

Music and the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

Music is one of the most influential arts that humanity has developed. This paper critically examines the effect of music and music listening during the pandemic. It focuses on three dimensions of music and its use throughout the pandemic. First, it discusses the social dimension of music. Second, it focuses on the therapeutic dimension of music. Third, it examines the role of digital media and its impact on the consumption and production of music.



Keywords: COVID-19, Sociology of Music, Therapeutic, Social solidarity, social media

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Introduction:

The recent outbreak of the virus known as Coronavirus or COVID-19 has shaken the entire world immensely. As the world struggles to cope with this pandemic, music has played an essential role. Videos were widely circulated on social media showing neighbors singing together from their balconies at the beginning of the lockdown. This was trending in India, Spain, Italy, USA and Germany (Rogers, 2020). Similarly, many people shared, interpreted, and re-narrated music worldwide throughout the pandemic.

Music is considered one of humankind's most valuable inventions. It is a significant weapon that positively affects a person's physical and mental health. It is connected to curing, mediation, corrupt practices, and a variety of impactful issues throughout history and cultures (DeNora, 2003). Music has been an important field of study for socio-musicologists, ethnomusicologists, and so on throughout history. Musicologists studied plagues of the past which were common throughout continents and which resemble present scenarios, for researching music during the pandemic (Wang, 2020). Thus, music has been beneficial in various areas of overall human development.

In this context, music has been one of the most important sources of inspiration and motivation throughout the crisis. This article attempts to analyse the impact of music during the COVID-19 crisis. It examines three dimensions of music and its role in these times of

COVID-19. First, it explores the sociological dimension of music and its role during the pandemic. Second, it focuses on music's healing value and its use as a therapy for sickness. Third, it examines the role of digital media and how it affected music consumption and distribution during the pandemic.

Social Aspect of Music:

Music has been sociologically informative due to its social characteristics since it is produced collectively. The sociology of music helps us define how music is social and how it serves as a source of identity through which individuals or communities express themselves. Roy & Dowd (2010, p. 184) argues that,

Music is a mode of interaction that expresses and constitutes social relations (whether they are subcultures, organisations, classes, or nations) and that embodies cultural assumptions regarding these relations. This means that sociocultural context is essential to understanding what music can do and enable.

In this aspect, its role during the pandemic must be addressed. Due to widening feelings of loneliness and exclusion in society, it is an alternative as presently we are called upon to consistently maintain social distancing and isolation (Langley & Coutts, 2020). Music was created and circulated during the pandemic to show a sense of belonging and collectiveness among various communities. Across various cultures, music has been used as a medium of expression that reinforces solidarity and belongingness. As a form of strength and feeling, music has the potential to affect how people structure their bodies, behave themselves, perceive time, and think about themselves, other people, and circumstances (DeNora, 2000, p. 17). Even though the COVID 19 crisis threatens to wreak havoc on the planet, music as a platform has proven to be a lifeline.

Different types of performances, such as balcony concert and live concert streaming during the pandemic, has created a sense of social solidarity among musicians and their fans. Such live online performances have created a medium for musicians worldwide to engage socially with their supporters. It further establishes the context for the conversation on how music is being utilised by individuals to describe themselves personally and socially (Roy & Dowd, 2010). Thus, music elicits feelings of presence and attachment. While social distancing and quarantine were enforced, music unified people together all over the world.

Therapeutic Aspect:

Sudden lockdowns, social distancing, etc., significantly impacted different sections of people around the world. One primary concern was physical and mental health among various people. Several mental disorders, namely stress, anxiety, depression, anger, insecurity, and their impacts were gradually emerging throughout COVID-19 (Serafini et al., 2020). Similarly, music therapy has become one of the most influential treatments for mental disorders. Odell (1988, p. 52) states that,

Music therapy in the field of mental health is the use of music to allow an alternative means of communication and expression where words are not necessarily the most effective way to fulfil therapeutic aims for the client. These aims are worked towards through a developing relationship between client and therapist with practical music-making as the primary medium.

As a result, music became one of the most important tools by which people worldwide sought shelter during the pandemic. Music has been a significant element of confidence and excitement which has been shown to stimulate the mind, body as well as emotional components of people (Bains, 2020). Many studies have revealed that many people used music during the pandemic to release their stress levels. A survey of 2,000 participants carried out last year by marketing firm One Poll along with Harman revealed that music has been the most common means people deal with difficult circumstances. Around 80% of participants stated that music allowed them to get through quarantine caused by the pandemic, whereas 64.2% stated that they felt associated with others while experiencing online music (Rogers, 2020).

Also, a similar study conducted by Mas et al. (2021) in Spain found that during the lockdown, many people use music and spend more time listening to music which further helps them to deal with anxiety, depression, etc. Music influences not just people's emotional experiences but also their physical, besides offering the basis on which they perceive themselves and through the prosthesis of technology and learning gadgets (DeNora, 2000). Listening to music during difficult situations regenerates moods and builds emotional and physical strength. DeNora (2007, p. 284) argues that music may be used in hospitals and therapy facilities from different perspectives by understanding the invisible role music therapy plays within our daily life, relying upon the task of the patient as well as whatever music therapy brings to its assigned skills. Indeed, music could very well raise people's hopes and facilitate them in dealing with unexpected situations.

Music Listening and Digital Media:

The exponential rise of digital media in recent years has brought the globe more together than ever before since the pandemic. As live events and music festivals were closed down due to the rise of COVID-19, live concert streaming, virtual singing competitions, etc., became the new normal. This was shared through Internet-generated social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, etc.

Spotify, Gaana, and other online music streaming apps became popular among music lovers across the world. India's self-proclaimed pioneer Gaana in the domain of music streaming, reported to Gadgets 360 that within three weeks beginning in mid-March last year, they had seen an increase in traffic by double digits (Arora, 2020). Thus, people began listening to their favourite tunes via these music streaming platforms to cope with depression and anxiety during the lockdown period.

Interestingly, Facebook, Whatsapp, and Twitter all became common social media sites through which online live performances, and music recordings began to take place. Payal Dev, a playback singer and music composer, states,

"In the lockdown, social media has helped us to reach out to our fans, and so we started planning for our virtual concert; maybe, this way, we will adapt to newer ways moving forward." (Prasad, 2020).

Thus, the process of digitalization has helped many different artists to reconnect with their audiences during the pandemic. Digitalization has become mostly as a way for communication and sharing music, thus creating a platform through which our memories of music and relationships with others are being constructed (Theberge, 2015). As a result, music consumption and production have taken a new dimension throughout this pandemic.

Conclusion:

This article has highlighted the use of music during the pandemic. It has discussed three aspects of music: its sociological aspect, its therapeutic aspect, and the rise of digital media and its impact on music during the pandemic. Music is one of the most potent tools that humankind has ever created. Music has emerged as a vital antidote as the world struggles with the COVID-19 pandemic. It has not only mental and physical benefits among individuals but is also beneficial to society, which helps create a sense of solidarity and interconnectedness. Thus, in the coming year, music will continue to play a significant role worldwide, especially in times of crisis.

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