



# **Finding One's Voice: The Role of Music in the Formation and Expression of Self-Identity**

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Senior Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology  
with Honors in the Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences

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April 2023

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# Abstract

Self-identity formation and how we learn to express that identity to others is a lifelong process for so many people. My research explores the potential ways that the medium of music plays a role in the formation and expression of a self-identity. Through my qualitative data analysis from 12 interviews with college students who are self-defined as ‘music lovers,’ I argue that music does in fact play an integral role in the formation of this self-identity for some people. The ways in which that identity is expressed to others, whether it be physical manifestations of the music or the behaviors of the individual, can be centered around an us vs. them narrative, desire to find others like themselves, or aim to control the ways in which they are perceived through their music engagement, among other justifications. Additionally, I illustrate that individuals use music to mold a personal, almost autobiographical narrative of their own lives, weaving integral memories, people, and experiences together through their relation to music.

# Introduction

In Nielsen's (2015) quantitative study titled Music 360, 93% of the US population listens to music. On average, people spend more than 25 hours each week listening to their favorite jams (Nielsen 2015). As a medium that plays such an integral role in the lives of many, music can provide a pathway of self-actualization and identity refinement for people as individuals seek to mold their identity around the activities they engage with. The hobbies that people engross themselves in can range from something like rooting for a sports team, to writing the next great novella. In my research, I will be examining this subculture of self-defined "music lovers" and their reflective relationship with this identity. How might they come to understand their own identity as a serious music fan, and how might they construct this identity to be presented to others? Furthermore, what are the ways in which music might be utilized to compose a personal life narrative, linking together one's past experiences to gain better clarity on how their life has progressed? Identity formation and social connection with others are attributes of the person that remain a lifelong journey, and delving into the role that music can play in this process is crucial to improving our holistic understanding of human development.

There are many historical and contemporary sociological theories that pertain to identity formation, management of self, and the like. However, there is a distinct lack of empirical literature that analyzes specifically how music aids in this process. It is important to fill this literary gap because it provides a bridge between research pertaining to theories like impression management and identity formation with more contemporary reports exploring the important role of music in our society through a listeners' perspective. Additionally, with the growing prominence of technology in how people engage with music, via streaming for example, the discourse surrounding musical identity and the ability to draw a personal life narrative may have

drastically changed compared to just a few years ago. This fact implies that identity formation must have also changed, and it is important to examine how music now plays a role in identity formation given its widespread availability in the Internet age.

To answer these questions, I conducted a study through a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews. I chose to interview college students whose extracurricular activities highlighted their understanding of their own self-identity as a music lover. In these interviews I sought to examine the role that music plays in their identity formation, how they aim to express themselves to others, and how they might use music to draw this autobiographical narrative of their own lives.

### *Symbolic Interactionism*

George H. Mead is arguably one of the first and most prominent theorists in sociology. Mead was an early social constructivist who pioneered the school of thought that we have come to know as ‘symbolic interactionism.’ In his book *Mind, Self, and Society*, Mead explores how we as individuals are reflexive creatures that can be both the object and the subject of our own thinking and behaviors. Symbolic interactionism is defined by this reflexive nature of humanity. It can be illustrated in the context of our relationships with ourselves, others, and how we use our own interpretations and language of certain situations to help define them for us. For Mead, “symbolic naming is the basis for human society (Griffin, 2012). How we interpret ourselves in conversation with others can be closely related to how others would see us. The “control of the action of the individual” is a highly reflexive process that can “take place in the conduct of the individual himself if he can take the role of the other” (Mead, 1934). The way we interpret how others perceive us is by stepping into the others shoes and watching yourself from their perspective. The thinking we do in these circumstances is the “mental conversation we hold with

others.’ (Griffin, 2012). Within this mental conversation, we all are able to interpret, in our own language, “how they might see us and react to what we might do,” and this can further inform what we say and do (Griffin, 2012).

Sociologist Joel Charon (2004) further helps define symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism rests on the assumption that the “human being must be understood as a social person” (Charon, 2004). We as social creatures rely on interaction with others. The “activities that take place between actors” within a given conversation, rather than external societal factors, is what makes those interactions reflexive on our own self (Charon, 2004). The human is a “thinking being” that is engrossed in “conversing with ourselves” as we go about our days and interact with others (Charon, 2004). Similarly, Charon posits that humans also use this thinking to properly “define the situation they are in” (Charon, 2004). Definition of a circumstance or an interaction doesn't just happen randomly through external societal factors. We apply meaning to our own circumstances based on how we, whether knowingly or unknowingly, choose to interpret the interaction. In Charon's view, symbolic interactionism also has to do with how we as humans now respond to this interpretation of the interaction. The “cause of human action” is formulated within these moments of thinking during social interactions, not our past environments or experiences (Charon, 2004). Finally, symbolic interactionism states that human beings are “active beings in relation to their environment” (Charon, 2004). Mead and Charon's subsequent elaboration of symbolic interactionist theory highlights that individuals may be in a position to examine their own behavior through their understanding of themselves as an object that is being acted upon. There may be implications of music as a medium for deriving self-identity in how an ‘avid’ listener observes their own thoughts and behaviors, which I aim to explore in my research.

### *Dramaturgical Observation*

In his 1956 book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman presents another major area of sociological theory related to self identity and how we communicate with others. Layered in dramaturgical theory, Goffman's work illustrates how we as individuals and teams interact with one another through the analogy of theater and being in a play. He argues that we are all playing a sort of 'role' in one way or another, with particular emphasis on how we communicate with others. There is a dichotomy in behavior that people can either be sincere about the role they are playing, or very cynical. People who are sincere about playing their role truly believe that their own performance is reality. They become both the performer and the observer of their own show. On the other hand, those who are cynical about playing their role have a "lack of inward belief in one's role" and can recognize that it is merely a "mask" (Goffman, 1959). Goffman frames these performances under the pretext of 'fronts.' These fronts are the set of fixed objects in the 'setting' that define the situation for the audience. An actor "seldom finds that the front it is given is itself new" when they enter a new role, and subsequently a new front (Goffman, 1959). When an actor takes on a role that has already been established in time, they often are able to discover and utilize the fronts that have already been created for that particular performance. The settings associated with these fronts help people understand what is expected of their behavior in that given role.

Importantly, Goffman notes that behaviors can become suppressed by the actors when a behavior or a fact is illustrated that isn't in line with what the "idealized version" of the self that the performer is aiming to portray (Goffman, 1959). This includes any idea that might suggest the displayed role or performance is anything other than the actors' "only routine or at least their most essential one" (Goffman, 1959). Furthermore, "unmeant gestures" can cause the audience

to “see through the performance” (Goffman, 1959). This is in line with Goffman’s idea of ‘breaking character’ when one action is different from the originally projected archetype or role. Any behavior that is not adequately suppressed by the actor has the potential for others to see through the role that is trying to be illustrated and played. This often is disastrous for the actor. Interestingly enough, Goffman argues that the threshold for playing a certain role or character-type is different based on who or what the actor is trying to play. For example, claiming to be a law graduate can usually be backed up with some “formal ratification” that can help establish whether claiming this role is valid or invalid (Goffman, 1959). However, an actor playing the role of “a music lover” is a status where membership does not need to be formally proven. This further suggests that the consequences for misrepresenting a role that is less formal would be less stringent and disastrous, than compared to playing the role of a law graduate when you aren't one at all.

On a grander scale, Goffman highlights the innate performance that we as individuals put on for others on a near daily basis. In the context of self-described “avid music listeners,” this could be anything from presenting their own personal identity through their music tastes, or using the front of being an “avid” listener to illustrate how they want to appear to others. Goffman’s insights demonstrate that how we approach interacting with the people and places we come across in life is affected by this desire to present ourselves in congruence with our own perceived identity. As I aim to highlight, music is a powerful medium that individuals can use to mold this presentation of themselves in the context of their larger environment.

### *Impression Management*

Goffman also discusses theory related to the concepts of front region, the ‘backstage,’ and impression management. The ‘backstage’ is defined as where actors can drop the front and



“step out of character” (Goffman, 1959). The behaviors of the performance and the true behaviors of the actor completely contradict each other here. It is imperative for actors to have complete control over their backstage. The backstage exists regardless if an individual is cynical or sincere about their role. It is merely the place where the behavior associated with the role can be dropped. Individuals must keep the transition between front and back stage a secret from the audience. This process is commonly referred to as ‘impression management.’ Impression management is defined as the behavior that individuals can employ to influence others’ opinion of themselves. Goffman highlights that control of the backstage in tandem with keeping the front stage performance perfectly illustrated to the audience is an integral method for impression management. This is illustrated as a sort of “dramaturgical loyalty” (Goffman, 1959). The behaviors and language exhibited backstage are entirely different from that of the front stage. This allows the actor to have complete control of both fronts, if executed correctly.

### *Double Consciousness*

W.E.B. DuBois introduces the theory of double consciousness to help future define identity with oneself and others. Originally written in 1897 in his article *Strivings of the Negro People* for The Atlantic, DuBois comments on how one may interpret their own self through the eyes of another. DuBois's double consciousness is very similar to what Mead was suggesting with symbolic interactionism. You are only yourself in that you read how others respond to you. DuBois writes on this topic in the context of racial and class identities. He writes about the feelings of inadequacy and inferiority that he recognizes others see in him due to his race. The way that DuBois sees himself is one thing that can be completely different from someone else’s interpretation of him. Through the double consciousness lens, one is “measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (DuBois, 1897). DuBois

illustrates in real life terms how double consciousness and symbolic interactionism can manifest themselves by using the story of the “American Negro” as the backdrop for this theory. The double consciousness theory also touches on the power dynamics that can be seen as a result of putting oneself in the other's shoes, and then observing their own personhood. For DuBois, noticing this reflexivity about himself made him feel like he was inherently different from everyone else. That was how others saw him, and this conflicted with his identity simply as a human being living amongst everyone else (DuBois, 1897). This is related to Mead and Goffman in that in all of these theories, the self behaves as both a driver for exhibiting behavior with others, while also changing as a result of this behavior. What is important to remember about DuBois though in comparison with other theories centered around self-perception is that his ideas are based around the power structures in society, most notably surrounding race.

### *Social Construction of Self-Identity*

An emphasis on reflexivity and social construction have also permeated the conversation (Callero 2003). As previously mentioned, in the reflexive process of social interaction, the human body becomes seen as both a subject and an object that can therefore be acted upon (Callero 2003, Mead, 1934). We as humans are reflexive and regulatory agents on our own selves. This enables and constrains the perceptions, reflections, and actions of our own self and identity (Callero 2003). Consequently, understanding self-identity in relation to social construction helps provide a framework for how we perceive ourselves. This understanding also aids in how we may want others to perceive us in a way that reflexivity does not. The social construction of the self is defined as how the person privately sees themselves, as well as with the “meanings and understandings associated with the public self” (Callero 2003). It is the idea that how we define ourselves is constructed from our own narrative. We as the primary agents in

our own lives can – and do – use a sort of ‘storytelling’ for our lives. This creates a narrative that follows how we want to be perceived by other people and how we wish to view our own person (Callero 2003). Our purpose for this autobiographical self-narrative is to preserve some form of stable identity, and ground our understanding of the world in something that we have control over (Bruner, 1996).

The self-constructed narrative we create for ourselves can be established through just about anything, from our relationships to our jobs. As further research illustrates, even ‘nonhuman objects’ and forms of media aid in self-construction (Callero 2003). Knorr-Cetina (1997) expands on the modern-day “untying” of where we traditionally derive our identities from that has permeated in society. We are living in a time of “expansion of object-centered environments” in which we can “situate and stabilize selves” (Knorr-Cetina, 1997). These objects allow us, as the writers of our own story, to “define individual identity” on the same level that “communities and families” do (Knorr-Cetina 1997). There is a linkage between socially constructed self-narratives and the objects that people interact with on a daily basis. These objects help inform, sometimes even more so than family and communities, how that person sees themselves and wants others to see them. Altheide (2000) takes this one step further to highlight that these objects can be part of “media communities.” The technological nature of this adds an even further layer of depth to the ways that we can ground our personal narrative and self-identity. Mediums such as the television shows people like, whether they read the *New York Times* or watch Fox News, and what types of music they listen to and consider their own all play a role in the self-construction of an identity.

Leary and Tangney (2011) discuss this sort of narrative-making in the framing of ‘self-verification theory.’ Similarly to Goffman and Mead, this is defined as ensuring the public

perception of a self-view remains intact and in control. Having “stable self-views” and “coherence” in what we like gives us the ability to base our identity on personhood on that given entity. They illustrate that “just as being perceived in a self-congruent manner may bolster feelings of existential security and calm the waters of social interaction, being perceived in an incongruent manner may produce the epistemic and pragmatic equivalents of a tidal wave” (Leary & Tangney, 2011). These worlds that we create for ourselves to live and act in are threatened when others may not observe us as we want to appear. Due to this fact, people enter into communities themselves where they can receive this self-verification of who they are, and “confirm their self-views” (Leary and Tangney 2011). This research highlights the nature of self-identity when it appears under attack from how it normally understands itself. It has further implications for the ‘storytelling’ that we socially construct about ourselves, which I believe can be seen in nearly all people.

### *Reflexivity through Music*

Music is one of the most widespread and popular forms of media that we have access to in our contemporary society. In combination with sociological literature on social identity and personhood, music can be seen as an example of the ‘nonhuman object’ Callero (2003) describes as helping inform how people define themselves. Denora (1999) characterizes music as a “technology of the self.” It helps listeners “shift mood or energy level” based on certain situations as a part of the “care of self” (Denora 1999). For example, one of the reasons someone may choose to listen to a particular type of music is because it “portrays affect or lyrics that the listener can identify with in the moment” (Van Den Tol 2016). Thus, “music's 'effects' come from the ways in which individuals orient to it, “and how they interpret it. (Denora 1999). Music also finds a place in a person’s own “personal musical maps” for their life narrative (Denora 1999). In

line with other related literature, this suggests that people interpret music ‘effects’ in a way that is in line with how they perceive themselves and how they want others to see them. When people listen to sad or angry music because it enables them to feel less alone and more understood is an example of this (Van Den Tol 2016).

In *The importance of music to adolescents*, North et al. (2000) seek to understand the main functions of music as this ‘nonhuman object’ in the lives of younger people who are more likely to be influenced by social factors and external perceptions. They discovered two central results that illustrate the role of music as twofold: to “portray an ‘image’ to the outside world” and to “satisfy their emotional needs” (North et al. 2000). This highlights the increasingly important need of people to curate how they are perceived by others often drives much of our behaviors (Callero 2003). Larsen et al. (2009) further confirms this point. They view the consumption of music under the umbrella of “self-representation” (Larsen et al., 2009). This definition illustrates how people might try to align the meanings, character, or even the artist of a piece of music into the image of themselves that they present to others. There is strong evidence in existing literature that highlights the ability of music to “offer a route towards self-creation through fantasy” (Hesmondhalgh 2008). How we consume music might not always be about if we objectively like the way it sounds or how it makes us feel. As Larsen et al. (2009) suggests, it may be about external factors. An example of this can be seen in a study where participants report that properties of music like “its rhythms, gestures, harmonies, styles, and so on...” are used by the listener to represent where they “wish to go... emotionally [and] physically” (Denora 1999). The swing of a beat in reggae music, the loud bass drop on a house track, or the faint and somber harmonies of a folk song all become interpreted by the listener as something personal to their life. The music they listen to and share with the world becomes synonymous with how

people see themselves. Individuals aim to align others' perceptions of themselves with a certain type or style of music. This also suggests a link between music and the negative consequences of not being seen by others in congruence with how you express your own narrative and identity, as referenced by Leary and Tangney (2011).

Some of the existing literature on the personal 'storytelling nature' of music suggests a strong link between the music people choose to listen to and the memories of events and people that might be associated with it. Music acts as part of the "material and aesthetic environment" where "the past comes alive when certain music is heard" (Hesmondhalgh 2008, Denora 1999). The study done by Hesmondhalgh (2008) illustrates this link between music and a person's memory, especially in regards to relationships with others. In a series of interviews conducted by Hesmondhalgh (2008), remembering key people from their lives was one of the most paramount reasons individuals gave for listening to certain types or songs. For example, one respondent explained that they loved a certain song because it was a song their grandfather used to love, and they would listen to it together. The piece of music becomes an "artifact of memory and its constitution" (Hesmondhalgh 2008). By playing it again, it "provides a device for unfolding, for replaying, the temporal structure of that moment" (Hesmondhalgh 2008). This evidence has large implications for how music, memory, and the personal storytelling of music can intersect. People can root their identity and self narrative in these events that have had a major impact on them. The use of mediums like music allows the listener to come to understand the song, artist, or lyric as something personal to themselves and their life story. Schubert (2016) explores this through the 'reminiscence bump,' which is a 'psychological phenomenon that favors autobiographical recall of events that took place or were "encoded" within the second and third decade of life.' This

study further highlights the role that previous memories with music can have in informing the “autobiographical” narrative that an individual can form for themselves (Schubert 2016).

This was further illustrated by Knorr-Cetina (1997) and Altheide (2000) earlier, as the ‘media community’ that music offers to individuals can play a profound role in the development of an identity or personal narrative in one’s life. One notable way to illustrate this is through the examination of concerts in the lives of music fans. Cavicchi (2014) highlights the “sharing of selfhood” that patrons can have with the artist that they choose to see live. These “concert audiences” have “idealized a ‘bond of feeling’ with performers” (Cavicchi 2014). It is almost as if the audience at a concert feels a “uniquely charged connection” to the given performers “inner being,” and that they are one in the same identity (Cavicchi 2014). Concerts are a front, as Goffman (1959) would say, where individuals can define their role and identity alongside that of the artist they are watching. This results in the “convergence of a personal and collective experience” where “meanings and values” of being a ‘fan’ of an artist is clearly expressed (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2017).

## Methods

I draw upon data collected from college students in a private Catholic university in New England. The initial project focused on the college student demographic and the role that music plays in their lives, either through social connections with others or how they see themselves. I conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with young, college-aged people who considered themselves to be a part of various musical organizations across campus. In doing so, I assume that in this cohort of students, music as a part of one’s personal identity is much more prominent and important to them compared to the general public, and thus would be excellent

subjects to analyze the role that music can play in one's identity formation. The two student organizations where nearly all of my respondents were either a part of one or the other, were the Avid Listeners of Boston College (ALBC) and the Music Guild.

ALBC is a discussion-based music club that meets once a week Thursday nights and provides college students with the space and opportunity to come together and share songs/artists with one another, react to whatever the selected 'Album of the Week' is, and discuss their thoughts on different aspects of music. There are 190 members in the instant messaging chat for the club that remains fairly active, and around 25-30 people consistently attend the weekly meetings. The format of these meetings consists of a topic chosen by the e-board of the club and sent out to the organization's members on Tuesday, and then during the Thursday meeting students have the opportunity to share a song that they think fits well with that topic. The song is played in the room for about 1 minute and afterwards the students discuss what they thought about the song, before moving onto the next person. Examples of weekly topics are "play this song at my funeral," "summer drives," and "jumpscare," to name a few. The other student organization I draw interviewees from is the Music Guild on this campus. Unlike ALBC, the Music Guild focuses much more on giving students the space to physically perform the music that they like, as they host weekly open mic sessions every Wednesday. Generally, 10-12 artists and groups perform for around 10 minutes each gathering, with the artists often changing on a weekly basis. There are over 100 people on the email listserv for the Music Guild that gets informed about these meetings, and oftentimes the crowd is filled with other guild members who want to enjoy the music. These open mics are either outdoors near one of the dining halls, or inside a student lounge area depending on the weather. The Music Guild has access to all of the necessary tech equipment, such as microphones, amplifiers, and cables that players would need



to perform. I chose the source of participants on the basis of how relevant they were to my research questions. Cohorts of ‘musically minded’ students would provide the most in-depth and pertinent insights into my research questions surrounding music as a driver for identity development. Interviewing both people in ALBC and the Music Guild provides me with the unique opportunity to hear perspectives about music from both people that play a musical instrument themselves as well as people who simply love listening to music as a medium for entertainment. Due to these differing musical backgrounds within each respondent, I stratified by membership to either ALBC or the Music Guild. The sample consists of 7 people who consider themselves a part of ALBC and 5 people who consider themselves to be members of the Music Guild.

I completed interviews with 12 students in their junior and senior year between the ages of 20-22. Interviews were conducted both in-person on the campus as well as over the video chat service, Zoom. Interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of the respondent and completely transcribed. I used the software Otter.ai to aid in transcription of these interviews onto a digital and written format. Each interview lasted around 30 minutes and went from mid-November of 2022 to late February of 2023. The main population for this study are students who already place an emphasis on music throughout their daily lives, such as actively enjoying listening to, playing, or talking about music. I also placed an emphasis on speaking with older students in their junior and senior years rather than underclassmen in their freshman or sophomore years. I did this with the assumption that as an individual progresses through college and has more experience at school, their own identity becomes more rooted in this time in their life. Students in their freshman and potentially sophomore year may not have had ample time to anchor themselves into university life yet and may not have had the opportunity to develop a

musical anchoring with their college experience so far. On the other hand, juniors and seniors are much more likely to see their identity as a college student much more rigidly, and have had time and opportunity to create an adequate sense of self so far. This fact makes them an ideal group to interview on topics like the formation of a self-identity during college.

I recruited participants for my interviews through my pre-existing relationships with members of the e-boards of both ALBC and the Music Guild. I was given permission to speak in front of each club at their meetings and speak about my research, what I was hoping to achieve and analyze, and offer the opportunity to members of these groups to partake in the study. This, alongside general word-of-mouth within the organizations afterwards, is how I was able to recruit interviewees. This brings into question one possible limitation within my research. Given my own personal involvement within both ALBC and the Music Guild, albeit in a small capacity, many of the people I interviewed are students that I have some sort of pre-existing relationship with, with many of them simply being distant acquaintances, while a few were good friends. Because of this, it is important to recognize this positionality. Some interviewees may have presented a version of themselves that could be in line with how I already know them to act as, and thus could affect their responses to some interview questions.

In my approach to the interviews, I sought to hear students' stories on how music has shaped their perspective of themselves in relation to others, as well as the way in which music has been utilized to craft a personal identity and narrative, either based on specific people, events, or feelings. In considering the role that music plays in my own life and my own personal interest in the subject matter, I was able to create a tone within the interview setting that allowed for the respondents to feel at ease sharing personal experiences from their life. When I would share my own experiences with music as a form of personal storytelling or how I form my social

connections with others around music, many respondents would visibly smile and appear much more excited to share their own stories. In my data analysis, I cleaned up my transcriptions by relistening to the audio that Otter.ai recorded and reading through the text that the software registered, making the necessary changes where it misheard words or phrases. Next, I examined the major themes of self-identity, social connection, expression to others, and music as a personal narrative,, and noted which chunks of text in each interview related to which pattern. In doing this, I observed 2-3 patterns of behavior within each of these themes. The results from this coding were analyzed through my own qualitative interpretations of the data, as I recognized distinct patterns that emerged in my conversations with these students.

## Results

### The Molding of A Self-Identity

One of the most prominent themes that I saw in the qualitative data was how my interviewees would use music as a way of defining themselves. Music was a core part of their identity as a person, as expected due to their backgrounds in music related clubs and organizations. More notably and interestingly, this self-perception as it relates to music often leads to many of my interviewees coming to see themselves as distinctly separate from the rest of the general population in this, almost with a hint of elitism. Whether it be in how they appreciated art as a whole, or how their particular music tastes was a bit more ‘elevated’ compared to others, the large percentage of my interviewees expressed some level of this elitist discourse. On another note, the pattern of music as an expression of personality also came up in many of my responses, which lends to the idea of music as either a reactionary or informative medium for one’s personal identity. The music someone considers ‘their own’ may either be as a

result of their already defined personality, or due to its ability to mold and inform a personality into something entirely new.

### *The Music Itself*

The overwhelming majority of my respondents expressed in one way or another that they saw themselves as distinctly different from others, usually in a more positive way, based on their relationship with music. One particular interviewee I had, a Political Science student who was an active member of Avid Listeners of Boston College, or ALBC, noted that she was always “very very focused” on what she was listening to. Listening to music is rarely a background activity, and the type of music that she engages with separates her from the rest of the crowd. She remarks that when all of her friends would be listening to “general pop music,” she wasn’t, and she “always felt that it made me slightly see myself differently in a sense of how I interpret art and how I like to appreciate art.” She later emphasizes that it’s “not a passive activity,” and suggests that if someone isn’t as ‘into’ music as her, then “You don’t love music. You like music.”

Another student I spoke with, who largely expressed his love for playing the guitar and listening to Bruno Mars, acknowledges:

“I definitely am a little bit elitist in that... I’m not gonna judge but like if you’re listening to like I say, if you’re listening to like Halsey or like, the top 100 radio, I’m kind of like, like, you’re not that into [music].”

This rings very similar to my previous PoliSci student who highlighted the difference between who ‘like’ music and ‘love’ music. The Bruno Mars fan later remarks that when walking around

campus, “I have my air pods and the atmosphere has like some good ass music. I’m like, wow, these people are not experiencing what I’m experiencing right now.” This comment is interesting because it again helps us understand how one’s own sense of an elevated relationship with music helps them further draw a dividing line between those who engage with music more deeply, and those who might not.

A particularly enjoyable conversation I had through my interview process was with a girl who was self-described as “an old person at heart,” and has this identity through her love for Werther’s hard candies and classical music. Notably, when discussing her relationship with classical music and how often she listens to it, she states somewhat hesitantly that it makes her feel on a separate level from others, on a different type of “intellectual music level.” As she quickly blurts out “it’s absolutely terrible,” she goes on to say that “sometimes makes me think I can listen to music better” than others. I loved hearing her particular insights because throughout our whole conversation, she kept muttering to herself how terrible what she was saying sounded, and was very clearly annoyed at how she was thinking about these questions.

This comment is striking to the point about identity related to music because it bodes the question that do these self-described music ‘intellectuals’ shape their identity around how they might be perceived as such? Relating to Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism, our behavior as humans can be derived from reflexivity and the ‘stepping into others’ shoes’ to reexamine our own behaviors. Mead defines this reflexive role-taking as one understanding “the characteristic of the self as an object to itself” (Mead, 1934). As this particular student who is an old person at heart ‘converses with herself’ as Joel Charon would say, does this reflexive thinking of herself as the object of the conversation influence her later assertion that what she is saying is ‘terrible’ as she appears so ashamed of herself? What becomes of her identity as someone on an intellectual

music level, and even more so this inclination to see herself as someone mentally older than her peers, given how she begins to think of her own answering of my questions? I think it is fascinating to consider the implications of Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism within this context of music and identity. So many of the students I spoke with acknowledged this slight elitism in how they spoke about themselves, and applying Mead to their observations about themselves led to much more thrilling and exciting findings. These post-research questions were unexpected as I engaged with the data I collected, and should be explored further.

### *Expression Through Song*

The other notable pattern that I noticed in my data relating to self-identity saw many of my respondents expressing that their musical identity was simply an important mode of expression for themselves. The way that they engaged with music helped inform how they defined, and refined, their personality. I spent some time with a student from the Bay Area in California who was heavily engaged with house music. He is an active member and resident DJ of Province 44, a house and techno collective in Boston. Province 44 was established in 2018 by students at Northeastern, and has grown into a well-organized community of DJs passionate about performing house and techno music for the sake of the music itself. The student I interviewed spoke about the collective he was a part of with such passion, and it clearly plays a large role in his life and how he sees himself. When asked how he found this passion for house music, he noted that the music itself is a perfect medium for his own personality. "I like to experiment... I like to be uncomfortable..." he states:

"Music without words is kind of intimidating for a lot of people. It's something that people are not usually willing to, to give a shot. But I think my personality that way, like relates to the genre, and it's why I love it so much."

It is utterly fascinating that he is able to use house music as a mode of expression for his own personality. The commonalities between the ‘uncomfortableness’ of house music and his affinity for experimenting highlights the role that music can play in defining this self-perception.

### *Lyrics That Resonate*

On a similar note, the type of music that someone listens to can inform and refine how they see themselves on the basis of the lyrical content of the music, and what a particular artist might stand for. I interviewed an Environmental Geoscience student who is an active guitar player and described himself largely as anti-capitalist, and that some of the music he listens to reflects this. He spoke heavily about his “DIY God,” an artist named Jeff Rosenstock who makes pop punk and ska punk music, and whose subject matter in his songs bashes for-profit institutions, consumerism, and capitalist society as a whole. When asked how he might use Jeff Rosenstock’s music in self-perception, he acknowledged that “in an actualized version of myself,” however he quickly notes that he must still of course engage in capitalism and buy stuff. He even speaks about a particular song by Rosenstock, titled “Nikes (Alt),” where the singer acknowledges how he still finds himself buying new pairs of shoes online to fill a void inside of himself that capitalism has created, and the inherent irony in that behavior. The student loves this particular song, and says that he really relates to what the lyrics represent. This is an incredibly interesting piece of data because it is such a specific example of the larger theme of how listeners can refine and mold parts of their identity around the lyrical messaging of the music they enjoy.

### *Engaging with Personality Through Music*

Keeping in this theme of self-expression, another student I had the pleasure of spending time with was a young man from Naples, Florida. He sees himself as a “lifelong learner” and

someone who always wants to keep asking questions. He noted that in regards to the importance of music in his life:

“Music influences the way I see myself because I like listening to a variety of music. And I feel like that kind of represents one of the things I value the most about myself, which is my curiosity. Because I like learning about new people. I like learning about new places. I like learning about new things and I like listening to new music.”

His passion for all things ‘new’ allows this particular student to examine his curiosity within music listening as something representative of his larger identity. The active search for a new sound, new song, or new artist acts as much more than just a love for music. It represents within himself his own curious nature, and is a behavior that helps reinforce this notion he holds of himself as the ‘lifelong learner,’ always searching for a new thing. As Larsen et al. (2009) and Denora (1999) spoke about, people may use music as a form of “self-representation” and align the meanings of the music they listen to, or even the artists of the music, to form the image they have of themselves. As we see with this particularly curious individual, the anti-capitalist student, and the house DJ, the meanings of the music are all subject to these individual interpretations and are modes of expression for their image of self-perception.

## **Social Connection and Expressing to Others**

Another pattern that I coded for in my data analysis was how my interviewees saw music as it relates to social connection, and more interestingly their molding of themselves for others’ perceptions. Nearly all of my responses agreed that music is a great way to enhance social connection with others, but is not necessarily “the whole thing.” In delving a little deeper, I



found two separate patterns pertaining to how a particular musical persona is used, or not used, in order to play a particular role within this ‘front stage.’ The majority of my interviewees told stories of how the particular version of themselves that they would like to portray with music completely changes depending on who they are with and what the environmental context is. On the other hand, few of my other responses highlighted that for them, there was no distinct correlation between the type of music they choose to express themselves with and how they aim to be perceived by the audience. This marks an interesting dichotomy between cases where Goffman’s *Presentation of Self* is highly pertinent for some, and not even a thought for others.

### *All Together Now*

The most indisputable conclusion that nearly every single one of my interviewees agreed with was that music is a uniquely incredible way to enhance social connection with other people. The theme that music enhances connection was omnipotent in my conversations with my peers, with many of them explaining that when you can relate similar music tastes with someone there is simply another level of bonding that goes unspoken. It’s as if for some reason once people have shared interests in music, their relationship has already leaped beyond what it could have been beforehand. I spoke with a psychology student from northern Vermont who was very enthusiastic about this notion. She illustrated that:

“I think that when I meet people who like share that and like understand that and like have similar like, like music preferences, like I get immediately like a deeper level of connection with them regardless of how long I’ve known them”

It seems that for this student, who echoed what many of my other responses emphasized, this ‘deeper level of connection’ that one can achieve with someone on the pure basis of music is remarkable. Another student I chatted with, who described himself as a very “sing-songy guy” explained to me that he loves playing music in the car with his friends and everyone knows that tune, “then it’s just like, you know, you just feel so good because music is so fun to sing along to.” Here, this student is similarly describing an example where music is providing an avenue for a deeper sense of connection with other people. The idea of him and his buddies driving along the road singing classic car ride songs was clearly something that resonated with this student, and was rooted in the fact that he was able to enjoy the music that he loves in a social setting, thus bringing him and his friends closer together.

If we remember our Political Science student from before, she also took the time to explain how important a musical connection with someone else is. She indulged in the fact that while it’s “obviously never something that like breaks up a friendship,” there is still a clear delineation between friends you have that share your music taste, and those that don’t. She goes on to say that “when you have a friend that you like the same music there’s a very like deep connection there. I feel like that just kind of instantaneously comes when you like discover that you like the same music.” This is particularly interesting because it stays with the pattern that connection based on music seems to be inherently different for self-described music lovers compared to connections based on something else. However, this comment also brings into the limelight the acknowledgement that a shared interest in music can only go so far in the development of a relationship.

Her comment that a lack of musical similarity would never be something that “breaks up” a friendship opens the door to discuss another pattern I observed in my data, which was that

connection through music can be incredibly important, but isn't the "whole thing," as one student stated. I sat down with this particular student during his lunch break between practicing with his band, Photo Negative, where he plays guitar. Photo Negative is a band of BC students who have made a bit of a name for themselves on this campus and, as he was describing to me, plays a few local shows occasionally. When prompted about the role that music can play in social connection, he goes on remembering "meeting people hearing that they like the Avett brothers, which is one of my favorite bands. We're like, oh, like that's cool. Turns out we have nothing else in common. So like, I guess it can't just be music. It's just kind of part of it." In finding another student who happens to like your favorite band, this insight highlights that that commonality can only go so far, and suggests that there are other, more paramount characteristics than music for these self-described music lovers that defines who they consider themselves close to.

Another student echoed this sentiment in a very clear and concise manner. He is a sailor from the Chicago area, and clearly acknowledges that others would see him as very "alt" in terms of music style and tastes. He echoes what our PoliSci student and the Photo Negative guitar player say, highlighting that "if you find people who have the same music taste, and like can kind of like start sharing songs with that, that's a really fast way to develop bonds." However, he goes on to state that "if I don't happen to share the same music taste with anyone I wouldn't say that's necessarily detracting from any relationship, that's just not adding another layer." For these self-described music lovers, the 'layer' of musical commonality in a relationship is seen as something that can truly develop a relationship fast, and almost inherently desirable when seeking out new relationships. Nonetheless, this 'layer' still is not the sole driving factor when this student group meets new people. This is quite interesting as it suggests that the self-identity based around music that my respondents often derived their own

self-perception from may be detached from the types of communities and social circles that they are willing to find themselves in. As Knorr-Cetina (1997) explored, “object-centered environments” like one found within music ‘groups’ have been playing a larger and larger role in the way that one can “situate and stabilize” their own selves. However, it can still be observed through my analysis that the medium of music is one of many potential places where identity definition can take place.

### *Existing in the Frontstage*

Where my respondents really illustrated how they use music in social situations was when our conversation shifted to their understood perceptions of themselves by others. Impression management, or how one may engage in particular behaviors to influence others’ opinion of themselves, is at the root of this observation. The Bruno Mars loving guitar player from earlier spoke on how he might expect others to view him based on the type of music he plays, and what his tactics are for managing that:

“I think when I’m with like, my cousin who’s from California, who loves r&b. But you know, she’s super she’s from the bay. So like she’s super in r&b and like, like I portray that version of myself that’s more like free flowing like kinda like what defines like the Bay Area or something, you know, something like that through r&b or... with my friends, it’s a lot of acoustic stuff. Just because we like to play that music [with our instruments]. Or like Midwest emo, Yeah. Stuff like that.”

The notion that how you portray yourself is circumstantial and based on the surrounding context of your fixed setting, or “front” to use Goffman’s terminology, is fascinating. The people you are

with, what you are doing, and even the geographical location can inform how you might use music to portray different identities and versions of yourself. For this student in particular, anytime he is with his cousin from California, how he presents himself is defined by ‘free flowing’ vibes with a more R&B and chill persona. And when he is with his friends playing music together, he presents himself as someone who relates much more to the acoustic sound, and “Midwest Emo,” which is a genre of music that is traditionally associated with sadness, bittersweet nostalgia, and depression. This wide range from sunny and happy R&B to depressing and sad Midwest Emo also brings into the conversation something else that this student brought up: what defines having “good music taste?” A minute or so later into the interview, the student remarked that:

“I obviously want people to think that I have a good music taste... it's a big thing and it's very important, and especially with people who also have like a, I think I think on a first impression, you want to give the impression that you have a depth to the music that you enjoy.”

This is a very interesting comment right off the tail end of his previous statement because it suggests that the ability to have such a wide-ranging taste in music, and thus the capacity to express each of these through your personality at given times, suggests some sort of objective ‘mastery’ in the world of music. However, this could also mean that the student is simply acting, as Goffman suggests, based on a given front to make it appear to the audience that he or she has “good music taste.” Of course with his cousin from sunny California, he is going to want her to think he is fitting in and has the right personality for the setting, so he will define himself more as an R&B listener. And on the contrary, with his musical friends he wants to appear part of the

group and in line with what the “front” expects of him, so he’ll portray himself as a big Midwest Emo fan. Both of these music tastes can of course be true at the same time, but this nonetheless highlights how the role of others’ perception might mold how an actor uses music to portray themselves.

Another particularly interesting student fell in line with this pattern of impression management. An extremely extroverted and ‘excited-about-life’ individual, this student is a very avid music listener, and also highly engaged with the Campus Ministry office here at Boston College. She spoke at length about her love for Campus Ministry programs like Kairos, a weekend-long retreat filled with reflection and small group discussion, and APPA, a Spring Break service trip in the Appalachian region that highlights servant leadership and even more individual reflection. When prompted to discuss how others’ perception might influence the way she engages with music, she commented:

“I don’t know... I definitely think that being in like, a campus ministry space like Kairos or APPA, like leads me to, like not completely define myself through one genre of music but also like, listen more to like that kind of like a reflective sound outside of those spaces. Almost to be like, almost like to be a self fulfilling prophecy of like, okay, I’m part of an organization that has this vibe, let me live up to it”

This “self-fulfilling prophecy” that she feels she needs to complete by being a part of Campus Ministry provides great insights into how music taste and the expression of such taste can be shaped and molded based on the surrounding front. On this topic I can also speak on my own positionality. I myself have engaged with quite a few of the programs that Boston College’s

Campus Ministry office offers, including Kairos and APPA, and the reflective nature of these spaces does indeed encourage a particular ‘type’ of atmosphere. This particular student highlights this exact behavior in herself, indicating that when seeing herself as a representative of this office, she feels the need to model her music tastes to align with this community, that being slower, calmer songs that might provoke deep reflection in a small group setting. This can be linked to our previous interviewee who swings back and forth between R&B and Midwest Emo. In both cases, these students identify the environment that they find themselves in and aim to express themselves through their music in a very particular way: one that would seem to be the “correct” way given the setting.

Keeping with this pattern, another student I had the pleasure of sitting down with described a situation that we all have likely been in:

“I feel like in high school, I definitely would like fake know lyrics to songs like popular songs that I like it didn't actually I still am horrible with lyrics. Yeah. And even like a little bit today... So yeah, I don't know. I feel like sometimes too, I've pretended to enjoy music that I don't like depending on like the crowd that I'm with.”

Aside from the embarrassment that often comes when we get caught pretending to know song lyrics, this students’ insights further exemplify this idea that how we present ourselves in the “front stage” of Goffman’s dramaturgical play can be individually curated based on how we want to be perceived. Being another Political Student that describes herself yet again as an “avid” music listener, this respondent's fear of being seen as not knowing the words to a particular song in public leads to her mold her behavior in order to avoid this reality. In line with the general

pattern that I observed, she appears to be extremely aware of how she is presenting herself to others on the basis of how she engages with music. She even shared with me that a nightly routine for her is to play music while in the shower, and a question she always asks herself is “hmmm how do I want to portray myself in the shower today,” implying that her roommates were around the apartment and would hear what she was listening to. She then goes on to explain that “sometimes I’ll get out of the shower and they’ll be like, ‘Oh, what a playlist’ And I’m like ‘thank youuuu’.” Once again, how she wants to present herself is entirely dependent on the setting and front that she finds herself in.

The sheer acknowledgment that the type of music she chooses to put on in the shower is influenced by how she wants her roommates to react to it highlights the overarching theme in my data. How one engages with music is indeed affected by, and can even be directly driven by, the context that one finds themselves. Most notably, the perception of oneself by other people can be this driving factor. This conclusion is something that I expected to find in my research, especially when observed through the lens of the theories from Mead’s symbolic interactionism, Goffman’s presentation of self and Charles Horton Cooley’s “the looking glass self.” In this example and the ones that precede it, my respondents echo Cooley’s examination that “we perceive in another’s mind some thought of our appearance, manners...” in that the student actively observes how they might be appearing to those other than themselves (Cooley 1902). This in turn causes them, like the shower singer we just met, to mold how they are using the music itself to present themselves, thus they “are variously affected by it” (Cooley 1902). This reflexive observation of oneself as the object of inquiry by another calls back to Mead’s symbolic interactionist examination of the world. Speaking on Goffman, these findings further illustrate the active existence in the ‘frontstage’ as he puts it that the audience sees is molded by the actor themselves to remain in



line with the role that they have given themselves, with the role here being rooted in a music lover identity.

## **Material Manifestations of the Music**

Keeping in conversation with how my respondents used music as a form of expression to others, a common theme that kept returning was the role that the physicality of music can play in this conversation. All of my interviewees expressed that they own some physical form of musical expression or mode, whether it be a t-shirt from a concert, a record player with a loaded vinyl collection, or simply a poster of their favorite artist that they hang on their wall. The physical nature of these objects all had different meanings for each of my interviewees, but an overarching theme with physical modes of music was that listening to albums in CD or vinyl format informed the self-identity of an active music ‘listener,’ rather than someone who simply ‘likes’ music from time to time. Physical copies of music also signified a closer connection between the listener and the music itself. Furthermore, in regards to owning music memorabilia such as t-shirts or posters, interesting insights came up pertaining to how music listeners may use these physical items to express themselves to others. A common theme I saw was that these students used this physical manifestation of their music taste as a further delineator between themselves and the general public of people who just ‘like’ music. A large camp of my respondents also illustrated that they would wear a t-shirt of a band they really liked as a sort of open invitation for others to come up and ask them about it.

### *It's an Active Listening Experience*

A major theme I noticed in my data in regards to what the music listening experience is like with physical copies of the albums was that respondents overwhelmingly saw it as a much more “active” process compared to something like putting on headphones and walking through

the campus. One respondent reminisced about his days in high school and how he would drive to school with his brother every morning and have the ability to choose from the array of CD options that their parents car was always fully stocked with. He spoke about these “older CDs,” and how they were “just kind of locked in” whenever they were on, despite also engaging in an activity like driving. When the CD was playing in the car, this student and his brother were quite literally and figuratively “locked in” to what was coming through the car’s stereo speakers, with the inability to quickly grab their phones and play a song that wasn’t from that album.

Two other students that we’ve already discussed also followed this theme, more so with their relationship with vinyl records instead. If we remember back to the “lifelong learner” from Naples, Florida, it was fascinating to see his eyes light up when I brought the conversation to the discussion of physical forms of music:

“It feels more important when I'm listening to music on vinyl. Like it feels like I'm like oh like you know this is more than just listening to music. It's like an experience. So that's kind of how it feels with vinyl. Like it kind of just... you're active. It's more active and it feels more significant”

The heightened importance of the music on vinyl format demonstrates that to the music listeners, the songs somehow take on a new meaning if they are engaging with the physical copies of them instead of streaming. This also brings into question how the role of their own self-identity as ‘avid music listeners’ plays into their understanding of vinyl as something “more significant?” Does their own self-identity inform this conclusion, or does the expression of their love of music to me, the interviewer, alter the way that they are trying to portray themselves? Another student

similarly remarked that owning physical copies of the music that she loves leads to a greater “personal connection” between herself and the music, suggesting that this answer may be derived more in terms of self-identity and how one sees and observes themselves in regards to Mead’s symbolic interactionism, Cooley’s looking glass self, and Dubois’ ‘double consciousness’ ideas.

### *Name Three Songs*

One of the questions I asked all of my respondents towards the end of our time together gave me a wide breadth of data to consider: I would eagerly ask “How would you feel if you were walking around campus wearing a [insert favorite artist] shirt, compared to the one you’re wearing right now?” excitedly awaiting their answer. A plethora of the students I spoke with discussed how music different they would feel simply due to the fact that it was music on their article of clothing, and how that in and of itself informed how they wanted to be interacting with people that day. One student from Westchester, NY who loves underground punk music bluntly stated that his inner monologue would be, “Yeah, I’m cool. I listen to these.” Here again is the common theme of this ‘elite’ persona that we saw in pattern with how music is used to form self-identity. And thus, for this New Yorker, wearing a Dead Kennedys t-shirt through the campus of his private religious institution in New England affected how he was observing himself through Duboisian double consciousness in public.

My Long Islander Political Science student related this question to the “typical joke” where someone is “wearing like an AC/DC sweatshirt and being like ‘oh you like AC/DC, name three songs then,’” suggesting that there is a difference between people who wear clothes with bands on them that don’t know the music, and those that do. The pattern of delineation between these so-called “active” or “avid” listeners and other more “normal” music listeners dominated my conversations, and in discussion with the physically of music-related clothing is also

suggested here. If someone can't happen to name three AC/DC songs despite wearing a shirt with their band logo on it, they are not considered "real fans." This further informs the self-identity of the avid music listener as one that is indeed a real fan, since the music-related clothing they choose to wear would be heavily influenced by their pre-existing music taste, rather than "seeing a Rolling Stones shirt in the store and buying it because the tongue looks cool" as one student stated.

### *A Friend of the Devil is a Friend of Mine*

For many, the physical manifestations of music taste also acted as an open invitation for others to come up to such students and ask about their shirt. The songwriter and guitarist that we spoke with before from the band Photo Negative highlighted how he would use a particular piece of clothing to sort of "find" other fans of that band. And even if he never did, he was always wearing it in the hope that another day someone would strike up a conversation with him about his favorite band:

"My freshman year I used to wear, it was a green shirt that was like a Heineken logo but it's trying to catch a sunflower with like the Grateful Dead. And I used to wear that to like you know, suss out people who knew, like to attract deadheads and it kind of worked."

Another female student also related to this idea. She had just seen a Maggie Rogers concert the weekend prior to our interview, and when asked about what it would feel like to wear a shirt with your music taste on display, she excitedly said that she had actually just bought a shirt at the concert and loved wearing it to class the Monday afterwards. She described the day as this:

“I would be walking around hoping people would either be like, ‘yeah, it's Maggie Rogers’ or be like, ‘who is Maggie Rogers?’ Like, I feel like music is such a communal thing and to be able to like share that experience of being like, ‘Oh, ‘I love her’ to like, ‘this is my favorite song.’ Or to get to introduce somebody to an artist is really really cool.”

This sort of attracting others, or “suss out” as the first student states, by wearing clothing that displays your musical preferences illustrates the role that physical representations of musical identity plays in how they might seek to be perceived in the world, as well as how they hope the world responds to them. The Maggie Rogers fan wears her new shirt with pride, all the more willing to take any questions that others might have about who this artist is that she happily displays to them. This student who defines himself as a songwriter and guitarist, and music rests at the core of his identity, uses a Grateful Dead shirt as a way to seemingly offer up the opportunity for other people to come up and talk to him about it, ask questions, or relate with him in a similar interest. This desire to be noticed, seen, and acknowledged for their musical taste in public proves to highlight their wish to “confirm their self-views” as Leary and Tangey (2011) put it. These self-views of, for example a Grateful Dead or Maggie Rogers fan, is confirmed when others in public address these physical manifestations of music taste that actors can use to portray themselves. This also addresses the role that “self-representation” by music can have on younger adults (Larsen et al., 2009). As he spoke about his love for playing guitar and the Grateful Dead, this student remained cool and relaxed in his chair, speaking informally with words like ‘yeah dude’ and a free spirited vibe in his demeanor. One can infer that this “hippie” and cool, calm, and collected impression that he gave off would carry over even more so if he were wearing his Grateful Dead shirt in public, thus highlighting the role that the

Grateful Dead themselves informed his own “self-representation” and how he aligns the meanings of the artist with the image of himself. Ultimately, this self-representation and expression of such self-views allows the individual the chance to find others within their group of music lovers, make friends, and further confirm their identity as a “music lover.”

## **Creating A Personal Music Map**

Perhaps the most enjoyable part of my semi-structured interviews were when respondents were given the space to share with such excitement and passion about their favorite musical memories, and how that has helped them draw a personal narrative of their life. From loads of stories about impactful concert experiences, to musical moments that now when they hear a particular song can’t help but be reminded of an old friend, I felt extremely privileged that my interviewees felt comfortable enough to share these personal experiences with me. An overwhelming pattern that emerged from this data highlighted the importance of individual relationships in how music is used to draw this life narrative. Additionally, concerts came up very often and illustrated that these live music experiences are particularly impactful for people. Aside from the overabundance of impactful music stories, many of my respondents also quite literally document how their music taste changes as their life progresses through a variety of ways.

I would like to provide a snapshot of a couple of these types of stories that were shared with me. The most thought-provoking question I asked that resulted in these stories was simply “I’d love to hear some of your favorite memories associated with music, do you have any to share?” The hours I spent in data collection gave me a plethora of personal musical anecdotes from the lives of my twelve interviewees, and I will catalogue some of them here now, with an extended analysis on a few stories in particular to illustrate the patterns that I observed:

“My mom is a very big John Mayer fan and really likes listening to John Mayer radio and like yacht rock and that kind of softer sound. So all those types of songs I like associate very much with like my mom at home like on like a lazy Sunday like that type of thing. So when I hear those songs, I can kinda I can feel myself or like relaxing a little bit more because like I associate that sound like with that type of day with her”

“I do you know, like the things people do, like one second a day. Yeah, I've done that since 2018. So I've never missed a day. I've done it for like since 2018. And so, yeah, so but when it comes time like at the end of the year to put the videos to songs. I can kind of picture my life story with like a soundtrack basically. Like I get the actual opportunity to do that. And I try to pick things that are more upbeat.”

“It was the very last show that Province 44 hosted and it was a boat party. And they brought in this DJ Sebastian Leger. This amazing French DJ who plays deep melodic house. And the very last track that he played was George's request, because he got to use artists liaison for the day... And it was during this song that Sebastian ledger played the last one of his set, one of George's favorites. And like that memory stuck with me for a long time. And then there was another time. No, no, it was like, a week later, was my flight back home. And that song came on shuffle. And I remember being in line for a coffee at fucking Dunkin or pizza or whatever. And dude, the song played, and I started bawling, bro, I started bawling. Like, someone turned around and asked me if like, this is like, as I was tearing up, someone turned around, like asked me if I was good. And I was like, yeah. And then I like, ran out a line, went to the bathroom, and I

literally cried for like, 15 minutes. It was like, literally just because this song triggered that feeling. And like, that's why like I so strongly associated with that.”

“And I always say Change Your Ticket, by One Direction, whatever. I associate that with my other ex-girlfriend. Because before we got one home for COVID, I had just met her that week. And it was like our second time maybe hanging out alone. And we're on Fairfield Beach Rd.. And I was discussing that my parents told me that I couldn't... they weren't sure about sending me back[to school] so they're like, ‘should I change your train ticket like COVID like this thing is happening.’ And so I remember telling her like, ‘I think I'm gonna change my ticket. Like how would you feel about that?’ And she's like, ‘I would love that. If you did that. Like I'd love to see you.’ I'm like, okay, so that holds a special place.”

“I actually started keeping last year, monthly playlists like of new songs that I find but like things that kind of define how I'm feeling like I have like June, July, August, like all the months like 2021 or whatever. So I started keeping that to track. Sometimes it's fun to go back and see how it was feeling.”

“Oh. well concerts, there's this one great concert I went to in Boston, it was the day before Thanksgiving. Oh, yeah. Tuesday or Wednesday or something? It was the Jeff Rosenstock concert. He was great obviously. I just loved the energy there. We were in the front row... He's there in the flesh and you're looking at him and he's saying all these things. And John Domenici (the guitar player) is like chiming in classic quips, and, and so you just kind of get a fuller sense of like, wow, this is a real thing.”



“When I was 13 my parents sent me to Slovakia to stay with some friends. I was lucky because for a long time, like eight years, my mom worked for the USA like at a developmental agency. And so they had really good family friends there and like I don't know if they just wanted me to go like traveling. So I went for three weeks. And like the first thing I got in, one of the people I was staying with took me to this really massive Music Festival in Bratislava called Pohoda. And this band called Die Antwoord played and they are like this South African punk band and it was wild, it was *wild* because like I was exhausted like I was so tired and jet lagged and like I did not want to be there. But then they started playing the music and every person in the crowd just started going like so crazy for them. And I was just like, alright we're here. It was really cool. And they're like they're just they're super weird looking people like they're really like on purpose, very eclectic and like eccentric and like the guy's name is Ninja and the girl's name is Yolandi and they have a daughter and her name is Sixteen. I just thought it was so awesome and like they were so *them* and like *hardcore them* and like it was so fun.”

“Yeah, so with all the playlists, I also do like a picture from that month. So like all the playlists like yeah, like I can show them to you. [Pulls out their phone to show me their monthly playlists]. And so like this is this year, but like, there's definitely some months where the first like, five songs are just from one artist. And it's just like, kind of like remembering where I was then. like at the beginning of the year when I was studying abroad, and like there were a bunch of happy songs my friends would send to me, and I remember walking around castles listening to that.”

“And then fast forward to last December I played with my band at Paradise [Rock Club]. It was like 1000 people there and like, that's such an absurd thing to do. But I think it goes back to like, being a little pipsqueak with a tuxedo. Being like, yeah, I can play Billy Joel. Yeah, probably out of time and like, I messed up like three times anyways but I didn't give a fuck, like I was doing it... But other best memories. When my grandfather died, I wrote a song about him. And I'll put it on an album. And that was like, a cool moment where like, like I was saying about, like, ways to express yourself or view the world and make sense of feelings and emotions that you can't really make sense out of otherwise.”

“One of my favorite memories associated with music. I went to a Metallica concert with my dad when I was in seventh grade. No, no later. Later, it was the summer... It was the summer before 10th grade. I went to a Metallica concert with my dad with Avenged Sevenfold and Valby and, light flex little flex: my dad knows Metallica. Because he was working in the music industry in the 80s Well, I mean like he was still a kid. And they were all still kids too. And he had been friends with someone from the Bay Area. And he was like the guy who said ‘hey, listen to this. Listen to this tape. Like I'll send you this tape right now. These guys just dropped.’ It was their first demo. And my dad listened to it and it was Metallica. And he loved it. It was before they put out singles before they put it on the album. So he got to know them because they were all the same age and this was before they made it popular. There was just a group of like 10 guys that listened to Metallica first because they were all friends. And they became friends with Metallica and my dad ended up being thanked on the first Metallica album. Now flash forward to summer before 10th grade for me. I go to see these guys in Miami, and I get to meet them. And I get to meet you know, Lars Ulrich. You know, I get to meet them and being able to do that in person,

but more so than just being able to meet them, being able to be in an environment where my dad, who I've always kind of had is one of my main role models growing up, being able to see him like around other people that are super cool.”

“Growing up, we'd sit by my grandma while she was playing the piano. And yes, you obviously know the Beatles song Octopus Garden. And so she would play it on the piano, And so my brother and I would be sitting on either side of the piano bench to be playing ‘I want to be under the sea and put his garden in the shade.’ And to this day, in other words, it's just one of my happy memories with my grandma.”

“My sister and I are very much connected whenever we're in the car. We're either playing anything by Taylor Swift or the Hamilton soundtrack. And that's something that like, we could be screaming at each other, but then like, get in the car and put on the Hamilton soundtrack and all is well. So I feel like music in that way is a common ground for me and my sister. And then with my dad, he has a very narrow taste in music. And over the summer, we went on a road trip to Maine. Oh, yeah, it was like yeah, Acadia National Park, which was gorgeous. And so I made a playlist of all the songs that I know my dad likes that I also like. So it was like Billy Joel, The Beatles, Queen... what else was on there like random.. Brown Eyed Girl like older songs that I know that my dad a) knows and b) likes since he hardly knows anything else I listen to. And so to like that I feel like it almost comes from like me knowing my dad's music tastes my dad like showing that to me, and that's why I like it. And so to share that with him. So it's more like an inherited taste from him. Whereas with my sister, it's just two things that we both happen to like. And granted we both grew up with Taylor Swift at least.”

“I also did meet Taylor Swift on her Red tour, which was really exciting. And actually one of my favorite memories is from that concert. She asked, it was me and my cousin, she was like, ‘oh, what song are you most excited to hear?’ And like, you know, they weren’t real Taylor fans they were like, I Knew You Were Trouble or like 22 or whatever. And I was like, Stay Stay Stay. And what was the one song she didn’t play off that album? Stay stay stay!”

“Oh, this is the best music memory! Oh my gosh. So Senior Week High School. We did Fields of Fire which was like a ropes course we went to at night and it was actually really fun. And they had like Gaga ball and like big fire pits and got like so much pizza. And so at the end like it was probably like 10pm, everyone had been done, like ropes, climbing ropes, courses, whatever. And we were all eating pizza. Chatting. It was like a few days before graduation. And Come On Eileen came on. And everybody started like screaming it and dancing. It was like 200 of us like our whole grade and like, I remember it was one of those moments where we’re like we are going to remember this for like a long time. So now sometimes when I listen to Come On Eileen, I’m like oh, so happy.”

### *Support Live Music*

In the lives of my interviewees, a common marker that signified an important defining moment for them in their relationship with music was attending concerts. The most interesting concert-going experience that these students had has to be the one from my respondent who lived in Slovakia for three weeks when she was 13 years old. As she recalled this experience of being shipped off to another country by her parents and abruptly landing and immediately running to this music festival, her eyes were filled with so much passion and excitement as if she hadn’t

been reminded of this memory in years. Perhaps the inherent frenzy and craziness of seeing this South African punk band in a foreign country with people she barely knows is what caused this particular concert memory to stick out in her head when I spoke with her. This analysis echoes what Cavicchi (2014) states about the importance of concerts for the listener, as they offer the opportunity to feel a “uniquely charged connection” with the artist on stage that would stay with them for the rest of their lives. My avid punk fan that I interviewed also echoes this sentiment, as he describes his time seeing Jeff Rosenstock, one of his favorite artists, as an enlightening experience that made him say to himself “wow, this is a real thing.” This “bond of feeling with performers” that concerts can inherently form play into why for both these students and so many more that live shows are integral in how one draws their own personal musical narrative (Cavicchi 2014).

### *What Was I Listening to Back Then?*

Another common pattern from this data was the quite literal documentation of one’s life with the aid of music that some of my interviewees engaged in. These ranged from using the ‘1 Second Everyday’ app to creating “monthly playlists.” For the 1 Second Everyday app, users would be prompted at one point each day to record one second of video and then it chronologically edits them together into a single film at the end of the year. Users are able to attach up to four songs to the year-long video as a sort of “soundtrack to my life” for that given year’s video. Likewise, the idea of monthly playlists is much more simply the creation of a January, February, March, etc. playlist on a streaming service that’s filled with songs you would find yourself listening to a lot during that given month.

One student illustrated how he likes to use monthly playlists as a way to “define how I’m feeling,” and that “it’s fun to go back” and reminisce about how he was feeling during that

particular month in his life, all based around the music he was listening to. Likewise, another student echoed this statement by commenting that he uses them to help in “remembering where I was then,” even purposefully uploading pictures of a moment or memory from that month to attach to the playlist. This is very similar to the student who mentioned her avid use of 1 Second Everyday since 2018, which automatically matches pictures and videos to your songs that you choose as your “life story with like a soundtrack.”

This pattern of intentional documentation of one’s own life through music is a central point that I was hoping to find. It suggests that music can play a large supplemental role in helping people understand their own life trajectory, how they used to be, where they are now, and all of the little changes that have occurred as time has passed. Monthly playlists and 1 Second Everyday are the encapsulation of using music as a means to create this sort of personal narrative and musical map throughout one’s life to develop a better perception of life’s changes. Denora (1999) touches on this analysis at its core in describing how music finds a place in a person's own “personal music map” for their life narrative. Additionally, musical lyrics or themes can be used by the listener to “identity with in the moment,” and my data suggests that the creation of this musical map through a monthly playlist or 1 Second Everyday gives the listener the opportunity to do exactly that with a prior version of themselves (Van Den Tol 2016).

### *In An Octopus’ Garden With You*

Of course, the overwhelming pattern that emerged when people were prompted with their favorite musical memories had to do with memories reminding them of other people. Whether it be a family member, an old friend, or a general group of people that had played a role in their lives, nearly all of the students I chatted with spoke about the ways in which music can remind them of other people. This only further highlights my earlier point about the role that music plays

in social connection. My favorite story pertaining to this pattern came from the student who was the self-described “old person at heart” and her memory with the childlike Beatles tune, Octopus Garden.

Fondly remembering back to her childhood, the description of her and her brother sitting beside their grandmother at the piano was clearly an important memory for this student. It seemed as if this was something that occurred nearly all the time in their family household, as daily an occurrence as sitting down and eating dinner together. As she sung the little hook of the Beatles song in the interview, this student illustrated that she has so strongly associated that song with that particular moment in time with her grandmother, and that she’ll never be able to associate it with anything else. I prompted her after she finished her story with, “so, now when you listen to Octopus Garden, do you think of anything else?” to which she bluntly replied “Nope. Just my grandma, and sitting on that bench.”

This story, alongside the plethora of ones just like it from my data, highly suggest the pertinence of relationship-based memories in creating a “personal music map.” Hearing a song that reminds you of someone else is a great way to illustrate to yourself that *that song* belongs in your personal narrative. In the same way that Octopus Garden is part of this student’s personal narrative because of its association with her grandma, music more generally can be placed in someone's musical map for very similar reasons. Hesmondhalgh (2008) speaks to this point at length, analyzing that “the past comes alive when certain music is heard” for many people. In hearing a song that evokes such a memory, that song, in Hesmondhalgh’s (2008) words, acts as “a device for unfolding, [and] for replaying, the temporal structure of that moment.” The “autobiographical narrative” that one can form for themselves is submerged in stories like this, where impactful memories relating to other people rest at the center of these musical maps

(Schubert 2016). Ultimately, the role that music can play in the development of a personal life narrative is plentiful and highlights the importance of the medium in establishing how individuals can gain a better and more meaningful understanding of their own life.

## Discussion

When I began this research, I was hoping to find clarity on a few different questions. For starters, how might music play a role in the development of a self-identity for these younger, college-aged students. What is the impact that this self-realization of oneself as an “avid music listener” has on the way these students interact with the world around them? I was curious to examine the relationship between music and these students, the group dynamics that might come into play, and how a student might choose to express themselves to others is affected by this identity rooted in music.

I also sought to learn more about the ways that these students have used music to create a personal narrative of their own lives, whether it be through nostalgia, memories of specific people, events and experiences, or simply just acknowledging previous times in their lives when things were different from how they are now. How does this ‘musical map’ play a role in the way in which the student engages with their own self-identity and acknowledges their own life trajectory?

A central conclusion from my research is that music can play an extremely important and pivotal role in the formation of a self-identity within people. This leads to the understanding of oneself as a defined ‘music lover’ and the self-identity informs how they understand themselves as individuals both within the context of their own lives, as well as the lives of others. The theme of elitism that I uncovered in my data analysis demonstrates that there is a slight ‘us vs. them’ discourse in the minds of these music lovers. There is a stark contrast between those who simply



like music, and those whose identity is curated around their musical habits. The music lovers delineate between themselves and others to further emphasize their own self-perception.

Furthermore, the tangible aspects of the music and artistry themselves play a role in defining this self-identity. Listeners may draw on attributes like the lyrics of a song, the 'vibe' that a particular genre is associated with, or even what an artist signifies and stands for as a person, all with the intention of further molding their identity in accordance with how they aim to see themselves. This highlights the ways in which how the listeners engage with the music directly informs the refinement of their self-identity.

My research also explores themes of social connection, and how music might play a role in development of relationships and interactions with others for these self-described avid music listeners. A main conclusion from my research details that music can play a key role in this context. Individuals may alter how they mold the appearance of themselves in order to further emphasize this perceived self-identity within themselves. This rests at the core idea from my data that first and foremost music can play a central role in establishing social connections. These interactions lead to the construction of a particular presentation of oneself that is knowingly created to match a depiction of oneself that appears accurate to their own self-image. People choose what music to play in particular contexts and how to portray their image associated with music based on these external environmental factors like who they are with or what they might be currently doing.

A particularly common theme in this self-presentation that I unveiled in my data analysis was the role that physical manifestations of music play in how people might express themselves to others. For the avid music listener, there is a clear distinction between listening to music via streaming and listening to music in a physical format. Using a record or CD player is reported to

be a much more active listening experience. Once again we can see the outlined differences between those more ‘serious’ music listeners that have a record or CD collection, and those more casual listeners that only stick to streaming. Engaging with music through these physical mediums is another way for individuals to present themselves to others as a more committed music listener, while also providing this point to themselves at the same time.

People can also use the physical nature of music memorabilia like stickers or clothing to illustrate their musical identity to others. This is a common avenue that these music lovers use to further mold this presentation of themselves in social settings. There was a clear distinction between the feeling of walking around in public with a shirt of your favorite artist compared to walking around in a plain shirt. For many, the expression of their music taste through something like clothing acted both as a way to express a piece of themselves to others, while also being an invitation to others to come up and inquire about the topic. While this might not always happen in reality, the description of the material manifestation of musical identity here still highlights the ways in which avid music listeners can further delineate themselves from other more casual listeners, molding how they aim to be perceived in public and how they wish to observe themselves.

A final conclusion that I draw from my research pertains to the functionality of music in creating a personal life narrative for people. I conclude that music remains a paramount medium for helping individuals draw a better picture of their life trajectories, their past experiences, the people and places that they have been, and what remains important to them. The creation of a ‘personal music map’ can be done in a plethora of different ways depending on the person. I observed in my data the examination of concerts, monthly playlists, ‘One Second Everyday’ applications, and the recall of impactful memories associated with certain people or groups, and

how all of these can help individuals create their own life narrative through music. The uncovering of this kind of behavior illustrates that music plays a pivotal role in how these self-described music lovers come to examine their own existence and memories, and the changes that they have been through.

As with any research project, limitations exist. In my case the most prominent limitation would be my own positionality as a peer to my interviewees. Of the 12 people I interviewed, I am either good friends or acquaintances with 8 of them, and I have also been a member, albeit a distant and non-committal one, of both Avid Listeners of Boston College and the Music Guild throughout my time as a student. My prior relationships with some of these students may have influenced how they sought to present themselves in the interview setting, and what particular pieces of data they chose to share with me. Nonetheless, having done this as a senior honors thesis, how might future research potentially expand upon my own findings? I concur that the results of such a project may differ if a researcher with an alternate prior relationship with the respondents were to replicate the study. Moreover, it would be interesting and insightful to examine how an individual's relationship with music and their self-identity differs and changes on the spectrum of age. How might the testimonies of music-related reflection in older adults compare to those of college students? Further research into such a topic would be beneficial for a better understanding of the role that music can play in self-identity, social connection, and a personal narrative in one's life.

Ultimately, music remains an important medium in the lives of many. From the swing of a beat, to powerful lyrics, and the excitement of live concerts, music is an awe-inspiring form of artistic expression that enamores so many people each and every day. My research has sought to uncover and illustrate the ways in which the subculture of self-described 'music lovers' engage

with the medium that they love so much. The role that music can play in the formation and development of a self-identity, how one might portray themselves to others, and the drawing of a 'personal music map' is plentiful. How we come to understand ourselves, who we are, and what we stand for is a lifelong journey, and finding identity within the world of music is something that can be impactful, important, and life-defining for so many.

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