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A Review of Group Music Therapy for Social Anxiety in University Students

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Abstract. Frequent interpersonal communication and public social situations make university students a group at high risk of social anxiety. Group music therapy is an integrated intervention that combines group psychotherapy techniques with music therapy methods. Most existing studies have focused on small-sample experiments at a single school or on the social anxiety of a particular group. There is a lack of systematic reviews of social anxiety among university students as a whole. Based on existing literature, this paper reviews research on group music therapy for social anxiety in university students. First, the paper classifies the types of existing studies, then analyzes how group music therapy may improve social anxiety in university students, and finally discusses the current state of research and its limitations. Current research indicates that group music therapy can significantly alleviate social anxiety in university students. It uses music as a non-verbal medium to reduce resistance to self-expression, builds a sense of belonging and safety through group interaction, and eases anxiety symptoms through low-pressure social practice. It may therefore serve as a supportive intervention in mental health education at universities. However, current studies have limitations, including small sample sizes, limited coverage of participant groups, and inconsistent assessment scales. Further, more in-depth and standardized research is needed to strengthen the evidence.

Keywords: group music therapy, social anxiety, university students, music therapy

1. Introduction

University represents a critical transitional period for students as they adapt to a brand-new environment. Beyond academic pursuits, interpersonal communication constitutes an essential component of campus life. Some college students experience nervousness, fear of evaluation, or social avoidance, which can in turn undermine their university adjustment. Existing research indicates that university students frequently encounter interpersonal difficulties of varying severity. One study reports that over 30% of students at military academies suffer from such interpersonal struggles [1]. Conventional interventions targeting social anxiety largely consist of approaches such as group cognitive-behavioral counseling, which primarily depend on verbal interaction. For students already apprehensive about social contexts, direct self-disclosure from the outset may impose Group music therapy, which uses music as a medium, allowing people to interact first through rhythm, singing, instruments, and movement. This provides a safe setting in which to

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practice social interaction before gradually increasing verbal communication. Related studies have found that improvisational, Orff-based, and integrated structured group music therapy can all have some positive effects, although their main focuses differ. Improvisational approaches mainly address social avoidance and increase acceptance of others. Orff-based approaches focus on reducing social anxiety and social avoidance, while using musical activities to increase interaction between people. Integrated approaches place more emphasis on a fuller process of building team relationships, musical interaction, and emotional expression. Therefore, based on existing research, this paper reviews studies on group music therapy for social anxiety in university students. It first classifies the existing types of research, then analyzes how group music therapy may reduce social anxiety among university students, and finally discusses progress and limitations in this field.

2. Key concepts

Social anxiety mainly refers to the nervousness, fear, and uneasiness that people experience in social situations because they worry about how others will judge them. It may also trigger corresponding social avoidance behaviors. If these problems seriously affect daily life and social functioning, they may reach the level of social anxiety disorder. The main assessment tools include the Interaction Anxiousness Scale (IAS) and the Social Avoidance and Distress Scale (SAD). Some studies also use tools such as the SCL-90.

Group music therapy refers to a process in which a professionally trained music therapist leads a group in musical activities, such as singing, music creation, and improvisation, to support participants' emotional expression, interpersonal interaction, and psychosocial functioning. In the context of group music therapy, music creation itself is never the ultimate therapeutic objective. Instead, music is a therapeutic medium for supporting self-expression, teamwork, communication, and interpersonal interaction.

The mainstream categorized group music therapy modalities in the Chinese context mainly cover three orientations: music appreciation-focused, Orff approach-based, and cognitive behavior-oriented. Main techniques include drum circles, song discussions, guided imagery with music, group lyric writing, and musical movement. Drum circles mainly encourage interaction and cooperation through playing music together. Song discussions and group lyric writing can help participants express their thoughts and emotions. Guided imagery with music can support emotional expression and self-exploration, while musical movement uses body movements to increase interaction and help participants relax.

3. Current research on group music therapy for social anxiety in university students

This paper reviews three intervention models: improvisational, Orff-based, and integrated approaches. They were selected because they are widely used in this field and have established experiments and related research literature.

3.1. Improvisational approach

In Hu Tao's study, the improvisational approach involved group members building relationships and communicating through musical improvisation and discussion during music therapy. Improvisation can directly and clearly reflect genuine emotional expression [2]. It is one of the most spontaneous ways to express emotions and thoughts, and may reveal inner psychological experiences more clearly than verbal interaction [2]. The process began with participants completing assessment scales

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before the intervention. In the same room, they completed the Acceptance of Others Scale, the Social Avoidance and Distress Scale, and the Emotional-Social Loneliness Questionnaire within 20 minutes. Questionnaires were administered on-site immediately to collect baseline pre-intervention data. Participants were subsequently allocated to different intervention groups. Upon completion of the intervention program, participants filled out the identical set of questionnaires a second time. Each intervention session lasted 90 minutes, with two sessions conducted weekly, amounting to a total of 11 sessions. During improvisation, participants chose instruments they liked and played freely. The group decided when anyone could begin or end playing.

3.2. Orff-based approach

The studies used the SCL-90 Symptom Checklist, the Social Avoidance and Distress Scale (SAD), and the Interaction Anxiousness Scale (IAS). The intervention was divided into several stages: establishing the group, transition, intervention, and farewell. At the opening session, participants received a brief introduction to the links between emotion and cognition within music-therapy practice, signed a group agreement, and took part in self-introductions guided by musical rhythm. This segment aimed to foster familiarity among participants and establish mutual trust within the group. Activities then included passing sounds around the group, playing sounds together, rhythm chains and imitation, writing new lyrics for familiar songs, and creating group accompaniment for simple melodies. In the third stage, participants relaxed their bodies through music, searched for harmonious sounds, and created new music together. In the final stage, they took part in receptive music relaxation and imagery, expressed their emotions through sound, and said goodbye through group dance. The results showed that interaction anxiety, social avoidance, and distress decreased after the intervention. Scores on the IAS, SAD, and SCL-90 differed significantly between the experimental and control groups at post-test. After Orff-based group music therapy, social anxiety in the experimental group decreased significantly, related factors also improved, and participants' interpersonal skills improved [3, 4].

3.3. Integrated structured group approach

In one study, 36 university students were randomly allocated to either an experimental group or a control group. The experimental group underwent a structured eight-week intervention consisting of one 60-minute session per week. The control group continued its usual study and daily routine without special treatment. Changes in social anxiety were examined by comparing the pre-test and post-test results of the two groups.

The intervention included seven units: ice-breaking; building connections; recognizing emotions; discovering the self; accepting the self; expressing the self and learning to communicate; teamwork; and closure and personal growth. Their main aims were to help participants introduce themselves, get to know one another, and build group awareness; understand the nature of the group, the process, expectations, and tasks; experience the group atmosphere; get to know other members better and build positive group relationships; relax physically and mentally and reduce tension; and recognize their emotions through music and movement. The activities also helped participants develop a clearer understanding of themselves, understand outside evaluations, improve their self-image, and accept themselves more fully. Song discussions helped them recall past successful social experiences, while sharing experiences with peers aimed to build interpersonal confidence. Participants learned to recognize emotions expressed in different kinds of music and to accept themselves. Through musical activities, they developed connections with others and worked

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together to complete tasks. Group interaction also helped them consider interpersonal situations from different perspectives and understand them more fully and objectively. Musical interaction helped them connect with other members, with music serving as a bridge for communication. Most controlled studies found significant decreases in SAD and IAS scores in the experimental group after the intervention, with particularly clear improvements in social avoidance. Participants also reported feeling safer in the group and accepting themselves more. The experimental group showed significant differences in IAS scores, SAD scores, and the two dimensions of social avoidance and social distress ($p < 0.05$). However, some studies found no significant between-group differences in certain measures, showing that the intervention still has limitations [5, 6].

4. How group music therapy may improve social anxiety in university students

4.1. The role of the medium

As an inherently non-verbal therapeutic medium, music offers participants a comparatively indirect and low-stakes channel for self-expression. Instead of being immediately required to engage in direct face-to-face verbal communication, individuals can first participate in interactive group activities through rhythmic synchronization or instrumental performance. This indirect participation path effectively lowers the level of interpersonal defensiveness and alleviates the intense social pressure that is typically triggered by explicit verbal self-disclosure in conventional social scenarios.

4.2. Therapeutic factors in the group

Shared activities and mutual feedback can help members gradually build trust. Groups with similar experiences can offer acceptance and a sense of belonging, creating a safe environment with less judgment. When members realize that others also feel nervous or have similar social difficulties, they may feel less alone. Liu Rong's research on group counseling also notes that groups can provide a degree of social support. Cooperative activities in music therapy groups may have a similar effect.

4.3. Behavioral practice

Activities such as group singing, drum circles, and collaborative lyric writing allow members to practice listening, cooperation, and expression step by step. These activities construct a relatively unthreatening, rule-bound practice environment that eliminates much of the uncertainty and judgment anxiety present in unstructured daily social interactions. When participants can successfully transfer the social skills and adaptive interaction patterns cultivated in these therapeutic scenarios to their real-world daily social contexts, the severity of their social anxiety symptoms is expected to show a measurable reduction.

4.4. Emotional regulation

Music therapy techniques widely used in existing studies, such as music relaxation and guided imagery with music, use structured auditory stimulation and immersive experiences to guide individuals away from excessive attention to how others judge them. Instead, they help individuals notice and regulate their own physical arousal and emotional states. These interventions may reduce high stress levels during interpersonal interactions among people with social anxiety and provide more stable emotional support for starting and maintaining social interactions later.

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5. Discussion

Existing research suggests that group music therapy has some positive effects on social anxiety among university students [7]. Although the methods differ, many studies have found improvements in participants' conditions after intervention, especially in social avoidance and distress. Participants also often report feeling safer in the group, accepting themselves more, and having more opportunities to communicate [8-10]. However, these studies have limitations. For example, Hu Tao's study included only 39 participants. The studies by Lu Hongyu [6], Li Shuqi [4], and Liu Hongqi [5] included only 20, 24, and 36 participants, respectively. Many studies therefore have relatively small samples, and many were conducted at only one university, which limits how representative their findings are [9, 10].

Intervention plans have also not been standardized. The duration and activities vary between studies: some use musical improvisation, some use Orff-based activities, and others use integrated structured programs. There is no shared standard protocol, so it is currently difficult to determine directly which approach works best.

Long-term follow-up is also lacking. Most studies only carry out a post-test immediately after the intervention and do not follow up later, so it is unclear how long the effects last. The assessment scales also differ between studies. For example, Hu Tao used the Acceptance of Others Scale, the Social Avoidance and Distress Scale (SAD), and the Emotional-Social Loneliness Questionnaire, which focus more on social interaction. The scales used in Li Shuqi's study were more comprehensive than those used by Hu Tao. In addition to social interaction, they also examined changes in other psychological symptoms. These differences make it harder to compare studies. Future research could use larger samples and include different universities, add follow-up assessments after the intervention, compare different music therapy approaches, and provide different interventions based on students' levels of social anxiety. Some of the studies available for reference were conducted only by postgraduate students, and their professional qualifications varied. In these experiments, participants were mostly university students whose symptoms were not severe enough to seriously affect daily life. Few studies recruited people with severe social anxiety or tested which approaches might be suitable for them.

6. Conclusion

A body of existing research has examined group-based music therapy for social anxiety among university students. Improvisational, Orff-based, and integrated structured group music-therapy approaches have yielded relatively promising outcomes. Most studies document reductions in social anxiety, social avoidance, and improvements in interpersonal interaction following intervention. Such therapeutic effects may stem from the non-verbal characteristics of music, which enable participants to convey inner experiences through sound, rhythm, melody, and musical instruments. This provides an intermediate medium for students who find it difficult to express themselves or are afraid of direct communication. Group activities can also build a sense of belonging and group cohesion, helping participants feel less lonely and experience connection with others without excessive pressure. Through interaction and cooperation, musical activities provide a low-pressure environment in which students can practice social behaviors. Rhythm and melody may also help people relax, release emotions, and regulate their feelings. However, current studies generally have small samples, inconsistent intervention plans, and limited long-term follow-up. More studies with larger samples, more standardized plans, and long-term follow-up after the intervention are needed to verify these findings.

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