Pandemic Burnout: An Investigation of College Music Major's Mental Health

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Abstract

Mental health remains an ongoing concern among college-aged students (Buchanan, 2012). Collegiate music students often face specific stressors (Wristen, 2013)—performance anxiety, career concerns, lack of respect (Berhard, 2005), perfectionism (Dews & Williams, 1989), focal dystonia (Jabush & Altenmüller, 2004), performance anxiety (Kokotsaki & Davidson, 2003), and time management (Conway et al., 2010). Music students exhibit high levels of stress, anxiety, and exhaustion with correlations between burnout, sleep, exercise, and relaxation (Bernhard, 2010). Over half, 57%, of music education majors in the US exhibit moderate to severe depression while 70% exhibit severe anxiety (Payne et al., 2020). This study's purpose was to investigate the level of burnout and COVID-19-related anxiety among undergraduate and graduate music majors at a flagship Southwestern university.

To investigate this topic, a survey research design was chosen. An 86-item survey was developed utilizing a modified Demographic Data Form (DDF) (Hamann and Daugherty, 1985; Payne et al., 2020), Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach, Jackson, & Schwab, 1986), and researcher-generated items targeting COVID-19 curricular adjustments and modifications. After an initial pilot study, music major participants ($N = 102$) responded to demographic questions, the Maslach Burnout Inventory, prompts concerning the emotional impact of COVID-19 accommodations (e.g., mask wearing, social distancing, and virtual instruction), and Likert-type COVID-19 opinion statements.

Analysis of the data revealed that a high percentage of respondents suffered from high levels of emotional exhaustion and moderate to high levels of depersonalization, yet still reported high levels of personal accomplishment. Respondents reported an average of only 6.50 hours of sleep per night ($N = 102$, $SD = 0.98$) with an average sleep quality of only 5.69 on a scale of 10 ($N = 102$, $SD = 1.88$). Utilizing inferential statistics, Mann-Whitney U and Independent t-tests were performed to examine key demographics (gender, degree level, housing, relationship status, and employment status) and burnout subscales. Despite differences, these tests did not reveal any statistical significance. Concerning COVID-19, further analysis revealed that respondents' primary source of negative emotional impact centered around virtual adaptations (specifically virtual field experience, ensemble rehearsal, academic instruction, private lessons, and concert performances). Additional Likert-type responses showed respondents' concern for quality of education in alternative/virtual formats.

This study revealed high levels of emotional exhaustion and moderate to high levels of depersonalization across all music major demographics. Additionally, this study uncovered the negative impact of COVID-19 university adaptations on respondents— notably virtual alterations. While there was not a statistically significant difference in burnout subscales and key demographics, general trends were observed. Future researcher should address mays to mitigate extreme burnout indicators as well as methods to overcome instructional and musical obstacles considering the COVID-19 pandemic.

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