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Much Harder to Deal With. A Study of Mental Well-Being, Listening Behaviours, and Musical Practices during the COVID-19 Lockdown in Switzerland in 2020

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On 16 March 2020 the Federal Council of Switzerland announced the strictest precautionary measures to date in the prevention of the spread of the COVID-19 virus: Not only were public and private events prohibited and borders partially closed, but various institutions and facilities were shut down for the foreseeable future.² It was only in June of the same year that life started to resemble some sort of pre-COVID-19 normality.³ Those three months marked a time of insecurities and emotional turmoil for a large part of the Swiss population with over a fourth of interviewed citizens expressing mental unease during the lockdown.⁴ Young people struggled most with the precautions taken by the government, which can be explained by the fact that many measures, such as changes in educational facilities, working environments, and childcare, predominantly affected people aged 18 to 24.⁵ Unfortunately, with most forms of leisure activities impacted by the lockdown, finding a way to cope with these negative emotions proved difficult.

There is, however, a well-established method humans use for regulating and improving emotional moods: In her book *The Psychology of Music*, Susan Hallam describes how listening to music “can reduce anxiety and stress levels, increase the threshold for pain endurance, make people feel more positive about life and enable them to escape reality, stimulate the imagination and contribute to feelings of spirituality”.⁶ In addition to listening, making music – for example in the form of singing in a choir – has also shown benefits such as decreasing feelings of physical and emotional tension and stress as well as a sense of improved well-being.⁷ Furthermore, making music is often used as a means of distraction from negative feelings.⁸

Inspired by this research, I created a digital survey and chose fourteen interviewees in their twenties to assess changes in their mental well-being and musical behaviour during the lockdown and examine correlations.⁹ The survey was divided into three parts, focusing on general information on the participants, their mental well-being during the lockdown, and their listening behaviours and musical activities, respectively. The participants were also asked to reflect on the potential mutual influence between their mental well-being and the way they engage with music.

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2 *Der Schweizerische Bundesrat* 2020.

3 *Bundesamt für Gesundheit BAG* 2020.

4 HÜRLIMANN 2020.

5 HÜRLIMANN 2020.

6 HALLAM 2019: 43.

7 HALLAM 2019: 59.

8 HALLAM 2019: 59.

9 The survey was conducted as part of a seminar at the University of Bern.

Of the fourteen interviewees, seven reported negative changes to their mental well-being, six reported no changes to their mental state, while one emphasized an improvement. Regarding the group that reported no changes in mental well-being, it is notable that these participants were all in their early twenties when the lockdown took place, suggesting that most of them may still have been living with or relying on support from their families, potentially removing certain pressure points such as job insecurities or financial problems. While these participants did report changes in their working environment, studies, and social life, most of them found that the lockdown had some positive side effects – mainly feeling like they had more time. From the results, it seems that these positive aspects cancelled out the negative effects experienced. Even though these participants did not perceive many changes in their mental state, they did report some differences in their listening behaviours. They mostly attribute these developments to external factors such as the fact of having more time and opportunity to listen to music, which also allowed them to discover new genres they would not usually have experimented with. The musical practices of the participants also seem to have been affected. Changes noted in their practices range from playing more to practicing significantly less, which is at least partly traced back to there being no rehearsals. Two participants reported developing new techniques in their playing which helped them get over having to play predominantly by themselves.

In this group, only two people saw a general correlation between their mood and the music they listen to. One participant specifically reported a direct influence of her mood on the music she chose: she described listening to 'lively'¹⁰ music when she was feeling well and 'melancholic' music when she was not. In a book chapter by Davidson and Krause (2018), the authors propose possible reasons why some people choose music that is considered sad when already feeling down instead of choosing music considered to be uplifting: their hypothesis is that some people may prefer listening to songs that enhance negative emotions to build up those specific emotions and achieve a greater feeling of delayed gratification through an effect of catharsis.¹¹ Three of the participants in this group stated that they were unsure whether there was any correlation between their mood and the music they listen to. This outcome was surprising, as I had hypothesized that all the participants would recognize the reciprocal influence music and their mental state have, especially when being specifically asked to reflect on it. Furthermore, I wondered whether these interviewees might have reported a correlation between their mood and the music they chose, had their mental well-being been negatively affected by the lockdown. It is also possible that choosing certain pieces of music based on emotions is too subconscious a decision to be consciously acknowledged. Of course, there is always the chance that some people's mental well-being truly does not influence their musical behaviours and vice versa.

The second group of participants noticed the lockdown negatively affecting their mental well-being. This group consisted predominantly of people in their mid-twenties, who reported severe impacts of the lockdown on their lives in the form of losing work and a decrease in the quality of their education. The main explanation this group provided for their low mood was the lack of social interaction with additional changes such as a missing daily structure or rising pressure from working and educational facilities. In contrast to the first group, no positive side effects of the lockdown were mentioned.

In terms of listening behaviours, these participants all experienced differences in the amount of music they listened to, ranging from an increase to a decrease for various reasons. Similarly to the first group, the participants described listening to a variety of genres.

What sets them apart, however, is that five of seven people saw a direct correlation between their mood and the music they listened to, with two people specifically answering that the music they chose reflected their mood as opposed to contradicting it. In accordance to the first group, the participants' musical practice was also influenced by the lockdown in various ways, ranging from external factors

¹⁰ The words used to describe music in this article reflect the way the participants wrote about it.

¹¹ DAVIDSON and KRAUSE 2018: 40–41.

such as cancelled rehearsals to additional internal factors like a lack of motivation. Four of the six musically active people reported that their mood influences their musical practices.

Interestingly, it seems that the group that experienced a negative effect of the COVID-19 lockdown on their mental well-being was more aware of the correlation between their mood and the music they chose to listen to and practice. This raises the question whether they were actively searching for ways to cope with the negative feelings they experienced in connection with the lockdown and found music to be one of the few accessible tools to combat those emotions, or whether the participants of this group are just generally more reflective about the way they process emotions and are thus more aware of the specific coping mechanisms they employ.

In this experiment one can see that the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown were highly influenced by general lifestyles and individual personalities. In general, no matter the potential changes in the interviewee's well-being, the lockdown did influence all participants in their listening behaviours and musical practices in various ways. The impacts range from them feeling they had more time to enjoy music, to a lack of motivation in practising, and/or to a broadening of their musical horizons. All the participants who reported a correlation between their mood and the music they engaged with, noticed their behaviours adapting to the lockdown. Even the ones who did not report their mental well-being having been affected described consuming 'sad' music when feeling down and 'happy' music when the opposite was true. However, it remains somewhat unclear from the interviews whether this is a tendency they picked up during the COVID-19 lockdown or whether they have always used music to regulate their moods in that way. Given that only the participants who noticed their well-being worsening overwhelmingly reported a correlation between their mood and the music they choose, I assume that the negative effects of the lockdown strengthened this relation and affected the way the participants used music to regulate their mood. Further research would be necessary to confirm these hypotheses within and beyond Switzerland, but in any case, I suspect that one participant's poignant statement that "[d]er Lockdown wäre sehr viel schwieriger zu bewältigen ohne Musik" ('the lockdown would have been much harder to cope with without music') rings true for many musicians and non-musicians affected by the restrictive measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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