

It's time to open your ears to world music: Commentary on Quan et al. (2022)

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ABSTRACT: This is a commentary on Quan et al. (2022) about their paper on world music open earedness and functional uses of music in relationship with psychological and sociocultural adaptations in student sojourners in Australia. The strengths of the paper, including the significance of cross-cultural music research and its applications for mental well-being, are discussed. Additionally, comparing responses through control groups and providing clear definitions of “novel and unfamiliar” musical excerpts for future replications are suggested in more detail in this commentary.

Submitted 2023 June 1; accepted 2023 August 11.

Published 2023 November 9; <https://doi.org/10.18061/emr.v17i2.9535>

KEYWORDS: *world music, mental well-being, cross-cultural music studies*

THIS paper by Quan et al. (2022) examines the relationship between world music open-earedness and functional application of music with psychological and sociocultural adaptation, and demonstrates a significant correlation between world music open earedness and sociocultural adaptation. World music open earedness is defined as “the willingness to explore, listen to, tolerate, and learn about various kinds of novel and unfamiliar music” by the authors, and adaptation is “the long-term ways in which people rearrange their lives and settle down to a more-or-less satisfactory existence” (Berry, 2006). The authors also found that using music for arousal and activation significantly predicted psychological adaptation. I commend Quan and colleagues for taking this remarkable step and examining various factors to potentially help student sojourners (international students who live in a foreign country for a period of time; Anderson and Guan, 2017) in Australia through exposure and engagement with world music. This study is a great model for music research to identify and provide solutions to specific populations utilizing world music. This study investigates several personal factors that could mediate psychological and sociocultural adaptation in the host country including the student sojourner's personality, heritage culture features, language competence, etc.

Quan et al. (2022) are committed to best practices in music research by focusing on mostly non-WEIRD participants (as WEIRD societies-Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic- are not representative of all populations in many aspects of behavioral science research; Henrich et al., 2010) as well as non-Western musical stimuli; however, they excluded European and North American music from their musical stimuli when most of the participants in the study were not from Europe and North America. It seems that the premises of the experiment were built upon an assumption that European and North American music were not ethnic and worldly enough. The recommendations for cross-cultural music studies advise against such divisions between Europeans and non-Europeans (Western and non-Western) and instead, encourage diversity and inclusivity to mitigate any possible underlying presuppositions (Jacoby et al., 2020; Sauv e et al., 2023; Savage et al., 2023; Thompson et al., 2019). The exclusion of Western musical sample might be reasonable in some other circumstances where Western music has been often studied, yet in this research by Quan et al. (2022), it might be the case that these sojourners are not as familiar with European and North American music as anticipated and the exposure to these musical traditions could provide us with more insight into their musical preferences and the correlation to their psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Since the experiment is concerned with well-being and adaptation capabilities of student sojourners, it also seems helpful to add a control group to find out whether the general population’s world music open earedness and functional appraisal of music differs from the sojourners in future replications; in particular, because the aspects pertaining to the functions of music are not constrained to world music and can be similarly obtained through a broad range of musical genres and other activities. It would also be insightful to evaluate participants’ responses with more mainstream and possibly familiar musical stimuli from the host country to



examine whether exposure to local music can facilitate the process of adaptation to the new cultural environment.

It is worth noting that music's ability to impact one's affect (Cespedes-Guevara & Eerola, 2018) can potentially influence the participants' responses to the proceeding questionnaires. Thus, running the experiment without the musical stimuli might be useful in eliminating "demand characteristics" (Orne, 1962). Furthermore, the authors' choice of musical stimuli was based on "novel and unfamiliar music"; however, the definition is a bit unclear. For example, a large number of participants (n=58) in this study come from Asia and 12 out of the 21 musical stimuli also belong to the Asian continent. Although there is a diverse musical culture in Asia, since the specific regions where the Asian participants come from are not mentioned, the musical excerpts from Asia might not be sufficiently representative of world music to the Asian participants. Additionally, the music choices raise the question of whether we can distinguish between familiarity with a musical culture vs. familiarity with a genre or style. It is unclear whether the 24 students who rated the musical excerpts based on familiarity and preference pre-experiment were sojourners too. One can be unfamiliar with a certain musical excerpt and yet be familiar with its specific genre and style. In order to overcome the challenges of musical selections from various cultures for future research, it might be helpful to: (1) provide more information about the criteria for "novel and unfamiliar music" and define what is considered to be world music, based on the goals of the study as well as best practices for diversity and inclusivity in music research, (2) add more mainstream musical stimuli to compare the findings, and (3) measure familiarity and preference across a larger pool of musical cultures from regions other than those where most participants come from.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank their supervisor Professor Patrick Savage for the discussion and feedback. This article was copyedited by Tanushree Agrawal and layout edited by Niels Chr. Hansen.

NOTES

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