

The Soundtrack of Our Lives (SOUL): Understanding the Experiences of Disabled Women¹ in Engineering Programs through Song Choice (WIP)

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Abstract— This research paper explores the intersectionality of disabled students in engineering education, with a novel focus on using music as a reflective tool during the research process. Drawing from intersectionality frameworks – which emphasize the compounded nature of identities such as race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, disability status, age, and geographical location – this study investigates the unique ways in which disabled students with multiple marginalized identities navigate through undergraduate engineering. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seventeen disabled undergraduate engineering students over the 2023-2024 school year. At the end of each interview, students were asked to select songs that represented their experiences in engineering as individuals with multiple marginalized identities. The analysis of their chosen songs and the lyrics' relevance to their personal narratives provided a deeper understanding of the intersections of sexism, ableism, and capitalism within their educational experiences. The full paper expands on how music served not only as a method for eliciting rich, qualitative data but also as a reflective tool for both interviewees and researchers.

Keywords— *Students with disabilities, women, reflective practice, reflection, qualitative*

I. INTRODUCTION

While the impacts of gender, race, and ethnicity have been heavily researched in the field of engineering education, these identities have typically been examined in isolation from one another [4]. Such an approach overlooks the critical interplay between identities. Intersectionality theory [5] invites the opportunity for a deepened understanding of individual experiences by examining the complexities of identity and oppression. It posits that individual identities, such as race, gender, class, and disability status, do not exist in isolation but intersect in ways that shape individuals' experiences of privilege and discrimination. In the field of engineering education, where diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have increasingly become focal points of study, applying an intersectional lens can reveal how multiple identities interact to affect students' educational trajectories and outcomes. Despite sustained growing interest in DEI research within this field, disability remains notably absent from such research [6-9]. Although higher education research has gradually begun to explore the experiences of disabled students on campus and acknowledge disability as a key component of social identity

and diversity, it has yet to fully examine how ableism intersects with other forms of oppression to affect these students' experiences [10]. Scholars advocate for a broader application of intersectionality in studying and supporting disabled individuals [11]. Our research aims to delve into the complex intersectional realities faced by disabled women within their engineering higher education programs.

Building on existing literature, this study seeks to fill a gap by focusing on disabled students who navigate their engineering education while also belonging to other marginalized groups. By exploring these intersections, the study aims to provide insights into the unique challenges and barriers that disabled students face, which are often overlooked when disability is not considered as part of the intersectional matrix.

A novel aspect of this research involves the use of music as a reflective tool during interviews with students. Interviewees were asked to identify songs that resonated with their personal journeys, providing rich, multi-layered contexts to their narratives. This approach not only facilitated a deeper engagement with the participants' lived experiences but also highlighted the potential of arts-based methodologies to uncover nuanced insights in educational research. This paper will discuss how integrating music as a reflective tool in the interview protocol enhanced the exploration of intersectional identities and posits future avenues for the integration of music in engineering education research. Through this research, we aim to address the following research question: How can music serve as a reflective tool to enhance understanding of the lived experiences of disabled students with multiple marginalized identities in engineering education?

II. BACKGROUND

A. The Experiences of Disabled Students in Engineering

Before attending college, disabled students often receive inadequate encouragement to explore potential postsecondary degree pathways [12]. Those who do enroll in higher education encounter numerous challenges, such as difficulties in accessing disability accommodations, balancing heavy course workloads, and managing mental health [13-15]. Existing support structures remain scant, forcing disabled

¹ Identity-first language (e.g., disabled student) is used in this paper to emphasize the identity and experiences of a collective group. Using person-first language (e.g., students with disabilities) can diminish disability as an integral part of one's identity [1-3].

students to overcome physical, cultural, and bureaucratic obstacles to access necessary resources [13, 16]. While adjusting to college is challenging for all students, disabled students face the additional burden of managing their accommodations alongside their academic coursework, presenting a unique set of challenges [17].

In the field of engineering, the challenges are compounded by the prevailing belief that "bodily normalcy" is indicative of intelligence, motivation, and success in the field [9]. This ableist viewpoint often leads to doubts about the professional capabilities of disabled students, dismissing their skills, abilities, and potential as engineers [18, 19]. In engineering, disabled students are less inclined to seek disability accommodations compared to their peers in other disciplines, often due to the stigma that associates accommodations with cheating [20-23]. This stigma exacerbates existing challenges, resulting in increased emotional labor during the accommodations request process, embarrassment about one's disability, and deterrence from pursuing engineering as a career [18, 24].

B. Use of Arts-Based Research (ABR) Methods in STEM Contexts

Arts-based research (ABR) methods have been effectively utilized across various STEM fields, particularly in the sciences, to foster deeper connections with student needs and interests [25, 26]. In engineering, these methods have largely been used in K-12 and pedagogical contexts, through shaping K-12 STEM educational policies and practices, influencing curriculum development and instructional strategies [27-31]. At the K-12 level, ABR has been pivotal in enhancing students' understanding of scientific concepts and fostering a greater connection to their educational journey [32, 33]. Additionally, ABR has found application in the exploration of ethical considerations within engineering, further demonstrating its versatility and impact [34].

III. METHODS

The findings shared in this paper are part of a larger project and data collection effort that focuses on the experiences of disabled engineering students more broadly. More thoroughly described methodological details can be found in [35, 36].

A. Participants, Recruitment, and Data Collection

The study included 17 disabled undergraduate students from two different U.S. institutions. Of this sample, 13 participants identified as women and 4 as non-binary. Additionally, 12 participants identified as white, 2 as Black, 2 as Asian, and 1 as Middle Eastern.

This study was conducted during the 2023-2024 academic year at two, large research-intensive (R1) universities with high engineering student enrollment (as noted in [37]). Participant recruitment was conducted through emails and flyers sent by each university's disability resource office and engineering department(s) to their undergraduate students. The recruitment materials outlined the study's eligibility criteria, which included being a currently enrolled engineering student at the university and identifying as a person with a disability or as being disabled. Recruitment materials also invited potential participants to discuss their disability-related experiences at their institution and explained the participation process. It also mentioned that all participants would receive

a \$40 gift card as compensation for their contribution to the study.

Data collection adhered to the required human subjects research protocols and received approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants began by completing a screening and demographic survey to confirm eligibility. Following this, eligible participants engaged in a roughly 60-minute semi-structured interview conducted via Zoom. Each interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed by a professional transcription service.

The interviews were carried out by the first author, who was a Ph.D. candidate during the time of the interviews. To build rapport during the interviews, the interviewer openly shared their own experiences of navigating disability within the engineering field, especially during moments of vulnerability in the interviews. The interview protocol consisted of eight main questions and additional probing questions tailored to delve deeper into the participants' experiences within their undergraduate engineering programs and how their various identities (e.g., disability, gender, race, ethnicity, and citizenship) influenced those experiences. Each interview started with the question, "What identities do you hold?" followed by questions about how each identity may have shaped their self-perception and experience within engineering contexts. Participants then led the discussion about their engineering experiences, contemplating the impact of their identities in this specific environment. The interview concluded by asking participants to choose a song or songs that were representative of their experiences in engineering as individuals holding multiple marginalized identities.

B. Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Transcripts were de-identified before analysis to ensure participant confidentiality. Once de-identified, the transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose [38] for coding and analysis. We conducted two rounds of coding using thematic analysis [39] with a critical lens. The initial round involved open coding to extract significant and recurring elements of disabled students' experiences in engineering. The subsequent round of coding utilized pattern coding to categorize these elements into sub-themes.

The team implemented various strategies to build trustworthiness and quality throughout the research process [40, 41]. We engaged in ongoing reflection to understand how our positionalities might influence the research. Regular meetings during the data analysis and writing phases allowed for the exchange of diverse perspectives, critical examination of our preliminary findings, and consensus building on our interpretations. Additionally, an external group of researchers audited our final interpretations to further validate the study's findings.

IV. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Table 1 includes the song choices of each participant. The lyrics of the song choices related to their lived experiences, as shared in their interviews, and provided a different vehicle for understanding their lived experiences related to sexism, ableism, and capitalism as they operate within engineering education. In this section, we provide brief explanations of each song and how it aided in a deepened understanding of the particular participant's lived experience.

TABLE I. PARTICIPANT SONG CHOICES

Song Title	Artist	Personal Resonance to Participant's Experiences
"Murder on the Dance Floor" [42]	Sophie Ellis-Bextor	This song represents this participant's continued fight to stay afloat in her academic environment. She knows that she must continue the "grind," despite knowing that continuing at this pace will end poorly.
"Imposter Syndrome" [43]	Sydney Gish	This song addresses feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, reflecting the participant's expressed internal conflict of never feeling "enough" despite tangible achievements.
"Hurricane" [44]	Kayne West, The Weeknd, & Lil Baby	The turbulent emotions and struggle for stability expressed in this song reflect the participant's feelings of being overwhelmed by the pressures and expectations of their academic environment and personal relationships. These feelings are compounded by their personal battles of feeling like they constantly need to "mask" while around their peers.
"Verbatim" [45]	Mother Mother	This song discusses themes of conformity and the pressure to fit into societal norms. For this participant, it reflects their expressed need to continuously alter parts of themselves to succeed in their academic and social spheres.
"Yellow is the Color of Her Eyes" [46]	Soccer Mommy	This song explores themes of longing, loss, and the impact of personal challenges over time. It reflects this participant's profound sense of isolation and grief as she loses parts of herself while navigating through a toxic, high-stress academic environment.
"Apocalypse" [47]	Cigarettes After Sex	This song's ethereal and melancholic tones represent this participant's sense of isolation and alienation as they navigate a hostile academic environment.
"Circus Maximus" [48]	Travis Scott, The Weeknd, Swae Lee	This song represents the participant's internalized chaos from feeling like they need to "put on a show" for others to conceal their disabled identity, navigating the performative aspect of trying to blend in or stand out as needed. As a result, they never feel truly recognized or understood by anyone.
"Art Deco" [49]	Lana Del Rey	This song's exploration of being misunderstood and seen as entertainment rather than a person resonates with this participant's feelings of constantly having to "perform" and as though they are only valued when they are at the dispense of others.
"The Man" [50]	Taylor Swift	This song explicitly addresses gender-based discrimination, reflecting the experiences of this participant confronting repeated instances of sexism in her largely male-dominated major.
"Infinitely Ordinary" [51]	The Wrecks	This song captures the mundanity of feeling ordinary amidst extraordinary circumstances, a feeling that this participant has learned to enjoy while navigating through frequent turbulence.
"The Archer" [52]	Taylor Swift	This song discusses vulnerability and resilience, reflecting this participant's defensive stance they feel that they must take to establish a place in their field amidst recurrent ableist experiences.
"The Anonymous Ones" [53]	Dear Evan Hansen	This song highlights the unseen struggles people carry, representing this participant's invisibilized barriers she carries as someone with non-apparent disabilities and pressure to appear unphased to limit other's potential burden.
"You Signed Up for This" [54]	Maisie Peters	This song reflects the participant's acceptance and acknowledgment of the challenges of their chosen path in engineering, despite the repeated systemic barriers they encounter.
"Goodnight Chicago" [55]	Rainbow Kitten Surprise	This song's themes of change and saying goodbye to a part of oneself symbolizes this participant's journey with personal growth by beginning to accept and own their disabled identity.
"Clean" [56]	Taylor Swift	Symbolizing renewal and recovery, this song represents this participant's liberation from

Song Title	Artist	Personal Resonance to Participant's Experiences
		past hardships and a newfound sense of clarity from persistence through significant challenges.
"Imagine" [57]	John Lennon	As an anthem for hope and unity, this song represents the participant's hopeful vision of a more inclusive and equitable future for the field of engineering.
"Choker" [58]	Twenty One Pilots	This song discusses vulnerability and the fear of failure, connecting to this participant's feelings of being constantly under the scrutiny of others and fear of being exposed as unfit or "not cut out for" for her chosen discipline.
"Bold" [59]	Ledger	This song emphasizes courage and standing out, resonating with this participant's internal conflict of longing to embrace their identities boldly and advocate for change within engineering, while simultaneously fearing the potential repercussions of showing up as authentically themselves.
"Eat Your Young" [60]	Hozier	This song criticizes the capitalist, consumerist, and militaristic structures that pervade modern society. For this participant, the song reflects their experiences of navigating in a discipline (engineering) conceptualized on inequitable power dynamics, while disabled.

V. AVENUES FOR FUTURE INTEGRATION OF MUSIC INTO ENGINEERING EDUCATION RESEARCH

The use of music as a reflective tool in this study has yielded profound insights into the intersectional experiences of disabled students in engineering education. By allowing participants to choose songs that resonate with their personal experiences, music has served as a powerful medium to express complex emotions and narratives that might otherwise be difficult to articulate. This practice not only enhances the depth of qualitative data but also provides a unique lens through which researchers can better understand the nuanced impacts of intersectionality on students.

Incorporating music into research publications can also build a stronger personal resonance with the readers. By integrating multimedia elements such as links to the songs referenced or audio snippets within the digital versions of research papers, readers can experience a more immersive understanding of the participants' emotional landscapes. This method can bridge the gap between traditional academic text and the emotive underpinnings of the students' narratives, making the research findings more accessible and impactful to broader audiences.

Music can play a crucial role in facilitating discussions around difficult or uncomfortable topics during interviews. Songs selected by participants can act as a starting point for conversations, providing a safe space to explore particularly sensitive or uncomfortable topics. Music can serve as an indirect way for participants to express feelings or experiences that they might find hard to discuss openly. Future studies might consider using music more strategically during interviews to help participants ease into the discussion of marginalizing experiences, thus enhancing the richness of the data collected while also respecting the emotional well-being of the participants.

Looking ahead, engineering education researchers could consider the structured integration of music into their methodologies not just as an auxiliary tool but as a central component of data collection and analysis. Training future researchers on the potential uses and benefits of music in

qualitative research could lead to more innovative approaches that enhance both the process and the outcomes of research in educational settings. By embracing the expressive power of music, the field of engineering education can advance towards more inclusive and holistic research practices that honor and reflect the complex identities of its diverse student body.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As we contemplate the future of research in engineering education, embracing arts-based methodologies offers a promising path forward. Training new researchers in these methods can inspire innovative research designs that illuminate a deeper understanding of experiences while supporting the emotional well-being of students. Such holistic approaches could significantly advance our understanding of the complex dynamics within educational settings and lead to more empathetic, responsive, and effective educational practices.

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