Abstract
Meaningful musical experiences during youth can leave a lasting impression on an individual by shaping their identity and place in the world. This study examines such experiences in relation to autobiography and self-identity. An online questionnaire (N = 50) was distributed to establish how individuals understood musical experiences from their youth as important to their past and present self-identities. Following the online study, 10 questionnaire participants were selected to be interviewed to further examine the meanings created within their nominated experiences, and how these meanings had been autobiographically contextualised against the backdrop of the memory of these experiences. Questionnaire data was analysed using Thematic Analysis to establish shared autobiographical- and identity-related concepts. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis served as the methodological framework for analysing the participant interviews to support a more individualised interpretation of each participant’s experience. Data from the online questionnaire were analysed to reveal a network of identity- and autobiography-relevant themes, which were organised under three wider thematic categories: the self, the social, and the musical. Analysis of the interviews, guided by Identity Theory, revealed individual differences in participants’ processes of identity formation, relationships with music, and attitudes towards their past selves. In both sets of data, prominent themes emerged around ideas of personal transformation and pivoting to a new path in life. These findings frame autobiographically significant musical experiences as powerful in their potential to contribute to identity formation, although their impact varies for each individual. We assessed this autobiographical significance through the enduring salience over time of the identity the experience affected, enabled by our respondents’ reflections on both their past and their present self-identities. Our results illustrate that music can support a wide range of self-identity-relevant meanings, and fundamentally transform our sense of who we are.

Keywords
Autobiography, identity, meaning, music, the self

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Introduction
The ability of music to anchor events in our autobiographical memory is remarkable. A song on a crackling radio has the power to send us back in time, allowing us to relive the past and reflect upon who we were and how we saw ourselves. These music-evoked autobiographical memories (MEAMs) have been shown to be a powerful trigger for memory recall, often more vivid than memories elicited by other stimuli – such as images (Belfi et al., 2016) – and can be recalled decades after the original event and even persist in the presence of neurodegenerative diseases (Cuddy et al., 2017; El Haj et al., 2012). Previous research has explored music recall ability (Bartlett & Snelus, 1980; Schulkind et al., 2013); however, few studies have examined the content of these recollected events or investigated how these memories are situated within broader autobiographical contexts. This study builds on the work of Janata et al.
(2007) – in which the content of MEAMs were identified into broad categories – and Alf Gabrielsson’s Strong Experiences with Music (SEM, 2011) – which explored myriad powerful and transformative experiences – and focuses on exploring the autobiographical significance of meaningful musical experiences. The link between music, memory, and autobiography is investigated through the lenses of identity, in keeping with the assertion that ‘both memory and self are constructed through specific forms of social interactions and/or cultural frameworks that lead to the formation of an autobiographical narrative’ (Fivush & Haden, 2003, p. xii). Our focus on youth is motivated by the analytical fertility of the ‘reminiscence bump’ (Rubin et al., 1986), a concept recently re-assessed by Loveday et al. (2020) in terms of the ‘self-defining period’ (SP) to better account for ‘the main theoretical aspect of memories from the SP, which is their enduring relation to self across the lifespan’ (p. 1; our italics). Autobiography, memory, and identity are co-constitutive: by exploring the way we interpret the effects of meaningful musical experiences on our past-and-present identities, we can better understand their autobiographical significance and the types of memories they engender.

Our understanding of identity is guided by the Identity Theory (IT) of Burke and Stets (2009). In this framework, individuals are said to have various identities: clusters of meanings that they have internalised as roles, based on constant dialogue between the self and the ‘patterned’ social structures in which it exists (Stryker, 2008, p. 19). These identities are then activated in appropriate situations, leading the individual to behave in keeping with the identity’s meanings and thus perceive their identity performance as successful. Since terms such as ‘self’ and ‘identity’ are often used in confusingly mixed ways (Oyserman et al., 2012), we observe an analytical distinction between the overarching ‘self’, which denotes ‘an individual’s consciousness of his or her own being’ (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 9), and ‘identity’, which denotes the ‘self as something; for example ‘father, […] storekeeper’ (p. 10). In order to link these binaries to the autobiographical concerns of this study, we borrow Giddens’ term ‘self-identity’ to discuss ‘the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography’ (Giddens, 1991, p. 53; italics original). In this (auto)biographical vein, we endorse McAdams’ claim that each of us is the ‘life story’ we develop, although we retain ‘self-identity’ over his preferred ‘identity’ to avoid confusion (2003, p. 187).

IT pins down the key variables that interest us in our respondents’ autobiographical reports of past identity meanings and behaviours, in the form of the following concepts:

Identity standard: This is ‘the self-meanings of an identity’ (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 50), the internalised values that define what a particular identity means for the individual it acts through.

Salience: This is ‘the likelihood that [an identity] will be activated’ (p. 133), and reflects its position in an individual’s identity hierarchy.

Identity hierarchy: This is the hierarchy of all the identities internalised by an individual, in which more situationally specific identities at the bottom tend to be moderated by increasingly general identities higher up in the hierarchy (p. 136).

We used these concepts because they enable the organised analysis of our respondents’ discussions of their past and present self-identities. We analysed the meanings introduced to the identity standards affected by our respondents’ meaningful musical experiences and measured the relative salience of the corresponding identities, in order to contextualise the overall autobiographical significance of their chosen experiences.

Other social-psychological perspectives on identity have emphasised group identification, such as social identity theory (SIT; see Hogg, 2003; Toots & Virshup, 1997). IT was chosen because its individual emphasis matches our own focus on unique, individual life narratives, and our wish to elicit responses in such terms.

What is music’s place in all this? Identity-oriented musicology and music psychology have offered some useful frameworks and concepts. Hargreaves et al. offered a useful distinction between ‘identities in music’, that is, identities we take from music, and ‘music in identities’, that is, the use of music to pursue prior identity goals (2002, p. 2). More broadly, DeNora (2000) has influentially understood music as a Foucauldian ‘technology of the self’, while Hesmondhalgh, following Nussbaum, has regarded it as a means for ‘human flourishing’ (2013, p. 5), that is, the ‘idea of living a good life’ (p. 17). The common sentiment here is that music can facilitate activities and modes of understanding that help individuals to manage their identities (for good or ill; see Hesmondhalgh, 2008, 2013, pp. 40–41). Relating this sentiment to IT, we here understand music as a ‘resource’: as a means with which we do our identity work (Stets, 2006, pp. 97–98; Burke & Stets, 2009, pp. 99–109).

Uniting these ideas, we define an autobiographically significant experience as one that has inaugurated or affected an identity that remains salient over time. Since self-identity is an inherently autobiographical phenomenon, the enduring salience of an identity over time can be said to indicate the autobiographical significance of any experience that has impacted it, as reported by the individual in question.

Research Question

How do meaningful musical experiences in youth contribute to identity formation, and how are these contributions contextualised in autobiographical memory?
Methods

In order to investigate the research question, a two-part methodology was devised, consisting of an online questionnaire followed by interviews, to provide both general and specific data about meaningful musical experiences. The research project was guided by Yardley’s (2000) research principles: sensitivity to context, rigour of data collection, transparency of methods, and impact.

Recruitment for the online survey was carried out through university email lists and word of mouth. Participants were required to be 18 years of age or older, with no additional restrictions placed on participation. A threshold of 50 participants was set in order to collect sufficient qualitative data within the time restrictions of the research project. Fifty-three participants responded to the questionnaire with three participants being omitted from the study due to their failure to submit responses. The average age of participants ($N = 50$) was 35.8 years ($SD = 12.73$) with a range between 18 and 64 years. The participant ages were non-normally distributed, with skewness of 0.84 ($SE = 0.34$) and kurtosis of -0.51 ($SE = 0.66$). Participants comprised 22 men and 28 women (men’s age: $M = 37.3$, $SD = 12.7$; women’s age: $M = 34.7$, $SD = 12.8$). The nationality of participants was reported as British (27), American (7), German (4), Swedish (2), and 10 other individual nationalities (Paraguayan, Italian, Turkish, Belgian, Irish, Canadian, Greek, Polish, Swiss, and Vietnamese). Though the survey was made accessible to the general public, many of the respondents were directly associated with universities. The level of education reported was high, with 21 (42.9%) of the participants holding a graduate degree and 14 (28.6%) a doctorate. Musical background was also high with an average of 15.32 years ($SD = 11.90$) of musical training and 16.48 hours ($SD = 11.29$) of music listening per week, while 23 (46%) participants reported attending live music events at least monthly. Ten participants were selected from those who had volunteered to be interviewed and had comprehensively articulated their experiences in detail in the questionnaire. These participants were generally representative of the survey respondents in education and musical background.

The online questionnaire was securely hosted by JISC (www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk) and collected data regarding demographic information, musical background, and the relation between meaningful musical experiences from youth and the creation of autobiography and identity. Three free-response questions were posed to participants. These questions (given in the following) were designed to allow participants to recall past experiences and express them in their own words. We deliberately chose the terms ‘personal identity’, ‘sense of self’, and ‘understanding of “who you were” at that time’ for their everyday resonance, in order to provide ample conceptual breadth for various participant interpretations and allow for unique understandings of similar concepts.

1. Please describe in your own words a musical experience from your youth that you found particularly meaningful to your personal identity, sense of self, or understanding of ‘who you were’ at that time. This can be an experience of playing music or listening to music (live or recorded). Please be as descriptive as possible in your recollection of the event and specify your age at that time.
2. How did this experience influence your sense of personal identity, sense of self, or ‘who you were’ at the time?
3. How, if at all, does the same music influence your personal identity, sense of self or ‘who you are’ now?

Participant data from the online questionnaire was analysed using Thematic Analysis, following the guidelines of qualitative inquiry set by Boyatzis (1998), and the procedure phases suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). This methodological approach was chosen due to its ability to identify patterns from a large number of participants with responses of varying length. These patterns were analysed, categorised, and condensed into themes to give insight into responses and guide the analysis of interview data.

Following the online questionnaire, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews – which lasted an average of 40 minutes – with each of the ten participants, wherein four main questions were posed:

1. Please retell in your own words the musical experience from your youth that you found particularly meaningful to your personal identity or understanding of who you were at that time.
2. What was the relationship you had with this music at the time?
3. Did this musical experience mark/coincide with a more generally important moment, such as a romantic episode, moment of tragedy/loss?
4. How important is music generally to your sense of self or identity?

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed by the researchers, and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), according to guidelines suggested by Smith et al. (2009). To complement the questionnaire data, these interviews sought to build richer accounts of the participants’ lived experiences (p. 32) and draw out the meanings of those experiences (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith, 2004). IPA was chosen due to the relatively small number of participants (Reid et al., 2005) and the self-reflective nature of the questions posed. Analyses made by each researcher were audited and cross-validated by the other researcher.
Results and Interpretation

Questionnaire

Describe in Your Own Words a Musical Experience from Your Youth that You Found Particularly Meaningful to Your Personal Identity, Sense of Self, or Understanding of ‘Who You Were’ at That Time. The free response data collected from the online questionnaire varied in length between participants, with reports spanning from a few sentences to several paragraphs. These responses were coded for pertinent and insightful information. These codes were then compared with each other to reveal common and higher-level themes that were shared between many participants. The emerging themes were analysed as belonging to one of three general topics: The Self, The Social, or The Musical (see also Lamont and Loveday (2020) for a similar approach to topical differentiation). The delineation of these topics is best viewed as a permeable membrane, one that allows a theme to leech outside its own topic and connect with themes categorised under other topics. Each of these topics and their respective themes were examined through direct participant quotations and interpreted to reveal thematic connections.

The first topic, The Self, contained the themes of Identity Creation, Personalisation of Music, and Emotional Responses. The theme of Identity Creation captured explicit descriptions of processes involved in establishing self-identities. Several participants described instrumentalist identities, and how events early in their lives acted as critical origin points for these identities.

At the time I didn’t have any particular hobby or passion. From that period on I have always been a boy who plays violin. That has always identified myself. That particular passion and ability was something special nobody else shared with me. (P8)

This act of labelling shows the importance of the connection made between the individual, the instrument, and the new identity. To become a ‘boy who plays violin’ speaks not simply to the value of that instrumental activity, but to the elevation of that identity to the top of their identity hierarchy. Naturally not all participants reported experiences this starkly. Others used more general language, self-labelling as a ‘music person’ (P1) or describing an understanding of themselves as fundamentally associated with the performance and/or love of music. Other participants reported vocational aspirations of their past selves in which a new identity took root or was strengthened. ‘I knew I had to be a violinist’ was stated by P12 due to the impact of an orchestra rehearsal, after which they changed their course of study from medicine to music. Experiences of music listening also were reported as fostering identity creation. The cultivation of musical taste was often an influential factor on how they saw themselves. To enjoy and embrace the ‘weirdness’ (e.g., P42) in the music was to understand themselves as someone who enjoyed the odd and the bizarre. This understanding of one’s self-identity through the music also spoke to themes within The Social and The Musical, as ‘weirdness’ is defined in contrast to a common or generally accepted norm in society or musical practice. As the theme of Identity Creation is at the heart of this exploratory study, connections to other themes are expected.

Personalisation of Music described the way individuals felt the music was directed at them and/or how they saw themselves in the music. The idea of music ‘speaking’ to the individual was raised by multiple participants, implying a direct and purposeful connection between the music (and often lyrics) and the listener. This sense of the music’s personalisation often coincided with identity- and meaning-creating processes due to the explicit focus on the self. By seeming to address the participants (in each case) as individuals, the music established the self as the frame of reference for its meanings. In addition, strong identification with particular musical artists reportedly lent a sense of personalisation to the music: ‘It seemed as though he was speaking directly to me’ (P13). The musician on the recording was understood to be an active participant in the listener’s experience; this can be seen as an act of social surrogacy (Schäfer & Eerola, 2020) whereby the listener feels an attachment to a particular person in the music and even a sense of belonging (Greenwood & Long, 2009).

It just spoke to me in a very deep way, like it just connected with my soul somehow, and I knew that this was my kind of music. It was energetic, rebellious, melodic, fast-paced, and at the same time the lyrics were very articulate and thoughtful and personal and meaningful, and it all just clicked. (P20)

The musical qualities articulated within the quote highlight a direct connection from the sound of the music to themes within The Musical. These musical features resonated with the individual due to the sharing of these same qualities in their personality. They were able to project themselves into the music or see themselves reflected in the music, using the music as a ‘mirror’ (DeNora, 2000, p. 70).

The theme Emotional Responses was created to capture the physiological and cognitive emotional sentiments many respondents reported. Often these expressions indicated strong, intense experiences that were overwhelming and uncontrollable. The majority of the emotional content was positively valenced, expressing joy, ecstasy, and happiness. These intense positive experiences predominated the responses, echoing the results found in Gabrielson’s SEM (2011). However, the negatively valenced responses were also present and can be understood via the ‘music as a mirror’ concept mentioned previously.

I felt a sense of despair around me, and the album seemed to mirror that for me. (P50)
Though this type of negative ‘mirroring’ may seem counterintuitive in terms of negotiating one’s self-identity, music that resembles negative emotions can actually provide some sense of comfort through feelings of being moved (Vuokskoski & Eerola, 2017).

The second topic, The Social, relates individuals’ understandings of themselves with the world around them. This topic consists of two themes – Family, Friends, and Peers and Political Relationships – and captures the dialogue between these social ties and meaningful musical experiences. The first theme, Family, Friends, and Peers, describes the relationships closest to the individual. By asking participants to recall experiences from their youth, it was not surprising that many responses detailed school- and family-related experiences and the associated interpersonal relationships. These relationships shaped how participants understood themselves as social beings, and simultaneously affected the development of their self-identities. General social themes common among many responses were feelings of isolation, the need for rebellion, and friendship. Individuation from one’s family was achieved by embracing new and different music. This acted as a lesser form of rebellion that set the individual apart from those close to them and afforded them a new arena for identity creation independent from their other social spheres.

The Political Relationships theme was derived from numerous responses in which participants discussed themselves in relation to the wider world and socio-political structures in which they lived. Notions of class, social injustice, and nationality were often invoked. Participants often contrasted their chosen musical experiences with their day-to-day lives, wherein ideas about the world around them came into conversation with the narrower social spheres of friends and family.

The band [Cake] also interjected a bit of politics into what they were into . . . and their politics (American Left) was very different than my family and extended families at the time (American Right) and felt a strange disconnect between my families identity and the identity of loving this band and the music. I think everything they were singing about and talking about really resonated with me and their music really gave me a way to adopt this new identity as my own without outright going against the culture and politics I was currently a part of. (P34)

In this case, the music in question was a surreptitious actor that allowed for a new political identity to develop even while surrounded by a culture opposed to it.

The third general topic, The Musical, was formed of two themes: Musical Features and Uses of Music. These themes described the characteristics of the music, how the music was presented, and the uses it was put to in processes of identity creation and formation. In Musical Features some of the participant descriptions focused on the sonic qualities of the music (e.g. timbre) whilst other participants commented on more traditional musical features (e.g. instrumental arrangement). These features perceived in the music itself can be interpreted as related to and/or reflective of the self. Other musical descriptions from participants’ referenced evocative lyrics and novelty of the music. These musical descriptions also commented on the personal understanding of lyrical content and incorporated the meaning of these lyrics into the overall larger understanding of their sense of self. A full discussion of lyrical influence on identity is outside of the purview of this study, but research has been carried out in this area showing its importance (e.g. Michael, 2019; Skinner, 2018).

The final theme, Uses of Music, referred to the ways in which the music was consciously employed by participants for identity-forming processes. One particularly interesting function was that of using music to enter into adulthood. This sense of growth from childhood or adolescence was shared between several participant responses.

I felt this was a [music] group who appealed to the older teens and I wanted desperately to be an adult before my time. (P25)

This sentiment can be connected with the previously mentioned ideas of rebellion and social relationships. Viewing this music group as a way to enter into adulthood suggests that the individual was uncomfortable in their own social surroundings and was able to glean a future identity in the social network associated with the music. Participants also reported using this music as a therapeutic tool, similar to the way Gabrielsson described ‘music itself [being] the “therapist”’ (2011, p. 220). Other descriptions of how music was ‘used’ (e.g. political change, social surrogacy) are also linked to this theme as they can all be understood as ‘technologies of the self’.

How Did This Experience Influence Your Sense of Personal Identity, Sense of Self, or ‘Who You Were’ at the Time? Several themes emerged from the second question, which focused on the influence of the musical experience on self-identity. Identity as a Musician was a common theme mentioned in the previous section. For some their experience was a continuation of a previously established identity, while for others it acted as a starting point for their identity as a musician. These experiences were often not just the impetus for taking up music as a hobby, but elsewhere it prompted the musician identity to be reflexively recognised and promoted. P7, who reported, ‘I made the fact that I played an instrument one of the first things I would tell someone about myself.’

A second theme, Opening up of the self, encompassed expressions of expanding one’s mind and embracing new ideas. In these cases, a deep engagement with music birthed a curiosity about the wider world.
I suppose it made me think of myself as a person who was thirsty to find out about how different people thought about the world. (P24)

Looking back on their meaningful musical experience, P24 described themself as ‘innocent and naive’. The music then recontextualised their self-identity within the new, wider world it suggested, effectively expanding their cultural consciousness.

Another theme dealing with the evolution of the self was Change in Life Path, denoting a reorientation of the self-identity trajectory. The ‘this could be my life’ (P15) sentiment projects the self into the future and offers new possibilities for the way individuals see themselves. This theme has similarities with Becoming a New Person, a rare but interesting expression that described a fundamental change in self-identity such that their previous sense of self-identity was replaced entirely. These recollections often differed from the slower longitudinal evolutionary processes of self-identity seen in other themes.

The last identity-related theme was Finding a Place in the World. This described the feelings of validation of one’s self-identity due to a sense of affinity with the music and/or by the musicians. This was internalised by individuals to develop a sense of belonging, and of their identity being conferred and confirmed by social surrogates.

So it did make me feel like, ok there is a place in this world for me as well, because these people made this music and we must be similar somehow. (P20)

How, if at all, Does the Same Music Influence Your Personal Identity, Sense of Self or ‘Who You Are’ Now?. This study was interested in not only how individuals saw themselves at the time of their meaningful musical experiences, but also how that music now resonates with their self-identity. Relatively common in these data was the expression of nostalgia from looking back on youth and comparing it with the present. Often this manifested in expressions of fondness for the music regardless of its current relation to identity. Participants who rejected the influence of their formerly influential music on their current self-identity attributed this to changes in musical preferences over time.

I definitely moved on with my musical taste over the years. At 17 or so, I happened to be at an AC/DC concert, and already then I did not feel it anymore. (P40)

P40’s preferences were rooted in an emotional connection with the music, and after they ‘did not feel it anymore’, they had moved on and left those associations with identity and the music in the past. The data as a whole showed that some participants rejected their formerly influential music as part of their current identities whilst others embraced it in the same ways they had in their youths. Notably, the majority of participants fell somewhere between these two categories, with many participants instead providing responses that detailed their relationship with music in general. These responses suggest that their original experience was important in some way, and certain ideas or characteristics were carried into the present, but the current understanding of that particular music is not directly impactful or easily traceable to their contemporary self-identities. There is a more holistic way participants potentially understand the role of their music experiences in their contemporary identities: it is not something that concretely forms who they are now, but has afforded a space or afforded their current self-identity to flourish.

It is foundational to how I experience and use music to this day. How I use music to help me think through what I am feeling and going through, taking advice or comfort from lyrics. The music itself always reminds me of good and bad times, and how I have grown in the last 5–7 years. (P53)

Interviews

The participant interviews explored the themes of the questionnaire in greater depth. With this richer data, in which more embellished life stories emerged. It was then possible to see more clearly the patterns of autobiographical significance that the reported musical experiences tended to form, and the corresponding identities through which this significance manifested. We categorised each of our ten interview responses under one of six main themes. These themes aim to summarise the autobiographically contextualised self-identity effect of the musical experience reported.

Vocational Path in Life. This theme characterised the responses of P1 and P11, who are both musicologists. In these autobiographical reports, the meaningful musical experience served to orient them vocationally.

[S]uddenly I had this clarified ‘this is what I wanted to do’, and, you know, it was a moment where my ambitions had been sort of clarified for me a bit and I sort of recognised the role that music had played in my life and the formation of me as a person and my social circle and all of those things. (P1)

P1 found their musical identity moved higher within their identity hierarchy by their musical experience, a performance of Lin Marsh’s ‘Believe’ during a choir tour to France, age 15. While they had long been musically active, they had not fully endorsed this part of their life during their adolescence. The performance of ‘Believe’ epiphically altered this by illuminating the significant personal and social value of the activity they were engaged in, the awareness of which had been hitherto suppressed. This epiphany helped ensure the endurance of their overall musical identity by contextualising their musical setting as the kind in which they belonged, and were happy to belong, thus reorienting them towards musical activities
in the future. Their self-identity now is primarily defined by musical meanings, with their musician and musicologist identities ranking high in their hierarchy, meaning they are highly salient.

P11’s experience was similar, if less epiphanic. Although they had already been ‘obsessed’ with it beforehand, their surprise trip to see Giuseppe Verdi’s opera Nabucco on their tenth birthday was understood as ‘the moment where the real obsession’ began. They trace a narrative line from this event to their developing musical and linguistic abilities, which were often-invoked sources of pleasure and pride in their youth, and the mechanisms of salient identities, such as their singer identity. Like P1, these interests eventually led them, if indirectly, to the musicologist identity that now underpins their professional life. Less like P1, any firm causal links between their experience and that identity have been obscured for them by the 24 years that have passed since (9 years in P1’s case), and are undermined by their having been already interested in Nabucco prior to the concert. Nevertheless, P11’s presentation of this experience as one which influenced their self-identity at the time, along with the consistent salience of musical and music-related (e.g., linguist) identities across their life, demonstrate the memory’s autobiographical significance.

Maturation. This theme characterised the responses of P24 and P34, who associated their experiences with their wider personal development, fuelled by the promise of a richer socio-cultural consciousness perceived in the ‘mystery’ (P24) and ‘weirdness’ (P34) of the music involved.

I think music just opened up all these possibilities of what music can be, what your life can be. (P34)

[T]he idea that the range of what was out there could be found in the little song was exciting to me, and . . . it also suggested to me what kind of person I might like to be, and that was to be a person that was curious and wanted to learn and wanted to search and find out about life and how you might approach it in as many ways as possible, and I would say I’ve been the same ever since. (P24)

For P24, hearing Bob Dylan’s ‘Visions of Johanna’ for the first time, age 13, sparked a fresh pitch of curiosity about not just art, but the world more widely. Over the 20 years since their experience, this curiosity has remained central to their self-identity. Here, P24 draws a clear line from the meanings apprehended in their memory of this moment to the top of their present-day identity hierarchy, where sits what might be termed their music connoisseur identity. This identity is highly salient, particularly in social situations, in which they value like-minded interlocutors. But the meanings of this experience extend yet higher, having informed abstract traits of what Burke and Stets call the ‘“person identity”’, that is, ‘the set of meanings that define the person as a unique individual rather than as a role-holder or group member’ (2009, p. 124). In this case, the open-minded curiosity sparked in their experience has sedimented itself as a fundamental trait of P24’s personality, making it maximally salient. As such, as P24 autobiographically contextualises it, their experience triggered a process of maturation that has defined who they are today in the most fundamental terms.

A similar process emerged in P34’s report. They cast their experience of seeing the band Cake in concert, age 14, as catalysing the growth of ‘my personality in terms of what I liked to do and how I like to do it’, in that it intensified the salience of their trumpeter identity at the time, the identity through which they developed the tendency for ‘obsessive fixation on things’ now involved in their data scientist identity. The commonality of this tendency between trumpet-playing to data science suggests that it has similarly assimilated into the foundations of their person identity. This development traces back to their experience of seeing Cake, indicating its autobiographical significance.

Personal Aesthetic Awakening. This theme characterised the responses of P17, P22, and P53, although the impact of this awakening in their autobiography differed for each respondent. For P7, their experience of seeing, age 11, a performance of Adolphe Adam’s ballet Giselle – their first such concert experience – suddenly unveiled to them a powerful aesthetic world into which they could migrate and create themselves.

I think that was also around the time where I was increasingly looking for things to enrich my life or have a connection with, because that was around the time I really I think firmly decided to not want to be engaged with the world I was living in . . . it was almost pointed towards, yeah, a different world or realm that I wanted to be part of . . . much more inviting and beautiful and comforting. (P17)

This experience directly inaugurated their ballet dancer identity, which remained highly salient until they were 19, but the meanings of embodied involvement with art also fundamentally conditioned their latent aesthetic priorities regarding music: ‘to wanna move, and be moved at the same time’. This stands athwart to the ‘rational activity’ that experiencing music now is for them as a musicologist, a transformation they rue. Their experience thus has autobiographical significance as the origin of the meanings that defined their aesthetic identities, meanings that persist today, but which are contradicted by the ‘rational’ meanings of their musicologist identity.

P53 had a similar if less momentous experience, in which encountering Edward Elgar’s cello concerto as a 15-year-old violinist revealed to them a new dimension of musical expressivity, and provoked a more independent appreciation of music in general.
I’d really not had much experience of any sort of 20th century music at all, and... the structure of it is... quite different from like the concertos I’d heard before... and... [it] just did things with harmonies that I’d never heard before. (P53)

Now 56, the then-salient musician identities (they also play piano) whose meanings were transformed by this experience have persisted throughout P53’s life, albeit with fluctuating salience and meanings as they started a family and pursued careers in accountancy and primary school teaching. In light of their teaching experience, P53 endorses an inclusive view of musicality – in the spirit of Small’s concept of ‘musicking’ (1998) – an attitude which resonates with the anti-snobbery they felt regarding the concerto, in contrast to many of their peers who ‘dissed it really as being quite sentimental’. As such, beyond being a treasured high point in their performance activities, their experience also has autobiographical significance as the moment when these values emerged, values whose persistence is reflected in P53’s enduring love of the concerto itself.

Despite being a trained cellist and scholar of early 20th-century French music, P22 actively denied a direct causal link between their experience of hearing Ravel’s ‘Introduction and Allegro’, age 13, and these identities. However, this was significant as the first time they can remember experiencing:

that sense of being kind of borne away by the music...or responding to this very living thing...I don’t want to say inhabiting a new identity by listening to that music...just...not being kind of involved in your own selfhood. (P22)

P22 emphasised ‘constantly being open to just thinking about how [music’s] working and therefore being open to all kinds of music’, and aiming, as a musicologist, to ‘maintain a sort of fairly kind of catholic, objective sort of stance’. In this light, the autobiographical significance of their experience can be said to lie in introducing the experience of leaving the confines of their own ‘selfhood’ (coherent with Herbert’s notion of ‘trancing’; 2011, p. 5), as they suggest previously, a crucial mechanism in their highly salient musicologist identity today.

Subversion of Self-worth. This theme characterised the response of P19. Their experience of seeing, age 10, their older sister perform Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto filled them with pride, but subsequently symbolised their sense of personal inadequacy within their family, as they felt unable to live up to her example as a violinist. This played into a wider pattern of significant psychological distress, resulting in multiple hospitalisations. This is a difficult case to analyse, given the clinical issues involved, the particulars of which the researchers are not qualified to discuss. Nevertheless, a tentative interpretation here is presented: P19’s most salient identities during their youth were ‘violinist’ and ‘family member’, identities whose meanings were largely derived from the examples set by their sister. This set a precarious and damaging course for their wellbeing, as these examples were ever-present and clear-cut, and any apparent failure to follow them equated to a failure to successfully perform their most salient identities. This course has been defined by the subversion of their self-worth, not only in that their violinist and family member identities often did not satisfy their identity standards, but also insofar as their entire individuality was completely subordinated to the examples set by someone else. For P19, now 24, this experience thus holds autobiographical significance as the originary example that their sister set, an identifiable beginning of that subversion. Their ongoing recovery is partly reflected in their reconciliation with music.

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I admire my 11-year-old self that didn’t put make-up on and didn’t really care, just had a laugh with my friends and danced cus I enjoyed it and knew I was good at it, and...I can see part of my 11-year-old self coming back now I’m a bit older and wiser, but I do admire that about myself. (P44)

They prize this memory as an example of them exhibiting a sense of self-worth, echoed in the song’s lyrics, that was subsequently lost during adolescence, and which they are now happy to have partially reclaimed. Even throughout their pained adolescence, their dancer identity remained an important source of self-worth, and their pre-adolescent experience stands out as a final autonomous exercise of the dancer identity, wrapped up in meanings of self-belief, before it became functional as a ‘safe space’ during adolescence. But this innocence they associate with pre-adolescence is complicated to want back, since, at that time, it was as much a remnant characteristic of the developmental stage Harter identifies as ‘Middle to Late Childhood’ (2012, p. 689) – before the onset of ‘intense self-consciousness’ in ‘Early Adolescence’ (p. 693) – as it was an actual trait of their person identity. This illuminates the autobiographical significance of this experience for P44. There, they experienced an unadulterated sense of self-worth that is irretrievable, given the impossibility of returning to that earlier developmental state; as such, it serves not only as an autobiographical marker of the end of pre-adolescent innocence, but also as an ideal for them to pursue, one with ramifications for core traits of their person identity.

Affirmation of Self-worth. This theme characterised the response of P44. This respondent reported a ‘cloud memory’ (Istvandity, 2019, p. 23), an amalgamated impression of rehearsing and performing a dance routine to Gwen Stefani’s ‘What You Waiting For?’, age 11–12.

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sad because it’s so joyful, music is so joyful, but I think like anything: the pressure gets to you, and it becomes about being best, rather than the joy. (P19)

**Music as a Mirror.** This theme characterised the response of P50. They discussed listening to Radiohead’s 1997 album *OK Computer* with their brother on the night of its release, aged 18. Here, the tenor of P50’s circumstances was carthetically mirrored in the music they encountered, music that was already strongly emblematic of their sense of self.

I suppose that it was an album that . . . it echoed that sense of chaos and that sense of . . . yeah, dislocation and not really understanding the world around me. Feeling very confused, and I was, you know, emotionally very raw. (P50)

To recall Hargreave et al.’s distinction, P50 primarily found their self-identity *in the music of OK Computer*: the music both captured the ‘existential angst’ they felt about the world in the wake of their parents’ divorce, and manifested ‘the complexity’ which ‘at that age you’re looking for’; it was ‘a critic’s record . . . a grownup record’. The only ‘sense of identity’ they had was as ‘a very young guitar player, songwriter, and really loving music’, identities developed after hearing Radiohead’s 1995 album *The Bends*. Later in life, their ‘sensitivity’ decreased, the time for musical activities shrank, their connection to music became less ‘emotional’. Now, due to the emergence of other identities relating to activities and responsibilities with which ‘life becomes busier’, their primary musical identity is what they call ‘music dude’: someone with ‘a critical ear’, interested in socialising with similar music enthusiasts. This identity’s generality enables its continued salience, as it allows it to be invoked in many situations. But P50’s experience has autobiographical significance not because it birthed the ‘music dude’, but rather because it helped them understand and validate themselves during difficult times. Their past and present selves ‘are different people’, but they can connect through the ‘living memory’ of *OK Computer*.

**Discussion**

Previous research has tended to focus on either music and autobiographical memory (e.g. Janata et al., 2007; Krumhansl & Zupnick, 2013) or music and identity (e.g. Dibben, 2002; Folkestad, 2002; Tarrant et al., 2002). By emphasising the necessary interdependence of both autobiography and identity, we have offered a way of studying each through the other while cataloguing the effects of meaningful musical experiences on their formation.

The results detailed previously suggest a number of answers to our research question. Each experience affords and, upon reflection, represents the eruption of new meanings into an already complex landscape of self-identity in youth. These new meanings are incorporated into the standards of new or pre-existing identities, and their influence on identities are subject to change as the respondent’s life progresses. Both our questionnaire and interview themes represent the *types* of meanings that were incorporated into our respondents’ identities at the autobiographical moment to which they refer in their response. Naturally these themes do not capture all self-identity effects that such experiences can possibly have. However, we feel they are a helpfully diverse collection that also subtly differentiate autobiographical priorities between respondents, differences which can help illuminate respondents’ identity standards, both past and present. Compare, for instance, the interviews of P17 and P1: both are musicologists, but only P1 fits into the *Vocational Path in Life* category, while P17 fits into *Personal Aesthetic Awakening*. This is due to the different autobiographical perspectives of each: P1’s experience is valued by them *because* it set them on their present path; meanwhile, P17 values their experience because it represents a more desirable mode of aesthetic experience that their professional life actively undermines, and to which they wish to return. This can be largely explained by the higher salience of the researcher identity in P1’s hierarchy.

Our results afford reflection on observations made in previous research on music and identity, autobiographical memory, and the impact of powerful musical experiences. Our responses endorsed Loveday et al.’s general claim that ‘[m]usic from the SP connects an individual to the people, places, and times that are significant to their identity’ (2020, p. 7). The depth and dynamism of many of our responses supports Rubin’s explanation that first-time and novel experiences in the reminiscence bump window (Rubin et al., 1986) – or SP – may be rehearsed more frequently and in a deeper way than other memories (Rubin et al., 1998). The memories reported were often associated with happiness, excitement, and nostalgia, an observation previously made regarding MEAMs (Belfi et al., 2016). However, other respondents also exhibited sadness or regret when reflecting on their experiences due to the pain associated with the resulting identity negotiations, even if the experience was positively valenced at the time (although the sadness associated with some of these memories reflected their role in positive ‘redemption sequences’ (McAdams et al., 1997)). This suggests a link between the relative valence of the *memory* of the experience (if not the experience itself) and the success of the identity impacted by that experience. This link between valence and identity resonates with Barrett et al.’s (2010) observation regarding nostalgia – a response also exhibited in our results – experienced through MEAMs that ‘nostalgia was stronger to the extent that a song was autobiographically salient’ (p. 390). Our data generally supported many of Gabrielson’s (2011) observations regarding SEMs, such as their therapeutic (pp. 66–67) and self-identity-transforming (p. 149) potential. This latter motif pervaded our results, perhaps unsurprisingly, but what is notable is just how radical these
transformations could be. This is evinced by questionnaire
themes such as Opening up of Self, Change in Life Path,
and Becoming a New Person, whose preponderance of
responses supports the view that meaningful musical
experiences in youth – a time when self-identities are ripe
for transformation – can not only modify but also wholly
transform a person’s self-identity.

This has been an exploratory study, and there are many
unexplored paths leading away from the data we have col-
clected. We first acknowledge that a high proportion of our
questionnaire respondents and all of our interview respon-
dents explicitly associated their experience with a specifi-
cally musical identity. This is a consequence not only of our
study’s musical focus, but also its distribution methods,
which led to a high proportion of music-oriented partici-
pants. A larger study, casting a wider net, would hope to
include more interviewees whose musical experiences
interacted with non-musical identities. Moreover, we have
generalised the very idea of a meaningful musical experi-
ence, but a better understanding of such an experience’s
autobiographical significance would delineate the relative
importance in that experience of the music itself. This
relates to another key variable largely unexplored here, that
of ‘liking’. We would suggest a link between persistent
‘liking’ of the music and the persistent salience of the iden-
tity affected by the experience (see also Lamont & Loveday
(2020)).

When considering autobiographical significance, we
have not differentiated between the varyingly prominent
roles each experience played in the formation of the iden-
tity in question: some were literally epiphanic, for instance,
while others served to cohere present but hitherto uncon-
nected meanings within the standard of a specific identity.
We would posit no categorical rule here (e.g. inauguration
¼ higher significance), as there is too much autobiographi-
cal complexity at play in any given life. What matters is the
emphasis placed during the experience on the meanings in
the relevant identity standard (new or otherwise), and
whether this emphasis has persisted in the form of that
identity’s continued salience.

Lastly, we have passed over the importance of the part-
icipants’ varying ages at the time of their experiences.
Following Harter (2012), their developmental stage will
have determined what kinds of identity-forming processes
were operational, and the degree of reflexivity available.
The present study is interested in each respondent’s auto-
bigraphical narrativisation of the past regardless of its
‘truthfulness’, but ‘validating’ the developmental possibil-
ity of a reported identity formation might illuminate a
respondent’s narrative priorities. A related issue is how to
compare autobiographical significance between respon-
dents of considerably different ages; for example, a retiree
(P53) and an undergraduate (P19). Since we equate auto-
bigraphical significance with enduring identity salience,
this would require some measurement of identity durabil-
ity, that is, its resistance to dissolution. We might then
compare an older respondent whose relevant identity has
endured a few mild crises with a younger respondent whose
relevant identity has survived multiple and intense crises,
and say that the autobiographical significance of the ori-
ginary experience of each is similar.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the ways in which people autobi-
ographically contextualise meaningful musical experiences
from their youth. We gauged the autobiographical signifi-
cance of these experiences via the impact they had on our
respondents’ self-identities, as measured through the trajec-
tory of the specific identities implicated in the experience
in question. The themes we have identified represent the
types of meanings that were incorporated into the relevant
identity standard in any given case. These identities
develop differently depending on the passage of each indi-
vidual’s life: some wax, others wane; some transform, oth-
ers obdure. Autobiographical significance of a meaningful
musical experience is reflected by the continued salience
over time of the identities that either partially or wholly
emerged from, or were sedimented by, each respondent’s
experience. In trying to extract generalisable lessons from
our results, it is important to re-acknowledge the complex-
ity of any given respondent’s case: each has their own life
narrative, which spans a particular stretch of time, and each
of which places a different emphasis on the importance of
its own meaningful musical experience. It is beyond the
scope of this study to fully account for all this potential
variance, and to outline firm rules for how such experiences
will impact one’s sense of self. Nevertheless, we have
established some key themes that capture the ways in which
musical experiences in youth can be meaningful for iden-
tity formation, which can be further elaborated and added
to in future studies. These themes illustrate the ability of
meaningful musical experiences to mobilise musical,
social, and self-oriented meanings to not only interact with
our self-identity, but also actively transform it. Here we see
that music can not only mark meaningful experiences, but
also fundamentally motivate their autobiographical
significance.

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LP and PG researched literature, conceived the study, involved in
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