LO-FI FOR THE SOUL: HOW DOES LO-FI MUSIC HELP WITH EMOTIONAL ANXIETY

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ABSTRACT

Music was found to play an important role in the human brain and is closely linked to our wellbeing (Blood & Ferris, 1993; Kemp, et.al, 2018). Due to this link, music is therapeutic for anxiety-prone individuals (Baker & Bor, 2008). However, a new genre born online has remained unexamined in academia. Lo-fi is a new melodic genre that has been growing in popularity. The problem covered in this paper sets to find if lo-fi music is helpful for anxiety. Hence, this current study was aimed at understanding the meaning that anxiety-prone individuals give to lo-fi music. Specifically, through examining their daily music interests, the thesis was narrowed to lo-fi, and analysed from a mental health perspective The main research question this study set out to answer is the following: 'How do anxiety-prone individuals give meaning to lo-fi music?'. As a comparison, other genres were also examined for a better contrast. Qualitative semi- formal interviews were utilised addressing the individuals listening patterns, mental health and relation to lo-fi. In comparison, other genres of their choice were explored. The sample consisted of 11 people that suffer from or experience anxiety on a daily basis. The results indicated that individuals use lo-fi passively, and find the genre neutral. The interviewees listen to the genre in the background and while working/conducting other activities. The listeners relax while listening to lo-fi, as it helps them be more productive. Lo-fi was also found to be perceived in a positive light by all interviewees and evoke nostalgic feelings. It was also found that the genre was understood as very personal and versatile. Mainly, lo-fi was seen as a tool for mood regulation and helped the respondents shut off their minds. This lead to the listeners' anxiety levels decrease. Other genres were found to cause opposite reactions, with one exception of feelings of comfort similar to those induced from lo-fi. However, these reactions differ from each individual. This represents a path for future examination. The study has concrete implications for the fields of sociology, psychology and music therapy. Recommendations include future longitudinal research into the subgenres of lo-fi.

Preface

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor Ms. Kim Dankoor for her thoughtful supervision and for believing that I can do this. Without your help, I would have spiralled into confusion and desperation. Thank you for your help and understanding!

I would also like to thank my boyfriend for being patient with me during this stressful time and my aunt for her help and kindness. My parents have no idea abut what I wrote but I love and I am grateful for them too. Also, I thank my brother for always being there for me and making me laugh, whenever I was feeling down. Even if we are in different countries, it still felt like he was next to me.

I am extremely grateful for lo-fi music, as it has calmed me and helped me get into flow whenever I needed to work for this thesis. I have listened to nothing but lo-fi during the process and I owe it my life.

Last, I would like to give a special thank you to my friends from the Master program. This pandemic has thrown us to different parts of the world but we have talked everyday and it made it easier. Marina, Marta and Marisa, we will meet soon. I am grateful for this Master course because I met you and have made three new friends for life.

To conclude this drawn out section, while the reader will skim through this paper, I suggest opening YouTube and playing lo-fi beats to relax/study to for a better read, by the channel Lofi Girl. Hope you enjoy!

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1. Introduction

Music plays a significant role in every individual's life. It is an artificial creation and an outstanding aspect of every culture. Throughout our lives, ever since the beginning of history, we have been making music for different purposes without batting an eye (Harvard Medical School, n.d.). Observed in scientific theory on the effects of music and its perception, the mind and music are closely connected (Jourdain & Mehta, 1997; Hodges, 2000; Bennet & Bennet, 2008).

The human mind and sensory system are hard-wired to recognize music from commotion and to react to musicality and rhythm. It is purely impractical to state if it is a biologic mishap or if it feels a need. However, there are plenty of studies recommending that music may improve human wellbeing and execution. For example, some might even argue that music, in general, influences our way of being by triggering an array of emotions which can affect our feelings (Habibi & Damasion, 2014; Vuoskoski & Eerola, 2017). The emotions brought about can be either positive or negative. It is understandable that music can lead to individual nourishment and can become a booster of culture and society (Hunter, Schellenberg & Schimmack, 2010). Nevertheless, music was found to positively affect our mood by regulating our emotions (Kemp, Williams, Min & Chen, 2018).

Additionally, studies have shown that music is a great promoter anchor for our sense of self, fuelling it and making us more creative, sociable and active (Finnegan, 2003). Music is a form of escapism from everyday life through fantasy (Frith, 1996). Adding to this concept, DeNora (2000) describes music as an instrument to be used to find ourselves or our identity. As we can observe, all these studies describe music as a beacon on the path towards the better self, which represents a symbolic-interactionist view.

Limited research has been conducted on the connection between mental health issues and musical preferences (Blood & Ferriss, 1993; MacDonal, Kreutz, & Mitchell, 2012; Baker & Bor, 2008). Musical preferences have been found to be a gateway to the understanding of every individual's psychology, a micro-sociological perspective of people and their inner beliefs and attitudes (Attali, 1985). Other studies have demonstrated that music can transform

audiences' emotions, which in turn may affect their intellectual cognition (MacDonal, Kreutz, & Mitchell, 2012).

Other studies (Lacourse, Claes & Villeneuve, 2001) have discovered a connection between different kinds of music and solitary practices, suicidal tendencies and medication use. Nonetheless, researchers reject the idea of music as a causal factor and state that musical inclination is more characteristic of emotional susceptibility. In addition, medical trials found that listening to music before surgery eliminates preoperative anxiety, providing an alternative to medication (Bradt, Dileo & Shim, 2013). Nevertheless, these studies dealt with temporary anxiety and did not focus on every day, continuous emotional anxiety. More examination needs to be performed to understand whether music preferences of those with mental health issues contrasts with their mentally stable counterparts, and the aim of this research is to begin filling that gap.

On a more cultural note, humanism and wellness practices have been impacting the psychological field for a few centuries. This post-Enlightenment understanding of humanity is at the centre of modern therapy. Values such as self-love, honesty, creativity, hope, individualism and living are inherently something we aspire to (Schneider & Krug, 2010). Humanism is closely related to music therapy, as the end goal consists of the same values.

Accordingly, music use depends on each individual, and patterns can differ. This account represents a lack of clarity as to why we enjoy music as a collective. Many researchers attempted to take a leap and answer this question (Jourdain & Mehta, 1997; Levitin, 2006; Welch & Fremaux, 2017). Alas, no empirical study was found to examine why individuals appreciate one style of music, that has developed recently. This thesis will try to analyse the relationship between music and the brain further, specifically focusing on lo-fi music.

We can see that lo-fi music is rising in popularity on online streaming platforms. Because it is new and in vogue, this style of music has remained unexamined in academic circles. Lo-fi is soft and melodic, distinguishable to the mid-2010s, with its roots in 1990s instrumental or tribal hip-hop. This specific type of music has been advertised as 'beats to relax/study to', relieving

anxiety and stress from everyday life (Winston & Saywood, 2019). It has become so popular that countless subgenres playlists have been uploaded, inspired by the calm beats.

Specifically, one single video shaped the genre as we see today, and that is the continuous video entitled Lofi Girl (Lofi Girl, n.d.). Ever since it started broadcasting, the music did not stop playing and has been raved about in the lo-fi circles. It has been gaining attention online, even from celebrities, that created a playlists of their own on the platform, and generated millions of views (Smith, 2020; Lofi Girl, n.d.). Just a small keyword search on YouTube and countless results of subgenres emerge: lo-fi Brazil, lo-fi Latino, House lo-fi, lo-fi old school (old songs rebranded), and even lo-fi playlists with music tracks from popular movies and Tv shows. However, these aforementioned small niches all claim the same thing: their purposes are just for studying and relaxation.

The scientific relevance of this paper will be the elucidation of the unfamiliarity around lo-fi music. As a fairly new genre that has never been studied, lo-fi is a strange concept on the internet. The results of this thesis could have an important effect on the music and wellness industry and can develop suggestions for further studies. What is more, this paper will produce recommendations that can help us understand our minds and/or cope with our anxiety more effectively. This subject is extremely relevant to the conditions of the current pandemic. Allegedly, lo-fi helps listeners control their surroundings by hearing relaxing sounds that evoke feelings of nostalgia and by helping individuals cope with quarantine restrictions (Nemo, 2020). Nonetheless, there are no empirical studies researching lo-fi and its direct influence on mental health. Thus, this research will examine how this genre helps people with psychological problems, and how said individuals perceive meaning in the music.

The research question (herein after abbreviated as RQ) this study will try to answer is, *How do anxiety-prone individuals give meaning to lo-fi music?* The following subquestions are also proposed: 1) *How do anxious individuals use lo-fi music?* 2) *In what ways does lo-fi music help with anxiety?* And 3) *In what ways do anxious individuals value lo-fi music in comparison to other genres?*

Qualitative approaches have been chosen to examine the sociological aspects underlying individual mental health, and interviews were conducted to gain insight into the listeners' cognition. Following this method, the aim of this study is to understand the meaning society gives to lo-fi music and the reason behind its magnetism. Personally, I have discovered the genre and have been playing it constantly, thus more reason to understand why and how we enjoy lo-fi.

In the pages ahead, the structure of this paper is as follows: First, the current chapter, Chapter 1 presented the aim of the study. Next, Chapter 2 explores previous studies on lo-fi music and addresses music targeted towards mental health issues. Chapter 3 addresses in detail the research procedure, the sample and the data analysis. Chapter 4 presents the results and connects them to previous theory. Finally, a conclusion and a short discussion will be drawn based on the results in Chapter 5.

The main concepts this thesis puts forward are presented in the RQ. Those are anxiety-prone individuals, lo-fi music and meaning-giving. This means the perceptions of interviewees are explored in regards to lo-fi music. I will further examine said concepts in the next chapter by reviewing relevant studies.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section is organised based on the main concepts. The first concept analysed is internet music. Next, the relationship between music and mental health needs to be explained. Finally, previous research on audience theory will be brought in to aid in understanding an audience's use, and the effects of music. This chapter will shine a critical eye on previous literature from cultural studies, sociology and psychology.

2.1. Internet music

2.1.1. History of internet music

Internet music is a predecessor of lo-fi music (Truax, 2008). Over the last decades, music has gone through constant transformations, and its analysis has become an instrument for observing society (Attali, 1985). Internet music is a new concept devised by Hugill (2005) and refers to an endless discography on the internet, where young unsigned artists try to reach an audience.

One of the most popular genres on the internet is lo-fi, a popular music type among listeners and unsigned artists (Winston & Saywood, 2019). Due to the fact that the music is purely instrumental, having no lyrics, it utilises all sorts of sounds from nature and our quotidian lives. Unique noises from forests, such as animals, natural phenomena and movements are used to represent vocalisation (O'Callachan, 2018). These sounds are familiar to us and quite mundane because of their ordinary aspect. In fact, the term 'lo-fi', an abbreviation of 'low fidelity' (Li, 2011), was coined to refer to urban soundscapes in human-built environments, wherein sounds frequently overlap. This has been translated into an imperfection in the harmony of sounds, or some may argue, a poor quality of sounds (Harper, 2014).

Online lo-fi music has also been called the new Muzak (Tagg, 1982), the music typically played in elevators, in stores or in hotel lobbies. However, as a successor of Muzak, lo-fi is highly digitised; all sounds and compositions are computer-made. Researchers call this type 'world music', or an amalgam of cultures (Truax, 2008). This genre has gone global for its instrumental and lyric-less characteristics, which makes it is easy to reach universal popularity.

However, in the past, hi-fi aesthetics were preferred to lo-fi, poor-quality soundscapes. Hi-fi, or 'high fidelity' is the opposite of lo-fi. As Harper (2014) puts it,

> [lo-fi] was a particular construction rooted in a particular set of historical contexts and particular discourses, always already a particular (inverse) relation to a perceived norm. Moreover, that construction had come into effect, quite clearly, in the 1990s, and had then worked retroactively by establishing a category and a canon that, while alluding to a broad locus of aesthetics and creativity (amateurs, roughness), unknowingly excluded amateurs making music from the wrong genres – electronic music, dance and jazz – or whose sound quality had not been poor enough (Harper, 2014, pg.3).

We can observe lo-fi as negatively perceived by its past association with unpopular genres and its broadness. One must not forget that jazz was regarded as 'lo-fi' during its days of glory. It was considered a mixture of music from enslaved people and Western characteristics that was frowned upon by high-class society (Gioia, 1998). However, it became very popular in the 1970s and 1980s. This demonstrates the change in narrative surrounding an undervalued genre that flew to the top of the charts, a trend we also see with lo-fi.

The perspective of lo-fi as a meagre type of music is shifting, and the genre has become a popular niche on online platforms. The underground style of lo-fi uses samples from pre-existing songs to create something new. The loops are repeated and reconceptualised to form central melodies over drums. The fans enjoy these unique songs, with nostalgic beats and a repurposed repertoire (Winston & Saywood, 2019). These individuals can be found online assembling a subculture of their own.

2.1.2. The subculture of online lo-fi music

For some individuals, the internet represents a safe place where anonymity allows them to be themselves. In fact, online anonymity has been found to lead to more interpersonal communication and more internet usage (Christopherson, 2007). Individuals seek the cover of privacy on the web in order to express their individuality without being judged (Kang, Brown & Kiesler, 2013). More people using the internet to become anonymous leads to a larger group of people enjoying their preferred genre of music (Larsson, Svensson & Kaminski, 2012).

These musical subcultures need to be identified to understand the context surrounding lo-fi music and its audience. The definition of subcultures is a deviance from the norm, a small group sharing similar characteristics within the larger population (Hall and Jefferson, 1975). A key point of focus for this study is the way in which subcultures create meaning for themselves. Usually, those in these lo-fi groups pick elements from mainstream music and develop new aesthetics or new music styles that deviate from the average (Hedbige & Potter, 1979; Alexander, 2003).

Williams (2006) believed that there is a new subculture arising mainly from the internet. Musical preferences were found to be one factor for inclusion within a musical subgenre but was not the only one. The internet produces these types of interaction and develops them further creating a unique experience. In our case, lo-fi hip-hop, lo-fi jazz and lo-fi Brazil (bosa nova) all represent subculture music genres reworked from their conventional counterparts.

Styven (2007) argued that the move towards internet music has created marketing opportunities and new mediums of communication. However, lo-fi is fairly recent and not yet exploited for the masses, but rather for small subgroups (Winston & Saywood, 2019). The genre has remained untouched by mainstream industries and belongs to the listeners, signifying lo-fi as a rare subculture, that is still growing.

Music is also believed to be a means of communication, creating entire communities and even developing opportunities for a better life by listening and relating to others (Hesmondhalgh, 2008). One look at the YouTube lo-fi radio chats and its live communications reveals a growing community surrounding the new genre (Lofi Girl, n.d.). For this audience, lo-fi represents belonging and reassurance as they relate to a particular group of people.

Furthermore, the peculiarity of the lo-fi listeners comes from a reflective nostalgia for a better life. Boym (2002) explains that individuals do not look to immerse themselves in nostalgia, nor to duplicate their past, but rather to envelop the dissolution of memory by creating another past reality. They are in love with the passing of time and not with the actual missed object, thus alluding to an imagined past. Born and Haworth (2017) suggest that lo-fi is not the only online subgenre where a re-imagination of past life has more value than the actual

past. Other internet-born niches use the same structure along with ironic or even kitsch elements to create musical nostalgia (Reynolds, 2011). These undertones indicate that lo-fi is cherished by the audience, and its meaning-making hides in the listeners sense of self, due to the genres' personal and/or familiar aspects.

In contrast, Harper (2017) criticises internet music as damaging to our brain. In his study, he found that such music causes a lack of attention or information overload and that it dehumanises us the more time we spend online. Nonetheless, Carr (2011) and Reynolds (2011) argue that the damage is superficial and that the human mind is expanding from internet music, because it is bringing us closer to what used to be inaccessible information. Lo-fi is established online, and its chat option is arguably a communication channel for those alike, forming a positive community that do not show dehumanisation traits.

Going through the analysis of lo-fi, we observed it is a descendant of internet music, a mixture of cultures that created a subculture of its own. It built a strong online community, a membership of high spirits. The genre can be viewed as nostalgic for a nonexistent past. Nevertheless, additional questions persist, and one must delve into the effect of music on mental health, since this thesis focuses on anxiety-prone individuals.

2.2. Mental health and music

A broad range of papers touch upon music in a general sense, making it difficult to offer a perspective specifically related to lo-fi music. Nevertheless, the following theories are focused and useful for developing an operational framework to find the meaning of this beloved music genre. First, wellbeing is discussed to understand the theoretical perspective. Then, the psychological understanding of anxiety and stress is addressed together with empirical studies that touch upon music and mental health.

2.2.1. Wellbeing

An extensive examination of the literature revealed psychological theories of positive feelings and mindfulness are linked to wellbeing. The approach, analysed below, has a holistic character, even though it is often associated with mental and not physical health. There is often no distinction made between mental health and wellbeing. On the subject of mental health,

one must give a salute to the professionals who explore the field of mental issues. Psychologist study the mind, psychiatrists are focused on deeper mental illnesses, psychoanalysts scan the subconscious, therapists and counsellors provide advice on a range of topics and social workers help people with social problems (Pilgrim, 2020). These are the experts that need to be included in the conversation, while discussing mental health, as they represent the gatekeepers of information, and bring great insights to the literature.

Pilgrim (2020) defines mental health as 'used positively to indicate a state of psychological wellbeing, negatively to indicate its opposite (as in mental health problems)' (Pilgrim, 2020, pg.3). This approach will be used interchangeably in the current thesis, referring to mental health as positive and mental health problems as negative. Furthermore, the World Health Organisation (WHO) classifies wellbeing accordingly: 'Mental health is defined as a state of wellbeing in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community' (WHO, n.d.). However, Dodge, Daly, Huyton and Sanders (2012) defined wellbeing as a stable state, where individuals have the internal and external resources required to meet their needs. This idea suggests that if new challenges arise, the necessary skills or tools required already exist within our arsenal. On the other hand, if those skills are not in place, then we can observe dips in our wellbeing, causing negative effects on our peace of mind (Heady & Wearings, 1992).With that in mind, individuals can recognise by themselves whenever they experience mental health problems (Pilgrim, 2020).

Thus, we can observe great techniques for a better mindset/ mental health utilised at home, without the presence of a professional. Multiple studies linked mediation to wellbeing, as an alert technique for a balanced mental health (Manocha, 2000; Maclean & Walton, 1997; West, 1987; Sobolewski, Holt, Kublik & Wrobel, 2011). It relates to mindfulness, which is interpreted as a mental state of total awareness or calmly living in the moment, suggestive of a wellbeing state. A mindful individual is conscious and focused on that specific moment, without any negative emotions clouding his mind (Manocha, 2000). One can emphasise that this mental state of peace and tranquillity is often associated to a type of meditation.

Implicitly, meditation is part of Eastern cultures and has been brought to the West as a relaxation technique (West, 1987). However, it is an ancient religious practice that is thought to produce beneficial behaviours, generating positive effects on our mind and body (Manocha, 2000). According to this perspective, meditation is a form of wellbeing and can lead to a stress-free cognizance.

Thus, this section examines what mental health, mindfulness and meditation practices are and their connection to wellbeing. It is relevant to this study because it provides a base for the paper ahead, while forming an overview of the context. This framework of wellbeing will be taken into account when phrasing the questions, as a humanistic perspective is needed in such a sensitive subject. Anxiety has to be treated carefully in order to be fully understood.

2.2.2. Anxiety, stress and its effects

Narrowing the focus along the lines of the main RQ, the concepts of anxiety and stress need to be clearly defined. However, before going further, I need to clarify the difference between physical and emotional stress. This study will address the latter, as it can spill over into physical stress.

According to Keyes (2005), mental health is a positive feeling that leads to happy relations between peers, strong communication, feelings of productiveness and a powerful sense of coping with change. This state of wellbeing consists of multiple symptoms, such as healthy psychological functioning, independence, clear focus, determinacy and safety. When one of those symptoms is lacking, the criteria for mental health are not met, and one may fall on the spectrum of mental illness (Keyes, 2005).

Furthermore, the most common anxiety disorder is generalised anxiety disorder (GAD; Spitzer, Kroenke & Williams, 2006). GAD is defined as a persistent phobia, with symptoms such as restlessness, sweating, increased blood pressure, high stress levels, fear, irritability and constant tension (Brown, O'Leary & Barlow, 2001). Said symptoms can cause physical damage to our bodies. It comes in the form of panic attacks, increased heart rate, chest pain, trouble breathing that could transform into long time disorders (Pilgrim, 2020).

Similar to GAD, stress is considered a universal affliction that can lead to physiological and psychological imbalances. It is characterised by a state in which individuals experience, or perceive, demands that are beyond their control (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Anxiety can lead to stress, with symptoms such as fatigue, headaches and uncontrollable, heightened emotions (Burke, Davis, Otte, & Mohr, 2005).

These symptoms can build up and create worse mental states. For example, consistently high levels of stress can lead to negative emotions, depression or chronic afflictions, with no cure in sight (Labbé, Schmidt, Babin, & Pharr (2007). Hence, there is a clear association; we can observe a negative connection between stress and mental health. This means that the worse a person's mental health, the higher levels of stress. Even though these adverse impacts on wellbeing seem overwhelming, individuals have illustrated time and time again many ways of coping with such negative emotions.

2.2.3. Mental health in relation to music

The relationship between mental health and music is extensive and can be divided into three subsections, namely music listening, musicking and music practising. There have been multiple attempts to examine music as a form of coping or as an effective means of alleviating stress. Although an insufficient amount of literature addresses why music has the capacity to alter emotional states, there are a few studies that have investigated how music reduces anxiety or stress.

Multiple studies touch upon feelings and the effects of music listening. First, music was demonstrated to cause intense emotion. In an extensive paper on how music can make us feel not just one, but a plethora of emotions, feelings were occurring from association, memory, energy or aesthetics (Juslin, 2013). A study on musical theatre focused on the stimuli of the live performance on the audience. Basically, the raw emotions evoked by musicals can elicit strong feelings from the listeners, and they will try to sing along or mimic the actors' movements (Taylor, 2010). The study addresses the intense emotional response people get when listening to music, and is relevant in understanding the recognition of music and the response of the body.

Moving on, one quantitative study experimented with attributing adjectives to songs in order to describe the expressiveness of music (Hevner, 1936). The interviewees' perceptions of music were usually described by associated emotions, demonstrating the emotion music carries. Positive music evokes positive emotions but can also evoke nostalgia and wonder. Interestingly, individuals experience feelings of pleasure when listening to sad songs because our cognition confuses the feelings with a sudden rush of hormones. Hence, we enjoy a comforting surge of chemicals released from nostalgic sounds (Juslin, 2013).

We can deduce that lo-fi is a nostalgic genre and might help with anxiety-prone individuals. For example, life is found to be complicated, a hybrid between bitter and sweet, and music that perfectly reflects this quality will have a greater impact on listeners (Levinson, 2004). This is further discussed in Huron (2011), who suggests that music arouses sadness, then, following a chemical reaction in our brain, pleasure.

In a similar vein, nostalgia has been found to help the development of wellbeing, and it actually promotes a better lifestyle for individuals at risk of stress and anxiety (Routledge, Wildschut, Sedikides & Juhl, 2013). Sad emotions are experienced as positive, and nostalgia is related to sad emotions, further implying lo-fi could possibly be helpful against negative emotions. Listening to sad music was consistent with friendliness, indicating an open and social aspect of nostalgic music (Ladining &Schellenberg, 2012). It is confirmed that liking sad music is characteristic of the emotions it carries over listeners, and argues that it cannot be generalised between different individuals.

Next, taking into account mental health and music, qualitative research on different genres and the feelings each of them elicits suggests that music can be helpful in curing the negative emotions of depression, anxiety and insomnia (Solli, Rolvsjord & Borg, 2013). In contrast, Recours, Aussaguel and Trujillo (2009) analysed metal music fans and their mental health while listening to music. Results showed normal or reduced anxiety levels compared to the general public, debunking the idea of suicidal metalheads. The findings indicate that metalheads express an openness to mortality, something the general audiences are not adjusted to. In contrast, soft lo-fi music is perhaps the opposite of heavy metal music, often viewed as nostalgic and 'chill' (Winston & Saywood, 2019), therefore it is interesting to examine

and compare with a different music style. Its characteristics may induce feelings opposite to those elicited by metal music.

The second subsection of music's relationship to mental health entails the concept of 'health musicking' (Stige, 2012). This notion implies that the wellbeing effects of music are not given by the musician but are established by the continuous use of the audience. It can be understood as both an active and a passive use of music as a therapeutic means of regulating emotion. Small (1998) argues that individuals better themselves because they actively listen to music. This concept relates to DeNora's (2007) work on music; she describes the effects of music as developing positive feelings, which helps our mental health when listening is continuous. She insists that the performance of simple, mundane tasks while listening to music can aid in recovering from depression and anxiety. While lo-fi is a soft, monotone genre, if listened to daily, one would expect that the genre be linked to mental-health promotion.

A study by Balsnes (2014) used the theory of health musicking to examine choral activities. It was found that members of choirs have significantly calmer minds while actively listening and participating. Supporting this argument, music intervention was employed on individuals suffering from autism spectrum disorders. It was found that music reduced anxiety and evoked positive attitudes for their self-esteem and the surrounding environment (Hillier, Greher, Poto & Dougherty, 2011). Albeit, this thesis will not focus on people on the autism spectrum. Nevertheless, a compelling case is made, observing music having such a strong effect on harsher mental illnesses.

Advancing into the third subsection that concerns music practising, Perkins and Williamon (2014) delve into the subject of music participation as a means of wellbeing. The study dealt with active practising with music and is therefore useful as a base to compare lo-fi audiences who are learning or those who are simply listening to music. The emotional outcomes of learning music were found to be 'musically-nuanced engagement in day-to-day life, enhanced social interactions through music, a fulfilment of musical ambition and desire, the ability to produce and make music and self-satisfaction through musical progress' (Perkins & Williamon, 2014, p. 563).

Similarly, learning music has been found to be cathartic for juvenile criminals and helps them manage difficult emotions (Daykin, Viggiani, Moriarty, Pilkington, 2017). Music gives them 'new experiences, broadened horizons, enjoyment, learning, expression, supportive interactions, pride and achievement' (Daykin et al., 2017, p.955). This finding is similar to that of Recours, et. al (2009) on metal music and demonstrates that music can be a medium for venting negative emotions. However, music cannot replace medication in the long term but is only a quick alternative remedy.

In contrast, some medical investigators found that simply listening to music at home alone does not have the same effect when compared to music therapy conducted by a professional in a specialised setting (Lin, Yang, Lai, Su, Yeh, Huang, & Chen, 2011). This implies that lo-fi fans listening to music at home will not experience strong effects on their mental health. However, multiple studies exemplified music significantly reducing anxiety and physical pain after just one session (Horne-Thompson & Grocke, 2008; Wong, Lopez & Molassiotis, 2001; Guetin, Portet, Picot, Pommie, Messaoudi, Djabelkir, Olsen, Cano, Lecourt & Touchon, 2009), demonstrating the strong effects of music on anxiety even succeeding one session.

Nevertheless, some have criticized such studies. One revision comes to mind, wherein the authors disagree that music can influence wellbeing without the mediation of professionals. According to them, paradigms must change in order to implement the initiatives of health experts and music teachers, otherwise no progress will be made (Tsiris, Derrington, Sparks, Spiro & Wilson, 2016). Veblen and Waldron (2013) recommend that in the future, music workers, educators and even music therapists have to emerge in order to help people deal with stress and anxiety.

Music, in general, was discovered to stimulate and evoke very strong emotions. Focusing on sad songs, individuals reported positive, nostalgic and comforting feelings (Juslin, 2013). Taking it one step further, the self is analysed and found music as therapeutic towards our identity. In fact, active participation in music provides great benefits for out mental health. While lo-fi can result in alleviating anxiety, its effects are up for debate when it comes to how the audience uses the music.

2.3. <u>Audience Theories</u>

When discussing meaning-making of music, one has to consider audience theories, respective uses and sources of gratification, to understand the context of how music is used to help audiences with anxiety. These theories explain the consumption of music and the satisfaction in brings after listening. Several audience studies explain that there are different types of theories of listeners.

A model to understand audience consumption is presented by Alexander (2003) using the gratification approach. Essentially, this theory holds that audiences actively use mass media for consumption. The approach explains the reason for said usage and the mode of consumption. One of the first studies examined the use of television, and found four different needs: escapism, personal relations (to characters as well as to create relationships with other fans in person), identification (relating or comparing personal problems) and information gaining (simply put, surveilling and gathering information from news; Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974).

One study indicated that individuals use media when they have a need for affection, as they turn to it in times of stress or emotional nervousness (Bryant & Oliver, 2009). Hence, people use such media because they represent a comforting environment (Ruggiero, 2000). The types gratification gained from listening to music are quite similar to those found by Katz et al. (1974): music gave them (1) emotional regulation, to maintain one's moods; (2) information, by active listening and focusing on the music itself, or simply by sharing music as a social capital; (3) aesthetic enjoyment, which refers to audiences finding the piece enjoyable or beautiful and consequently develop positive feelings of entertainment, ecstasy and pleasure; and (4) a way to pass the time (Belcher & Haridakis, 2013).

In connection to mental health, Miranda and Claes (2009) focused on the many ways of coping with anxiety and depression through music. Three main styles of listening usage emerged: 'emotion-oriented', 'avoidance/disengagement' and 'problem-oriented' (Miranda & Claes, 2009). This means that audiences listen to their music by venting negative emotions,

escaping reality or by contemplation. This demonstrates that lo-fi can be seen as a coping mechanism.

Complementary, music can be regulated for mood-adjustment and used in a similar manner to Miranda and Claes (2009). A study concluded that the uses and gratification of the psychopathologic youth will result in: discharging of negative emotions, distraction from external stressful factors and, simply, entertainment (Thomson, Reece & Benedetto, 2014). These establish that young people experience great benefits on their mental health when self-therapy with music is involved.

Be that as it may, the consumption modes of people seem to lead to problems later in life. For example, the use of avoidance/disengagement listening style is a short-term solution for coping with anxiety. It can generate neuroticism and elevate stress further (Miranda, Gaudreau & Morizot, 2010). This can mean negative implications on lo-fi listeners coping mechanisms and their future consequences. Nevertheless, this criticism can be used only when in contact with lo-fi fans coping with anxiety by escapism and avoidance.

2.4. Conclusion

Based on the sources discussed above, one can see music plays a big part on our emotional responses. Lo-fi was born from internet-music and has been shown to shift its negative meaning into an affirmative one (Gioia, 1998; Winston & Saywood, 2019). Furthermore, music, in general, has a positive effect on our wellbeing and our anxiety, as well as evoke feelings of nostalgia (Boym, 2002; Juslin, 2013). As a consequence, individuals are using music to avoid problems, entertain themselves and to regulate their emotions.

Hypothesis cannot be formulated regarding the qualitative aspect of this study because it entails understanding single cases for pattern search. However, some expectations were drafted regarding outcome. It is believed that most participants will listen to lo-fi for emotion-regulation and that the genre will be helpful in lowering their anxiety levels. As we have observed above, lo-fi is unexamined in scholarly works, and this thesis will apply theory based on sources that examined the general themes of music.

All of the discussed theories are relevant to the relationship between anxiety and music. Thus, the sources lead us to understand music as a tool, and not a cure for anxiety (Alexander, 2003; Miranda & Claes, 2009). Lo-fi is recent and unusual for academic study, making it an unfamiliar genre. This thesis suggests that lo-fi does improve our mental health. Nonetheless, the reason why is still unknown, and will be explored in the next parts.

3. Methodology

In order to answer the main research question, a qualitative approach has been chosen to determine the features underlying individuals' mental health. Specifically, meaning is generated from qualitative studies, mainly interviews. Krauss explains that 'Epistemologically, the researcher is engaged in the setting, participating in the act of "being with" the respondents in their lives to generate meaning for them. Developing themes and storylines featuring the words and experiences of participants themselves is an important result of qualitative data analysis that adds richness to the findings and their meaning' (Krauss, 2005, pg. 767). Due to the nature of the RQ, this method was chosen for a better analysis.

To explore the sensitive subject of anxiety, semi-structured interviews have been conducted. The research method of interviewing was employed to answer the research question because of its richness and flexibility (Bryman, 2012). The semi-structured interviews provided insight into the respondents' experiences and attitudes towards lo-fi music, thus benefiting the aim of the study (Bryman, 2012). Interviews are also an easy and comfortable way of acquiring deep and sensitive data regarding personal subjects such as this one (Babbie, 2010). This method has brought more information to light than a simple qualitative content analysis or focus group would have. In this section, the methods and their justification are discussed. I will describe the design selected, the participants, the research procedure and the data analysis.

3.1. Participant description

I conducted 13 qualitative interviews to understand the meaning of lo-fi, but two had to be eliminated due to the participants' lack of anxiety. The remaining interviewees all suffered from anxiety. Due to the non-restrictive quota sample, two men and nine women participated in this study. There was no need for gender comparison, and more women responded to recruiting than men.

These participants had different occupations, as observed in Table 1 below. Out of the 11, seven were studying at the high school, bachelor's or master's level at the time of the interviews. Specifically, one was in high school, two were studying for their bachelor's degree,

and four were master's students. The four working professionals were spread across different fields. Interviewee 3 was a software developer, Interviewee 5 was an e-health expert, Interviewee 7 was working in IT and Interviewee 8 was working as a social worker.

The age of the respondents ranges from 18 to 42. Initially, the age of participants was restricted to millennials (individuals born between the 1980s and the mid-1990s; Dimock, 2019). This was because research indicated that the main audience for lo-fi was the millennial generation (Winston & Saywood, 2019). Therefore, no age delimitation was implemented while recruiting because it was implied that millennials would be the main participants. Nevertheless, three younger candidates and one older candidate responded enthusiastically to the research post and were used in the main thesis. Upon further research, there were no large generational differences between millennials and those from Generation X (the older generation; Lyons, Duxbury & Higgins, 2007). Meanwhile, the younger generation (Gen Z) shares commonalities with their predecessors, likely due to their closeness in age (Rue, 2018).

Furthermore, the participants' nationalities differed, including Australian, American, European, Brazilian and Mexican. They all had similar experiences working or studying in the Netherlands, sharing one common characteristic. What is more, countless individuals from all over the world listen to this type of music (Winston & Saywood, 2019), making it difficult to narrow it down to just one nation or gender. Thus, this sample is representative of the wide variety of lo-fi listeners.

This current sampling method was best utilised with the guidance of previous sources by DeNora (2013), Miranda and Claes (2009) and Recours et.al (2009). The meaning-making of anxious individuals were focused in the abovementioned studies and their method qualitative method was implemented. This allowed for previous studies to construct a framework developed in this thesis.

Problems regarding the representativeness of the population have emerged due to the small sample, but this sample is the best choice for uncovering something new and developing a fresh pattern (Babbie, 2010). Nonetheless, aspects seem to be missing from the comparison, characteristics such as class, ethnicity and gender that limit the population. These aspects were

not analysed, following DeNora's (2013) advice over the general attitudes on the individuals and elimination of such demographics from the analysis.

Upon reflection on my own position as a researcher, I was also part of the population, as an anxious individual within the age group, and as a fan of lo-fi. That space in between interviewees but at the same time an outsider has been analysed and proven that we cannot completely separate ourselves from the research (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). I avoided stating any personal opinions towards the genre in the interviews, to refrain from any subjectivity (Babbie, 2010). Nevertheless, the intimacy of the subject truly prevented me from being completely outside.

Hence, Babbie' s (2010) framework implies reliability of reason when conducting the interview, and pertinent questions were asked in relation to lo-fi music. Qualitative concurrent validity was also established, consisting of comparison between two measures to ensure logic. Lo-fi was compared to a different genre, of their choice, to observe the role of the genre.

3.2. Research procedure

The sampling method was theoretical and employed snowball purposive sampling. According to Bryman (2012) a theoretical sample is a strategic way of selecting participants that fit a certain criterion, and is made concomitantly with data analysis. The snowballing approach entails a sampling technique that starts from a small group of people and then grows by said people introducing the researcher to others that fit the criteria (Bryman, 2012).

Due to lo-fi music's online nature, interviewees were approached online. I posted a recruitment message on my social media platforms, including LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram. Initially, other social media platforms, such as Reddit, Facebook groups, YouTube playlists and even Instagram lo-fi pages were to be used to reach lo-fi fans willing to be interviewed. However, so many responded and agreed to interviews that there was no need for further recruitment.

Hence, out of those social media platforms mentioned above, LinkedIn was the main source of recruitment, with eight individuals agreeing to participate. The rest came from Facebook. The interviews were conducted online because of the current pandemic and were recorded for easier transcription. Zoom was used to conduct the interviews because it does not require an account to join meetings. Furthermore, Zoom allowed for easy recording, cloud storage and in a few cases even accurate transcription. The respondents were recruited anonymously in the middle of April 2021. The interviews were between 40 minutes and an hour.

According to DeNora (2013), who dedicated her life to studying music, a qualitative method is the best technique to study music and wellbeing because it 'allows us to study the differences that music makes from ''the inside,'' by following music as it ''leads'' people into situations of wellbeing that do, and/or do not, accumulate over time.' (DeNora, 2013, pg. 11). Thus, this method was utilised for valid results to study the effect of music on individual mental health.

Before the start of this study, I set a limit of 12 total hours of interviews, which could be changed to 10. This is the equivalent of 12 to 14 respondents, depending on the duration of the interviews. This number was also chosen due to the time constraints for the thesis. The quota was reached, but because of the elimination of two interviews, the total ended up slightly below 10 hours. Nevertheless, the interviews provided enough reliable data because a small sample that has been methodically chosen leads to more accurate conclusions regarding the population than a random one (Maxwell, 2012).

Ethical concerns were taken into consideration, as the nature of the interviews were very personal and included questions about mental health, official diagnosis and personal routines. Dempsey, Dowling, Larkin and Murphy (2016) suggest developing an amicable relationship with the interviewee before the start of the interviews. In the beginning of each interview, I introduced myself, my intentions and my hobbies. Thus, a comfortable atmosphere was created for the participants from the outset. According to Babbie (2010), the more comfortable the participants, the better the resulting data. The interview guide is found in Appendix A and each topic is explained in the next subsection.

In addition, before the start of the interviews the participants were briefed on the nature of the interviews, and a consent form was sent to them. After signing the form, the interviews were conducted, and the participants were again given a description and a warning. At the start of each recording, they were given the option to skip uncomfortable questions about their mental health, but they all answered without any hesitations.

DeNora (2013) has critically assessed music and how it has been researched in relation to mental health. Her framework has analysed techniques to produce ecologically valid data of how music promotes wellbeing. She explains that to know the individual, one must understand their everyday motivations and routines surrounding music (DeNora, 2013). This approaches music on a simple level and its relation to wellbeing, thus the interviewees were asked to describe their mundane experiences with music.

3.3. Operationalisation

As previously mentioned, I began by gathering information and previous literature to form the topic list. Because of the qualitative nature of the studies found in examining the literature, an interview guide was formulated based on the concepts discussed in Chapter 2, namely lo-fi music, music and mental health and audience theories. The guide can be found in Appendix A. The implementation of said concepts in the interview provided a logical order aligned with the theoretical framework. Nevertheless, the last concept of audience theory was fused together with the other concepts in the interview to create a consistent flow and a gradual and logical outcome.

To formulate a clear analysis, the interview list was divided into six topics. The first topic of the guide begins with general questions about demographics, personal information, the responders background (Babbie, 2010) and information about their relationship with music in general. This section was drawn from literature by DeNora (2013) and Perkins and Williamon (2014) to better understand the context of the responders.

The second topic is related to lo-fi music, and the questions relate to the participants' relationship with the genre. This section allowed me to understand the responders' opinions regarding lo-fi, the meaning they give it and their use of the music, all of which relates to

audience theories. Based on the study by Winston and Saywood (2019), the questions addressed issues ranging from duration of listening, which playlist is listened to and the length of listening time. DeNora and Truax (2008) provided follow-up questions on the attractiveness of the genre, reasoning and popularity. DeNora (2013) suggested that music is listened to differently every day, thus another question was formulated regarding routine and the activities performed while listening. Follow-up questions emerged depending on the responders' clarity in their answers. Finally, participants were asked to attribute an adjective to lo-fi music, as in Hevner (1936).

The next series of questions were very personal, and thus a warning was given to the participants before starting. These questions address the subject of emotional anxiety. The theories were developed by Keyes (2005), Brown et.al. (2001), Boym (2002) and DeNora (2013). This topic provided information regarding the participant's mental wellbeing, coping mechanisms and their everyday life as it relates to music. An extra question was formulated to understand how they use lo-fi to cope with anxiety.

The next series of questions addressed the relationship between lo-fi and emotions. To better understand the meaning-making of anxiety-prone individuals, Solli et.al (2013) propose asking about how they feel when listening to the genre. The next question was drawn from Juslin (2013), and interviewees were asked what specific emotions they feel when listening to lo-fi. Considering the current pandemic, Nemo (2020) inspired the question about their current relationship with the genre during the COVID-19 crisis.

Moreover, the next topic was stimulated by the second part of the interview guide, similar to those asked in relation to lo-fi music. It was beneficial to make comparisons with a different genre. The same questions from the lo-fi topic were copied and posed to the participants. Extra inquiries over their coping with anxiety by using different genres of music were also formulated, as the corresponding literature was used.

Finally, the last topic of the interview guide consists of clear questions for comparison. Thus, two genres were put side by side and each participant was asked about the differences. Miranda and Claes (2009) and Born and Haworth (2017) were the motivation behind this last

topic. During this last part, the responders were able to reflect on their answers, and perhaps better explain their uses and gratification of lo-fi.

Number	Age	Gender	Profession	Nationality/Background	Sings (yes/no)	Plays an Instrument (yes/no)	Official Diagnosis
1	18	f	student	American	n	y	-
2	27	m	student	Kurdish/Dutch	n	y	-
3	26	f	work	Romanian	n	n	-
4	22	f	student	Dutch	n	n	-
5	42	m	work	Dutch	n	y	-
6	28	f	student	French	y	y	PTSD, ADHD, Depression, Anxiety, Insomnia
7	32	f	work	Australian	y	y	Depression, Anxiety
8	37	f	work	Dutch	y	y	Depression, anxiety
9	25	f	student	Mexican	y	y	Depression, anxiety
10	23	f	student	Mexican	y	y	ADHD, depression, anxiety
11	25	f	student	Brazilian	y	y	-

Table 1. Detailed description of the sample

3.4. <u>Data analysis</u>

Once the data had been gathered, it was analysed in Atlas.ti using a mix of deductive and inductive approaches. Furthermore, a thematic analysis was chosen for identifying themes or patterns in the interviews and in the meaning-making of lo-fi music. Essentially, this method allows the researcher to make sense of the similarities found between the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This analysis approach entailed a qualitative analysis from a latent manifest, resulting in the underlying connotations of the interviews (Bengsston, 2016).

During this process, I had to systematically comply with a set layout for trustworthy and valid results. Following Babbie's (2010) approach to validity, this research measured meaning-making by being as objective as possible and following the same advice of objectivity. All responders were asked the same questions Furthermore, when looking at the exploratory aspect of this research, the method of analysis helps in understanding an otherwise unexamined subject in academia.

This analysis was done by a directed approach based on a thorough research process before the data gathering, which helped identify the initial coding process (Hsiez & Shannon, 2005). However, during the analysis, new data arose, hence the change in coding. The main object of the thesis was also taken into account when analysing the data; thus the procedure was focused to fit the fundamental goal (Bryman, 2012).

Next, during the transcription process, names and other personal information were anonymised for the protection of the participants' personal data. Hence, I have numbered the participants and the interviews in the order that they were conducted and will refer them as such from this moment on.

The model from Xu and Zammit (2020), following a 'top-down' approach to identify the themes, was utilised. First, I had to familiarise myself with the data and understand it. Next, initial codes were generated from previous literature and fused together with in-vivo codes. The third step was to look for common themes, while scrutinising any pertinence between overarching themes. A miscellaneous category was created to encompass codes that did not fit into the main themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following step consisted of reviewing any

themes that were not relevant to the research question. Additionally, this part utilised a comparative approach to guarantee the themes were grounded in the data (Xu & Zammit, 2020). Then the themes that incorporate the overall account were defined. They were named with precision to answer the main inquiry. Last, the finished product was reported on (Xu & Zammit, 2020). This report is contained in Chapter 4 of this paper, where new and old literature is discussed in juxtaposition with the findings on lo-fi music.

A limitation of the study method comes from Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), where it was explained that one person conducting the analysis is insufficient. However, the approach of Bryman (2012) and Babbie (2010) to validity was operationalised and reflected upon. For trustworthy and rigorous results, an objective perspective was used in order to conduct the analysis fairly.

4. Results

The aim of this paper is to understand the meaning anxiety-prone individuals give to lo-fi music and how it helps them cope. The analysis method consisted in 11 anonymous interviews with different individuals. When analysing the results, the following themes were found: *neutral*, *lo-fi helps calm down nerves, helps them get into the flow* and *it elicits positive feelings*. These themes were focused in order to answer the main RQ.

This chapter is organised according to the themes mentioned above, fused with other genres analysed side by side. These trends have great implications for the current research. Other categories were found during the analysis, such as 'other genres', 'listening patterns' or 'lo-fi not helpful for anxiety'. These themes were integrated with the rest of the results discussed below, as questions about other genres, or their listening habits were posed for a clear comparison.

First listening patterns will be discussed and then the study will delve further into the larger themes. Said themes seem to be interconnected when analysing the results, in relation to productivity, neutrality and emotion regulation. Due to this connection, correlations were made. However, the main themes are discussed separate and in a logical manner: lo-fi is neutral and because of this the genre calms listeners down, leading to higher levels of productivity thus evoking happy feelings.

4.1. Listening patterns

Overall, the majority of respondents play an instrument and/or sing, and two produce their own lo-fi songs. As observed in Table 1, two individuals studied music for their bachelor's degrees and expressed their relationship with music in more detail and with much more extensive vocabulary while analysing lo-fi. In addition, those that sang also expressed a more in-depth relation with music and were more aware of its effect on their attitudes, behaviours and/or body.

This finding provides a link to a previously mentioned theory by Perkins and Williamon (2014), in which practising music is reported as a means to wellbeing. Even though the participants that sang had the vocabulary, their mental health was no different than those who

did not sing. What is more, the participants reported going to therapy and being officially diagnosed with mental illnesses. Additionally, health musicking can be referenced here to confirm that active participation has observable positive effects on our mental health (Balsnes, 2014). It implies the individuals partaking in therapy, were able to express themselves better in relation to music.

Every respondent stated that they listen to lo-fi passively, compared to other genres that they listen to more actively. Cross, Flores, Butterfield, Blackman and Lee (2012) studied the effects of active versus passive music listening. It was found that active listening alleviated signs of depression in older adults. Thus, we return to lo-fi listening and the found passive pattern as related to anxiety-prone individuals. One can argue that the interviewees do not use lo-fi for coping because they are passive listeners. In addition, three of the interviewees mentioned that they do not actively look for lo-fi in times of stress.

The majority of participants said they create playlists based on moods, but only one made lo-fi playlists, while the others either used the playlists already available on YouTube and/or Spotify. In addition, only two participants expressed that they create a setting or have a routine when listening to lo-fi, which usually consists of cleaning the desk or making sure to have food/drink before starting work. When asked, the other interviewees stated that there was no routine to listening to other genres of music. However, upon further analysis, a pattern was found in that they tend to actively listen to other genres when in a better mood or a positive mind-set.

Additionally, the participants were divided when asked about their listening patterns during the COVID-19 crisis. While some said they listen to lo-fi more, others answered that nothing changed in their listening habits. A few actually explained that during the pandemic their lo-fi listening dropped, along with their music listening in general, because they were focusing on other hobbies. Some scholars called it 'computer overload', which has been reported to be rising during the COVID-19 crisis (Islam, Laato, Talukder, Sutinen, 2020). Thus, we can account a trend of electronic fatigue due to isolation and internet overuse. Interviewee 5 even mentioned he is experiencing 'computer overload' during this pandemic.

On the other hand, when asked about different genres, all interviewees explained they listen to multiple genres. Their repertoire was found to be quite extensive and mixed with genres of opposite natures. Nevertheless, in comparison to lo-fi, other genres were observed to have antagonistic features. The most common genres listed were pop music, alternative, classical and hip-hop.

In terms of duration of listening to other genres, respondents disclosed that they had been listening to other genres for a longer time. In some cases, they mentioned listening to a genre for more than 10 years, which is much longer than the time they had been listening to lo-fi. Their listening to other genres was linked to feelings of familiarity, and lo-fi represented a fairly new style for them.

While their listening styles were found to be quite contrasting with other genres, the active versus passive listening patterns are compelling. It illustrates they use the genre for background noise and perceive lo-fi as an impartial genre. Thus, this indifferent aspect will be further presented.

4.2. Neutral

4.2.1. Lo-fi

The first common pattern or theme that arose during the findings was the language used to describe lo-fi. Almost every interviewee portrayed lo-fi in a neutral light. When asked how they would describe the music, they explained that it was ambiguous, versatile, empty and flexible. Other codes include: 'diverse' (interviewee 1, 2), 'immersive' (interviewee 7) and 'non-cultural sound' (interviewee 5).

Moreover, all of the participants labelled lo-fi as background music, something to fill in the silence while doing other activities:

I usually use it for work, but I've caught myself like just leaving it on because it's really nice to listen to instead of (...) Being in the silence or trying to listen to other things that I might get either way-distracted and not pay attention to (...) keep on listening so I can just transition from a work setting to, for example, cooking or even walking around, and

it really let's say stabilizes my mood, so I don't feel like, yeah like a change in pace (Interviewee 9).

[Lo-fi is] Easy background music that isn't. Overly present. And not, not to say that it's boring because I don't think it is, but it just I don't think it dominates spaces or listening experience, so I think it is something that probably is more versatile to put into different spaces (Interviewee 7)

These results demonstrates that they tend to listen to lo-fi passively, using a technique of indifferent listening. This is similar to Kassabian (2001), where this type of use is characterised by an industrial, urban setting, conducted by multitasking behaviours. In this manner, we can observe that the meaning the participants give to lo-fi is one of absentminded audit, hence producing a neutral feeling. These findings connect to the listening patters found in the section above, and further demonstrate that lo-fi has an impartial aspect.

Another participant noted that she enjoys the repetitive melodies of lo-fi and that it does not stand out:

I like the generally repetitive nature of the rhythms and the musical structures, so I think. The point of difference to. Other genres of music that have very strict structures (…) I like the lo-fi doesn't necessarily follow that same strict structure, so I think it does. Allow itself to be a bit more immersive because it's not so rigid (Interviewee 7).

Other interviewees expressed their feelings of appreciation for the genre and its easy nature of sound. Interviewee 5 stated that lo-fi is smooth and easy, and perceives it as quite harmless. One interviewee explained that:

It's just always the same or very similar and that like that's good that's a very constant sound in the back. And the lyrics; it's never sung really loudly it's just always very calming. So it doesn't really get in the way of your thoughts and your work (…) And with lo-fi I don't really have that problem because it's just really, really chill. You're just focused completely on something else (Interviewee 11).

What is more, Interviewee 4 described lo-fi as non-cultural music, worldly music that no one country can claim. He called lo-fi an ambiguous genre, which everyone can relate to. This is revealed in Truax (2008) and Harper (2014) and their theories of internet music as a mixture of multiple genres.

Even though interviewees had largely neutral attitudes towards lo-fi, their perception was negative in certain situations. For example, some participants expressed how they sometimes stop listening to lo-fi because it loses its value. Alternatively, some stated that lo-fi is associated with certain stressful memories from the past, so when they listen to the genre now, the feelings of anxiety come back. In this fashion, the genre can be triggering to anxiety-prone individuals, which can lead to ceasing to listen to lo-fi altogether. This result provides a link to Miranda, et.al (2010) showing lo-fi as harmful to our mental health.

Interviewee 3 revealed that while listening to lo-fi in the background, if she can recognise one song while working, they will get distracted. Thus, the music can lose its purpose and distract from the task at hand; its neutral effect will be erased and the genre is transformed by the audience's listening method. When used passively, lo-fi fulfils its ambient purpose, but when listened to actively, emotional responses occur and the listener loses concentration.

4.2.2. Other genres

Generally, lo-fi was found to evoke neutral attitudes. In contrast, a majority of the interviewees mentioned that they enjoy the melodies of different genres, when asked why it is attractive to them. Usually, other genres evoked larger emotional responses than lo-fi, as they focused on the message and the associated feelings. A majority characterised other genres as emotional, romantic, or sad, rather than neutral.

Studies have found that our brains release dopamine (the hormone that makes us feel pleasure) during anticipation and peak positive feelings while listening to music (Salimpoor, Benovoy, Larcher, Dagher, Zatorre, 2011). We can observe from our findings that other genres are perceived as intense, suggesting that dopamine is increased in listeners brain while playing other music. As a song is more profound, the more chemical hormones are released, creating

an euphoric state. However, this was not found in their attitudes towards lo-fi, drawing a line between the music.

In comparison with other genres, the terms used to describe lo-fi were in opposition where positive emotions were described, mainly 'happiness', 'heartfelt', 'dramatic', 'inspiring' and 'romantic'. Specifically, different interviewees called other genres 'heartfelt', regardless of the type of genre. In this case, the participants that used neutral words to describe lo-fi were usually the ones that mentioned using lo-fi as a tool for studying and nothing more.

The majority of interviewees compared lo-fi to other genres, and stated that pop or hip-hop are used for non-cognitive activities. Indeed, music that contains lyrics has been proven to be distracting compared to instrumental music (Salame & Baddeley, 1989; Avila, Furnham & McClelland, 2011). Furthermore, popular music, such as pop, has been found to interfere with our cognition (Anderson & Fuller, 2010). This demonstrates that lo-fi is non-intrusive for activities that require more focus. Thus, we can observe that participants actively listen more to other genres than to lo-fi.

Lo-fi evoked in its fans neutral feelings, and other genres did the opposite. We can detect an ambiguity in the respondents understanding of the genre. While other genres were passionate and heightened, lo-fi was easy and neutral. Indeed, it is found to be very different to other music, and is interpreted as such. Nonetheless, it can achieve gratifying results due to its relaxing effect on individuals.

4.3. <u>Lo-fi helps listeners calm down</u>

4.3.1. Lo-fi

Nine out of 11 participants expressed that lo-fi is very helpful for anxiety because it calms them down. Half of them were very happy with lo-fi due to these beneficial effects, and they agreed the genre regulates their emotions. Many interviewees called it soothing, as it helps them with overthinking, stress and anxiety by supporting them in focusing on the task at hand, which was the cause of said anxiety. Words that responders used included 'ground oneself' (interviewee 4), 'ease out physical pain' (interviewee 8), 'regulate emotions'

(interviewee 7, 9), 'create a calm setting' (interviewee 2) and 'reduce the intensity of negative feelings' (interviewee 4, 6).

Furthermore, lo-fi was found to ease physical pain, such as tense muscles and dull headaches, for five of the respondents. Nevertheless, lo-fi did not make said pain go away but took their minds off of the discomfort for the moment:

> What will happen with the lo-fi music, it would ease it out a bit, so I would have maybe the chest pain was still there, but I would feel it less or paid less attention to it and also like the headaches, it would be more less like. In the front of, of like what was going on, and then I could focus more on the reading, etc (Interviewee 8).

Previous studies have found that music can have a healing effect on anxiety, depression and insomnia (Solli, Rolvsjord & Borg, 2013). These findings may support such arguments, since responders argued that lo-fi eases physical pain caused by anxiety, thus making the listeners' discomfort disappear. Music was also found to reduce anxiety and physical pain in medical trials after just one sitting (Wong, et.al, 2001; Horne-Thompson & Grocke, 2008). As is clear, there are positive advantages to lo-fi listeners on their emotional and physical health.

Moving on, five of the participants were officially diagnosed with stress, resulting in anxiety. Two of them were also diagnosed with ADHD, and another with PTSD, an eating disorder and insomnia. Four of them have prescriptions for anti-anxiety and anti-stress medication, and we must therefore take into account the medication's effect on the individuals when talking about the effect of lo-fi. Two interviewees mentioned that lo-fi helps the medication take effect because it regulates their emotions better. In addition, two interviewees who suffered from ADHD mentioned that this is the only music that helps them concentrate better while studying, even for a short period of time, while off their medication: 'It helps with my anxiety. So the music calms me a little bit, even if I'm freaking out inside like two seconds before. It just helps me with my anxiety, with the stress I'm dealing with' (Interviewee 10) and

> Anxiety or depression, I really struggle with these big emotional responses (…) and sometimes that's even a source of anxiety that I get anxious about maybe feeling

depressed. (…) I do think that lo-fi does help to just to cut some of the highs of that intensity of emotion (Interviewee 7).

Due to the pandemic, people answered that they have been quarantining and that while in isolation, some would fill that silence with all types of music, not just lo-fi. Specifically, they use lo-fi when reading, working or focusing on other activities as a passive listening experience. This can be linked to the three listening concepts of Miranda and Claes (2009): emotion-oriented, avoidance and problem-oriented. Applying this to the interviewees' responses, the findings show lo-fi is being used as a mix between venting negative emotions or avoidance and escapism or problem-oriented. Nonetheless, very few participants mentioned using music as a coping mechanism. They would usually try to keep busy with other activities, such as hobbies or sleeping.

On the other hand, some found lo-fi reassuring and comforting during dark times. She explained that while struggling with self-esteem, and depressive feelings, the interviewee tried different techniques to improve her moods. Thus, whenever she was feeling down, lo-fi music has been of great help:

I try not to like (…) hurt myself when it comes to like negative thoughts and stuff. Sometimes I do feel like very lonely, especially when I'm home alone that's why like I said, I mentioned earlier, like I need to have some music in the background and that's when lo-fi really helps [with anxiety] (Interviewee 1).

A majority of the interviewees said that they are most anxious at night, specifically before going to bed or while lying in bed, as their mind goes over a sort of mental checklist of tasks and/or remembers different uncomfortable scenarios from the past. One struggled with insomnia because of past trauma, leading to high levels of anxiety. When asked, however, none turned to music for calming their nerves but instead had other coping techniques for that specific situation. Surprisingly, in contrast to other studies (Solli, et. al, 2013; Recours, et.al, 2009), lo-fi is not being used directly to calm down but rather as a tool for the listener to get into a better mind-set. Fighting against negative feelings, lo-fi steadies the listeners in times of great stress.

On the other hand, only one responder mentioned that they do not use lo-fi anymore because it is connected to a stressful period of time. Explaining that she used to listen to lo-fi while studying, after years of therapy, the interviewee has no need for the genre now. She does not desire to remember all those past negative feelings, and thus they refuse to listen to it anymore: 'I think it's so interconnected to that moment of studying (…) it's so much connected to that moment and that period so that you know, sometimes it's also gets like a reverse result' (Interviewee 8). This demonstrates that lo-fi is not for everybody when it comes to alleviating anxiety altogether.

4.3.2. Other genres

By contrast, a majority of participants mentioned that they do not use other genres of music to cope with anxiety, as they are usually in a better place mentally when listening to it. This demonstrates a large difference between lo-fi and other genres, namely that lo-fi is primarily used during studying/working or anxious situations, and other genres are primarily used during uplifting periods. Hence, other genres are not used to calm down as is lo-fi, but are usually played because the participants are already calm.

Despite the mentioned uses of audiences above, results also indicated that the interviewees listen to other genres during physical activities. The majority of respondents explain that other genres help motivate their workouts. Another difference in the genres as one has a calming effect, while the other invigorates them.

Moreover, several respondents mentioned they were introduced to the genre during a dark time in their lives in which they were experiencing vast amounts of stress and anxiety, and/or had trouble with school. This contrasts to other genres, which interviewees stated they had listened to for a long time, sometimes since childhood. It exemplifies a comfort in familiar music, an attribute quite similar to lo-fi and its soothing characteristics mentioned above.

Some participants mentioned that they try not to listen to music leading up to the evening, as it may over-energise them and make falling asleep difficult. In fact, 10 of the interviewees stated that they withdraw from listening to lo-fi music or other genres during

evenings, as their anxiety levels were at their peak. Rather, three of them use meditation music or yoga and breathing techniques in the evenings to temper the nerves.

Comparing the results from this section, lo-fi music manages big emotions, by relaxing anxious nerves. The findings indicate calmer attitudes after listening to the genre. In opposition, other genres report normal attitudes, used only when level-headed. Important to point out is the comforting similarity between other genres and lo-fi, as a first resemblance between the genres. While the listeners expressed their feelings towards lo-fi, their working habits were considered.

4.4. Helps get them into the flow

4.4.1. Lo-fi

This theme relates to the concept of 'flow', described by Richard Shusterman (2006). It is defined as a separate experience where individuals enter into a trance by enjoying the activity at hand, focusing solely on it and creating a routine or 'a flow'. Flow is a distinctive experience first developed in the art sector. Nevertheless, this concept has been transferred to all disciplines, and can be implemented to a never-ending number of activities. The flow state can be applied to lo-fi and its use for better productivity. Lo-fi slows down the mind of all the interviewees when they use it as a tool for working, studying or background noise for other activities.

The codes found for this theme were extensive, as interviewees described lo-fi in various ways: 'brain shut down' (interviewee 1 and 6), 'accompanying any activity' (interviewee 7), 'constant' (interviewee 5, 6 and 11), 'focus' (all interviewees), 'helps constant working' (interviewee 11) and 'not demanding' (interviewee 7).

Some interviewees actually mentioned the term 'flow' and explained it clearly, connecting it to productivity. Moreover, the majority of the interviewees mentioned that lo-fi helps them maintain a constant work flow throughout the day, and it keeps them in the neutral state while working, thus making them more productive:

Helping me cope with the stress (…) I can't say that I get like overwhelming feelings when I listened lo-fi, but I think it just kind of helps amplify like the little bit of calm that I already have you know. Like it keeps me stay there throughout you know the time period that I'm listening to it (Interviewee 3).

This find can be related to Fox and Embry (1972), who studied the use of music for increased productivity. In other words, it was suggested that by reducing stress, the responders become more productive while listening to music. We can make a connection with the previous results related to anxiety. While they might become more productive, participants were able to decrease their stress: 'It makes me more productive, but (…) I can guess that it makes you more productive, because it helps me to regulate my emotion, something my pills are supposed to do, but a little help is never you know denied' (Interviewee 9).

Linking it to Boym (2002), lo-fi has similar tendencies of increasing productivity. Winston and Saywood (2019) theorise that the genre is a product of Post-Fordism capitalism. The audience has been raised from young to work harder with their emotions and they consume the genre accordingly. Similar to my thesis, Winston and Saywood (2019) observed frequent students in lo-fi YouTube live chats, tuning in whenever they had work to do. This displays lo-fi is used for working, hence the audience using it for increased potency.

In fact, music has been found to improve academic performance. Cabanac, Perlovsky, Cabanac and Cabanac (2013) have demonstrated that students taking music classes and/or are interested in music receive higher grades, helping and reducing stress towards school tests. Thus, they use music for productivity and higher academic success. This study has proven that lo-fi makes respondents more productive and further demonstrated the argument to be valid.

By entering flow, participants have been reported to experience a stress relief. It contains seven factors that help the brain regulate our emotions through: 1) an achievable challenge for the individual, 2) a total submersion into an enjoyable activity, 3) clear and strong goals, 4) a determined focus, 5) an awareness of control, 6) an inner freedom and 7) a rewarding activity (Cziksentmihalyi, 1990; Fritz & Avsec, 2007). This holistic state of being is exemplified in the interviewees' attitudes:

[lo-fi] prevents me from being distracted by other things, but it's there in not that I hear it while working on something. But in a good way, so not (…), I'm not as much paying attention to what actually is going on, unless I really dislike or like it. But if it's just like yeah this is nice, that I am able to do my work better (Interviewee 4).

The merging of activity into an enjoyable experience is highlighted in this result, as lo-fi becomes a door towards the state of flow. This approach towards lo-fi is shared by three other respondents. It demonstrates the power of the flow state, while in total concentration, enjoyment and activity-skill balance. Interviewee 6 elaborates that she enjoys 'music that makes me relax and focus, where I can kind of enter flow. And I think lo-fi has the power of doing that and I recon it's probably like a mix of cords and repetition'.

What is more, three of the participants mentioned that lo-fi helps language barriers, as the genre has little to no lyrics and it is not distracting from the task at hand, keeping them in the flow state. The interviewee explained that:

Well I'm Dutch and like the program I'm doing is in English and when I have, like most of the music I listen to is English. So it messes with my focus when I have to listen to something in English, while doing something in English (…) it also really helps me during studies to like really focus on what I'm reading or what I'm writing (Interviewee 4).

Drawing from the above-mentioned results, this further proves that lo-fi is nonintrusive because the music is purely instrumental, thus being a better tool for concentration (Salamé & Baddeley, 1989). Due to easy nature of lo-fi, individuals relax to the sound and all second language obstacles are removed. During this process, the flow is continuous as listeners become more efficient, and consistent in their working rate.

As already mentioned, two very anxious respondents said they had a routine before playing lo-fi, such as cleaning their work space, getting into the mind set to work or study and making sure they had food or water. Interviewee 8 mentioned that they only used it specifically for studying and not working, because it was more difficult to focus while studying than

working. It has been shown that routines stimulate flow and invoke a balanced working habit as well as great pleasure (Fritz & Avsec, 2007).

4.4.2. Other genres

For flow, the results found for other genres were completely opposite to those of lo-fi. It is important to mention here that all the respondents expressed that they never used other genres for working or to get into the flow state. It was found that other genres were too distracting, and they did not listen to other genres for productivity. Specifically, Interviewee 5 expressed that they use their hobbies to get into flow, and not music.

However, all of the findings indicate that flow can be achieved with other genres, as participants entered flow by listening to other genres while doing physical activity. Interviewees 2, 4 and 6 described passively listening to other genres while working out, alluding to automatic capacity listening for energy boost. They were playing other genres to achieve flow for stamina.

When asked about putting the genres side by side, the majority responded that other genres give them instant gratification, are fun and amplify their emotions, while lo-fi is stable, consistent and helps them get into the flow by stabilising their emotions and making them focus on the task at hand.

In comparison, two respondents spoke about other genres of music, such as dance genres, as music that one can party to, while lo-fi was described as working/flow and 'chill' music. One described lo-fi as undanceable because it is stagnant, one cannot 'jam to it' (Interviewee 10) or do other physical activities. Overall, other styles of music were seen as more dynamic and richer, and lo-fi was seen as idle and effective.

4.5. Elicits positive and nostalgic feelings

4.5.1. Lo-fi

Overall, the participants expressed how happy or nostalgic lo-fi makes them feel. This theme contains codes such as 'approachable' (interviewee 5), 'cheerful' (interviewee 4), 'comfortable' (interviewee 7 and 8), 'creative' (interviewee 9) and 'nostalgic' (interviewee 2,4,5

and 6). The perceptions of the respondents conjured warm attitudes towards the genre. For many, lo-fi represented serenity and familiarity and evoked feelings of comfort.

The majority of responders stated that lo-fi arouses nostalgic emotions and/or attitudes, mentioning memories that never occurred but were somehow remembered:

Nostalgic (...) That Nujabes guy has music I'm listening to and it literally brings back, like it makes me think about stuff I haven't even done. It makes me like, I can create memories, or something, because I haven't done this thing, but I kind of imagine me doing stuff. It's just super odd (…) you visualize something (…) like I visualize [a] certain memory I haven't experienced yet, or like a country I haven't been or like a certain environment, I want to visit (Interviewee 2).

This finding can be interpreted using Boym's (2002) theory of reflective nostalgia, which entails a simple imitation of an actual memory and not the real version of said memory. Lo-fi contributes to this and can be attributed to the love of time passing, an imagined past that we, as listeners, remember fondly. This demonstrates that the repetitive tones of the music can evoke nostalgic feelings.

Moreover, positive feelings were observed when analysing the answers of the interviewees:

Now since COVID, I'm trying to find new artists that make me feel a certain way because the way I listen to lo-fi is for it to make me feel a certain way. [I] find a certain song that makes me think about something or if it can link to something. And (…) can make my day better than finding a good song which I can listen to for the next couple of weeks without being boring, you know. The one song, even if it's two minutes I just felt very happy. It keeps me happy for a while (Interviewee 2).

The same interviewee explained that he produced lo-fi music, and when he released his music, the audience's response was overwhelming, touching and pleasant. He explained that he tries to insert as much personal emotion as possible into their songs, and the audience recognizes their efforts, and they feel validated. Inherently, we derive pleasure from music production (Janata, 2009). The lo-fi producer experiences positive feelings listening and

producing his music, thus adding more value to the genre. This is similar to Perkins and Williamon (2014), wherein music practising is a means of wellbeing.

What is more, active musical participation was found to increase the health of musicians (Aasgaard 2002). By creating and perceiving positive results, the self stabilises and anxiety decreases (DeNora, 2007). In fact, our sense of self is fuelled by music, and a big promoter of wellbeing (Finnegan, 2003). The fulfilment the producer feels is a by-product of active participation in music, thus creating self-satisfaction that aids in the fight against anxiety.

In contrast, some respondents explained that lo-fi creates a connection to certain moments from their lives and this can influence their behaviour. Using an example from their place of work, Interviewee 5 illustrated their experience of said connection by conjuring a metaphor of drug addiction and association. He revealed a new method of drug addiction and control. Basically, when the urge kicks in, therapists have found a way to counteract the desire by controlled behaviour. For example, whenever the body might ask for the drug, the individual can simply call their mother, so shame or worry are added to the equation and the drugs will be forgotten.

 He looks for the 'drug' or the controlled behaviour that brings him pleasure. Hence, the respondent explained that lo-fi is associated with a positive time in their past life and would play the genre just to bring back that behaviour or those feelings:

> So the idea is to create the right behaviour the environment where someone is in.
> There's a lot of connection with it and, and I think we are in an area where it's easy to
> go to a place that is not healthy for you. And, and for me, I look to places that that are
> healthy for me and these places are not only physical places as used to be like the
> library, but these places, can also be a podcast that gives me (…) That brings me to that
> healthy place that gets to behaviour that I want to have (Interviewee 5).

One interviewee mentioned that the ambience surrounding lo-fi makes the music more relatable and approachable. Additionally, the chat section is perceived by interviewee 2 and 11 as enjoyable and always filled with positive messages. They mentioned that it makes them feel supported because they do not feel alone while working:

I really like the girl, and I like that they have the different videos for different times of the day, so if you're going to like study at 2am there's like a tree and video. It's one hour long is just the girl sitting at night and I don't know, that makes you feel like I have some (…) company for this study time so, not just in music but there's a whole vibe to it (Interviewee 11).

Other respondents described lo-fi as very personal. Two listeners attached personal meanings to the genre and explained that it allows each listener to create their own story; the meaning of lo-fi is up for interpretation by each individual. This alludes to the fact that music does not represent the audience but the listeners create their self-identity through continuous listening sessions. The self is a mobile process, and music is the key to that process (Frith, 1996). Music can contribute to the self by interfering with our lives and makes us move along to it (Janata, 2009).

Interviewee 3 mentioned that they used lo-fi as a stepping stone and built their playlists after discovering lo-fi. Basically, they found their musical identity with lo-fi and continued from there. DeNora (2000) analyses music as a tool to be used in order to find one's identity. We can see these findings as a positive effect of lo-fi music, and it can be used to create new theories of identity in relation to music.

4.5.2. Other genres

The feelings evoked by other genres were found to be mixed. Different responses from the interviewees showed that other genres can elicit positive or negative feelings, depending on the individual and their mood. For example, Interviewee 1 argued that classical music is sad and intense, whereas Interviewee 6 characterised baroque music (a style of the classical branch) as romantic and happy.

Interviewee 2 perceived hip-hop as aggressive, making him feel active, and focused on the messages of the lyrics. On the other hand, Interviewee 9 found Spanish hip-hop, or trap songs, toxic and vulgar but catchy. Thus, the individual gives the context to the song, exemplifying the self-identity (Frith, 1996) of the listener and influencing the perception of the genre.

Interviewee 10 stated that they listen to pop music to escape reality and to relate to the singer:

That's why I'm listening. I'm always listening to music because it's like kind of escape from reality, like of course (…) you have to live in the space (…) You're like in this world. And of course in this reality, but sometimes is that is like just too much and just want to go outside or think about something else, I think that music helps with that, like they show you (…) different scenarios, they put you on different situations that you can just picture yourself in (Interviewee 10).

This demonstrates previously discussed theories on audience use (Katz et.al, 1974; Belcher & Haridakis, 2013; Miranda & Claes, 2009), as escapism is found in all of the motivations for music. Essentially, listeners feel the need to evade reality in order to avoid problems and discard feelings of anxiety. The respondent disclosed that other genres help her creatively, while writing short stories as a hobby.

One commonality is clear: other genres evoked heightened feelings for the participants and gave them instant gratification. Five participants characterized other genres as emotional, while lo-fi was perceived as calm and happy but stable. Hence lo-fi creates very different responses, and other genres are not as consistent in the responses evoked.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis is to understand the meaning anxious individuals give to lo-fi music, how they use the genre and how it helps them with anxiety. To recall the research question, this paper answered the following inquiry: How do anxiety-prone individuals give meaning to lo-fi music? Three sub questions were also addressed: 1) How do anxious individuals use lo-fi music? 2) In what ways does lo-fi music help with anxiety? and, 3) In what ways do listeners value lo-fi music in comparison to other genres?

It is with confidence to say this study found answers to said questions. First, we can observe that lo-fi does help anxiety-prone individuals because they find the genre ambiguous. They use it as a tool to calm down by keeping their emotions constant. Lo-fi also helps anxious listeners because it encourages focus, thus getting putting listeners into a flow state. By doing this, it allows listeners to face the problems they were anxious about and handle them with a calm mind. The genre also elicits positive feelings and nostalgia that induce a beneficial state of wellbeing.

It is clear that the participants most often use lo-fi for productivity and rarely use it for coping with anxiety. The genre is more of a method of managing stress for anxious individuals than a cure. Interestingly, lo-fi does help with anxiety despite the fact that none of the respondents listen to it during anxious or stressful periods.

Various participants regard lo-fi as nostalgic and use it for feeling elevating. These practices reveal how important the genre is to their everyday lives and show nostalgia as a gateway to wellbeing. They perceive lo-fi in a positive light; however, they do not feel happy while listening but rather supported and peaceful.

A view shared by all is that compared to other genres, lo-fi is neutral and can be perfect for background music as a white noise to fill the silence. Two participants found the genre did not help anxiety, but even they still used lo-fi for productivity with other activities. Thus, various individuals believe that lo-fi can influence their state of wellbeing.

Nevertheless, the interviewees gave lo-fi a positive meaning, in general believing that it makes them more productive. The analysis clearly shows other genres produce a different

effect and are given different values, depending on the listeners. Other genres are seen as intense and lo-fi as harmonious. Therefore, anxiety-prone individuals perceive lo-fi as neutral, nostalgic and helpful in relieving stress and anxiety. It makes them more productive because it calms them down, and other genres do not have the same effect.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, lo-fi remains unexamined in academic circles. These findings can further aid in developing a more extensive theory of lo-fi and bring forth new insights into music as a help for continuous anxiety. In the psychological field, music theory can be additionally improved, adding lo-fi to the therapeutic genres. Moreover, individuals can use the calming melody as a cure against procrastination, as it increases productivity.

Speaking from an academic perspective, these results can open doors for more detailed studies on nostalgic music and mental illness. As an extension of DeNora's (2007) framework of everyday listening behaviour, and looking into a new genre of music, the current thesis acts as a stepping stone towards a unified theory of music as treatment for anxiety. The new findings on lo-fi in relation to productivity can advance new studies into lo-fi subgenres to understand which can help the most with either anxiety or productivity.

We can learn from this study by implementing lo-fi in our daily routine whenever we feel we are not as active. As no respondent played lo-fi in times of heightening anxiety, society can try and to acquire and control that behaviour by turning to the genre in times of stress. We, as individuals, can learn to use lo-fi to relieve our anxiety. Psychopathologic persons can further use this study to better themselves mentally by listening to lo-fi or to other instrumental music. In order to understand oneself, one must come out of one's comfort zone and experiment with new things, and lo-fi can be a new addition in one's life.

Due to its nostalgic nature, lo-fi can reveal parts of our minds that we cannot yet comprehend. The findings on lo-fi and false memories remains unexplained from a psychological paradigm. Nonetheless, the meaning given was found to be constructive for the musical world. It is perceived as an identifier of the self and a pillar of wellbeing.

In the context of the present pandemic, people have become anxious from isolation and a lack of physical touch. The genre helped alleviate those negative emotional symptoms. Thus, individuals can use lo-fi whenever feeling depressed during the pandemic.

What is more, we can observe a rising trend of wellness and awareness of mental health in the span of the last two years (Castillo, 2021). Many of the respondents used meditation techniques and made conscious efforts to improve their mental state. This thesis can be beneficial for mental health industries, as apps or other programmes centred on lo-fi music could be developed. Lo-fi could also be incorporated with yoga or meditation mantras, as it was found to be very relaxing.

Limitations of this current study need to be discussed as well. The time deadline were constrictive, thus creating a shortened period for participant recruitment. This influenced the size of the current sample. In addition, the results, although comprehensive, were limited to the positive or neutral attitudes of the listeners. This in turn might cause the findings to become broad and personal. Furthermore, there were no age, gender or nationality limitations, hence further recommendation for other studies to explore those differences is needed. The recommendations arose from the results and from the previous literature. It was observed that insufficient studies have examined the therapeutic effects of music. Thus, an inclusive approach towards lo-fi music needs to be taken in order to understand all angels and shape an informed opinion on the genre. In addition, further a longitudinal research needs to be conducted into different genres within lo-fi and their specific effects on the audience, to understand its long-term effect.

As it is evident, internet/lo-fi music needs to be understood in a new way as technology keeps evolving rapidly, and individuals as well. New personal and relaxing music emerges every day, and in order to understand our society, we have to understand the meaning-making of its listeners.

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Appendix A – Topic List

Demographics ->

 1.Can you introduce yourself?

2. What do you do for a living? What is your background?

3.How old are you?

4. What are your hobbies? (Babbie, 2010).

5. What is your relationship with music in general? [Do you play any instruments or are you part

of any musical groups (choirs, orchestras, music therapy)? (Perkins and Williamon, 2014)

Lo-fi Music ->

6. Which playlist or subgenre do you listen to?

7. When do you listen to lo-fi music? (Winston & Saywood, 2019);

8. How long have you been listening to lo-fi?

9. What attracts you to the genre? Or Why do you listen to it? (DeNora & Ansdell, 2014);

10. Why do you think it is so popular? (Truax, 2008);

11. Tell me more about your relationship with the genre. How do you listen to lo-fi? (Follow-up:

Do you perhaps have a routine when you listen to the music? How do you listen to it? Do you

actively listen to it? (DeNora, 2013)(Kassabian, 2001).

12. I want to ask you to describe what you do when you listen to the genre and what do you

think about?

13. I also want to ask you to attribute an adjective to lo-fi music. (Hevner, 1936) Why that one?

Anxiety/Stress ->

14. Tell me more about your mental wellbeing.

15. Walk me through your everyday life in relation to music.

16. How would you describe your anxiety? (Keyes, 2005; Brown, O'Leary, & Barlow, 2001);

17. When do you feel most anxious?

18. What would be a coping mechanism for you? (Winston &Saywood, 2019; Boym, 2002)

18. During what time in your life were you introduced to the genre? (DeNora, 2013),

19. How do you use lo-fi to cope with stress, anxiety or hard times?

Meaning-making In relation to lo-fi music

20. How do you feel when you listen to it? Can you elaborate more on that? (Solli, Rolvsjord, &

Borg, 2013), How do you make sense of the music?

21. What emotion do you link to lo-fi? (Hevner, 1936).

- What other emotion do you feel when you listen to the genre? (Juslin, 2013)

22. What is your relationship with the genre now, during the Covid19 crisis? (Nemo, 2020).

Other genres of music ->

23. What other genre do you listen to?;

24. Can you explain to me why you listen to that genre?;

25. How do you feel when you hear it?

26. When do you listen to this genre?

27. Can you tell me about a song that you have been listening to on repeat recently? Why does

it attract you?

28. What is in your repertoire? Tell me what other kind of music you listen to.

29. How long have you been listening to it? Tell me more about your relationship with the

genre.

30. How do you listen to this genre? (Follow-up: Do you perhaps have a routine when you listen

to the music? Do you actively listen to it?(DeNora, 2013).

31. I want to ask you to describe what you do when you listen to the genre and what you think

about. (Follow-up: How do you use this genre to cope with everyday struggles?)

32. I also want to ask you to attribute an adjective to this music. Why that one? What emotion

do you link to this genre?

Comparison ->

33. When comparing 2 genres, how do you use lo-fi music and how do you use other music?

(Miranda & Claes, 2009)

34. What does it do for you? (Miranda & Claes, 2009) During which certain periods in your life

do you listen to one or to another genre? (Follow- up) What physical changes do you notice in

your body?

Closing -> Thank you so much for your help!

Appendix B - Overview of respondents

An overview of the anonymous respondents was also shown in Table 1. However, in this section a more extensive one resides.

Interviewee 1 - female, 18 years of age, a high school student, residing in Romania, nationality American-Romanian, does not sing, plays piano, and no official diagnosis

Interviewee 2 – male, 27 years, a Master student, residing in the Netherlands, Kurdish-Dutch, does not sing, plays the Kurdish guitar, also produces its own music, no official diagnosis

Interviewee 3- female, 26 years, software developer, residing in the US, Romanian, does not sing, does not play any instrument, no official diagnosis

Interviewee 4- female, 22 years, Master student, residing in the Netherlands, Dutch, does not sing, does not play nay instruments, no official diagnosis

Interviewee 5 – male, 42 years, e-health professional, residing in the Netherlands, Dutch, does not sing, plays the piano, guitar, produces its own music, no official diagnosis

Interviewee 6 – female, 28 years, Master student, residing in the Netherlands, French, sings and plays the piano and guitar, officially diagnosed with: PTSD, ADHD, Depression, Insomnia and Anxiety, is undergoing therapy and is currently on treatment

Interviewee 7 – female, 32 years, IT professional, residing in Australia, Australian, sings and plays guitar, official diagnosis depression and anxiety

Interviewee 8 – female, 37 years, social worker, residing in the Netherlands, Dutch, does not sing, does not play an instrument, officially diagnosed with severe depression and anxiety, has gone through therapy

Interviewee 9 – female, 25 years, Master student, residing in the Netherlands, Mexican, does sing, plays the guitar, officially diagnosed with depression and anxiety, is undergoing therapy and is under medicinal treatment

Interviewee 10 – female, 23, bachelor student, residing in the Netherlands, Mexican, does sing and plays guitar, officially diagnosed with ADHD, depression and anxiety, is undergoing therapy and is under medicinal treatment

Interviewee 11 – female, 25 years, Master student, residing in Brazil, Brazilian, does sing and play the guitar and ukulele, no official diagnosis

Appendix C - Code Tree

This section contains print screens from Atlas.ti with the visual relationship between the codes and the themes found.

First mind map — central node: "very personal"

- put emotion into the music
- music connected to a behaviour
- easily make a connection
- find yourself
- very personal
- connection to the different moments
- give the meaning you wanted
- frequencies that just resonate with you
- fitted my mood
- relatable
- used as a stepping stone
- helps create your own story

Second mind map — central node: "positive meaning"

- connected to a positive mindstate
- put emotion into the music
- music connected to a behaviour
- very stable
- warm
- aesthetically pleasing
- pretty
- calm
- supportive
- Happy
- comfortable
- enhance everyday experience
- fun
- detracts from negative feelings
- stimulating
- serenity
- colorful
- positive vibe
- mood booster
- miracle cure
- mellow
- cafe ambience
- approachable
- creative
- familiar
- pleasant
- connection to the different moments
- nostalgic
- easy
- never gets boring
- cheerful
- appealling
- ellicits positive feelings
- soft
- welcoming
- relaxing
- centered
- peaceful
- non-intrusive
- smooth

other genres

- og:chaotic and aggresive
- og:pasive listening
- og:other ativities
- og:relate to music
- og:amplify emotions
- og:hapiness
- og:spontaneous
- og:motivate
- og:evoking big emotions
- og:get out little frustrations
- og:focus on the message
- og:contemplative thoughts
- og: sad
- og:inspiring
- og:mental checklist
- og:background music
- og: heartfelt
- og:toxic
- og:emotional
- og: use it for coping
- og:dramatic
- og: bitter sweetness
- og:romantic
- og:no rutine
- og: supports you
- og:entertaining
- og:escapism
- og:energise
- og:don't use it as coping
- og:fun
- og:better mindset
- og:analyse the music
- og:active listening
- og:familiar
- og:more upbeat
- og:vulnerable
- og:daydreaming
- og:night rutine
- og:during physical activety

not useful for anxiety

- music loosing its purpose
- disassociate
- decreased since covid
- sad
- don' t use it as coping m
- not helpful for anxiety

neutral

- give the meaning you wanted
- the sound of the Internet
- entry points for new fans
- neutral
- immersive
- frequencies that just resonate with you
- music for anime
- diverse
- used as a stepping stone
- neutral state
- modern
- versatile
- ambiguous
- fitted my mood
- flexible
- ambient sound
- up for interpretation
- Non cultural sound
- really empty

helps with anxiety by calming

- influence your state of being
- use it for sleep
- listen more when stressed
- helps for language barriers
- coping tool
- medication
- reassuring
- positive community
- gives feelings of safety
- feelings elevation
- positive light
- alternating based on mood
- helps with overthinking
- place that I go to when i'm struggling
- rested
- listening for a few years
- introduced in a stresful time
- regulate emotions
- therapeutic
- ease out physical pain
- promote a more calm feeling
- reduces the intensity of negative feelings
- stress relief
- escapism
- breathing steadies
- helps with ADHD
- music as a coping mechanism
- ground oneself
- soothing
- unwind
- nice thingly sensation
- helping me cope with the stress
- make self care routine
- help with feelings of anxiety