JURNAL PSIKOLOGI JAMBI p-ISSN : 2528-2735
VOLUME 11, NO. 01, Mei 2021 : 66-82 e-ISSN : 2580-7021

Music and Emotional Experience in Listening and Feeling From Psychological and Experiential Perspectives

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Abstract. *Listening to music is widely recognized as a powerful source of emotional experience; however, existing studies often examine music-induced emotion from isolated psychological, physiological, or experiential perspectives, resulting in fragmented theoretical understanding. This integrative literature review synthesizes contemporary evidence on emotional experiences in music listening by integrating psychological, physiological, and experiential perspectives. Relevant peer-reviewed studies were identified through Scopus, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate using predefined search terms related to music listening, emotion, emotional experience, and psychological processes. Eligible publications were screened for relevance, scientific quality, and conceptual contribution before thematic synthesis. Three interconnected themes emerged: music as emotional regulation and adaptive coping; interactions between psychological and physiological processes; and the influence of personal meaning, musical preference, and subjective experience on emotional responses. Collectively, the evidence demonstrates that music-induced emotions emerge through dynamic interactions among cognitive appraisal, bodily responses, contextual influences, and lived experience, rather than isolated mechanisms, providing a comprehensive framework.*

Keywords: *emotion regulation, emotional experience, music listening, psychological processes.*

Introduction

Music has long been recognized as one of the most powerful stimuli capable of eliciting emotional responses. Beyond its artistic value, music influences affective states by shaping emotional regulation, modifying mood, and supporting psychological well-being (Kahn et al., 2022; Kim, 2023; Trost et al., 2024). Within psychology, music listening is no longer viewed as a passive auditory activity but rather as an active cognitive and emotional process in which listeners continuously interpret, evaluate, and assign personal meaning to musical experiences (Alluri & Toiviainen, 2023; Reybrouck & Schiavio, 2024). Emotional responses to music emerge through complex interactions among musical characteristics, individual psychological traits, previous experiences, cultural background, and situational context, making music listening an important domain for understanding human emotion (Carpentier et al., 2020; Mohd Rashid et al., 2024).

Emotional experience is generally understood as a multidimensional phenomenon involving subjective feelings, physiological reactions, cognitive appraisal, and reflective interpretation (Hoemann et al., 2024; Meuleman & Rudrauf, 2021). Music provides a unique context for investigating emotional experience because it evokes affective responses without relying on verbal communication, instead utilizing melody, harmony, rhythm, timbre, and expressive musical structures (Chabin et al., 2020; Singer et al., 2023). Numerous cross-cultural studies have demonstrated that listeners consistently recognize and experience emotions such as happiness, sadness, tension, and relaxation while listening to music, suggesting that music-induced emotion represents a universal yet individually interpreted psychological phenomenon (Greenberg et al., 2022; Jiang & Zheng, 2024).

Although research on music-induced emotion has expanded considerably over the past decade, the existing literature remains conceptually fragmented. Many empirical studies investigate isolated dimensions of emotional experience, such as emotional regulation, physiological responses, neural mechanisms, or emotional recognition, without adequately explaining how these dimensions interact to shape

listeners lived emotional experiences (Eerola et al., 2025; Mencke et al., 2023). Similarly, psychological studies often emphasize measurable cognitive or physiological outcomes, whereas experiential studies focus primarily on subjective meaning-making and personal interpretation. Consequently, current knowledge provides only a partial understanding of how emotional experiences emerge during music listening.

This fragmentation represents an important theoretical limitation. Emotional experiences evoked by music are inherently multidimensional, involving simultaneous interactions between psychological appraisal, physiological activation, personal memories, contextual influences, and subjective interpretation. Examining these dimensions separately limits the ability to explain why identical musical stimuli may evoke different emotional responses across individuals or why similar physiological reactions may be interpreted differently depending on listeners' experiences and personal contexts. Therefore, a more comprehensive framework is needed to integrate these complementary perspectives into a coherent understanding of music-induced emotion.

Recent developments in affective science and music psychology have increasingly emphasized the importance of integrating objective psychological mechanisms with subjective experiential perspectives (Martínez-Castilla et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2023). Rather than viewing emotional responses as merely measurable physiological events, contemporary research recognizes that listeners actively construct emotional meaning through continuous interactions between cognition, bodily responses, personal history, and environmental context. Nevertheless, despite these theoretical advances, no comprehensive synthesis has systematically integrated psychological, physiological, and experiential evidence into a unified conceptual perspective on music listening.

Accordingly, this integrative literature review aims to synthesize contemporary evidence concerning emotional experiences in music listening by bringing together psychological and experiential perspectives. Specifically, this review seeks to identify the principal psychological mechanisms underlying music-induced emotion, examine

the contribution of physiological and contextual processes to emotional experience, and develop a more integrated conceptual understanding of how listeners construct emotional meaning during music listening. By synthesizing findings across diverse theoretical traditions, this review contributes to the psychology of music by providing a broader framework that connects psychological processes, bodily responses, and subjective lived experiences within a single conceptual model.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed an integrative literature review to synthesize contemporary knowledge regarding emotional experiences in music listening from psychological and experiential perspectives. Unlike traditional narrative reviews, an integrative review enables the inclusion and synthesis of findings from diverse empirical and theoretical studies, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena (Ardila Suárez & Escalada-Hernández, 2024; Sargeant & O'Connor, 2020). This approach was considered appropriate because emotional experiences in music involve multiple dimensions, including psychological, physiological, cognitive, and experiential processes that cannot be adequately explained through a single theoretical perspective. The review aimed not only to summarize previous findings but also to identify recurring conceptual patterns, compare evidence across different research traditions, and develop an integrated understanding of music-induced emotional experiences.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted using three major academic databases: Scopus, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate. These databases were selected because they provide extensive coverage of peer-reviewed publications in psychology, music psychology, neuroscience, and music education.

The literature search employed combinations of the following keywords: music listening; music and emotion; emotional experience; emotion regulation; psychological

processes; music psychology; physiological responses; experiential perspective.

Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to combine search terms to improve retrieval accuracy. Examples of search strings included: "music listening" AND emotion"; "music listening" AND "emotional experience"; "music psychology" AND emotion regulation; "music" AND psychological AND experiential. The literature search primarily focused on contemporary publications to ensure that the synthesis reflected recent theoretical and empirical developments in music psychology.

Eligibility Criteria

The retrieved literature was screened according to predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure methodological consistency and conceptual relevance.

Inclusion criteria**:** Peer-reviewed journal articles; publications discussing music listening and emotional experience; studies examining psychological, physiological, or experiential dimensions of music-induced emotions; empirical studies, review articles, and theoretical papers contributing to the conceptual understanding of music and emotion; publications written in English.

Exclusion criteria: Conference abstracts, editorials, dissertations, and unpublished manuscripts; studies focusing exclusively on music performance without discussing emotional experience; articles lacking sufficient methodological or theoretical information; duplicate publications retrieved from multiple databases.

Literature Screening Procedure

The literature selection followed a sequential screening process to maximize transparency and reproducibility.

First, potentially relevant publications were identified through database searches using predefined keywords. Duplicate records were subsequently removed. Titles and abstracts were then screened to evaluate their relevance to the objectives of this review. Publications that met the preliminary screening criteria underwent full-text assessment to determine their conceptual relevance and methodological quality. Finally, only studies directly addressing psychological and experiential aspects of

emotional responses to music listening were included in the thematic synthesis. This multistage screening procedure ensured that only relevant and scientifically credible literature contributed to the final review.

Data Extraction

Information from each selected publication was extracted systematically to facilitate comparison across studies. The extracted information included: author(s) and year of publication; research objectives; research design and methodology; participant characteristics (when applicable); psychological concepts investigated; main findings related to emotional experience; theoretical contribution to understanding music-induced emotion. The standardized extraction process enabled consistent comparison across studies originating from different methodological traditions.

Data Analysis

The selected literature was analyzed using thematic synthesis. The analysis followed an iterative process adapted from qualitative thematic analysis Miles et al (2018), consisting of five stages.

First, all selected publications were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the conceptual content. Second, relevant findings concerning emotional experiences in music listening were coded according to recurring psychological, physiological, and experiential concepts. Third, similar codes were grouped into broader conceptual categories by identifying patterns of convergence and divergence across studies. Fourth, these categories were synthesized into overarching themes representing the dominant perspectives within the literature. Finally, relationships among themes were interpreted to construct an integrated conceptual understanding of music-induced emotional experiences.

Rather than merely summarizing individual studies, the thematic synthesis emphasized cross-study relationships, conceptual integration, and theoretical interpretation. This analytical approach enabled the review to explain how psychological mechanisms, physiological processes, and subjective experiences

collectively contribute to emotional responses during music listening.

Results

The thematic synthesis identified three interconnected themes that collectively explain how emotional experiences emerge during music listening: first, music as a mechanism for emotional regulation, second, the interaction between psychological and physiological processes, and third the influence of personal meaning and musical preference on emotional experience. Rather than representing independent dimensions, these themes consistently demonstrate that music-induced emotions arise through dynamic interactions among cognitive appraisal, bodily responses, and subjective interpretation.

Emotional Regulation Through Music Listening

Across the reviewed literature, emotional regulation emerged as the most consistently reported psychological function of music listening. Despite differences in research designs and participant characteristics, the studies converged in demonstrating that listeners intentionally use music to regulate their emotional states according to situational demands. Music was not merely associated with increasing positive emotions or reducing negative emotions; instead, it functioned as a flexible psychological resource that enabled individuals to maintain, modify, or reconstruct emotional experiences depending on personal goals and environmental contexts (Blasco-Magraner et al., 2023; Chong et al., 2024).

Several studies further indicated that emotional regulation operates through multiple psychological strategies rather than a single mechanism. These strategies include emotional reflection, cognitive reappraisal, attentional distraction, mood maintenance, and emotional release (Lee et al., 2025). Although individual studies emphasized different regulatory processes, their findings collectively suggest that music listening represents an intentional and adaptive coping strategy rather than a passive emotional reaction.

Furthermore, evidence consistently demonstrates that successful emotional

regulation through music influences broader psychological outcomes. Positive emotional regulation has been associated with enhanced motivation, improved creative thinking, greater emotional resilience, and adaptive coping abilities (He et al., 2017). Collectively, these findings indicate that emotional regulation constitutes the primary psychological pathway through which music contributes to emotional well-being.

Psychological and Physiological Responses to Music

The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that emotional responses to music involve inseparable interactions between psychological processes and physiological activation. While emotional experiences are commonly reported through subjective feelings, converging evidence indicates that these experiences are simultaneously accompanied by measurable physiological changes, including alterations in cardiovascular activity, autonomic nervous system responses, and neural activation patterns (Tervaniemi et al., 2021; Wen et al., 2019).

Importantly, the literature suggests that physiological responses should not be interpreted as independent indicators of emotion. Instead, bodily reactions interact continuously with cognitive appraisal and emotional interpretation during music listening. Studies examining neurocognitive mechanisms indicate that emotional perception is influenced by the integration of sensory processing, emotional recognition, memory, and attentional mechanisms, resulting in complex patterns of emotional experience rather than isolated physiological reactions (Tabei, 2015; Thoma et al., 2012).

Across studies, psychological appraisal consistently emerged as the mechanism through which physiological activation acquires emotional meaning. Consequently, emotional experiences cannot be explained solely by bodily responses or neural activation but should instead be understood as multidimensional processes integrating physiological changes with psychological interpretation.

Emotional Experience, Musical Preference, and Personal Meaning

The final theme demonstrates that emotional experiences during music

listening are strongly shaped by listeners' personal meanings, musical preferences, and previous experiences. Across the reviewed literature, enjoyment was consistently conceptualized as more than a pleasurable response; rather, it represents a psychologically meaningful experience in which listeners actively interpret music in relation to their emotions, memories, and identities (Reybrouck & Eerola, 2022).

Evidence further indicates that emotional outcomes are not determined exclusively by the emotional characteristics of musical stimuli. Individual preference, familiarity, autobiographical memories, and personal associations substantially influence how listeners interpret and emotionally respond to music. This relationship is particularly evident in studies examining preferences for sad music. Although sad music contains negative emotional characteristics, listeners frequently describe the experience as comforting, emotionally validating, and psychologically beneficial because it facilitates emotional reflection and meaning-making rather than simply inducing sadness (Ny & Wing, 2024; Taruffi & Koelsch, 2014).

Moreover, emotionally engaging music has been shown to influence broader cognitive experiences, including attention, temporal perception, and emotional immersion (Ansani et al., 2021). Taken together, these findings demonstrate that emotional experience is not solely a consequence of musical structure but emerges through continuous interactions between musical characteristics and listeners' subjective interpretations.

Overall, the synthesis reveals that emotional experiences in music listening cannot be adequately understood from isolated psychological, physiological, or experiential perspectives. Instead, the reviewed evidence consistently supports an integrated model in which emotional regulation, bodily responses, and personal meaning interact dynamically to construct music-induced emotional experiences.

Discussion

The present review demonstrates that music-induced emotional experiences cannot be adequately explained through a single psychological, physiological, or

experiential perspective. Rather than functioning as independent mechanisms, these dimensions interact continuously throughout the music listening process, shaping how individuals perceive, interpret, and regulate their emotions. The synthesis of the reviewed literature indicates that emotional responses to music emerge from the reciprocal relationship between cognitive appraisal, physiological activation, and subjective meaning construction, providing a more comprehensive explanation than approaches focusing on only one dimension of emotional experience (Armitage et al., 2025; Levitin et al., 2018).

From a psychological perspective, the findings consistently indicate that music listening is an active process through which individuals intentionally regulate emotional states, cope with everyday psychological challenges, and maintain emotional balance. Previous studies have demonstrated that listeners actively select music according to their emotional goals, using music to reduce stress, enhance motivation, or facilitate emotional reflection (Kim, 2023; Šimunoviˇ, 2025). However, the present review suggests that psychological regulation alone cannot fully explain music-induced emotion because emotional outcomes vary considerably among individuals despite exposure to similar musical stimuli. This variation indicates that emotional regulation is influenced not only by psychological processes but also by physiological reactions and personal interpretations developed through previous experiences.

The physiological perspective complements these psychological explanations by demonstrating that emotional experiences are accompanied by measurable biological responses. Previous research has consistently reported changes in autonomic nervous system activity, cardiovascular responses, and neural processing during music listening, confirming that emotional experiences are embodied phenomena rather than purely cognitive events (Flaten et al., 2022; Liao et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the reviewed evidence suggests that physiological activation should not be interpreted as a direct indicator of emotional experience. Instead, bodily responses acquire emotional significance through cognitive interpretation and contextual meaning, indicating that

physiological processes function together with psychological appraisal rather than independently.

The experiential perspective further broadens this understanding by emphasizing the importance of personal meaning, social interaction, and contextual influences in shaping emotional responses. Emotional bonding, identity construction, and participation within musical communities demonstrate that music listening is simultaneously an individual and social experience (Choi, 2024). Likewise, familiarity with song lyrics, musical preferences, and previous listening experiences influence how listeners interpret emotional content and derive personal meaning from music (Kasai & Ando, 2025). These findings explain why individuals frequently report different emotional experiences while listening to the same musical composition, despite comparable acoustic characteristics.

This integrated perspective also extends previous psychological theories of music by emphasizing that emotional meaning is actively constructed rather than passively received. Music does not automatically generate identical emotions across listeners; instead, emotional responses depend on the interaction between musical characteristics, listeners' emotional goals, previous experiences, and contextual conditions. Such an interpretation is consistent with contemporary psychological theories that conceptualize emotion as a dynamic and goal-directed process rather than a simple stimulus-response mechanism (Armitage et al., 2025; Schäfer et al., 2013). Accordingly, the present review contributes to the psychology of music by proposing a more holistic framework that connects cognitive, physiological, and experiential dimensions within a unified explanation of music-induced emotion.

The findings also have important practical implications. Understanding emotional experiences as multidimensional processes suggests that psychological interventions using music should move beyond selecting musical characteristics alone and instead consider listeners' personal histories, emotional objectives, cultural backgrounds, and listening contexts. Such an integrated approach may strengthen applications of music in psychological well-being, emotion regulation, educational

psychology, and music therapy by recognizing the active role of individuals in constructing emotional meaning during music listening (Gardener et al., 2025; Peters et al., 2024; Pranjić et al., 2024; Smit et al., 2020).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This integrative review demonstrates that music listening is a multidimensional emotional experience involving continuous interactions among psychological processes, physiological responses, and subjective lived experiences. Rather than functioning as a passive auditory activity, music listening represents an active process through which individuals regulate emotions, construct personal meaning, and respond to social and contextual influences. Collectively, the reviewed evidence indicates that music-induced emotions emerge not from isolated psychological or physiological mechanisms but from the dynamic interplay between cognitive appraisal, bodily activation, and experiential interpretation.

The principal contribution of this review lies in integrating psychological, physiological, and experiential perspectives into a single conceptual framework for understanding music-induced emotion. While previous studies have frequently examined these dimensions independently, this review synthesizes evidence across multiple theoretical traditions to demonstrate how they complement one another in explaining emotional experiences during music listening. This integrated perspective provides a broader theoretical foundation for the psychology of music and offers a more comprehensive understanding of how emotional meaning is constructed across different listening contexts.

Despite these contributions, several limitations remain within the current body of literature. Much of the existing research continues to emphasize isolated psychological or physiological outcomes, with relatively limited attention given to the interaction among cognitive, biological, and experiential dimensions. Furthermore, differences in research designs, participant characteristics, cultural settings, and measurement approaches make it difficult to establish a unified explanation of music-

induced emotional experiences across diverse populations.

Future research should therefore adopt multidisciplinary and mixed-methods approaches that simultaneously examine psychological processes, physiological indicators, and subjective experiential reports. Greater attention should also be directed toward cultural diversity, individual listening goals, musical expertise, and contextual factors, as these variables may substantially influence emotional experiences during music listening. Such approaches are expected to strengthen theoretical development in the psychology of music while supporting more effective applications of music in psychological well-being, emotion regulation, educational psychology, and music-based therapeutic intervention.

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