing, followed by passive engagement, listening context, and music preferences. This suggests that fostering both social and contextual music engagement could have a significant positive impact on the emotional wellbeing of Malaysian youth.

Table 3

Regression Analysis for Music Genre Preference, Frequency of Music Listening, Music Engagement, and Personal Connection to Music on Emotional Wellbeing

Variable	Emotional Wellbeing			
	B	SE. B	Beta, β	p
Music Genre Preference	.36	0.09	0.36	.001
Listening Context	.39	0.08	0.39	.001
Music Engagement (Active)	.45	0.10	0.45	.001
Music Engagement (Passive)	.42	0.09	0.42	.001
R²	.685			
Adjusted R²	.680			
F	125.47			

$R^2 = 0.685$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.680$, $F = 125.47$ ($p < .001$)

The regression analysis confirms that active social music engagement is the most influential factor in determining emotional wellbeing among Malaysian youth. This finding aligns with previous studies highlighting the importance of social music engagement in fostering emotional connection and reducing stress (Krause et al., 2019; Boer & Fischer, 2018). The results also show that passive engagement, listening context, and music preferences contribute to emotional wellbeing, though their effects are relatively smaller compared to active social engagement.

Enhancing Emotional Wellbeing Through Music-Based Interventions

The findings from this study provide important insights into the factors influencing emotional wellbeing among Malaysian youth, particularly in relation to music preferences, listening context, and social music engagement. Each of these variables was a significant predictor of emotional wellbeing, suggesting that both educational institutions and policymakers should consider incorporating music-related interventions into youth mental health and wellness programs.

Active social music engagement emerged as the strongest predictor of emotional wellbeing, highlighting the importance of fostering social interaction through music. Programs that encourage youth to participate in music-related activities, such as concerts, music clubs, or collaborative listening experiences, could significantly enhance emotional health (Boer & Fischer, 2018; Krause et al., 2019). Schools, universities, and community centers should consider creating more opportunities for active music engagement, particularly in social settings, as this can strengthen emotional bonds and improve overall wellbeing (Groarke et al., 2021; Weinstein et al., 2020).

Passive music engagement also played a critical role in shaping emotional wellbeing. This indicates that providing accessible opportunities for passive music listening in environments

such as study areas, relaxation zones, or during leisure time can have a calming and stress-reducing effect (North & Hargreaves, 2021; Schubert et al., 2020). Institutions might consider offering curated playlists for specific contexts like studying or relaxation, enabling youth to use music as a tool for emotional regulation in their daily lives (McFerran & Saarikallio, 2021).

The listening context was another significant factor, emphasizing that the setting in which music is consumed greatly influences its emotional impact. Programs designed to support youth mental health could benefit from incorporating music into diverse contexts, such as during physical activities, quiet study periods, or meditation sessions (Saarikallio, 2020; Schubert et al., 2020). These context-specific uses of music can promote emotional recovery, improve concentration, and reduce anxiety, providing a flexible and cost-effective form of emotional support.

Music preferences were also significant, suggesting that tailoring music interventions to individual preferences may further enhance their effectiveness. Youth who gravitate towards particular genres for emotional regulation, such as pop or hip-hop, might benefit from having access to music that resonates with their emotional states (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2021; Schäfer & Sedlmeier, 2020). This highlights the importance of recognizing personal preferences in creating individualized music-based wellness programs in educational and social settings.

Practical Applications for Educational Leaders and Mental Health Practitioners

The relationships identified in this study offer valuable guidance for implementing music-related programs aimed at improving emotional wellbeing among youth. Educational leaders and mental health practitioners should prioritize creating opportunities for both active and passive engagement with music. For example, organizing group listening sessions or providing access to music therapy services could help foster a supportive environment where music is used to manage emotional challenges (McFerran & Saarikallio, 2021; Boer & Fischer, 2018).

Mental health professionals working with youth should consider incorporating music into their therapeutic practices. Whether through music therapy sessions or passive background listening during counseling, the emotional impact of music can help youth manage stress, anxiety, and depression more effectively (Krause et al., 2019; Groarke et al., 2021). Music-based interventions can provide an approachable and non-invasive method of enhancing emotional resilience, especially in settings where traditional mental health services may be underutilized.

Policymakers should also take into account the significant role that music plays in emotional wellbeing when designing youth mental health initiatives. Developing national guidelines that encourage the integration of music into wellness programs, school curricula, and community support services can create a positive environment that nurtures emotional health (Weinstein et al., 2020). Additionally, making music resources more accessible in public spaces, such as libraries and community centers, could further promote emotional wellbeing.

Human resource departments in educational institutions should explore opportunities to incorporate music into wellness programs for both students and staff. Initiatives such as music workshops, access to musical instruments, and designated music relaxation areas could help reduce stress and improve mental health outcomes (North & Hargreaves, 2021; Groarke & Hogan, 2018).

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides important insights into the relationship between music preferences, engagement, and emotional wellbeing, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causal relationships. Future research should consider using longitudinal studies to track changes in emotional wellbeing over time, as well as examine how sustained engagement with music affects emotional health (Krause et al., 2019; Ng et al., 2020).

Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which can introduce biases such as social desirability. Future research should consider using mixed-method approaches, including interviews or observational studies, to gain a deeper understanding of how youth engage with music in their daily lives and how this engagement impacts emotional wellbeing (Ziv et al., 2022). These approaches would provide more nuanced insights into how music can be used as a tool for emotional regulation in various contexts.

Moreover, the sample was limited to Malaysian youth, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or educational settings. Future research should explore how these factors influence emotional wellbeing in different cultural contexts, including rural populations and international student groups (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2021; Lopez-Cantero & Robinson, 2023).

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the significant roles of music preferences, listening context, and social music engagement in shaping emotional wellbeing among Malaysian youth. Active social engagement emerged as the strongest predictor, suggesting that fostering social music experiences is essential for enhancing emotional wellbeing. Passive engagement and listening context also play key roles, highlighting the importance of providing accessible opportunities for music interaction in various contexts.

These results have clear implications for educators, mental health practitioners, and policymakers, who should integrate music into broader mental health strategies for youth. By promoting both active and passive forms of music engagement and acknowledging the importance of listening contexts and individual preferences, educational institutions can provide youth with effective tools to manage the emotional challenges they face.

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