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'It's like a hug': examining the role of music-making for the well-being of youth during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This article presents findings from a cross-disciplinary, international project that seeks to understand the importance of music-making for young people (aged 18–35 years) as a source of well-being during the COVID-19 crisis. A key objective of the project is to evaluate whether music-making has contributed in palpable ways to young people's individual well-being and their sense of connection with others. For the purposes of the project, well-being is defined in relation to both physical and mental health but also by having a sense of social belonging. Given the unprecedented circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic, its rapid spread and ensuing disruptions to everyday life, the project findings offer a significant opportunity to examine and evaluate the importance of music-making for young people's well-being in a time of rapidly shifting and increasingly uncertain socio-economic conditions. The article draws on data collected during 77 online interviews with young music-makers based in different locations around Australia, the UK and Portugal. Participants for the project were recruited through calls posted on social media with additional internal recruiting at one of the partner universities through a monthly call out for volunteers for research projects.

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Introduction

The rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus during early 2020 created a global crisis unparalleled since the first half of the twentieth century when two world wars, a pandemic and economic collapse led to suffering and trauma on a massive scale. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020 and 2021, the attempts of governments around the world to curb its effects saw a restriction of civil liberties beyond the living memory of many individuals, particularly among those living in western-industrialised nations

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where freedom of movement and speech have become essentially taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life. Strikingly, amidst concerns to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus through lockdowns, social distancing and the closing of many businesses and public services, there was little accompanying commentary on the negative effects of such measures on the well-being of ordinary citizens, although medical experts around the world have subsequently begun to acknowledge the social and psychological costs lockdowns and social distancing.

When imposing restrictions, governments globally emphasised the need to protect the well-being of physically at-risk groups, such as the elderly and those with underlying health issues (Matthewman and Huppatz 2020). While justified, such measures also had significant negative effects on the well-being of other groups outside high-risk categories, including youth. Indeed, many spaces of leisure and consumption, including bars, clubs, music venues and festivals, closed or cancelled during lockdowns, are patronised by young people between the ages of 18–35 (van Leeuwen et al. 2020). It has been frequently noted how, during lockdowns sales of home entertainment and physical fitness equipment began to increase (Tsai 2020). This also applied to the sale of musical instruments, with a number of online music stores advocating the purchase of instruments and recording equipment during lockdown as a means of remaining active and creative (Thakur et al. 2020). At the same time, bands and individual artists, internationally established and amateur alike, began streaming live performances on YouTube and other online platforms (Lehman 2020). The world's media featured reports about informal live music performances from the balconies of apartments and the front rooms of houses (Hebblethwaite, Young, and Martin Rubio 2020). These online and physical contexts became spaces for the performance of live music, in the absence of access to venues and other official performance spaces.

While such musical productivity and performance during lockdown and post-lockdown restrictions cannot be exclusively attributed to youth, a sizeable proportion of it can and thus demonstrates the ongoing importance of music for youth. This article presents a preliminary examination of the significance of music-making for youth in preserving well-being and a sense of purpose during the public health crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic. The specific focus is on three countries, namely, Australia, United Kingdom and Portugal. Our method of data collection was semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with young music-makers between the ages of 18–35 in each country. The purpose of the interviews was to determine how participants used music as a resource in preserving well-being and positive mental health during the first wave of the pandemic in 2020. By music makers, we refer to singers, songwriters, DJs, producers and instrumentalists operating at professional, semi-professional and amateur levels.

Official responses to COVID-19 in Australia, the UK and Portugal

This section outlines the early official responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the three countries where data was collected between June and October 2020. Governments implemented measures to control the virus prior to and during this period. The study focuses on participant experiences during the pandemic's first wave, particularly the lockdowns implemented across all three countries. We contextualize our research within the

broader context of early pandemic responses to provide a deeper understanding of the role of music in individual well-being during these ongoing disruptions.

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Australia occurred on 25 January 2020 (Ministry of Health 2020). Responses by the Australian government to the pandemic evolved through time as foreign threat progressed to community transmission resulting in a rapid growth in cases. A notable response to the pandemic – a full shutdown – was initiated on 21 March 2020 when the total number of cases in the country reached 1000 and doubled within three days (COVID19 Data 2020). Social distancing measures were introduced together with broader travel bans, testing, contact tracing, and quarantine. Social gatherings were limited to fewer than 500 people, then to 100 people (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2021). Later, further spatial distancing measures were announced, limiting indoor social gatherings to 10 people, and then, by the end of March, to two people (AIHW 2021). All non-essential businesses and activities were shut down, and Australians were urged to ‘stay at home’. The government response/restrictions in Australia varied by states and territories.

The initial response to COVID-19 in the UK was a 3-month period (March to May 2020) of strict lockdown when people were only permitted to leave their homes for key worker jobs, such as those in the medical profession, and to obtain food supplies. Lockdown measures began to ease during June 2020 but later in the year were re-introduced as infection rates again began to climb. Within the UK, COVID-19 had a disruptive impact on the lives of young people with many of them being confined to their homes. Alongside these experiences of confinement, young people lost opportunities to socialise, spend time with others and all elements of recreation. This had a major impact on young people’s well-being (Bengtsson et al. 2021).

In Portugal, on March 18, 2020, the first *State of Emergency* was decreed, leading to a general lockdown, as in the UK and Australia. All cultural facilities, bars and small concert venues were closed (Howard et al. 2021). To avoid high concentrations of people and following the restrictions on the national and international circulation of people, most concerts and summer festivals were cancelled. Only in June were cultural facilities and some concert venues (excepting bars) able to reopen, subject to having contingency plans and guaranteeing a rigorous hygiene protocol. The maximum capacity of venues was also substantially reduced (Guerra et al. 2021). In November 2020, a new *State of Emergency* was announced with fewer restrictions than the former. In fact, Portugal was one of the ten European Union countries with the highest number of cases that did not opt for confinement. Even so, a *Mandatory Curfew* was decreed, which placed new restrictions on the opening of cultural facilities and other leisure spaces.

Youth, music and crisis

Since the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, research has explored its severe and unequal impacts on groups including children and adolescents in Australia, the UK and a range of other countries (Aarah-Bapuah et al. 2022; Bessell 2022; Holt and Murray 2022). Globally, an increase in major depressive disorders and anxiety disorders was associated with higher infection rates and decreased human mobility (lockdowns), with the greatest impacts suffered by young people and women (Covid-19 Mental Disorders Collaborators 2021). Among youth, particularly in industrialised nations, the COVID crisis produced

highly novel responses, including the increased use of social media, video gaming and other activities such as ‘cloud clubbing’ (Li, Ghosh, and Nachmias 2020) as a means of combatting social isolation (Comerford 2020). Music also took on added importance for young people as a means of coping with the difficult circumstances created by the pandemic. For example, Levstek et al. (2021) noted the value of virtual group music-making for young people during lockdowns. Although limited to the UK, Levstek et al.’s findings resonate with our own in that they indicate the value for young people of making music together on digital platforms in helping them to maintain a sense of well-being and belonging. Given the way that lockdowns prevented physical gatherings of young music-makers, Levstek et al. observe how ‘Music Spaces’, an initiative of three local music education hubs¹ in the south-east of England, provided opportunities for young people to come together virtually in order to participate in music-making activities that spanned a range of music from traditional to classical. Participants in the Music Spaces project exhibited a restoration of confidence and also used music as a means of expressing their feelings concerning the pandemic and its impact on their social lives. A further study by Hansen et al. (2021) also examines the value of digital technology in enabling young people to connect, in this case, to create and share pandemic-themed music online. Primarily focusing on YouTube, Hansen et al. note how much of the online ‘coronamusic’ they sampled as part of the study was aimed at ‘[t]ackling anxiety through humoristic coping’ and designed to promote ‘good mental health’ (2021, 2).

The above findings build on a longer tradition of research that examines the significance of music as a means of crisis management among young people. Predating the current pandemic, such work focuses on a range of other crisis situations including war, refugeeism, social unrest and environmental disasters (e.g. tornadoes, floods). For example, Pripp (2019) examines how young Kurdish refugees in Sweden have used traditional music and dance as a means of articulating their Kurdish identity and overcoming the trauma of forced displacement from their homelands. Pripp identifies the multi-modal qualities of music and dance as critical factors for Kurdish young people in maintaining a sense of ethnic belonging. Similarly, Marsh (2017) examines the value of music in aiding the resettlement of migrant children and young people in Australia whose families have escaped conflict in countries including Iraq, South Sudan and Sierra Leone. Applying the concept of bicultural children, Marsh notes how music assists in enabling young refugees to forge new cultural spaces for themselves. Cox et al. (2017) worked with youth between the ages of 13–22, from four communities in the US and Canada that have been impacted by an environmental disaster. With an emphasis on the associated risks to mental health, social stability and educational achievement, Cox et al. invited research participants to take part in workshops focusing on art, music, photography, and videography as a means of allowing them to reflect on their post-disaster recovery. A key finding of Cox et al.’s study was that young participants considered creative and artistic practices, including music, as important ‘outlets for telling their stories and commemorating their disaster experiences’ (2017, 253).

Defining well-being

Well-being is a complex, multifaceted and nuanced concept, which is difficult to define. Consequently, how to best conceptualise and measure it has been subject to much

debate in academic literature across disciplines with various definitions and conceptualisations being put forward. For the purpose of this study, we draw on the definition of well-being proposed by Dodge et al. (2012) namely, well-being as the balance point between an individual's resource pool on a psychological, social and physical level and the respective challenges faced.

This definition presents a straightforward, yet dynamic understanding of well-being, where the see-saw represents a balancing of resources and challenges resulting in stable well-being. In other words, an individual who possesses the psychological, social and/or physical resources to meet the respective challenges is considered to be in a state of stable well-being. In the case of increased challenges without additional resources the see-saw dips, along with well-being, and vice-versa. The see-saw also represents the drive of an individual to return to equilibrium recognising the active role that individuals have in balancing their well-being in their daily lives. This definition presents a number of strengths, such as simplicity, universal application (it can be applied to various individuals/populations regardless of age, culture and sex), optimism (individuals are able to affect their own well-being) and is a useful definition when considering the role of music-making as a means of creating supportive resources for well-being as is the case in the current study. However, critics may argue that this definition is unable to account for context and that the responsibility for well-being falls largely on individuals even in circumstances that are outside their control. Recognising this, we also draw on a relational well-being approach, which views well-being as a dynamic concept, constituted through the interaction of individual, social and environmental processes at a particular time and place to contextualise well-being (White 2015). Dodge's et al. definition of well-being and the latter approach aligns well with the aim of our study to explore how young music-makers use music to cope with the increased challenges presented by the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

Study design and method

This exploratory study adopted a qualitative design with the data drawn from semi-structured interviews with young people between the ages of 18–35 in Australia, the UK and Portugal. This age range was chosen as it conforms to the current parameters of late youth (Arnett 2014). The research sites were chosen to examine if and how differing national rates of COVID-19 infection and steps to curb its spread have impacted the daily experiences of youth and how they have used music as a means of coping with measures including lockdowns and social distancing. Given the advice concerning health and safety at the time of data collection, all interviews were conducted online using Teams, Zoom and Skype and taking about 40 min on average. The interview protocol included questions on basic demographics (e.g. age, gender), music involvement (e.g. type, level, frequency of live performance), the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on music-making activity (e.g. 'Has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your music-making activities in any way?') together with questions surrounding the role of music-making in shaping well-being and social connection during the pandemic (e.g. 'Have there been ways in which music-making has helped you cope more positively with the COVID-19 crisis?').

Data collection ceased when no key new topics were emerging during interviews. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. Written consent was required and obtained from all participants prior to interviews being conducted. Ethics approval for this project was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Griffith University, the lead institution on the project (GU ref no: 2020/359).

Participant recruitment

Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit participants with some variation across the three countries. Any type of music makers (e.g. solo-musicians, band players and DJs) aged between 18–35 years and of any proficiency level (amateur, semi-professional, professional, music student) were eligible to participate in this study. The key recruitment strategies included social media callouts, volunteers for research projects using university broadcast emails; an extensive database of indie rock built over the last decade and the use of gatekeepers (including organisations involved in local music scenes/networks such as Music ACTin Australia, the Music Education Hubs in England and Circuito² in Portugal).

Participant characteristics

In total 77 young music-makers aged 18–35 years (Mean age = 28 years) were interviewed across the three countries; Australia ($n = 18$), Portugal ($n = 37$) and the UK ($n = 22$). Nearly 64% of the sample were male ($n = 49$), 33.8% ($n = 26$), female and 2.6% ($n = 2$) identified as non-binary. Participants from all countries mostly resided in major cities and the majority reported being employed full-time or part-time (75.3%, $n = 58$). The sample included a diversity of music-makers, including singers, songwriters, DJs, producers and instrumentalists with 43% ($n = 33$) operating at professional, 31% ($n = 24$) semi-professional and 26% ($n = 20$) amateur levels. Most of the participants said that before the crisis they usually participated in live performances, with frequency ranging from occasional to upwards of five times a week, with the majority of participants performing at least once a week. [Table 1](#) offers further detail on the key participant characteristics.

A notable characteristic that emerged in the Australian cohort was that all participants had learned to make music in some form during childhood. These skills and practices have been continued and developed up to the present day. In contrast, for the Portuguese and UK cases, some of the interviewees started to study music in their period of childhood but, for the majority of them, the formal and informal (in a self-taught way or via friends, family members, amongst others) learning of music happened in adolescence.

Data analyses

The aim of the in-depth interviews was to elicit information about the participants perceptions of music and its value to them as a health and well-being resource during the pandemic. Data was analysed using the thematic analysis method following the five-step approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, each interview transcript was read and reread to enable the research team to familiarise themselves with the data and to identify initial ideas emerging from it. Then initial codes were manually generated

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

| Characteristic | Australia <i>N</i> = 18 <i>n</i> (%) | Portugal <i>N</i> = 37 <i>n</i> (%) | United Kingdom <i>N</i> = 22 <i>n</i> (%) | Total <i>N</i> = 77 <i>n</i> (%) |
|--|---|--|--|-------------------------------------|
| Gender identification: | | | | |
| Female | 7 (38.9) | 12 (32.4) | 7 (31.8) | 26 (33.8) |
| Male | 10 (55.6) | 24 (64.9) | 15 (68.2) | 49 (63.6) |
| Non-binary | 1 (5.5) | 1 (2.7) | 0 | 2 (2.6) |
| Location: cities/towns by country | | | | |
| | Brisbane: 9 (50) Gold Coast: 3 (16.7) Ipswich: 1 (5.5) Geelong: 1 (5.5) Sydney: 1 (5.5) Canberra: 3 (16.7) | Lisbon: 12 (32.4) Porto: 9 (24.3) Others*: 16 (43.2) | London: 4 (18.2) Nottingham: 7 (31.8) Brighton: 2 (9.1) Leeds: 2 (9.1) Manchester: 4 (18.2) Norwich: 3 (13.6) | - |
| Employment: | | | | |
| Student | 6 (33.3) | 3 (8.1) | 6 (27.3) | 15 (19.5) |
| Unemployed | 1 (5.6) | 2 (5.4) | 1 (4.5) | 4 (5.2) |
| Employed part-time/full-time | 11 (61.1) | 32 (86.5) | 15 (68.2) | 58 (75.3) |
| Music-making level: | | | | |
| Professional | 5 (27.8) | 20 (54.1) | 8 (36.4) | 33 (42.9) |
| Semi-professional | 6 (33.3) | 11 (29.7) | 7 (31.8) | 24 (31.2) |
| Amateur | 7 (38.9) | 6 (16.2) | 7 (31.8) | 20 (25.9) |
| Impact of COVID-19 on musical activity: | | | | |
| Increased | 9 (50) | 8 (21.6) | 5 (22.7) | 22 (28.5) |
| Decreased | 6 (33.3) | 14 (37.8) | 9 (40.9) | 29 (37.7) |
| Neutral/mixed | 3 (16.7) | 15 (40.5) | 8 (36.4) | 26 (33.8) |
| Perceived impact of COVID-19 on music career: | | | | |
| Positive | 6 (33.3) | 1 (2.7) | 7 (31.8) | 14 (18.2) |
| Negative | 5 (27.8) | 10 (27) | 12 (54.5) | 27 (35.1) |
| Neutral/uncertain | 7 (38.9) | 26 (70.3) | 3 (13.6) | 36 (46.7) |
| Lost job/income during COVID-19: | | | | |
| Yes (music-making income) | 5 (27.8) | 29 (78.4) | 17 (77.3) | 51 (66.2) |
| Yes (non-music-making income) | 6 (33.3) | 1 (2.7) | 2 (9.1) | 9 (11.7) |
| No | 7 (38.9) | 7 (18.9) | 3 (13.6) | 17 (22.1) |

*By 'Others', we mean cities other than the two largest in the country (Porto and Lisbon): Barcelos (1); Cascais (1); Leiria (1); Matosinhos (1); Rio Tinto (1); Salvaterra de Magos (1); Seixal (1); Torres Vedras (1); Vila Nova de Famalicão (1); Vila Nova de Gaia (5); Viseu and Sabugal (2).

to identify patterns within the narrative data, which were then collated into preliminary themes. The data with preliminary themes were then shared and compared across the three countries. Interpretation of the data, codes and themes were discussed and agreed upon by the whole international research team to ensure rigor. As the final step of this process, themes were then revised, named and defined.

Findings

In the review of existing studies of youth, music and crisis presented earlier, we note how youth have used music as a resource against crisis in a situation of collective engagement, this sometimes extending to a more structured form of intervention, such as workshops. For our participant group, the fact of social distancing and lockdowns meant that they were frequently deprived of such collective modes of engagement against crisis. Although these could be rescued to a degree via online social and other forms of

digital media, youth resilience during the COVID-19 crisis has frequently begun with the individual young person taking the initiative in finding ways to combat feelings of loneliness and isolation accompanied by contemplation of an increasingly uncertain future in a post-COVID world.

The impacts of COVID-19

Our findings indicate that the COVID-19 crisis had a range of impacts on the interview participants. A majority of participants (Australia: 11/18; Portugal: 14/37, UK: 19/22) reported a loss of income, including income from music making (Australia: 5/18; Portugal: 14/37, UK: 17/22). Most of the Australian participants who reported no income loss were full-time students (4/7), and for Portugal the majority of the interviewees who had experienced no income loss were part-time musicians, meaning they have other full-time jobs (23/37). Within the UK cohort, the majority of income loss came from the closure of retail and hospitality venues, which were the main sources of employment for the musicians. For the Portuguese case, in addition to the loss of income from the music industry, artists were also affected – as in the case of the UK – by a substantial loss of income and work in most cases, as they were focused on industries such as hospitality or tourism. In addition, many of our interviewees also held jobs as sound technicians, which made them suffer even more from the impacts of the pandemic. Apart from financial impacts, all participants suffered some negative personal consequences, most commonly through loss of contact with friends and family, and the disruption of routines and plans.

For a majority of participants (Australia: 12/18; Portugal: 27/37), the experience of these events was discussed as a mental health concern, ranging from feelings of flatness, loss of purpose and anxiety, to debilitating depressive episodes lasting weeks in several cases. These levels of anxiety were echoed by the UK cohort, with 12 out of 22 reporting lack of motivation, feelings of helplessness and isolation and drug abuse for one participant. Some described this as a new experience, while for others the COVID-19 situation exacerbated pre-existing mental health issues and prevented them from using their usual coping strategies, which for one Australian participant led to suicide attempts. The Australian participants who suffered the more serious mental health impacts sought professional psychological help.

The most notable impact of the COVID-19 crisis on music making was the cessation of live performances. For the Portuguese case, 33/37 interviewees mentioned the cancellation of the performances as the most significant impact. Most people interviewed in Australia (14/18) said that before the crisis they usually participated in live performance, with frequency ranging from occasional to upwards of five times a week. Within the UK context, all professional musicians (8/22 of the total cohort) reported the cancellation of live music performances, with one band member being mid-way through a tour when lockdown impacted. Musicians reported the cancellation, over a forty-eight hour period, of performances and in some cases national or international tours. This in turn disrupted 'release schedules' for songs and albums, which had been based around 'launch' performances and promotional tours. A less publicly visible impact was the suspension of group rehearsals for bands, ensembles, choirs and orchestras, which for some participants was a part of weekly routines. Music making became a largely domestic and solo pursuit, when for many the more public and collective practices of music making had been a core

element of their social life, including those for whom immersion in music scenes meant frequently attending other musicians' performances as well as their own. The interrelation of financial and mental health impacts from the cessation of live music is emphasised in the following quote from a professional singer (32, F) in Australia:

I went from being a very booked and blessed artist to absolutely nothing in 24–48 h. So that takes a huge toll on your mental health because you go, 'Holy shit'. Not only do I identify as an artist and I love singing and performing, there's that added financial stress as well.

As this statement illustrates, music-making is for some people a source of both identity and income, so the disruption of musical performance was a double blow.

The effects of the crisis on private music making activities, such as practice, songwriting and home recording were mixed. For some these activities increased (Australia: 9/18; Portugal: 8/37; UK: 5/22) while for others they decreased (Australia: 6/18; Portugal: 14/37; UK: 9/22) and in some cases, the effects were neutral or mixed. The complex factors affecting time for music making are illustrated in this quote from a bass player in an Australian rock band (30, M):

We've gone from being in a relatively stable band and business to I guess overnight losing our income for the whole year ... In turn it's meant we've all, including me, had to find other work and work more to make ends meet which means less time for making music.

The mixed picture reflects the uneven impacts of COVID-19 on diverse work, study, family, caring and housing arrangements, yet this is not a complete explanation. Drawing on the 'see-saw' model of well-being (Dodge et al. 2012), it is clear from our data that narratives of loss, depletion of social connections and individual drive and motivation unbalanced the equilibrium of well-being for young music-makers. Accompanying the physical restrictions on the cancellation of music-making in the public sphere, was the psychological fall out of the COVID-19 crisis, which further tipped the balance. Unable to balance life events, alongside a dwindling set of available resources, young people struggled to stabilise their well-being.

However, a significant minority of interview participants described their experience of the crisis in overall positive terms, as it allowed them to devote more time than ever to their passion for music making, while other young people who reported a surplus of free time and the intention to make music described encountering internal barriers, related to issues of motivation, inspiration and personal capacity. These challenges are discussed later, but it is significant to note here that music making is not understood as a purely rational or dispassionate undertaking, even when its benefits are clearly known, but a process involving deeply personal and somewhat magical demands and rewards.

The effects of music making

Interview participants were asked if music making was a source of well-being and social connection for them during the COVID-19 crisis. Unanimously they answered both questions in the affirmative. All participants discussed music making as a source of well-being and social connection before the crisis as well, though in most cases this was heightened during the crisis, including for every participant who said their mental health had suffered

in this time. In response to these questions and further probing questions, participants discussed the specific qualities of music making that they perceive as a source of well-being and social connection, and their strategies for achieving these benefits in light of the specific challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the most basic level, music making offered *something to do*. In the context of disrupted lives and cancelled plans during the strictest periods of mandated lockdown, music making was identified as a mental and physical focus, a diversion or escape, and a way to structure time. In this regard, it was discussed alongside activities like exercise, meditation and the creation of daily routines:

Exercising and writing music, they're the ones [mental health strategies] that are the most effective, but they're the ones that are hardest to get in the right mindset for ... When I have been able to get in the mind space to write music that I resonate with and that I'm proud of, it's been really rewarding. (Singer/songwriter, 26, F, Australia)

For some, it provided an alternative to a sense of wasted time, or as one participant described playing his guitar, 'just one more thing that is helping me not go back to bed' (singer/songwriter, 24, M, Australia). In several cases, this alone was a significant part of recovery from depression, but also an escape and source of psychological well-being. This is illustrated in the two interview extracts below:

In terms of mental health, I would say that it has affected me a lot that I can't leave home and not be on the road, because it's something I've been doing for 7 years. Being locked up at home and not having that freedom has affected me a lot and affects me in the long run. So, if music was one of my first escapes? Yes, without a doubt, I had my guitar at home and in order to distract me a little from the situation I played and that ended up calming me down a little and losing all the anxiety of being in this situation. The music always is my refuge when I am in a situation of crisis and it was always. (Musician and Vocalist, 28, M, Portugal)

Some also described this as a diversion from the anxieties associated with the crisis: 'a good way to just disconnect from watching the news and seeing anything related to COVID. It's a good way to just forget about everything that's happening and focus attention elsewhere' (Singer/songwriter, 23, M, Australia). A UK participant (19, F) observed the profound importance of music as a distraction when other forms of escape were foreclosed:

It really has been a big thing for me. For someone who suffers from anxiety and depression, just before I started making music, I was going through a dark patch. And so when I had something to distract me, that was a really good thing. And because of my caring role, I couldn't go out. I couldn't go to college, I couldn't go to my boyfriend's. I couldn't do the things that I normally would to escape my everyday life. That's why music-making was really important to me as it brought me out of what was going on at home. It brought me into a new type world, sort of thing, where I could focus on something and relax and just have a few hours to myself. (Student, 19, F, UK)

All of the young people interviewed identified as music makers, meaning that this is an activity to which they would naturally turn, and we could expect that people with other interests might turn to their chosen pastime for similar benefits. However, participants discussed what they understood to be the benefits of music making specifically. A common theme in this regard was the physicality of music experience, which was identified as an important part of its benefits for well-being:

It is scientifically proven that music activates areas of our brain that are important for our well-being. It can cause us [to have] various types of sensations. It's impossible that music doesn't do me good in this sense. It's almost as if the problems, at that moment, no longer exist. Of course it helps. (Musician, music teacher and pedagogical director of a music school, 31, F, Portugal)

Another major theme was the particular level of focus involved in music making, which engages physical, mental and emotional attention as noted in the quote below:

That taking away of the external pressure, makes the process more meditative, more mindful. And it does take your mind off things. When you are focused in, I think that it's a definite release. And that helps no end with mental health. (DJ, 32, M, UK)

At its most effective, playing music at home could result in a welcome loss of time, and refreshed energies and attitudes that would remain after the session. This participant describes an initial lack of motivation to make music, experienced by many young people in our study, and how this was overcome by cognitive engagement:

I could force myself to get up, put the flute together, start playing just anything and then five minutes later I would be so engrossed in it I would forget all about what I felt like. (Amateur flautist, 21, F, Australia)

Music making also offered a way to structure time in the longer term, by providing a *sense of purpose*. The loss of milestones and goals, like scheduled performances and recordings, significantly challenged some people's motivation and capacity to make music, as discussed later. However, some participants consciously decided to use the lockdown period to learn new instruments or software and to undertake projects of writing, recording or long-distance collaboration. This is consistent with media reports that music shops experienced a large boost in sales (Thakur et al. 2020). Even participants who merely continued their previous music making activities (in adapted form as required by the circumstances) discussed a sense of purpose as a contribution to their well-being:

I think music has always had that role. In my area, we talk a lot about the impact of music on mental health, even in more complicated cases, of people who are hospitalized. Music has that impact of giving them another stimulus. I believe that in this moment of pandemic, not only making music has helped me, but it must have helped other people who have rescued themselves from it, but also the fact that we listen to music. And not just the music. I think that culture, at the time of the pandemic, in those early months when we were confined, was the refuge of many people. I had never tried to record myself from home and so I connected everything to the computer and started to do it and it was something that made me more motivated. I didn't think I was confined and that there was nothing to do. (Musician/Singer, 35, M, Portugal)

Participants in our study were not asked about pre-existing mental health conditions, however, wherever they were disclosed, feelings of depression and isolation were shared, which participants believed could be alleviated by music-making, as this quote from a UK MC demonstrates:

There have been times where I've struggled with mental health myself and at that moment in time I stopped making music. I didn't put as much effort into it because I was quite depressed and I didn't feel like I had the time. I just felt like I wasn't getting anywhere. But this time I didn't feel isolated. I was constantly in conversation with people and just being pro-active.

So it's definitely helped my mental health to be more involved with music when I feel at my lowest. (MC, 28, M, UK)

As our data shows, young people overwhelmingly reported on their music-making as a resource for well-being during times of lockdown. Dodge et al. (2012) argue for the importance of rebalancing these resources during times of crisis, in order to maintain equilibrium. Whilst music afforded social and physical foci for some of our participants, which enabled a newly constructed structure or reward for getting through each day, the psychological resources were also noted. Offering mediative, mindful and at times refreshing encounters, private spheres for music-making were deemed vitally important.

For some, music making was also a source of *self-worth*, and some interview participants made reference to the idea that 'people need music' during times of crisis, positioning their practices as a service to others, often with critical reference to a perceived lack of government support for the arts. A number of interviewees were highly critical of the State's attitude in responding to the implications of the pandemic in the cultural sector, feeding the precariousness that even before the pandemic characterised the sector and which was intensified by it. The theme of purpose is connected to the unsurprising finding that all of the young people interviewed described music making as part of their *identity*. This is far from restricted to professional musicians, and some hobbyists identified music making as a practical way of connecting to a self that exists beneath work and other everyday activities.

In reflecting on the specific qualities of music making in relation to well-being, a major focus for the young people interviewed was its utility in *working with feelings*. This includes recognising, dwelling, working through and overcoming negative emotions, through the deliberate and careful selection or composition of material with positive or negative themes. A classical music student and pianist who was bedridden with depression for several weeks discussed this range:

[W]hen I started feeling a bit better, I played a few songs that are very dear to my heart, that bring me back, or songs that have hopeful or positive lyrics. But that being said, there were also songs that were also silent and very mournful, so that I can get my feelings out. ... It's that chill up your spine, and that inner warmth that it gives you. It's like a hug. (Student, 18, M, Australia)

Similar sentiments were expressed by research participants in the UK and Portugal:

I don't know what I would do if I didn't have my saxophone. It's very nice just to be able to pick that up and be able to have a little play along with it. It's good to be able to express myself in that way. That's been a very nice release, definitely. But in terms of uncertainty in the world, I've been trying not to think about that too much. I think it helps you tune in to your emotions a little bit more. So dealing with everything on that side of things as well. If you are trying to express yourself through what you are playing, you need to have at least some form of understanding of what is actually happening in yourself. It's kind of putting sounds to feelings. (Student, 21, M, UK)

There is something in music that makes us activate the emotional system, parts of our brain that stimulate sensations. Joy, sadness, sensations that music makes us feel, whether positive or negative ... Mostly, I think music helps people in a positive way. (Guitarist, 26, M, Portugal)

Participants reported both song writing and playing music as a 'kind of therapy', which enabled them to 'get things off their chest'. In addition, under the lockdown and social

distancing restrictions of COVID-19, music offered a site to reflect upon being with friends and being nostalgic about the ‘good times’ (Songwriter, UK).

Emotional benefits of music-making, as well as enacting alternative forms of expression and communication, offered a form of therapy during times of uncertainty and rapid change. The following participant refers to music supporting their ‘processing’ of the world around them at that time:

Making music has, for me, a very therapeutic side, of translating emotions. I think that all this we are experiencing is so overwhelming that I don't even know yet what I feel or how I feel or what I want to say. Making a song is about wanting to say something. I think that only when I can assimilate and process what is going on around me do I enter into a state where I am able to create something. (Musician, 35, M, Portugal)

Based on these recognised affordances, our interview participants spoke about music making as a tool or resource available to them, which they drew upon in this time of particular need:

I've used songwriting as a personal therapy. Like I deliberately use songwriting as a way to work through something. I'm not particularly interested in it being a good song, it's more like, let's write this out, let's work on it and shape it into something so that I can have a look at it and yeah, it gives me a point of focus so yeah. ... but I would only really use it at that [annual songwriting] camp right? ... But I was like hang on, I've got this tool that I know works, why don't I just try it on myself? (Amateur singer/songwriter, 35, NB, Australia)

As this quote illustrates, when the pandemic and lockdowns inhibited the efficacy of music making as a source of income and even as a form of public sociality, its other known affordances as a resource for well-being came to the fore. Taking a relational approach to well-being (Atkinson et al. 2012; White 2015), our study has highlighted the value of music-making for identity, working with feelings and other emotional benefits which generate individually and socially therapeutic processes for young people.

Discussion and conclusions

Drawing on the results of an empirical study involving 77 participants, this article has considered the significance of music-making as a means for the creation of supportive resources for young people in Australia, the UK and Portugal during the COVID-19 pandemic. A series of common themes emerge from our data. Significantly, despite Australia, the UK and Portugal each having pursued a characteristically different series of responses to COVID-19, all of our research participants found in music-making a source of comfort, and in many cases escape, from the pressures associated with lockdowns and social distancing. Pursuant to the see-saw model of well-being (Dodge et al. 2012), these young people turned to music-making for psychological, social and physical resources in response to the significant challenges posed by COVID-19. As discussed above, music-making activities offered something to do; a sense of purpose and self-worth; an affirmation of identity, and a way of working with feelings. This ranged from using music-making as a means of keeping active during lockdown, to its felt value in preventing or limiting the onset of depression or more severe forms of mental illness. As a form of creative practice, music-making served as a resource that allowed our participants an opportunity to reflect on their situation and evolve coping strategies. For example, among those

participants involved in writing music and lyrics, it was reported that a process of release was often found in creating new songs or musical pieces. Indeed, several respondents reported that songwriting became an important form of self-therapy due to the cathartic qualities they identify with the creative process of writing music and lyrics. For others, the simple act of picking up an instrument and playing a song or piece of music they had previously learned created its own form of cathartic pathway. Our findings also reveal differences and inequalities in both the challenges imposed by COVID-19, such as interruptions to income, and access to resources for music-making, including time, space, equipment and personal networks. This is consistent with a relational well-being approach in which individual, social and environmental processes interact (Atkinson et al. 2012; White 2015).

Obviously, the feelings of isolation and loneliness expressed by our participants have also been experienced by a broader section of national populations during periods of lockdown. However, as noted earlier, for people in the 18–35 age range, the impacts of lockdown were keenly felt. These included impacts on key spaces of socialisation, including bars, clubs, venues and festivals. For young music-makers, lack of access to such spaces both limited their opportunities to meet people and also frequently impacted their avenues for creative expression and generating income. For many of our participants, the fact of not being able to rehearse and play live shows in physical venues was also frequently stated as presenting an extreme challenge to their mental well-being. Music-making, in addition to being a form of creative practice, is also a social activity both among musicians and through their connection with the audience. Although live performance has continued during lockdown in the form of online concerts, many participants felt that this was not a viable alternative as much of the atmosphere generated through live performance in face-to-face settings was lost, as was artist/audience interaction. However, participants also reported some unanticipated benefits of lockdown, notably a focus on recording and production as a means of remaining active while unable to rehearse and play live shows. The opportunity to record and produce music at home using digital technology offered young musicians a chance to flex their creative impulses in new ways, to the extent that they had improved their musical and production skills during extended periods of lockdown.

As the pandemic evolved, new studies emerged that focused primarily on the impacts it introduced to the music sector and the careers of those within it (e.g. Strong and Cannizzo 2020, 2021). Based on three countries with distinct pandemic scenarios, the results of our research support and compliment these studies. The pandemic produced severe impacts on music-making, exacerbating already existing problems. At the same time, it highlighted that making music can be a relevant source of well-being for young people (Musgrave 2022). In this sense, we believe that our research makes clear the various ways in which music-making can promote young people's well-being, specifically in contexts of crisis or increased difficulties, such as that experienced in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The phenomenon of 'musical empowerment of society' has been witnessed through the ability of music to encourage and facilitate the expression of emotions and feelings, even in online contexts (Jabłońska 2021). As a result, online music-making has given rise to novel rituals of societal interaction (Vandenberg, Berghman, and Schaap 2021).

The present study is subject to several limitations. First, it was conducted at the early stages of the pandemic, that is during its first few months. Thus, our data does not capture the experiences and changes throughout this evolving crisis, including the pandemic fatigue that has been linked to its prolonged nature. Second, the sample is limited to three Western countries and major cities, with some states in Australia being over-represented. Therefore, views and experiences of music makers in other states of Australia, rural areas and less industrialised nations were not captured. Future research could examine how young music makers experiences and well-being evolved throughout the pandemic and aim to capture more diverse samples.

The affordances and benefits of music-making that we discussed in this article are broadly consistent with what has been observed in studies of youth and music in the context of crisis. However, where the pre-COVID-19 literature explores these benefits within structured interventions, often linked to educational and other institutional or organisational frameworks, our study highlights the self-directed exploitation of music-making by youth as a source of well-being.

Notes

1. Music hubs (or music education hubs) are regional groups of organisations in England – such as local authority departments, schools, other hubs, arts organisations, community or voluntary organisations.
2. Circuito is the main national network for the valorisation, protection and development of venues and clubs with their own live popular music programming. For more information: <https://circuito.live/>.

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