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The Contradictory Preferences of Neurotic Individuals: Seeking Emotional Intensity While Avoiding Sensory Stimulation

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ABSTRACT

Individuals high in neuroticism present an apparent paradox in their music-related behaviors: they simultaneously prefer emotionally intense and rebellious music genres while showing lower tolerance for high-volume auditory stimulation. Framed more precisely, however, this is less a genuine paradox than a conflation of two separable dimensions of music experience– emotional and physical intensity– that has recurred in popular and scholarly discourse; this review aims to synthesize that conflation rather than to resolve a true contradiction. This literature review synthesizes research on personality traits, music preferences, and sensory sensitivity to address this apparent contradiction. A comprehensive search yielded 9 peer-reviewed studies examining the relationship between neuroticism and music behaviors. The analysis reveals emotional intensity and physical intensity as separate dimensions of music experience. Neurotic individuals seek emotionally intense music for its psychological functions– emotional validation, regulation, and self-expression– while their heightened sensory processing sensitivity leads to discomfort in physically loud environments. Evidence suggests that listening contexts allow neurotic individuals to satisfy both needs simultaneously by engaging with emotionally charged content at controlled volumes in private settings rather than in overwhelming public venues. This resolution demonstrates that personality influences music behavior at multiple levels: content preference, listening environment, and emotional regulatory function. The findings have implications for understanding personality-driven music choices, developing personalized music recommendation systems, and applying music therapeutically with individuals high in neuroticism. Rather than representing contradictory preferences, neurotic individuals' music behaviors reflect sophisticated navigation of competing emotional and sensory needs.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine someone with significant anxiety who finds solace in heavy metal or intense hip-hop music– genres filled with raw emotion, aggressive lyrics, and themes of rebellion (see Filomerc, 2022; cited here only as an anecdotal, first-person illustration for the opening, not as part of the empirical evidence base).

Yet this same person may experience discomfort at a loud concert or crowded music venue, finding themselves overwhelmed (Jach & Smillie, 2019). This scenario captures a genuine psychological paradox: neurotic individuals, characterized by heightened emotional sensitivity and anxiety, simultaneously seek out emotionally intense music while actively avoiding high-volume auditory stimulation. On the surface, these preferences seem contradictory. How can someone crave intensity while avoiding it at the same time? As this review will argue, the tension is more apparent than real: "intensity" conflates two separable properties– the emotional charge of music and its physical loudness- so the paper is best understood as synthesizing that conflation rather than dissolving a true paradox.

The Big Five personality framework has long established that personality traits influence musical preferences. Among these traits, neuroticism– characterized by emotional reactivity, anxiety, and heightened sensitivity to negative stimuli– presents a particularly intriguing case (Widiger & Oltmanns, 2017). Research demonstrates that, in general, individuals high in Neuroticism show lower tolerance for intense or aversive auditory stimuli, such as loud sounds, and experience genuine physical and psychological discomfort in noisy environments (Abbasi et al., 2021). Yet simultaneously, research indicates that neurotic individuals show a positive association with intense and rebellious music, selecting music that reflects and validates their internal emotional experiences (Li, 2024).

This apparent contradiction raises an important question: Why do neurotic individuals prefer emotionally intense music despite experiencing discomfort with high-volume stimulation? Rather than merely contradicting each other, these two findings expose a deeper pattern about how neurotic individuals manage their own emotional and sensory needs. Understanding this tension is not merely an academic curiosity, however. Since neuroticism is associated with a multitude of negative life outcomes, some researchers have proposed screening the general public for clinically significant levels of neuroticism during routine medical visits (Widiger & Oltmanns, 2017). Studies suggest that various forms of musical emotion regulation can mediate the potential negative impact of neuroticism on symptoms of depression and anxiety (Miranda, 2021).

This paper presents evidence that neurotic individuals prefer emotionally intense music and avoid high-volume stimulation. The paper attempts to explain this apparent paradox by distinguishing between emotional intensity (which they seek for psychological regulation) and physical intensity (which they avoid due to sensory sensitivity). The examination of listening contexts– what, why, and how they listen– suggests that neurotic individuals may satisfy their preference for emotionally meaningful music while avoiding sensory overwhelm. This resolution also reveals that neurotic personality influences musical behavior at multiple levels: content preferences, listening environments, and regulatory functions (Miranda & Blais-Rochette, 2020).

Neuroticism is not a unitary trait, but a multidimensional construct: the NEO-PI-R, for example, decomposes it into six facets– anxiety, angry hostility, depression, self-consciousness, impulsiveness, and vulnerability (Widiger & Oltmanns, 2017). The behaviors reviewed here are most directly implicated by the anxiety, depression, and angry-hostility facets: anxiety and depression plausibly drive the use of

emotionally congruent music for validation and regulation, while angry hostility may underlie the appeal of confrontational or rebellious content. The evidence base does not consistently disaggregate neuroticism at the facet level, so the claims that follow are most confidently made about this anxiety/negative-affect cluster rather than about neuroticism as an undifferentiated whole.

METHODS

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using PubMed and Google Scholar from August 2025 through December 2025 to identify peer-reviewed empirical studies and theoretical works examining the relationship between personality traits– particularly neuroticism– and music preferences, listening behaviors, and auditory sensitivity. Google Scholar was selected as the primary database due to its comprehensive indexing of psychology, music psychology, and behavioral science journals. PubMed was searched in parallel to capture indexed work on neuroticism, noise sensitivity, and physiological reactivity; the majority of retained works, however, were identified through Google Scholar, and this asymmetry is acknowledged as a limitation of search coverage. The following search terms and combinations were systematically used to identify relevant literature: "Personality and music," "Personality and noise," "Neuroticism and emotion," "Neuroticism and music," and "Personality traits and sensitivity." Additional targeted searches were conducted using variations and combinations of key terms including "Big Five," "music preference," "emotional regulation," "sensory sensitivity," "intense music," and "rebellious music" to ensure comprehensive coverage of the topic.

Articles were included if they met the following criteria: peer-reviewed empirical research published in academic journals, focus on personality traits (particularly neuroticism and the Big Five framework) in relation to music preferences, listening behaviors, or auditory sensitivity, discussion of emotional intensity, sensory processing, or music as an emotion regulation strategy, and availability in English. Sources were excluded if they did not directly address the relationship between personality traits and music-related behaviors or lacked empirical support for their claims. A distinction is drawn throughout between this included empirical corpus and supplementary theoretical or contextual works, which are cited in the paper as framing material rather than counted as evidence; non-peer-reviewed sources are admitted only as illustrative anecdote and never as empirical support.

The initial search yielded approximately 90 articles for review. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance to the research question. The articles were then evaluated based on the inclusion criteria outlined above. After the screening process, 9 sources were retained for inclusion in this synthesis (Table 1). These sources comprised empirical studies and theoretical papers that directly addressed the relationship between neuroticism, music preferences, emotional regulation through music, and sensory sensitivity to auditory stimuli. The final collection of literature provided sufficient evidence to examine the apparent paradox of neurotic individuals' simultaneous preference for emotionally intense music and avoidance of high-volume auditory stimulation. Screening and full-text review were conducted by a single reviewer; the absence of a second independent screener is acknowledged as a methodological

limitation that may have introduced selection bias. The methodological quality of the included studies was not formally appraised with a standardized instrument such as the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) or a CASP checklist– and this absence of formal quality appraisal is acknowledged asa further limitation of the synthesis. Screening was guided by the reporting principles of the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021). The flow of records through identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion is summarized in Fig. 1 below.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of the study selection process

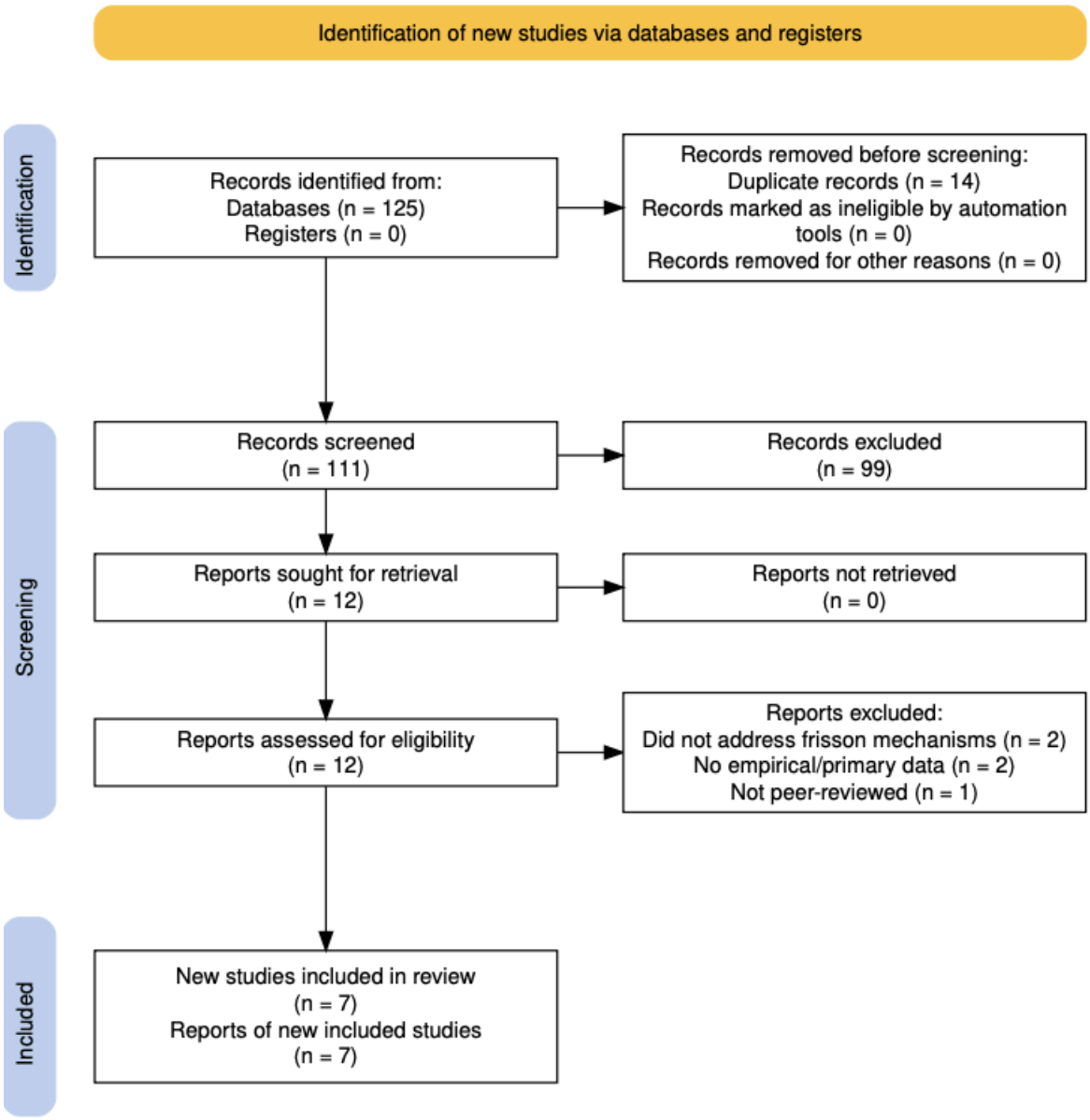

Table 1. Included Reports from Literature Search

Reports	Sample (Size and Population)	Category	Relevant Results
Abbasi et al., 2021	80 BSc and MSc students of the Faculty of Health in Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences	Physical Intensity/Sensory	Individuals high in Neuroticism show lower tolerance for intense or aversive auditory stimuli such as loud sounds, experiencing genuine physical and psychological discomfort in noisy environments
Chamorro‐Premuzic & Furnham, 2007	341 respondents	Context-Dependent Selection	Neurotic individuals were more likely to use music for emotional regulation than those with higher IQ scores
Habe et al., 2023	603 university students	Context-Dependent Selection	Music's effects on mood vary significantly by context (intrapersonal vs. social listening)
Jach & Smillie, 2019	308 United States residents	Physical Intensity/Sensory	Higher neuroticism is associated with lower tolerance for ambiguity and unpredictable environments, including loud/chaotic settings
Levine et al., 1966	29, 52 independent samples of individuals	Physical Intensity/Sensory	Lower tolerance for physical discomfort
Lo et al., 2024	Seventy-nine undergraduate participants	Emotional Intensity	Music listening provides emotional regulation benefits for

			neurotic individuals
Miranda, 2021	1,137 undergraduate students	Emotional Intensity	Music emotion regulation mediates the relationship between neuroticism and mental health outcomes. Music also helps manage anxiety and depression symptoms
Yang et al., 2020	160 right-handed, healthy volunteers	Context-Dependent Music Selection	Neuroticism is negatively associated with emotion regulation abilities when neurobiologically tested.
Yu et al., 2024	125 Americans	Emotional Intensity	Heightened neuroticism corresponds with amplified stress responses and an increased likelihood of experiencing anger, sadness, and disgust.

Note. Table 1 enumerates the 9 included empirical reports only. Theoretical and contextual works cited in the body of the paper as framing material– e.g., Belojevic et al. (2003), Norris et al. (2007), Levinson (2011), Lionetti et al. (2019), McCown et al. (1997), McCrary and Altenmuller (2021), Miranda and Blais-Rochette (2020), Aron and Aron (1997), Rentfrow and Gosling (2003), Rentfrow et al. (2011), and Saarikallio and Erkkilä (2007)– are not part of the included corpus and are not counted toward the evidence base.

RESULTS

Avoiding Physical Intensity: Sensory Sensitivity

Individuals high in Neuroticism experience emotions more intensely than their more emotionally stable counterparts, and they are particularly attuned to threats, discomfort, and aversive experiences in their environment (Yu et al., 2024). This heightened sensitivity extends beyond emotional experience into the

sensory domain– neurotic individuals also process and react to physical stimuli differently than others (Levine et al., 1966).

Physical intensity refers to one of the objective acoustic properties of sound: volume level (decibels) (Levine et al., 1966). This is a measurable feature of auditory stimulation that can be quantified independently of the music's emotional content or meaning.

When it comes to auditory stimulation, this difference becomes particularly pronounced. Research indicates that higher neuroticism is associated with lower tolerance for intense or aversive stimuli, such as loud sounds, due to heightened sensitivity to negative cues and increased discomfort in noisy environments (Abbasi et al., 2021). In other words, loud music is not simply a matter of preference for neurotic individuals, but distressing. This discomfort stems from a fundamental difference in how neurotic individuals process sensory information. They show lower tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty, which translates to less comfort with unpredictable or loud environments, including music with high volume (Jach & Smillie, 2019). The unpredictability and intensity of loud sounds activate their sensitivity to potential threats, creating psychological and physical discomfort.

Furthermore, research demonstrates that higher Neuroticism is associated with lower tolerance for physical discomfort more broadly, which extends to sensory discomfort from loud music (Yu et al., 2024). This suggests that neurotic individuals are less tolerant of high-volume auditory stimulation, not because they dislike it aesthetically, but because it causes them genuine sensory distress. The physical intensity of the volume itself becomes an aversive stimulus that those with higher neurotic levels naturally avoid. This avoidance reflects underlying neurobiological differences in how neurotic individuals process environmental stimuli. This heightened reactivity and sensory-avoidance pattern described is closely linked to Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS). The construct of SPS originates in Aron and Aron's (1997) foundational research on the highly sensitive person, which identified sensitivity as a temperament marked by deeper cognitive processing of, and stronger physiological reactivity to, sensory input. These findings indicate that neurotic individuals experience genuine hyperarousal in response to intense sensory input, meaning loud auditory environments trigger measurable biological stress responses rather than providing stimulation or enjoyment. The avoidance of high-volume music, therefore, represents an adaptive behavioral response to this heightened physiological reactivity (Belojevic et al., 2003). Neurotic individuals' avoidance of loud music is rooted in physical sensory sensitivity, not a mere preference or lack of interest.

Emotional Intensity and Validation

Given that neurotic individuals experience genuine distress from loud auditory stimulation, the finding that they prefer emotionally intense and rebellious music seems paradoxical. However, this apparent contradiction dissolves when we distinguish between emotional intensity and physical intensity– two distinct properties of music that operate on different psychological levels (McCrary & Altenmüller, 2021). Emotional intensity refers to the content and themes of music: lyrics that express anger, sadness, or defiance; musical moods that feel heavy, dark, or cathartic; and aesthetic choices that convey emotional

charge. A song can be emotionally intense without being physically loud; conversely, a song can be loud without being emotionally meaningful. Research on neurotic individuals' music preferences suggests they seek the former while avoiding the latter (Chamorro‐Premuzic & Furnham, 2007). As used throughout this paper, the term "rebellious music" refers descriptively to genres marked by emotionally charged, confrontational, or nonconformist content– principally rock, alternative, and heavy metal, with punk, emo, and hip-hop treated as adjacent examples. It denotes this loosely bounded cluster of genres rather than any single, formally defined preferences category. This descriptive cluster corresponds closely to the "Intense and Rebellious" dimension identified in Rentfrow and Gosling's (2003) Short Test of Music Preferences (STOMP)-- later refined into the "Intense" factor (rock, punk, alternative, heavy metal) of the five-factor MUSIC model (Rentfrow et al., 2011)-- although the present paper invokes the term descriptively rather than as a formally scored preference category.

Neuroticism predicted using music for emotional regulation, indicating engagement in music to influence mood (Chamorro‐Premuzic & Furnham, 2007). Research demonstrates how music allows neurotic individuals to process, validate, and sometimes transform their emotional experiences (Chamorro‐Premuzic & Furnham, 2007). These functions map closely onto the strategies articulated in the Music in Mood Regulation (MMR) framework– particularly discharge, the venting of negative affect through emotionally congruent music, and solace, the seeking of comfort and emotional understanding (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007). Research suggests that individuals high in neuroticism show preferences for emotionally intense and rebellious music genres (Li, 2024). Rather than seeking arousal or stimulation (as extraverted individuals might), neurotic individuals are drawn to music that reflects and resonates emotionally with their internal landscape (Li, 2024; McCown et al., 1997). A song with dark, angry, or anxious themes validates their emotional experience.

This emotional validation function becomes clearer when we consider how neurotic individuals select music based on their emotional state. When neurotic individuals are anxious or distressed, they gravitate toward music that matches that emotional state rather than music designed to calm or distract (Chamorro‐Premuzic & Furnham, 2007).

Rebellious music genres, such as rock, punk, and hip-hop, frequently feature lyrical content addressing nonconformity, struggle, and resistance to authority. Such music could be particularly meaningful for neurotic individuals if their emotional experiences feel isolating or misunderstood. It provides a voice for emotions they might otherwise feel compelled to suppress or hide in social contexts. The appeal of emotionally intense music is not about seeking physical stimulation or arousal, but about expression and emotional legitimacy (Lo et al., 2024).

Neurotic individuals are not contradicting themselves by simultaneously avoiding loud music and preferring intense genres. They are pursuing two distinct but compatible goals: emotional intensity without physical intensity. The emotional intensity found in genres like metal, emo, and punk may provide opportunities for emotional regulation and processing (Chamorro‐Premuzic & Furnham, 2007; Miranda, 2021). However, they can access this emotional content at lower volumes that don't trigger

sensory distress. By contrast, the physical intensity of loud volume activates their heightened sensitivity to aversive stimuli and causes genuine discomfort (Abbasi et al., 2021; Belojevic et al., 2003).

Context-Dependent Music Selection

The apparent contradiction between neurotic individuals' preference for emotionally intense music and their avoidance of high-volume stimulation becomes reconcilable when we examine how listening context shapes their music choices. Rather than experiencing a genuine conflict between incompatible desires, neurotic individuals appear to navigate these two needs through the contexts in which they engage with music, allowing them to satisfy their emotional needs without overwhelming their sensory systems (Chamorro‐Premuzic & Furnham, 2007; Yang et al., 2020).

Research demonstrates that the impact of music on mood and affect is not uniform across all listening situations. Studies show that music's effects on mood vary significantly depending on whether individuals are listening in intrapersonal contexts (alone, focused on their emotional experience) versus social contexts (with others, in group settings) (Habe et al., 2023). This context-dependency applies to neurotic individuals as well and is crucial to understanding how they manage their music preferences. Rather than seeking out loud, physically intense music in all situations, different listening contexts may allow neurotic individuals to engage with emotionally intense content while avoiding overwhelming sensory input (Chamorro‐Premuzic & Furnham, 2007).

For example, a neurotic individual might listen to aggressive, rebellious music– which would satisfy their need for emotional intensity and allows them to validate or externalize their internal emotional experiences– but do so through headphones at home, or at lower volumes, rather than attending a loud concert venue. This distinction is critical: the individual is still engaging with music that is emotionally intense and psychologically arousing, but they avoid the physical discomfort of high-volume stimulation through the listening environment.

Central to this resolution is recognizing that emotional intensity and physical intensity operate on different levels. Research indicates that neurotic individuals prefer intense and rebellious music– music that is emotionally charged, carries themes of rebellion or emotional turbulence, and evokes strong internal responses (Li, 2024). However, this emotional intensity does not necessarily correlate with physical loudness. A song can be emotionally intense in its lyrics, themes, and affective content without being physically loud.

This distinction suggests that emotional intensity and physical intensity may function as separate dimensions in music preference. Neurotic individuals may be drawn to music with emotionally intense content– themes of rebellion, emotional turbulence, and strong affective messaging– while their sensory sensitivity influences how and where they choose to consume that music. Whether through volume control, private listening contexts, or environmental selection, the separation of emotional content from

physical intensity may allow neurotic individuals to engage with their preferred genres while managing sensory discomfort.

CONCLUSION

This paper began with a seeming paradox: neurotic individuals simultaneously avoid high-volume musical stimulation and prefer emotionally intense, rebellious music genres. On the surface, these preferences seem fundamentally contradictory– how can someone flee from intensity while seeking it? However, through careful examination of the research on Neuroticism and music preference, this apparent contradiction reveals itself to be not a paradox but a nuanced expression of personality-driven behavior.

More precisely, the paper dissolves not because a real tension is resolved but because "intensity" was conflated across two independent dimensions; the contribution of this review is therefore corrective– clarifying a conflation that has recurred in popular and semi-scholarly discourse– rather than a resolution of a genuine tension. A recent meta-analysis also determined that neurotic individuals are more likely to use music to manage unpleasant emotional states (Miranda & Blais-Rochette, 2020). Research on physiological arousal patterns demonstrates that those higher in neuroticism show amplified reactivity across multiple psychophysiological markers, including heightened skin conductance responses to external stimuli (Norris et al., 2007).

The answer lies in distinguishing between emotional intensity and physical intensity. Neurotic individuals, characterized by heightened emotional reactivity and sensitivity to negative stimuli, experience genuine sensory distress from loud auditory environments. This is not a matter of taste or preference– it is a reality rooted in their heightened sensitivity to aversive stimuli. A recent meta analysis has demonstrated that neuroticism is highly correlated with Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS), a trait characterized by deeper processing of sensory information and heightened responsiveness to environmental stimuli (Lionetti et al., 2019). Additionally, these individuals are drawn to emotionally intense music because such music serves a crucial psychological function: it validates their internal emotional experiences, facilitates emotion regulation, and provides a vehicle for authentic self-expression.

The key insight is that this tension may be resolved through different listening contexts. Rather than compromising on either emotional intensity or sensory comfort, the availability of different contexts allows engagement with both needs. They may listen to intense, rebellious music through headphones at moderate volumes in solitary settings. They may seek out emotionally resonant genres in controlled environments while avoiding loud concert venues. Research shows they match music to their emotional state and can engage with emotionally intense content in ways that avoid sensory overwhelm (Chamorro‐Premuzic & Furnham, 2007).

This matching where neurotic individuals select music based on their emotional state serves multiple psychological purposes according to philosopher Jerrold Levinson: it externalizes internal experience, validates difficult emotions, and can even facilitate emotional processing (Levinson, 2011).

LIMITATIONS

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the listening context resolution central to this paper is inferential rather than directly demonstrated. No study included in this review directly tested whether neurotic individuals systematically select private or lower-volume listening environments when engaging with emotionally intense music. Several further limitations bound the strength of these conclusions. First, the included evidence base is small (n = 9 studies), which constrains the generality of any synthesis. Second, the included samples are demographically narrow– predominantly university students drawn from a small number of countries– so the patterns may not extend to older, non-student, or cross-cultural populations. Third, most included studies are cross-sectional and correlational, which precludes causal inference about the regulatory function of music for neurotic individuals. Relatedly, none of the included studies were longitudinal, so it remains unknown whether the listening-context strategies proposed here are stable across the lifespan or develop with age; establishing their developmental trajectory would require longitudinal designs. Finally, as noted above, the evidence rarely disaggregates neuroticism by facet, so claims are most secure for the anxiety/negative-affect cluster.

What this reveals about personality and music preference extends beyond the specific case of Neuroticism. It demonstrates that personality influences musical behavior at multiple, sometimes independent levels: what we choose to listen to (content preference), how we listen (context and volume control), and why we listen (emotional function and regulation). A complete understanding of personality-driven music preference must account for all these dimensions rather than reducing music choice to a single preference ranking. People do not simply like or dislike music; they may navigate complex, sometimes competing needs through their behavioral choices.

This resolution has important implications for how we understand the relationship between personality traits and music preferences. It suggests that personality-driven music preferences are not simple; rather, they reflect complex negotiations between sometimes competing needs. Neurotic individuals do not simply "like" or "dislike" music– they use music listening as a tool for emotion regulation while experiencing sensitivity to sensory overload.

Furthermore, this pattern suggests that studying only music preferences (what people like) without examining listening contexts (how and where people engage with music) provides an incomplete picture. The same individual who avoids loud concert venues may be deeply engaged with emotionally intense music in solitary, controlled settings. Understanding personality-music relationships requires attention to both preference and practice– to what people choose and how they choose to experience it.

For practitioners and researchers, this has implications for how we think about personality and music. Music recommendations based on personality traits might benefit from considering not just genre preference but also listening environment and emotional regulation function. Therapeutic applications of music might recognize that individuals with high neuroticism need not avoid intense musical content– they simply need control over the sensory properties and contexts of their listening.

Ultimately, the case of neurotic individuals and music preference illustrates a broader principle: human behavior is rarely reducible to simple contradictions. When apparent contradictions emerge, they often point to deeper complexity. By taking both sides of the paradox– the avoidance of loud sounds and the preference for intense genres– insight emerges not just into how neurotic individuals experience music, but into how personality, emotion, sensation, and behavior interweave in sophisticated ways.

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