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Investigating Happiness and Gratitude Among University Music Majors During a Global Pandemic

The primary purpose of this descriptive research was to replicate a previous study, comparing perceived happiness (pleasure, meaning, and engagement) and gratitude levels of university music majors by year in school (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, or graduate) and major (music education or non-music education). The secondary purpose was to examine relationships among perceived pleasure, meaning, engagement, gratitude, and academic/personal variables (number of credits and hours per week of classes, ensembles, homework, practice, exercise, sleep, work, and socializing). Participants were 267 music majors at a public university school of music. Collectively, mean scores for meaning, engagement, and gratitude were lower than the previous study, while mean scores for pleasure were slightly higher. Variance was much greater in the current study, with collective standard deviations well higher for all four variables. Seniors reported higher levels of gratitude than freshmen, sophomores, juniors, or graduate students, and music education majors reported higher levels of meaning and gratitude than other majors. Conclusions and recommendations are offered to help university music majors reduce stress and make the most of their academic and personal lives.

Keywords: positive psychology, mental health, college students, COVID-19

Introduction

Researchers and educators have long posited that university students can be challenged by issues related to stress (e.g., Bernhard, 2005; Gold et al., 1989; Jacobs & Dodd, 2003; Kitzrow, 2003), more recently evidenced by acute anxiety, depression, and impostor syndrome among music majors (e.g., Gilbert, 2021; Payne et al., 2020; Sims & Cassidy, 2020). Gold et al. (1989) conducted an early study of burnout among university elementary education majors and found moderate levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and perceived lack of personal

accomplishment. Jacobs and Dodd (2003), as well as Kitzrow (2003), suggested that university students may be challenged by living away from home for the first time, negotiating new personal relationships, and managing course attendance and homework. They also reported that variation in schedule, such as holidays and other university vacations, may cause unexpected turmoil.

Bernhard (2005) extended this work to specifically examine potential burnout among music education majors, and reported that unique stressors such as ensemble requirements, individual practice time, and hours of field experience may compound problems. Gilbert (2021) supported these results more recently, finding that music majors reported higher levels of anxiety and depression than non-music majors, as measured by the Burns Anxiety Inventory and Burns Depression Checklist. Sims and Cassidy (2020) also reported high levels of impostor syndrome among music education graduate students, as measured by the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale. While many higher education music faculty and administrators have attempted short-term interventions and long-term curricular changes, sudden and turbulent shifts forced by the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many of the existing problems. New challenges related to physical isolation, online classes, remote performances, and inequitable access to resources typically available on university campuses may have led to deepening feelings of stress and hopelessness for many music majors.

Even prior to the viral pandemic, experts from the field of positive psychology developed models about how healthy human beings, including university students, can respond to stress. They suggested that practices related to happiness (pleasure, meaning, and engagement) and gratitude can help university students manage stress and prevent burnout (e.g., Bass, 2018; Carr, 2020; Emmons, 2007). Peterson et al. (2005) defined pleasure as an immediate, hedonistic pursuit of positive sensation, meaning as long-term life purpose, and engagement as absorption in psychological flow. They posited that some pleasure is important in life, but in excess, can lead to poor physical and mental health. On the contrary, they stated that deep levels of engaged activity, particularly when paired with life meaning, will lead to satisfaction and fulfillment. Seligman (2011) later added the importance of relationships and accomplishment, creating a five-part "PERMA" model of human flourishing; pleasure, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment.

McCullough et al. (2002) found gratitude, or thankfulness, to be positively related to optimism and life satisfaction while negatively related to depression, anxiety, materialism, and envy. Emmons (2007) further documented that gratitude can enhance willpower, improve creativity, deepen spirituality, increase self-esteem, and even boost academic performance. In a four-tier model, Bass (2018) suggested that gratitude includes personal and communal expressions, with both emotional

feeling and ethical response. Personal emotions of gratitude might include strong feelings of awe, delight, and joy when someone helps or offers a gift of some sort. Ethical response from a personal perspective involves traditional reciprocation, often in the form of a spoken "thanks" or a more formal email, text message, or handwritten card. Communal, emotional expressions of gratitude often occur in places of worship or at sporting events as large groups gather to express common thanks through prayer, music, or cheer. Finally, expressions of gratitude through communal ethics result in civic commitments to volunteerism, charity, and stewardship.

Bernhard (2020) compared perceived levels of happiness (pleasure, meaning, and engagement) and gratitude among 257 university music majors by year in school and major. While no significant differences in gratitude were reported by year in school, sophomores and juniors reported significantly higher levels of pleasure and lower levels of meaning and engagement than freshmen, seniors, or graduate students. While no significant differences in meaning or engagement were reported based on major, music education majors reported significantly higher levels of gratitude and lower levels of pleasure than non-music education majors.

The primary purpose of the current descriptive research study was to replicate the 2020 publication (three years later, during the COVID-19 pandemic), comparing perceived happiness (pleasure, meaning, and engagement) and gratitude levels of university music majors by year in school (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, or graduate) and major (music education or non-music education). The secondary purpose was to examine relationships among perceived pleasure, meaning, engagement, gratitude, and academic/personal variables (number of credits and hours per week of classes, ensembles, homework, practice, exercise, sleep, work, and socializing). Research questions were:

1) Do happiness and gratitude levels of university music majors differ by year in school?

2) Do happiness and gratitude levels of university music majors differ by major?

3) Are there relationships among happiness, gratitude, and academic/personal variables of university music majors?

Survey Instruments

The same three surveys were used in both studies. Gratitude was measured using McCullough et al. (2002) *Gratitude Questionnaire-Six Item Form (GQ-6)* (Table 1). All six items measure perceptions of thankfulness, both short- and long-

term, on a seven-degree scale, from *strongly disagree* (one point) to *strongly agree* (seven points). Items one, two, four, and five are scored on an additive scale, while items three and six are reverse scored. For reverse scoring, *strongly disagree* is scored with seven points, *strongly agree* is scored with one point, *disagree* is scored with six points, *agree* is scored with two points, etc. Final scores for the *GQ-6* fall between a minimum of six and a maximum of forty-two points. "The *GQ-6* has good internal reliability, with alphas between .82 and .87" (McCullough et al., 2002, p. 112).

Happiness was measured using Peterson et al. (2005) *Orientation to Happiness (OH)* (Table 2). Items two, five, eleven, twelve, fourteen, and seventeen are indicators of meaning (long-term life purpose), items three, eight, thirteen, fifteen, sixteen and eighteen are indicators of pleasure (an immediate, hedonistic pursuit of positive sensation), and items one, four, six, seven, nine, and ten are indicators of engagement (absorption in psychological flow). All eighteen items are scored on a five-point scale from *not at all like me* (one point) to *very much like me* (five points). Point totals are added for each of the three variables (meaning, pleasure, and engagement), and then divided by six (the number of items per category), resulting in average scores from one to five for each variable. The survey designers reported internal reliability alphas of .88 for meaning, .84 for pleasure, and .77 for engagement.

Academic and personal variables were measured using a researcher-constructed adaptation of Hamann's (1986) *Demographic Data Form (DDF).* While permission was obtained from Hamann to use the *DDF*, the original version of the form was not available. The current researcher thus reconstructed and adapted Hamann's form to survey variables of interest in the current study (number of credits and hours per week of classes, ensembles, homework, practice, exercise, sleep, work, and socializing; Table 3).

Method

The *GQ-6, OH,* and *DDF* were emailed via Google Form Survey to all 481 enrolled majors at a public university school of music during the spring semester of 2021 (original study data had been collected during the spring semester of 2018). Of these 481 potential participants, 178 had returned completed surveys within one week, while another 13 responses contained incomplete information. A follow-up email was distributed and 69 further completed surveys were returned, for a total of 247 responses (51.35% of 481 potential participants). Due to the concern that nonrespondents' answers might differ from those of respondents, 20 nonrespondents were randomly contacted by phone to complete the *GQ-6, OH,* and *DDF.* Data of the nonrespondents did not differ significantly from the initial

respondents in any question category ($p > .05$). Thus nonrespondents' answers were combined with respondents' data for a total of 267 participants (55.51% of 481 potential participants).

Table 1

The Gratitude Questionnaire-Six Item Form (GQ-6)

1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = slightly disagree
4 = neutral 5 = slightly agree 6 = agree 7 = strongly agree

1. *I have so much in life to be thankful for.*
2. *If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list.*
3. *When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for.*
4. *I am grateful to a wide variety of people.*
5. *As I get older, I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history.*
6. *Long amounts of time can go by before I feel grateful to something or someone.*

Table 2

Orientation to Happiness – Meaning, Pleasure, and Engagement (OH)

1 = not at all like me 2 = a little like me 3 = moderately like me 4 = quite a bit like me 5 = very much like me

1. *Regardless of what I am doing, time passes very quickly.*
2. *My life serves a higher purpose.*
3. *Life is too short to postpone the pleasures it can provide.*
4. *I seek out situations that challenge my skills and abilities.*
5. *In choosing what to do, I always take into account whether it will benefit other people.*
6. *Whether at work or play, I am usually "in a zone" and not conscious of myself.*
7. *I am always very absorbed in what I do.*
8. *I go out of my way to feel euphoric.*
9. *In choosing what to do, I always take into account whether I can lose myself in it.*
10. *I am rarely distracted by what is going on around me.*
11. *I have a responsibility to make the world a better place.*
12. *My life has a lasting meaning.*
13. *In choosing what to do, I always take into account whether it will be pleasurable.*
14. *What I do matters to society.*
15. *I agree with this statement: "Life is short - eat dessert first."*
16. *I love to do things that excite my senses.*
17. *I have spent a lot of time thinking about what life means and how I fit into its big picture.*
18. *For me, the good life is the pleasurable life.*

Table 3
Demographic Data Form (DDF)

1. *Year in school (e.g., freshman, sophomore, etc.)*

2. *Major (e.g., performance, music education, etc.)*

3. *Number of official credit hours this semester*

4. *Average number of hours in classes per week (do not include lessons or ensembles)*

5. *Average number of hours in ensembles per week*

6. *Average number of hours of homework per week*

7. *Average number of hours practicing per week*

8. *Average number of hours of exercise per week*

9. *Average number of hours of sleep per week*

10. *Average number of hours of paid or volunteer work per week*

11. *Average number of hours relaxing or socializing per week*

Results

Descriptive data were computed for all *GQ-6* and *OH* responses, including means and standard deviations for meaning, pleasure, engagement, and gratitude, by year in school and major (Tables 4 and 5). Descriptive data were also calculated for *DDF* variables, including means and standard deviations for combined participant responses (Table 6). While comparisons between studies should be made with caution, collective mean scores for meaning, engagement, and gratitude were lower than the previous study, while mean scores for pleasure were slightly higher (Bernhard, 2020). Mean scores for engagement were particularly low compared to adults in other previous research (e.g., Park et al., 2009; Peterson et al., 2005). Variance was much greater in the current study, with collective standard deviations well higher for all four variables: meaning, pleasure, engagement, and gratitude.

Comparisons of perceived happiness and gratitude levels in the current study were determined using a two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), with year in school and major serving as the independent variables and meaning, pleasure, engagement, and gratitude serving as the dependent variables. Results of the MANOVA revealed statistically significant effects for year in school ($F(16, 688) = 2.13$, $p < .01$), major ($F(4, 225) = 11.91$, $p < .01$), and interactions between the two independent variables ($F(16, 688) = 12.33$, $p < .01$).

Post-analysis univariate ANOVAs with Bonferroni post hoc tests revealed that seniors reported higher levels of gratitude ($F(4, 228) = 3.88$, $p < .01$) than freshmen, sophomores, juniors, or graduate students, and music education majors reported higher levels of meaning ($F(1, 228) = 34.99$, $p < .01$) and gratitude ($F(1, 228) = 33.22$, $p < .01$) than other majors (performance, sound recording, music therapy, and composition). No other interactions reached the .05 alpha level of statistical significance.

Relationships among perceived happiness, gratitude, academic, and personal variables were determined using Pearson product-moment correlation analyses, with *GQ-6, OH,* and *DDF* data serving as measures of the respective variables. Results of the correlation analyses revealed moderate to moderately weak direct relationships ($p < .01$) between meaning and gratitude ($r = .53$), meaning and engagement ($r = .42$), gratitude and sleep ($r = .36$) as well as gratitude and exercise ($r = .35$).

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations for Meaning, Pleasure, Engagement, and Gratitude by Year in School

	N	ME Mean/*SD*	PL Mean/*SD*	EN Mean/*SD*	GR Mean/*SD*
Freshman	74	3.84/.10	3.36/.09	3.26/.08	34.78/.67
	57	**3.46/1.07**	**3.28/.73**	**2.97/.69**	**32.84/7.9**
Sophomore	48	3.67/.12	3.53/.11	2.91/.10	35.31/.81
	45	**3.50/.95**	**3.22/.74**	**2.75/.76**	**32.60/4.68**
Junior	65	3.69/.10	3.64/.10	3.02/.09	32.89/.70
	69	**3.50/.81**	**3.42/.56**	**2.89/.49**	**33.61/5.61**
Senior	63	3.96/.11	2.89/.10	3.13/.09	34.63/.74
	75	**3.49/.76**	**3.38/.83**	**2.95/.71**	**34.64/5.95**
Graduate	7	4.11/.26	3.39/.25	3.22/.22	37.33/1.81
	21	**3.71/.83**	**3.18/.41**	**3.06/.85**	**31.71/5.8**
Total	257	3.84/.05	3.31/.05	3.09/.04	34.57/.36
	267	**3.50/.88**	**3.33/.70**	**2.91/.68**	**33.42/6.19**

*Original Study Data in Regular Font

Current Study Data in Bold Font

Table 5

Means and Standard Deviations for Meaning, Pleasure, Engagement, and Gratitude by Major

	N	ME Mean/*SD*	PL Mean/*SD*	EN Mean/*SD*	GR Mean/*SD*
Music	155	3.89/.07	3.18/.07	3.18/.06	35.62/.48
Education	**171**	**3.63/.83**	**3.39/.76**	**2.86/.62**	**34.63/5.92**
Non-Music	102	3.77/.08	3.44/.08	2.99/.07	33.47/.55
Education	**96**	**3.28/.93**	**3.23/.57**	**3.01/.77**	**31.25/6.10**
Total	257	3.84/.05	3.31/.05	3.09/.04	34.57/.36
	267	**3.50/.88**	**3.33/.70**	**2.91/.68**	**33.42/6.19**

*Original Study Data in Regular Font

Current Study Data in Bold Font

Discussion

While data from Spring 2018 and Spring 2021 were collected at the same institution, participants were different between the two studies. Thus, comparisons should be made with caution, and future longitudinal research should be conducted to explore long-term characteristics among music majors as they progress through degree programs. With this limitation and caution in mind, collective mean scores for meaning, engagement, and gratitude in the current study were lower than the original study (Bernhard, 2020). As music majors pivoted to online learning environments and adjusted to virtual rehearsals and performances, or cancellation of such events, it is not surprising that these indicators of human flourishing from the field of positive psychology may have been languishing during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is interesting to note that standard deviations were substantially greater in the current study, perhaps indicating that while some truly struggled in this environment, others rose to the challenge and even flourished. Some students anecdotally mentioned appreciation for a slowing of pace, reduced number of concerts and rehearsals, and new opportunities to connect with friends and family online. "The COVID-19 pandemic has offered us an opportunity to pause, reflect, and take stock of attitudes, beliefs, behavior, and routines" (Wood, 2021, p. 64).

Table 6

Means and Standard Deviations for Demographic Data Form (DDF) Variables (N = 267)

	Mean	*SD*
Number of credits per semester	17.09	3.56
	16.46	**3.58**
Hours of classes per week	17.83	8.79
	15.74	**8.69**
Hours of ensembles per week	5.08	3.69
	2.92	**2.33**
Hours of homework per week	8.58	6.49
	9.32	**6.99**
Hours of practice per week	9.07	5.91
	9.30	**6.95**
Hours of exercise per week	2.78	3.18
	2.68	**2.46**
Hours of sleep per week	45.31	8.11
	47.25	**9.76**
Hours of work per week	4.82	7.24
	4.72	**8.63**
Hours of relaxation per week	14.03	10.06
	14.48	**10.99**

*Original Study Data in Regular Font

Current Study Data in Bold Font

Further study should be pursued to determine why collective scores for engagement were so low. One possible explanation could be related to the current culture of digital distraction. As Jackson (2009) argued, "The way we live is eroding our capacity for deep, sustained, perceptive attention—the building block of intimacy, wisdom, and cultural progress" (p. 13), and this potential for distraction may have been particularly acute while accompanied with pandemic-related anxieties. Attention to mitigating distraction is also important considering the relatively strong direct relationship in this study between engagement and meaning. It is possible that music majors who feel that their efforts are being made toward a greater good may better be able to focus and feel satisfied with daily life.

Seniors reported higher levels of gratitude than freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and graduate students. This finding is similar to the original study, in which sophomores and juniors reported lower levels of gratitude than students in other years, but may have been more pronounced in this study due to differences in curricular opportunities for current seniors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, senior music education majors were still assigned to student teaching experiences of some sort. Similarly, other majors were still tasked with completion of capstone recitals, compositions, and other internships. The majority of these senior experiences were completed in non-traditional, unexpected circumstances, such as teaching PK-12 students on videoconference platforms, livestreaming solo recitals in empty concert halls, or piecing together multiple soundtracks for engineered ensemble recordings. When the pandemic first began, many of these seniors assumed they might not be able to complete degree requirements in a timely manner, so may have felt heightened senses of gratitude for pivoting opportunities, caring professors and other mentors, and self-satisfaction in overcoming these new challenges.

Music education majors reported higher levels of meaning and gratitude than other majors (performance, sound recording, music therapy, and composition), consistent with findings in the original study. Future research should clarify whether certain types of students are naturally drawn to a major like music education, curricular opportunities such as PK-12 field experiences enhance feelings of meaning and gratitude, or whether a combination of these two possibilities led to the observed differences. Carr (2020) suggested that individuals with deep life meaning take advantage of "personal strengths," such as kindness, teamwork, and leadership (p. 34). It is possible that some music education majors bring heightened meaning and gratitude from earlier in life, based on positive interactions with family, former teachers, and music peers. Alternatively, or in addition, it is possible that meaning and gratitude are strengthened by traditional music education curricula. Interacting with PK-12 children, learning about human development and social justice, and enhancing personal relationships during group projects may help

music education majors to strengthen life meaning and gratitude more than other university majors.

In addition to moderately strong direct relationships among gratitude, meaning, and engagement, further direct relationships were observed among gratitude, sleep, and exercise. Music majors who reported more hours per week of sleep and exercise were more likely to report higher levels of gratitude, as measured by the *GQ-6*. Previous work regarding university students suggests that potential exists in healthy attention to sleep, physical movement, and nutrition (e.g., Bernhard, 2021; Rath, 2013), as well as mindfulness and meditation (e.g., Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Bernhard, 2021; Rogers & Maytan, 2012). Providing recommendations for sound sleep, physical movement, nutrition, and mindfulness into existing coursework, elective offerings, or extracurricular clubs may help music majors to make better decisions about these underlying pillars of health. At the institution where these data were collected, a large campus room has been designated for physical and mental health, encouraging students to rest and participate in organized activities such as yoga, meditation, and group counseling.

While pursuits of pleasure can be initially helpful in overcoming feelings of stress and burnout, they are typically only a small part of deep happiness. Practices related to gratitude, meaning, and engagement, while often more challenging, can offer better opportunities for connection and fulfilling experience (e.g., Wood, 2021). As music majors continue to negotiate the COVID-19 pandemic and enter a new normal, recognition of the positive is important. Taking quiet time to reflect about aspects of life that are going well and acknowledge existing privileges can help to turn the tide against feelings of unrest and despair. Furthermore, avoiding distractions such as negative media and fake news can provide space to focus on the positive challenges of existing coursework, music making, and extracurricular activities. As always, severe cases of physical or mental trauma should be addressed by licensed medical professionals, but music majors who are able to maintain basic health, successfully negotiate distraction, and appreciate the good, are likely to better handle daily stressors and experience greater personal and academic life satisfaction.

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