



SOUNDTRACKS OF SURVIVAL: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF MUSIC LISTENING AS STUDENT STRESS COPING

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Abstract:

Students frequently experience psychological pressure due to the combination of academic demands and organizational responsibilities in university life. This study aims to explore how music listening functions as a coping strategy for managing academic and organizational stress in students' lived experiences. The research employed a qualitative case study approach involving five undergraduate students who were actively engaged in both academic activities and campus organizations. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, then analyzed using data condensation, data display, and conclusion verification techniques. The findings reveal three main patterns: music listening reduces perceived academic and organizational stress, supports emotional regulation and sustained focus during demanding tasks, and helps maintain productivity in academic activities. The novelty of this study lies in its phenomenological exploration of music listening as an everyday coping practice embedded in students' academic routines. These findings highlight the importance of recognizing simple self-regulation strategies that support students' psychological well-being and academic sustainability.

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary higher education, students are increasingly exposed to multiple psychological pressures arising from academic demands and social participation in campus life. Universities encourage students not only to achieve academically but also to develop leadership and social competencies through organizational involvement (Hill et al., 2024; Kovaleva et al., 2023; Maquera et al., 2021). While these opportunities contribute to students' personal and professional growth, they also create complex psychological challenges related to stress management, emotional regulation, and well-being. From a psychological perspective, unmanaged stress may influence cognitive functioning, motivation, and mental health outcomes among students. Research in educational and health psychology shows that prolonged academic stress can lead to anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and reduced academic engagement (Custodio et al., 2023; Juang et al., 2025; Vishnu et al., 2022). Therefore, understanding how students regulate stress in their daily academic lives becomes an important issue within psychological research. Investigating practical coping strategies that students naturally use, such as listening to music, can provide meaningful insights into everyday psychological processes of stress regulation and emotional adaptation.

One common phenomenon in universities is the increasing involvement of students in both academic activities and campus organizations. While such participation supports leadership development and social learning, it also generates overlapping responsibilities that often lead to academic and organizational stress (Chaika, 2025; Herman et al., 2023). Students frequently face tight academic deadlines while simultaneously managing meetings, events, and leadership roles within organizations. This dual pressure may create psychological strain, particularly during periods of high academic demand such as examinations or final projects. In many cases, students report difficulties maintaining emotional balance, concentration, and motivation when academic and organizational tasks accumulate. From the perspective of educational and organizational psychology, this phenomenon reflects a challenge in students' self-regulation and coping behaviors (Almalki et al., 2024; McLeod et al., 2021). As a result, many students rely on informal coping practices embedded in their daily routines. Among these practices, listening to music has become a common activity that students use to regulate mood and maintain psychological stability.

Previous psychological research has widely examined the role of music in emotional regulation and stress management. Finnerty et al. (2023) and Tahirbegi (2022) demonstrated that listening to relaxing music can significantly reduce physiological stress responses and support emotional recovery. Similarly, He et al. (2024) and Huang et al. (2022) found that listening to music in everyday contexts is associated with lower perceived stress and improved mood regulation. In the field of music psychology, Jääskeläinen (2023), Kong et al. (2022), and Syafii et al. (2025) argue that individuals intentionally use music to regulate emotions and cope with stressful experiences. Additionally, Krause et al. (2023), Jääskeläinen et al. (2022), and Jääskeläinen (2022) emphasize that everyday behaviors, such as listening to music, can serve as self-regulation strategies to improve psychological states. However, much of this research relies on experimental or quantitative approaches that focus on measurable outcomes such as physiological responses or mood changes. Consequently, limited attention has been paid to understanding how students subjectively experience listening to music as a coping strategy in complex academic and organizational contexts.

Although the psychological benefits of music have been widely documented, few studies explore how students interpret and experience listening to music within the lived reality of academic and organizational stress. Most previous studies examine stress management in controlled environments or focus solely on academic stress without considering students' simultaneous involvement in campus organizations (Gulyas, 2022; McConkey et al., 2022; Tsang et al., 2022). Therefore, this study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore students' lived experiences of using music as a coping strategy. From a psychological perspective, understanding how individuals construct meaning around their coping behaviors is essential to explaining everyday psychological adaptation (Oliveira et al., 2021; Valieva et al., 2022). The novelty of this research lies in its effort to integrate perspectives from educational psychology, health psychology, and music psychology by examining how music listening functions within students' daily psychological processes of emotional regulation, stress management, and cognitive restoration in real academic environments.

Based on the issues described above, an important research problem emerges concerning how students experience and interpret music listening as a coping strategy for academic and organizational stress. While previous studies confirm that music can influence emotional and physiological states, little is known about how students personally perceive and utilize music when facing the combined pressures of academic responsibilities and organizational commitments. From a psychological perspective,

coping strategies are shaped by individual meaning-making, emotional experiences, and situational contexts. Therefore, understanding students' lived experiences is essential for capturing the psychological processes underlying everyday coping behaviors. Accordingly, this study seeks to explore how university students experience listening to music in relation to stress management within their academic and organizational activities. The central research question guiding this study is: How do students experience and interpret music listening as a coping strategy for academic and organizational stress in their daily lives?

This study argues that music listening serves not only as a leisure activity but also as a psychologically meaningful coping strategy that helps students regulate emotions, restore cognitive focus, and maintain psychological well-being during stressful academic and organizational situations. By exploring students' lived experiences, this research contributes to psychological scholarship by providing deeper insights into the subjective processes through which individuals use everyday activities to manage stress. The originality of this study lies in its phenomenological exploration of music listening within the intersection of educational, social, and psychological contexts experienced by university students. The findings are expected to enrich discussions within educational psychology, health psychology, and music psychology by highlighting how music operates as a self-directed emotional regulation tool. Furthermore, the study offers practical implications for educators and mental health practitioners in supporting students' psychological resilience and well-being in contemporary academic environments.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore students' lived experiences of listening to music as a coping strategy for academic and organizational stress (Kekeya, 2023). A qualitative case study was chosen because it allows researchers to examine psychological phenomena in real-life contexts and capture the meanings individuals assign to their experiences. In psychological research, stress management behaviors are often shaped by subjective perceptions, emotions, and daily routines, which cannot be adequately explained by numerical measures alone. Therefore, a qualitative approach provides deeper insight into how students interpret the role of music in managing stress arising from academic responsibilities and organizational involvement. The case study design was particularly appropriate because it focuses on understanding a specific phenomenon, music listening as a coping strategy, within a defined group of participants who experience similar academic and organizational pressures in university environments.

The research was conducted at four universities in Semarang, Indonesia: Walisongo State Islamic University (UIN Walisongo), Semarang University (USM), STIKUBANK University, and Semarang State University (UNNES). These universities were selected because they represent higher education institutions with active academic environments and vibrant student organizational cultures. Students at these campuses are often involved in academic activities while also participating in student organizations, committees, and extracurricular programs. This dual engagement creates conditions in which academic and organizational stress are frequently experienced. The selection of multiple universities was intended to capture diverse student experiences across different institutional contexts while still representing similar patterns of academic pressure and organizational involvement. Therefore, these locations were considered appropriate settings for exploring how students use music listening as a coping strategy for managing stress related to their academic and organizational responsibilities.

Table 1. Data Participants

Participant	University	Educational Background	Organizational Involvement	Reason for Selection
P1	UIN Walisongo	Undergraduate Student	Active in the student association	Meets criteria of active academic and organizational engagement
P2	Semarang University (USM)	Undergraduate Student	Member of campus committee	Frequently involved in organizational activities and academic workload
P3	STIKUBANK University	Undergraduate Student	Student organization member	Experienced academic pressure alongside organizational duties
P4	Semarang State University (UNNES)	Undergraduate Student	Organizational committee member	Actively participates in campus programs and academic projects
P5	UIN Walisongo	Undergraduate Student	Student organization member	Demonstrates consistent involvement in both academic and organizational tasks

The participants in this study were five active undergraduate students selected through purposive sampling. The selection criteria required participants to be actively involved in academic activities with a minimum academic load of 20 credits per semester and to have participated in campus organizations or community activities for at least one year. These criteria ensured that participants had sufficient experience in managing both academic and organizational responsibilities, which could otherwise be stressful. The purposive sampling technique was chosen because it allows researchers to select participants who possess specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives. In this study, students who regularly experience academic and organizational demands were considered capable of providing rich, meaningful information about their experiences with music as a coping strategy for stress management.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation (Sarfo et al., 2021). In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore participants' experiences related to academic life, organizational responsibilities, the types and situations in which they listen to music, and their perceptions of music as a stress-coping strategy. The interviews also explored emotional and physical responses experienced after listening to music during stressful situations. Each interview was conducted face-to-face and recorded with participants' consent to ensure data accuracy. In addition to interviews, the researcher conducted direct observations to examine how students interacted with music during stressful activities such as completing assignments or participating in organizational work. Supporting documentation included field notes, audio recordings, and photo documentation. Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained official permission from the universities and informed consent from each participant to ensure ethical research procedures and the confidentiality of participants' identities.

The data analysis process followed qualitative analysis procedures consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. First, data condensation was conducted by organizing and reducing interview transcripts to identify important themes related to music listening habits, types of music, listening contexts, and perceived effects on academic and organizational stress. This process allowed the

researcher to focus on meaningful information relevant to the research objectives. Second, the data were presented in narrative form, with key findings supported by participants' direct quotations to illustrate their experiences. Finally, conclusions were drawn by identifying patterns and relationships in how music listening functions as a coping strategy for stress management among students. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, data validity was strengthened through triangulation techniques, including source triangulation and method triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from different participants, while method triangulation involved comparing interview data with observational findings and documentation. These procedures ensured that the findings accurately reflected participants' experiences and enhanced the credibility of the research results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results of this study present the main findings regarding the role of music listening as a coping strategy for students experiencing academic and organizational stress. Based on interviews, observations, and documentation, three key patterns emerged related to stress reduction, emotional regulation, and academic productivity. These findings illustrate how students integrate listening to music into their daily routines to manage psychological pressure.

Music Listening Reduces Academic Organizational Stress

In this study, the sub-finding that music listening reduces academic organizational stress refers to students' experiences of feeling calmer, less pressured, and more emotionally stable after listening to music during periods of academic and organizational demands. Operationally, this phenomenon was identified through students' narratives describing how music helped them manage tension arising from deadlines, assignments, meetings, and organizational responsibilities. Students reported that listening to music created a psychological pause, allowing them to regulate emotions, release accumulated pressure, and regain a sense of control over their tasks. In the field context, this stress reduction was reflected in students' descriptions of feeling more relaxed, mentally refreshed, and able to continue their academic or organizational activities after listening to music. Thus, listening to music served as an accessible coping behavior that students intentionally used to manage stressful situations encountered in their daily campus life.

Interview data revealed that students often used music as an immediate strategy to reduce psychological pressure. One participant explained, "When assignments and organizational meetings come at the same time, I usually listen to music for a few minutes. It helps me calm down and makes the pressure feel lighter." Another participant stated, "Sometimes I feel overwhelmed with deadlines, but when I listen to my favorite songs, I feel like my mind can breathe again." These responses indicate that students perceive music as a simple yet effective emotional release when they experience stress. The researcher interprets these statements as evidence that music functions as a self-initiated coping mechanism. Through listening to music, students temporarily shift their attention away from stressful demands, allowing their emotional state to stabilize before continuing their responsibilities.

Further interview results reinforce the role of music in stress reduction. One participant mentioned, "Listening to music before starting my tasks makes me feel less anxious about the workload." Another participant shared, "If I feel stressed after a long organizational meeting, I listen to music on my phone while resting, and it helps me feel

relaxed again.” These statements show that students intentionally use music at specific moments when they feel psychological pressure building up. The researcher interprets these responses as an indication that music listening is integrated into students’ daily coping routines. Rather than a passive activity, listening to music becomes a conscious strategy students use to restore emotional balance when they encounter academic and organizational challenges.

Observational data supported the interview findings. During several observation sessions, students were observed listening to music through earphones during short breaks between academic tasks or after completing organizational discussions. In these situations, students appeared more relaxed, showed reduced signs of tension, and resumed their work with a calmer demeanor. The researcher reiterates that listening to music serves as a momentary stress-relief mechanism, helping students manage psychological pressure in their academic routines. A pattern emerged in which students tended to listen to music during transitions between demanding activities, such as after meetings or before starting assignments. This pattern suggests that music serves as a psychological buffer, allowing students to reset emotionally before resuming their academic or organizational responsibilities.

Music Improves Students’ Emotional Regulation Focus

The sub-finding music improves students’ emotional regulation focus refers to the observable behavior of students who appear calmer, more attentive, and more engaged in academic or organizational tasks while listening to music. In the field context, emotional regulation was reflected through students’ ability to maintain stable emotions during demanding activities. At the same time, focus was observed through sustained attention to tasks such as reading, writing, or preparing organizational materials. Music listening in this study was therefore operationally defined as a background activity that supports emotional stability and concentration during task performance. The phenomenon was primarily identified through direct observations of students during their academic and organizational routines. These observations allowed the researcher to examine how students’ behaviors changed when music was present, particularly in terms of their concentration, emotional composure, and persistence in completing tasks.

Table 2. Observation of Music improves students’ emotional regulation focus

Observation	Indicator
Student listens to music using earphones while completing assignments	Maintains steady attention on the task for a longer period
The student plays music quietly during organizational discussion preparation	Appears calmer and less reactive to stressful situations
Student listens to music while reading academic materials	Shows consistent concentration and reduced distraction
Student uses music during late-night study sessions	Demonstrates sustained engagement with academic tasks

The observational data indicate that music listening is closely associated with students’ ability to regulate emotions and maintain focus during demanding activities. Students who listened to music tended to remain calmer and showed fewer visible signs of frustration or fatigue while completing tasks. In several observed situations, students maintained longer periods of concentration and were less likely to shift their attention away from their work. The researcher reiterates that listening to music serves as a supportive environmental stimulus that helps stabilize emotional responses and sustain

cognitive engagement. In this context, music appears to create a psychological atmosphere that reduces internal distractions, allowing students to remain attentive to their tasks. These observations suggest that listening to music plays a functional role in helping students maintain emotional balance and cognitive focus in challenging academic environments.

A consistent behavioral pattern emerged from the observational data. Students tended to listen to music during activities that required sustained concentration, such as reading materials, completing assignments, or preparing organizational documents. Music was usually played at a moderate volume through earphones, allowing students to remain connected to their surroundings while maintaining personal focus. The repeated occurrence of this behavior across participants indicates that listening to music serves as a practical tool for maintaining emotional composure during academic work. The pattern suggests that music is not used randomly but rather strategically during periods that demand sustained attention and emotional stability. This consistent behavior highlights the role of music as an environmental aid that supports students' ability to regulate emotions and maintain focus while managing multiple academic responsibilities.

Music Supports Productivity During Academic Tasks

The sub-finding music supports productivity during academic tasks refers to situations in which students demonstrate increased engagement, task persistence, and efficiency when completing academic work while listening to music. In the field context, productivity was operationally defined as students' ability to complete assignments, maintain continuous work sessions, and remain actively involved in academic activities. This phenomenon was identified through documentation evidence that captured students' academic activities, such as studying individually, working on assignments, or collaborating in organizational teams while listening to music. These visual records provided contextual evidence that music listening occurred simultaneously with productive academic behaviors. Therefore, the presence of music listening in these documented activities suggests that students incorporate music into their work environment to support sustained effort and engagement with academic tasks.

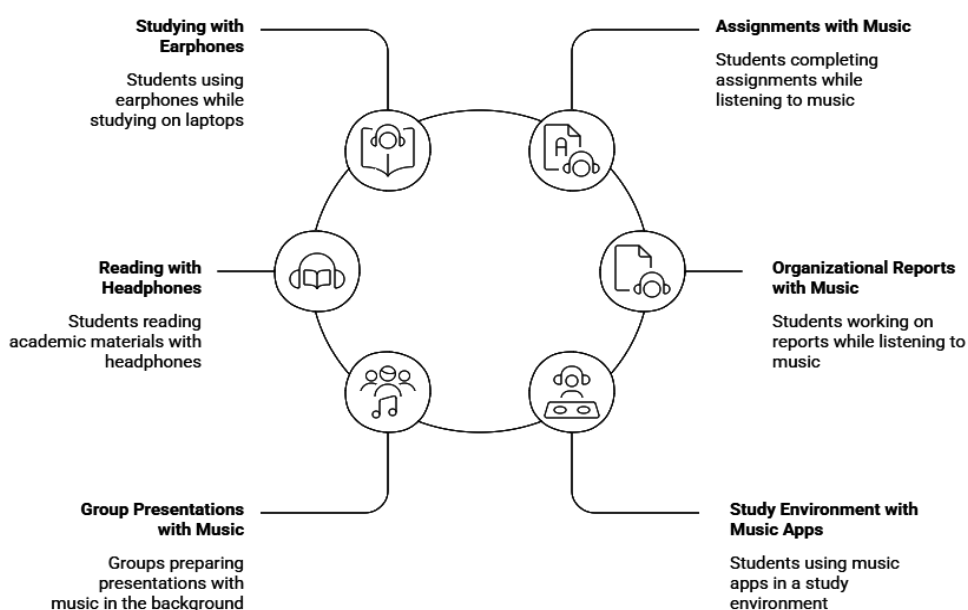


Figure 1. Music supports productivity during academic tasks

Observational notes accompanying the documentation revealed that students often integrated listening to music into their academic work routines. Students were seen using earphones or playing soft background music while completing assignments, preparing presentations, or reading academic materials. During these moments, students appeared consistently engaged with their tasks and maintained steady working rhythms. The researcher interprets these observations as evidence that listening to music helps students sustain their working momentum. Rather than distracting them, music appeared to accompany the task and support sustained engagement in academic activities. These observations reinforce the idea that listening to music becomes part of students' productive work environments.

The collected documentation indicates that listening to music frequently occurs alongside academic task completion. Students were repeatedly observed working on academic tasks while listening to music on personal devices. These activities included studying, writing assignments, preparing organizational reports, and collaborating with peers. The researcher restates that the presence of music within these documented situations reflects a consistent behavioral pattern in which students integrate music into their work routines. In this context, listening to music appears to serve as a supportive background activity that accompanies productive academic engagement.

Across the documentation, a clear pattern emerged indicating that listening to music is common during periods of sustained academic work. Students often treated music as background noise while focusing on assignments or collaborative tasks. This pattern suggests that music becomes part of students' personal study environments rather than a separate leisure activity. The repetition of this behavior across different contexts indicates that students perceive music as compatible with productive academic engagement. Music listening, therefore, appears to serve as a supportive component of students' working routines, helping them maintain continuity and involvement in their academic responsibilities.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that listening to music serves as an effective coping strategy that helps students reduce academic and organizational stress. Students reported that listening to music provided emotional relief and allowed them to regain psychological balance when facing demanding academic workloads and organizational responsibilities. These findings align with previous psychological studies indicating that music can influence emotional states and reduce perceived stress. Research by Pérez et al. (2021) and Shahid et al. (2020) shows that listening to music reduces physiological stress responses, while Anshori et al. (2024) and Hemanthakumara (2024) emphasize that everyday music listening is associated with improved emotional well-being and lower perceived stress. The results of the present study support these perspectives by demonstrating that students intentionally use music as a coping mechanism in real academic settings. However, unlike experimental studies that examine music in controlled environments, this research highlights how music is integrated into students' natural daily routines to manage academic and organizational pressures.

The findings also indicate that listening to music contributes to students' emotional regulation and sustained focus during academic tasks. Observational data revealed that students who listened to music tended to maintain longer periods of concentration and demonstrated greater emotional stability while performing academic work. These results are consistent with the work of Imjai et al. (2024), who argue that individuals often use music intentionally to regulate emotional states in everyday life.

Similarly, Muniroh (2021), Oxhandler et al. (2024), and Hsiung et al. (2022) suggest that everyday activities, such as listening to music, can serve as behavioral strategies to support emotional self-regulation and restore mental energy. The present findings extend these theoretical perspectives by illustrating how music supports both emotional regulation and cognitive focus within academic contexts. This suggests that music not only influences mood but also helps maintain attention and emotional composure when students face complex academic responsibilities.

Another important finding of this study is that listening to music supports productivity during academic tasks. Documentation and observational data show that students frequently listen to music while studying, preparing presentations, or completing assignments. This behavior indicates that music becomes integrated into students' working environments and routines (Herlina, 2024; Nisa' & R, 2024). These findings correspond with previous studies suggesting that music can facilitate task engagement and motivation during cognitive activities. At the same time, the present study reveals a practical dimension that is less frequently discussed in prior research, namely, how students deliberately integrate music into their study habits to maintain work momentum (Abdullah et al., 2024; Heru et al., 2024). The findings suggest that music serves as a background stimulus, helping students maintain task continuity without disrupting concentration. This demonstrates that music listening is not merely a leisure activity but also a supportive element within students' academic productivity strategies.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on coping strategies and emotional regulation within educational and health psychology. The findings reinforce the idea that coping behaviors are often embedded in everyday activities that individuals use to manage stress and regulate emotions. Music listening can therefore be understood as a form of self-directed emotional regulation that allows individuals to adjust their psychological state in response to environmental demands. By examining students' lived experiences, this study highlights how simple, accessible activities can serve as effective psychological coping mechanisms. The results also broaden understanding of music psychology by demonstrating how music operates in real-life academic environments rather than in controlled experimental settings.

In practical terms, the findings have important implications for universities and student support services. Recognizing that students frequently use music as a coping strategy suggests that institutions should consider promoting healthy study environments that support students' emotional well-being. For example, universities could encourage balanced study routines, provide flexible study spaces where students can work comfortably, and integrate discussions about everyday coping strategies into student well-being programs. Educators and counselors may also acknowledge music listening as a constructive and accessible way for students to manage academic stress. By understanding how students naturally regulate stress through music, institutions can better support psychological resilience and academic sustainability among university students facing increasing academic and organizational demands.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that listening to music functions as an effective coping strategy for students facing academic and organizational stress. The findings reveal that students consciously use music to regulate emotions, alleviate psychological pressure, maintain concentration, and sustain productivity during demanding academic activities. Through interviews, observations, and documentation, the study shows that music

provides a psychological space that enables students to temporarily distance themselves from stress, restore emotional balance, and regain cognitive focus. Drawing on educational, health, and music psychology perspectives, the research offers valuable insights into students' lived experiences and stress-management behaviors. Nevertheless, the study is limited by its relatively small sample size and reliance on qualitative data. Future research should involve more diverse participants and adopt mixed-method approaches to examine both subjective experiences and measurable outcomes, thereby enriching understanding of music's role in student well-being, emotional regulation, and academic performance.

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