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Expressing Emotional Catharsis and Professional Identity Formation Through the Medium of Metal Music: Development of a Heuristic-Informed Music Therapy Method

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Abstract

Metal music has been a taboo music genre for years, with some claiming that listening to the music can lead its listeners towards anti-social behavior, violence, and anger. However, more research has determined that metal music is beneficial for the mental health of its fans. Metal fans have used their favorite music to cope with their angry or sad emotions, gain a better understanding of their emotions, explore their personal identity, and find a community for support and advocacy. Although research has expanded on the mental health benefits of metal music, there has been little research on the music's effectiveness from a music therapy perspective. No clinical method has been explored to use the genre as a music therapy tool. The crux of this study was to explore the beneficial forces of metal music by using a heuristic, self-inquiry study grounded in music therapy techniques like the iso principle and vocal psychotherapy. The researcher/participant created a playlist of metal songs that progressed from depressive to energetic emotions and sang along to the playlist while journaling and consulting supervisors about emotional awareness and professional identity. Through this process, the researcher/participant found several themes that impacted his professional practice and his understanding of his own emotions. With these results, the method has shown some potential as a helpful music therapy intervention for introspection and exploring emotions. The method encourages more testing to explore its impact on other music therapists and the general population.

Introduction

In the 1980s and early 1990s, metal music was proposed as a risk factor for suicidality, antisocial behavior, and satanic worship (Hansen & Hansen, 1991). Metal fans were mostly lumped together as teens or young adults, despite any acknowledgment from other age groups, because critics put their focus on how metal music "influenced" the youth. With several high-profile cases of metal bands being sued for influencing teenagers to end their lives, and further back lash from parents and politicians, such as Tipper Gore, metal and other problem-oriented music genres led the music industry to add the "Explicit" labels to albums or songs that contained lyrics with cursing or taboo themes (Moore, 1996).

However, this initial belief was outweighed by current research that indicated that fans of metal music were using the genre to cope with their depression or anger, such as by improving their emotional awareness (Stewart et al., 2018) and finding/refining coping skills (Miranda & Claes, 2009; Sharman & Dingle, 2015). In addition, fans in the metal community reported that being a metal fan was a beneficial social factor, especially for many isolated teens (Rowe & Guerin, 2018). The powerful energy of metal music and the authority-questioning attitudes also created empowered communities of fans from many cultures, such as with alternative rock music in post-1997 Hong Kong (Ma, 2002) or tours to promote social justice (Mageary, 2018).

Though the breadth of research in metal music's therapeutic benefits grew, there had been little inquiry into the genre's use in music therapy. More so, much of the current research had been led by non-music therapists, and the use of metal music relied on listening to songs as opposed to other music therapy interventions like performing, songwriting, or improvisation. Given the growing research in destigmatizing the link between metal music and depressed

individuals, it was also advantageous to learn how this genre can be used within a music therapy context, especially with clients whose preferred music is metal.

This study helps fill a gap in the understanding of metal music as preferred music, as the use of a client's preferred music has been shown as a powerful factor in the music therapy field when regarding pain reduction (Lingham & Theorell, 2009), reduced anxiety and depression (Costa et al., 2018; Walworth, 2003), and increased understanding of personality and the self (McFerran et al., 2015; Swami et al., 2013; Greenberg et al., 2013).

To differentiate this study's "metal music" from metal music of the 80's and 90's, and to generalize the selection of the songs, this paper will define "metal music" in a similar way to the definition of "contemporary metal" proposed by a previous research article (Swami et al., 2013). In this thesis, "metal music" is music from bands that focus on musical elements like loudness, heavy guitars, technical drums (usually involving double kick), the addition of unpitched vocals (like screaming and growling, along with melodic singing), and a wide range of tempos (Swami, et al., 2013). From this definition, other musical elements can be brought out when looking through certain songs made from metal bands, such as songs that may be slower or softer, or that may contain hopeful messages along with messages related to depression or anger.

There were many approaches in music therapy that could stand as guiding principles and techniques for this genre. The two used in this project were vocal psychotherapy in combination with the framework of the iso principle. The iso principle is a concept in music therapy that involves managing moods by first matching the initial feeling of the listener before moving into a desired and more positive feeling state (Heiderscheit & Madson, 2015). For example, if the client is depressed, they would first listen to a song that is also sad to match their mood, instead of immediately jumping into a song that is overly positive and unmatched towards their here-and-

now mood state. After the songs and the client's mood are matched, the songs can then build toward the desired mood. Vocal psychotherapy is another music therapy model that focuses on using the voice for emotional exploration and psychoanalysis by using stable "holding" music for the voice to tone and sing in an improvisational, free associative manner (Austin, 2008). Though the bulk of vocal psychotherapy focuses on improvisation, there has been some exploration into using vocal psychotherapy techniques with pre-written songs to ease a client into vocal improvisation or to use an already established song to explore the song's meaning to the individual's history and identity (Measheley, 2020).

To fill a missing link in music therapy and metal music research, this thesis will develop a music therapy-based method that will combine vocal psychotherapy and the iso principle to fulfill therapeutic goals of emotional understanding and professional identity formation. Using a heuristic research study influenced by Moustakas (1990), this study will form a new method of reflective process and creative synthesis using metal music as the person-preferred music. This new clinical method uses the iso principle and vocal psychotherapy by the use of an iso emotional playlist to explore emotional awareness and identify formation for a student music therapist. It also served as a means of further understanding the value of communal aspects of the metal music fanbase.

Literature Review

The exploration of the psychology of metal fans produced interesting yet contrasting results. Some studies showed the correlations between deviant behavior and metal fandom and presumed the metal genre was a dangerous influence on teens and young adults. Other studies highlighted that metal music was used by teens and young adults to cope, form their identities, and connect with a passionate and supportive community. Despite the contrasting research, all of

the articles could be considered together to gather a larger picture on the power and risk of metal music, and in general provide more insight into how metal music could be used within a music therapy context.

Historical Contexts

During the inception of the metal genre, many media outlets covered the idea of metal music as a new genre in youth culture that was "dangerous" and could influence kids into adverse, risky behaviors such as sexual promiscuity, drug abuse, and suicide. As the media reported sensationalized stories on metal music, psychologists and other researchers planned to study the genre, the youth culture, and any other elements that could show what factors about metal music were so maladaptive and what metal music does to the psychology of teens and young adults.

Mental Health of Heavy Music Fans

The first studies that were carried out about metal music were to inquire into the mental health of music fans, particularly with such topics as suicidality and antisocial behavior. When doing questionnaires of young people in the early 1990's, a study claimed that metal fans were significantly more likely to practice machismo, act with manipulative/Machiavellian behavior, engage in antisocial behavior like crime and substance use, and display lower cognition (Hansen & Hansen, 1991). In contrast, another study did not find associations between metal fans and satanism or rebelliousness, but did find common themes of hopelessness and suicidality, especially concerning the isolation of metal fans and the apparent defeatism in the lyrics of metal music (Arnett, 1991).

Many of the studies carried out to explore the dangers of metal music were focused on the increased risk of suicidal ideation among metal fans. Given several popular cases of families

suing metal bands in the belief that their music influenced their child to commit suicide (Moore, 1996), many psychologists of the time also wanted to investigate if metal music could be a risk factor for self-harm tendencies. Various quantitative studies on metal versus non-metal fans were carried out to examine several traits and behaviors, such as the previous focus on criminal and suicidal behavior. Indeed, several studies did discover findings of increased risk of suicidality of metal fans compared to non-metal fans (Scheel & Westfield, 1999; Till et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2018).

With these replicated studies, and the fact that many of these findings carry out to the present day, there could be a strong argument for the case of metal music's influence on suicidality, or at least hopelessness, of its avid listeners. Interestingly, many of the discussion sections of these studies proposed the correlation of this increased suicidality from the author's point of view versus the metal fans' point of view. The authors of these studies theorized that the "nihilistic" lyrics and pessimistic mood of the songs were the culprit, but many of these studies did not ask the fans themselves for the reason they listen to metal, nor the reason that they tend to have a greater tendency towards suicidal ideation over non-metal fans.

Qualitative Insights into Heavy Music Fans

Throughout the following decades, research studies pivoted from showing the link between metal music and elevated risk of suicidality to the cause of this increased level of hopelessness and thoughts of self-harm. As researchers turned to qualitative studies, the authors discovered metal fans that already had depression and used metal music to relieve their depression or anger as opposed to exacerbating it.

Emotional Awareness, Understanding, and Regulation

One of the primary qualities that researchers pursued in their studies was the emotional distress that apparently resulted in increased suicidality and risky behavior. A qualitative paper looking at adolescents with a preference towards metal and other heavy styles of music (emo, punk) found a similar link towards suicidal ideation, but also saw that metal music would lead to decreased levels of depression when the metal fans listened to metal music (Miranda & Claes, 2009). In particular, the efficacy of the decrease in depressive symptoms revolved around the specific method that fans used when listening to music. For example, if a teenager used the music or lyrics to match their mood, then moved the mood of the music to how they would like to move throughout their day, that type of coping music was called "problem-solving coping." However, if metal music was used as a basis for constant rumination and staying stuck on the bad feelings, that kind of coping would end up increasing depressive symptoms or keeping it at the same level.

Given the apparent negativity in the research discourse of metal music, it had been up to debate if metal fans were out of touch with their emotions or if they had a greater sense of emotional awareness from exploring all facets of the emotional spectrum. One team of researchers found that metalheads had less awareness of their emotional states if they listened to metal/negative music as opposed to other styles of music (Shafro & Karno, 2013). Other studies reported that metal music aids in the processing of angry emotions (Sharman & Dingle, 2015), depression (Stewart et al., 2019; Miranda & Claes, 2009), and violent imagery (Sun et al., 2019) compared to other forms of music.

Some studies arose that showed there was a link between adolescents/young adults, metal music preference, and an increase in symptoms of anxiety or depression (Shafron & Kano, 2013; McFerran et al., 2015). However, other studies responded that the listening of this "problem

music" (any music with negative connotations, depressive lyrics, etc.) was what metal fans use to comfort, match, and ultimately improve their mood (Stewart et al., 2019). Other researchers believe that the correlation between emotional distress and metal music aligned more with the overall emotional vulnerability evident with metal fans and other fans of "problem music" (Baker & Bor, 2008).

This idea of metal fans using the music as catharsis was supported most clearly when delving into the emotion of anger. Given prior beliefs about the deviancy, anti-authoritarian behavior, and anti-social tendencies of metal fans, more recent studies contrasted those beliefs and reported that metal music did not increase rates of anger or violence, but sometimes decreased anger (Sun et al., 2019). In one study, metal fans aged 18-34 were allowed to listen to either their preferred metal music or sit in silence after imagining a stressful event. After ten minutes of listening or silence it appeared that both groups had similar rates of relaxation and decreased anger, but the metal listening group also had increased positive emotional states like "action" and "inspired" (Sharman & Dingle, 2015).

Identity Formation

Like many other music genres, people who took a particular liking to metal music also based some of their identity on their favorite music, bands, or other musical elements. Because of the loud, distorted, and dissonant sound of metal, many metal music fans had tastes that are outside of the norm in popular music. One such study reported that metal fans were more likely to be open to experiences, such as scoring high on Openness in the Big Five Personality Factors (Swami et al., 2013). Another study determined that metal fans tended to have feelings of marginalization and outside status compared to normal peers, and a stronger sense of power when listening to metal music (Rowe & Guerin, 2018). Some metal fans even used the perceived

metal fan stereotype of being violent and weird to deter bullies or make themselves more confident among like-minded peers.

In addition to personality traits, the metal genre produced fanbases that provided identity and meaning to different generations, professions, and moments in people's lives. When surveying metal fans from the 1980's after thirty or more years since the inception of their first exposure to the genre, a research study developed results that would contrast with previous researchers in the 1980's and 1990's. First, it detailed that there was no significant difference between adverse childhood events, deviant behavior, or attachment styles among metal fans and other music fans from the same generation (Howe et al., 2015). Second, the authors wrote that metal fans reported being happier in their youth than non-metal fans and were less likely to have regrets of their teen years than similar aged adults that were non-metal fans.

Communities and Cultural Factors

Along with individual identity, metal fans reported connecting to other fans and peers who also listen to metal by going to concerts, buying albums, or talking about their favorite bands. Given the social isolation from some metal fans, the metal genre gave them a community of like-minded people, whether online or in person, that supported each other with their social skills or mental health (Rowe & Guerin, 2018).

Additionally, metal music, and other forms of heavy music like punk, provided an empowered advocacy platform so that bands could promote social justice. What was thought to be harmful disapproval of authority was instead a potent critique of the injustices in the current landscape, and the metal genre and the fan community brought hope in raising awareness of these unjust practices so that they could be changed. Some punk musicians stated that that they

gained their political awareness and energy to pursue social activism through their exposure and involvement in the punk scene (Mageary, 2018).

When looking at demographics of metal fans across these studies, many surveyed metal fans consisted of white, middle-class, able-bodied males. There has been a dearth of demographic research into exploring the LGBTQ+ community in metal music (Nicholes, 2016), though some studies that discuss sexual themes do so through the heterosexual lens. This may be due to the cultural disproportion of fans in this genre of music, the limitations of current research studies, or due to the perceived hypermasculinity and violent nature that has been blamed upon metal fans, especially among the early years of metal music research.

However, another strong demographic found in studies about metal music involved females, particularly when studying the correlation between metal music and depression (Miranda & Claes, 2009; Shafron & Karno, 2013). In contrast to male fans, female metal fans sometimes were studied according to "groupie" status and sexual proclivity, and though one study reported more risky behavior and more unstable attachment styles in females (Howe et al., 2015), the "groupie" population was split into that specific gender group, the "musician" population was split into mostly males, and the overall group of "metal fans" and non-metal fans were split equally among genders.

There had been instances of metal fans reveling in their hypermasculinity and using the misogyny of some lyrics of metal songs to gain influence and confidence. One study collected music-based posts from an anti-feminist forum and saw members stating the fast tempos, heavy rhythms, loudness, and aggressive music as reinforcing their hypermasculine status (de Boise, 2020). However, other female metal fans spoke out against the misogyny and formed their own communities, through fanzines or fan-fiction websites, to find solace with fellow women and tear

down the hypermasculine imagery through slash fiction (same-sex romantic fan fiction) and writing of real-life musicians with sensitive, non-masculine sides (Hoad, 2017).

Despite some lack of current research specialized on demographics, metal music became a cultural touchstone for other non-Western cultures at other points in time, like when many alternative and heavy bands, led by Asian musicians, appeared in Hong Kong after the British de-colonization in 1997 (Ma, 2002). Like the previous studies, many of the Asian musicians reported similar feelings of strength, hypermasculinity, and community because of the metal genre.

So far, none of the studies that researched about metal fans claimed to see any difference of opinions between races, ability level, neurodivergence, or class, though the inclusion of more focused studies on demographic differences between metal fans would assist in determining this claim.

Music Therapy and Metal

Despite the wealth of research on metal music that inquired on the risks or benefits of the genre, there were few studies carried out to explore the metal genre within a music therapy perspective (Baker & Bor, 2008; McFerran et al., 2015). Given the many studies proposing the decreased mental health of metal fans, and other studies proposing the reasons that metal music provided a benefit for metal fans, there laid a lack of studies that showed how music therapy techniques or procedures could lead to using the metal fans' preference to the genre and expanding it to its musical and therapeutic elements.

Finding a definition for the music therapy profession that could encapsulate a varied and dynamic field was workshopped over many years, but Kenneth Bruscia (2013) updated his third rendition for the definition of music therapy as the following:

> A reflexive process wherein the therapist helps the client to optimize the client's health, using various facets of music experience and the relationships formed through them as the impetus for change. As defined here, music therapy is the professional practice component of the discipline, which informs and is informed by theory and research. (p. 36).

This definition laid the relationship and power of music as a therapy experience, the various ways music addressed therapeutic goals, and promoted the professional and credentialed field of music therapists that provide ethical, trained service in music therapy practices. Of the many techniques in music therapy, a few held promise in the growing field of metal research.

Iso Principle

One popular application used by music therapists is known as the "iso principle." The iso principle is an experiential, here-and-now technique where a person's music is matched to their current mood before being changed to a more positive, energetic mood. With this technique, a depressed client could begin by matching their depression and feeling more connected to the emotion instead of trying to shove away the depression with overly positive music. The technique originated in 1948 by Ira Altshuler and has been a staple in music therapy theory in the mental and medical health settings (Heidersheit & Madson, 2015). Given previous findings in metal music on the "cathartic" use of the genre for anger and depression (Sharman & Dingle, 2015; Shafron & Karno, 2013), this music therapy technique provides a suitable subject for further study when learning how to help client that are metal or "problem music" fans.

Even though the theory of the iso principle had been around for decades, there were few studies that took the iso principle and formed a clinical method to be used in daily music therapy practice. One such study detailed how two music therapists helped a client to make an iso

playlist to relieve symptoms of depression and encourage feelings of hope and energy (Heidersheit & Madson, 2015). However, this study, and most of the studies that investigated metal music, focused on listening to music as opposed to performing music or writing therapeutic songs. To explore the aspect of the performance and songwriting phenomenon, and to from an expressive action-based approach, rather than receptive listening approach, the technique of "holding music" within the model of vocal psychotherapy could become a part of this clinical method.

Vocal Psychotherapy

Vocal psychotherapy is a music therapy approach that in its theory and practice focuses on the use of voice in improving mental health, usually through free associative singing and holding music techniques, also known as music that keeps a steady one or two chord progression to ground the musical space for improvisation. Though the voice had been used in music therapy for decades, this model, based in object relations, Jungian, and trauma theory, was formed by Diane Austin (2008). In her practice, she works one-on-one with clients and provides holding music for clients to free associate on their past emotional experiences. The music therapist reflects, honors, and provides commentary to the free association and singing to encourage further exploration into the trauma narrative. Similarly, this technique could be used for fans of the music metal genre based on the emotional catharsis provided from the lyrics and the music.

Although Diane Austin's theory focused on improvisation and psychodynamic psychology, other vocal psychotherapy techniques emerged that took inspiration from Austin's practice and adapted them to pre-written songs by other artists. With pre-written songs, one could explore the connection between artist and singer/client, the emotions brought about from

the performance, the exploration of identity brought about by the connection, and understanding the relationships within music and community (Measheley, 2020).

However, the vocal psychotherapy field predominantly encouraged improvisation and free association over pre-written songs because they believed that songs created by the individual could speak more to the inner experience of the client instead of trying to take on someone else's perspective (Austin, 2008). Despite this, there were several non-vocal within pre-written metal songs that could provide a backdrop for vocal improvisation, like humming or wordless vocalizing.

Self-Awareness

In addition to the two above music techniques, another therapeutic tool that aided in the development of identity formation in this clinical method experiment was the exploration of the self. In this case, I decided to choose the heuristic research design model to base this method in a pre-structured, evidence-based practice used in other qualitative studies (Guigan, 2020; Nicholes, 2016).

This specific model was inspired by the heuristic self-inquiry model developed by Moustakas (1990). This method was chosen because it provided an involved process into self-inquiry that studied the self and the potential clients/co-researchers, and put focus on an embodied, internal lens instead of a phenomenological, transpersonal experience (Mihalache, 2019). Although the process is non-linear and any stage of the project could be revisited or explored, the six stages of Moustakas' (1990) model are:

1. Initial engagement: forming the topic of the study, culminating in a research question.
2. Immersion: extensively researching and experiencing the topic.
3. Incubation: taking a short break from the topic for the knowledge to process.

4. Illumination: returning to the project with a new understanding of the topic.
5. Explication: putting this new understanding of the topic into words.
6. Creative Synthesis: forming a creative project and narrative to analyze and communicate the heuristic inquiry process.

This technique also related to the professional identity formation that was explored in this research study. Several articles by other graduating music therapy students also chose heuristic self-inquiry to introspect on their professional and personal selves. One such study used a heuristic inquiry method to explore the therapeutic presence based on the author's expertise in mindfulness meditation and his journey as a music therapy student (Guigan, 2020). In this author's study, the researcher/author led three experiential workshops with six student music therapy participants, and the researcher/author used the heuristic model to present results about the essential nature of self-awareness and musical improvisation. Another study that approached the heuristic method was designed to test a new clinical method of using therapeutic songwriting in exploring self-awareness (Damore, 2022). The author used herself in a heuristic model to test this method to explore her songwriting and therapeutic background, and to test and refine a clinical method to be used by other music therapy students.

Methods

Sample

With this heuristic study model, I was both the researcher and the participant. As the participant, I hold multiple intersecting identities that influenced the results of this clinical method. I identify as a white, cis-gender male from a middle-class background. I am able-bodied, contain a mental health diagnosis, and believe in atheism. I hold a bachelor's degree in electronic media, where I studied filmmaking and audio production. After several years in the freelance film

business, I transitioned to music therapy because the profession felt more meaningful to my existential goals of helping people through the arts like the arts have helped me. Due to these and other intersecting identities, my results should be considered within this background so that readers understand the validity and reliability of the results and its limitations while testing this experimental clinical method.

Design

The process of this clinical method occurred from December 2022 to January 2023. The method followed a step-by-step fashion that took inspiration from some principles of Moustakas' method for heuristic studies (1990). My procedure followed these steps:

1. Conducted an interview between my on-site internship supervisor and myself about my personal and professional identity as an intern and developing therapist.
2. Created a depression-focused iso playlist that followed a three-stage model detailed by John Ortiz (1997). This playlist started with matching my mood with three depression-adjacent songs (stage one), progressed to three songs with hopeful messages and themes (stage two), and ended with three songs to create a state of energy (stage three). I limited this playlist to songs from the metal genre as I defined above.
3. Practiced and performed vocally through this iso playlist on my own. Practice was defined as playing in sections to improve performance. Performing was then defined as playing through the whole song with a focus on emotional awareness and reflection of my professional identity.
4. Wrote down my thoughts related to my professional identity and my emotions when practicing/performing the pieces in my personal journal. I based this journal reflection on the Immersion and Implication stages of Moustakas' heuristic method (1990).

5. Performed in a Zoom session with my music therapy supervisor through the iso playlist as he observed my performance and wrote notes in his own journal on his observations of the presenting emotional journey and my identity formation. He was prompted to act as a warm, therapeutic presence, in a similar vein to Diane Austin's work on Vocal Psychotherapy (2008).
6. Met the following week with my music therapy supervisor and myself to reflect on last week's performance by comparing our notes, reflecting on the experience verbally, and beginning to synthesize and explicate our processing (Moustakas, 1990).
7. Conducted a post-study interview with my on-site supervisor to discuss my personal/professional identity and to compare the most recent observations to the themes created from step 1.

Data Analysis

The data on the emotion, identity formation, and musical experience was collected in several self-inquiry journals, where I documented the experience of practicing/performing the song, how the practice/performance revealed elements of my personal/professional identity, how the songs fit within an emotional and affective theory, and how the self-inquiry challenged and immersed me in a deeper understanding of myself. I also made notes of my supervisors' feedback, with the consent of my music therapist supervisor and my on-site supervisor, so I could break down their input to find common themes that arose from my experience and their feedback. Lastly, the data was collected through a free-write narrative of the whole experience to further develop common themes and create more data to perform a general inductive analysis (Thomas, 2003).

In the general inductive analysis, I read through my journals, notes, and narrative multiple times, coded out related themes in the data, put those coded themes into smaller themes, and

narrowed the subthemes down to a few, substantial sections (Thomas, 2003). This method of analysis was chosen for its ability to take qualitative data from words and then use those words to synthesize and explicate the data.

Results

During data analysis, the two themes of emotional awareness and professional identity were broken down into a total of seven subthemes (see table 1 and table 2). Four themes related to emotions, and three themes related to identity. Some of these themes overlapped, because the immersion within the journals, supervisor notes, and narratives led to a multifaceted data set. However, each subtheme that was created could stand alone as its own topic of reflection.

Table 1

Subthemes for the "Emotional Understanding" Theme

Subtheme	Description	Example
Emotional Matching/Iso	How the emotional catharsis/outpouring related to the songs being played at each stage of the playlist.	"I noted even after the performance that I was talking more dynamically, energetically, and giddily, so my emotions are my own in that case."
Body Awareness	How paying attention to the body (i.e. heart, warmth, gut support, throat, etc.) matched the mood of the song/performance.	"I noticed that my body usually tells the truth of what I am feeling regardless of what it supposedly looks like from the outside."
Emotional Distress/Dysphoria	When the anxiety of the performance/process led to disconnecting from the here-and-now moment and the emotion (dysphoria).	"I shied away from some of the more vulnerable ways my voice could be."
Images/Thoughts/Memories	How the images, thoughts, and memories that arose during the playing/performance led to enhanced emotional experience.	"It was the energy and the memories of the concerts that made me happy."

Table 2.

Subthemes for the "Professional Identity" Theme

Subtheme	Description	Example
Unique Identity	When I explored how my singing voice, choices of songs, and experiences related to my unique personal/professional identity.	"Something I also noticed based on this performance was my professional identity involves the value of structure that also has flexibility built in."
Technical/Analytical	How my experience with technical aspects (audio production, writing, singing technique) and my analytical mind revealed aspects of my identity.	"… and even when I did the lower and softer sections I felt that sense of support underneath."
Flexibility/Confidence	How working on flexibility, letting go, and exploring the unknown led to a growth of my professional identity which followed the procedure of the clinical method.	"I had to let go in those situations at the end and let my lack of preparation just get out of the way, and usually it went over better than I thought."

Emotional Understanding

The first subtheme explored related to the topic of emotional understanding was noting when moods were matched with the present experience, or when the iso principle was most in effect. Given the purpose of the study, the playlist related to its progression from depression to energy in a predominantly positive progression (figure 1). In addition, this subtheme revealed most when the emotional intensity was given further awareness when making notes on the performance experience (see Appendix).

The second subtheme parsed out of the data was body awareness, or times when I noticed the feelings inside my body and how they related to the song's emotional intensity. In general,

"numb" and "downcast eyes" were associated with the depression stage, "heart" and "warmth" was associated with the hope stage, and "headbanging," "smiling," and "arm movement" was related to the energetic stage.

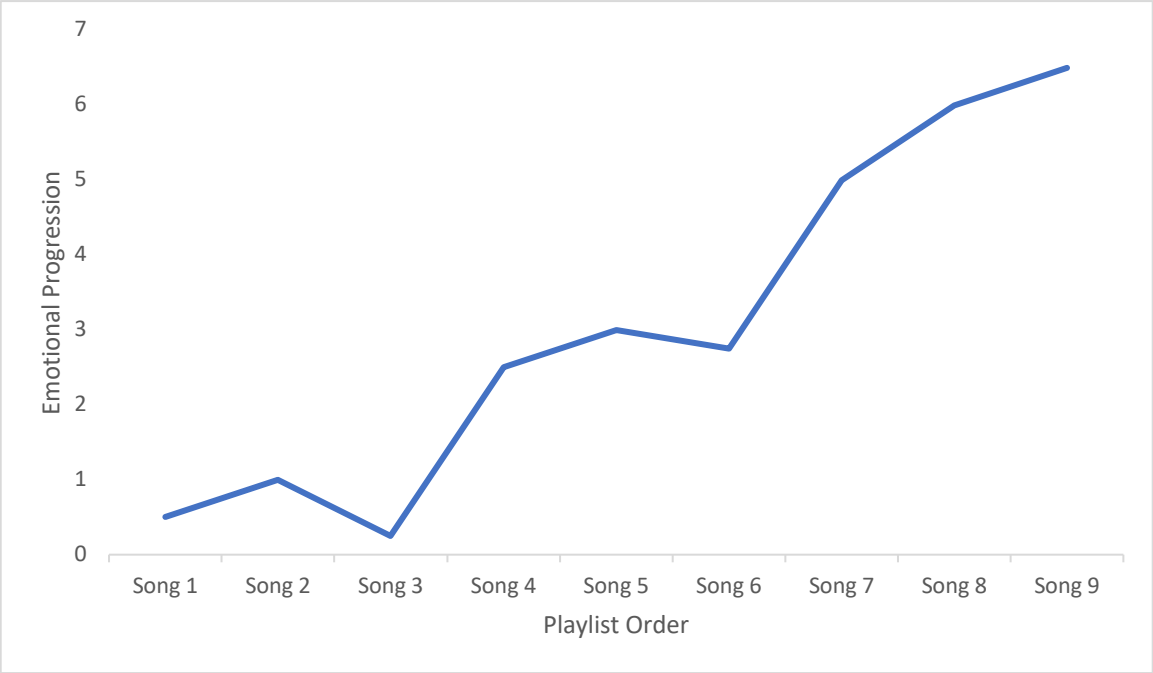
The third subtheme provided a data set I did not expect would arise from this clinical method. This sub-theme related to the distress, anxiety, or emotional dysphoria I felt during the process. Given the inflexibility, perfectionism, and technical prowess that represent a part of my professional identity, distress and anxiety crept into my self-inquiry when practicing and playing through the songs. With the main performance, there were fleeting moments of this anxiety that brought me out of the moment and towards being over-judgmental of my technical abilities. Despite this, most of the performance lacked these moments of distress, and the first theme of emotional matching became more evident when performing in front of my music therapy supervisor. Another aspect of this subtheme, emotional dysphoria, was also concerned with the moments when the themes of the song appeared to go against my feelings about the song. For example, the songs in the active phase (songs 7-9) had lyrics about rejection, protest, and anger, particularly the eighth song ("Silence Speaks" by While She Sleeps). This result resonated with another study that showed the emotional contrast between the song's lyrics and the felt mood of the metal fan (Stewart et al., 2019).

The fourth and final subtheme on the topic of emotional understanding related to how images, thoughts, and memories played into accessing affective states. This differed from the body sensations that reflected my emotions, or how my emotions were reflected in the here-and-now experience during the performances. These images, thoughts, or memories played a part in amplifying or enhancing my emotions. Memories played an essential role in the third stage of the playlist, where the songs were amplified when I thought about the energy that I felt when at the

concerts of these artists. Because of this, it was crucial to acknowledge thoughts, images, and memories as other aspects to aid in understanding the emotional experience.

Figure 1

Timeline of Iso Playlist from Depression to Energetic



Professional Identity

The first subtheme that arose during the inductive analysis was the concept of forming a unique identity in both personal and professional life. Initially, much of the identity perspective focused on figuring out where the "unique" voice arose that could be translated into my professional practice. During that time, the naming of my unique identity was not fully formed, and this subtheme focused on exploration instead of naming. When the post-performance interviews occurred, it was then that I found ways that my "voice" as a therapist translated to my professional identity, as well as my growth in flexibility.

Along with finding a unique identity, the second subtheme that related to professional identity was diving into the technical and analytical mindset that forms a basis of my therapy

presence and abilities. I studied extensively with audio production, writing, and vocal technique, so many of the notes in my journals also focused on the technical aspect of practicing the vocals of the song or preparing for the performance through the vocal less recordings. This theme also showed up in both of my pre- and post-interviews with my on-site supervisor when she noted where my experience and my analytic tendencies appeared in my therapy practice, such as when inventing session plans.

The third subtheme regarding professional identity, and perhaps the most explored out of all the subthemes, was the idea of flexibility and how that flexibility turned into confidence. Several of the significant phrases that were repeated in my notes were “letting go,” “home,” and “away from home.” Letting go involved getting away from perfection and judgments and focusing on the here-and-now, free-form movement of the song and experience. “Home” related to a sense of feeling connected to my voice and the pitch tuning of the song, where I could feel a better connection to the song when I sang to it. The “away from home,” in contrast, concerned the times when I got away from this tuning center and where I would either move towards emotional dysphoria/distress or towards increasing my flexibility by using the “away from home” experience to lead to an exploration into uncomfortable feelings and of being flexible within the process. This skill was one that I focused on prominently in this process, evidenced by the notes from my on-site supervisor, my observations of that interplay in playing the iso playlist with my work at my internship, and how the development of letting go led to greater confidence and comfort into my professional and personal identity.

Discussion

The field on metal music research determined several vital factors in why metal fans found the genre beneficial, healing, and valuable. These studies countered previous research on

metal music, where metal music was depicted as dangerous, detrimental, and a negative influence on young teens and adults (Arnett, 1991; Scheel & Westefeld, 1999; Hughes et al., 2018; Till et al., 2019; Hansen & Hansen, 1991). In particular, the main concern about metal music was its link to increased risk of suicidality (Till et al., 2019; Scheel & Westefeld, 1999). Other studies on metal music had shown positive indications for the formation of identity (Greenberg et al., 2015; Rowe & Guerin, 2018), emotional coping (McFerran et al., 2015; Sharman & Dingle, 2015; Shafron & Karno, 2013; Sun et al., 2019; Miranda & Claes, 2009; Stewart et. al, 2019), and membership in a robust community (Rowe & Guerin, 2018; Ma, 2002; Swami et al., 2013; Miranda & Claes, 2009; Stewart et al., 2019; Howe et al., 2015).

From the clinical method detailed here, many aspects of emotional coping, catharsis, and professional identity were showcased in this study. Through the structure of the playlist, the process of heuristic self-inquiry and journaling, and the consultation with supervisors, this method led me to dive deeper into ways that my technical prowess, inflexibility, and emotional release or dysphoria played a part in my music therapist identity. When comparing the on-site supervisor notes from the beginning of the method to the end, my supervisor noted several improvements in my flexibility, professional development related to my identity, improved understating of the site culture, and increased confidence.

Along with the above feedback, several elements of this project surprised me compared to when I began the process in December. First, I did not realize the power images could hold in my mind. They were both a part of my emotional awareness (how images of concerts or events brought about emotions) and my professional identity (using the image of “home” to represent being in tune with pitch and myself, and “away from home” as the uncertainty needed to be okay with being out of tune and less attuned to myself). Second, I did not expect to be unaware of

many other emotional facets of my life. Not only did the anxiety during parts of the project lead to a disconnect with my emotions, but I also found a certain disconnect between the content of some songs and my personal experience of the song. When looking deeper into the contrast between the themes, it reminded me of how other metal fans held this dichotomy of emotions between the content of the song and the fan's own experience (Stewart et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2019).

Clinical Implications and Considerations

Through a heuristic, emotional-progressing, introspective model, this method could provide an excellent tool for music therapist students to reveal aspects of their professional and personal identity as they transition to the professional world. Such as other music therapists have used journaling and heuristic self-inquiry in their final year (Guigan, 2021; Damore, 2022), the act of using playlists, person-preferred music, and self-inquiry presented as an opportunity for self-reflection and gaining insight into aspects of emotional awareness.

Limitations

Given that this study used a one-participant, self-inquiry format, there are several limitations to address for future notice. For example, I can only observe metal music, emotional awareness, and professional identity through my intersecting identities (white, middle-class, male, etc.). With this limitation, the findings of this method should not be generalized to the larger population. This is especially true given that the data analysis on identity focused on my professional identity as a music therapy student, so if this method were to be applied to a non-music therapist, there would need to be modifications. The results of this project are a starting place for an innovative clinical method, and more research and testing into this method can

provide more precise results into how the method responds to people with different intersecting identities.

Additionally, given the reflective nature of journaling and choosing a method to examine the self, I have provided myself with a strategy for improvement from the act of journaling itself, so some of the revelations could be attributed to the journaling method. In addition, I was in the process of an internship, clinical supervision, individual therapy, and weekly group therapy, so there were several outlets for growth during this December-January timeframe.

Further Indications

There are many opportunities for singing with an iso playlist for music therapy. Though this playlist focused on metal music, the playlist for a client can be adapted to any person-preferred music, as the power of person-preferred music is more effective than the limitation of using only one genre in music therapy. Also, though the playlist focused on the iso principle, the playlist could be adapted to any kind of therapeutic progression, such as creating a life narrative or moving through the process of grief. This study used the method of a live virtual performance with a semi-professional mic and audio interface, so some of the technical considerations of future applications include the hardware, like the mics on a headphone, and the program, such as using Skype or Google Teams instead of Zoom. Finally, the method could be presented to others in a variety of ways, including with a therapist, with a supervisor in person, in front of a live public audience, while playing along with an instrument, while playing with other band members, and also whether the consultation or processing occurs before, during, or after the performance.

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Appendix

Notes of Emotional Awareness and Understanding based on Iso Playlist Song

Songs	Emotional Awareness and Understanding	Examples
"Dying Is Absolutely Safe" by Architects	Limited melody, holding self, apathy in voice, closed posture, depression and apathy, sad/downcast eyes	"As I sang, I noticed that I was hugging myself and felt a tug in my stomach."
"Is It Really You?" by Loathe	Feeling a warmth in the heart, still downcast eyes, and closed posture, leaning into song images (stars, skies, snow)	"I felt the most emotional pull when I imagined a couple looking up at the stars, and the melancholy of the couple being broken up."
"Bloodsport" by Sleep Token	Vulnerable yet grounded, lower vocals then all out and cathartic at end, lowest point of the playlist, humming as consoling	"After I screamed the last line, I hummed along with the outro to hold myself and soothe the deep emotions that the song brought."
"The Love You Want" by Sleep Token	Beginning of seeing hope, some reside of last song due to themes of love, feeling "home" and powerful at the end	"Although I messed up the falsetto at the bridge for a bit, I brought back power into the outro and my heart really poured into the lyrics."
"Where We Go When We Die" by Thornhill	Challenging song, mix of the "home" and "away from home" sensations, feelings of warmth, flexibility, and connection	"In the outro, the most difficult yet emotionally charged part of the song, I felt a sense of 'home' and 'away from home' from being 'in tune' and 'out of tune,' but my flexibility led me to let go of tuning and be present in the moment."
"My Curse" by Killswitch Engage	Laid on the powerfulness of the voice and technique, needed to use memory to bring out connection, felt nostalgia to the beginning of my metal journey	"As I imagined myself first listening to the song in the car, I connected the experience of sitting in the car with me sitting in my chair now and moving my right hand for expression."
"Higher" by Sleep Token	More powerful and in tune than any other song, letting go, first song to involve headbanging and smiling, using a mistake as a boon	"Though I didn't do the pre-breakdown vocals the way that Vessel [the original singer] did, I still felt great in making the song my own and

		getting to headbang and smile to a really great instrumental breakdown."
"Silence Speaks" by While She Sleeps ft. Oli Sykes	Using the fast pace of the song, the screaming, and the idea of protest in the song to ramp up my energy, headbanging and smiling to the max, heart warmth translated into warmth/energy throughout the body, taking in memory of seeing them in concert	"Although the backing vocals I produced in some sections didn't line up, I focused on the energy of the song, the memory of singing along to them in a concert and getting compliments from someone, and my overall feelings with the song to ramp up my energy and happiness."
"All My Life" by Foo Fighters	More of the screaming and letting it go quality, laying in on the song because it was the end, memory of seeing them in concert and the emotional connection I have with the band	"The song's energy and tempo brought about those memories of concerts past, even if I only had to picture it in my head once. The performance and emotion was already there, waiting to get out."

THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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Title:

Expressing Emotional Catharsis and Professional Identity Formation Through the Medium of Metal Music: Development of a Heuristic-Informed Music Therapy Method

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

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