

## Music and feelings of teens – A case study in the Greek area

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### Abstract

Music is a form of art and one of the most basic human functions. Music is considered important for many reasons but mainly because it is a source of joy and creativity and has a positive effect on people's lives. Music has the ability to affect people both intellectually and socially as well as emotionally. Especially for teenagers, music is important as it entertains them, educates them, accompanies their daily life, enhances their sociability, supports them and helps them manage or express their emotions. The present research examined and analyzed the relationship that nine teenage Junior High school students in the region of Thessaly have with music. Specifically, the research examined how students feel about music in their lives and what it means for them. The results of the qualitative research, collected through interviews with the students demonstrate that music is considered very important in the lives of students of this age. The research shows that music supports and empowers students by helping them express their feelings, make friends and feel good in all aspects of their lives.

**Keywords:** Music, music education, teenagers, musical identity, music preferences.

### Introduction

Music is a form of art that is defined in various ways in the international literature. Among the various definitions we distinguish that music is "... a human activity which, in modern times, surrounds us sometimes consciously through our personal choices and sometimes unconsciously in our daily activities" (Tsaftaridis, 2008, p. 8). According to Kokkidou (2019, p. 195), music is "what we hear or play but also all the practices that determine the creation, transmission and recruitment of musicians" and generally something in which we are actively involved as listeners, performers or composers (Papazachariou-Christoforou, 2016).

Research results support that music has a positive effect on the individuals by offering joy and satisfaction to the listeners and performers, helping people to cultivate their cognitive, emotional and social skills (Regan, 2020). Research shows that music helps people to focus their attention on something particular, and has the ability to enhance brain function (Karapetsas, et al., 2011). Specifically, the rhythm of music helps to develop coordination and synchronization of movements and according to Ixtupe (2017) it leads to sensory realization, which is important for the development of fine motor skills.

Music also helps to enhance perception skills. Music has long-term benefits on cognitive abilities (Greasley & Lamont, 2006) because, by listening to it, the use of many areas of the brain as well as different cognitive functions such as attention, categorization, etc. are activated (Leroi et al., 2015). Music has the power to develop the mind, boost self-confidence and cultivate broad-mindedness (Ji et al., 2019), making people more imaginative and resourceful (Barbot & Lubart, 201). Music has the ability to promote positive energy and enhance skills such as creativity. It also helps people express the emotions they experience by facilitating their daily lives in their relationships with others (DeNora, 2003).

According to Destiana (2017), music allows the development of people's self-esteem and self-confidence, it helps them express their emotions, removing negative feelings or experiences. According to research, listening to music as well as performing it, helps in promoting physical and mental health (Theorell, 2014). In addition, and as Artemi (2013) claims, music provides individuals with moments of joy and satisfaction, while at the same time it is a means to help them overcome difficult moments they experience because it

soothes anxieties, calms people down and has therapeutic properties for those who face emotional or other difficulties (e.g. learning). According to Macionis (1997), (as cited in Kelly, 2002), music is a social act, which is an object of interest in sociology, i.e. the study of human behavior, institutions and the development of human society.

From a sociological point of view, people learn to function and behave within society and through their particular culture and civilization. Music, which is a form of human behavior, reflects society and the culture of individuals and plays an important role in the process of their cultivation and in the transmission of social and cultural values, skills and traditions (Rehfeldt et al., 2021). Young people and especially adolescents are fond of music. Adolescence is a distinct phase of the developmental life cycle of individuals (Arnett, 2000). It is characterized by a complex and transitional process that the individual goes through, from the immaturity and social dependence of childhood, to the adult life with the aim and expectation of fulfilling adolescents' developmental potential, personal autonomy and social responsibility (Berzonsky, 2004).

Research reveals that music is an activity in the lives of teenagers that entertains them but also educates them, indicating models and behaviors with which teens identify in their lives, in their friendships, in their interests, in their appearance, or in the values they adopt (Bianco, 2020). It has been shown that teenagers respond positively to their favorite musicians and artists or to people who adopt their favorite musical style, rather than to those who listen to or engage in music that does not interest them or that they consider outdated and anachronistic (Westenberg, 2016).

Research findings support that music helps teenagers explore new ideas, manage their emotions more effectively, and express themselves successfully even without words. According to research, music helps teenagers connect with social groups, gain a sense of belonging, and feel safe and calm (Miranda, 2011). This positive influence through music can help teenagers develop coping mechanisms and react effectively to stressful and difficult situations they may experience.

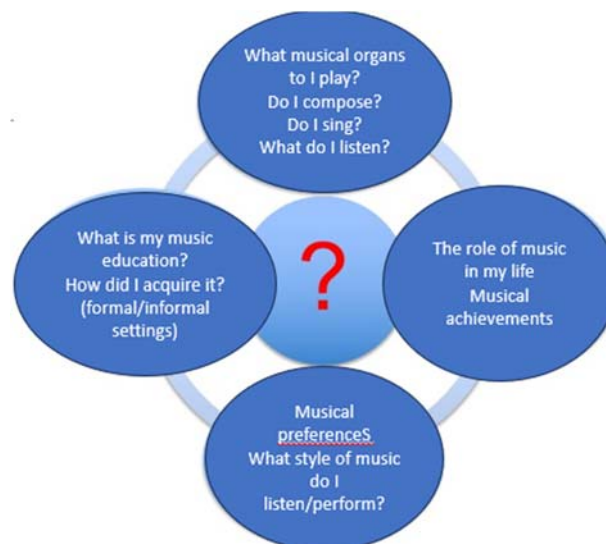
Teenagers often use music to deal with specific personal and social issues that are important to them, such as love, relationships with the opposite sex, trust, independence, friendship, power, etc. (Saarikallio et al., 2020). Based on the above, music seems to be particularly important and ubiquitous in the lives of teenagers, while at the same time it turns into a sign of their identity (Miranda, 2011). There are many aspects of adolescent development that music can influence in one way or another, such as aesthetics, identity, socialization, emotion, mood and its regulation, personality, motivation, etc.

More specifically, music influences the lives of teenagers on issues such as relationships with parents, sociability, participation in groups, behavior, language development and learning skills related to the everyday life of teenagers and the role of music in their lives. In recent years and especially during the last decades, the interest of music educators in musical learning processes does not only concern those that take place within formal educational institutions but also in all those various forms of informal musical learning practices outside schools (Hargreaves, 2011).

Research findings indicate that informal musical practices outside educational institutions contribute to music learning and increase students' interest in music (Folkestad, 2006). Therefore, the interest of music educators, and not only, is also focused on what happens in a child's music education, when they are not in school, and seek to find how this informal experience can be used in the classroom. This interest is based on the view that if we allow students to bring their own musical experiences, that happen outside the classroom, into the classrooms, we will help them have a greater interest in music and better learning outcomes. More specifically, if these student experiences are integrated into 'formal' musical practices, the outcomes of musical engagement and learning can be much more successful and students can form their musical identities.

According to Papazachariou-Christoforou (2021b), the term 'identity' refers to a multidimensional and complex concept that was examined mainly by the sciences of sociology and psychology. More specifically, psychology is the first science that studied and defined what the personality is, what identity means, what are the elements of one's personality/self, etc. The concept of identity refers to our self-image, that is, the way we see ourselves, or as Erickson (1980) claims (as cited in Sokol, 2009) the concept of identity refers to a person's self-perception both in the past, in the present and in the future. According to Hargreaves et al., (2002) identity is nothing more than the way we perceive ourselves in terms of what capabilities we have, what our preferences are, how we function in our lives, the relationships and interactions we have with others and the roles we assume in our lives.

There are different types of identities (national, social, gender, music, etc.). Regarding our musical identity, and in trying to ask ourselves what this might be, we can take into account issues such as the instruments or the type of music we play, the role music plays in our lives, our musical preferences, etc. The image below is indicative of a suggested reflection on musical identities (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1:** Self reflection issues as regards musical identities (Papazachariou-Christoforou, 2021a)

According to Davies (2012, p. 7) music plays an important role in shaping the musical identities of each individual. Many theorists have talked about specific stages that each person goes through to complete their identity and the common view is that this process never ends, it starts in childhood and until one gets older there is a constant reshaping/repositioning of who we are. This means that this process changes the identity, with the dynamic quality it displays which has changed depending on the social context and the experiences we have with the people we come into contact with.

### **Rationale of the study**

In the modern world, music is one of the subjects of Secondary Education in many parts of the contemporary schools, for example in Hungary, Japan, the Netherlands, Great Britain (Hadžihasanović Gojmerac, 2018). However, research has shown that the teaching of music or musical instruments in public schools is not based on the preferences of the students. On the contrary, students are obliged to follow a specific framework defined by music curricula and implemented by music teachers (McQueen et al., 2018). However, for music educators, it is important to consider that: "For a better understanding of teenagers, their musical identity

and their motivations for learning, educators must take into account a number of factors, mainly the already formed musical background with which they enter the classroom based on their accumulated musical experiences” (Saltari, 2018, p. 426).

According to the aforementioned considerations, one could argue that knowledge of children's perceptions, preferences and musical engagement before and during their school studies can inform music educators and enrich their teaching practices more effectively. This knowledge of students' musical experiences can help identify ways to align their needs and wishes with the instructional approaches adopted in the classroom. Thus, they can provide them with a learning context that inspires and engages them actively and meaningfully in the musical practice.

Based on the above and the fact that there seem to be some gaps in the literature on the musical feelings of teenage high school students in Greece both inside and outside the school context, it was decided to conduct this research. Its main purpose is to examine how today's teenage high school students, in a region of Thessaly, feel about music in their daily lives both in formal and informal contexts. The author of this research is hoping that the results of this research can provide some useful information that could be exploited by music educators in their efforts to modernize the learning process with practical and teaching methods that are meaningful for the participants and that are connected with the way they feel about music in their everyday lives.

### **Methodology**

#### **Research purpose and research questions**

The purpose of this research was to investigate the feelings adolescent students, aged 13-15 years have about music. Specifically, the research focused on examining and analyzing the relationship that teenage students have with music and the way it makes them feel. Based on the above, the research question is the following: What are teenage students' feelings about music in the Greek domain and what does it mean to them?

#### **The sample of the research**

The population that the research aimed was students of Secondary Education and especially Junior High School learners. The sample consisted of nine High School students deriving from three different schools. Their selection was done with the help of their teachers based on specific criteria: 1. To have some participant learners that dealt with music only in school, some others that were involved with music in other formal settings (i.e. conservatoria, private lessons) and some others that were dealing with music in informal settings (playing music in groups with friends, self-taught etc). Teachers' support in the sample selection was considered important as they knew their students and could suggest relevant cases. Five male and four female learners aged 13-15 constituted the sample of the research. Consent was asked and given by the students' parents and by their teachers. All participants were reassured of their anonymity and of the fact that they could withdraw any time they felt uncomfortable or wished to stop participating in the research.

#### **The Research tool**

The main research tool was personal semi-structured interviews. Interviews are considered a way of gathering respondents' perceptions and take place between people who are essentially strangers to one another, thus ensuring the objectivity of the process (Cohen et al., 2000). They can be structured or semi-structured (Paraskevopoulou-Kollia, 2008) and issues such as privacy, anonymity, consent, appropriate conduct, data interpretation and confidentiality should be considered carefully (Webb, 2015). The researchers record and take notes from a rather small sample of participants (Buriro et al., 2017), using all the elements contained in the interviews (interviewees' comments, observations, etc.) (Buriro et al., 2017).

Based on the above, semi-structured interviews were used in this research, with predetermined questions by the researcher, which do not necessarily appear in a specific order (Paraskevopoulou-Kollia, 2008). For their implementation, the content of the research question and its purpose was taken into account. The interviews were conducted to obtain as in-depth answers as possible that would expand the information on the research topics. They were also chosen as a data collection tool as they focus on the interaction and communication between the research participants and served its aims and objectives.

For the validity of the research instrument, the interview questions were designed based on the literature on interview design and stages (Cohen & Manion, 2000). They also drew on material collected, prior to the survey, from informal discussions with non-survey teenagers to enlighten the researcher on the topic and help formulate the questions. Thus, the data obtained from the informal discussions served to design the first interview questions, which were piloted with two students, non-research participants.

The aim of this pilot phase was to test the questions in terms of wording, logic, understanding and accuracy of the content, in order to collect useful information and based on the comments of the students who participated in the pilot phase, to redesign them appropriately to be applied in the main research (in the interviews with the nine students). During the interviews, however, other interesting issues emerged that were not foreseen in the design (such as whether students believe that music helps them socialize or if they are fanatic about the music they listen to and support and why).

The duration of the interviews ranged from 35 to 47 minutes. The course of the interviews depended on the interviewees, their personality and their ability to be communicative, so that they responded from their side with their own thoughts and answers. The main questions of the interviews revolved around the need to collect data that could provide answers to the research question.

With the completion of the questions and after the necessary consent and permission was given from both parents and teachers, the interviews with the students took place and were completed over a period of 40 days. The interviews took place in the school libraries or in the events rooms, for the environment to be familiar and safe for the children and always taking into consideration their space preferences. The interviews were carried out at times that did not interfere with the timetable (at the end of the lessons).

The analysis of the interviews data was done with the content analysis method.

## **Results**

All the research data converges on the fact that teenage students consider music to have a very important place in their lives. For them it is a part of their current daily life, a means that helps them think and escape as much as they can. It is an occupation that they love, that they cannot part with and that empowers them at every step.

As they claim, music today is a companion for them, a friend, fun, happiness and strength while it provides them with unique moments and sometimes liberates them from their daily pressure. As one student stated: *"Music is very important in my life right now. It is mainly what helps me in difficult times. Sometimes I think it is the only 'person' who understands me"* (S4).

From all the interviews it was clear that the students claim that music helps the participants in many aspects of their lives. They argue that, in addition to the joy, relaxation or even peace they feel when engaging with music, regardless of the role they adopt each time, music has a positive influence on their lives and provides them with the necessary balance: *"I couldn't live without music. It gives me joy, it gives me many emotions, it makes life more interesting, for example, if someone sees a movie without music it's very boring, this is how I feel"* (P2).

As the students argue, music is present in many aspects of their lives and in many important ways that have special meaning for them. Mostly, as the data shows, music is something that makes them happy, entertains them, helps them pass their time, while, often, doing other



things at the same time. For most participants, music is a means to help them forget and feel better about their problems and worries, while it helps them feel alive and adds meaning to their lives and what they do for themselves.

They admit that music moves them and relaxes them from the tiredness of a hard day, while there are many students who admit that music urges them to dance and move because that's how they express themselves better. Specifically, one participant said: *"Music is a way of expression, some songs are closer to what I think, some show some people's experiences. But music also helps me forget problems and when I listen to music I often dance"* (P3), and another participant said: *"It helps me escape from some stressful situations especially when I study, and it gives me feelings of joy, it makes me generally feel better, so it's an option I resort to quite often"* (P8).

The students emphasized that music has an important role in general in their lives for many reasons. But mainly it has an *"entertaining"* role (S3), *"supportive"* (S7), *"basic and everyday"* (S4). As they explained, for others, music is a means to overcome obstacles they encounter on their way and in their daily life, or escape from their concerns. According to the learners, music which strengthens them, causes positive emotions, helping them to balance and avoid the stress, due to their demanding school courses, or even their personal difficulties. It also helps them think better, and sometimes gives them new ideas, while it almost always keeps them entertained, from the moment they wake up to the moment they go to sleep, whether they are alone at home reading or just relaxing or out and about going for a walk alone or with friends. As a learner argues: *"I really like music. I also play a musical instrument. So, it has a very important role in my life. I also like to learn about the history of music and sometimes it makes my day and sometimes if I'm sad I'll put on a nice piece that I like and I'll listen to it and it will lift me up, so it also helps with my psychology"* (S5).

At another point, a student states: *"Undoubtedly, music plays a very important role for me because if I don't feel well, it's something that helps me overcome my worries even if they are ephemeral. I am always overwhelmed by some positive emotions when I listen to music. It's also a choice I make when I'm alone, it helps me relax, calm down, it adds to my joy"* (S3).

Students report being excited and having many and varied emotions when listening to music. As they stated, the emotions they feel are sometimes positive and sometimes negative, meaning that they may feel melancholy: *"My emotions depend on the music I listen to. For example, pop, rock, most of the time provokes happy and strong emotions. On the contrary, more melancholic music makes me think about quite negative things"* (P4). Nevertheless, one student stated: *"My feeling with music depend on the song I listen to but mainly, no matter if the song is sad or not, listening to music always gives you a good feeling because you hear sounds that make you happy that have meaning and that's nice"* (S6).

In general, most of the feelings that accompany adolescent students listening to music are joy and intense pleasure, or feelings of assurance, calmness, or courage to continue their personal struggles. Other times there are songs that they find very moving and make them cry, while, as they mentioned, the 'softer' (meaning ballads) the song, the more melancholy or reflective about things they are. A student (S5) typically states: *"I get excited, if it's a really interesting music piece that has elements that might seem difficult to me to play, I always try to listen carefully to the drummer and understand him/her if I find something that's difficult, I get excited. If I have heard a piece that I really like and I want to see what the person playing the piece is doing, I always go and ask my teacher who is always very nice and helpful. More specifically, in a rock piece that is a bit more relaxed, pop-rock let's say, I feel happy, it can also give me energy, for example, if I go to the gym. There are no negative feelings with music"* (S5).

Another student stated that *"if it's a powerful song you also feel the power inside you somehow. That is, if a song is happy, you feel the joy, if a song is sadder you won't dance for example but you will be a little worried"* (P1) or elsewhere another research participant argued: *"When I listen to traditional Greek music, let's say, I feel feelings of joy, not all of them,*

*but it triggers me, I have good vibes, or when I listen to some peace that has a negative meaning, it may not make me feel bad but it will make me think deeper” (S6).*

In addition to the emotions that overwhelm them when they listen to music, the students stated that music helps and supports them psychologically. For example, almost all of them mentioned that it helps them manage especially the negative emotions they may have: *“In some situations, after the loss of a relative, for example, I have resorted to music and it has helped me to relax, to express myself” (S8).* Additionally, they pointed out that, studying for a test can be more relaxing and less stressful when accompanied by music, while reading can simply be made more efficient when listening to music because it helps them focus on the book and its content. In particular, a participant stated: *“When I read or study and I want to concentrate, I listen to music and I put on jazz, when I feel depressed, I put on something pleasant to relax, when I’m really good I put on something popular, I don’t know why. When I go to the gym, I put on some trap songs that you listen to because they are loud but you don’t understand what they are saying to ‘wake me up” (S2).*

And elsewhere someone else said that: *“Music helps me calm down a lot and when I’m angry it helps me to relax, to get a little more positive emotions and it affects my psychology and it has affected my psychology a lot because music makes me happy if I’m sad” (P3).*

The majority of teenagers participating in the research stated that music will have the same important place in their lives in the future as they believe that it is not something that ends nor can it be forgotten or left behind. The participants argued that music will have an even more important place in their lives in the future. They also mentioned that they will go to more concerts, they will try to listen to other types of music, they will be able to discover more about themselves through music, that is, what they don’t like now or what they reject at the moment to try to understand it in the future. As they stated: *“It will always be a part of my life. You can’t get rid of it, it’s something that remains there forever and especially if you’re particularly involved with it, like I am with the drums, it will follow me in my life and maybe I can do it professionally as well” (S5).* Another learner said: *“In the past, when I was younger, music was not very important and not very pleasant when I played the guitar. Today this has completely changed. With my bouzouki, which I’m learning how to play, it’s something great and I can spend my time wonderfully. I feel that without music I would just waste my day doing nothing special. In the future, I always want to play and I may play music professionally. It is definitely something that will accompany me for my whole life and it will be something valuable” (S1).* Additionally, someone else said: *“Music has made me a better person, it has taken me to where I am now and in the future it will fill me with joy and although I don’t want to work professionally with music I would like to play in some concert with other people, in an orchestra perhaps” (S7).*

Based on the research results it can be seen that music is also a means of socialization for the adolescent students. From the analysis of the data, it is shown that, the students consider music as a very nice way to make friends and participate in groups as a common interest in music unites them and helps them to maintain a friendship or an acquaintance. As learners mention: *“music for me is a channel of communication” (S2)* or *“Music helps you make friends because you hang out with those who listen to the same music as you” (S7).* Even more intense seems to be the possibility of interaction in musical ensembles and groups, when the teenagers play a musical instrument and especially when they are often with other people, as members of musical ensembles. In particular, one participant said: *“When you know an instrument and play it well, it gives you the ability to get into bands and you make a good ensemble and you make friends and even date. You may as well start a band and while the band may break up at some point, the members won’t be apart but, as far as I know, there will be a contact with each other, even after 30 years for example, so, it is not possible to lose contact with the partners you make with music” (P1).*

Students claim that music helps them open up more as individuals and not be closed up to themselves. In addition to having contact and socializing due to music, they believe that music makes them more sensitive when addressing various situations they may face in their lives: A student claimed: *“Personally, because I’m not a very social person, it helps me have this company that I have and to find another friend through music and to get closer to the children”* (P1). Another learner said: *“Music opens you up, whether it’s ensembles or individuals, so you open up in this way, the happiness your favorite music or musical instrument gives you is awesome, you give joy to others who listen to you and you make yourself happy too”* (S6). While another participant explained that: *“Me and my friends who listen to a lot of music, I feel we are more sensitive with various things. That is to say, we cry more easily but we also care about other children more easily and we worry or fight against injustice, and about such things at school and elsewhere that we see and we don’t like and we want to help. And the music we listen to, sends good messages and influences us to be better towards others”* (P2).

Based on the learners’ comments, music as a motivational factor to achieve their goals and a means of expression and self-efficacy for the adolescent students. At the same time, students believe that music helps them express themselves better, and communicate with themselves and their inner self. As they argue, music is the “vehicle” through which they can envision themselves in the future and what they can do with their lives. They can also communicate their thoughts and beliefs with greater ease and comfort while, as they claim, they feel more powerful as music is what gives them the power to speak about their ideas and for that reason they need it in their lives: *“I believe that it’s a great thing that music exists, I don’t know what I would do without it, it helps me think and see myself as a better person, what I can do, what I want to do”* (S2). Specifically, participant S9 stated: *“In music there are the words that give your life meaning and will help you, it gives you a direction - although it is not always easy to understand what a singer is saying and sometimes it is even more difficult to understand music than what it is to analyze a text in school. What I mean is that songs have a deeper meaning, even more than a poem itself that we discuss and analyze in class in detail. I feel that a song has a greater meaning and more messages to send than what is hidden in a text or a poem”* (S9).

Adolescent students reveal that music has the ability to help them set goals, even simple ones, while the majority of them find that engaging in music (listening or performing) makes them feel better at something or more effective. As they argue: *“Some songs can affect you, make you think about something more analytically”* (S9) or *“Music motivates me to look for bands and artists”* (S3) or *“Because [music] is a way to escape from every day difficulties I make various scenarios of what I could do differently, and I think this it also helps with imagination”* (P4) and *“Music makes me a better person and more responsible”* (P1).

### **Discussion - Conclusion**

This research shows that music has a very important role in the lives of teenagers for many reasons. As it has been found in other researches (Artemi, 2013; Saarikallio et al., 2020), research participants believe that music helps them overcome their difficulties, empowers them, strengthens them, it accompanies them, “understands” them, as if they were a person, relaxes, calms and balances them, while it increases their creativity. As supported in other works (Barbot & Lubart, 2012; Hargreaves, 2012; Ji et al., 2019) music for research participants has a positive effect on their lives. As they themselves stated, music is everything to them and without it, their life would be as empty as a movie without sound or background music. According to what is reported in other researches, the participants stated that music has a supportive and entertaining role, supports them psychologically, helps them manage difficult situations, express themselves and share more easily their concerns and perform better in their school obligations.



In addition, as it has been found, music is the most important means of expressing their emotions, it brings about strong feelings, offers them joy and satisfaction and causes them mainly positive sentiments although it sometimes makes them sad. However, there is also a case of a student, participating in the research, who mentioned that she chooses to listen to certain music to reinforce the negative emotions she feels and this helps her manage her bad mood better.

At the same time, as it has been found, music is an important means of socialization of teenagers that helps them make friends and be part of groups, and whether it concerns ordinary listeners or performers of musical instruments, it helps them know people better, and have common interests and ideas. Music also empowers more introverted students to open up more and seek contact with their peers. Another interesting fact is that the participants feel that music unites them and promotes empathy and concern for fellow human beings, while they believe that music makes them more sensitive and approachable. In addition, music is an important motivation and reason for them to set goals and strive for self-improvement.

Overall, the research shows that music plays and will always play an important role in the lives of adolescent students and will have an important place in their lives. As they themselves argued, music is one “love’ that cannot be lost or forgotten and they wish to manifest it by further involvement in other forms of it, such as participating in concerts or musical events, so that they have more musical experiences and learn more about different types of music.

The research displays some limitations. This is qualitative research with a small number of participants, so the results concern the specific group of teenage students who participated in the research and they cannot be generalized. Additionally, in order to collect richer data and draw safer conclusions it would be interesting to have a larger number of research participants.

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