

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Perceived Value of Music Listening

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Amanda E. Krause^{1,2} , Sabrina McKenzie² ,
Solange Glasser²  and Margaret S. Osborne^{2,3} 

Abstract

This study considers if, and how, the value people place in music listening changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, by comparing findings with pre-COVID data. A sample of 296 Australian university students ($M_{age} = 19.32$) completed an online survey in which they provided a short response to an open-ended question, “has the value you place in music listening changed during the pandemic? If so, how?” Of the 67.20% of respondents who indicated that their perceived value of music listening had changed, 99.50% expressed that the value had increased. A thematic analysis resulted in seven themes characterizing how people’s value in listening had increased: emotion regulation, exploration, social connection, uses, listening more, self-connection, and reliance. Relative to pre-COVID value themes, emotion regulation remained the most frequently endorsed value. In the COVID context, many more people highlighted music’s ability to combat loneliness, promote social connection, and provide solace, comfort, and companionship during difficult times. Our findings highlight that people’s perception of the value of music is malleable and influenced by context. Future research will reveal whether the increased value of music listening seen in the present study is long-lasting.

Keywords

COVID-19, engagement, everyday music listening, uses & gratifications, value

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Globally, people spend up to 20.1 hr listening to music per week (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry [IFPI], 2022). Not only do people spend a lot of time listening – most people consider music to be important in their lives: compared to 54% of IFPI’s (2019) participants who said they “love” or are “fanatical” about music, only 2.5% of participants said that music was “unimportant” to them.

Given how prominent music is in people’s lives, research has considered people’s reasons for listening to music (e.g., Lonsdale & North, 2011; Randall & Rickard, 2017; Schäfer et al., 2013). This research has often adopted a Uses and Gratifications approach (e.g., Lonsdale & North, 2011) and typically has considered how music is used or the functions it might serve (e.g., Schäfer et al., 2013). While various functions have been identified, Schäfer et al. pointed to three dimensions for listening to music – “to achieve self-awareness, social relatedness, and arousal and mood regulation” (2013, p. 6). This focus on function places the value of music listening in

“its ability to function as a means to an end” (Krause et al., 2021b, p. 3).

Our prior work shows that approximately one-third of young adults value and appreciate music because of its beauty and/or the enjoyment they receive from listening, suggesting respondents value music listening as a “means in and of itself” – a phrase supported by philosophical and ethical considerations of intrinsic value (Krause et al.,

¹ Department of Psychology, James Cook University, Townsville, Australia

² Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

³ Melbourne School of Psychological Sciences, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

Corresponding author:

Amanda E. Krause, Department of Psychology - Building 4, James Cook University, 1 James Cook Drive, Townsville, QLD 4811, Australia
Email: Amanda.Krause1@jcu.edu.au

Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article



2021b). This acknowledges music's intrinsic value, irrespective of extrinsic motivations for using music to fulfill various functions (Krause et al., 2021b); however, it is also important to consider that people's everyday music listening practices are influenced by the context in which people find themselves (e.g., Greb et al., 2019; Hargreaves, 2012; Krause & North, 2017; Saarikallio et al., 2020).

Thus, we can look to the Reciprocal Feedback Model, which outlines that our responses to music are determined by three, interacting determinants – the music, the context, and the listener (Hargreaves, 2012) – to ask: How is the perceived value of music listening influenced by a macro-level context like the COVID-19 pandemic? The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected many lives (Zacher & Rudolph, 2021); disruptions to social interactions and everyday routines have led to various mental health concerns such as anxiety, stress, and depression (Brooks et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2020). In response to social distancing, young adults consumed more media content (television, music listening, social media, video games) during the pandemic (Fink et al., 2021; Wulf et al., 2022). COVID-19 research has shown people typically increased the time they spent listening to music (Carlson et al., 2021; Fink et al., 2021; Ziv & Hollander-Shabtai, 2022) and that listening to music assisted with regulating moods, coping with stress, and feeling connected to others – often to a greater degree than under usual circumstances (Cabedo-Mas et al., 2021; Fink et al., 2021; Granot et al., 2021; Groarke et al., 2022; Henry et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2021; Vidas et al., 2021; Ziv & Hollander-Shabtai, 2022). Moreover, during COVID-19, music listening has been reported as positively associated with life satisfaction (Krause et al., 2021a) and has been considered to be the most efficient activity to attain enjoyment, maintain a good mood, and alleviate negative emotions

(compared to watching TV, cooking, physical activity, gaming; Granot et al., 2021). With particular reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, 85% of 16–19-year-olds said music had a positive impact on their well-being (IFPI, 2021).

In the present study, we explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on how people value music, looking beyond just its uses and functions. The COVID-19 pandemic presented a potential once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to capture the impact of an historical moment on music listening behaviors and values. As a research team, we embraced the opportunity to study the impact of the pandemic on the perceived value of music listening to consider potential changes in individuals' music listening behaviors. Our aim was to compare pre- and peri-COVID music listening behaviors and values, comparing results from the present study to our previous study conducted pre-COVID-19 (Krause et al., 2021b). We did this by collecting questionnaire data on music listening during COVID-19 via items similar to those in Krause et al.'s (2021b) study conducted prior to COVID-19. We posed two related research questions:

1. Did the value young adults place in music listening change during COVID-19, and if so, how?
2. What are the potential changes in perceived value relative to our pre-COVID findings (Krause et al., 2021b; see Table 1)?

Method

Participants

A total of 296 university students residing in Australia completed an online survey between February and November 2022. This sample included 211 individuals identifying as female (71.28%), 72 as male (24.32%), seven as non-binary

Table 1. Krause et al.'s (2021b) themes identified in people's responses to being asked, "Do you value listening"? (Pre-COVID data collection).

Theme	Percent of cases ^a	Brief description
Appreciation	31.40	Included enjoyment, beauty, and that music listening is a favored activity
Emotion	24.50	Included inducing emotions, processing emotions, expressing emotions
Time and engagement	22.50	Value reflected in the time spent on music listening
Cognitive	13.70	Value through focused listening, and on the ability to listen in an expert, or analytical, manner
Mood regulation	10.80	Included using music listening to regulate mood, complement a mood, and as a healthy coping strategy (especially regarding stress, motivation, relaxation)
Escape	7.80	Included using music listening to escape from thoughts, feelings, or physical reality
Narrative	7.80	Value gained "through the lyrics" and because lyrics foster felt connections between listener, music, and/or performers
Identity	6.90	An indication of music as an important aspect of someone's identity
Social	6.90	Value due to being able to connect with others via music listening
Purpose	4.90	Music and music listening adding meaning to life and as integral to life
Physical	2.00	Value through perceived physical effects
Study	1.00	Value as a study aid
Money	1.00	Music having a monetary value

^aIt is possible to have over 100% because each response could pertain to more than one theme.

(2.36%), two as genderfluid (0.68%), one as agender (0.34%), and three preferred to not answer (1.01%). Participants were aged 17 to 33 ($M=19.32$, $Mdn = 19$, $SD=2.37$). The University of Melbourne human ethics committee approved this research (HREC number: 2022-23129-24935-3). Study participation was voluntary; however, individuals who took part via a University research participation scheme did receive course credit for their participation.

Procedure and Materials

Data reported here was obtained as part of a larger survey exploring contemporary music listening. Individuals accessed the participant information via a direct weblink to the Qualtrics website. Following their indication of consent, individuals then completed the survey, which was experienced as a series of webpages (e.g., background questions appeared on one page and the open-ended question [detailed below] on another). The final webpage thanked and debriefed participants.

Demographic questions asked participants to report their gender, age, whether they were currently a university student, and postcode (to ensure respondents were currently residing in Australia).

Next, participants were asked questions relating to their musical engagement and background. They rated how important they considered music to be on a seven-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*) and stated how many hours they listened to music on average daily (Krause et al., 2020). Participants were also asked to indicate how often they had been listening to music during the pandemic relative to before the pandemic using a seven-point scale (1 = *much less*, 7 = *much more*). Additionally, they rated their level of musicianship via Kreutz et al.'s (2008) single item, such that they selected professional, semi-professional, amateur, occasional, or hardly ever play(ed).

Lastly, an author-developed, open-ended question was posed to participants. It asked, "Has the value you place in music listening changed during the pandemic? If so, how?" Participants were asked to provide a one- to two-sentence response. As in Krause et al. (2021b), we presented the question without defining "music listening" so as to not influence participant responses.

Data Analysis

SPSS version 27 was used to produce summary statistics, conduct frequency analyses, and perform an exploratory chi-square analysis. A chi-square test of contingencies ($\alpha = .05$) was used to analyze if value change (coded as yes/no) was related to whether people were listening to music more often during the pandemic than before. For this analysis, we created three categories to represent less, the same, and more listening (a response of 1–3 was coded as "less"

listening, a 4 was "the same", and a 5–7 was "more" listening).

In response to the qualitative open-ended question ($n = 195$), thematic analysis was used to identify, examine, and record repeated patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2022; as done in Krause et al., 2021b). After familiarizing ourselves with the data, responses were coded in Excel to capture key messages, before refining and grouping into themes and sub-themes using an inductive, reflexive approach. In this way, an inductive approach was used, such that the analysis was guided by the data rather than an existing theory or framework (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Multiple codes were permitted for each participant's response (Nowell et al., 2017). Coding reliability was assessed by two of the authors (2nd and 3rd author) blind coding 33% of the responses, with overall coding agreement of 88%. Disagreements were resolved by consensus, and the 2nd author subsequently completed the coding. After coding all responses, multiple response frequency analyses were performed in SPSS version 28 to determine frequency of themes.

Results

To characterize our sample, we assessed the frequency of participants' responses for each item in our musical background questionnaire. On average, the sample rated music as very important in their lives ($M=6.21$ on a 7-point scale, $Mdn = 6$, $SD=0.95$) and reported listening to 3.50 hr of music daily ($Mdn = 3$, $SD=3.14$). The majority of the participants labelled themselves as a "non-musician" (37.20% reported that they hardly ever play(ed) and 17.60% reported that they occasionally play[ed]); 30.70% labelled themselves as amateurs; and only 12.20% and 2.40% labelled themselves as semi-professionals and professionals, respectively.

Of the 296 participants, 80.41% reported listening to music more often during the pandemic than before. In contrast, 11.82% reported their listening as about the same, and only 7.77% reported any decrease in listening.

To consider value change (RQ1), participants responded to the open-ended question: "Has the value you place in music listening changed during the pandemic? If so, how?" We first categorized their responses as to whether they expressed that the perceived value in music listening had changed. A frequency analysis showed that most participants (67.20%) expressed that their perceived value of music listening had changed. Of the people who said that it *had changed*, 99.50% expressed that the value had increased (RQ1). Of the people (32.80%) who said that it *had not changed*, 48.46% simply said it had not changed, 37.11% explained that there had been no change because it was already highly valued, 8.24% said while the value had not changed, their usage had, and 6.19% expressed that the value had not changed because the pandemic was not an issue for them.

The chi-square analysis examining whether value change (yes/no) was associated with pandemic listening time (less, the same, or more) was statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N=296) = 35.92, p < .001, \Phi = .348$. Specifically, people who indicated that their listening had increased were more likely to also report the value had changed (see Table 2). This suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial impact on many participants' relationship with music.

For the thematic analysis examining shifts in the perceived value of music listening, we analyzed 195 responses that explicitly articulated value changes. This analysis yielded seven themes (with additional sub-themes): emotion regulation, exploration, social connection, uses, listening more, self-connection, and reliance. The percentage of participants who reported each theme is detailed in Table 3. Responses that were ambiguous with insufficient detail to code to a theme, for example "Appreciate it more," "Yes," "Sometimes, because I do not have too many things to do." are referred to as "Not specified" in Table 3. Table 4 defines the themes and includes indicative quotes.

By examining both the type and frequency of themes regarding perceived music value relative to our pre-COVID findings (summarized in Table 1 – Krause et al., 2021b), we can consider perceived changes in the value placed in music listening (RQ2). The most dramatic shift occurred in the percentage of respondents whose responses reflected *social connection*, which was more than three times greater in the COVID period than pre-COVID (as seen in the percentage of cases in Tables 1 and 3). The largest number of responses pertained to the value labeled as *emotion regulation*, which is consistent with our pre-COVID data. One third of the sample valued the opportunity to *explore* music, which represented an expansion of the appreciation theme, which also appeared in our pre-COVID dataset. In this context, listeners sought new experiences and connections with a variety of genres and artists, expanding their musical listening repertoire. Similarly, the *uses* theme expanded to include specific uses, including to pass time; escape; stave off boredom; and distract oneself. People also noted music helped them stay focused and productive whilst studying or working from home, with distinct relevance to the COVID-19 periods of

Table 2. Cross-tabulation of how perceived value change in music listening was related to listening frequency during the pandemic relative to before the pandemic.

Whether the perceived value in music listening had changed		Listening frequency during the pandemic relative to before			
		Less	Same	More	Total
No	Count	11	26	60	97
	% within Value change category	11.3%	26.8%	61.9%	100.0%
	% within Listening frequency category	47.8%	74.3%	25.2%	32.8%
	% of Total	3.7%	8.8%	20.3%	32.8%
Yes	Count	12	9	178	199
	% within Value change category	6.0%	4.5%	89.4%	100.0%
	% within Listening frequency category	52.2%	25.7%	74.8%	67.2%
	% of Total	4.1%	3.0%	60.1%	67.2%
Total	Count	23	35	238	296
	% within Value change category	7.8%	11.8%	80.4%	100.0%
	% within Listening frequency category	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total	7.8%	11.8%	80.4%	100.0%

Table 3. Themes identified concerning the value of music listening during COVID-19.

Theme	Number of times code indicated	Percent of codes	Percent of cases ^a
Emotion regulation	77	28.00	38.70
Exploration	55	20.00	27.60
Social connection	48	17.50	24.10
Uses	33	12.00	16.60
Listening more	31	11.30	15.60
Not specified ^b	17	6.20	8.50
Self-connection	8	2.90	4.00
Reliance	6	2.20	3.00
Total	275	100.00	138.20

^aPercent of cases indicates what percentage of respondents provided a statement that was coded to that theme. It is possible to have over 100% because each participant response could include more than one theme.

^bThe code "Not specified" referred to responses that were unable to be coded thematically due to insufficient or unclear expression.

Table 4. Thematic descriptors and exemplars concerning the value of music listening during COVID-19.

Themes (description)	Sub-theme	Exemplar quotations
Emotion regulation The theme of “Emotion Regulation” recurred frequently in the participants’ responses, underscoring the significance of music in facilitating emotional regulation.	Emotional support	<i>“Music listening has become more valuable as a form of healing and way to calm or distract from stressful situations or thoughts about future events.”</i>
		<i>“Yeah I think it has because it’s become more prevalent in my life but it is also another way for me to lift myself up when I feel down.”</i>
		<i>“Music has really helped me particularly during isolation and keep my emotions positive and happy.”</i>
	Reduce stress or anxiety	<i>“Yes, I’ve been listening to more music to reduce my stress.”</i>
		<i>“Yes. It’s helped me to become more in tune with my emotions. Helps regulate stress...”</i>
		<i>“Yes, it is a good way of managing stress/anxiety and difficult emotions”</i>
	Coping mechanism	<i>“I placed a lot more value of it as the pandemic progressed as listening to angsty music quickly became a coping mechanism and a way for me to boost my mood.”</i>
		<i>“More difficult life events during pandemic – more stress & less ways to relieve stress because of lockdowns/no entertainment venues open – music used as coping mechanism.”</i>
		<i>After the pandemic started, I have started listening to music much more extensively as a way to cope through these hard times. It has helped in keeping my emotions check since then.”</i>
	Feeling less lonely	<i>“It has become more important to me so I don’t feel so alone.” “Made me feel less lonely in lockdowns.”</i>
<i>“Yes and that value has increased as music made me feel less lonely in the pandemic as I felt others were going through similar experiences and music helped me express my emotions and feel better, e.g., listening to happy music (pop) to feel happy or sad music when I wanted to wallow in my feelings.”</i>		
Emotional expression		
Exploration Exploring music differently during the pandemic. This theme brings attention to the role of music in facilitating new experiences and connections with various genres and artists, highlighting its meaningful value during challenging times.	Emotional expression	<i>“Yes. It has increased as I know can express and experience my emotions through music.”</i>
	Emotional expression	<i>“The value of music has become more important to me since the pandemic as it is a form of communicating my emotions and venting when I was unable to do physically with people. Music has become almost a friend for me in times when I felt alone during the pandemic.”</i>
	Emotional expression	<i>“I valued music a lot more during the pandemic as it was almost a source of remedy. One that can help to put me at ease and experience a surge of different positive emotions.”</i>
	New genres/music	<i>“I’ve begun exploring new genres that were unfamiliar.”</i>
Exploration	New genres/music	<i>“I have broadened my music taste and delved into more types of music since the pandemic and also felt connected to more types of music.”</i>

(continued)

Table 4. (continued)

Themes (description)	Sub-theme	Exemplar quotations
Social Connection Social Connection includes responses in which individuals used music to connect with others or to feel a sense of shared experience with an artist or lyrics. This theme also includes instances where participants described using music as a source of companionship during times of loneliness or solitude. The theme highlights the importance of music in promoting social connections and creating a sense of belonging and community.	Different meaning/ appreciation	<p>"I placed more value in music during the pandemic. As I have nothing to do at home, the frequency of listening to music has increased so much. This has also exposed me to new music styles, artists, genres, lyrics etc."</p> <p>"Yes. more meaningful listening after pandemic."</p> <p>"Yes, it has made me appreciate the passion and time as well as raw emotions that are required to formulate music."</p>
	Brings people together	<p>"I think I have a greater understanding of music and the industry which has lead me to be more involved."</p> <p>"The value has increased. It acts as a way to bond with friends over common interests, which is harder during COVID in which travel is restricted."</p> <p>"Yes, I value music more during the pandemic because it is one way to feel togetherness..."</p> <p>"Yes, I see music as something that can be gifted and shared between people, and something that can create special moments."</p>
	Connection to community/people/ friends	<p>"I value music more because it is a way for me to connect with my community after being apart for so long..."</p> <p>"Yes, because music has accompanied me through pandemic and making feeling I am connected to others."</p>
	Connection to the lyrics/artist	<p>"Music is a way to connect with others and with myself while distracting myself from the world around me and relax in times of stress."</p> <p>"Yes, more so than before when it is difficult to confide in other people I feel that I can find some sense of connection and feel validated by the lyrics in songs that are relatable, music can also lift my spirits and make me feel more optimistic, and excited for the present and future."</p> <p>"... I have always had emotional reactions to artists I love, so overall the value I place on listening to music has not changed drastically."</p>
	Sense of belonging	<p>"... Helped me feel more connected to the artists"</p> <p>"... It reminds me that I am not alone and that everything I am experiencing is human."</p> <p>"Something to escape to and understand that someone else has the same feelings as I do"</p>
	Live performance	<p>"Yes, music gives me more sense of belonging and safety when I feel lonely."</p> <p>"I value live music experiences – rehearsals, concerts, lessons, the chance to perform – much more."</p> <p>"I value live concerts much more."</p> <p>"Yes as I appreciate live music more and getting out to concerts."</p>

(continued)

Table 4. (continued)

Themes (description)	Sub-theme	Exemplar quotations
	Music for company	<p>“Listening to music in isolation was a way to feel as though I was with people even though I wasn’t. So at that time I listened more regularly to music with lyrics and more intimate lyrics.”</p> <p>“The value of music has become more important to me since the pandemic as it is a form of communicating my emotions and venting when I was unable to do physically with people. Music has become almost a friend for me in times when I felt alone during the pandemic.”</p> <p>“Yes, during the pandemic I have come to highly value the usage of music. Usually I am used to hanging out friends to study, however especially during the lockdown I was stuck in my room alone. Therefore, music seemed to be a ‘friend,’ and allowed me to feel a sense of comfort when preparing for assessments.”</p>
Uses Includes responses where the ‘use of music’ has changed during the pandemic.	Escape	<p>“It’s become more valuable as I use it to escape.”</p> <p>“Yes, it allowed me to realise that music can be an escape no matter what is going on around you.”</p> <p>“Yes, it has now become some sort of escapism from my own reality, an imaginary world in which I could explore without the constraints present in the physical world.”</p>
	To pass time	<p>“Yes, place more value on simply listening to music as a way to pass time rather than listening to it whilst doing something else in order to better appreciate it.”</p> <p>“Yes as I have more free time to think and therefore music is a way of filling up time.”</p> <p>“... I think since the pandemic hit I have enjoyed the small moments a little more and this has including the time to put on background music and enjoy it if a good song comes on rather than always being in a rush.”</p>
	Study/work	<p>“However, due to online classes, I began to play music in the background as I studied, and now I have become dependent on this as a background noise for whenever I am undergoing intense note-taking or revision.”</p> <p>“I have definitely valued music listening more during the pandemic, in terms of its ability to allow me to focus and calm myself down when I’m studying or working.”</p>
	Exercise	<p>“... My life definitely is more involved with music now as well, in terms of how I use music as a tool to prepare my mind for different work or tasks.”</p> <p>“During the pandemic, I frequently did workout in my room so I need to play some music while workout.”</p> <p>“... Helps me relax, enjoy myself, exercise, connect to others & think about world.”</p>
	Distraction	<p>“Yes, because it has helped distract me and feel good during low times.”</p> <p>“Music is a way to connect with others and with myself while distracting myself from the world around me and relax in times of stress.”</p>

(continued)

Table 4. (continued)

Themes (description)	Sub-theme	Exemplar quotations
	Boredom	<p>“During the pandemic music became a great source of relaxation and distraction.”</p> <p>“Guess yes because I listen to music more during the pandemic as I was bored.”</p> <p>“Yes, it makes me get through hard times in pandemic and kill the boredom.”</p>
<p>Listening more</p> <p>The theme captures the trend of increased music consumption during the pandemic.</p>	Listened to music more during the pandemic	<p>“I valued music a bit more during the pandemic, as it helped me become less bored staying at home.”</p> <p>“I have always valued music but listening to it more during the pandemic did make me value it more.”</p> <p>“Yes, I didn’t listen to much music pre-COVID, but during and after COVID I have listened to a lot of music. It is enjoyable and helps me keep a stable mood, when I’m down it allows me to cheer up, and when I’m happy, it allows me to sustain it.”</p>
<p>Self-Connection</p> <p>The theme refers to being attuned to one’s own inner experience, feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations through music during the pandemic. It includes responses where individuals cultivate a sense of inner peace, clarity, and balance as a result of developing a deeper relationship with themselves.</p>	Connection to self	<p>“Yes. Music listening has been more present in my life during the pandemic than before.” “I listen to it much more and appreciate it much more.”</p> <p>“I feel more connected to myself to be honest.”</p> <p>“Yes, music listening has become more valuable to me because it has been a way to connect more with myself and others and stay up to date with the world around me (especially by listening to new tracks and songs that recently won awards) despite being in lockdown.”</p>
	Self-identity	<p>“I now listen to more international music which has strong influences from my ethnic background, enabling me to connect with my own roots.”</p> <p>“Yes, as I listened to music more and found more artists, certain songs have developed emotional value. Therefore, through listening to music more, I feel as though it has become a core of my identity.”</p> <p>“I like having an identity relating to music, and going to shows.”</p> <p>“I love music more because I started dancing to them (especially k-pop) during the pandemic, so now I dance when I hear certain songs and it’s helped me become more confident in my body.”</p>
<p>Reliance</p> <p>The theme of reliance explores how people became dependent on music during COVID-19. Music has emerged as a reliable and dependable source of emotional solace as individuals around the world face unprecedented challenges and uncertainty.</p>	Reliance on music	<p>“Has increased due to the reliance I had on music in lockdown.”</p> <p>“... I almost feel I dependence on certain songs or pieces now to stay focussed or as part of my daily routine.”</p> <p>“Yes as I tend to rely on music more now since the pandemic.”</p>

lockdown and isolation. The pattern of results in both *listening more* and *reliance* suggests that individuals developed a greater dependence on music during the pandemic by listening to music more frequently and for longer periods of time.

Discussion

Context and COVID-19

Our results indicate the role of music in people’s lives may not be static but can evolve and adapt to support their

changing life worlds. A notable transformation was observed in the ways participants engaged with music listening for social connection during the pandemic, with our thematic analysis results revealing that individuals increasingly turned to music to fulfil a deeper and more pressing need for emotional support and social belonging. Our analysis implied that the function of music listening was adapted during the pandemic – for example, serving as a stand-in for direct social interaction. This nuanced shift, where music listening might have been used to compensate for reduced face-to-face social opportunities, highlights a broadening of the scope of music’s social utility. Furthermore, by comparing participants’ responses before and during the pandemic, our study highlights how music engagement contexts shape music’s perceived value.

Two of our most frequently endorsed COVID themes, *emotion regulation* and *social connection*, indicate a continued emphasis on valuing music for social and emotional reasons pre- and peri-COVID. These are often highlighted in research on the value or uses and gratifications of, or well-being benefits associated with, music (e.g., Dingle et al., 2021; Krause et al., 2018; Schäfer et al., 2013). Music plays a crucial role in regulating emotions (Juslin & Laukka, 2004; Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007; Sloboda et al., 2001), including recent studies that have reported people use music to cope with stress and connection with others specifically during COVID-19 (Cabedo-Mas et al., 2021; Granot et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2021).

Music for company has been implied in past work indicating music supports friendships and community building (e.g., Lonsdale & North, 2011), but in the present data (Tables 2 and 3), we interpret people’s responses concerning social connection as indicative of music functioning as a social surrogate (Groarke et al., 2022; Schäfer et al., 2020). Participants engaged with music to compensate for a lack of social interaction, allowing them to feel connected to others despite physical distancing measures (e.g., “*I value it even more as I realised how much it can connect people even if we are disconnected*”). In these ways, individual listening was social – it provided feelings of connection, companionship, and community. Therefore, the social functions of music are broadened to include the desire to feel connected with others, a finding that is consistent with other music listening research conducted during COVID-19 (Cabedo-Mas et al., 2021, Fink et al., 2021, Ribeiro et al., 2021; Ziv & Hollander-Shabtai, 2022). Our study highlights the potential for music to play a vital role in addressing social and emotional challenges, and emphasizes music’s ability to provide solace, comfort, and companionship during difficult times.

The desire for social connection is also demonstrated through the context of the pause in live performances due to COVID-19 measures (Taylor et al., 2020). Both performers and would-be audience members vocalized a desire for live performances (Anderton, 2021), and many artists and organizations developed new online offerings in response. Yet, even with an increase in livestreamed events, research

suggests that at-home, livestreamed music experiences do not completely replicate in-person, live ones (Phillips & Krause, 2024). Drawing on the present data (e.g., “*I have also experienced a greater appreciation of live music and making music with others as this has not been easy with restrictions.*”), it seems that by experiencing the absence of live music, people regained (or increased) their appreciation for live music experiences that offer opportunities for social connection.

Theoretical Considerations

The endorsement by a majority of participants pertaining to a change in the value of music listening suggests that music’s value can be considered as a dynamic process, expanding beyond the individual to include broader external, contextual variables. Such an interpretation is in line with the Reciprocal Feedback model (Hargreaves, 2012; Hargreaves et al., 2005). The Reciprocal Feedback model outlines that our responses to music are determined by three, interacting determinants – the music, the context, and the listener. These three determinants can influence each other, and they can also be influenced by our responses (Hargreaves, 2012). Concerning the present findings, we can see how COVID-19 acts as an important context that reciprocally influences people’s musical responses as well as their value judgements.

Examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of the Reciprocal Feedback Model accentuates the dynamic interaction between the context (the pandemic), the listener, and the music. The pandemic created a specific environment that influenced feedback loops in the model: a) the listener’s goals, for example, that social restriction triggered the desire to connect with others, and b) music listening behaviors (including increased listening time), as listeners sought emotion regulation support to cope with the heightened fear of real and perceived loss across many aspects of life and livelihood. This model-driven interpretation suggests that the pandemic not only shifted uses of music but also redefined its value in supporting the fulfilment of essential social needs. This speaks to the constant evolution and change in an individual’s preferences as they increased the frequency of their music listening to meet redefined goals.

If the value of music can change and adapt to meet the needs of individuals and communities, it is important to continue to explore the relationship between music and society, particularly during times of crisis and change. By understanding the evolving role of music during crisis and change, we can better appreciate its social, cultural, and psychological significance, which has implications for continuing to understand how music listening might promote health and well-being. The present study adds to growing evidence that music listening can be used as a coping tool, with young people turning to it as a means of emotional regulation and self-care (e.g., Fink et al., 2021; Krause et al., 2023; Vidas et al., 2021).

Limitations and Future Directions

While the current study's themes speak to mood and well-being, we did not overtly examine these relative to participants' commentary on the value of music listening or their individual characteristics (e.g., gender and personality). An individual's pre-existing (trait) characteristics and momentary emotional state are likely to influence the desire to initiate music listening practices and/or the degree of emotional impact that results from it. Thus, a study considering listening, value, and degree of well-being would provide greater precision in our understanding of perceptions and uses of music listening. Such work would also inform potential music listening interventions designed to promote well-being with consideration of the value people place on it.

In considering the context of COVID-19, it is important to acknowledge that our sample resided in Australia, which may limit the generalizability of the study's findings. Although Australia, as a country, fared better than some during waves of the pandemic, many of our participants resided in Melbourne, VIC, which faced one of the greatest number of lockdown days globally (Macreadie, 2022). Given our focus on asking people to consider a change in value relative to their COVID-19 experiences, individual differences in lived experiences cannot be understated. Thus, it is important to recognize people's lived experiences differed such that people may have been affected by the pandemic to different degrees (or not at all in the case of some of our participants). Moreover, it is difficult to predict whether this shift in value is a short-term or long-term trend. On the one hand, the pandemic was an exceptional event that has disrupted daily life and impacted people's behaviors and preferences. On the other hand, the pandemic may have prompted a re-evaluation of people's priorities and values, which could have a lasting impact on their relationship with music. It is also possible that the increased value for music listening that we identified in our sample of younger adults could indicate a generational shift concerning a greater emphasis on the importance of music in their daily lives relative to other generations. Further, data collection occurred during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and additional work is needed to consider subsequent, "recovery" phases.

Future research is needed to deepen the level of detail concerning potential shifts in perceived value of music listening. Making use of data collection techniques that permit both episodic and longitudinal data capture (e.g., experience sampling, diaries) will enhance the precision in understanding listeners' drivers and rewards of music engagement in specific situations.

Conclusion

The present findings advance our understanding of the impact of the pandemic and how individual music listening practices and experiences are valued. Among those who

reported a change in the value of listening to music, almost all stated it had increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The increased value placed on music listening during the pandemic has the potential to result in lasting changes in people's future relationship with music. Recognizing how the role of music evolves during times of crisis (or change) can broaden understandings of its social, cultural and psychological importance.

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AK, MO, SG, and SM collaboratively developed the study, gained ethical approval, and conducted participant recruitment. SM oversaw data collection. SM and SG conducted the data analysis with input from AK and MO. AK wrote the initial draft, and worked collaboratively with MO, SG, and SM on revisions. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.





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ORCID iDs

Amanda E. Krause  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3049-9220>
 Sabrina McKenzie  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2400-1089>
 Solange Glasser  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2630-6118>
 Margaret S. Osborne  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4654-8392>

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