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An Exploratory Study of Music Listening and Anxiety Level Among Hong Kong Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

According to a survey conducted by the University of Hong Kong in 2018 (n = 1,119), 54.4% of undergraduate students in Hong Kong expressed a mild degree of anxiety symptoms. Previous studies suggested that music listening can be a healing tool for alleviating anxiety. To investigate its effectiveness, this research further explored the relationship between music listening and anxiety level of undergraduate students in terms of (1) music listening time, (2) music preference, and (3) music listening mood. The research used a multi-methods design. Participants were 230 undergraduate students from eight universities in Hong Kong, selected using the convenience sampling method. Participants answered an online survey that consists of 23 items for three components: (1) music listening habits, (2) music preferences, and (3) Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale (HAM-A) with 14 anxiety symptoms. In comparison with some Western countries' students who scored 15-20 (mild level) over the range of 0-56, Hong Kong undergraduate students had a higher average anxiety level of 22.74 (moderate to severe level). Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with five participants, who had suffered from mild or severe anxiety disorder before. The interviewees provided reflection on their anxiety experiences and music preference. Pearson's Correlation result suggested a significant negative correlation (r = -.448, p <.001) between music listening time and anxiety level. ANOVA result showed a significant difference between music listening preference and anxiety level, $F(8, 221) = 10.26$, p <.001. Post hoc comparisons using the Games-Howell test indicated that the mean anxiety score for rock music (M = 33.04, SD = 10.92) were significantly higher than western classical music (M = 14.22, SD = 7.55, p <.001) and light music (M = 19.10, SD = 11.93, p =.001). The interview data provided further evidence that listening to classical and light music helps to relieve anxiety, while rock music cannot. Results showed a significant relationship between music listening and anxiety level. It shed light on music listening's effectiveness on anxiety relieving. Further implications for music education include (1) adding more music appreciation activities of classical and light music in the curriculum, (2) organizing some music appreciation trips to the nature as suggested by the interviewees, etc. Future research may include a more in-depth investigation on anxiety and long-time music listening.