Music Makes My Soul Happy: Relationship Between Music-Related Mood Regulation Strategies and Subjective Happiness in Emerging Adulthood

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Abstract

Emerging adulthood is a life stage characterized by numerous demands and challenges that impact emotions and subjective happiness. In this context, music plays a significant role in mood regulation, engaging individuals in various strategies. This study examines the relationship between music-related mood regulation strategies and subjective happiness in emerging adulthood. The sample included 507 participants (61.3% female, M = 22.8 years, SD = 2.9), recruited via the Internet. The Music in Mood Regulation scale was used to assess seven strategies for mood regulation (Entertainment, Revival, Diversion, Solace, Discharge, Mental work, Strong sensation), while the Subjective Happiness Scale measured subjective happiness. Results revealed a weak negative correlation between overall mood regulation by music and subjective happiness (r = -.32, p < .001), primarily driven by the Discharge strategy (r = -.24, p < .001). Although Discharge strategy, which involves venting negative emotions through music, may provide short-term relief, the reactive nature of this strategy potentially reflects unresolved emotional difficulties, which raises concerns regarding its long-term adaptiveness. In contrast, other music-based regulation strategies showed no significant associations with happiness, possibly due to their temporary emotional effects or because they are predominantly employed during periods of heightened distress. These findings highlight functional differences among music-based regulation strategies and suggest that not all contribute equally to well-being during emerging adulthood.

Keywords: mood regulation, emotions, music, subjective happiness, emerging adulthood

Introduction

The period of emerging adulthood

The concept of *emerging adulthood* was first introduced by Arnett as a period spanning "from the late teens through the mid-to-late 20s (roughly ages 18–25)" or "from the late teens through the twenties" (Arnett, 2000). As the theory developed after the initial presentation of the term and its definition of age (Arnett, 2004), it became clearer that the boundaries of this period are fluid. Rather than being strictly defined by age, it is the characteristics of the period—such as prolonged time in education, delayed marriage, and later parenthood—that define it (Arnett, 2007). However, for the purposes of research, the emerging adulthood stage is most commonly defined as spanning ages 18–29 years (Arnett et al., 2014; Arnett, 2018). Arnett describes this transitional phase, characterized by numerous demands and challenges, as encompassing five key characteristics: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling "in-between" and a sense of limitless possibilities. Individuals continue exploring their identities from adolescence onward, navigating various aspects of self-discovery (e.g., further exploration of values, choosing a career). This period is also marked by instability in different areas of life, such as relationships, living arrangements, and employment, often creating emotional turbulence and a heightened sense of uncertainty. Individuals in this phase tend to be self-focused, prioritizing personal growth, education and career planning. Emerging adults often feel "in-between", as though they are neither fully adolescents nor entirely adults, leading to a sense of ambiguity in their social roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, this stage offers numerous possibilities that, while promising, often provoke anxiety about life decisions, underscoring the need for effective emotion regulation to navigate societal pressures and future responsibilities (Arnett, 2000, 2004, 2007, 2018; Arnett et al., 2014).

Emotion regulation and well-being

Emotion regulation is widely recognized as a fundamental component of positive psychological well-being, both in clinical contexts and in empirical research. In contrast, poor or dysfunctional

emotion regulation has been associated with negative outcomes (Nyklíček et al., 2011). A review of research on the promotive and protective effects of emotion regulation in children and adolescents found strong evidence connecting these skills to positive psychological and behavioural outcomes. Specifically, adaptive emotion regulation was associated with reduced internalizing and externalizing difficulties, as well as improved mental health indicators, such as lower levels of depression and anxiety (Daniel et al., 2020). Expanding on these findings, a more recent systematic review emphasizes the pivotal role of emotion regulation in adolescent well-being (Serey et al., 2025). It shows that adaptive strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal and acceptance, are strongly associated with greater life satisfaction, positive emotions, happiness, and higher self-esteem. This is further supported by Verzeletti et al. (2016), who found that adolescents who frequently engage in cognitive reappraisal report better well-being across multiple domains. In addition, adaptive emotion regulation strategies serve as protective factors against depression, anxiety, and emotional distress (Serey et al., 2025). Conversely, maladaptive strategies, such as rumination and suppression, are associated with lower well-being and more psychological difficulties, including poorer psychological health, emotional loneliness, and increased negative emotions (Verzeletti et al., 2016). Longitudinal evidence from the review suggests that emotion regulation not only fosters adolescent well-being but also contributes to sustained mental health into emerging adulthood (Serey et al., 2025).

These patterns remain consistent into adulthood, where studies show similar associations between emotion regulation and well-being. Adaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies, such as reappraisal and refocusing on planning, are associated with better subjective and psychological well-being, while rumination, catastrophizing, and self-blame are linked to poorer well-being, indicating that different cognitive emotion regulation strategies have different impacts on individuals' well-being (Balzarotti et al., 2016).

Subjective happiness represents one important aspect of psychological well-being and is often used as an indicator of overall emotional functioning. It is defined as a global assessment of one's overall happiness, incorporating absolute self-perceptions, relative comparisons to peers, and alignment with the characteristics of happy individuals (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). Research shows that individuals with higher subjective happiness tend to perceive and interpret both positive and negative life events in more favourable and adaptive ways, such as finding humour in adversity or focusing on recent improvements in their circumstances, demonstrating a strong connection to adaptive emotional functioning (Lyubomirsky & Tucker, 1998). In line with this, in studies that examined subjective happiness as an indicator of well-being, greater use of cognitive reappraisal was associated with higher levels of subjective happiness, whereas increased use of emotional suppression was linked to lower levels of happiness (Cunha et al., 2022).

Emotion regulation in emerging adulthood: Can music help?

Previously mentioned challenges in emerging adulthood highlight the important role of emotion regulation during this period. The ability to manage emotions effectively can help individuals navigate the uncertainties and demands characteristic of this transitional phase while significantly influencing their future development. This period may even be considered one of the key stages for emotion regulation, not only as a necessary skill for the present moment due to numerous emotional changes and challenges (Brewer et al., 2016), but also as a foundational skill for future adult life. Research shows that emerging adults exhibit high dysregulation of anger, suppression of fear and passivity or avoidance when feeling sad, similar to adolescents (Zimmerman & Iwanski, 2014). However, in comparison to adolescents, they seek more social support and use more adaptive emotion regulation strategies, which creates fertile ground for the continued improvement of regulatory mechanisms in later adulthood (Zimmerman & Iwanski, 2014). Therefore, understanding how emotion regulation strategies function during this critical transitional period can provide valuable insights into fostering emotional stability and overall well-being in later life, as well as supporting the future development of emerging adults. Although previous studies have examined the role of general emotion regulation strategies in relation to well-being, little is known about how music-specific emotion regulation strategies relate to subjective happiness in emerging adults.

Given the significance of emotion regulation during this phase, music emerges as a versatile tool for managing and processing emotions across various contexts, such as coping with stress or enhancing positive mood, one of its

most important functions (Schäfer et al., 2013). The literature describes strategies that differ in emotions they regulate and the way they engage people in contact with music (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007). Some strategies involve simply creating a musical background atmosphere, with the aim of maintaining or enhancing already existing positive emotions (*Entertainment*). Apart from those, there are other strategies designed to promote relaxation and restore energy when one feels tired or stressed (*Revival*), as well as the ones that help listeners forget unpleasant or other troubling emotions by shifting their focus to music (*Diversion*). Similarly, some strategies allow listeners to feel as though the music understands and accepts them, offering comfort when they are sad or distressed (*Solace*) (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007). In contrast, there are strategies that require listeners to be more active: for instance, to release accumulated anger or sadness, one might choose music that directly expresses these emotions, aiming for an emotional release (*Discharge*). Alternatively, music can be used to spark introspection and reflection on the listeners' personal concerns (*Mental work*). Finally, there are times when listeners simply want to experience music intensely, engaging their whole bodies and senses, for example, by feeling chills (*Strong sensation*) (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007).

While general emotion regulation strategies have been widely studied in relation to well-being (e.g., Balzarotti et al., 2016; Daniel et al., 2020; Nyklíček et al., 2011; Serey et al., 2025; Verzeletti et al., 2016; Zimmerman & Iwanski, 2014), research focusing specifically on music-related mood regulation strategies remains limited. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have directly examined the relationship between these music-based strategies and subjective happiness during emerging adulthood. Given that emerging adults spend considerable time listening to music, which serves various emotional and psychological functions during this transitional period (Coyne et al., 2016), the key exploratory question guiding this study is: how are music-related mood regulation strategies associated with subjective happiness in emerging adults?

Although the research question is exploratory in nature, expectations regarding the direction of associations are grounded in prior findings on emotion regulation and well-being. Accordingly, it is anticipated that certain music-related mood regulation strategies may function as adaptive or maladaptive, depending on their association with subjective happiness. For instance, strategies such as Entertainment, Solace, Strong sensation, or Revival may be expected to positively relate to subjective happiness, given their focus on enhancing or restoring positive emotional states. In contrast, strategies such as Discharge, Mental work, or Diversion, which may involve confronting, excessively analysing or avoiding negative emotions, could have more complex or mixed associations. However, given the complexity and contextual sensitivity of music listening, along with the exploratory aim of the study, expectations regarding associations were kept tentative rather than being formalized into specific a priori hypotheses.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and internal consistency coefficients for MMR and SHS (N = 507)

	M	*SD*	Range	*Sk*	*Ku*	*α*
Entertainment	4.43	0.68	1.00–5.00	-1.81	4.03	.71
Revival	4.08	0.75	1.43–5.00	-0.86	0.21	.84
Strong Sensation	4.18	0.72	1.43–5.00	-1.09	1.00	.83
Diversion	3.46	0.90	1.00–5.00	-0.39	-0.43	.80
Discharge	2.73	1.09	1.00–5.00	0.29	-0.88	.86
Mental Work	3.74	0.87	1.20–5.00	-0.54	-0.28	.80
Solace	3.59	0.92	1.00–5.00	-0.44	-0.42	.85
MMR total	3.74	0.63	1.58–4.93	-0.61	0.06	.94
SHS total	4.65	1.42	1.00–7.00	-0.37	-0.49	.87

Note. M = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation; *Sk* = Skewness; *Ku* = Kurtosis; *α* = Cronbach's alpha.
MMR = Music in Mood Regulation scale; SHS = Subjective Happiness Scale.

Method

Participants

The study used convenience sampling and included 507 emerging adults from Serbia, aged 18 to 30 years. The literature emphasizes that the boundaries of emerging adulthood are not strictly age-defined, but rather fluid and context-dependent (Arnett, 2004, 2007, 2018; Arnett et al., 2014). Therefore, participants aged 30 were also included to allow for an additional year of variability beyond the commonly used upper age limit of 29. The average age of the participants was 22.8 (*SD* = 2.8). Half of the sample consisted of participants aged 18 to 22 years, while the other half included participants aged 23 to 30 years. Females made up 61.3% of the sample, males 38.1%, and 0.6% of the participants chose not to specify their gender.

Procedure

Data were collected online using Google Forms, chosen for its accessibility across multiple devices (e.g., smartphones, laptops, tablets) and its broad distribution capabilities. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method, where the survey link was shared via digital communication channels, including social media platforms (e.g., Facebook) and messaging apps (e.g., WhatsApp). On the Google Forms platform, participants were provided with an informed consent form, which they reviewed before proceeding. Completing the questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes.

Instruments

This study utilized two instruments. The first was the *Music in Mood Regulation scale* (MMR; Saarikallio, 2008), a self-assessment scale consisting of 40 items related to seven previously mentioned strategies for mood regulation through music (Entertainment, Revival, Diversion, Solace, Discharge, Mental work, Strong sensation). Participants responded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" (e.g., "For me, music is a way to forget about my worries"; "When I'm really angry, I feel like listening to some angry music"). The MMR demonstrated excellent reliability for the overall instrument (α = .94) and good reliability for its subscales (α = .71 to .86).

The second instrument used was the *Subjective Happiness Scale* (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), one of the most widely used instruments for assessing global subjective well-being, consisting of four items, that participants rated using a seven-point Likert scale. It assesses the individuals' general perception of their happiness, their perceived happiness compared to peers, and how well they align with descriptions of generally happy or less happy people. The SHS demonstrated adequate reliability in this study (α = .87), similar to a study examining the psychometric properties of the Serbian adaptation of SHS in a sample of Serbian young adults (Jovanović, 2013).

Results

Descriptive statistics

The aim of this study was to examine how music-related mood regulation strategies are associated with subjective happiness in emerging adults. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and internal consistency coefficients for the MMR and the SHS scale among emerging adults. The total MMR score was moderate, indicating a generally balanced use of music for various emotion regulation purposes. However, when interpreting the total score, it is essential to consider that individual strategies may vary in their adaptive functions and psychological implications. For instance, Discharge may serve a different regulatory purpose compared to strategies like Entertainment or Mental work (Saarikallio, 2008). Among the seven MMR subscales, Entertainment had the highest mean score, indicating that listening to music for enjoyment and fun was the most commonly utilized mood regulation strategy in this sample. This was followed by Revival and Strong sensation, both reflecting the use of music to energize oneself or to experience strong emotional responses. Solace and Mental work had moderate mean values, suggesting that participants frequently used music to reflect on emotional experiences or find comfort. The subscale with the lowest average score was Discharge, which refers to venting negative emotions such as anger or sadness through music. Similarly, Diversion, indicating the use of music to distract from negative thoughts, was somewhat less preferred compared to other strategies. Regarding subjective happiness, the SHS total score indicated a moderately high level of subjective happiness in this sample.

In terms of distribution characteristics, skewness and kurtosis values for most variables were within acceptable ranges, defined as absolute skewness values less than 2 and kurtosis values less than 3, suggesting no severe deviations from normality. However, the Entertainment subscale showed relatively high negative skewness and leptokurtic

kurtosis, indicating a distribution heavily skewed toward higher ratings and a peaked distribution, reflecting that many participants rated this strategy toward the upper end of the scale.

Correlational analyses

To examine the relationship between mood regulation strategies through music listening and subjective happiness, the correlation between the total MMR score and each individual strategy with the subjective feeling of happiness was calculated. Although the MMR scale comprises seven subscales reflecting distinct strategies for using music in emotion regulation, previous research (Saarikallio, 2007) has shown that the scale has strong internal consistency and can be meaningfully interpreted both at the level of individual subscales and as a total score. The total MMR score reflects a higher-order factor representing general engagement in music-based mood regulation. In the present study, it was used to capture participants' general tendency to rely on music as a mood-regulating resource in daily life. The correlation analysis (Table 2) revealed a significant weak negative correlation between the total MMR score and subjective happiness. A closer inspection of the correlations with specific strategies indicated that this association was driven solely by the weak negative correlation between the Discharge strategy and happiness.

Table 2. Correlations between subjective happiness and music mood regulation strategies

	Subjective happiness
Entertainment	.09
Revival	.09
Strong Sensation	-.02
Diversion	.07
Discharge	-.24**
Mental Work	-.04
Solace	-.06
MMR total	-.32**

Note. $^{**}p < .01$ (2-tailed).

Discussion

The Discharge strategy: cathartic expression and its complex relationship with subjective happiness

The results of this study revealed a significant but weak negative correlation between the overall tendency to regulate mood through music and subjective happiness, with Discharge being the only one of the seven individual strategies to show a significant negative correlation with happiness. These findings raise important questions regarding the nature of the Discharge strategy and its role in mood regulation among emerging adults.

First, the Discharge strategy, which relies on releasing accumulated negative emotions through music (e.g., venting anger through aggressive music), may indicate a focus on negative affect. Emerging adulthood, as conceptualized by Arnett's (2004) model, often involves emotional instability and uncertainty. In this context, music may serve as a medium for expressing frustration, sadness, or anger. However, as Zimmerman and Iwanski (2014) noted, strategies that do not promote adaptive emotion regulation patterns may be less effective in achieving long-term well-being. In line with this, it can be assumed that such a pattern of releasing difficult emotions through music could reduce overall subjective happiness. Future research should explore whether this strategy, regardless of this, allows individuals to shift their attention toward more positive feelings.

Second, while the Discharge strategy may provide temporary, short-term emotional relief, it may lack the long-term benefits needed for both achieving and sustaining subjective happiness. Proactive strategies, such as enhancing positive emotions (e.g., Entertainment) or promoting emotional renewal through music (e.g., Revival), appear to offer deeper and more enduring benefits. In contrast, emotional Discharge is often more reactive than proactive in its approach to mood regulation, which may explain its association with lower levels of subjective happiness. Although no positive correlations between more proactive strategies and happiness were obtained, likely due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, it is possible that certain proactive strategies of mood regulation (with or without music) may contribute to subjective happiness over the long term. However, this remains to be explored in future research.

Third, the use of the Discharge strategy may indirectly reflect the presence of unresolved emotional challenges experienced by a person. Emerging adults who heavily rely on Discharge may be navigating emotionally intense periods, using music as a form of emotional expression. However, the lower levels of subjective happiness may suggest that the underlying issues, despite the use of Discharge, probably remain unresolved. This finding reveals the need for further exploration of

how music choices, emotion regulation strategies, and contextual factors collectively influence happiness.

Beyond immediate relief: non-significant associations of other strategies with subjective happiness

Following the discussion of the unique role of the Discharge strategy, it is equally important to reflect on the lack of significant associations between the remaining music-based mood regulation strategies and subjective happiness, as this may reveal important variations in how individuals engage with music for emotion regulation and its potential implications for long-term well-being.

Three of the strategies—Entertainment, Revival, and Strong sensation—can be described as primarily hedonistic, aiming to induce or maintain a pleasurable mood. Entertainment involves enhancing mood through enjoyment, Revival is focused on restoring energy during moments of emotional fatigue, and Strong sensation refers to seeking intense emotional or physiological reactions (e.g., chills) while listening to music (Saarikallio, 2007). The absence of significant correlations between these strategies and subjective happiness may reflect their temporary nature. That is, while they may boost positive mood in the short term, their effects might not extend to sustained well-being. Furthermore, individual differences and the limits of a cross-sectional design may have hidden more complex, long-term effects that future longitudinal and qualitative studies may be better suited to reveal.

Two other strategies—Mental work and Solace—are more introspective and oriented toward self-reflection and emotional processing. Mental work involves using music to think through emotional experiences, while Solace refers to using music for emotional comfort and validation (Saarikallio, 2007). Although these strategies are often considered adaptive, they showed no significant relationship with subjective happiness in this study. One possible explanation is that individuals who rely on them may already be experiencing emotional distress, particularly during vulnerable life periods, such as emerging adulthood. In this sense, the use of these strategies may reflect a current need for support rather than a general state of low well-being. Additionally, as noted by Saarikallio and Erkkilä (2007), these strategies may foster emotional insight and personal growth over time, a process that is unlikely to be captured in a single time-point assessment of subjective happiness.

The Diversion strategy, using music to distract oneself from negative thoughts or feelings (Saarikallio, 2007), also showed no significant correlation with subjective happiness. While this approach may provide temporary relief in acutely stressful situations, as is the case with the Discharge strategy, excessive reliance on it may signal or reinforce avoidant coping mechanisms that could be maladaptive in the long term. Similar to the other non-significant correlations, the context of use, individual coping styles, and the temporal trajectory of emotion regulation outcomes may all play important roles, highlighting the importance of future research using longitudinal or mixed-method approaches.

Compared to the six previously discussed strategies, Discharge can be conceptualized as a more cathartic and expressive form of mood regulation, aimed at releasing intense negative emotions rather than enhancing or reflecting on emotional states. This functional distinction may help explain why Discharge was the only strategy significantly correlated with subjective happiness. The other strategies, generally thought to produce short-term effects, primarily aim to enhance positive emotional states. In contrast, Discharge focuses on the release of negative affect, highlighting an important difference in emotional valence. Notably, Discharge also exhibited the highest standard deviation among all strategies, suggesting greater variability in its use among participants. Such variability may have enhanced the statistical power to detect a significant statistical relationship. In contrast, the lower variability observed in other strategies could have reduced the statistical power needed to identify potential associations with subjective happiness. These findings underscore the importance of considering both the functional characteristics and variability of individual strategies when interpreting their psychological implications.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the correlational nature of this study, which limits the ability to draw causal conclusions between subjective happiness and the frequency of Discharge use. It remains unclear whether lower levels of subjective happiness lead to greater reliance on the Discharge strategy or vice versa. The correlations observed were relatively weak, which underscores the

importance of interpreting these findings with caution. Nonetheless, even small effects may hold meaningful implications in the context of emotion regulation research. Future studies employing longitudinal designs could provide greater clarity on the directionality and causality of these relationships.

Conclusion

In the challenging world of emerging adulthood, it is essential to encourage more conscious, balanced, and adaptive music-based mood regulation strategies that not only facilitate the release of negative emotions but also foster positive feelings and long-term well-being. Music can serve as a powerful emotion regulation tool, but it requires appropriate guidance. Future research should explore the hypothesis that Discharge may be a potentially maladaptive strategy, or at least be maladaptive under certain conditions. For instance, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the specific mechanisms through which strategies such as Discharge affect emotional functioning. Additionally, research examining the long-term effects of different music-based mood regulation strategies could offer crucial insights for designing preventive and educational programs aimed at promoting emotional well-being among emerging adults.

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