

# **MainStreaming Success**

## **Neoliberal Success Narratives in Music and their Internalization among Adolescents**

*Luca Carbone*

De verantwoordelijkheid voor de ingenomen standpunten berust alleen bij de auteur.

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## Summary

Music has long been considered an important medium for youth's identities, signaling group affiliation, providing emotional support, and inspiring with its musical and narrative content. Music could be even more important for contemporary adolescents, experiencing increasingly higher levels of anxiety, depression, and performance pressure since the 1980s. In a music landscape ruled by streaming platforms and social media, adolescents have endless access to music content that could provide emotional solace and narrative inspiration to cope with the various challenges of this period. Music could therefore help adolescents in their developments, but it could also promote narratives that might endanger their well-being. In particular, popular music content could be at the forefront in the distribution and internalization of neoliberal success narratives, which have been argued to be at the root of such epidemic of mental ill-being. Neoliberal success narratives might foster feelings of anxiety and performance pressure by setting unrealistic ideals of success, rewarding individualistic values of materialism, fame, power, and merit. Such narratives have been also proposed to potentially empower adolescents, representing a view of the self as agentic and in control of one's own life. The distribution of neoliberal success narratives through popular culture, such as through music products, could therefore have wide implications for the well-being of youth. In order to understand whether and how neoliberal success narratives in music influence the mental health of contemporary adolescents, a first necessary step requires to assess the presence of such narratives in popular music products and the process through which they are eventually internalized in the belief systems of contemporary adolescents. This PhD dissertation does so in six chapters.

Chapter 1 maps the music taste profiles (i.e., the expression of likes and dislikes for various music pieces or genres) of contemporary Flemish

adolescents ( $n = 533$ ,  $Mage = 15.2$  [ $SD = 1.6$ ], 61.2% girls, 80.9% Western-European). The advent of music streaming platforms (MSPs) has brought several changes in how youth consume music, for example by facilitating consumption and by broadening music choices. Moreover, MSPs are key actors in the contemporary music industry, directing the distribution and discovery of music through their recommendation algorithms and curated playlists. Chapter 1 summarizes the existing literature on music tastes in relation to three key determinants, namely the socio-cognitive (i.e., cosmopolitan, and meritocratic beliefs), social (i.e., gender, race, and socio-economic status), and digital (i.e., adoption, frequency, and quality of music listening on MSPs) characteristics of music audiences. By means of latent class analysis and logistic regression, this chapter finds three taste profiles, namely a refined, a practical, and a mainstream profile. These profiles indicate significant gender differences in the adoption of MSPs and show the ubiquity of an omnivore consumption pattern of music macrogenres on MSPs.

Chapters 2 and 3 chart the presence and prevalence of neoliberal success narratives in the content of songs ( $n = 4117$ ) frequently streamed on Spotify in six highly individualistic countries (i.e., the US, UK, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands) between 2016 and 2019. Chapter 2 focuses on status markers used to define “what” is success. It does so by combining a Bourdieusian approach to status, focused on forms of capital (i.e., economic, cultural, and social), with an intersectional focus on power relationships (i.e., sexual objectification) and on the social positionality of artists (i.e., in relation to their gender and racial-ethnic background). Chapter 3 focuses on narratives about “how” to reach success. It does so by centering meritocracy as the primary framework used in neoliberal narratives to define deservingness and worth. Chapters 2 and 3 show a wide depiction of neoliberal success narratives in music, with around 24% of the analyzed lyrics representing neoliberal markers of status and merit. Chapter 2 specifically

indicates that status is commonly represented through markers of materialism, utilitarianism, conspicuous consumption, and sexual objectification. It further shows that, in mainstream music, these markers are typically represented by Black and Brown men. Chapter 3 further indicates that mainstream music typically represents status as legitimately acquired through five meritocratic frames, namely Rags-to-Riches, Control-the-Ship, Deservingness-Reward, Deservingness-Punishment, and No-Pain-No-Gain. By highlighting concepts of giftedness, perseverance, hard work, and resilience, these frames capture the essence of meritocratic narratives as represented in mainstream music.

After mapping the taste profiles and the distribution of neoliberal success narratives on MSPs, Chapters 4, 5, and 6 focus on the potential internalization of music narratives into audiences' beliefs. Chapter 4 conducts a meta-analysis of existing literature studying music effects on beliefs, finding that exposure to music messages is related to the holding of message-consistent beliefs. In particular, such effects are mostly present in relation to song-specific messages (rather than genres or general levels of music exposure), concerning the topics of gender (e.g., sexual objectification) and race (e.g., racial stereotypes), and especially among youth (i.e., adolescents and young adults). Chapter 4 also shows that lyrics and videos have similar effects, that most studies are experimental, and that most literature focuses on populations from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) countries.

Finally, Chapters 5 and 6 specifically examine the internalization process of neoliberal success narratives around effort and performance as represented in adolescents' favorite music products. They conduct among the first longitudinal studies of music effects, surveying a sample of Flemish adolescents ( $n = 405$ ,  $M_{\text{age}} = 15.1$  [ $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.5$ ], girls = 64%) across three waves between 2021 and 2022. Chapter 5 studies whether such internalization happens through the identification with adolescents' favorite artist and

whether a similarity of gender further promotes music effects. Chapter 6 additionally focuses on narrative transportation to study whether feeling transported into music narratives facilitates the internalization of neoliberal success narratives. It further explores whether the experience of hardships in adolescents' lives facilitates the internalization of messages that center around overcoming life struggles. Contrary to the formulated hypotheses, Chapters 5 and 6 do not find evidence of internalization of neoliberal success narratives in the beliefs of a sample of Flemish adolescents from privileged backgrounds over a one-year period.

Overall, this PhD dissertation delves into the MainStreaming of Success, namely, the popularization of neoliberal success narratives through MSPs and the differential internalization (or lack thereof) of such narratives by adolescent music audiences. It shows that neoliberal success narratives are widely and variedly present on MSPs but that they are not internalized by a sample of Flemish adolescents from more privileged backgrounds. The results of this PhD dissertation set an agenda for future research on music effects. They prompt considering the fragmentation of music consumption and the segmentation of music audiences as central aspects in a music industry governed by MSPs and social media platforms. They further highlight the need to develop music-specific theoretical and methodological approaches that are better equipped to capture temporal and selection effects in a continuously changing music landscape. While music has long been considered as a central resource for the development of youth's identities for its capacity to bring people together, MSPs might have long-lasting repercussions on the fragmentation of music audiences and their tastes. They might be fundamentally reshaping the capacity of music to function as a key socializing medium for contemporary and future generations of youth.

## Co-Authorship Statement

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# Introduction

Music fulfills a variety of roles in the everyday lives of its audiences—used to reflect on oneself, to process one’s emotions, and to find and cultivate friendships (Miranda, 2013). In a large group of individuals ranging from age 8 to 85, Schäfer and colleagues (2013) identified as many as 129 non-redundant roles of music in individuals’ lives. The ability of music to accompany a wide range of emotional and social aspects of everyday life is connected to its immense variety of sound qualities, lyrical and video content, genres, and subcultures. Prosaically put, “music is amazing for everybody’s wellbeing” (Musgrave, 2022, p. 2). Music becomes especially important during adolescence as a central source of identity construction (Miranda, 2013; ter Bogt et al., 2013). In this regard, music has been defined as a “badge” of group belongingness, such as for music subcultures (Frith, 1981), as a “marker of distinction,” to define norms and stereotypes about ingroups and outgroups (Lonsdale & North, 2009), and as a “resource,” to learn from others and to better understand oneself (North & Hargreaves, 1999).

This research shows that music could be a unique source to help adolescents overcome and better understand the various problems they normally encounter during these crucial developmental years (ter Bogt et al., 2017). The role of music as a guide through the turbulent times of adolescence may be even more important for today’s youth. Besides the developmental changes that typically accompany adolescence (e.g., identity elaboration, detachment from parental figures; Christie & Viner, 2005), various studies have documented increasing levels of mental health problems among contemporary youth, such as anxiety, depression, sleeping difficulties, and eating disorders (Bor et al., 2014; Jardim & Sofia Marques da Silva, 2018). Among the major sources of such problems, performance pressure and perfectionism are frequently mentioned, especially in relation to academic, job, social, and

personal achievements (Anniko et al., 2019; Curran & Hill, 2019). Today's youth feel increasingly pressured to perform at their best in many different spheres of their lives, such as in their school tasks, appearance, sports capacities, and friendships (Flett & Hewitt, 2022).

In contemporary Western societies, such feelings of performance pressure arguably derive from the internalization of widely available ideals about what it means to be and how to become successful (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2021). In particular, contemporary societies are characterized by what I define in this PhD dissertation as *neoliberal success narratives*—narratives that promote a view of success as the achievement of a high status through the meritocratic principles of individualized effort (e.g., hard work and self-reliance; Bellah et al., 1985) and performance evaluations (e.g., being deserving or undeserving; Lamont, 2019). Neoliberal success narratives are therefore defined by two components: “what” is success (i.e., status defined in terms of individual wealth, fame, and power) and “how” to achieve it (i.e., hard work and self-reliance). The label “neoliberal” is assigned to specify a late stage of Western individualistic and capitalist societies, governed by “the belief that free, meritocratic market competition with minimal government intervention is the best way to organize society” (Bettache & Chiu, 2019, p. 14). In this system, individual freedom and worthiness are ultimately guaranteed by the capacity to rely on oneself and to craft one's own destiny in ceaseless competition against others (Centeno & Cohen, 2012). Such specifications help distinguish the success narratives studied in this PhD dissertation, focused on materialistic, individualistic, and utilitarian definitions of success, from other success narratives and definitions of a good life (Rosa, 2016). Alternative success narratives emphasize, for example, community building, attention toward self-care, or connections with nature and one's spirituality (e.g., prioritizing values such as personal balance, passion, and equality; Zilberstein et al., 2023; Lamont, 2023). This focus on

neoliberalism is particularly relevant, as contemporary adolescents are searching for their own identity in societies that increasingly reward a view of the self as materialistic, individualistic, and meritocratic (Mijs, 2018; Strenze, 2021). While beneficial for some, neoliberal success narratives can be particularly harmful to today's youth and might contribute to explaining the contemporary crisis of mental health occurring since the 1980s, when neoliberalism was first introduced (Centeno & Cohen, 2012; Potrebny et al., 2017).

As frequently pointed out, music could be a unique resource to help adolescents cope with the existential problems experienced in these crucial developmental years (Musgrave, 2022). Music could provide emotional solace (ter Bogt et al., 2017), a means to establish social connections and friendships (Franken et al., 2017), and reflexive opportunities and inspirations (Schäfer et al., 2013). Yet, while helping adolescents cope with developmental- and social-specific challenges, music could also be at the forefront in the distribution and internalization of neoliberal success narratives deemed partly responsible for the mental health crisis of contemporary youth. Music artists have indeed been suggested to adopt neoliberal success narratives in their music products, in which hustling and fighting for their dreams are represented as necessary means to acquire a "good life," made of branded clothes, fast cars, and expensive liquors (Baksh-Mohammed & Callison, 2014; Primack et al., 2011). The consumption of such narratives might be beneficial for some, for example, by providing a sense of control and redemption among marginalized groups while consolidating a sense of deservingness and self-esteem among privileged ones (McCoy et al., 2013). Simultaneously, it might entrench feelings of hopelessness, performance pressure, and anxiety that might further complicate healthy developments toward adulthood (Essau et al., 2014). Music could therefore be a double-

edged sword, functioning as a potential solver of the problems that it contributes to reproduce.

Studying the presence and prevalence of neoliberal success narratives in music content allows to further assess their potential internalization and health effects among audiences. Music crafts narratives that can be powerful tools used by individuals to make sense of and to act in the world they inhabit (Rose, 1991; Somers, 1994). Once internalized into audiences' beliefs, music narratives could further impact mental health by orienting behaviors and affecting the physiological functioning of their audiences (Dingle et al., 2021). For example, the internalization of narratives that center hard work as the key element to achieving success might promote behaviors like working extra hours or feelings like self-efficacy that might disrupt (e.g., performance pressure; Becker et al., 2021) or enhance (e.g., self-esteem; Trautwein et al., 2006) one's mental health. Before studying the impact on mental health, this PhD dissertation is specifically interested in how music displays neoliberal success narratives and in the potential internalization of such narratives into adolescents' belief systems. Addressing these questions will be crucial to explore the potential consequences of such internalization for the mental health of adolescents.

To understand whether and how music represents neoliberal success narratives and whether such narratives are internalized into adolescents' beliefs, the existing research has fallen short in three aspects. In relation to music representations, few studies have documented how success is represented in popular lyrics beyond typical depictions of materialism and conspicuous consumption (i.e., consumption of luxurious products to gain prestige; Podoshen et al., 2014). The literature interested in status representations in music has overlooked other sources of status differentials beyond social class, such as race and gender, and other markers of fame, such as power and social relationships (Ridgeway & Kricheli-Katz, 2013).

Moreover, no study has yet assessed the presence and prevalence of meritocratic narratives in popular music. That is, we have only partial knowledge of how neoliberal success narratives (i.e., “what” is success and “how” to achieve it) are depicted in music.

To further understand whether such narratives are subsequently internalized by adolescents, existing research has also fallen short of understanding how audiences consume and might be affected by music in today’s streaming era. In particular, contemporary generations of adolescents are growing up in highly digitized environments where music is distributed, consumed, and shared through music streaming platforms (MSPs; Webster, 2019b). Youth are the biggest consumers of music on MSPs (IFPI, 2023b), and yet we know little about how they consume music and develop music tastes on such platforms. This can be particularly relevant in relation to neoliberal success narratives, as such narratives could be widely present on MSPs because embraced by the main actors of the contemporary music industry, namely major labels (Arditi, 2020), music artists (Taylor & O’Brien, 2017), and representatives at MSPs (Hodgson, 2021). More generally, it remains unclear whether music influences audiences’ beliefs, as the existing meta-analyses on the effects of music mostly relate to health effects (e.g., anxiety and depression; Harney et al., 2023; Tang et al., 2020) or have been conducted before the advent of MSPs (Timmerman et al., 2008). This leaves open the question of whether contemporary audiences, and more specifically adolescents, internalize music messages in the current streaming era.

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach between media psychology and cultural sociology, the current PhD dissertation addresses these shortcomings by analyzing the content of popular music lyrics, the configuration of contemporary adolescents’ music tastes, and the internalization process through which adolescents select and interpret neoliberal success narratives in music to elaborate their beliefs about success. Taken together, these analyses

delve into the *MainStreaming of Success*, namely, the wide presentation and distribution of (neoliberal) success narratives through music streaming platforms. In the current streaming era, success narratives become mainstream when they are popularized through recommendation algorithms and curatorial practices (e.g., playlists) present on MSPs. From this perspective, success narratives become mainstream not only for their wide reach but also for their distribution within corporate logics of music dissemination, typical of MSPs (Arditi, 2020). Companies such as Spotify and Apple Music are primarily guided by a neoliberal interest in the maximization of corporate profit (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2018). Such interest prioritizes the maximization of revenues at the expenses of creative freedom and of a fair payment of artistic royalties (Marshall, 2015). Music artists who aspire to become popular through the recommendations and curatorial systems offered by MSPs are, therefore, required to comply with industry- and algorithmic-specific logics, driven by metrics such as listening volume and access to new markets and audiences (Maasø & Hagen, 2020). As such, narratives that become popular through MSPs, such as those about success studied in this PhD dissertation, are those that are popularized by recommendation algorithms because of their potential to maximize corporate profit. The *MainStreaming of Success* constitutes a window into contemporary systems of music distribution and consumption, where success narratives become popular because rewarded within neoliberal logics of cultural diffusion.

### **Neoliberal Success Narratives**

In 1987, UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher expressed her programmatic views on the relationship between the welfare state and individual entrepreneurship: “There is no such thing as Society. There are individual men and women, and there are families” (quoted in Ratcliffe, 2016). Margaret Thatcher was a key figure in the development of neoliberalism, together with other prominent figures, including Ronald

Regan, the 40th President of the US between 1981 and 1989, and Milton Friedman, one of the intellectual founders of neoliberalism, who also served as the economic advisor for the governments of Thatcher and Regan. Neoliberalism was introduced in the 1980s as the dominant political-economic system governing the political and economic relationships of Western societies and their international relationships (e.g., enforced through entities such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank; Roberts, 2021). Neoliberalism was set in place to lift the world economy from the financial instability that hit after the dismantling of the Bretton Woods Accord in 1971 and the OAPC oil embargo in 1973 (Centeno & Cohen, 2012). These events generated a situation of economic recession in which prices were increasing in tandem with economic stagnation and rising unemployment, paving the way for the dismantling of Keynesian politics enacted since World War II. State interventions and public funding, typical of Keynesian approaches, were deemed ineffective in tackling the challenges of this period. New monetary policies were instead put in place to strengthen the market's capacity to self-regulate, leading to policies of fiscal austerity, privatization, and market deregulation (Centeno & Cohen, 2012).

By individualizing risks and removing the necessary counterbalancing safety nets, neoliberal policies have been argued to generate increasingly competitive and unequal societies (Zucman, 2019), leading to more precarious job markets and an existential loss of hope among the most vulnerable social groups (Nkansah-Amankra et al., 2013). An extreme and most poignant example of such effects is the so-called “deaths of despair,” which characterizes a surge of deaths by suicide, drug overdose, or alcohol-related diseases attributed to feelings of despair and hopelessness among those social groups most exposed to the risks introduced by neoliberal policies (King et al., 2022). While deaths of despair represent some of the most extreme and dramatic consequences of neoliberalism, various researchers have pointed to



a more general decline in mental health since the 1980s and have started investigating the potential responsibilities of neoliberalism for this decline (Roberts, 2021; Teghtsoonian, 2009). In particular, the introduction of neoliberal policies has been argued to promote mental ill-being in three ways: by fueling social segregation, by differently impacting the most privileged and marginalized groups in society, and by promoting individualistic narratives that tie a sense of worth to individuals' capacity to overcome others in increasingly dire conditions.

First, societies with stronger neoliberal values are also characterized by more severe levels of social segregation, in which communities are further isolated from each other (Mijs & Usmani, 2024). Social segregation represents situations in which neighborhoods and schools are increasingly homogenous, typically along socioeconomic and racial-ethnic lines (Hewstone, 2015). Such segregation can be conducive to lower levels of well-being (e.g., higher psychological distress, depression, and anxiety) because it facilitates and promotes the diffusion of group stereotypes (Do et al., 2019; Koenig & Eagly, 2019). Group stereotypes, in turn, can be detrimental not only for the targeted groups (e.g., Black and Brown people, poor people; Eylem et al., 2020) but also for social cohesion more generally (Fone et al., 2014). Individuals living in neighborhoods with less social cohesion (e.g., with lower levels of inter- and intragroup trust, reciprocity, and bonds; Hewstone, 2015) are also generally found to experience worse mental health outcomes (Kingsbury et al., 2020). As such, the social segregation brought about by neoliberal processes is thought to dismantle intergroup trust and social cohesion, fostering worse mental health outcomes among its members (Haslam et al., 2022).

Second, while generally believed to more strongly affect the mental health of marginalized groups, neoliberalism may also affect the mental health of the most privileged (Foster & O'Mealey, 2021). Among marginalized groups,

neoliberalism negatively impacts well-being by limiting access to central institutions for human flourishing, such as education and healthcare systems (Mijs, 2023; Nkansah-Amankra et al., 2013). It does so through processes of urban and social planning (e.g., gentrification; Brown-Saracino, 2017), through which the best healthcare and school services are offered in the most affluent areas (Christafore & Leguizamon, 2018). This, in turn, has severe consequences for the well-being of marginalized communities, not only because of their limited access to health services but also because of their limited capacities to flourish and fully participate in society (Versey, 2023). Neoliberalism also has negative consequences among members of privileged groups (the affluent and members of racial-ethnic majorities). Among them, holding neoliberal success beliefs can be conducive to higher perceptions of status threats (i.e., perceptions of potential threats to one's current status in society; Siddiqi et al., 2019) and to higher risks of burnout due to increasingly higher pressures to perform and maintain a high status (Becker et al., 2021; Billings, 2021). In other words, neoliberalism is argued to impact the mental health of the most disadvantaged by limiting their capacities to flourish in society, while also impacting the most privileged by increasing their feelings of performance pressure to maintain their status quo and to avoid losing their privileges (Siddiqi et al., 2019).

Third, neoliberal policies are supported by and further promote narratives that tie individuals' sense of worth to their abilities to compete and overcome others in increasingly dire and adverse conditions (Centeno & Cohen, 2012). Neoliberalism promotes neoliberal success narratives that define what are considered markers of success and what is the legitimate modality to achieve success (Leyva, 2019). In particular, neoliberalism promotes a view of success, where having a high status means accruing large amounts of wealth, fame, and power, considered the primary means to evaluate human worth (Rosa, 2016; Lamont, 2019). Success is further seen as legitimate when

achieved through individual effort rather than through factors that are outside individuals' direct control, such as inheritance, luck, or chance (Pluchino et al., 2018). In neoliberal societies, individual effort is typically framed through a meritocratic lens consisting of the set of values that prioritize ability, talent, self-reliance, and hard work as the morally correct way to achieve one's goals (Mijs, 2015). From this perspective, today's youth grow up in social, economic, and political contexts that reward individuals' capacities to rely on themselves while prevailing over others, corroding the fulfillment of basic needs for relatedness and community. These contexts create the conditions for the success of the most privileged, at the expense of the most vulnerable (Zeira, 2022). Existing literature indicates that individuals with stronger neoliberal beliefs suffer higher rates of social disconnection, loneliness, and competition (Becker et al., 2021). Holding neoliberal beliefs also relates to increased feelings of performance pressure and perfectionism—known sources of stress and anxiety (Curran & Hill, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2019). Finally, systematic reviews and meta-analyses further report that holding stronger materialistic (Bradshaw et al., 2023; Moldes & Ku, 2020) and meritocratic (Madeira et al., 2019) beliefs is negatively associated with individual (e.g., lower life satisfaction and higher depression) and social (e.g., higher antisocial attitudes and stereotypes) indicators of well-being.

This literature points to the detrimental consequences that the introduction of neoliberal policies has on individual and social well-being. In particular, it points to the negative implications that an overly individualized focus on effort and performance can have for individual and social well-being. A support for beliefs in line with neoliberal success narratives has also been argued to promote, rather than thwart, well-being. In particular, various streams of research point to the beneficial effects that holding beliefs such as a strong sense of self-efficacy and individual agency have on individuals' well-being (Disabato et al., 2019). Beliefs such as grit (i.e., "perseverance and

passion for long-term goals;” Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087) or a growth mindset (i.e., intelligence is malleable and can be improved with training; Yeager et al., 2019) have indeed been found to promote higher levels of subjective well-being and happiness (Kwon, 2021a; Weisskirch, 2019). Such literature aligns with psychological theories that remark the importance of self-efficacy and agency as central aspects for human flourishing, such as self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000), social cognitive (Bandura, 2001), and incremental theory (Bernecker et al., 2017). According to these theories, concepts that are also present in neoliberal success narratives, such as autonomy, self-efficacy, and agency, are also essential for individuals’ capacities to flourish and, ultimately, for their well-being (Passmore et al., 2018). As such, holding beliefs that partially align with neoliberal success narratives, such as those emphasizing a sense of agency and self-efficacy, could have positive consequences for mental health because they fulfill fundamental psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Moreover, the literature drawing from system justification theory suggests that such positive effects might also derive from an increased sense of agency and reduced cognitive dissonance, even among groups that are most affected by the detrimental consequences of neoliberalism (e.g., the poor; Hadarics et al., 2021). System justification consists of “the psychological process by which existing social arrangements are legitimized, even at the expense of personal and group interest” (Jost & Banaji, 1994, p. 2). Holding beliefs that justify a system where grit and a growth mindset prevail can help individuals from marginalized groups achieve a sense of agency and control over their otherwise precarious lives (Li et al., 2020). They help justify individuals’ current positions in society while simultaneously providing a potential solution to move out of marginalized conditions (McCoy et al., 2013). At the same time, holding grit can also have positive effects among privileged social groups (e.g., the rich; Li et al., 2020). By romanticizing hard work and

persistence as redemptive narratives of self-made success, privileged social groups can strengthen their sense of self-efficacy and legitimacy (Kantola & Kuusela, 2019), benefitting from a heightened sense of self-esteem (Roex et al., 2019).

Overall, the introduction of neoliberal policies has been argued to promote both negative and positive consequences for well-being. Among the negative effects, neoliberalism has been argued to promote feelings of performance pressure and anxiety in the general population, to increasingly limit the capacities of individuals from marginalized groups to flourish in society, and to increasingly pressure the most privileged to maintain their status quo and avoid losing their privileges (Siddiqi et al., 2019). Instead, the literature on the positive effects suggests that beliefs such as grit and a growth mindset can generally promote the fulfillment of basic psychological needs of autonomy and competence, to increase a sense of stability and agency among marginalized groups, and to provide a sense of deservingness and self-esteem among privileged ones (Li et al., 2020). Neoliberalism can therefore have wide-ranging implications for well-being. These implications are highly dependent upon the specific social groups under consideration, as different individuals (e.g., along socioeconomic or racial-ethnic lines) are differently exposed to and potentially affected by neoliberal success narratives. An important caveat in reviewing this literature is the consideration that the theoretical approaches studying the mental health effects of neoliberal success narratives have developed independently from each other. On the one hand, sociological approaches have focused on socio-cultural processes (e.g., social segregation and narrative distribution) that overlook the psychological elaboration of such beliefs. On the other hand, psychological approaches are primarily interested in universal processes of psychological elaboration (e.g., basic psychological needs) that overlook the societal structures in which they take place. A full understanding of how neoliberal success beliefs influence

mental health requires interdisciplinary efforts capable of evaluating the psychological processing of neoliberal success narratives within broader systems of marginalization and privilege.

### **Contemporary Adolescents amidst Typical Developments and Crises**

In neoliberal societies, adolescents are particularly at risk of suffering from mental health issues (Gore et al., 2011). In its latest report on this issue, the World Health Organization (WHO) reports that one in seven adolescents worldwide (14%) experience some form of mental ill-being, particularly anxiety, depression, and suicide, which remain largely unrecognized and untreated (WHO, 2022). Other sources document incidence rates that vary between 10% and 30% (Choi, 2018). Mounting research has further indicated that such incidences have been increasing in recent decades (Bor et al., 2014). Girls, in particular, have been recurrently found to suffer worse mental health than boys, especially in relation to life satisfaction, anxiety, and depression (Silva et al., 2020). Boys also suffer from particular forms of mental ill-being, especially anxiety, suicide intentions, and loneliness (Rice et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2017). While it still remains unclear whether we are witnessing an actual increase in incidence or a rise in diagnosis, for example, because of better mental health literacy (Gunnell et al., 2018), a significant group of contemporary adolescents struggle with mental health.

The mental health crisis experienced by contemporary adolescents may complicate typical developments in their cognitive and social skills, posing a fundamental threat to their later flourishing in society (Essau et al., 2014). Indeed, adolescence is a fundamental period for the development of individuals' identities, typically lived between the ages of 12 and 19 (Sanders, 2013). In transitioning from childhood to adulthood, adolescents develop increased cognitive and relational skills, such as abstract forms of thinking, emotion regulation, and perspective taking, which are crucial for the formation of their identities (Choudhury et al., 2006). These changes typically

occur through various stages and at different age periods. Transitioning out of puberty, young adolescents (11–14 years old) start developing early moral concepts, strong peer identification, and emotional separation from their parents (Christie & Viner, 2005). Such changes continue to develop throughout middle (15–17 years old) to late (18–21 years old) adolescence, further including complex forms of abstract thinking, and increased verbal abilities, social autonomy, and vocational capabilities (Christie & Viner, 2005). These developments go hand in hand with rapid changes in adolescents' brains, bodies, and social lives that accompany this period (Choudhury et al., 2006). While individuals' identities can consolidate and adapt throughout life, adolescence is a foundational period for defining the self (Erikson, 1968).

Adolescents could be particularly exposed to and prone to internalizing neoliberal success narratives. In these formative years, youth gradually become independent and better able to reflect on themselves in relation to others, such as by comparing themselves to friends or modeling parental beliefs and behaviors (Van Der Aar et al., 2018). Indeed, parents and peers become central in adolescence as models to mimic and compare themselves to (Johnson et al., 2016). Such comparisons become important in this period as they accompany and help address fundamental questions about oneself, such as who to become, what dreams to pursue, and how to realize one's potential (Beyers & Çok, 2008). Through such comparisons, adolescents gradually develop increasing concerns about social issues, such as poverty and wealth, and gradually form their opinions and positions in relation to these topics (Oosterhoff et al., 2020). The generations of adolescents growing up since the 1980s (so-called Baby Boomers and especially Millennials) have typically been supportive of neoliberal success narratives (Gill et al., 2021). Across Western countries, adolescents have tended to see themselves through concepts such as hard work and commitment (i.e., performance-oriented self-

concept; Smith & Skrbiš, 2017), and similar frames have been used to explain the successes and failures of others (i.e., effort-oriented success beliefs; Flanagan et al., 2014). These generations of adolescents have also expressed support for materialistic and individualistic definitions of success, where material wealth and achievements in one's academic and work career define characteristics of what it means to be successful (together with other relevant indicators, such as supporting one's family and friends; Killoren et al., 2017; Sichling & Karamehic-Muratovic, 2020). Findings about the contemporary generation of adolescents (so-called Gen-Z) also point to similar beliefs, although research is ongoing. Contemporary adolescents seem to maintain strong support for meritocratic and individualistic views of success (Franceschelli & Keating, 2018), while increasingly adopting more collectivistic views (e.g., increased social activism; Pew Research Center, May 2021) and dedicating more attention to their mental and physical health (Zilberstein et al., 2023).

Contemporary adolescents are coping with important existential transitions—typical of this developmental period—in socio-cultural climates that increasingly pressure them to become their best selves and to work hard to attain unreachable ideals of success (Franceschelli & Keating, 2018). While some could benefit from these beliefs by developing a heightened sense of agency and control (Almroth et al., 2018), others could suffer from feeling incapable of reaching their goals and pressured to define themselves through such failures (Anniko et al., 2019). To better understand potential explanations and solutions for these differences, the existing literature has identified several macro factors considered responsible for these trends, such as societal crises (e.g., the 2008 recession, the Covid-19 pandemic) as well as country-specific (e.g., recessing socio-economic conditions) and individual-specific (e.g., immigration status, family breakage) stressors (Choi, 2018). Various sources have also reported a steady surge of mental ill-being since the 1980s,



especially anxiety, loneliness, and depression (Collishaw, 2015; Madsen et al., 2018; Potrebny et al., 2017). Odgers and Jensen (2020, p. 337) report that “secular increases in emotional problems among young people have been observed [...] in countries such as Greece, Germany, Sweden, Iceland, Norway, China, and New Zealand from the 1980s onwards.”

While the debate around the origins and determinants of the mental health crisis among adolescents is still ongoing (Keyes & Platt, 2024), current literature has started to acknowledge the potential consequences that holding neoliberal success beliefs has for the mental health of youth (Weinberg et al., 2020). The development of potentially heterogeneous well-being effects across different social groups has further stimulated the investigation of potential processes and sources through which adolescents are exposed and further develop neoliberal success beliefs (Mijs & Usmani, 2024). Most of this literature has focused on the *social* processes through which individuals come to support neoliberal success narratives, such as school segregation (Mijs, 2023) or perceptions of social mobility (Mijs et al., 2022). This literature remarks on the role of *offline* segregation (e.g., in schools and neighborhoods) in limiting the information available to individuals to fully understand their social conditions in relation to others (Mijs & Hoy, 2021).

While providing valuable insights into the offline determinants for the development of neoliberal success beliefs, this literature disregards a key aspect that makes the current generation of adolescents different from previous generations. Contemporary adolescents are born and are growing up in deeply mediatized societies (Hepp, 2019). While previous generations of adolescents have been heavy consumers of media technologies, such as radio and television (Twenge et al., 2018), the advent of the Internet and of digital devices, such as smartphones and laptops, have brought contemporary adolescents to be more heavily and frequently immersed in digital platforms and content (Pew Research Center, 2021). Indeed, various reports document

that around 97% of adolescents use the Internet daily, consuming digital content for around 3 hours per day, and with an active profile on at least three social media platforms, on average (Barry et al., 2017; Pew Research Center, 2021).

Disregarding the ubiquity of media consumption among contemporary adolescents ignores how media can be key socializing agents for youth in the development of neoliberal success beliefs. Media can provide information about success beyond those available in offline contexts (Lieberman & Schroeder, 2020). Even if different groups are increasingly pushed apart by neoliberal processes (Mijs, 2023), they can still learn about each other through the narratives provided by media content (Wojcieszak & Azrout, 2016). Importantly, these narratives can be constructed in such a way that they do not accurately reflect reality but selectively highlight and omit several key aspects present in offline contexts (McArthur & Reeves, 2019). Neoliberal success narratives diffused through media content can therefore provide different social groups with information about each other that does not necessarily reflect accurate lived experiences but instead promotes idealized representations that follow industry- and producer-specific understandings and interests (Lena, 2006). In this sense, contemporary adolescents can learn about social groups with whom they have limited contact in their everyday lives (e.g., the rich, the poor), and more generally about success, from media representations that promote unreachable ideals of fame and success (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2021). To understand the role of neoliberal success narratives in the mental health of contemporary youth, it is first necessary to unpack how such narratives are made available in popular media products and how they are internalized into the belief systems of their consumers.

## **Neoliberal Success Narratives in Popular Media**

Since their inception in the 20th century, mass media have been central agents in the production and distribution of narratives about social groups (Gamson et al., 1992; Simonson et al., 2019). Mass media craft public narratives that provide “the common culture through which communities cultivate shared and public notions about facts, values, and contingencies of human existence” (Gerbner, 1969, p. 138). They constitute representations that are public to the extent that they are commonly available to large audiences and readily deployable to understand one’s own reality (Powers, 2022). They provide the tools available to individuals to craft their own understanding of the world through a commonly shared vocabulary of representations (Somers, 1994; Swidler, 1989).

Among the many narratives present in media content, neoliberal success narratives have featured a prominent position in newspapers (McArthur & Reeves, 2019) and television fiction (Ronsini, 2014). Such narratives have mostly focused on topics such as poverty (Rose & Baumgartner, 2013), wealth (Rowlingson & Connor, 2011), and economic inequalities (Ronsini, 2014). In this literature, around 60% of the content analyzed represents certain social groups (e.g., the wealthy) as successful because of their hard work, while others (e.g., the poor) as deserving of their difficulties because depicted as lazy and unmotivated (Bullock et al., 2001).

More recently, the so-called “malleability narrative of mediated ideals” (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2021) has further considered the presence and prevalence of neoliberal success narratives in media that are popular among adolescents (e.g., social media) and has urged for an investigation into their effects on mental health. In particular, such literature defines malleable ideals as “a collection of media representations of a variety of ideals that tend to be portrayed as within reach for anyone who is committed to pursuing his/her own self-interest” (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2021, p. 1). This perspective

offers a specific focus on the presence and prevalence of neoliberal success narratives within reach for those committed enough in their pursuit. Malleable ideals have been investigated in the areas of career and professional development (de Lenne et al., 2022; Devos et al., 2024), social popularity (Devos et al., 2022), and body image and surveillance (Maes & Vandenbosch, 2022; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). This literature shows that malleable ideals are widely present in media that are popular among youth (“89.9% [of TV-series characters] had a lot of self-development opportunities within their careers,” Devos et al., 2024, p. 8), and that exposure to such ideals relates to an internal attribution of responsibilities among adolescents, which is subsequently associated with increased feelings of performance pressure (de Lenne et al., 2020). Currently, malleable media narratives have been studied on television (Devos et al., 2024), magazines (Devos et al., 2022), and social media (de Lenne et al., 2020).

### **Music for Identity Developments**

Overall, the existing literature on neoliberal success narratives has focused on their representation mainly on news and televised media (Devos et al., 2024; McArthur & Reeves, 2019), and also on social media (de Lenne et al., 2020). Yet, we know little about a medium that has been recurrently found to be central to adolescents’ identities, namely music (North & Hargreaves, 1999). Music fulfills a variety of needs and purposes for adolescents, used for hedonic reasons, such as to relax and dance, as well as for more reflexive purposes, such as to reflect on the lyrics and to communicate group affiliation (Schäfer et al., 2013). Adolescents use music daily to regulate their emotions and stress (ter Bogt et al., 2017) and to learn from music artists, often mentioned as their favorite media role models (Chia & Poo, 2009; Hammond et al., 2024). Among the globally expanding audience of music listeners, adolescents are the group that dedicates the most time listening to music, consuming around 25 hours of music per week (Bonneville-Roussy et al.,

2013)—they are the age group most likely to listen to music on MSPs compared to older generations (IFPI, 2023b). This literature has also indicated gender differences in adolescents' music preferences. Before the advent of MSPs, this literature showed that girls tend to prefer light music (e.g., pop and dance; Schwartz & Fouts, 2003), while boys tend to express preferences for heavy music (e.g., metal and rap; North, 2010). More recently, gender differences seem to be slowly fading in terms of genre preferences, with more women consuming genres typically consumed by men (e.g., rap; Palma-Martos et al., 2021) and more men consuming genres typically consumed by women (e.g., pop; Lorenzo-Quiles et al., 2020). Such research also suggests that gender differences are shifting from genres to artists' qualities, with men preferring artists who depict themselves as tough (e.g., leaders) and women preferring more sophisticated (e.g., underground) artists (Donze, 2017).

During adolescence, music becomes an important source of identity construction, self-expression, and emotional coping (Miranda, 2013; ter Bogt et al., 2017). Such functions could become even more important to help today's youth cope with their feelings of performance pressure and to guide and inspire them in the search for their identities (Miranda, 2019). Among contemporary adolescents, music could be at the forefront in the distribution and internalization of neoliberal success narratives that might be empowering for some individuals while fueling feelings of anxiety and stress for others. Empirical evidence shows the prevalence of neoliberal values, such as meritocracy and self-reliance, among the heads of the mainstream music industry (e.g., boardroom at major labels; Hodgson, 2021) as well as among cultural creators (e.g., music artists; Taylor & O'Brien, 2017). Moreover, existing content analyses show the prevalence of materialistic markers of success, such as expensive cars and luxurious brands, in popular music products (e.g., music videos and lyrics; Burkhalter & Thornton, 2014).

Neoliberal success narratives are therefore expected to feature the content of mainstream music.

However, we currently do not know much about how and how frequently neoliberal success narratives are present in music content and whether such messages are subsequently internalized by adolescents, potentially affecting their mental health. This is surprising for two main reasons. First, the countries where music content has generally been studied and in which most popular music is produced (mostly the US and UK; Achterberg et al., 2011) are also those with the highest levels of neoliberal beliefs among their audiences (e.g., meritocracy, individualism; Mijs, 2019). Cultural products, such as music lyrics or videos, often contain meanings and narratives that are popular in the context of their production (Lena, 2006; Roy, 2004). As such, if most popular music is produced in highly neoliberal countries, such as the US, it would be reasonable to expect that high levels of neoliberal success narratives also feature the music produced in those countries and distributed worldwide.

Second, the current music landscape is dominated by streaming platforms such as Spotify (IFPI, 2023a), which have amplified the already ubiquitous presence of music in everyday life (Hodgson, 2021). As companies that embrace and promote a meritocratic culture (Arditi, 2020), streaming platforms might also amplify the diffusion of such meritocratic narratives through their algorithmically curated playlists and user-specific recommendations (Bonini & Gandini, 2019). Such systems have been found to be more likely to recommend male, international, and established artists (Melchiorre et al., 2021; Werner, 2020), providing more visibility to those artists who are already successful. Furthermore, existing research shows how algorithmic recommendation systems are built by developers who are strongly guided by the assumption that music artists have equal chances of becoming visible and that those who end up becoming more visible do so because of their better skills and increased efforts (Bishop, 2020). The same developers

consider meritocracy to be a morally desirable feature of algorithms, “rewarding effective agent performances but also encouraging correct behaviors” (Comi et al., 2014, p. 1461). Meritocratic values are therefore important drivers in the construction of music recommendation algorithms, in the selection of artists and music promoted as popular, and potentially also in the content distributed through such selection.

Given the potential role that music has in the development of neoliberal success beliefs and in youth’s mental health, it is surprising to see a dearth of studies about the distribution and consumption of neoliberal success narratives in music, especially among contemporary adolescents. The current PhD dissertation departs from this literature to answer two main research questions: 1) How and how frequently do mainstream music lyrics represent neoliberal success narratives? and 2) Do contemporary adolescents internalize such narratives through their favorite music products?

### **Distribution and Consumption of Neoliberal Success Narratives in Music: An Outline of the Current PhD Dissertation**

To address these questions, the current PhD dissertation is divided into two parts. The first part, titled “The Contemporary Music Landscape: Adolescents’ Music Tastes and Mainstream Music Content,” maps the current music landscape by analyzing the music tastes of contemporary Flemish adolescents and the content of music lyrics that are popular in highly individualistic countries. These chapters specifically focus on streaming platforms as central sources for the distribution of neoliberal success narratives and music consumption among adolescents.

To study music audiences, the current PhD dissertation focuses on Flanders, the northern region of Belgium. Various studies have reported that Belgium in general (Roex et al., 2019) and the region of Flanders in particular (Clycq et al., 2014; Weinberg et al., 2020) currently display higher levels of

meritocratic beliefs than those generally reported in most other European countries. Santos et al. (2017) further showed that Belgium has undergone a similar increase in individualistic beliefs as those experienced in other highly individualistic countries, such as the US and Norway. Although not representing the steepest increase among the countries analyzed, Belgium nevertheless sits among the countries with the strongest increase in individualistic beliefs in the past 60 years. Given these changes, Belgium and Flanders are a particularly interesting case for studying the development of neoliberal success beliefs among the adolescent population. Contemporary Flemish adolescents might be increasingly surrounded by neoliberal success narratives and increasingly pressured to internalize them.

To study music content, the current PhD dissertation focuses on music written in English that is popular in highly individualistic countries, namely the US, UK, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the Netherlands (Mascini et al., 2013). These countries were chosen for two main reasons. First, existing research suggests that the context in which music is produced and consumed is important to the content represented in such music (Lena, 2006). That is, countries in which certain values are more salient in the general population are also more likely to be used in the production of cultural content, such as music lyrics or videos (French, 2017). This process can be explained by considering, for example, the public appeal of culturally known scripts. Audiences are more likely to consume and relate to content that aligns with, rather than challenges, their preexisting beliefs (Song & Boomgaarden, 2017). Moreover, cultural producers who belong to a specific cultural context are also likely to draw from and to use scripts that are available to them, rather than using new ones or those available elsewhere (Evans, 2022). As such, music produced and consumed in highly individualistic countries is expected to be likelier to contain individualistic narratives (i.e., neoliberal success narratives) than those produced and consumed in non-individualistic countries (French,



2017). If neoliberal success narratives are not present in countries with the strongest neoliberal success beliefs among their populations, they are unlikely to be found in other countries. Second, although the Belgian population does not hold the strongest individualistic beliefs as those in the chosen countries, it shows significant increases in such beliefs over time (Santos et al., 2017). Moreover, the Belgian population shares music preferences similar to those of other highly individualistic countries, such as the Netherlands. As an example, at the time of writing this PhD dissertation (May–June 2024), the Spotify charts of Belgium and the Netherlands share one-third of the same songs in the top 200 streamed weekly (own elaborations). The existing literature further hints at this similarity by showing that Belgian and Dutch adolescents tend to cluster in similar music taste groups (ter Bogt et al., 2011; ter Bogt et al., 2012). As such, studying the content of music that is popular in those countries that are currently the most individualistic (i.e., the US, UK, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the Netherlands) might provide a window into the music that might soon become (or that already is) popular among the Belgian population as well.

The second part, titled “Music and its attitudinal effects. The development and testing of music effects” studies the development of content-consistent beliefs among music audiences, in general, and among Belgian adolescents, in particular. It does so by first meta-analyzing the existing literature to understand how contemporary music contributes to the development of content-consistent beliefs among its listeners. Such a meta-analytical approach is particularly relevant, as the most recent meta-analysis on the effects of music listening on audiences’ beliefs was published before the advent of MSPs (Timmerman et al., 2008). To understand whether music listening is still relevant for the development of music-consistent beliefs among contemporary audiences, this chapter specifically focuses on key features of this literature, such as messages (e.g., about race and gender),

format (e.g., lyrics or videos), design (e.g., experimental or longitudinal), and theoretical approaches. After this chapter, the PhD dissertation focuses on two key mechanisms of narrative persuasion, namely identification and transportation, to explore whether and how adolescents develop neoliberal success beliefs through their favorite music artists and songs. These chapters focus on neoliberal success beliefs related to “how” success is achieved, whether focused on the self (i.e., performance-oriented self-concept) or related to others (i.e., effort-oriented success beliefs). These chapters do not include beliefs about “what” success is (e.g., materialism, power), because most of the literature on the effects of neoliberal success beliefs on mental health has focused on performance and effort as the main determinants of health effects (Weinberg et al., 2020). By providing evidence about the internalization of neoliberal success beliefs through music, this PhD dissertation provides guidance for future research aiming to explore the effects of music on mental health outcomes. A visual outline of the current PhD dissertation can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1.** PhD dissertation overview

Part 1				Part 2		
The contemporary music landscape				Music and its attitudinal effects		
				Chapter 4	Chapter 5	Chapter 6
CHAPTER	Chapter 1 <i>Typology of music tastes among contemporary Belgian adolescents</i>	Chapter 2 <i>Content analysis of status representations in mainstream lyrics</i>	Chapter 3 <i>Content analysis of meritocratic representations in mainstream lyrics</i>	Chapter 4 <i>Meta-analysis music effects on beliefs</i>	Chapter 5 <i>Music effects on adolescents through identification with favorite artist</i>	Chapter 6 <i>Music effects on adolescents through transportation with favorite song</i>
METHOD	Latent class analysis and multinomial logistic regression on cross sectional survey	Manual quantitative content analysis	Manual quantitative and computational content analysis	Meta-analysis	RI-CLPM on longitudinal survey (three waves)	RI-CLPM on longitudinal survey (three waves)

***Part 1: The Contemporary Music Landscape***

The first part of the PhD dissertation maps the contemporary music landscape by focusing on MSPs as key sources for the formation of music tastes among contemporary adolescents and for the distribution of neoliberal success narratives in popular music lyrics. Chapter 1 develops a typology of taste profiles (i.e., the expression of likes and dislikes for various music pieces or genres; Peterson & Kern, 1996) among contemporary Flemish adolescents. While existing research has typically focused on adult populations (socialized before the advent of MSPs) and on the social (e.g., gender and socio-economic status) determinants of music tastes, we still do not know much about the music taste profiles of contemporary adolescents. This is an important gap when considering that today’s youth are the most avid consumers of music on MSPs, such as Spotify and Apple Music (IFPI, 2023b). Moreover, MSPs are key actors in the contemporary music industry, directing the distribution and discovery of music through their recommendation algorithms and curated

playlists (Arditi, 2020; IFPI, 2023b). Only considering the music tastes of those generations socialized before the advent of MSPs ignores the key role MSPs play today in the distribution of music and in the definition of successful and unsuccessful artists. Chapter 1 addresses this gap by summarizing the existing literature on music tastes in relation to three key determinants of music tastes: socio-cognitive (i.e., cosmopolitan, and meritocratic beliefs), social (i.e., gender, race, and socio-economic status), and digital (i.e., adoption, frequency, and quality of music listening on MSPs) characteristics of music audiences. This literature spans the fields of cultural sociology, music psychology, media, and communication science to better understand how socio-cognitive, social, and digital aspects combine in the formation of music taste profiles. This understanding allows us to better position the results of the other empirical chapters in the contemporary music landscape.

After detailing how contemporary adolescents consume music on MSPs, Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the content present on MSPs by mapping the presence and prevalence of neoliberal success narratives in mainstream music lyrics. As previously presented, the current PhD dissertation defines neoliberal success narratives as the achievement of a high status in the form of luxurious material resources and power attained through the meritocratic principles of hard work and self-reliance (Bellah et al., 1985; Lamont, 2019). Accordingly, Chapters 2 and 3 focus, respectively, on how social status and meritocracy are represented in popular music lyrics. In particular, these chapters analyze a sample of 4,117 lyrics that were the most streamed on Spotify between 2016 and 2019 in six highly individualistic countries (the US, UK, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands). These chapters further document the presence and prevalence of such narratives across genres and the ethnoracial and gender characteristics of their artists. Importantly, they contextualize their results within the mainstream music industry, in which

MSPs and major labels play a key role in the types of narratives that are distributed (Arditi, 2020).

### ***Part 2: Music and Its Attitudinal Effects***

The second part of the PhD dissertation examines the internalization processes of music messages into audiences' belief systems. Before focusing on the specific mechanisms through which contemporary Flemish adolescents might internalize neoliberal success narratives, Chapter 4 maps the existing quantitative literature studying the effects of music on beliefs. It does so by meta-analyzing 82 studies published between 1972 and 2021 to map the theoretical and methodological features of the literature. A key result of this meta-analysis is the lack of specific theoretical frameworks to study music effects and a shortage of longitudinal studies that could empirically test such frameworks by considering the temporal development of beliefs and the reciprocal relationships between selection and exposure to music messages. To address these gaps, Chapters 5 and 6 tackle questions about the relationship between music content and the internalization of message-consistent beliefs about success by distinguishing between- and within-person changes. Drawing from a longitudinal dataset of 405 Flemish adolescents (Mage = 15.1 [SDage = 1.5], girls = 64%), these chapters analyze two key aspects of narrative persuasion: the identification of adolescents with their favorite music artists (Chapter 5) and the transportation with their favorite songs (Chapter 6). The results of these chapters spark new opportunities and challenges for the study of music effects, which will be extensively covered in the conclusion of this PhD dissertation.

# Chapter 1

## Adolescents' Music Tastes in the Streaming Era: The Case of Belgium<sup>1</sup>

The sociological literature about music considers youth as a crucial period for the development of one's music tastes and identity. Yet, scarce research has documented the taste profiles of adolescents and their composition in relation to identity characteristics, especially in the current streaming era. In this chapter, we integrate different strands of literature analyzing the role of music tastes in identity building to define and segment the composition of contemporary adolescents' taste profiles. We employed data from a cross-sectional study among Belgian adolescents ( $n = 533$ ,  $M_{\text{age}} = 15.3$  [ $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.6$ ], 61.1% girls, 83.2% Western European) and used latent class analysis to derive their taste profiles. Multinomial logistic regression subsequently segmented the socio-cognitive, social, and digital characteristics of these profiles. Our findings contextualize adult taste profiles among adolescents and the streaming landscape, shedding light on cultural tastes as gendered technologies of self-presentation.

### Introduction

The sociological study of music has long been invested in understanding the role of music tastes as key markers of individuals' everyday lives (Glevarec and Nowak, 2022). Music tastes have been typically defined as the expression of likes and dislikes for various music pieces or genres (Peterson and Kern, 1996). They form primarily during adolescence due to significant changes characterizing this period. First, the elaboration of socio-cognitive beliefs and changes in social bonding make music an important badge to

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define ingroups and outgroups through the expression of different music tastes (i.e. socio-cognitive positioning; Rentfrow and Gosling, 2007). Similarly, social characteristics such as one's gender, ethno-racial characteristics, and socio-economic resources are key in developing and expressing different music tastes (i.e. social positioning; Nagel and Lemel, 2019). Finally, in increasingly digitized societies, the access, consumption, and sharing of music through music streaming platforms (MSPs) further contribute to generating new music experiences and tastes (i.e. digital positioning; North et al., 2008).

This literature has rarely been combined into an integrated account of the socio-cognitive, social, and digital components involved in the formation of adolescents' music tastes. While part of this literature has studied adolescents but disregarded the social value (i.e. prestige) attached to likes/dislikes (Rentfrow and Gosling, 2007), other studies have focused on prestige but uniquely among adults (Lizardo and Skiles, 2016). Moreover, this literature has largely ignored contemporary systems of music consumption (e.g. MSPs), focusing instead on Information Communication Technologies (ICT) (North et al., 2008) related to traditional media, such as television and CDs (Weingartner, 2020). This is surprising considering the ubiquitous role of MSPs for music consumption and sharing, especially among adolescents (Hesmondhalgh, 2021; IFPI, 2023b).

In this chapter, we provide an integrated approach to the socio-cognitive, social, and digital factors structuring adolescents' music tastes. Employing data from a cross-sectional study among Belgian adolescents ( $n = 533$ ,  $M_{age} = 15.3$  [ $SD = 1.6$ ], 61.1% girls, 83.2% Western-European), we first derived adolescents' taste profiles using latent class analysis. We subsequently employed multinomial logistic regression to segment these profiles according to socio-cognitive, social, and digital characteristics. Adolescents' music tastes were finally derived by interpreting differences across the profiles' composition.

## **Music Tastes**

Music tastes have been typically studied by grouping participants into taste profiles, based on their expressed preferences for music genres. These profiles are subsequently segmented according to characteristics of interest, such as stereotyped attitudes (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2007) or socio-demographic features (Chan, 2019). This literature has adopted two different strategies to measure taste profiles, dependent on whether the profiling was based on music-specific subgroups or on genre hierarchies. One has grouped subgenres (e.g. heavy metal and classical rock) to define broader genre categories (e.g. rock) (Mulder et al., 2006) or groups with similar audio-lyrical characteristics (e.g. mellow, contemporary) (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013). The other has grouped genres based on their prestige (e.g. classical as highbrow, metal as lowbrow), as granted by cultural intermediaries, such as music critics, or by listeners themselves. Taste profiles such as the omnivore or the snob are typical examples of such a grouping strategy (Peterson & Kern, 1996). By expressing appreciation or disapproval for various genres, individuals simultaneously express aesthetic and moral judgments as an evaluation of one's and others' position in society.

These literatures are limited in two ways. The first (i.e. profiling based on music-specific subgroups) has largely focused on adolescents, disregarding the prestige attached to genres in the definition of cultural hierarchies (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2007). These studies are thus unable to capture the uses of music in relation to processes of social distinction and group belongingness, where taste profiles function as badges. The second (i.e. profiling based on genre hierarchies) has more explicitly focused on the prestige of genres, but mostly targeting adult populations (Lizardo & Skiles, 2016). This is problematic as adults tend to have rather stable music preferences, while adolescents undergo stronger changes (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013). Adolescents' taste profiles can differ from those of adults because of different



purposes for music consumption (e.g. as a badge rather than as a background, Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013). Critically, they can also differ because of socio-cognitive characteristics (e.g. stronger importance in being politically active and more risky decision-making among adolescents, Defoe et al., 2015), and because of technologies (e.g. MSPs) not available to previous generations.

In short, it still remains unclear what are the music taste profiles of contemporary adolescents. To address this gap, our first research question (RQ) asked: *What are the music taste profiles of contemporary adolescents?* (RQ1)

### ***Segmentation of Taste Profiles***

The study of adolescents' taste profiles is particularly important to understand the relationships between the expression of cultural tastes and key characteristics that accompany adolescents while growing up. This segmentation is further important to understand theoretical mechanisms that could underlie processes of taste formation (e.g. gender differences in highbrow consumption; Bihagen & Katz-Gerro, 2000) and influences (e.g. internalization of music messages in adolescents' beliefs; Carbone & Vandenbosch, 2023). To better understand the composition of music taste profiles, the next sections offer an integrated reading of three main areas in which music tastes have been studied among adolescents, namely socio-cognitive, social, and digital characteristics.

*Socio-cognitive positioning.* The relationship between music tastes and youth's socio-cognitive factors becomes particularly important during adolescence because of the formation of beliefs about oneself and others that characterize this developmental period of life. During adolescence, socio-cognitive skills gradually develop to facilitate the formation of one's identity in relation to others, such as complex forms of abstract thinking, emotion

regulation, and perspective-taking (Choudhury et al., 2006). These skills allow adolescents to reflect more in-depth about values and beliefs defining their position in society and (Flanagan et al., 2014). Moreover, these changes allow adolescents to develop aesthetic categories used to signal such beliefs through the choice of cultural products, music included. By connecting aesthetic features (e.g. complex/simple, intellectual/practical) with moral principles (e.g. good/bad, right/wrong; Hanrahan, 2018), associations like ‘good because complex, bad because simple’ are used to decide about one’s and others’ music preferences (Brisson & Bianchi, 2021a; 2021b).

These aesthetic categories develop according to one’s dispositional openness, defined as a combination of ‘intellectual, imaginative, sensitive, and open-minded’ tendencies (Roccas et al., 2002, p. 792). Previous literature about music tastes has focused on two aspects of dispositional openness, namely cosmopolitanism and meritocracy (Brisson & Bianchi, 2021a; Friedman et al., 2015). While cosmopolitanism manifests an inclusive expression of openness, aimed toward the inclusion and appreciation of diversity, meritocracy resembles an exclusive expression of openness, meant to explicitly define boundaries and distinctions between deserving and undeserving social groups (Taylor & O’Brien, 2017).

As an attitudinal expression of openness, cosmopolitanism represents the tendency to view cultural diversity as an asset to cultivate and promote, indicating a curious mindset open to being challenged and inspired by new influences (Skey, 2012). Previous research has indeed found that individuals with broader musical tastes are more cosmopolitan compared to those with narrower tastes (Flemmen et al., 2019). Being curious and open to new music influences might promote the propensity to develop broader music tastes rather than to prefer one or few genres. In this sense, cosmopolitanism signals aesthetic dispositions, such as openness, curiosity, and desire for innovation.

While previous research has extensively focused on cosmopolitanism, little research on music tastes has paid attention to another dimension that has been, instead, extensively studied, namely, meritocracy (Jarness & Friedman, 2017). Generally speaking, meritocracy is the belief that hard work is essential to reach success (Taylor & O'Brien, 2017). Concerning music tastes, sociological studies have shown that a meritocratic narrative is also employed as a strategy for boundary construction (O'Brien & Ianni, 2022), to define symbolic boundaries between ingroups and outgroups based on the tastes of their members (Lamont, 2019). According to a meritocratic perspective, not subscribing to a correct modality of music consumption (in other words, not listening to the 'right' artists or genres) can be seen as the expression of a passive and lazy disposition, uninterested in cultivating refined music tastes (Friedman et al., 2015). For example, Ollivier (2008) showed that individuals with omnivore tastes tend to see themselves as curious, cultivated, and voracious, while perceiving those who prefer mass culture, such as pop music, and with narrower tastes (i.e. univores) as simplistic and passive. These judgments derive from a narrow definition of the legitimate modality of music consumption, one that promotes openness and curiosity (Flemmen et al., 2019). Individuals draw from their meritocratic beliefs to define their music tastes and to infer personal characteristics (e.g. openness rather than laziness) based on such tastes.

Cosmopolitan and meritocratic beliefs become important during adolescence for the formation of music tastes (Flanagan et al., 2014). Yet, no study has mapped the composition of music tastes among adolescents based on their socio-cognitive beliefs and only a handful of studies have tackled this question among adults (Chan, 2019; van Eijck & Lievens, 2008). If music tastes serve the purpose of personal understanding and social distinction, it is crucial to understand whether beliefs that are generally used for these purposes are also relevant in the definition of adolescents' music tastes. Building from

this literature, our second RQ is therefore interested in understanding: *What are the levels of cosmopolitan (RQ2a) and meritocratic (RQ2b) beliefs among adolescents with different music taste profiles?*

*Social positioning.* Music tastes are intrinsically social; they shape and are shaped by social processes such as friendship formation or social distinction. Existing literature has extensively focused on the role of gender, ethno-racial, and socio-economic characteristics. Regarding gender, this literature has documented higher levels of highbrow music consumption among women compared to men (Bihagen & Katz-Gerro, 2000), explained by differences in terms of gender socialization, involvement in the labor force, and peer networks (Christin, 2012). Some research has also documented differences in how music preferences cue ethno-racial identities, including those among immigrants (Elias & Lemish, 2009). For example, Marshall and Naumann (2018) showed that strangers correctly guess someone's race uniquely based on music preferences. Interestingly, their respondents were also aware of how music preferences reflected one's own race. These differences are crucial for perceptions about cultural assimilation among ethno-racial minorities and majorities (Stewart et al., 2019). Gender and ethno-racial characteristics are therefore two key characteristics related to music tastes. For this reason, our third RQ asks: *What are the proportions of different gender (RQ3a) and ethnoracial (RQ3b) groups among adolescents with different music taste profiles?*

Together with gender and ethno-racial characteristics, the resources provided by ones' family have also been studied in relation to the type of music consumed (e.g. genres and artists; Childress et al., 2021) and the modality of such consumption (e.g. on Spotify or using vinyl records; Webster, 2020). In particular, youth growing up in families with higher educational (i.e. higher degrees obtained) and cultural (i.e. higher knowledge of prestigious culture) capital have more opportunities to be frequently

exposed to multiple cultural activities, including listening to different music genres and going to concerts (Nagel & Lemel, 2019). Existing literature has adopted a social identity perspective to suggest that individuals tend to use music to achieve, maintain, or enhance a positive image of themselves through in-group favoritism (Lonsdale, 2020) or the formation of ingroup and outgroup stereotypes (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2007). In this sense, music could be used by adolescents to signal and uphold their socio-economic conditions, signaling closeness to similar and distinction from different socio-economic groups. For this reason, our fourth RQ asks: *What are the levels of parental education (RQ4a) and cultural capital (RQ4b) among adolescents with different music taste profiles?*

*Digital positioning.* The social positioning of adolescents also informs the possibilities and extent of interactions with digital technologies, such as music on MSPs. Growing up in a family with high and heterogeneous forms of capital facilitates the access to digital technologies (Webster, 2019) and their uses (e.g. for political or non-political purposes, Weingartner, 2020). The almost endless availability of music on MSPs creates the ideal conditions for the realization of a democratizing process of music taste formation, where a user's background does not interfere with their possibilities to form music tastes, promoting instead personally tailored music experiences (Hanrahan, 2018). Yet, recent research has challenged the idea of MSPs as democratizing forces by showing the biases intrinsic to these algorithms. Despite being potentially open, the access to music is actually patterned by previous preferences and governed by algorithms that prefer male, international, and established artists (Melchiorre et al., 2021). Currently, we still do not know much about the role of MSPs in processes of taste formation (Prieur et al., 2023). We interrogate such a process by considering three digital aspects in relation to music tastes, namely the adoption, frequency, and quality of music consumption on MSPs.

*Adoption.* MSPs have become central in the formation of adolescents' tastes, such that the term 'algorithmic identity' is now used to refer to the process of identity formation by and through the algorithms governing such platforms (Cheney-Lippold, 2011). Most of the emerging literature about MSPs and algorithmic recommendation systems, though, has been rather theoretical or focused on algorithmic biases, but less is known about how such technologies influence processes of taste formation (Webster, 2019). Adolescents' music tastes could be directly related to their access to MSPs because of the role of recommendation algorithms in profiling users and providing suggestions (Prey, 2018). For example, the large availability of music could bring individuals to broaden their tastes in terms of genres (i.e. omnivores in genre prestige), but become more similar to each other in terms of artists listened to (i.e. univores in artistic prestige), because of the tendency of algorithms to suggest mainstream music (Knox & Datta, 2020). Alternatively, individuals could become increasingly insulated in their own preferences (i.e. univores), because of the role of recommendation algorithms as individualizing forces that tailor their suggestions to each user's specific preferences (Prey, 2018).

Access to MSPs could also indirectly inform the definition of music tastes depending on the social characteristics of their audiences. For example, adolescents from lower social classes might still be increasingly disadvantaged by technological progress, in terms of quality of the access (e.g. using an old phone or limited data) or uses of the platform (e.g. not being able to acquire status by creating playlists and sharing them on other platforms, such as Instagram). Such limitations could impact the formation of their music tastes, for example by restricting their access to music or by reducing the quality of the one accessed. At the same time, adolescents from higher social classes might refrain from using MSPs, seen as a massively available product, to enjoy a qualitatively better music experience through items such as vinyl

LPs (Webster, 2020) or portable cassette tapes (Udarchik, 2018). Such ‘vintage’ consumption – rather than through the latest technological products, such as MSPs – is often connected to issues of ‘authenticity, nostalgia and identity’ that provide higher degrees of social status (Veenstra & Kuipers, 2013, p. 355). In both the direct and indirect case, the definition of adolescents’ music tastes depends upon access to MSPs and to the algorithmic system that governs users’ experiences of the platform. The first part of our fifth RQ is therefore interested in understanding: *What are the levels of MSP adoption among adolescents with different music taste profiles? (RQ5a)*

*Frequency.* At the same time, if MSPs personalize their content according to users’ preferences through their algorithms, it can be expected that repeated exposure to MSPs significantly contributes to the definition of one’s music tastes. This can be seen not only in terms of sheer exposure but also in considering the training of recommendation algorithms, as more information obtained through repeated and consistent exposure yields a more precise algorithmic recommendation (Prey, 2018). For example, individuals with omnivore tastes might have more opportunities to become even more omnivorous, while univores can become even more insulated in their few preferences. In other words, the amount of time spent on MSPs can be an important source for one’s music tastes. To address this point, the second part of our fifth RQ asks: *What are the frequencies of use of MSPs held by adolescents with different music taste profiles? (RQ5b)*

*Quality.* Adolescents can have qualitatively different experiences on MSPs depending on what they can do on and with the platform (Hanrahan, 2018). In the case of MSPs, a crucial aspect in this regard refers to the access to all or only some of the platform’s features. As an example, the free version of Spotify is inclusive in terms of access, allowing anyone with a digital device to access the platform, but exclusive in terms of uses. Various features, such as the presence of advertisements in between songs or the inability to select a

specific song of an artist can have a fundamental impact on the enjoyment and type of experience that is possible to achieve while using MSPs. For instance, a free subscription might signal a commercial, disinterested, and mainstream disposition toward music, while a paid subscription can relate to specific needs related to music listening, such as enjoying music for long periods of time or curating one's own library. As such, the third part of our fifth RQ is interested in understanding: *What are the subscription practices on MSPs among adolescents with different music taste profiles? (RQ5c)*

## **Methodology**

### ***Sample***

To answer our RQs, we used a cross-sectional dataset<sup>1</sup> among Belgian adolescents 12 to 18 years old ( $n = 533$ ,  $M_{age} = 15.2$  [ $SD = 1.6$ ], 61.2% girls, 80.9% Western-European)<sup>2</sup>. Approval for the survey was granted by the ethical board of the host university (KU Leuven). Adolescents were recruited from seven schools in Flanders, Belgium, between September and October 2021. In a first phase, we randomly drew schools to reach a proportionally balanced sample in terms of gender and age, and contacted principals by email to ask for participation. We continued the procedure of contacting schools after a potential of 1500 adolescents could be reached through the recruited schools. A total of 54 schools were contacted via multiple emails and telephone calls, but due to the ongoing covid-19 pandemic at the time of the data collection, principals were less available to participate. We were therefore unable to fully balance our sample, which resulted in a slight overrepresentation of girls compared to the corresponding population in secondary education (sample: 61%; population: 49%) (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2021). Moreover, our sample has a higher socioeconomic status (SES) compared to the population, as defined by the

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<sup>2</sup> Data, syntax, pre-registration, and Appendix can be found on OSF at this link: [https://osf.io/fv4uc/?view\\_only=fc86941954554f169277c2ff4eab626d](https://osf.io/fv4uc/?view_only=fc86941954554f169277c2ff4eab626d).



levels of higher education obtained by adolescents' parents (sample: 73.1% [father], 85.3% [mother]; general level population: 54.1%) (Statbel, 2022).

Informed consents were distributed to parents through schools in a digital format starting in March 2021. Participants were informed that the goal of the study was to investigate their media use habits, their social life, and how they see the world. To increase confidentiality, all participants were informed that data would be anonymously stored in a secured server, that their survey answers would have been processed separately from their identification data, that they could end the survey at any moment without any consequence, and that, in case of full completion, they would receive a reward of 10 euros in vouchers. Finally, we informed participants about the potential risks of discomfort related to participation and provided them with information about a Belgian youth organization in case of need.

### ***Measures***

*Music genres preferences.* Respondents rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (= Strongly dislike) to 5 (= Strongly like) how much they like or dislike the following music genres: 'Pop (Ariana Grande, Ed Sheeran)', 'Latin/Reggaeton/Reggae (Maluma, Bob Marley)', 'Rock (Foo Fighters, Queen)', 'Heavy metal (TOOL, Marilyn Manson)', 'Alternative/ Indie (Billie Eilish, Lana del Rey)', 'Blues/Funk (Bruno Mars, B.B. King)', 'Electronic/ Techno (Avicii, Marshmello)', 'Classical (Bach, Beethoven)', 'Jazz (Aretha Franklin, Frank Sinatra)', 'Rap/Trap (Travis Scott, Cardi B)', 'RnB/Soul (John Legend, Beyonce)', 'Country (Taylor Swift, Billy Ray Cyrus)'. These genres were chosen as they are the most commonly used across research on music taste profiles (Lizardo & Skiles, 2016).

### ***Socio-Cognitive Positioning***

Cosmopolitanism was measured following Leung et al. (2015) asking participants to "Indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following

ideas." Response categories were 'I am willing to study or work abroad in another country when I am older', 'I am open to live in a different country when I am older', 'I enjoy learning more about different countries in the world' (range = 1–5). Respondents answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (= strongly disagree) to 5 (= strongly agree). The variable was created by averaging the three items composing the scale and by grouping participants in four groups based on their quartiles (<25%: low [17.1%]; 25%–50%: middle-low [19.6%]; 50%–75%: middle-high [37.9]; ≥75%: high [25.4%]) (M = 3.8 [SD = 0.9]).

Meritocratic beliefs were measured using an adaptation of the Attribution for Poverty and Wealth scale, developed by Flanagan et al. (2014) specifically for adolescents. Respondents rated the following items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (= Strongly disagree) to 5 (= Strongly agree): 'People are poor because they are lazy and don't want to work hard', 'People are poor because they got into drugs and alcohol, and some ran away from home', 'People are poor because they waste their money', 'People are poor because they are discriminated against', 'People are poor because there is no work', 'People are poor because they got laid off and could not afford their homes anymore'. The original scale (16 items) was shortened by selecting the three highest loading items on each factor following an online pilot survey study among Belgian adolescents conducted in August 2021 (n = 121, Mage = 15, 54% girls). Exploratory factor analysis on these pilot data showed a two-factor solution that mirrored the distinction between meritocratic and structuralist explanations of inequalities found in previous research (Lamont, 2019) (meritocratic factor: eigenvalue = 5.08, explained variance = 30%,  $\alpha = .77$ , 3 items; structuralist factor: eigenvalue = 3.73, explained variance = 20%,  $\alpha = .61$ , 3 items). The items of the structuralist sub-scale (i.e. last three items) were reverse-coded and the scores of all the six items were averaged to create a measure of meritocratic beliefs, such that higher values indicated stronger

meritocratic beliefs. The variable was created by averaging the six items composing the scale and by grouping participants into four groups based on their quartiles (<25%: low [19.8%]; 25%–50%: middle-low [19.8%]; 50%–75%: middle-high [24.7%]; ≥75%: high [35.8%]) ( $M = 2.7$  [ $SD = 0.5$ ]).

### ***Social Positioning***

*Age, gender, ethno-racial identity.* Age was measured by subtracting the year in which participants were born from 2021, the year of the survey ( $M = 15.2$  [ $SD = 1.6$ ]). Gender was measured with the item ‘I am a’ with response categories ‘boy’, ‘girl’, ‘other’, ‘prefer not to say’ (61.2% girls). Ethnic background was measured by providing the following categories (multiple responses were allowed): ‘West-European’, ‘East-European’, ‘African or Middle East’, ‘North American’, ‘South American or Latin American’, ‘Asian’, ‘Other, namely’ (to be filled), ‘I don’t know’ (coded as a missing response). Given the low number of participants with a non-Western-European ethnicity, the variable was recoded into three categories, namely Western-European (80.9%), non-Western-European (5.5%), and mixed (10.2%).

*Parental education.* To measure parental education, we asked the following question separately for each participant’s father (or male guardian) and mother (or female guardian): ‘What is the highest degree that your dad/mum or male/female guardian obtained?’ followed by the categories ‘No diploma’, ‘Primary education’, ‘Secondary education’, ‘College’, ‘University’, ‘I don’t know, but my dad/mum works as a:’ (this value was recoded based on the job information provided, based on the specialization level), ‘Doesn’t apply to me’ (coded as missing value). The two variables (one for the father and the other for the mother) were created by grouping participants into two groups, (1–3 = low; 4–5 = high) ( $M_{\text{fat}} = 4.3$  [ $SD = 0.9$ ],  $M_{\text{mot}} = 4.4$  [ $SD = 0.8$ ]).

*Cultural capital.* To measure cultural capital, we followed Weber and Becker (2019) and asked participants ‘Think about the number of books (including e-books) your family has at home. Approximately how many books do you have in your home?’ (answer options: ‘10 books or less’, ‘11 to 25 books’, ‘26 to 100 books’, ‘101 to 200 books’, ‘201 to 500 books’, ‘More than 500 books’; range = 1–6). The variable was created by grouping participants into three groups, (1–2 = low [8.7%]; 3–4= middle [47.6%]; 5–6= high [43.7%]; M = 4.2 [SD = 1.2]).

### ***Digital Positioning***

*Adoption.* To measure the adoption of MSPs, we asked ‘On which streaming platform do you generally listen to music?’ using the following answer categories (multiple answers were allowed): ‘Spotify’, ‘Apple Music’, ‘YouTube’, ‘Tidal’, ‘Amazon music’, ‘Other (please specify)’ (to be filled), ‘I don’t listen to music on music streaming platforms’. The variable was created by grouping participants into three groups, based on whether they listened to a single (49.2%), multiple (49.7%), or no MSPs (1.1%).

*Frequency.* To measure the frequency of use of MSPs, the following question was asked: ‘In the past 4 months, how many hours have you been listening to music using streaming platforms (Spotify, Apple Music. . .)?’. Respondents answered using the following options: ‘Few hours a month’, ‘Few hours a week’, ‘30 minutes or less per day’, ‘Between 30 minutes and 2 hours per day’, ‘Between 2 and 4 hours per day’, ‘More than 4 hours per day’. The variable was created by grouping participants into three groups, based on whether they listened to music for a few hours a month or more rarely (low, 27.3%), between 30 minutes or less and 2 hours per day (middle, 43.5%), or more than 2 hours per day (high, 28.4%).

*Quality.* Finally, to measure the quality of consumption, namely, whether respondents had a free or premium account, they answered the question: ‘For

which streaming platform do you have a paid subscription plan?', with the following answer categories (multiple answers were allowed): 'Spotify', 'Apple Music', 'YouTube', 'Tidal', 'Amazon music', 'Other (please specify)' (to be filled), 'I don't have a paid subscription plan to any music streaming platform'. The variable was created by grouping participants into three groups, based on whether they have a subscription to a single (57.6%), multiple (2.5%), or no MSPs (39.9%).

### *Analytical Strategy*

The analysis is divided into four parts. First, we assessed the prestige of genres by looking at the ratings given to various albums on the Belgian website Dansende Beren during 2021. Music critics have often been considered key gatekeepers that inform and establish the prestige of cultural products (van Venrooij et al., 2021). Yet, the definition of prestigious and non-prestigious genres should not be considered universally valid, because of its variations across social and geographical boundaries, such as across class lines or national borders (Schmutz, 2016). To understand the cultural background in which Belgian adolescents form their music tastes, it is first necessary to assess Belgian specific hierarchies between music genres (Jarness, 2015). To do so, we focused on reviews published by music critics on the Belgian website Dansende Beren. We considered this source because, among other Belgian websites with music reviews (e.g. Focus Knack, Humo), it was the only one with an archive that covered reviews in the year of the data collection, 2021. We gathered all the albums reviewed during 2021 ( $N = 780$ ), extracted the albums' ratings – on a 0 (worst) to 5 (best) scale – extracted the genres from Spotify, and calculated the  $z$  value of the mean rating for each genre. In this way, we order the genres based on the level of prestige granted by key cultural gatekeepers in a specific country, instead of assuming cultural hierarchies built in other countries or in a different decade. Figure 1 in the Online Appendix shows the ordering of genres based on their prestige level.

Second, after assigning each genre with a prestige score, we fitted multiple LCA models (function ‘poLCA’ in package ‘poLCA’ version 1.6.0.1 available in R version 4.2.2), each with a different number of classes, from 1 to 10 (Visser & Speekenbrink, 2010). We then compared the AIC and BIC values of each model and considered the model with the lowest values (Weller et al., 2020). Once the number of classes was chosen, we extracted the posterior probabilities of each person to belong to each class and transformed them into class-specific z-scores.

Third, we evaluated the taste profiles based not only on the magnitude of each preference but also on the combination of prestigious and non-prestigious genres in each profile, as defined in the first step through the assessment of country-specific cultural hierarchies. Fourth, we used descriptive statistics and multinomial logistic regressions (function ‘multinom’ in package ‘nnet’ version 7.3.18 available in R version 4.2.2), in which each variable of interest was regressed onto each music taste profile. Music-taste groups were evaluated by segmenting each taste profile based on the socio-cognitive, social, and digital positioning of their members.

Although this traditional three-step approach is known to produce biased estimates due to the potential role of covariates in predicting the formation of the classes (Vermunt, 2010), we used it for two main reasons. First, a one-step approach (where the classes are estimated together with the covariates) is also known to produce biased estimates (Vermunt, 2010), where ‘the latent class variable could lose its meaning as the latent variable measured by the indicator variables’ (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014, p. 329). This study is the first to evaluate the taste profiles of adolescents and, as such, it is primarily interested in evaluating the taste profiles without further influences of covariates. Second, we do not have specific hypotheses or expectations about which covariate might influence which genre preferences or class. As such, also the improved three-step (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014) and two-step (Di Mari et

al., 2023) approaches are not suitable for our purpose, as they require the role of the covariates (i.e. the ‘direct effect’, Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014, p. 334–335) to be known in advance. This is particularly problematic when the number of covariates increases substantially, as in our case with 11 segmenting variables, because it becomes increasingly difficult to disentangle the direct and indirect effects of each variable (Vermunt, 2010). In other words, the goal of this chapter is to first estimate the classes uniquely based on genres and to subsequently segment these classes based on the variables of interest. This will inform future research about the role of each variable and their potential inclusion in the estimation of new classes (using improved three-step or two-step approaches). For these reasons, we followed existing research (e.g. Oncini & Triventi, 2021) and separated the estimation of the classes by their segmentation.

## **Results**

### ***Music Taste Profiles***

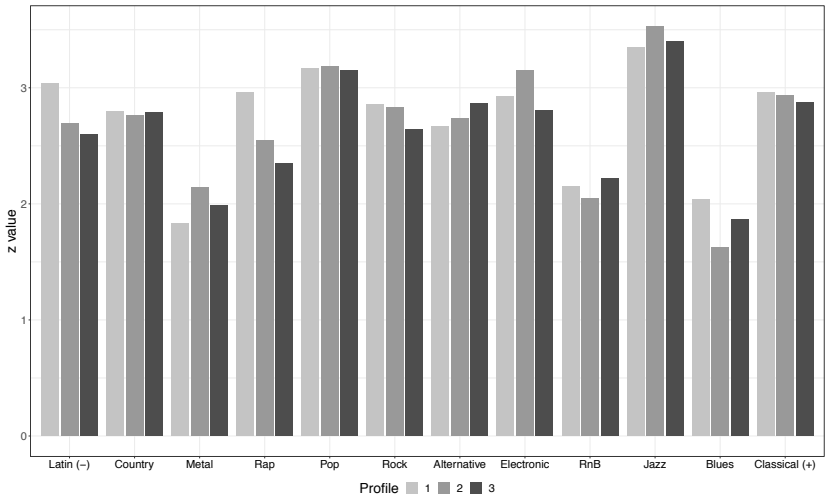
To answer RQ1, the results of our LCA showed a 3-class solution as the best-fitting for its BIC (AIC = 17917.76, BIC= 18541.87), which was preferred over an 8-class solution (best in terms of AIC = 17632.47, BIC= 19303.90) for its parsimony (Weller et al., 2020). The average preferences expressed by respondents for each genre were, in order: Pop (M = 3.6 [SD = 1.1]), Blues (3.5 [1.0]), Electronic (3.4 [1.2]), Alternative (3.4 [1.2]), Rap (3.3 [1.3]), RnB (3.2 [1.1]), Rock (3.2 [1.2]), Country (3.1 [1.1]), Latin (2.7 [1.0]), Jazz (2.6 [1.2]), Classical (2.1 [1.1]), Metal (2.0 [1.0]). Figure 1 shows the distribution of the three profiles over the selection of genres.

Despite the similar trends, it is possible to identify three main differences across the profiles. First, Profile 1 (n = 126, 24%) is characterized by the highest preferences for three of the four lowest-ranked genres (i.e. Latin, Country, and Rap) as well as for two highest-ranked ones (i.e. Blues and Classical). Second, Profile 2 (n = 101, 19%) is characterized by the lowest

average preference across all genres ( $M2 = 2.3$  [ $SD2 = 0.3$ ]) compared to the other two profiles ( $M1 = 3.6$  [ $SD1 = 0.7$ ];  $M3 = 3.0$  [ $SD3 = 0.5$ ]), but with the highest preferences for Metal, Electronic, and Jazz, and the lowest preferences for Blues and RnB. Finally, Profile 3 ( $n = 304$ , 57%) has medium levels of preferences across all the genres, with the highest preferences for Alternative and RnB and the lowest preferences for Latin, Rock, and Electronic.

After describing the outlines of the profiles, we turn next to an analysis of their socio-cognitive, social, and digital composition. To do so, we descriptively characterize the profiles in Text 1 and Table 1 in the Online Appendix. Table 2 in the Appendix shows multinomial logistic regression results, which we use next to segment the profiles. We draw from Table 2 in the Online Appendix to address each RQ, uniquely reporting statistically significant differences.

**Figure 1.** *Music taste profiles*



### ***Socio-Cognitive Segmentation***

Profile 1 shows lower levels of middle-high meritocratic beliefs (RQ2b) and higher levels of cosmopolitan beliefs (RQ2a) compared to the other two profiles. Moreover, while holding more meritocratic beliefs than those in



Profile 1, respondents in Profile 2 have lower meritocratic beliefs than those in Profile 3 (RQ2b).

### ***Social Segmentation***

Profile 1 has younger adolescents than Profile 3, and more girls (RQ3a) than the other two profiles. Instead, Profile 2 has more boys (RQ3a) of non-Western-European ethnicity (RQ3b) than Profile 3. We also see that Profile 1 has higher levels of cultural capital (RQ4b) than Profile 2, but no other statistically significant differences were detected for RQ4a (parental education).

### ***Digital Segmentation***

Profile 1 is characterized by higher levels of MSP adoption (RQ5a) than Profile 2, and higher listening frequencies (RQ5c) than those in Profile 3. Moreover, while having lower levels of listening frequency than those in Profile 1, adolescents in Profile 2 still have higher levels of listening frequency compared to those in Profile 3 (RQ5b). In relation to RQ5a, although the large effect was likely due to small sample sizes, it is nevertheless interesting to notice that all the respondents in Profile 1 used at least one MSP. Moreover, while having lower levels of listening frequency than Profile 1, adolescents in Profile 2 still have higher levels of listening frequency (RQ5b) compared to those in Profile 3. We did not find other statistically significant differences for RQ5c (quality of use of MSPs).

### **Discussion**

In this chapter, we charted the music taste profiles of contemporary Belgian adolescents and further investigated their socio-cognitive, social, and digital segmentation. By combining information from the taste profiles and their segmentation, three music-taste groups emerge, namely a refined, a practical, and a mainstream taste group.

Profile 1 represents a refined taste group, mostly composed of girls with Western-European or mixed ethnicity and with high cosmopolitan beliefs. Profile 1 is defined as refined for two main reasons. First, adolescents within this group express preferences for what is considered as refined among elite cultural intermediaries (van Venrooij et al., 2021), but also for genres that are at the bottom of the scale (such as Latin and Rap). Such a combined preference for highly and lowly institutionalized genres could indicate a capacity to appreciate and select preferred artists across the hierarchy. This is in line with the high cosmopolitan beliefs expressed by this group. Yet, it could also indicate a discrepancy of hierarchies across adolescents and institutionalized cultural intermediaries. For example, Latin artists such as Bad Bunny, Pitbull, and Rosalía are increasingly popular among adolescents (Soares-Quadros et al., 2023), despite this genre being at the bottom of the hierarchy established by critics. In addition, genres such as Latin and Rap are often characterized by commentaries on social injustices and representations of socioeconomic markers of success (Podoshen et al., 2014). The preferences for these genres might further signal refinement by indicating attention to socio-political issues, simultaneously expressing values related to social justice (e.g. against racism) and attention to status markers (e.g. expensive jewels). Adolescents might therefore consider genres, such as Latin and Rap, as ‘cooler’ than Classical or Blues, placing them at a higher level of prestige than other, traditionally established, genres (Michael, 2015).

Second, Profile 1 is also characterized by higher levels of MSP adoption than Profile 2 and listening frequency than Profile 3, indicating the central role of MSPs for this profile. The frequent consumption of music on MSPs makes these platforms central in the formation of music tastes for Profile 1. MSPs are increasingly seen as elite cultural intermediaries, with massive amounts of data that grant them a privileged position in the definition of cultural hierarchies (Webster et al., 2016). In this sense, the music attended by listeners

in Profile 1 represents refined preferences to the extent that it is frequently consumed on, and shaped by, new elite cultural intermediaries, such as MSPs. Together, adolescents in Profile 1 tend to express combined preferences for highly institutionalized genres (e.g. Classical) and for lowly institutionalized but ‘cool’ genres (e.g. Latin and Rap), and frequently consume these genres on MSPs (i.e. on new elite cultural intermediaries). The ability to navigate between institutionalized and non-institutionalized genres while adhering to what is considered as the legitimate modality of music consumption (i.e. on MSPs) can indicate that music functions as a badge of refinement and curation (Jarness & Friedman, 2017).

In addition, Profile 2 resembles a practical taste group, characterized by older non-Western-European boys, with high meritocratic and low cosmopolitan beliefs, high levels of parental education, and low levels of cultural capital. Adolescents in this group expressed, on average, the lowest levels of genre preferences across the three profiles. Simultaneously, they also indicated the highest preferences for Metal (a traditionally masculine genre, Rafalovich, 2006), Electronic and Jazz (typically instrumental genres), and the lowest preferences for Blues and RnB. This group also showed lower levels of MSP adoption and listening frequency than Profile 1, but higher frequencies than those in Profile 3.

Adolescents in Profile 2 also expressed particularly high meritocratic beliefs. Meritocracy is characterized by values such as self-reliance and productivity that closely match traditional masculinity norms such as stoicism and competitiveness (Levant & Wimer, 2014). As such, the expression of high meritocratic beliefs among the predominantly male adolescents in a practical identity potentially hints at the role of music in signaling and constructing adolescents’ masculinities. This can be better seen when read in combination with their genre preferences. On the one hand, preferences for a typically masculine genre such as Metal might indeed indicate the importance of music

to signal (male) adolescents' masculinities (Rafalovich, 2006). On the other hand, high consumption of typically instrumental music such as Jazz and Electronic might further indicate preferences for music that can be used as a background (e.g. while studying) rather than to elaborate on its content (e.g. reading lyrics). Once again, such genre preferences might indicate traditionally masculine norms of goal-directedness (e.g. to improve oneself), rather than attention to content that might elicit cognitive and emotional elaboration, further supporting the uses of music in the construction of adolescents' masculinities.

Finally, the most prevalent profile is Profile 3, which resembles a mainstream group. Adolescents within this group expressed average preferences across all the genres, with the highest preferences for Alternative and RnB and the lowest for Latin, Rock, and Electronic. They are mostly Western European, with middle-high levels of meritocratic and cosmopolitan beliefs, parental education, and adoption of MSPs, yet characterized by particularly low levels of listening frequency on MSPs. This group is labeled mainstream because it constitutes the largest group, it expresses average music preferences across all the genres, and it has low levels of listening frequencies. Considering their composition, we envision two ways of defining participants in this taste group. On the one hand, their low levels of listening frequencies could indicate a popular mainstream, where music selection does not play an important role. That is, this group could, for example, have short and targeted listening sessions with anything that is included in platform-curated playlists (Li et al., 2022) or is recommended by MSPs' algorithms (Knox & Datta, 2020). In this sense, music could be seen as an 'equalizer' rather than as a 'marker of distinction', as an opportunity to connect with people through shared preferences rather than to display one's niche and extensively curated music tastes, rejecting snob attitudes (Michael, 2015). On the other hand, they could constitute a cultivated mainstream. Their average levels of music

preferences could be an expression of underlying heterogeneous preferences, including adolescents with very niche and specific music preferences that are either not captured by the genres proposed here or are mixed together in the presentation of a single mean (Kowald et al., 2021). Simultaneously, their low levels of listening frequencies refer to MSPs, not necessarily to music in general. That is, adolescents in this group could prefer other music supports, such as vinyl LPs or other ‘vintage’ forms of consumption, to prioritize the quality of the experience and of the sound rather than its quantity (Webster, 2019). Table 2 below represents the characteristics of the three profiles.

**Table 2.** Characteristics of taste profiles

	Refined profile (1)	Practical profile (2)	Mainstream profile (3)
<b>Genres</b>			
<i>Most liked</i>	Blues, Classical, Latin, Rap	Metal, Electronic, Jazz	Alternative, RnB
<i>Least liked</i>	Metal, Alternative, Electronic	RnB, Blues	Latin, Rock, Electronic
<b>Social-Cognitive</b>			
<i>Meritocratic</i>		+	+
<i>Cosmopolitan</i>	+		+
<b>Social Positioning</b>			
<i>Gender</i>	Girls	Boys	
<i>Age</i>		Old adolescents	
<i>Ethnicity</i>		Non-Western European	
<i>Education Father</i>			
<i>Education Mother</i>			
<i>Cultural Capital</i>	+	-	
<b>Digital Positioning</b>			
<i>Adoption</i>			
<i>(# Platforms)</i>	+	-	
<i>Frequency</i>	+	-	-
<i>Quality</i>			
<i>(# Subscriptions)</i>			

Note: Only statistically significant results are reported. + indicates that the profile tends to have higher than at least one of the other two profiles estimates, while - indicates estimates that are lower than at least one of the other two profiles.

**Limitations**

In defining these taste groups, we acknowledge four main limitations of this study. First, we do not have actual measures about the uses of music (e.g. as a

background activity or to get inspired), about the reasons for consuming music (e.g. to better focus or to improve one's own understanding of social issues), or about identity processes (e.g. to remain updated with what everyone is listening to or to distinguish oneself from others). Given the lack of integrated research about taste groups among adolescents, especially on MSPs, our interpretations primarily derive from the segmentation of the profiles. We see this as a first step toward a better characterization of taste groups among adolescents in the streaming era and encourage future research to further characterize these groups by specifically looking at their uses and functions.

Second, although we considered a country-specific cultural hierarchy, we were not able to compare reviews from sources with different degrees of legitimation, such as internationally renowned outlets (such as Pitchfork) and more local ones. Moreover, we uniquely considered the hierarchies established by music critics, without considering those of respondents themselves, which might be crucial in interpreting their genre preferences (Childress et al., 2021). We therefore recommend future research to continue the effort of establishing culture-specific hierarchies by accounting for different sources.

Third, we followed previous literature (Lizardo & Skiles, 2016) by using broad genre categories, such as Rock and Rap. Yet, such a choice could hide important sources of variation. For example, the knowledge of niche genres could serve as a potential source of distinction by showcasing specific knowledge. Moreover, the presence of within-genre hierarchies (Childress et al., 2021) further complicates the use of broad genre categories as status markers. The digitalization of music production and consumption is increasing the amount of music produced, as well as the potential variety of music consumed (IFPI, 2023a). Although broad genres-categories might still function as social markers of distinctions, future research is encouraged to

take into account more specific categorizations, such as in terms of subgenres or within-genres hierarchies (e.g. of artists, albums, tracks).

Fourth, we recognize potential power issues in the analyses and warn about the generalizability of our results. For an LCA solution with 3 classes and 12 items, Dziak et al. (2014) suggest a sample between 449 and 607 participants to have a power of 0.80 and to detect an effect size of 0.3. Considering our sample of 533 adolescents and that our effect sizes are between 0.1 and 6.2, our study could be potentially underpowered for small effect sizes, or it could meet acceptable levels of power for larger effects. Moreover, we recognize that our sample was selected among schools in Flanders and with a slight overrepresentation of girls compared to the corresponding population in secondary education. As such, we warn against a facile generalizability of our results to other postindustrial societies and suggest future research to explicitly account for cultural differences when comparing results with those derived from our sample.

### ***Future Directions***

Despite these limitations, our results provide three main contributions to the existing literature on music tastes. First, by specifically focusing on adolescents, we mapped the taste profiles among an age group where music tastes as well as personal and social forms of identity are under intense development (North & Hargreaves, 1999). Compared to the outlines previously identified for adults, we found that the three profiles among adolescents are all roughly resembling an omnivore outline. This could be a product of age differences (i.e. adolescents having more fluctuating preferences than adults) as well as technological affordances (i.e. MSPs giving everyone access to heterogeneous types of content). At the same time, previous works have criticized the literature about omnivorousness for its theoretical (e.g. difference between genre liking and actual listening time) and methodological (e.g. inconsistent measurement strategies) issues (Brisson,



2019). This chapter further remarks that the ubiquity of access to heterogeneous content that is granted by MSPs makes omnivorousness a typical feature of streaming cultures, rather than a strategic choice made to distinguish oneself from others (Glevarec & Nowak, 2022).

Second, we offered a combined reading of socio-cognitive, social, and digital characteristics of adolescents' music-taste profiles. Our results align with existing literature about the gender stratification of cultural tastes. Previous literature has extensively documented the higher levels of highbrow cultural consumption and cultural capital among women compared to men (Bihagen & Katz-Gerro, 2000). Similarly, we identified a refined taste group, mainly composed of girls with high levels of cultural capital. In addition, we also found that this group has high levels of cosmopolitan beliefs, potentially indicating adolescents' commitment to cultivating their own openness through high levels of MSP adoption and frequency, as well as the appreciation of music with various degrees of consecration. Instead, the high levels of meritocratic beliefs among the practical boys could represent a masculine tendency toward grit (Gerber, 2015), where music functions as a technology to facilitate the achievement of their goals, such as to motivate them to get in shape at the gym or to create a focused mental setting while studying (Hammer & Good, 2010). Music tastes could be used as self-presentation technologies, through which girls control the image they themselves give to others based on the expression of their cultural tastes, while boys use it to functionally improve their skills and to achieve their goals (Haferkamp et al., 2012). By better surveying the uses of music in mediated contexts typically used for self-presentation practices, such as Instagram and TikTok, future research could more precisely study how adolescents use their music tastes in self-presentation practices.

Third, we specifically focused on the adoption, frequency, and quality of music consumption on MSPs. In this regard, our analyses showed that most

of the adolescents listened to music on MSPs (98.9% on at least one platform), with high listening frequencies (72% for at least 30 minutes per day), and often with paid subscriptions (60% with at least one paid subscription). MSPs feature as a central position in contemporary adolescents' music diet, but it currently remains unclear what their role in processes of taste formation might be. Looking at the differences between the three taste groups, we found that while the girls in a refined group tended to have high levels of MSP adoption and listening frequency, the boys in a practical group expressed higher levels of listening frequency but lower subscriptions. The higher levels of adoption and listening frequencies among the first group could indicate their higher selectivity and that they give greater importance to being up to date (also) because they are consuming music on MSPs. At the same time, the lower levels of listening frequencies among those in the mainstream group could be potentially indicative of less particular tastes (i.e. liking and disliking music that is generally liked and disliked) because of their lower exposure to individually tailored algorithmic recommendations or to highly niche tastes that are formed on other supports than on MSPs. Yet, looking at the outlines of the taste profiles in Figure 1 in this chapter, we do not see major variations between the profiles in the combination of likes and dislikes across all the genres. This finding could lend support to a homogenization thesis, according to which recommendation algorithms make users converge toward a mainstream (Knox & Datta, 2020). Alternatively, it could also derive from the scarce level of granularity that is granted by the study of music genres (van Venrooij et al., 2021). To better understand the role of MSPs in shaping music tastes, we therefore recommend future research to adopt more fine-grained information about users' music preferences, such as looking at the consumption and respective prestige not only of genres, but also of artists, albums, and single tracks (Childress et al., 2021).

## **Conclusion**

The sociological literature about music considers youth as a crucial period for the development of one's music tastes and identity (Glevarec & Nowak, 2022). Yet, scarce research has documented the taste profiles of adolescents and their composition in relation to key developmental and contextual characteristics, especially in the current streaming era. In this study, we synthesized different strands of literature analyzing the role of music tastes and key changes lived by today's adolescents to study the composition of adolescents' taste profiles. Our results call for a more focused approach on MSPs as active agents in the definition of cultural hierarchies and online musical communities (Krogh, 2023), crucial in the formation of music tastes. Moreover, a closer focus on gendered self-presentation practices promises to shed additional light on the uses of music tastes as identity badges. Overall, this study moves the sociological study of music forward by better specifying the aspects in which music tastes serve as identity badges, especially in the formative years during adolescence and in the current streaming era.

## Chapter 2

### **Status Markers in Popular Music Across Six Countries: A Content Analysis of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, Genre, and Capital in Music Lyrics<sup>3</sup>**

Music artists can be powerful sources of representation about what it means to have a high status. Previous literature has shown that artists display their high status by singing about economic factors, such as driving expensive cars. Yet, we do not know whether artists also showcase a high status in their lyrics by identifying with a particular social group and showing power via sexual objectification and subjectification. Considering the gender and ethnicity of the artists, this study analyzed 4117 popular lyrics on Spotify between 2016 and 2019 in six Western countries (US, UK, Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand, Canada). A manual analysis of the lyrics showed that almost half (46%) of the songs depicted status in terms of economic capital (e.g., wearing jewels), 26% through social capital (e.g., knowing famous people), 16% through cultural capital (e.g., drinking champagne), and 6% through sexual objectification and subjectification (e.g., showing naked bodies on expensive cars). Most of these status representations were present in rap lyrics and among Black and Brown male artists. These findings offer new evidence and theoretical insights on the diffusion of neoliberal ideals of materialism, utilitarianism, hegemonic masculinity, and objectification in music lyrics and their potential reinforcement of racial-ethnic and gender hierarchies.

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<sup>3</sup> Based on: Carbone, L., Alvarez-Cueva, P., & Vandenbosch, L. (2024). Status Markers in Popular Music Across Six Countries: A Content Analysis of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, Genre, and Capital in Music Lyrics. *Sex Roles*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-024-01483-0>

## Introduction

Music artists are often seen as important sources of reference and comparison to better understand oneself and others, especially concerning what it means to be successful and to have a high status (North & Hargreaves, 1999). In particular, luxurious goods, such as cars and jewels, are common indicators used by artists to signal their status, especially in music videos (Burkhalter & Thornton, 2014). These representations match with contemporary understandings of what is considered socially desirable in defining and evaluating individuals' worth and success, especially in Western countries (Mercado, 2019). Therefore, knowing how music artists portray status is crucial to understand the cultural references readily available to individuals to define their own and others' social positions (Shevy, 2008).

Several gaps exist in the literature on the display of status in music. First, most of the research on status portrayals in music has focused on videos and neglected lyrics. Popular music videos typically contain visible markers of status, such as luxurious objects (e.g., expensive cars or jewels) or sexualized and idealized bodies (e.g., partially naked slim and fit bodies; Alvarez-Cueva & Guerra, 2021; Hunter, 2011). Yet, these images do not appear in isolation but rather in conjunction with lyrics, which have a central role in the construction of the overall music narratives, including those about status (Neguț & Sârbescu, 2014). Second, the exclusive focus on luxurious products as markers of status in music literature ignores other factors that are crucial in everyday definitions of status, including more invisible social forms of capital (e.g., knowing influential people; Dijkstra et al., 2010) and power dynamics (e.g., sexual objectification; Aubrey & Frisby, 2011). Finally, previous quantitative studies on status representations have largely ignored how such representations depend on the artists performing them. Some research has documented the increasing pressures exerted on mainstream artists, especially by major labels (Arditi, 2019), in formulating gender and ethnoracial

stereotypes to maximize industry revenues (Jenkins, 2011). This research suggests that ethnoracial and gender stereotypes are key factors in determining status markers for artists (Oware, 2016). This observation especially applies to artists working in the mainstream industry, as they are not expected to represent their authentic self as compared to underground artists (Belle, 2014).

For these reasons, status representations present in mainstream music lyrics may be likely to mobilize ethnoracial and gender stereotypes to associate certain artists with specific status markers (e.g., Black men as hypersexual; Herd, 2015). A systematic analysis of how mainstream artists with different ethnoracial and gender characteristics mobilize status representations is still lacking. Drawing from a Bourdieusian (i.e., status as the holding of different forms of capital) and intersectional framework, the current study examines the presence and prevalence of different categories of status across genres and assesses which status categories are represented by artists at different intersections of gender and ethnoracial positionalities. Such an analysis would advance insights on comparisons between status representations and the associated positionality of artists across genres and industries (e.g., mainstream vs. underground).

### **Conceptualizing Status**

Status is a key dimension guiding many social relationships (Ridgeway, 2014). In this chapter, we adopt a Bourdieusian framework by considering status as determined by the forms of capital that are available to individuals to define their standing in relation to others (Bourdieu, 1986). In its original formulation, status was conceived in terms of *Stände* (Weber, 2010), a word that ties affective (in its meaning of social honors, such as winning sport competitions) and economic (in its meaning of estates, such as owning large amount of wealth) resources to define one's social standing (Gane, 2005). From this perspective, status groups are defined as "marked out by different practices and modes of consumption" (Gane, 2005, p. 219). Focusing on this

notion of modes of consumption, Bourdieu (1986) considered not only economic assets (i.e., economic capital, defined by the amount and prestige of material resources), but also lifestyles (i.e., cultural capital, defined by the amount and prestige of consumed goods), and social connections (i.e., social capital, defined by the amount and prestige of actual and potential acquaintances) as defining markers of status (Brubaker, 1985). In Bourdieu's reading, honor is not uniquely determined by economic resources, but also by the adherence to lifestyles that are considered prestigious and worthy of esteem and by the capacity to build durable and influential social networks (Flemmen et al., 2019; Trigg, 2001). Western societies are characterized by materialistic values, assigning prestige to objects and activities that are considered luxurious and sophisticated (e.g., cars and jewels; Kasser, 2016). Having expensive hobbies (e.g., playing golf), buying luxurious clothes, or knowing influential people are often seen as markers of high status (Friedman & Reeves, 2020). In other words, Western societies are infused with beliefs that a high status depends upon the socio-cultural and economic resources available to acquire prestigious objects and a luxurious lifestyle.

Intersectional, feminist, and critical race perspectives further recognize that power structures are key in defining who has access to resources in the first place, and who and what is considered worthy of prestige and esteem (Ridgeway & Kricheli-Katz, 2013). More precisely, the multifaceted nature of status relies on the fact that its core aspects (i.e., honor, prestige, esteem) depend on intersecting axes of power, including one's economic, social, and cultural capital, but also depend upon one's social positionality, for example, along ethnoracial and gender axes (Ridgeway, 2014). In this perspective, status differentials are not only defined by material but also by symbolic resources, such as the perceived and enacted boundaries between different social groups and the different power allocated to them (Collins, 2000). For example, research at the intersection of gender and race in the U.S. has shown

how income and health inequalities are tied to ethnoracial characteristics, such that Black and Brown people do not reap the same advantages as their White counterparts in terms of intergenerational mobility or health access (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). Such ethnoracial inequalities are further entrenched by gender inequalities, which are generative of a double-gap for Black women who earn lower incomes and have increased chances of poverty compared to Black men and White women (Greenman & Xie, 2008). Similar patterns between socio-historically privileged and marginalized groups have been found at the intersection of class and gender (Thomas & Moye, 2015) as well as race and class (Williams et al., 2016).

In other words, an intersectional perspective considers status as the unequal distribution of social and material resources, as in a Bourdieusian framework, that depends upon socially constructed and intersecting axes of power relationships (Collins, 2000). In the study of status, intersectionality further advances a Bourdieusian framework by describing and explaining how intersecting axes of power “binds and sometimes freedoms” (Ridgeway & KricheliKatz, 2013, p. 295) the acquisition and uses of economic, cultural, and social resources. From this perspective, status can therefore be defined as a set of social expectations about one’s and others’ positions in society that are based on cultural beliefs about who and what is worthy of prestige and esteem (Ridgeway, 2014).

## **Representation of Status in Music**

### ***Forms of Capital***

Recognizing the cultural nature and construction of status means focusing on the representations of status that are available to individuals in their socio-cultural context. In this regard, media are focal actors in the production of cultural narratives about status (Hesmondhalgh, 2006). Music, in particular, is a central source in the everyday lives of many people (North & Hargreaves, 1999). Music is further understood to portray representations about status



(Eze, 2020), and often used as a source of status demarcation (Roy & Dowd, 2010). Most research on popular music content has focused on the materialistic presentation of status in terms of prestigious goods. For example, Primack and colleagues (2011) studied the placement of alcohol brands in U.S. popular lyrics. Alcohol brands were often represented in connection to luxury and wealth, as an attribution of prestige to those possessing them. The consumption of prestigious alcohol brands was further connected to positive rather than negative consequences (e.g., sex, happiness, see also Baksh-Mohammed & Callison, 2014). In these songs, having a high status means wearing (fashioned clothes), driving (fast vehicles), and consuming (liquors and other drugs) expensive products.

A materialistic focus has thus been examined in the music literature, both in lyrics and in videos. Such a focus is nevertheless limited in grasping the complexity of how status is achieved in everyday life. As defined within a Bourdieusian framework (Bourdieu, 1986), status is not only characterized by economic and cultural forms of capital, expressed through materialism and conspicuous consumption, but it is also characterized by social connections (e.g., mentioning influential people as friends and examples or notoriously negative people as enemies). The lack of empirical studies scrutinizing all the facets of status means that we do not know much about how status is depicted in popular music beyond typical representations of “bling bling” (Chari, 2016) and conspicuous consumption.

### ***Sexual Objectification and Subjectification***

Beyond typical representations of status markers, content analytic studies of music (especially videos) have hinted at one specific expression of power dynamics, namely the sexual objectification of women (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Herd, 2015). Such sexual objectification needs to be defined in relation to subjectification.

*Sexual Objectification.* Research has documented the ubiquity of music representations that sexually objectify women. In particular, objectification has been defined as “degrading a human to the status of a physical thing” (Choi & DeLong, 2019, p. 1358; Nussbaum, 1995). Bartky (1990) further defined sexual objectification as occurring “when a woman's sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her” (p. 35; see also Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The concept of sexual objectification has been subsequently examined through a multitude of definitions and concepts (Choi & DeLong, 2019). Despite differences within each formulation, these perspectives align in seeing sexual objectification as a form of sexism (Ward, 2016) deriving from a patriarchal view of gender relationships that narrows women’s worth and value in order to maintain the gender hierarchy (Grower & Ward, 2021). As an expression of unequal power dynamics that are present in society at large, sexual objectification is a manifestation of status differentials that see men as inherently having a higher status because of their capacity to possess and dominate women.

*Sexual Subjectification.* Media scholars have shown that female artists tend to present themselves as sexual objects, especially in their music videos (Karsay & Matthes, 2020). Postfeminist sensibilities have pointed at a potential need of re-articulation of such sexually objectifying representations in contemporary media productions in terms of subjectification (Gill, 2007). Accordingly, some (female) media producers are believed to depict sexual objectification not (only) as a result of an oppressive patriarchal ideology, but as a liberated counter-narrative (Choi & DeLong, 2019). Subjectification refers to those representations in which “women are not straightforwardly objectified but are portrayed as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so” (Gill, 2007, p. 151). These representations may

subvert power dynamics by recognizing self-determination and sexual agency to women's representations of themselves, redefining the social distribution of power. In this chapter, we adopted the definition of Bartky (1990) for sexual objectification and of Gill (2007) for subjectification.

### ***Sexual Objectification and Subjectification as Potential Status Markers in Music***

In relation to music, sexual objectification may be viewed as a manifestation of status differentials that builds on the unequal distribution of the representational power to depict or be depicted as sexual objects (Alvarez-Cueva & Guerra, 2021). Because of its persistence and pervasiveness, sexually objectifying representations of women have been documented in music videos especially among male (Karsay et al., 2018a), but also among female artists (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011). Some scholars have also highlighted the subjectifying representations that some female artists are using in their music videos. For example, Alvarez-Cueva and Guerra (2021) showed how the Spanish singer Rosalia subverted previous representations of working-class women by combining images of “strength and ferocity [with] beauty, sensuality and femininity” (p. 15). In this way, the authors read Rosalia's videos as subverting typical depictions of gender and class, because they “[reinforce] emotions and pride while maintaining their own ‘features’ that are now desirable” (p. 15).

Whether sexual representations are subjectifying or objectifying has been a contentious issue (Gill, 2017). Critics of postfeminist sensibilities have remarked that this content still relies on the broader patriarchal premise that women's worth depends on their physical and sexual appearance (Whelehan, 2010). In this chapter, we do not partake in this discussion but instead recognize that previous literature has mostly focused on measuring the diffusion and effects of sexually objectifying and subjectifying representations in music (e.g., Aubrey et al., 2017). Yet, this literature has not

distinguished between the use of sexually objectifying and subjectifying representations as mirrors of existing conditions or as status markers. That is, while all sexually objectifying representations mirror power relationships, not all these representations are necessarily framed in terms of resources to reinforce or diminish someone's status. Artists might use sexually objectifying representations to mirror gender relations that are present in their environment but without the explicit intent of using gender to establish status hierarchies (Binder, 1993). Typical instances of such representations are, for example, the mentioning of transparent or unbuttoned clothes or a focus on sexual body parts, such as legs or breasts (Karsay et al., 2018a; 2018b). In this case, sexually objectifying representations that only mirror existing gender relationships do not actively construct differences in status between men and women, so that being a man normatively implies having more power and status than being a woman. Clearly, these representations still define power relationships but through the reproduction of existing narratives rather than through their active and explicit use to showcase one's high or low status.

Other artists might use the same narrative to explicitly state their power position and serve as a performance of their status. Potential instances of such representations are, for example, the mentioning of sexual body parts (e.g., buttocks or breasts) or activities (e.g., sexual intercourse) associated with luxurious vehicles or expensive jewels. This difference emerges when considering sexual objectification in relation to what is generally used to grant status, namely material resources and conspicuous consumption. As argued by Wang and Krumhuber (2017), representations of conspicuous consumption and sexual objectification are related by their common reliance on objectification. Objectified humans and human relationships are defined in transactional, de-personified, and instrumental terms in the same way in which money is used to exchange goods (Nussbaum, 1995). This connection is not only important to recognize the materialistic basis of sexual objectification,

but also to insert sexual representations in a framework that is generally used to define status. Songs that sexually objectify women while representing materialistic images of wealth contextualize these sexual images into an imaginary of conspicuous consumption, primarily aimed to define status hierarchies through gender (Fasoli et al., 2018). Considering sexual objectification as a status marker, rather than solely as a mirror of existing misogynistic representations, helps clarify how music actively contributes to the definition of status hierarchies through the sexual objectification of women. It defines such status hierarchies as the product of objectification processes that connect sexual objectification and subjectification with status markers.

### **Genre Differences**

Previous research further showed variations in how status is differently represented in music genres, both visually and lyrically (Podoshen et al., 2014). Genres can be defined as (rather) stable sets of representations, techniques, and themes that aggregate artists and audiences together (Lena & Peterson, 2008). Different genres emphasize different markers of status, both in their videos and lyrics. BakshMohammed and Callison (2014) showed that rap songs were significantly more likely to mention products (in general) and luxurious goods (in particular) compared to other popular genres, such as pop and rock. The prevalence of materialistic representations in rap music has been argued to rely on the newfound liberty that African Americans experienced in the post-slavery era. This period was characterized by consumerism and materialism as positive values representing status and success, an exclusive realm of the White majority until then (Davis, 1998). Being able to consume was therefore a new liberty that allowed previously stigmatized and enslaved communities to participate in socially widespread performances of status (Podoshen et al., 2014).

The academic literature on status representations in rap music has further focused on their antisocial messages. In particular, this genre is known for the prevalence of sexually objectifying representations in its lyrics and videos (Binder, 1993; Karsay et al., 2018a). While Frisby and Aubrey (2012) presented some variation across music genres, rap music has been consistently found as the music genre with the highest visual and lyrical prevalence of such representations (Flynn et al., 2016). As with materialism, past studies have linked the origins of rap misogyny to typical features of the African oral tradition, characterized by “signifying” (i.e., exaggerated wordplay; Quinn, 2000) and “playing the dozens” (i.e., verbal dueling; Dixon & Linz, 1997). While most of the literature on rap has focused on the sexual objectification of women by male artists (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009), Chepp (2015) adopted a Black feminist perspective to trace the development of narratives about the sexualization of Black women rappers. Starting from its blues origins in the 1920s until the third-wave Black feminism in the 1990s, she noted how Black women rappers introduced a shift in rap representations of Black women’s sex and sexuality. Widely represented as “deviant and problematic ideologies of fear, shame, and restraint”, sexual objectification has been rearticulated by these artists as a “source of enjoyment, pleasure, pride, and liberation” (pp. 559–560). These representations are readily available in a culture that oversexualizes Black bodies and that has made available a large pool of stereotypical sexual scripts for Black or Latina women (e.g., gold diggers, divas, matriarch; Ross & Coleman, 2011) that are not equally present for White women (Arrizón, 2008).

Sexually objectifying and subjectifying narratives can also be suggested to occur in other genres, especially pop (Frisby & Aubrey, 2012; Karsay & Matthes, 2020), but also country music (Rasmussen & Densley, 2017), given their gendered messages. For example, the work of Lindsay and Lyons (2018) showed how representations of alcohol consumption, hegemonic masculinity,

and consumerism are often connected in pop music videos as a way to maintain “imbalances in hegemonic gendered power relations” (p. 638). Similarly, as for rap music, misogyny and hegemonic masculinity are used as a way to assert status through representations of power differentials between men and women. Differently than rap, pop music is less bounded to a specific historical background that contextualizes the use of these narratives within race-specific systems of subjugation and emancipation. This does not mean that pop music, like any music genre, does not have any (many) racial histories (Schaap & Berkers, 2014). Pop music is characterized by boundary vagueness, mostly in terms of audience size (as measured, for example, by numbers of streaming or selling) and conventional fluidity (i.e., the constant change of coordinates about what is pop music, following popular tastes rather than genre-specific conventions; McKee, 2022). This means that, compared to rap or any other music genre, pop music is less bounded to genre-specific histories, including racial ones, and more strictly defined by audiences and artists’ characteristics and histories (McKee, 2022).

### **The Social Positionality of Artists**

Few studies have sought to understand the role of artists in the definition of what and who is honorable and worthy of status. The concept of social positionality refers to the unique combination of artists’ characteristics (e.g., class, gender, race) and their intersections that distinguish each artist’s identity and history (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). Social positionality helps to understand the meanings and origins of the narratives presented in artists’ lyrics and videos (Lena, 2006) and the institutional context (e.g., labels) in which their music is produced (Roy, 2004). At the same time, it also helps to clarify the possible interpretations and meanings of their music from the side of audiences. For example, a similarity of characteristics between artists and audiences might signify a similarity of experiences and, consequently, a

unique position to understand and decode the meanings of these artists' narratives (Cohen et al., 2018).

This chapter contextualizes the performance of status narratives by looking at the social positionality of artists because the same narrative can assume a different meaning if performed by a male or female artist or by a White or Black artist. For example, the same sexually objectifying narrative can be seen as objectification when enacted by a man and as subjectification when enacted by a woman (such distinction is nevertheless problematic when considering the potentially contentious claim that subjectification is objectification in disguise; Aubrey & Frisby, 2011). An intersectional perspective is crucial in this literature as various music representations have been shown to depend upon artists' social positionality, especially along race and gender lines (Karsay et al., 2018a). For example, Herd (2015) identified several narratives that typically differentiate sexually objectifying representations between male and female artists. While female rappers use sexual objectification to also promote "women's rights to assert their own desires [and their] independence and economic prowess" (p. 579), male rappers tend to perform stereotypes "of the 'Black buck' that embody images of Black men as 'tamed beasts'—wild, violent, unintelligent and hypersexual beings" (p. 581). Bound to industry decisions, mainstream music artists often perform representations that are frequently written for them by others, potentially reproducing stereotypical images tied to their gendered and racialized bodies for industry-related, rather than artistic, interests (Lena, 2006).

The literature on status representations in music has rarely looked at artists' intersectional positionalities, leaving open the question of how artists with different social positionalities perform narratives about status. Answering this question helps addressing pressing societal issues of representation in the mainstream music industry. Recently, social movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter have exposed the systemic construction of gender and



ethnoracial differences by remarking the unequal distribution of key resources, such as salary and job opportunities, and power structures, such as those enabling rape cultures and racial profiling (Gómez & Gobin, 2020). Mainstream media, such as music, movies, and television, have been shown to further contribute to the formation of such differences, by their presentation of gender and ethnoracial stereotypes, and the subsequent internalization of these stereotypes among audiences (Jean et al., 2022). The current study further adds to this literature by investigating how popular music products tie status representations, defining who and what is worthy of prestige and esteem (Ridgeway, 2014), to the gender and ethnoracial characteristics of the artists performing them. Such a perspective enables further investigations into the individual (e.g., artists' beliefs) and institutional (e.g., industry pressures) dimensions of gender and ethnoracial stereotypes in mainstream products and their audiences.

### **Current Study**

To better understand how status is depicted in mainstream music lyrics, the current study consists of a content analysis of the 200 most streamed songs on Spotify between 2016 and 2019 in six Western countries (US, UK, Netherlands, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada). We first inductively explored what categories are used in popular lyrics to define status in a sub-sample of songs and then deductively analyzed the sample of songs to better understand the presence and prevalence of different status categories across genres. Next, we descriptively assessed which status categories were represented by artists with different intersections of gender and ethnoracial positionalities to understand differences in the display of status narratives. By focusing on the representational power to sexually objectify and subjectify bodies as status marker, this study moves forward our understanding of how popular music establishes status differentials, defining who and what is worthy of prestige and esteem. Moreover, by providing a combined reading

of status markers and the demographic characteristics of artists, this study advances our understanding of how popular narratives of success are embedded in ethno-racial and gender differences among their producers. This study will address the following research questions:

*Research Question 1a (RQ1a):* How are economic, cultural, and social forms of capital, and sexually objectifying and subjectifying narratives used in music lyrics as markers of status?

*Research Question 1b (RQ1b):* How frequently are each of these status categories used in the sample of music lyrics?

In addition, despite being composed by similar scripts and narratives, representations about status in terms of resources and sexual objectification and subjectification could vary between different genres because of the different histories that characterize them. To further investigate whether status representations are differently portrayed across various music genres, we also addressed the following questions:

*Research Question 2 (RQ2):* Do status categories vary across music genres in the sample of lyrics and if so, how does the prevalence in status categories vary?

*Research Question 3 (RQ3):* Do representations of status vary across the intersectional axes of artists' gender and race in the sample of lyrics?

## **Method**

### ***Data Sources***

This study employed three sources of data<sup>4</sup>. First, we used Spotify to extract song titles, artists, and music genres. Through the openly available website Spotify Charts, we considered the 200 most streamed songs every week

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<sup>4</sup> Data, syntax, pre-registration, and Appendix can be found on OSF at this link: [https://osf.io/3bu5t/?view\\_only=0f78cd5af47c4ac0ad6b5c6b1b35a176](https://osf.io/3bu5t/?view_only=0f78cd5af47c4ac0ad6b5c6b1b35a176)

between December 23rd, 2016 and December 27th, 2019 (for a total of 52 weeks \* 3 years = 156 weeks) in six Western countries (i.e., US, UK, Netherlands, Australia, Canada, New Zealand). These countries were selected because of their focus on individualism and materialism and wide support for neoliberal values around success (Gorodnichenko & Roland, 2011). Importantly, these countries are also where major music labels are located, defining a geographical context of music mainstream (Achterberg et al., 2011). Afterwards, Genius was used to extract the lyrics of each song. Finally, we used Wikipedia to extract information related to each artist. This study received ethical approval from the review board of the host university. In total, we retrieved 187,200 songs that were the most streamed on Spotify in the countries and years under examination (200 songs for each country, in 52 weeks, in three years), 6701 of which were unique songs (i.e., not duplicated), and 5861 (87.46%) had lyrics present on Genius. This sample contained 4262 lyrics in English, 1371 in Dutch, 60 in Spanish, 16 in French, three in Maori, two in German and Turkish, and one in Italian and Swahili. We uniquely considered the 4262 songs in English. After removing songs with the same Spotify ID, the final pool of songs consisted of  $n = 4117$  unique English songs. Music genres were extracted from Spotify, which provided a list of artist-specific music genres. To define the music genre of each song, the first author selected the most frequently cited music genres for that artist (i.e., if an artist has “rap”, “rap pop”, and “rock” listed, it would be assigned rap). When the genre was ambiguous (e.g., equal presence of multiple genres or with ambiguous labels, such as “Eurovision”), the genre definition was triangulated by the first author through a web search (e.g., using music websites or Wikipedia). Among the 4117 songs, the distribution of music genres was as follows: rap (1861), pop (1545), rock (348), EDM (e.g., techno, dance; 196), country (92), R&B (36), highbrow (e.g., jazz, classical; 32), and latin (e.g., reggaeton, dancehall; 7).

Finally, we used Wikipedia to study the social positionality of the artist. Each human coder categorized the artists' ethno-racial characteristics by searching on Wikipedia for the name of the artist, and by looking at their complexion and self-assigned racial-ethnic affiliations (when present). Through this process, we retrieved information on the gender and race/ethnicity of the artists. Most artists were men (83.5%,  $n = 3438$ ), some were women (16.2%,  $n = 667$ ), and a few were gender non-conforming (e.g., intersex, non-binary; .7%,  $n = 29$ ). We relied on previous research (Karsay et al., 2018a) to differentiate race into five categories: White (52.1%,  $n = 2143$ ), Black/ Brown (46.2%,  $n = 1901$ ), Asian (1.7%,  $n = 69$ ), Native/ Indigenous (.1%,  $n = 6$ ), and a category Unknown/Mixed for unidentifiable or mixed racial-ethnic categories (.09%,  $n = 4$ ). We used the label Black/Brown to be inclusive of people with a darker complexion (i.e., Black skin) and of those with a lighter complexion (i.e., Brown skin). This label was not only characterized by skin color, but also by artists' self-assigned racial-ethnic identification and reflects the literature on race and ethnicity that warns against the use of terms like "people of color" for its "misleading universalism and racial divisiveness" (Kalunta-Crumpton, 2020, p. 115). Moreover, we did not use other commonly used terms in the related literature, such as "African American" for Black people, as not all the Black and Brown artists were African American, or "Caucasian" for White people, as not all White artists were from the geographical region of Caucasus. Such a categorization is further inclusive as the same artist could belong to multiple categories, such as being Black and Asian or White and Native/Indigenous. Finally, since the artists could potentially originate from any part of the world, geographically defined terms like "African American" or "Native Americans" would not have been accurate in capturing the ethno-racial affiliation of the artists. For these reasons, we opted for a categorization that builds from existing categorization of racial-ethnic identities, that is inclusive of Black and Brown people, and that is not geographically bounded.

### ***Codebook and Analytic Strategy***

To answer the RQs, a codebook was first built by manually coding the sub-sample of lyrics informed by previous conceptualizations of status. This step was used to answer RQ1a. The coding procedure started with the first and second authors independently coding 20 songs, sharing results and possible contrasting opinions during the process to solve potential terminological (e.g., about contextual meanings) and conceptual (e.g., metaphors) disagreements. Subsequently, the first author coded the remaining songs. The sub-sample consisted of 5% of songs for each music genre ( $n = 213$  songs) and songs were meant to be added once the saturation point was reached, that is when no new categories could be detected from the coding of additional lyrics (Saunders et al., 2018). Saturation was reached before ending the codebook, so no new song was added and the final sub-sample for step 1 consisted of 213 songs. We followed a mixed deductive and inductive approach to construct the codebook (Baksh-Mohammed & Callison, 2014; Matthes & Kohring, 2008). Deductively, we relied on definitions of status used in past content analyses of music lyrics to identify forms of economic capital and cultural capital in the songs. Inductively, we detected previously unexplored subtypes of status categories in the sub-sample of popular songs ( $n = 213$ ) to identify whether new categories for status were present. Subsequently, we manually coded the sample of lyrics ( $n = 4117$ ), based on the categories identified in the previous step.

### ***Coding Categories***

#### ***Economic Capital***

Economic status was deductively coded in terms of five categories of economic capital symbolized by luxurious goods portrayed in the songs (Baksh-Mohammed & Callison, 2014). These categories include: money/gemstones (e.g., diamonds, gold), vehicles (e.g., Ferrari, private jet), substances (e.g., alcohol, drugs), accessories (e.g., watch, telephone), and

brands (e.g., Chanel, Adidas). For each category, no occurrence of the cue was coded as 0 and at least one occurrence of the cue was coded as 1. Each category was subsequently coded by distinguishing luxurious and non-luxurious cues. This was done based on the adjective with which the item was described in the song (e.g., lush and sumptuous for luxurious, ugly and fake for non-luxurious) or by the cost that was associated with the goods as determined by an Internet search (0 = not luxurious, 1 = luxurious; Primack et al., 2011).

### ***Cultural Capital***

Cultural status was deductively coded in terms of four categories of cultural capital symbolized by luxurious activities portrayed in the songs (Baksh-Mohammed & Callison, 2014). These categories include: clothes (e.g., dress, Jordan shoes), travel (e.g., Maldives, Paris), food (e.g., caviar, cheeseburger), and activities (e.g., golf, shopping). For each category, no occurrence of the cue was coded as 0 and at least one occurrence of the cue was coded as 1. Each category was subsequently coded by distinguishing luxurious and non-luxurious cues. This was done based on the adjective with which the item and activity were described in the song (e.g., extraordinary and first-class as example adjectives that led to coding the item or activity as luxurious, boring and dull as example adjectives for coding it as non-luxurious) or by the cost that was associated with the goods and activities as determined by an Internet search (0 = not luxurious, 1 = luxurious).

### ***Social Capital***

Social status was inductively coded in terms of two categories of social capital symbolized by comparison and knowledge between people. These categories included the elevation and upgrading of someone's status based on virtuous and positive comparisons or associations (e.g., with a notorious and talented celebrity) or on shameful and downgrading comparisons or associations (e.g., with a a disreputable and untalented public figure). For each

category, no occurrence of the marker was coded as 0 and at least one occurrence of the marker was coded as 1.

### ***Sexual Objectification and Subjectification***

Sexual objectification and subjectification status was inductively coded in terms of two categories of sexual objectification and subjectification symbolized by the use of sexually objectifying narratives in relation to status markers. These categories included the elevation and upgrading of someone's status based on the connection of sexually objectifying narratives with luxurious status markers (e.g., sexualization of someone's body parts in relation to money) or the downgrading of someone's status based on the connection of sexually objectifying narratives with non-luxurious status markers (e.g., sexualization of someone's body parts in relation to cheap jewels). For each category, no occurrence of the marker was coded as 0 and at least one occurrence of the marker was coded as 1.

### ***Interrater Reliability***

Using the developed codebook, the first author and two human coders analyzed the sample of lyrics. Each coder was assigned, respectively 2108 (first author), 1474 (first coder), 735 (second coder) songs, including 100 randomly selected common songs among coders used to establish inter-coder reliability. Coders were extensively trained by the first author before the coding tasks to discuss the codebook and the coding procedure, and to solve eventual inconsistencies in the coding process. Inter-coder reliability was established among three coders (see Table 1 in Appendix for reliability values for each category). Once the inter-coder reliability reached an acceptable level (i.e., Gwet's AC1  $\geq .8$ ; for a discussion about the improved performance of Gwet's AC1 over traditional measures of inter-coder reliability, see Wongpakaran et al., 2013), the coders started coding the main dataset.

Finally, we compared the distribution of these narratives across the gender and race-ethnicity of the artists. This step was used to answer RQ3. Two human coders (different from the ones in the previous step) were trained to extract the needed information from Wikipedia. Once the inter-coder reliability reached an acceptable level for all categories (i.e., Gwet's AC1  $\geq$  .8, see Table 2 in Appendix for reliability values for each category), the coders started coding the remainder of the artists. To answer our RQ3, we conducted descriptive analyses to understand the gender and racial-ethnic distribution of artists performing different status narratives.

## **Results**

### ***Content Analysis of Subsample of Songs***

RQ1a sought to identify which categories were used to define status in popular music lyrics by evaluating a subset of the full sample of songs ( $n = 213$ ). Together with the categories used in past studies related to economic (e.g., cars, jewels, and brands) and cultural (refined food, playing golf) forms of capital (Baksh-Mohammed & Callison, 2014; Primack et al., 2011), we identified two new categories, namely social forms of capital and sexual objectification and subjectification. Following the grounded theory principle of axial coding (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019), this step consisted of iteratively and recursively defining key markers of these potentially new categories, comparing the characteristics of these songs, gathering common elements among them, and defining a label for the new categories based on these commonalities. In particular, new categories for social capital were extracted when songs depicted the connection with famous or infamous people concerning the artist or someone the artist is referring to (Herman, 2006). Similarly, songs were considered as representing sexual objectification to define status when they sexually objectified or subjectified women's bodies (e.g., mentioning of sexualized body parts or sexual activities) in relation to wealth and luxury (e.g., expensive cars and jewels) (De Wilde et al., 2021).



The category related to social capital is symbolized by associations with or knowledge of famous people or fictitious characters to elevate (positive) or degrade (negative) one's own status or the status of others. Positive social capital was portrayed through the social network of the artist, as a representation of their social capital and milieu, or as a connection to figures with positive and desirable traits. Negative social capital was portrayed through remarks about other people's lack of connections, the low status of their acquaintances, or as a connection to figures with negative and undesirable traits. For example, in the song "Ice Tray", the rap artist Quality Control sings "higher than Kurt Cobain" to create a positive association between his own drug use and high status (i.e., being high) and that of the famous frontman of the Seattle band Nirvana. Instead, in the song "Not Alike", rap artist Eminem sings "Y'all music sound like Dr. Seuss inspired it", indicating the incapacity of his rivals ("Y'all") to rap (Dr. Seuss was an American author of children's books who composed rhymes using basic rhyming schemes). In this way, the artist downgrades the status of his rivals by associating their rapping abilities to those of someone who is publicly known to write simple and child-like tales.

The status category on the sexual objectification and subjectification of women's bodies occurred when women's bodies (and its attributes) were shown in sexually objectified ways to elevate (upgrade) or degrade (downgrade) one's own status or the status of others (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). Women's bodies were presented together with representations of conspicuous consumption (e.g., jewels, cars) and treated as objects with different degrees of luxuriousness. In this way, the physical desirability of women's body parts was defined by the connection with luxury and used to display one's power and prestige (upgrade) or to mock someone else (downgrade). For example, in the song "New Patek", rapper Lil Uzi Vert sings "Fuck that b\*\*\*\* in my new whip (skrrt)/Her ass so fat, can't fit/Her ass

so fat, it's amazing (amazing)/Her ass so fat, it's a miracle (miracle)". In these verses, the artist connects images of wealth (i.e., "in my new whip", meaning "in my new [luxurious] car"), with images of sexual violence and dominance (i.e., a whip being also an instrument of subjugation), and sexual objectification (i.e., "Her ass so fat"). Such sexual objectification represents a power dynamic (through terms indicating power like expensive cars, a whip, the representational power to objectify bodies) that is used to upgrade the artist's status (positively connoted by the use of words such as "amazing" and "miracle").

Sexually objectifying and subjectifying representations are not unanimously presenting women as passive objects but are also used to empower and represent women's agency over their own bodies. For example, in the song "WAP", rap artist Cardi B sings "Make it cream, make me scream / Out in public, make a scene / I don't cook, I don't clean / But let me tell you how I got this ring [...] Never lost a fight, but I'm looking for a beating". By displaying explicit scenes of sexual domination (e.g., looking for a beating, screaming), the artist alludes to the sexualized male gaze through which women are frequently portrayed in music. She also presents a position of power, in which she sings about her sexual desires and her ability to achieve a high status (i.e., never losing a fight, an expensive ring) without complying with traditional gender roles (i.e., cooking, cleaning). Such an explicit position of power and agency promotes a reading of the verses related to sexual scenes in terms of sexual agency and the reclaiming of a position that is typically appropriated by men rappers.

### **Content Analysis of Full Sample of Songs**

To answer RQ1b, we used the complete codebook to identify the status-related categories portrayed in the songs ( $n = 4117$ ). We also evaluated the distribution of these categories across music genres to address RQ2. All percentages below refer to the proportion of categories present out of the total

sample of songs (n = 4117). Moreover, each percentage represents the proportion of songs containing the specific category, summing up to 100% when considered together with songs that do not contain that category. For example, 46.4% of the songs included a marker of economic capital, which means that 53.6% did not include such markers.

### ***Status Through Economic Capital***

A total of 46.4% (n = 1910) of the songs included a marker of economic capital. Specifically, we found portrayals of luxurious products in terms of money (37.6%, n = 1547), luxurious brands (27.4%, n = 1130), and luxurious vehicles (24.1%, n = 993). Further, 62% (n= 2569) of the songs referenced non-luxurious substances and accessories to transmit a sense of power and “socially unacceptable routes to success” (Dixon & Linz, 1997, p. 219) as a critique of societal rules. In these songs, status was defined by heavy consumption of non-luxurious substances (cheap alcohol and drugs, 36.7%, n = 1512) or by non-luxurious accessories representing power (mainly guns, 25.7%, n = 1057). Even though these last two categories were not luxurious, they were used to display power through ideals of hegemonic masculinity, such as aggressive competition, domination, and violence (Harrington, 2021). For example, the song “RERUN” by Quavo displayed the use of alcohol in strict connection with hegemonic masculinity ideals of competition and domination, as represented by the capacity to drink large quantities of alcohol (“Bring your drink up, we can do some business [...] We can drink; we can drink up”). As such, artists not only represented a high status by luxury and wealth but also by the use of objects that were not necessarily displayed because of their price tags but defined a position of power and control through a hegemonic masculinity perspective.

### ***Status Through Cultural Capital***

In total, 15.9% (n = 656) of the songs had at least one representation of status in terms of luxurious cultural capital in relation to travels (11%, n = 453), activities (6.95%, n = 286), and food (2.24%, n = 92).

### ***Status Through Social Capital***

A total of 27.1% (n = 1116) of the songs referred to social forms of capital to define status. Specifically, 26.2% (n = 1079) of the songs mentioned other people or characters to upgrade someone's status and 2.9% (n = 120) mentioned other people and characters to downgrade someone's status.

### ***Status Through Sexual Objectification and Subjectification***

A total of 6% (n = 247) of the songs used sexual objectification and subjectification to define status. In particular, 5.6% (n = 232) of the songs used this category to upgrade their own or others' status, while .5% (n = 19) of the songs used it to downgrade their own or others' status.

### ***Differences in Status Markers Across Genres***

Overall, we found rap to be the genre most frequently featuring status markers. For a more precise reporting, we disaggregate below the distribution of genres across each status category.

Economic forms of capital were mostly present in rap (36%, n = 1482) and pop (7.9%, n = 325), and less so in rock (1%, n = 41), EDM (.9%, n = 37), country (.4%, n = 16), R&B (.07%, n = 3), highbrow (.02%, n = 1), and latin (.02%, n = 1).

Cultural forms of capital were mostly present in rap (13.1%, n = 539), and less so in pop (2.1%, n = 86), EDM (.3%, n = 12), rock (.2%, n = 8), country (.1%, n = 4), latin (.02%, n = 1), and R&B (.02%, n = 1).

When social capital was used to upgrade someone's status, most representations were in rap (22.1%, n = 869), and fewer in pop (2.9%, n =

119), rock (.4%, n = 16), EDM (.4%, n = 16), country (.3%, n = 12), and R&B (.1%, n = 4). When used to downgrade someone's status, most representations were in rap (2.6%, n = 107), and fewer in rock (.5%, n = 21), pop (.3%, n = 12), and EDM (.02%, n = 1).

Finally, when sexual objectification and subjectification were used to upgrade someone's status, most representations were in rap (4.9%, n = 202), and fewer in pop (.7%, n = 29) and EDM (.02%, n = 1). When used to downgrade someone's status, rap was more prevalent (.4%, n = 16), and pop less so (.1%, n = 4).

To understand whether such differences were statistically significant, we conducted logistic regression analyses to predict the probability of various genres to feature status markers when compared to rap. Results from these analyses confirmed the descriptive differences across genres. As reported in Table 3, rap was the genre significantly more likely to feature status markers across all status categories as compared to other genres. The only non-significant differences were with country in relation to cultural capital and sexual objectification, highbrow in relation to social capital and sexual objectification, latin in relation to cultural and social capital, and sexual objectification, and rock and R&B in relation to sexual objectification. Such differences did not reach statistical significance probably because of the small sample size of genres featuring certain status categories.

**Table 3.** *Differences in popular music representations of status across genres*

	Economic capital		Cultural capital		Social capital		Sexual Objectification	
	Est. (SE)	P	Est. (SE)	P	Est. (SE)	P	Est. (SE)	P
Genres (Rap is ref.)								
Country	<b>-2.78</b> (.27)	<b>&lt;.001*</b> **	-1.77 (.43)	<.001	<b>-2.00</b> (.32)	<b>&lt;.001</b> ***	-16.54 (680.03)	.98
EDM	<b>-2.79</b> (.19)	<b>&lt;.001*</b> **	<b>-1.75</b> (.29)	<b>&lt;.001*</b> **	<b>-2.43</b> (.26)	<b>&lt;.001</b> ***	<b>-3.25</b> (1.01)	<b>.001**</b>
Highbrow	<b>-4.80</b> (1.01)	<b>&lt;.001*</b> **	<b>-14.67</b> (257.28)	<b>&lt;.001*</b> **	-15.57 (257.28)	.95	-16.54 (1153.0)	.99
Latin	<b>-3.16</b> (1.08)	<b>.004**</b>	-.89 (1.08)	.41	-15.57 (550.09)	.98	-16.54 (2465.3)	.99
Pop	<b>-2.68</b> (.08)	<b>&lt;.001*</b> **	<b>-1.92</b> (.12)	<b>&lt;.001*</b> **	<b>-2.40</b> (.10)	<b>&lt;.001</b> ***	<b>-1.80</b> (.19)	<b>&lt;.001</b> ***
R&B	<b>-3.76</b> (.61)	<b>&lt;.001*</b> **	<b>-2.66</b> (1.02)	<b>.009**</b>	<b>-2.84</b> (.73)	<b>&lt;.001</b> ***	-16.54 (1087.1)	.99
Rock	<b>-3.40</b> (.18)	<b>&lt;.001*</b> **	<b>-2.73</b> (.34)	<b>&lt;.001*</b> **	<b>-2.92</b> (.25)	<b>&lt;.001</b> ***	-16.54 (349.65)	.96

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

***Differences in Status Markers Across Artists' Social Positionality***

Table 4 in Appendix presents the proportion and distribution of status markers across the gender and race-ethnicity positions of the artists. In total, 35% (n = 1438) of the songs with any reference to status categories were by Black/Brown male artists and Black/Brown male artists referenced the most variety of status markers. Representations of economic forms of capital (32.7%, n = 1346) were the most frequently featured in the lyrics by Black/Brown male artists, and interestingly, social forms of capital (19.9%, n = 819) were the second most represented category.

Among female artists, White artists were more frequently displaying status in terms of economic (2.1%, n = 86) and cultural (.5%, n = 21) capital and sexual objectification and subjectification (.2%, n = 8), while Black/Brown female artists were more frequently representing status in terms of success (.6%, n = 25) and social capital (.8%, n = 33).

Representations about status among Asian artists were more frequently performed by male artists, especially in terms of economic forms of capital (.9%, n = 37), but also about social (.4%, n = 17) capital, success (.3%, n = 12), and cultural capital (.3%, n = 12). Asian female artists only featured representations about status in terms of social capital (.02%, n = 1).

Representations by Native or Indigenous artists were uniquely done by male artists, in terms of social (.05%, n = 2) and economic (.02%, n = 1) capital. As shown in Table 5 in Appendix, Black/Brown male artists in rap music (36.9%, n = 1519) were the most represented category across all genres, followed by White male pop artists (17.2%, n = 708), and White female pop artists (11.6%, n = 478), White male rock artists (8%, n = 329), White male rap artists (7.4%, n = 305), White male EDM artists (4.5%, n = 185), Black/Brown female pop artists (3.1%, n = 128), and White male country artists (2.1%, n = 87). All the remaining categories were represented less than 1% of the time.

As previously done for genres, we evaluated the statistical difference between the prevalence of status categories across artists with different social positionalities. To do so, we conducted logistic regression analyses to predict the probability of artists with different gender identities to feature status markers when compared to men as well as artists with different racial-ethnic identities to feature status markers when compared to Black and Brown artists. Results from these analyses confirmed the descriptive differences across artists' social positionality. In particular, as reported in Table 4, men are the group most likely to feature status markers across status categories compared

to women. Differences with gender non-conforming people were only significant in relation to economic markers, also probably because of the small sample size of artists in a specific combination of gender groups and status categories. Moreover, Black and Brown people are significantly more likely to feature status markers across all status categories especially when compared to White artists. Differences were statistically significant also when compared to Asian artists in relation to economic and social capital, and with Native or Indigenous artists in relation to economic capital. Other differences were non-significant, also probably because of the small sample size of artists in a specific combination of gender and racial-ethnic group and status categories.



**Table 4.** *Differences in popular music representations of status across artists' social positionalities*

	Economic capital		Cultural capital		Social capital		Sexual Objectification	
	<i>Est.</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	<i>p</i>	<i>Est.</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	<i>p</i>	<i>Est.</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	<i>p</i>	<i>Est.</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	<i>p</i>
<i>Artists' race (Black and Brown is ref.)</i>								
<i>Asian</i>	<b>-0.85</b> (.25)	<b>&lt;.001*</b> **	-.45 (.31)	.15	<b>-0.83</b> (.28)	<b>.003**</b>	-1.01 (.59)	.09
<i>Native</i>	<b>-2.67</b> (1.10)	<b>.01*</b>	-13.56 (360.38)	.97	-.48 (.87)	.58	-12.49 (360.38)	.97
<i>Unknown/Mixed</i>	-.37 (1.23)	.77	-13.56 (509.65)	.98	-.48 (1.23)	.69	-12.49 (509.65)	.98
<i>White</i>	<b>-2.35</b> (.07)	<b>&lt;.001*</b> **	<b>-1.69</b> (.10)	<b>&lt;.001*</b> **	<b>-1.85</b> (.08)	<b>&lt;.001*</b> **	<b>-1.99</b> (.18)	<b>&lt;.001*</b> **
<i>Artists' gender (Male is ref.)</i>								
<i>Female</i>	<b>1.25</b> (.10)	<b>&lt;.001*</b> **	<b>-1.23</b> (.17)	<b>&lt;.001*</b> **	<b>-1.62</b> (.15)	<b>&lt;.001*</b> **	<b>-1.24</b> (.28)	<b>&lt;.001*</b> **
<i>Non-conforming</i>	<b>-2.44</b> (1.04)	<b>.02*</b>	-13.04 (254.83)	.96	-13.75 (254.83)	.96	-12.96	.98

Note: \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

**Discussion**

The present chapter provides a comprehensive assessment of how status is represented in mainstream music lyrics. Overall, there was evidence for status being represented through luxurious forms of economic and cultural

consumption across the songs. Almost half of the analyzed songs referenced luxurious products and almost one fifth of the songs referenced expensive hobbies, travels, or food. We also found that more than one quarter of the songs highlighted the importance of social connections to mark status. Finally, a small proportion of the songs used sexual objectification and subjectification to upgrade or downgrade someone's status based on the representational power to sexually objectify or subjectify women's bodies. Most of these representations were found in rap and pop music, although rap had by far the largest share across all status categories. In addition to how status was represented, we further contextualized these status markers by looking at two critical characteristics of their performers, namely the gender and race-ethnicity of artists. In particular, we found that the large majority of all status markers was produced by Black/Brown men.

### ***Status as Economic and Cultural Capital***

In line with previous literature, our findings generally highlight the centrality of economic capital and cultural capital (in the form of conspicuous consumption) in artists' performances of success and status (Burkhalter & Thornton, 2014). In popular music, to have a high status means to be rich and to lead an expensive lifestyle. The analyses showed that such representations, typically found in music videos, were also present in music lyrics. This is particularly interesting when considered in tandem with results from a recent meta-analysis showing the similarity of effect sizes between lyrics and videos in how music exposure is related to content-consistent beliefs (Carbone & Vandenbosch, 2023). Despite being generally considered as less impactful than videos (Marshall, 2019), music lyrics might actually be an important source for the definition of audiences' worldviews, although potentially through different mechanisms than videos. Our findings therefore call for more studies comparing the audience effects of status representations across music formats.

### ***Status as Social Capital***

We further found that displaying social connections was a common way to define status. The importance of social connections has been previously represented in terms of homosociality (“individuals of the same-sex exhibiting strong social bonds toward one another in a non-sexual manner;” Oware, 2011, p. 26, such as through expressions of loyalty and mutual support) and community building (such as through political engagement and emotional expression; Epps & Dixon, 2017). Our study further shows that artists express status by comparing or associating individuals based on positive or negative characteristics, as exemplified by the lyrics in which Eminem associates his rivals to a public figure (Dr. Seuss) known for his child-like writing. This is a finding that potentially relates to existing literature indicating that music audiences tend to use their music preference to distinguish between ingroups and outgroups, for example to establish friendships (ter Bogt et al., 2013). In a similar fashion as their audiences, artists showcase the importance of actual and figurative social connections in the establishment of social hierarchies to define allies and rivals, ingroups and outgroups (ter Bogt et al., 2013).

Such findings open up questions about the display and the potential effects of neoliberal ideals of utilitarianism and disposability of social relationships in mainstream music (Bellah et al., 1985). That is, by showcasing social relationships as a means to reaching a high status, mainstream music might promote the utilitarian idea that people are disposable and that social relationships are useful to the extent that they allow the attainment of a high status (Gillath & Keefer, 2016). Future research could further explore this idea by asking how audiences perceive such music representations and their implications for defining ingroups and outgroups.

### ***Status as Sexual Objectification and Subjectification***

Our study further documented that sexual objectification and subjectification occurred in 6% of the songs when considered as status

markers. This is a rather low percentage when compared to findings in previous research, documenting that sexual objectification typically occurs in 20% to 60% of the analyzed songs, both in lyrics and videos (Flynn et al., 2016; Karsay et al., 2018a; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). Such discrepancy could be attributed to the specific focus adopted in this chapter in relation to sexual objectification and subjectification as status markers, which has not been distinguished in previous literature from other displays of sexual objectification. That is, while previous studies indicate that most popular songs contain sexual objectifying narratives, our study shows that only 6% of the analyzed songs use such narratives as explicit markers of status.

This finding warrants additional efforts to better understanding the context and reasons behind which artists, especially in rap, choose to display sexual objectifying narratives in their music. While all sexual objectifying narratives produce and reproduce unequal power relationships between their agents (typically male artists) and subjects (typically women), not all these narratives are actively used to establish status hierarchies. This could mean, for example, that when artists use sexually objectifying narratives without explicit connections to material possessions, they might do it to mirror existing conditions in which they have been living—as a critique of such conditions or as a display of their background to the wider public (Oware, 2011). Alternatively, they could use such narratives to comply with genre- and industry-specific requests and expectations to become famous, tying forms of hegemonic masculinity with genre- and industry-specific representations (Oware, 2014). A clearer understanding of the reasons behind the adoption of sexually objectifying narratives is warranted to better disentangling the establishment of ethno-racial and gender hierarchies as actively constructed by artists or as promoted by industry-specific pressures.

### ***The Social Positionality of Artists***

When looking at the social positionality of artists, we found that the majority of representations about status was performed by Black/Brown male artists, especially in rap music. To better understand such representations, it is important to contextualize them within the music realm that constituted the focus of this chapter, namely the mainstream music popular on Spotify. Mainstream music has often been conceived as the showcase of commercial interests (Belle, 2014). Rap music, in particular, conceives the mainstream as the realm of inauthenticity, an arena for corporate interests to maximize revenues by exploiting racial and gender stereotypes (McLeod, 1999). In an age of globalized music industry and streaming platforms (Hodgson, 2021), platforms such as Spotify might have broadened the audiences to rap music, simultaneously providing artists and major labels with more possibilities to tailor their narratives to specific publics (Evans & Baym, 2022). The tailoring of music narratives to specific publics, for example Black artists tailoring their rap music to be liked by White audiences, has frequently implied the mobilization of stereotypically gendered and racialized representations of status (e.g., expensive jewels) and power (e.g., hypermasculinity) (Oware, 2016). Such use of racial stereotypes has been explained by the need to maximize corporate profit at the expenses of the communities that performing artists belong to (Oware, 2014). For example, Stuart (2020) showed how young Black male rappers from Chicago employed streaming platforms to depict hyperviolent representations of their lives to attract more White listeners (unaware of the inauthenticity of such representations), to increase revenues.

Our findings might hint at similar dynamics through which mainstream music artists represent status through widely available scripts about hegemonic masculinity (i.e., sexual objectification) and racial stereotypes (i.e., hypersexuality of Black and Brown male artists). Indeed, sexually

objectifying status markers were mostly depicted by men, indicating typical hegemonic masculinity ideals of men's dominance through competitiveness, strength, and power over women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Moreover, these status markers were mostly depicted by Black/Brown men, reproducing widely held beliefs about Black men as hypersexual and hyperviolent (Herd, 2015). In this regard, recent research has pointed out how mainstream music artists are increasingly constrained in their creative efforts by market pressures and industry contracts that define commercial success in terms of materialistic, rather than artistic, considerations (i.e., hits are those able to maximize revenues; Arditi, 2019). The mobilization of widely held stereotypes about gender and race are therefore considered in this literature as established means to quickly maximize corporate profit (Stuart, 2020). As such, the rap representations presented in this chapter should not be generalized to the genre as a whole, but only to a certain type of mainstream rap that is popular in Western countries. Such a perspective calls for a closer focus on the institutional forces that might promote specific hegemonic and racialized masculinity representations of status within mainstream rap.

### ***Limitations and Future Research Directions***

We recognize three main limitations of this study. First, we do not know if the artists themselves wrote the lyrics of their songs or whether the lyrics and the status markers referenced correspond with the actual beliefs of the artists. This choice was guided by the interest in status representations that are popular in the mainstream music industry, where artists are not always in control of their products, for example because of copyright enclosure (Arditi, 2019) or the direction of lyrics written for profit maximization (Belle, 2014). Future research is needed to disentangle the relationship between artists' beliefs expressed in the songs they sing and their personal beliefs about status, for example by analyzing interviews or documentaries where mainstream artists have more freedom to express their voice.

Second, we considered key markers of status as defined in the previous literature about status, specifically through a Bourdieusian (i.e., status as an individual's access to different forms of capital) and intersectional (i.e., status as the differential access to forms of capital based on gender and racial-ethnic characteristics) perspective that accounts for the forms of capital held by individuals with different positionalities. Yet, status and success can more generally be considered as concepts related to what it means to live a good life (Rosa, 2016). In this chapter, we looked at what is represented as desirable, which can differ from the actual beliefs held by artists about the good life. Future studies might therefore adopt a broader perspective about status in terms of a good life by studying, for example, moral norms present in music representations (e.g., homosociality and community building; Oware, 2011) rather than implicitly assuming that some representations (e.g., expensive cars and jewels) necessarily refer to normative stances and desirable values. Such a focus would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how success is represented in music, allowing to compare the prevalence of various success markers (e.g., friendship, family, wealth) vis-à-vis each other. Such an effort would further allow to better contextualize the relative importance of success markers typically studied in content analyses of music products (e.g., materialism and misogyny) in relation to other aspects that contribute to a good life (e.g., friendship and love; Epps & Dixon, 2017).

Third, we gathered together various micro-genres (e.g., “pop rap”) in the definition of artist-specific genres. This was done to simplify the analysis, which would have otherwise included a list of micro-genres, such as “rap pop”, “rock rap”, or “pop country” that would have been difficult to analyze and distinguish. Moreover, considering the full list of micro-genres would have meant that two different artists would have been coded as belonging to different genres even when listing “rap pop” and “pop rap” among their genres. In this case, the difference between the two would have been minimal

and difficult to assess. Nevertheless, considering the large number of genres listed on Spotify (the website Every Noise at Once lists 6291 unique genres on Spotify) future research might want to further refine and theorize about differences between specific micro-genres (e.g., “drill rap” and “conscious rap”) to provide more accurate accounts of genre-specific representations of status.

### ***Practice Implications***

Beyond the theoretical contributions of this research in expanding our understanding of status representations in mainstream music through an intersectional lens, our results have important implications for psychological practitioners, activists, instructors, and counselors, especially for those working with adolescents. First, this study might help to better understand the current wave of mental ill-being that is increasingly affecting contemporary youth worldwide (Bor et al., 2014). Adolescents are living in societies that increasingly value individual responsibility and materialism, at the detriment of more communitarian and solidaristic values (Anniko et al., 2019). These values are potentially detrimental for mental health, leading to feelings of performance pressure and perfectionism (Curran & Hill, 2019). Moreover, hegemonic forms of masculinity and racial stereotypes have been shown to negatively affect the mental health of youth, especially of boys and young men (Wong et al., 2017). By showing the wide presence of materialistic and utilitarian values in mainstream music content, a medium that is frequently consumed by youth (Hird & North, 2021), this study provides evidence about central sources from which adolescents form status beliefs that could negatively impact their mental health. Moreover, music artists are key sources of inspiration for youth and could be important role models for their psychosocial developments (Ivaldi & O’Neill, 2008). By showing that these materialistic and utilitarian status markers are mostly depicted by Black/Brown male artists, our study can help psychological practitioners and



counselors to better inquire into the role models popular among adolescents, finding potential contributors to their ill-being in the media they are consuming such as in the music lyrics of their favorite artists (Karsay et al., 2018b; Zhang et al., 2009).

Second, this research informs the work of policymakers, industry, and activists in developing awareness and interventions campaigns on topics related to gender and ethno-racial stereotypes, social solidarity, and materialism. A key sector in which the results of this study can be applied is within the music industry itself. An increasing body of literature is reporting the detrimental effects that a highly competitive and precarious career has on musicians' wellbeing (Loveday et al., 2022). As our study shows, music artists work in a music industry in which success is heavily framed in terms of material accomplishments, as well as through values related to utilitarian connections, hegemonic masculinity, and racial stereotypes. In this mainstream music context, artists are therefore pressured to achieve increasingly high standards of success (i.e., more money and more power) and to rely on themselves for their accomplishments (Musgrave, 2023). This context is straining for artists themselves, who are increasingly cancelling their tours, taking long breaks to recover from exhausting working conditions, and reporting high levels of anxiety, depression, and burnout (Loveday et al., 2022). By showing that mainstream music content is ripe with the same materialistic and utilitarian narratives held responsible for artists' mental ill-being, our study can be used to promote awareness among artists and to further bargain more attention to mental health issues in the music industry and their audiences, as recently documented in IFPI (2023b).

## **Conclusion**

This study finds that mainstream music represents status through economic, social, and cultural markers, and through sexual objectification and subjectification to a lesser degree. Our results showed that Black/Brown male

artists are most likely to display such status markers. These findings provide scholars and practitioners with empirical evidence and theoretical insights about the diffusion of neoliberal ideals of materialism, utilitarianism, hegemonic masculinity, and objectification within music lyrics. Studying the distribution of status representations in the content of music lyrics is relevant for understanding how these representations reinforce racial-ethnic and gender hierarchies within the music industry and in society more generally, especially among youth who are the most fervent consumers of music (IFPI, 2023b). Future research is needed to further explore how status narratives within music are gendered and racialized and the potential impact on the social and mental well-being of music artists and their audiences.

## Chapter 3

### **Started from the Bottom, now we're on Spotify: Meritocracy in Popular Music Lyrics<sup>5</sup>**

Meritocracy is a pervasive narrative in popular culture. While we know more about the presence of meritocratic frames in news and televised media, music has received scarce attention. Yet, music is a widely consumed medium, especially on streaming platforms where it can reach millions of people. This study analyzes the presence and prevalence of meritocratic frames in popular lyrics by combining manual and network content analytic approaches. We analyzed the 200 most popular songs on Spotify in six individualistic countries from 2016-2019 ( $n = 4,117$ ). We found a wide and variegated presence of meritocracy, with 24% of all songs having at least one reference to meritocratic frames. Meritocratic frames were found to be the most common in rap music but also in pop and rock. Network analysis confirmed these results by analyzing patterns of word co-occurrences. By combining manual and network analyses, we provide suggestions for future research on music and its audience effects.

#### **Introduction**

“I don’t cook, I don’t clean / But let me tell you how I got this ring” recites American rapper Cardi B in “WAP,” the top hit on the Billboard 2020 “100 Hot Songs” (Cardi B, 2020, Single). Luxurious material goods (e.g., cars or jewels) are frequently showcased in contemporary societies to signal high social status (Ridgeway, 2014). Yet as the previous verses suggest, understanding how status is achieved is as important as the description of what is achieved. In fact, opulence only grants status when its possession is depicted

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<sup>5</sup> Based on: Carbone, L., Song, H., Vandenbosch, L. (under review). Started from the Bottom, now we're on Spotify: Meritocracy in Popular Music Lyrics.

as justified and legitimate. Meritocracy, the idea that hard work is necessary to achieve success, is central to the legitimization of status in contemporary societies (Mijs, 2019). By focusing on individual commitment, a meritocratic frame idealizes hard work and individual commitment as the primary means to achieve status (Mijs, 2015). Accordingly, meritocracy grants moral deservingness to those committed enough in the pursuit of their goals, while considering the others as underserving (Lamont, 2019). Typical examples refer to moral frames related to the rich and the poor, considered respectively as deserving and undeserving of status because of their presumed invested efforts (or lack thereof) (Kantola & Kuusela, 2019).

Beliefs in meritocracy are pervasive in contemporary societies and have potentially broad consequences at an individual and societal level. At an individual level, holding meritocratic beliefs has been suggested to promote both positive and negative effects, such as higher levels of self-efficacy and control over one's life outcomes (Weisskirch, 2019) but also stereotypical thinking toward low status groups (Madeira et al., 2019), and internal attribution of responsibility when facing discrimination (Foster & Tsarfati, 2005). Meritocratic beliefs could promote a sense of agency and self-efficacy when hold in a context where individuals have several opportunities to achieve one's goals, for example when living in an affluent family (Weinberg et al., 2020). When such opportunities are lacking, for example because of high levels of stereotypes (e.g., racism and classism) or scarce job opportunities, meritocracy could thwart individual well-being by overwhelmingly focusing on individual responsibilities and disregarding other factors that are crucial to reach one's goals, such as the family of origin or the opportunities on the job market (Mijs & Savage, 2020). In this way, individuals might primarily attribute their failures to a lack of individual efforts, ignoring the structural constraints that they are faced with.

Because of its potentially wide consequences for well- and ill-being, previous studies have therefore examined which factors contribute to the widespread adoption of meritocratic beliefs in contemporary societies (Mijs, 2018). While the role of popular culture and news media is well documented in promoting meritocratic ideals (McArthur & Reeves, 2019), less is known about entertainment content. Music, in particular, remains under-examined. The lack of studies about meritocracy in music is surprising for several reasons. First, music is among the most ubiquitous and pervasive forms of cultural consumption (IFPI, 2023a) and frequently shown to be associated with the holding of content-consistent beliefs among its audiences (Carbone & Vandenbosch, 2023; Timmerman et al., 2008). Knowing how frequently and in which way meritocracy is represented within popular music is therefore a necessary step to further inquire about the potential social and cultural consequences of such representations.

Second, previous analyses of music content have examined how music represents what it means to have status, especially focusing on materialism and conspicuous consumption (Podoshen et al., 2014). Yet, they have ignored how music represents how to legitimately acquire status. In this regard, the lack of studies about meritocracy in music is surprising as the countries where music content has generally been studied and in which most popular music is produced (mostly the US and the UK; Achterberg et al., 2011) are also those with the highest levels of materialistic and meritocratic beliefs among the public (Mijs, 2019).

Third, considering the current music landscape where distributions and consumptions of music are dominated by popular streaming platforms such as Spotify (IFPI, 2021), it is surprising to see the dearth of content analyses on such platforms. Streaming platforms have amplified the already ubiquitous presence of music in everyday life (Hodgson, 2021). As companies that embrace and promote a meritocratic culture (Arditi, 2019), they have

potentially also amplified the diffusion of meritocratic narratives. Studying meritocracy in music that is popular on streaming platforms thus opens up potential reflections about platform-specific dynamics that are likely to influence the diffusion of these frames (e.g., recommendation algorithms, labels-platforms agreements). A focus on streaming platforms therefore allows us to better understand the relationship between music content and its institutional conditions of production and diffusion.

In this chapter, we first critically review the concept of meritocracy as a cultural frame and its representations in news media. Next, we offer our theoretical perspectives regarding the presence of meritocratic frames and their prevalence within popular music genres. We draw from a unique dataset composed by the most popular songs on Spotify in six countries (the US, UK, Netherlands, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand) from 2016–2019 ( $n = 4,117$ ). The lyrics of these songs were retrieved from Genius and further analyzed in three steps. First, a subset of songs ( $n = 213$  songs out of 4,117) was manually annotated to explore which meritocratic frames were present. Next, based on a manual content analysis of all the songs, the prevalence of different meritocratic frames was analyzed considering genre differences. Finally, an inferential network analysis examined whether specific meritocratic words co-occurred more frequently with other meritocratic than non-meritocratic words (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). This final step brings along an additional contribution to the literature by providing new methodological venues for the study of frames and theoretical directions to combine content- and audience-specific framing effects.

### **Meritocracy in Media**

A frame is a central organizing idea (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987) or a structuring principle (Reese, 2001) that conveys specific meanings to the issue being portrayed. Following Entman (1993, p. 394), meritocracy can be considered as a frame because it (1) promotes a particular problem definition

(i.e., how to legitimately acquire status), (2) provides a causal interpretation (i.e., through hard work and commitment), (3) attaches a moral evaluation to the problem (i.e., hard-working people seen as deserving, lazy people as undeserving), and (4) suggests remedies (i.e., self-reliance).

Media frames of meritocracy have been mainly studied in news media outlets, where meritocracy was conceptualized as the selection of information highlighting individual efforts and commitment while disregarding or downplaying other aspects, such as luck or opportunity (Redden, 2011). Newspapers and television news depicted meritocracy as a frame of status in relation to different topics, such as poverty (Rose & Baumgartner, 2013), wealth (Rowlingson & Connor, 2011), and economic inequalities in general (Ronsini, 2014). On average, around 60% of the newspapers and television news portrayed a meritocratic frame, depicting hard work and individual responsibility as central aspects of individuals' positions in society (Bullock et al., 2001). This literature also suggested that three meritocratic subframes were often used to justify someone's status, namely a Rags-to-Riches, a Deservingness-Reward, and a Deservingness-Punishment subframe (Redden, 2011). These subframes rely on the idea that individuals' position in society is deserved because of hard work or undeserved because of laziness, yet they differ in the elements used to support this argument.

The Rags-to-Riches (or Success-over-Odds) frame depicts the achievement of a high social status as deserved when, despite initial impediments (e.g., poverty), hard work and commitment permit to achieve a wealthy lifestyle (Balestrini, 2015). Showing that struggles can be overcome, a Rags-to-Riches frame grants a high social status to its narrators because of its capacity to demonstrate one's worth against all odds. For example, Gill (2013, p. 343) showed that a popular way to pitch successful entrepreneurial stories is through the narration of humble origins (e.g., "the son of a poor baker") and

overworking (e.g., “he worked 18 hours a day, endured several near death experiences”).

The Deservingness frame can be further distinguished into a Deservingness-Reward (i.e., explaining high status; “deserving rich”) and a Deservingness-Punishment (i.e., explaining low status; “undeserving poor”) subframes (Rowlingson & Connor, 2011). In the deservingness-reward subframe, it is implicitly assumed that a high status is the product of one’s talent and competence, not necessarily of one’s hard work. While the Rags-to-Riches frame explains legitimacy of one’s status based on hard work, the deservingness frames highlight stereotypical beliefs suggesting that high-status individuals are inherently more competent and trustworthy (Durante & Fiske, 2017). Instead, a Deservingness-punishment subframe depicts having a low status as the result of little to no effort. For example, the poor and the immigrants are often portrayed alongside negative stereotypes depicting them as lazy or lacking a sense of self-reliance (Redden, 2011). An analysis of UK and Canadian newspapers has indeed found that 60% of the articles presented the poor as “lazy, criminal, and morally corrupt” (Redden, 2011, p. 832).

### **The Current Study: Meritocratic Frames in Music**

Although the depiction of meritocratic frames has been studied in news media, entertainment media, and music in particular, has received scant attention. Past research on music has generally studied social status by focusing on materialism and prestigious goods (Burkhalter & Thornton, 2014). For example, Primack et al. (2011) studied the presence of alcohol brands in popular US songs, showing their frequent associations with luxury and wealth. In music content, the definition of a high status through materialism and conspicuous consumption is defined by their attachment to positive (e.g., sex, happiness), rather than negative (e.g., death, sickness), consequences.



While we know more about how music represents status markers, no prior study has specifically examined the presence of meritocratic frames in music, although some research has hinted at this possibility. In Primack and colleagues (2011), the idea of humble beginnings was found in almost 40% of the studied songs. Another study further hinted at the presence of a Rags-to-Riches frame in a limited number of examined rap songs (Sköld & Rehn, 2007). Baksh-Mohammed and Callison (2014) also showed that rap songs mentioned more products (in general) and luxury goods (in particular) compared to country, pop, alternative, and rock songs. This study was mostly focused on how status is represented, but overlooked how such depictions are presented as legitimately acquired. Using computational methods, Carbone and Mijs (2022) explicitly tackled this problem and found some evidence of meritocratic frames in popular music (i.e., ‘Rags-to-riches’ and ‘Bragging rights’). Yet, they acknowledged the limitation of using unsupervised methods and recommended to more systematically examine the presence and prevalence of meritocracy in lyrics through content analysis. Overall, despite being heavily present in news media and popular beliefs, we do not know much about whether and how meritocracy is present in music.

To fill this gap, the current study investigates the presence of meritocratic frames in popular lyrics following three steps. In a first manual annotation step, informed by previous conceptualizations of meritocracy, a codebook was developed by coding popular lyrics. In addition to utilizing previous meritocratic frames identified in news media, an inductive approach detected previously unexplored subtypes in a representative subsample of songs ( $n = 213$ ). This approach is typical of framing studies exploring frames for the first time in a particular media genre (e.g., Matthes & Kohring, 2008). In this step, we focused on how songs depict meritocracy and examined which meritocratic frames are represented in popular music lyrics (RQ1).

In the second deductive step, we manually coded the whole population of lyrics ( $n = 4,117$ ) based on the meritocratic frames identified in the previous step, and asked how frequently different meritocratic frames are represented in popular music lyrics (RQ2). The manual coding allowed a rich human interpretation of the meanings of different words that constitute a particular subtype of meritocratic frames. Studying the frequency of each frame is crucial to build further hypotheses concerning the effects of these frames (Druckman, 2004).

Moreover, previous studies have extensively documented differences between music genres (Primack et al., 2011). Rap music, in particular, has often been found to emphasize wealth and luxury brands (Baksh-Mohammed & Callison, 2014) more frequently than other genres. Building upon this literature, we asked whether the prevalence of meritocratic frames varies across genres (RQ3).

Finally, the present study complemented the manual analysis of meritocratic frames with an automatic approach that considers how frames emerge from the co-occurrence of words in texts (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). While manual approaches are typically used to validly capture frames, automatic approaches excel at reliably extracting information from media texts (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). In particular, previous automatic approaches to media frames have mainly used network analyses to examine how words or concepts are connected to each other (Shim et al., 2015). These studies have looked at words (called nodes in network terminology) and their connections (edges) to detect clusters. They subsequently analyzed the words composing each cluster to understand the type of frame binding words together. Compared to a manual approach, this approach does not constitute frames based purely on human interpretation but on the arrangement of words in a text.

Automatic approaches to frame analysis have mainly been conducted to inductively discover unknown frames, still relying on human coding for the interpretation of the clusters. The human interpretation of frames constituted in this way strengthens the validity of such approach, but reopens questions of reliability. Yet, the identification of known frames requires a method that is able to include frame-specific variables—in our case, frame-specific meritocratic words—as predictors for the formation of links. For this purpose, we used an exponential random graph model (ERGM), testing whether the observed structure of a network—that is, how words are connected to each other—could be explained through a non-random stochastic process (Cranmer et al., 2017). Being able to deductively assess the presence of frames using inferential network analysis would not only support our manual coding but also strengthen the reliability and validity of a manual assessment (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). Furthermore, it would allow us to empirically test the claim that frames are structuring principles by paying particular attention to the relationships between words. Using this method, the final research question asked whether, for each meritocratic frame, meritocratic words are more likely to be connected to each other than to non-meritocratic words (RQ4).

## **Data**

The data for this study came from two sources<sup>6</sup>. The first source was the openly available website Spotify Charts, including the top 200 most-streamed songs each week in countries where Spotify is available. The second source was Genius, an online lyrics database. For this analysis, we selected songs from six countries (the US, UK, Netherlands, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand) for the three years preceding the time of data collection, collecting data for each week between December 23, 2016 and December 27, 2019 for a total of 156 weeks (52 weeks/year \* 3 years = 156 weeks). These countries

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<sup>6</sup> Data, syntax, pre-registration, and Appendix can be found on OSF at this link: [https://osf.io/dvwjp/?view\\_only=cfe2237ab4284d6382ed0d8117daab98](https://osf.io/dvwjp/?view_only=cfe2237ab4284d6382ed0d8117daab98).

were selected because of their high scores for individualism and thus high probability of finding songs adopting meritocratic frames (Mascini et al., 2013).

In the selected period, a total of 187,200 songs on Spotify were retrieved (200 songs weekly from each of the 6 countries for a total of 156 weeks). This process resulted in the identification of 6,701 unique songs, 5,861 (87.46%) of which had lyrics present on Genius. We considered only the 4,262 songs that were in English. We next removed songs with the same Spotify ID and the final dataset consisted of 4,117 unique English-language songs, each associated with the following characteristics: artist name, artist's Spotify ID, song title, song's Spotify ID, lyrics, and genre. Genres were coded from Spotify, which provided a list of artist-specific genres. We specifically assigned a genre to each song based on the most frequently cited genre for the artist of the song (i.e., if an artist had country, country pop, and rock listed as genres, country was assigned because the most frequently mentioned). Among the 4,117 songs, the distribution of genres was the following: country (92), electronic and dance music (EDM, e.g., techno, house; 196), highbrow (e.g., jazz, classical; 32), latin (e.g., reggaeton, dancehall; 7), pop (1,545), R&B (36), rap (1,861), and rock (348).

## **Manual Inductive Classification of the Subsample of Songs**

### ***Method***

We first started by developing a codebook for the manual inductive classification of songs. The first and second authors started by independently coding 20 songs, comparing results and possible contrasting views during the process to address potential differences in terminology (e.g., contextual meanings) and concepts (e.g., metaphors) present in the lyrics. Subsequently, the first author coded the remaining songs. The final sample constituted an equal proportion of songs for each genre (5%,  $n = 213$ ) to maintain comparability across genres. Songs were added to the sample until the

saturation point was reached and no new meritocratic frames could be detected (Saunders et al., 2018).

When inductively analyzing the sample ( $n = 213$ ), the aim was to understand whether new categories for meritocracy, in addition to those extracted from previous literature, were present. Following the grounded theory principle of axial coding (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019), we iteratively and recursively defined key markers of potentially new categories. First, we compared songs' characteristics, gathered common elements between them, and then defined labels for new categories based on commonalities. When songs presented typical meritocratic features, such as individual responsibility, deservingness, and self-reliance, and this representation did not align with previously defined meritocratic frames, we labelled the songs as potentially containing a new frame. The saturation point was reached before ending the codebook, so no new songs were added, and the final sample for step one was 213 songs.

The variables extracted followed the categorization developed in previous literature. A Rags-to-Riches frame was present when current wealth (in terms of the luxury of the products mentioned) was presented along with past difficulties (0 = no occurrence, 1 = occurrence; see Primack et al., 2011). A Deservingness-Rewarding subframe was present when positive stereotypes were presented to justify high status (e.g., rich and competent; 0 = no occurrence, 1 = occurrence). A Deservingness-Punishment subframe was present when negative stereotypes were used to justify low status (e.g., poor and lazy; 0 = no occurrence, 1 = occurrence).

## ***Results***

Our RQ1 sought to examine the types of meritocratic frames that are present in popular music lyrics. The inductive approach allowed to identify two

additional meritocratic frames and to better contextualize the meaning of Deservingness frames in music lyrics.

Regarding previously established frames, a Rags-to-Riches frame was adopted in similar ways compared to its use in news media (Gill, 2013): artists presented past difficulties (e.g., poverty, addiction) together with current instances of wealth (e.g., money, cars) to tell a story of personal and artistic emancipation. For example, in “Can’t Leave Without It,” rap artist 21 Savage paired his past delinquency (“Back in the day I used to rob with no mask on”) with a discussion of his current wealth (“One of my arms worth a ticket / Watch so much that a car came with it”) (21 Savage, 2018, Track 8).

Deservingness frames, manifested in two subframes—Reward and Punishment—were also prevalent. A Deservingness-Reward subframe emerged when linking status-specific stereotypes (e.g., intelligence) with stereotype-consistent situations (e.g., wealth). Music artists using this subframe stressed their personal (stereotypical) characteristics to demonstrate deserving a high status. For example, in “Remember the Name,” pop artist Ed Sheeran sings about being “cold,” “fresh,” and “clean” (adjectives describing his competence in the music industry and as a person) as a justification for his conspicuous consumption (e.g., “You can find me in my whip rockin’ my Fendi drip”) and his success (“climbed the Billboard charts to the top”) (Ed Sheeran, 2019, Track 8).

A Deservingness-Punishment was used by artists to morally justify hardships on the basis of personal characteristics (e.g., poverty as the result of laziness). Artists adopted this subframe often as a way to criticize other artists. As such, the Deservingness-Punishment subframe occurred in lyrics as “dissing” (i.e., disrespect and challenge) in popular music, thereby contrasting one’s own success against others’ failures. For example, in “Thug Life,” rap artist Brockhampton characterized an unspecified “you” as deserving of low

status (represented by the possession of fake jewels in the verse “Them gold chains turn your neck green,” a situation typical of jewels made of copper, a cheap metal) due to not being “fly” (a slang term often used to describe the personal, social, and artistic skills of an artist) (Brockhampton, 2018, Track 2).

Next to these three meritocratic frames, the inductive analysis yielded two new frames: No-Pain-No-Gain and Control-the-Ship. Contrary to the Rags-to-Riches frame, these two frames focused on current rather than past difficulties and proposed two different coping mechanisms. The No-Pain-No-Gain frame explicitly stressed hard work and dedication as a way to overcome various forms of current struggles an artist might face. For example, in “Battle Symphony,” rock band Linkin Park contextualized their struggles (“I’ve been searching for the courage / To face my enemies [...] But the sound of your voice / Puts the pain in reverse”) by noting their determination to actively fight against them (“If my armor breaks / I’ll fuse it back together [...] If I fall, get knocked down / Pick myself up off the ground”) (Linkin Park, 2017, Track 4). Other songs employing this frame used less figurative imaginary and talked directly about hard work as a way to solve current problems, as in “Brothers” by rap artist Lil Tjay (“I got 99 problems like Jay Z [...] I’ve been working hard driving me crazy”) (Lil Tjay, 2018, Track 12).

Finally, artists using a Control-the-Ship frame tended to set current difficulties in juxtaposition with the ostentatious display of their wealth and success, suggesting their resilience and control in difficult periods. This narrative overemphasized meritocratic aspects, such as determination and commitment, and represented them as crucial for reaching and maintaining success during difficult periods. The frame label came from the song “Aladdin” by rap artist Not3s (“I steer the ship, I’m the captain”), who sang about current difficulties (e.g., “And n\*\*\*\*\* they’re talking, they’re chatting [...] How could they ever doubt me?”) while simultaneously stressing his

current wealth and success (e.g., “Money in the bank [...] I am so fly, like Aladdin” ) (Not3s, 2017, Single). Because of its emphasis on resilience against current difficulties, the idea that struggles can be overcome through dedication and passion, a Control-the-Ship frame was fundamentally different from the Deservingness-Reward frame (i.e., focus on the deservingness of success), and the Rags-to-Riches frame (i.e., focus on past difficulties and commitment in the face of hardships). Table 5 summarizes the meritocratic frames identified in the inductive step.

**Table 5.** Meritocratic frames in mainstream music popular on Spotify

Meritocratic frames	Subframes	Key characteristics		Examples
Rags-to-Riches		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Past difficulties</li><li>• Current wealth</li></ul>		“Back in the day I used to rob with no mask on / One of my arms worth a ticket / Watch so much that a car came with it” (21 Savage, <i>Can’t Leave Without It</i> , 2018, Track 8)
Deservingness	Reward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Status-specific stereotypes (e.g., smart, lazy)</li></ul>	Common Features	Unique Features
	Punishment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Stereotype-consistent situations (wealth or poverty)</li></ul>	Positive aspects highlighted	Negative aspects highlighted
No Pain No Gain		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Present difficulties</li><li>• Hard work</li></ul>		“I’ve been searching for the courage / To face my enemies [...] If I fall, get knocked down / Pick myself up off the ground”) (Linkin Park, <i>Battle Symphony</i> , 2017, Track 4).
Control the Ship		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Present difficulties</li><li>• Current wealth</li></ul>		“I got 99 problems like Jay Z [...] I’ve been working hard driving me crazy” (Lil Tjay, <i>Brothers</i> , 2018, Track 12).



## **Manual Deductive Classification of Full Sample of Songs**

### ***Method***

After the codebook was constructed, three coders coded the entire set of songs based on the codebook. The three coders were assigned to 1,374, 635, and 2,008 unique lyrics, respectively, plus 100 randomly selected songs in common to establish inter-coder reliability. Coders were extensively trained about the codebook, the coding procedure, and ways to solve eventual inconsistencies in the coding process.

Coders started coding the main dataset according to the codebook once inter-coder reliability reached an acceptable level for all included variables. We used Gwet's AC1, with values equal to or above 0.8 indicating a high inter-coder reliability score (Wongpakaran et al., 2013). This is since Krippendorff's Alpha or Cohen's Kappa are insensitive to highly skewed distribution, which results in low inter-coder reliability even when agreement is high, a situation known as kappa paradox (Feinstein & Cicchetti, 1990). For each meritocracy category, a song was coded as 1 if it presented that category and coded as 0 if the category was absent. The coders also kept a list of keywords related to meritocracy (to answer RQ4). If a song contained a meritocratic frame, all the words connected to that specific frame were coded on the terms list. For example, "4AM" by rapper 2 Chainz presents a Rags-to-Riches story in the lines "Ride with Champagne P / If it wasn't for the struggle then I wouldn't be me / Call me Deuce or Dos, anything but broke," connecting words about past difficulties (e.g., struggle, broke) with current instances of wealth (e.g., champagne). The choice of these words was guided by their relevance in describing the frame; without those words, the song would no longer contain the frame. Table 1 in Appendix provides a description of all the frames, including the most typical words and verses characterizing each frame.

## Results

RQ2 sought to examine the frequency of meritocratic frames in popular music lyrics. Manual deductive coding identified a strong presence of meritocracy in popular music. A total of 23.5% ( $n = 967$ ) of the songs had at least one meritocratic frame, such that almost one song out of every four songs used a meritocratic frame to justify social status. In terms of subframes, 12.8% ( $n = 525$ ) of songs used Deservingness-Reward, 5.7% ( $n = 235$ ) used Rags-to-Riches, 4.4% ( $n = 180$ ) used Control-the-Ship, 4.2% ( $n = 174$ ) used Deservingness-Punishment subframe, and 2.9% ( $n = 119$ ) used No-Pain-No-Gain.

Genre Differences. RQ3 asked about differences in the use of meritocratic frames across music genres: 81.7% ( $n = 790$ ) of the meritocratic frames were found in rap songs, followed by pop (13.7%,  $n = 133$ ), rock (2.4%,  $n = 23$ ), EDM (1.3%,  $n = 13$ ), R&B (0.7%,  $n = 7$ ), and country (0.1%,  $n = 1$ ). The highbrow and Latin music did not contain any meritocratic frames. The distribution of frames across each genre is displayed in Table 2 in Appendix.

Considering the low number of meritocratic frames for rock, EDM, R&B, and country, the frequencies of these three genres were combined into one category (“other”), and three chi-square tests were conducted (with Bonferroni correction,  $\alpha = .02$ ). First, we compared pop and rap music ( $\chi^2 = 79.3$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .001$ ), then pop and all the other genres combined ( $\chi^2 = 7.3$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p = .12$ ), and finally rap and all the other genres combined ( $\chi^2 = 74.8$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Rap music was the genre most likely to use meritocratic frames, and there was no significant difference between pop versus all the other genres. Most of the meritocratic frames were present in rap music, further answering RQ3, yet they were also common in pop and, to a lesser extent, rock music.

## **Inferential Network Analysis to Detect Meritocratic Frames**

### ***Method***

To answer RQ4, we draw on inferential network analysis using the Exponential Random Graph Model (ERGM) that can test the presence or absence of a network structure (Cranmer et al., 2017). In ERGM terms, giving structure to the network, defined as the probability of forming a connection between two words in a frame, depends on theoretically relevant attributes of the frame under consideration. This technique was applied following the idea that “you shall know a word by the company it keeps” (Firth, 1957, p. 11), in which words that are close to each other (i.e., co-occur) have similar meanings and express similar ideas. As shown in previous research, verses (lyrics included) give metrical structure to texts, because they group words together to convey a specific meaning (Fabb & Halle, 2012). For this study, words belonging to one or more of the meritocratic frames identified in the manual coding step above were considered as being connected when they were present in the same verse.

Through this setup, we estimated the probability that meritocratic words would co-occur with other meritocratic words, as compared to their co-occurrence with other non-meritocratic words, in each meritocratic frame. In other words, we estimated the co-occurrence between homophily pairs (i.e., merit-merit) over non-homophily pairs (i.e., merit-non-merit) for each frame. For example, the words “struggle” and “money” were coded as representing a Rags-to-Riches frame, and the analysis estimated the probability that these words would co-occur in the same verse in the Rags-to-Riches frame. While the clustering of any words can be considered as the manifestation of a specific frame, this study used the meritocratic frame-specific words identified in previous steps to test whether they co-occurred together more often than at random (hence constituting such meritocratic frames). In line with previous ERGM research, we evaluated goodness of fit (gof) measures for each model

(i.e., per frame, Cranmer et al., 2017). To evaluate the model robustness, we conducted two additional exploratory tests, presented in Text 1 and Tables 4-6 in Appendix.

Results. RQ4 asked whether meritocratic frame-specific words are more likely to be connected to each other than to non-meritocratic words, confirming the presence of meritocratic frames. The results were in line with our expectations, indicating that, in lyrics with a certain frame, meritocratic words were not only more likely to be connected to each other but also less likely to be connected to non-meritocratic words. Table 6 shows the results for each frame. Goodness of fit measures showed a relatively good fit of the models for each frame (Figures 1 to 5 in Appendix). Robustness tests further confirmed these results.

**Table 6.** ERGM estimates

	Estimate	Std. Error	P-value
<i>Rags-to-Riches</i>			
Edges	-4.98	0.003	<.001
<b>Merit-Merit</b>	<b>1.14</b>	0.005	<.001
Merit-Other	-0.88	0.007	<.001
AIC		2007677	
BIC		2007723	
<i>No-Pain-No-Gain</i>			
Edges	-4.61	0.006	<.001
<b>Merit-Merit</b>	<b>0.66</b>	0.008	<.001
Merit- Other	-0.54	0.011	<.001
AIC		729759	
BIC		729801	
<i>Control-the-Ship</i>			
Edges	-5.00	0.004	<.001
<b>Merit-Merit</b>	<b>0.83</b>	0.008	<.001
Merit- Other	-0.68	0.007	<.001
AIC		1478165	
BIC		1478210	
<i>Deservingness-Reward</i>			
Edges	-5.43	0.003	<.001
<b>Merit-Merit</b>	<b>1.27</b>	0.005	<.001
Merit- Other	-0.97	0.004	<.001
AIC		3824986	
BIC		3825035	
<i>Deservingness-Punishment</i>			
Edges	-4.92	0.004	<.001
<b>Merit-Merit</b>	<b>1.12</b>	0.008	<.001
Merit- Other	-0.87	0.006	<.001
AIC		1680630	
BIC		1680675	

**Discussion**

This study contributes to our understanding of how meritocracy is represented in lyrics that are popular on Spotify. Overall, we found five different types of meritocratic frames (i.e., Rags-to-Riches, Deservingness-Reward, Deservingness-Punishment frames, No-Pain-No-Gain and Control-the-Ship) that were present in almost 24% of all the analyzed songs and mostly in rap, but also in pop and rock music.

Along with the previously defined (1) Rags-to-Riches, (2) Deservingness-Reward, and (3) Deservingness-Punishment frames, we found two additional frames: (4) No-Pain-No-Gain and (5) Control-the-Ship (RQ1). These frames present concepts of giftedness (or having inner talents), ungiftedness (or lacking inner talents), perseverance, hard work, and resilience. United by a focus on individual responsibility, these characteristics represent the essence of a meritocratic frame. Representing fundamental meritocratic facets, these frames can also feature other music products, such as music videos or the social media posts and stories of music artists. Each of these media formats is characterized by specific types of information (i.e., text in lyrics or images in videos) and affordances (e.g., feedback in the form of likes and sharing between fans and artists on social media) that might influence how meritocratic frames are constructed (Powell et al., 2015). Future research is therefore recommended to build upon our results to further explore whether new meritocratic frames emerge from other music products and whether the frames found in the lyrics also find similar expressions in other products, as in the case of the Deservingness subframes previously found in newspapers (Rowlingson & Connor, 2011).

Moreover, we found that meritocratic frames occurred quite frequently, as almost one in four lyrics (24%) had at least one meritocratic frame (RQ2). In line with previous literature (Balestrini, 2015), such representations were most frequently adopted in rap (81.7%). Interestingly, we also found these frames in pop (13.7%) and, to a lesser extent, in rock (2.4%) (RQ3). These findings might benefit future studies interested in the effects of music uses on individual beliefs. According to various theoretical perspectives, such as cultivation theory, priming, and framing, media content might influence individual beliefs depending on exposure levels and on the cumulative presence of messages (Druckman, 2004). Frequently featuring the content of mainstream music, meritocratic frames can therefore be expected to be widely

present in society at large and, consequently, to be widely available to individuals for consumption. Future studies can therefore explore potential routes through which meritocratic frames in lyrics are internalized by music audiences and how they can contribute in the formation of meritocratic beliefs based on levels of cumulative exposure (i.e., meritocratic frames present across multiple songs or multiple frames featuring the same song). This application is especially relevant in relation to music streaming platforms, where the almost endless availability and retrievability of music lyrics makes these narratives more likely to be encountered (Hodgson, 2021).

Finally, we found that these meritocratic frames were not only qualitatively different but were also quantitatively discernible from each other based on their patterns of word co-occurrences. Each frame has a set of frame-specific words that are likely to co-occur only in songs using such a frame. This result offers a promising avenue for future research, both methodologically and theoretically. Methodologically, the use of inferential network analysis to deductively confirm the presence of frames should be further explored to better understand its potentials and limitations. This method could be used to discover previously established frames in new texts or in different media formats. For example, using a defined list of words that identify a specific meritocratic frame in lyrics, researchers can use ERGM models on other textual scripts (e.g., television series) to evaluate whether the text contains a meritocratic frame. Theoretically, framing effects and other content-focused literature might benefit from the use of inferential network analysis to detect frames. In the same way as various types of information (e.g., words) are connected to each other in constructing media frames, individuals' beliefs can be seen as expressions of a cognitive arrangement of information that is made more or less accessible and available through media frames (Baden & Lecheler, 2012). Using inferential network analysis in the study of media frames means applying similar principles to the way humans process and

interpret incoming information, enabling framing researchers to examine the dynamic interplay between media framing and audience framing. As such, using this method offers a promising avenue for future studies to combine content analyses and their potential effects on individuals' beliefs.

As with other works, this study is not without limitations. First, the choice of six highly individualistic countries limits the representativeness of the sample. Research has hinted at media representations of meritocracy in countries from the Global South (e.g., Ronsini, 2014), albeit with some important variations in how such meritocratic representations are structured compared to a sample of countries examined here. A more complete overview defining global differences in meritocratic representations, especially in the Global South, requires a larger and more diverse sample of countries (Xiao, 2021).

Second, we followed Spotify's genre classifications and combined various genres (e.g., salsa and reggaeton) into previously established categories (e.g., latin). This approach can introduce bias not only regarding Spotify's classifications (e.g., female artists frequently classified as pop rather than rap, such as for Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion) but also when combining multiple genres, as it does not account for specificities of each genre in terms of their historical developments and ideological orientations. Failing to consider such specificities might conceal both greater variability between genres and a better overview of the relationships between genre-specific traditions and their content.

## **Conclusion**

Meritocracy is a pervasive narrative in contemporary societies, often used to frame status achievements as a matter of individual efforts and resilience (Mijs, 2019). Meritocratic frames have been argued to potentially empower individuals for promoting a sense of agency and self-efficacy, but also to



further entrench social inequalities by framing status primarily as a matter of individual responsibilities while disregarding structural barriers (Weinberg et al., 2020). This study is the first that systematically investigates the presence and prevalence of meritocratic frames in popular music, specifically focusing on music that is popular on the Spotify charts of highly individualistic countries. It finds that meritocracy is widely diffused in popular music lyrics and presented through five different frames. Considering the wide reach of popular music on streaming platforms, potentially reaching millions of people, this study spurs important questions about the potential internalization of such frames among music audiences. Moreover, the use of inferential network analysis to detect meritocratic frames in lyrics constitutes an important methodological advancement for the study of media texts. It allows future studies to automatically classify texts based on frame-specific sets of words, promising useful applications for the study of large amount of text data.

## Chapter 4

### A Meta-Analysis of Studies Examining the Effect of Music on Beliefs<sup>7</sup>

Much research documented the influence of music on various behaviors, including substance use and delinquency. Yet, less is known about its influences on dimensions that are crucial for behavioral outcomes, namely beliefs and attitudes. In this study, we reviewed and meta-analyzed the literature about music effects on beliefs ( $n = 82$ , published 1972–2021) by mapping the theoretical and methodological features of this literature, focusing on the effect size of various characteristics (e.g., age, design) and on open scientific practices. Results indicate a relationship between exposure to music and music-consistent beliefs, with heterogeneity related to the type of beliefs, modality of exposure, designs, and sample characteristics. We conclude by evaluating this literature and reflecting upon future opportunities in this area of research.

#### Introduction

Music has long been recognized as a crucial source for socialization, especially in relation to antisocial behaviors (Binder, 1993). In this view, studies have documented an association between music messages and behavioral outcomes, such as substance use (Franken et al., 2017), street gang involvement (Miranda & Claes, 2004), delinquency (Mulder et al., 2006), and aggression (Coyne & Padilla-Walker, 2015). This literature suggests that music messages can be internalized and mimicked in real-life behaviors (Miranda, 2013).

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While the literature about the effects of music on behaviors is well-developed, less is known about its effect on the cognitive antecedents of behaviors, such as beliefs and attitudes (Pieschl & Fegers, 2016). In particular, attitudes and beliefs are often considered interchangeable concepts (in the remainder of this chapter, we will refer to beliefs for conciseness purposes) and can be described as evaluative propositions that guide and justify behaviors (Petty et al., 2007). Various studies have shown that future behaviors can be predicted by the salience of current beliefs, hinting at the importance of studying beliefs to explain behaviors (Glasman & Albarracín, 2006). This literature suggests that, in order to better understand the socializing role of music, the influence of music on behaviors should be complemented with the analysis of its influences on beliefs.

Building upon these insights, a review and meta-analysis about the effects of music has indeed demonstrated that exposure to music brings listeners to hold and enact message-consistent beliefs and behaviors (Timmerman et al., 2008). The study of Timmerman et al. was the first effort to systematically assess the state of this literature at the time of its publication. However, the study focused on beliefs and behaviors, bringing together effects with potentially different origins, theorized mechanisms, and magnitudes. Moreover, since its publication, the music scene has dramatically changed, especially due to the advent of music streaming platforms, the large diffusion of digital devices such as smartphones, and new modalities of music sharing, such as through social media (Webster, 2020).

Currently, a specific focus on beliefs is lacking and the accumulated evidence since Timmerman et al. (2008) article requires a renewed effort to systematize and meta-analyze existing research. Such a review can help identify gaps in this quantitative literature, including methodological and theoretical issues (Page et al., 2021). More precisely, the main goal of this review is to describe the existing research from a theoretical and

methodological point of view and to evaluate this literature in terms of mean effect sizes and power. Specifically, we aim to map the main theoretical frameworks used to link music consumption with beliefs, the types of beliefs studied, and the different music sensory modalities that have been addressed in research (e.g., lyrics, videos). Moreover, we investigate the research design (e.g., experimental, longitudinal) and sample characteristics (e.g., age). Finally, we aim to meta-analyze the effects of studies using different sensory modalities, designs, and samples and to evaluate the extent to which existing research is underpowered and follows open science principles.

### **A Connectionist Definition of Beliefs**

Music is a form of entertainment that has been omnipresent throughout human history, not only for its hedonic (i.e., enjoyable, thought-free, and pleasurable), but also for its eudaimonic (i.e., based on appreciation and meaning-making) potentials, as a source of identity and a carrier of ideological messages (Frith, 1981; Savage, 2019). Among the many socializing roles of music, studies have focused on its effects on beliefs as core components of one's identity (Stets & Burke, 2000). Beliefs have been defined in multiple ways, often based on the idea that they are subjective linguistic expressions about something or someone (Connors & Halligan, 2015). To say that individuals believe in something means that they are capable of verbally articulating their stance toward the object of the belief. Indeed, beliefs have often been considered as linguistic representations of personal truths, especially in media effect research (Long & Eveland, 2021). In other words, beliefs are often considered as linguistic utterances used to communicate and express someone's position on a topic. This definition allows to consider under the umbrella term of "belief" other concepts, including explicit verbal articulations (e.g., attitudes, opinion) and their (often implicit) antecedents (e.g., schemas, cognitions, script). Priming these antecedents means activating the relevant connections that will be eventually used when verbally

articulating the belief itself. The inclusion of explicit and implicit forms of beliefs stems from the consideration that these concepts derive from the same underlying cognitive structure. Such reasoning departs from a connectionist perspective of human cognition, which considers beliefs as articulations of an underlying system of information—often referred to as cultural or cognitive schema—whose connections depend on the frequency and intensity of their co-occurrences (Lakoff, 2012). This framework is widely accepted in contemporary cognitive science (Conrey & Smith, 2007), often used in communication (Price & Tewksbury, 1997) and in music research (Bharucha, 1987). Accordingly, implicit and explicit definitions of belief both tap upon the same information. What changes is the route through which this information is processed (i.e., automatic for implicit, controlled for explicit, Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). Despite of their analytically different roles, these concepts are often used interchangeably to capture what individuals think about a certain topic and to study media effects on individuals' beliefs (Song & Ewoldsen, 2015). For this reason, in this chapter we refer to beliefs for conciseness purposes but include in such a definition a broad variety of concepts.

### **Music Genres, Messages, and Sensory Modalities**

The messages studied in music are thought to directly reflect the beliefs that users internalize after music consumption. Individuals are thus expected to form message-consistent beliefs after having listened to or watched songs with certain messages. In this context, a wide variety of beliefs has been studied, including beliefs about sexuality (C. L. Wright & Rubin, 2017), violence (Pieschl & Fegers, 2016), and ethnicity (Sousa et al., 2005). Currently, a comprehensive overview about which types of beliefs and thus messages are the most or least frequently covered is lacking. Such a gap does not allow to take stock of previous research in specific areas, evaluating the maturity of research on certain beliefs (e.g., violence), and concentrating the focus on

understudied beliefs (e.g., ethnicity). In order to provide such an overview, *RQ1a asked what are the types of beliefs studied and how frequently has each belief been covered? (RQ1a)*. Moreover, to understand whether different beliefs have different effect sizes, *RQ2a asked what is the mean effect size for each type of belief? (RQ2a)*.<sup>8</sup>

To identify with their favorite music, listeners tend to use genres for guidance. Genres can be broadly defined as (rather) stable sets of representations, techniques, and themes that aggregate artists and audiences together (Lena & Peterson, 2008). Because of their heuristic function, genres have been one of the main ways scholars studied the role of music in everyday life (Brisson & Bianchi, 2020). This genre-focused literature has especially studied the role of so-called deviant genres, such as heavy metal and rap, especially in relation to antisocial behaviors and beliefs (e.g., Epps & Dixon, 2017). Genres help to orient audiences, but there is much variation within each genre which likely constitutes very different representations (van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2018). For example, rap is generally associated with antisocial behaviors (e.g., drug use, gun violence) but the meanings associated with these behaviors can vary between subgenres (e.g., violence as a display of power in drill music, Stuart (2020), or as a denounce of police violence in conscious rap, Alridge and Stewart (2005)). Moreover, boundaries between genres are often fluid and open to contestation, such that their definition can vary between listeners (van Venrooij, 2009). Overall, these critiques point at the limitation of using genres as a heuristic marker and suggest that they might collapse the variation of music effects among songs from the same genre, yet with different messages (Vlegels & Lievens, 2017).

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<sup>8</sup> In this chapter, we distinguish three types of RQ. RQ1 refers to descriptive information, RQ2 to meta-analytical effects, and RQ3 to the robustness of the results (i.e., statistical power and open scientific practices).

To address the problems related to genres, researchers have turned to a more specific operationalization of music in which they distinguish the meanings of songs independently from their genres (Pieschl & Fegers, 2016). Such detailed focus is absent when working with genres that function as heuristics to estimate the promotion of particular messages. Moreover, this approach lacks attention to differences within genres (and even to songs within the same subgenre). Currently, it is unclear how much the evidence accrued in this area of research varies when focusing on genres or applying a more detailed approach on messages. In order to develop a comprehensive overview of this issue, *RQ1b asked how frequently have genre- or song-specific messages been studied? (RQ1b).*

This research has shifted the attention from genre-specific to song-specific messages by paying particular attention to the sensory modality in which music is consumed (Brummert Lennings & Warburton, 2011). Music sensory modality refers to the three main types of sensory information in which music is consumed, namely textual (i.e., lyrics), visual (i.e., videos), and auditory (i.e., sounds) information (Pan et al., 2019). Each modality is expected to influence beliefs differently according to how the human brain processes information (Powell et al., 2019). Textual and visual information in, respectively, lyrics and videos convey messages that can be subsequently internalized to form beliefs. While the images present in videos are processed in a fast and automatic way (Barry, 1997), the textual information present in lyrics requires more active and attentive reflection (Messaris & Abraham, 2001). Finally, auditory information constitutes the emotional background in which textual and/or visual information is encoded, potentially facilitating the internalization of music messages by synchronizing listeners to the song (through musical features such as rhythm, chords, melody), creating a so-called flow state (Tan & Sin, 2021).

A focus on a single sensory modality is necessary to understand how song-specific messages can be internalized according to specific types of information. Yet, music is often a combination of multiple types of information (Herget et al., 2022). For example, a music video is not uniquely defined by images, but it also contains lyrics and/or sounds. The lyrics and video of the same song can express different or even contrasting messages. When looking at the combinations between textual and visual information, listeners can experience a congruence (or double dose) effect when lyrics and videos express the same messages (Fiekkers et al., 2013; Gerbner et al., 1980). Instead, an incongruence (or discordant) effect occurs when they express different messages (Festinger, 1957; Powell et al., 2019), for example when violent lyrics are represented in a peace-promoting video. In the background, audio information provides the emotional and rhythmic context that might strengthen or further complicate the understanding of the messages. For example, a song with negative messages in the lyrics (e.g., violence) might be accompanied by minor chords and a repetitive rhythm that introduces the listeners in a flow-state in line with the textual information. Alternatively, the same lyrics can be followed by major chords, creating a dissonance between the messages expressed in the lyrics and the song's mood (Kolchinsky et al., 2017).

Together, a focus on music messages and sensory modalities isolates the effects of different types of messages and sources. Yet, it is currently unclear how frequently each modality (alone or combined) has been studied. To have a more comprehensive overview of this issue, we additionally asked *among studies focused on song-specific messages, how frequently have various sensory modalities (i.e., lyrics, videos, sounds) alone, or any combination between them been studied? (RQ1c).*

A focus on messages is expected to bring more accuracy and larger effects compared to the broader category of genres (Allen et al., 2007). However,



some authors noticed the lack of efforts to compare the effects between studies focusing on messages and genres, as well as between studies manipulating different sensory modalities (Brummert Lennings & Warburton, 2011). Considering that messages are more easily processed visually rather than textually, videos can be expected to have stronger effects compared to lyrics (C. L. Wright & Rubin, 2017). At the same time, a focus on sensory modality might overemphasize how attentive listeners are to the messages present in lyrics and videos (Marshall, 2019). Rather, some authors argued that a focus on genres might lead to larger effects because of the heuristic function they serve, providing easy-to-retrieve connections between genre-specific messages and beliefs (Redker & Gibson, 2009). In order to shed light on this controversy and to inform future studies, the next research question of this chapter asked *what are the effect sizes of studies focusing on genres and song-specific messages?* (RQ2b). *Among studies focused on song-specific messages, what are the effect sizes of studies using different sensory modalities?* (RQ2c).

### **Theoretical Frameworks to Understand the Links Between Music and Beliefs**

The variety of modalities and beliefs chosen to study music may also potentially reflect theoretical choices, as theories likely vary in their explanatory power across different modalities, design, and beliefs. For example, some theoretical frameworks have been developed to address antisocial beliefs (e.g., general aggression model; Anderson & Bushman, 2002), while others were originally created to understand the formation of misogynistic beliefs (e.g., affective engagement theory; P. J. Wright, 2016). Similarly, while some theoretical frameworks were developed to study short-term effects, more likely captured in experiments (e.g., priming; Price & Tewksbury, 1997), other theoretical frameworks were tailored to study the development of effects over longer periods of time, best captured by survey

designs (e.g., cultivation theory; Gerbner et al., 1980). Potentially, the use of theoretical frameworks in this area of research is connected to their original intents.

Heterogeneity also occurs in relation to the sensory modality of interest. Considering that images (in music videos) are easier to process than textual information (in lyrics), it could be expected that the choice of the theoretical framework is guided by considerations about stimulus-specific affordances in information processing (Geise & Baden, 2015). For example, due to their faster processing, it would be reasonable to expect studies using music videos to focus on theoretical frameworks about affect and emotions (e.g., affective engagement theory, see van Oosten et al., 2015). On the contrary, studies on lyrics might derive their strengths from theoretical frameworks that deal with attention and active processing (e.g., social learning theory, see Greitemeyer, 2011). The theorized mechanisms for which music can influence beliefs might reflect the cognitive paths used to process the specific sensory modality under consideration.

It is currently unclear whether the choice of the theoretical frameworks is in line with outcome-, design-, and modality-specific characteristics. If that was not the case, it would mean that three crucial aspects of how and why music might influence beliefs have been disregarded. Such inconsistencies might undermine the tenability of conclusions from previous studies, slowing down the cumulative process of knowledge building that is typical of a thriving field (Popper, 1959). In order to address this gap, *RQ1d asks for each type of sensory modality, belief, and design what are the theoretical frameworks employed to explain the effect of music? (RQ1d)*. The main goal of RQ1d is to create an overview of the frequency with which theoretical frameworks have been employed to study the effects of music in combination with various modalities, designs, and beliefs (e.g., theoretical frameworks used to study music videos in surveys).

## **Methodological Characteristics of Research Studying Music and Beliefs**

Together with theoretical considerations, the research design of choice is crucial to explain the influence of music on beliefs. In this regard, some scholars remarked difficulties in finding a common ground between generalizability and proper test of causal mechanisms (Pieschl & Fegers, 2016). As noted by Pieschl and Fegers (2016), most of the literature is according to them focused on cross-sectional designs, and few efforts have been invested in adopting designs with high external validity and that allow to test causal mechanisms, such as longitudinal surveys (e.g., Long & Eveland, 2021; van Oosten et al., 2015). Typically, experiments have been one of the most frequently used designs in media effect research in general because of their capacity to isolate the characteristics of interest that are deemed responsible for changes in the outcome (Gervais, 2020). Yet, they have been frequently criticized for their artificial setting, not allowing to determine the reproducibility of the studied effect in real life (Green et al., 2014). More recently, the field of media effects has seen a surge of studies using designs that are better able to disentangle causal mechanisms in a realistic setting, such as longitudinal, computational (e.g., network), and experience sampling designs (e.g., van Atteveldt & Peng, 2018). At the moment, it is not clear if the same applies to the literature on music effects on beliefs. As such, *RQ1e asks how frequently has each design been used? (RQ1e).*

Related to the choice of the design, a commonly reported problem of quantitative media effect research is that self-reported measures might not be accurate and, thus, survey designs might lead to biased estimates (Parry et al., 2021). Moreover, short-term effects might be stronger compared to long-term effects, especially in relation to physiological and emotional responses (Bushman & Huesmann, 2006). As such, experiments might yield the strongest effects as they provide evidence for the short-term consequences of

media exposure and do not incur recalling problems (Beaudoin et al., 2007). At the same time, changes in beliefs have been shown to take place over longer periods, and some effects of music might thus best be captured by repetitive measurements rather than short-term experiments (Thomas et al., 2021). In this perspective, studies employing designs that are able to capture within-person differences (e.g., diary and experience sampling method) might capture different effects compared to between-person designs (e.g., cross-sectional survey). In order to understand whether certain designs yielded larger effect sizes than others and to further advance the quantitative research on this topic, *RQ2d asked what are the effect sizes of studies using different designs? (RQ2d)*.

Another source of methodological heterogeneity has been suggested to be related to sample composition. Understanding the sample composition allows us to understand whether the literature has mostly focused on a certain population or whether it is biased toward specific groups. A typical example of such bias regards the oversample of WEIRD (i.e., Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) populations (Henrich et al., 2010). Music is consumed worldwide and, as such, its effects should be explored among many different populations, rather than a few selected ones. In order to understand the sample composition of this literature, *RQ1f asked what is the sample composition in terms of age, gender, country, social class, and ethnic background? (RQ1f)*. Following this reasoning, *RQ2e asked are the effect size of samples with WEIRD populations different compared to those with non-WEIRD populations? (RQ2e)*.

Among the many background characteristics that define a sample, age has often been considered a particularly relevant characteristic in relation to music. From a lifespan perspective, beliefs are rather stable among adults and are particularly malleable during adolescence (Kiley & Vaisey, 2020). Moreover, during adolescence, music is also a crucial resource as it helps

youngsters to complete developmental tasks such as identity building (Schäfer et al., 2013). Given the unique developmental context in which music is consumed during adolescence, many studies examined the effects of music on behaviors among adolescents (e.g., Franken et al., 2017; Mulder et al., 2006). Despite the evidence that beliefs are more stable among adults than adolescents in other domains or media (e.g., Kiley & Vaisey, 2020), it is still unclear whether this is the case for music. In order to shed light on this aspect and to systematically compare the effect sizes between adolescents and adults, *RQ2f asked is the mean effect size among adolescents significantly different compared to the mean effect size among adults? (RQ2f).*

Finally, the evaluation of field-specific effect sizes can be particularly helpful to evaluate the power of a study. Even if general thresholds are available, such as for the commonly used Cohen's *d* (Cohen, 1988), they are not universal, as each field has its own peculiarities (Schäfer & Schwarz, 2019). The use of meta-analytical tools to address the previous RQs also allows to assess whether studies are underpowered in relation to standard thresholds and a field-specific mean-effect size. Such assessment is crucial to understand the reproducibility and robustness of the results in this area of research (Dienlin et al., 2021). For this reason, our final RQs asked *what is the proportion of underpowered studies according to Cohen's d standard thresholds? (RQ3a), as well as to a field-specific mean effect size? (RQ3b).* In addition to a power analysis, *RQ3c is also interested in exploring what proportion of studies has applied open science practices? (RQ3c).* In particular, we follow Dienlin et al. (2021) in measuring the presence or absence of the following aspects: open data, open code, open additional material, pre-registration, pre-print, registered report, and publication bias.

## Method

### *Search Strategy and Sample Description*

In reporting our identification, selection, and synthesis of studies, we followed the PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021). Web of Science, Scopus, and the EBSCO Communication and Mass Media Complete were searched for relevant research in August 2021, and records were stored on EndNote. The search was performed in all fields (excluding full text), that is, in the article title, abstract, and keywords. Search terms included all the possible combinations between music, influence/effect, and concepts such as belief/attitude/cognition. For the full list of search terms, see Table 1 in Supplemental Appendix<sup>9</sup>. We selected these keywords in order to have a comprehensive overview about the concept of beliefs.

Altogether, the search consisted of 8,976 studies. After removing the duplicates, the number of entries was 5,896. Subsequently, titles and abstracts were screened for inclusion/exclusion based on the eligibility criteria discussed next, which led to 193 studies. Finally, the full texts of these studies were independently read and evaluated by the first author for inclusion/exclusion based on the inclusion criteria discussed next. This step led to 77 studies, with 122 studies removed because outside of the criteria. Inter-rater reliability was established selecting a random sample of 10% of the 193 studies ( $n = 20$ ) which full text was independently coded by the authors (Cohen's Kappa = 0.8). Finally, five studies that were not present in the search were added because deemed as relevant by the authors. The final sample of studies used for this chapter was 82, published between 1972 and 2021, with 326 effect sizes. Figure 1 in the Appendix shows the flow diagram followed to select the included studies.

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<sup>9</sup> Data, syntax, pre-registration, and Appendix can be found on OSF at this link: [https://osf.io/v8dx3/?view\\_only=b7123afbd1664141935f108b67cf8e07](https://osf.io/v8dx3/?view_only=b7123afbd1664141935f108b67cf8e07)

### ***Eligibility Criteria***

To be included in the review, studies needed to meet the following inclusion criteria: (a) to use beliefs as dependent variable (in their implicit and explicit forms, excluded beliefs about the music itself, unless it was the main dependent variable of interest) and music as independent variable, (b) to be published in academic peer-reviewed journals written in English, (c) to be full articles and not research reports, conference proceedings, or dissertations, (d) to use a quantitative methodology, such as survey designs (including cross-sectional and panel designs, diary studies, experience sampling designs) and experimental designs (qualitative articles, mixed-method articles, other meta-analyses, and quantitative content analysis were excluded), (e) to provide sufficient statistical information to be used in a meta-analysis such that an effect size can be reconstructed in case it was not directly reported (e.g., sample size, means and standard deviations, F-test). No date restrictions were applied.

### ***Data Extraction***

The first author extracted the items that were needed to answer the research questions. The following data items were extracted<sup>10</sup>: publication year, journal's name, country of the authors' affiliation(s), country in which the study was conducted, theoretical perspective (if explicitly mentioned in the paper), focus on genre or song-specific messages, music sensory modality, study design, sample composition in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and social class (measured in objective, such as salary or education, or subjective, such as self-position on a ladder, terms), sample size, performance of power analysis (yes/no), operationalization of music as independent variable, types of beliefs studied as dependent variable, polarity of beliefs, participants' familiarity with the music, use of implicit or explicit measures, availability of

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<sup>10</sup> We refer to Text 1 in Supplemental Appendix for a more detailed explanation of the extracted categories.

open data (yes/no), open code (yes/no), open additional material (yes/no), pre-registration (yes/no), pre-print (yes/no), and registered-report (yes/no) and effect size.

### ***Data Analysis***

Before analyzing the data, all the effects were converted into Pearson's correlation coefficients. Given the heterogeneity of effect types and the limitations in transforming certain effect sizes directly into correlation coefficients (e.g., F-test with multiple groups), we decided to follow the same procedure for all transformations, converting each effect first into a Cohen's *d* measure and then into a Pearson's correlation coefficient. We chose Pearson's correlation because of its interpretability and widespread use in meta-analytical studies (e.g., Godefroidt, 2023). In particular, when mean differences and the respective standard deviations were available, they were transformed into Cohen's *d* following Lipsey and Wilson (2001, pp. 172–206) and subsequently into correlation coefficients following Ruscio (2008). When an F-test was available, it was first transformed into partial eta squared and then into Cohen's *d*, provided information about degrees of freedom was reported, following Cohen (1988, pp. 276, 281), and finally into correlation coefficients. Other coefficients, such as t-tests and chi-squared tests, were transformed into Cohen's *d*, provided information about sample size was reported, following Lipsey and Wilson (2001, pp. 172–206), and subsequently into correlation coefficients. When regression coefficients were available, standardized coefficients were preferred. In answering the meta-analysis questions, regression coefficients were excluded as the inclusion of different sets of covariates affects the size and standard error of the beta coefficient, which, in turn, produces biased estimates of the pooled-effect size (Peterson & Brown, 2005).

Our results section was structured along the RQs. In order to answer RQ1s and RQ3c, which were descriptive in nature and answered with descriptive



analyses, we calculated the number or proportion of studies using each category of interest (e.g., theoretical frameworks or types of beliefs). RQ2s required a meta-effect approach and were studied with three-level random-effect model meta-analyses to take into account sampling and treatment effect variability within and between studies (Hedges & Vevea, 1998; Van Den Noortgate et al., 2013) and subsequently performed subgroup analysis (Borenstein & Higgins, 2013) to examine differences between categories of interest (e.g., age groups). Orthogonal polynomial contrast were used to determine whether differences between studied groups (e.g., adolescents and adults) were statistically significant (Raudenbush & Liu, 2001). Finally, to answer RQ3a,b, we performed post-hoc power analysis using common thresholds for interpreting the size of correlations (Cohen, 1988) and a field-specific effect size that was obtained from the random effect generated by the random-effect model meta-analyses (Jackson & Turner, 2017). Moderation analyses were conducted using Likelihood Ratio Test between an additive and an interaction model (Viechtbauer et al., 2015).

## Results

The 82 examined studies reported a total of 22,059 participants (males = 7,842, females = 9,745), with an average of 235 (Median= 137) per study. Across the studies, the mean effect size of the association between exposure to music and expression of beliefs was positive and significant<sup>11</sup>,  $r = .17^{***}$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ , within-study variance ( $v1$ ) = 0.008, between-study variance ( $v2$ ) = 0.026. Accordingly, consumption of music was associated with an increased likelihood of expressing music-consistent beliefs. This mean effect size refers to various types of music exposures, such as the recall of frequently listened music or the actual exposure to song lyrics or videos, as well as various types of beliefs, such as about gender or aggressivity. To have a more accurate

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<sup>11</sup> Throughout the chapter, we refer to the following notation for significance level: .001 “\*\*\*”, .01 “\*\*”, .05 “\*”, .1 “+”, 1 “ ”

evaluation of its magnitude and variability, it is thus necessary to answer each research question, which we turn next. Table 2 in Supplemental Appendix shows descriptive information about the selected studies.

### ***Types of Beliefs***

The examined literature covered 13 types of beliefs, namely gender ( $n = 20$ , 21%), brand/ad ( $n = 17$ , 18%), race/ethnicity ( $n = 15$ , 14%), sex ( $n = 12$ , 13%), aggressive ( $n = 9$ , 9%), prosocial ( $n = 6$ , 6%), appearance ( $n = 6$ , 6%), political ( $n = 4$ , 4%), homophobic ( $n = 2$ , 2%), substance ( $n = 1$ , 1%), competence ( $n = 1$ , 1%), environmental ( $n = 1$ , 1%), physical activity ( $n = 1$ , 1%). In addition to these categories, three studies (3%) reported beliefs that were not classified in any of these categories because about mixed categories (i.e., criminal behavior and love stories, Jevtić & Milošević, 2021), an experiment-specific narrative (i.e., a movie, Costabile & Terman, 2013), and an experiment-specific condition (i.e., water or family, Benes et al., 1990). Text 1 in Supplemental Appendix describes in detail which beliefs were captured by the categories defined above.

The mean-effect sizes and SEs for each belief, presented in decreasing order, were the following ( $k$  indicates the number of effects, not articles, about each type of belief): gender ( $r = .24^{***}$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $k = 49$ ), prosocial ( $r = .22$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ,  $k = 9$ ), race/ethnicity ( $r = .19^{**}$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $k = 38$ ), sex ( $r = .16$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $k = 16$ ), aggressive ( $r = .13$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $k = 17$ ), political ( $r = .12$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $k = 7$ ), appearance ( $r = .10$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $k = 11$ ), brand/ad ( $r = .09$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ ,  $k = 18$ ), homophobic ( $r = -.07$ ,  $SE = 0.24$ ,  $k = 2$ ). Beliefs with only one reported effect were the following: physical activity ( $r = .62$ ,  $SE = 0.47$ ,  $k = 1$ ), environmental ( $r = .42$ ,  $SE = 0.27$ ,  $k = 1$ ), competence ( $r = .23$ ,  $SE = 0.41$ ,  $k = 1$ ), substance ( $r = .05$ ,  $SE = 0.33$ ,  $k = 1$ ).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> We conducted robustness checks with familiarity with the music as a control variable (Table 6 in Supplemental Appendix). None of the results changed. We also conducted a moderation

To better understand the distribution of positive and negative attitudes across various types of beliefs, we conducted a follow-up analysis in which we descriptively assessed the direction in which each belief has been studied (see Text 1 in Supplemental Appendix). Such analysis showed that only pro-sociality beliefs (Number of effects related to this belief studied as negative = 9, 100%) were explicitly studied as positive, while aggressive ( $n = 17$ , 100%), gender ( $n = 34$ , 48%), homophobic ( $n = 17$ , 100%), and race/ethnicity ( $n = 41$ , 100%) beliefs were all studied as negative.

### ***Exposures and Modalities***

Most of the examined literature focused on song-specific messages ( $n = 69$ ). In addition, an almost equal proportion of studies focused on genres ( $n = 7$ ) and self-reported general exposure to music ( $n = 6$ ). Among studies that focused on song-specific messages, the distribution across modalities and their combinations was as follow: lyrics ( $n = 26$ , 36.6%), video ( $n = 22$ , 30.9%), audio ( $n = 17$ , 23.9%), lyrics/ audio ( $n = 4$ , 5.6%), video/lyrics ( $n = 1$ , 1.4%). One study (Wright & Rubin, 2017) also focused on messages posted by music artists on social media (e.g., Twitter and Facebook).

The mean-effect sizes and SEs for each content were the following: song-specific messages ( $r = .18^{***}$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $k = 162$ ), genres ( $r = .10$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ,  $k = 46$ ), exposure ( $r = .06$ ,  $SE = 0.34$ ,  $k = 1$ ). Focusing on effects reported in studies that focused on song-specific messages, the mean-effect sizes and SEs for each modality were the following: video ( $r = .20^{**}$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $k = 62$ ), lyrics ( $r = .19^{**}$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $k = 68$ ), lyrics/audio ( $r = .14$ ,  $SE = 0.18$ ,  $k = 6$ ), audio ( $r = .11$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ ,  $k = 24$ ), and lyrics/video ( $r = .04$ ,  $SE = 0.26$ ,  $k = 2$ ).

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analysis to test whether beliefs have different effects between WEIRD and non-WEIRD countries (Table 6 in Supplemental Appendix). The difference was not significant.

### ***Theoretical Frameworks***

The examined articles have used 46 different theoretical frameworks to explain the effects of music on beliefs. Table 3 in Supplemental Appendix showed that eight theoretical frameworks have been used more frequently, namely Cultivation theory, Elaboration likelihood model, General aggression model, General learning model, Priming, Social cognitive theory, Social comparison theory, and Social identity theory. The use of these theoretical frameworks across different studies hints at a correspondence between their theoretical assumptions, the type of belief, the modality, and design chosen to study these beliefs. For example, being developed to study televised contents through surveys because of its supposed long-term effects (Potter, 2014), cultivation theory has been mostly employed for music videos and using surveys. Instead, priming theory theorizes short-term effects that are best captured by experimental designs and is often used to study stereotypes (Arendt, 2013). Accordingly, the examined literature employing priming theory focused primarily on experiments and on stereotypes across various axes, such as gender and race/ ethnicity. Other examples of the correspondence between these dimensions of interest are the focus of general aggression and learning theories (Anderson & Bushman, 2002) on aggressive and prosocial beliefs, the focus on audio peripheral cues of the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), and the focus on beliefs about appearance among studies employing social comparison theory (Gerber et al., 2018).

To better understand which theoretical framework holds the greatest explanatory power, Table 3 in Supplemental Appendix showed that studies working with Social Cognitive Theory ( $r = .18^{***}$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $k = 162$ ), Elaboration likelihood model ( $r = .15$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ,  $k = 15$ ), and the General Aggression Model ( $r = .15^{\dagger}$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $k = 15$ ) reported the highest effect. Yet, only the effects reported in studies using Social Cognitive Theory and

Priming ( $r = .13^{**}$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $k = 61$ ) as theoretical frameworks reached statistical significance. To further grasp potential differences between mean effect sizes across the studies using these two theoretical frameworks, we conducted two follow-up moderation analyses (Table 6 in Supplemental Appendix). While the first focused on differences between research using Priming versus Social Cognitive Theory and the two beliefs most frequently studied, namely gender and race/ethnicity, the second focused on differences between research using Priming and Social Cognitive Theory together versus research using the other theoretical perspectives. None of these moderation analyses revealed significant effects.

### ***Design***

In terms of design, the examined literature mainly employed experiments ( $n = 67$ , 81.7%), but also cross-sectional surveys ( $n = 12$ , 14.6%) and longitudinal surveys ( $n = 3$ , 3.7%). Various measurement instruments were used in order to capture the desired effects within each type of design ( $n$  refers to the number of effects captured using each measurement instrument), namely scales (e.g., visual or Likert,  $n = 287$ ), implicit association tests ( $n = 16$ ), word-completion tasks ( $n = 17$ ), and free-association tasks ( $n = 6$ ).

The mean-effect sizes and SEs for each design were the following (no effects were present for longitudinal surveys because they were only analyzed using regression analysis): experiment ( $r = .17$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ) and cross-sectional survey ( $r = .09$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ). We also conducted a moderation analysis to test whether beliefs had different effects between studies using implicit and explicit measures (Table 6 in Supplemental Appendix). The results were not significant ( $\chi^2 = 4.30$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = .11$ ), indicating that implicit and explicit measures yielded similar effect sizes for the studied beliefs.

### ***Sample Composition***

The examined literature has been mainly conducted in Western countries, namely USA ( $n = 37$ ), Germany ( $n = 8$ ), England ( $n = 5$ ), Australia ( $n = 4$ ), Netherlands ( $n = 3$ ), Belgium ( $n = 2$ ), and Israel ( $n = 2$ ). Two studies have been conducted using online samples (Herget & Albrecht, 2022; Zoghaib, 2019). Other countries that have been sampled (each in one study only) were Canada, China, Fiji, France, Korea, Portugal, Serbia, South Korea, Spain, and Taiwan. Two articles have recruited participants from two countries in the same study, namely Germany and Austria (Greitemeyer & Schwab, 2014), and USA and England (Alexopoulos & Taylor, 2021).

The samples were constituted by participants who were, on average, 21.4 years old ( $SE = 0.4$ ), 41.4% male ( $SE = 7.26$ ), 64.7% white ( $SE = 3.35$ ), and 33.7% from a high social class ( $SE = 2.68$ ). Considering the country where the study was conducted and its racial and class composition, 93% of the studies focused on WEIRD populations. The mean-effect sizes and SEs for each sample were the following: WEIRD ( $r = .18^{**}$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ), non-WEIRD ( $r = .08$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ). A follow-up moderation analysis revealed that, in respect to the two beliefs most frequently studied, namely gender and race/ ethnicity, the mean effect size of WEIRD countries was not different than the one of non-WEIRD ones. See Table 6 in Supplemental Appendix for a more extensive overview.

A three-level random-effect moderation meta-analysis was used to estimate the mean-effect size between adolescents (younger than 19 years old; Davis, 2013), young adults (between 19 and 25 years old; Park et al., 2006), and adults (older than 25 years old). The mean-effect sizes and SEs for each group were the following: adolescents ( $r = .34^{***}$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ), young adults ( $r = .23^{**}$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ), adults ( $r = .07$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ). An orthogonal polynomial contrast shows that music has, on average, stronger effects on adolescents

compared to adults ( $F[1, 106] = 5.10, p = .02$ ), but not to young adults ( $F[1, 106] = 1.02, p = .31$ ).

### ***Open Scientific Practices and Power***

Performing post-hoc power analyses, the proportion of underpowered (power  $< 0.80$ ) effects according to Cohen's (1988) thresholds (i.e., small:  $r = .10$ ; medium:  $r = .30$ ; high:  $r = .50$ ) are the following: small (86.5%), medium (15.9%), large (0.31%). When considering a field-specific effect size, calculated as the mean-effect size from a three-level meta-analysis ( $r = .17$ ), the proportion of underpowered studies is 53.1%.

Open scientific practices were rarely followed, with 13.4% of the studies conducting an ex-ante power analysis, 1.22% reporting the open availability of data and code, 8.54% reporting the open availability of additional material, and 1.22% having preregistered the study. No study was pre-printed or submitted as a registered report. Finally, Figure 2 in Supplemental Appendix showed a somewhat symmetrical funnel plot, which symmetry is confirmed by Egger's test ( $Z = 1.07, p = .29$ ), indicating no presence of publication bias (Sterne & Egger, 2001).

### **Discussion**

The current meta-analysis showed that exposure to music was related to the holding of music-consistent beliefs in individuals. The examined literature was heterogeneous in the type of beliefs studied, with most of the studies focusing on gender, brand/ad, and race/ethnicity. Exposure to song-specific messages—rather than genres or more general exposure—was the most common type of exposure and the only type of exposure that significantly predicted the expression of music-consistent beliefs. Among studies focusing on song-specific messages, most of them focused on lyrics, videos, and audio, but few ( $n = 5$ ) explicitly focused on the combination between these modalities. Methodologically, most of the existing literature has focused on

experiments, few studies have adopted survey designs, especially longitudinal, and no study reported the use of computational designs (e.g., network). We also found that most of the studies included WEIRD populations, and that the effects reported on these population were, on average, stronger than those for non-WEIRD populations. Interestingly, music had stronger effects as the mean sample age decreased. That is, studies with younger samples had, on average, higher effect sizes than those with older samples. Finally, post hoc power analyses showed that most of the literature was underpowered. Open scientific practices were also rarely followed. Several reflections put these and the other reported results further in perspective.

First, despite using search-terms explicitly related to a causality language (e.g., “effect”), we caution against a causal interpretation of our results. Most of the included articles used an experimental setting to study the effects of exposure to music messages. Yet, this does not exclude that selection effects can occur and that a reverse causality can be present in the link between music exposure and music-consistent beliefs. That is, individuals’ beliefs can be influenced by music messages, but they can also guide the selection of the music listened to (for reasons that vary from individual, such as identification with the artist, to structural, such as algorithmic recommendation systems; see P. J. Wright, 2016). All the studied experiments included a predefined music stimulus, not allowing respondents to choose between different songs and, consequently, to reflect about selection mechanisms. The lack of longitudinal studies further impedes the exploration of reinforcing spiral mechanisms. Given that most effects were examined in an experimental setting, we know more about short-term priming effects, but less about the long-lasting changes in beliefs due to music exposure. These caveats are relevant to contextualize the reported effects and their implications and call for more theoretical and



methodological efforts in the field to disentangle selection and long-term effects of music exposure among audiences.

Second, the results need to be interpreted within a temporal perspective. More precisely, we noted an overall increase in the number of studies interested in music effects on beliefs. This increase was particularly present since 2008 (Figure 4 in Supplemental Appendix), the year in which Timmerman et al. published their meta-analysis.<sup>13</sup> Potentially, the latter research inspired subsequent research in this area. Interestingly, Table 7 in Supplemental Appendix showed that the mean effect size of the two beliefs most frequently studied, namely gender and race/ethnicity, was not different between studies conducted before and after 2008. This indicates that, despite substantial changes in the music landscape (e.g., emergence of music streaming platforms, of smartphones and social media), the extent to which music influences beliefs has remained the same. The time analysis further showed a fluctuation in the number of studies focusing on negative beliefs (Figure 5 in Supplemental Appendix) and, most importantly, the emergence of studies focusing on positive beliefs since the turn of the century. This is consistent with a general trend in media effects scholarship to attribute more attention to positive outcomes (e.g., Maes & Vandebosch, 2023).

Third, the literature was heterogeneous in the type of beliefs studied, with most of the studies focusing on gender, brand/ad, and race/ethnicity. Moreover, the effects of music on gender and race/ethnicity beliefs were the only ones that reached statistical significance. A follow-up analysis showed that beliefs about race/ethnicity were exclusively negative (in terms of stereotypes), while those about gender were either negative (48%) or neutral (52%). These results can be interpreted as reflective of the long-standing public concerns about music's anti-social effects, especially on stereotypes,

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<sup>13</sup> We conducted moderation analysis to test whether beliefs have different effects before and after 2008 (Table 6 in Supplemental Appendix). The difference was not significant.

violence, and misogyny beliefs and behaviors, that have also been the central focus of much academic literature on music, especially in relation to rap music (e.g., Dixon & Linz, 1997; Miranda & Claes, 2004). At the same time, these concerns have also been criticized as stemming from broader stereotypes associated with genre-specific music subcultures as well as related to moral panics recurrently surfacing at the emergence of new technologies (Orben, 2020). Especially in relation to rap, Epps and Dixon (2017) noticed how previous literature about rap did not make enough efforts to search for positive messages and to venture outside of the mainstream production of rap, governed by major labels that often push widely accepted narratives for monetary gains (Arditi, 2020). Epps and Dixon (2017) further considered this academic focus on mainstream and negative messages as problematic, as it narrows the depiction of Black individuals and culture into stereotypical representations of violence and hyper sexualization (Ross & Coleman, 2011). Such concern is indeed substantiated in our results, as most of the themes typically touched by rap have been studied in terms of negative effects. Attention to positive messages and effects in genres such as rap can help to have a more complete picture of its effects and add more nuance to scholarly insights on the positive versus negative effects of a particular genre.

Fourth, studies differed in their approaches to music exposure, designs, and modalities. More precisely, to better understand how music and beliefs were related, we first examined how individuals were exposed to music. Exposure to song-specific messages—rather than genres or more general exposure—was the most common type of exposure in the studied literature and the only type of exposure that significantly predicted the expression of music-consistent beliefs. In other words, the extant literature recommends to focus on song-specific messages (e.g., comparing the effects of songs with similar messages expressed through different words) rather than to genres in order to understand whether music influences individuals' beliefs. This is surprising

considering that the literature on music has generally focused on genres as crucial agents in processes of identity formation and socialization, especially in relation to anti-social beliefs and behaviors, such as for rap and heavy metal music (e.g., Coyne & Padilla-Walker, 2015).

We believe that the null finding on genre is the result of different measurement strategies (e.g., lack of a common set and definition of genres) in this literature as well as of intrinsic problems in the study of genres as broad categories of interest. While studies that focus on song-specific messages are able to precisely measure the type of information that is used to convey certain messages (e.g., words or images) and to align them with the specific beliefs that are of interest, studies focusing on genres are, by their own nature, more general. Genres are heuristic categories with fuzzy boundaries and great within-genre message heterogeneity (van Venrooij, 2009). Methodologically, this point can further be illustrated by looking at differences in design. While exposure to song-specific messages was mostly studied in experiments (84%), exposure to genres was uniquely studied in cross-sectional surveys. As such, studies focusing on genres can be less able to detect effects because of the incapacity of surveys to exactly manipulate the variables of interest but also because of the enormous heterogeneity that exists within genres. This does not mean that the research on genres is doomed to be neglected in the study of individuals' socialization. Instead, we recommend future research to adopt more experimental designs in the study of genre-specific effects and to more specifically focus on sub-genres, rather than mainstream genres, in contextualizing the formation of beliefs within sub-genre-specific messages and sub-cultures (Lena & Peterson, 2008; Wilderom & van Venrooij, 2019). In fact, while mainstream music might account for the largest share of popularity in general (i.e., by definition, most people know about mainstream music), this does not necessarily mean that it accounts for the largest share of music preferences within each user. In other words, being aware of the

existence of mainstream artists does not necessarily mean that they are the most frequently listened to by each user. In order to better understand the effects of music, it is therefore also important to focus on music genres that are the most attended to by different audiences, including more fine-grained subgenres and local artists.

Among studies focusing on song-specific messages, most of them focused on lyrics, videos, and audio, but few ( $n = 5$ ) explicitly focused on the combination between these modalities. The findings on modalities have several implications. A first implication is that the lack of cross-modality studies can most likely be attributed to the complexity of a design that can disentangle the effects of various combinations of music information, such as lyrical and visual, in the same study. Yet, such a gap has important consequences for the study of music effects, as it forces the study of music within modality-specific choices (e.g., in terms of designs and theoretical frameworks), obstructing a broader understanding of how various types of music information interact in influencing listeners' beliefs (Yu et al., 2019). Future studies are therefore recommended to take stock of the limited existing literature, and to further advance this literature in the direction of a cross-modality understanding of music effects.

Another implication relates to the surprising finding that exposure to messages in music videos had the same statistically significant effect than lyrics, considering that visual information is more easily processed than textual (Powell et al., 2019). Being encoded faster and more easily, the visual information present in videos can be expected to lead to a faster and easier decoding in the form of beliefs (Barsalou, 2008), but we did not see this when comparing them to lyrical effects. This finding might be explained by a problem with external validity, which is typical for experiments. It is possible that when invited in an experiment and asked to listen to a song, participants pay more attention to lyrics than in everyday life. In other words, this would

mean that the similar effect between lyrics and videos is not the result of actual differences but artificially created using experiments. Future studies might employ designs with a better ecological validity (e.g., experience sampling methods) and explicitly account for the role of attention in order to understand how and to what extent the exposure to music lyrics can influence individuals' beliefs.

Fifth, the existing literature has mostly focused on media effect theoretical frameworks that either privilege short-term exposure effects, such as priming (Price & Tewksbury, 1997) and the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), or long-term exposure effects, such as social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) and cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1980).<sup>14</sup> The use of theoretical frameworks that focus on short-term effects, such as priming and the elaboration likelihood model, should be carefully considered when applied in relation to beliefs. Especially among adults, beliefs are rather stable across one's lifespan. When beliefs do change in adults, it happens rather gradually and thus over time (Kiley & Vaisey, 2020). As such, theoretical frameworks focusing on long-term effects (and related methodological designs, e.g., longitudinal research) may be more suitable when focusing on belief changes in adults due to music exposure. Preferably, future research using such theoretical frameworks can select those that also capture selection and reciprocal effects. Individuals do not experience music content from a blank state; instead, their prior beliefs (and behaviors) are crucial to contextualize choice and subsequent exposure to musical experiences (Franken et al., 2017). Theoretical frameworks known for focusing in particular on such dynamic selection and effect processes appeared to be

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<sup>14</sup> We conducted moderation analyses to test whether beliefs have different effects between (1) studies using priming and social cognitive theory and (2) studies using either priming or social cognitive theory and all the rest (Table 6 in Supplemental Appendix). Neither of these comparisons was significant.

absent in the field. As such, future (longitudinal) research is recommended to apply such frameworks (e.g., Powell et al., 2019; Slater, 2015).

Sixth, the analysis of sample composition showed attention points regarding country and age. As for country, most studies were conducted in countries from the Global North, especially in the US and Western-Europe. Looking at the demographics, most of the sampled participants were female, young adults, white, and from a middle-high social class, even though only a handful of studies reported information about class origins. We found that most of the studies included WEIRD populations, and that the effects reported among these population were, on average, stronger than those for non-WEIRD populations. Yet, only 7% ( $n = 9$ ) of the studies included nonWEIRD populations, a result that calls for a closer focus on the experience of historically-marginalized groups (e.g., people of color, specific ethnic groups, individuals from lower social classes) and on countries from the Global South. We also acknowledge that our decision to only include English-language articles might have had an impact in the sampled populations, as many countries where studies are being published in a non-anglophone language were not considered. Our choice was motivated by the difficulty in accessing literature that used language-specific search-terms and, when eventually captured, in translating such literature. We encourage future efforts to conduct comparative analysis between two or more countries (and in particular WEIRD vs. NON-WEIRD samples) to better understand inter-cultural differences in this area.

As for age, we found that music exposure had stronger effects when the mean sample age decreased. That is, studies with younger samples had, on average, higher effect sizes than those with older samples. This finding is consistent with previous literature showing the importance of music among adolescents and young adults (Primack et al., 2009), but it is in contrast with findings from the previous meta-analysis of Timmerman et al. (2008).

According to the latter study, older individuals tend to have stronger effects than younger ones. Their results included both beliefs and behaviors and may have been especially driven by the behavioral effects of music. Behavioral versus belief effects are recommended to not be mixed when comparing adolescents and adults. From a developmental perspective, adolescence is a period of intense changes and beliefs are known to be especially fluid in this period (Miranda, 2013). To better understand the role of developmental phases in music literature, future studies may benefit from using theoretical frameworks that have been specifically developed to study adolescents, such as the adolescents' media practice model (Steele & Brown, 1995) or the music marker theory (ter Bogt et al., 2013) and to more explicitly combine the study of certain effects (e.g., behaviors, beliefs) with the characteristics of the population of interest (e.g., adults, young adults, adolescents).

Seventh, future literature is recommended to pay attention to two main aspects related to the credibility and reliability of their analyses and conclusions. First, post hoc power analyses showed that the majority of the studies were underpowered. We came to this conclusion when using a Cohen's *d* general thresholds for small effects (86.5%), which is typical of media effect studies, as well as using a field-specific mean-effect size (53.1%). In other words, it is possible that, for half of the articles analyzed, the effects are actually not significant, or they could have been significant with a larger sample. Uniquely speaking from a statistical point of view, the lack of a power analysis does not permit to clearly evaluate whether the effects found in the sample are actually true effects in the (again, unknown) case in which the true effects in the population were different. Second, the adoption of open scientific practices was rare, with very few studies following any of the open scientific requirements, such as making the data and syntax available or pre-registering the study. These results do not seem to be driven by the

exclusive publication of significant results as we did not find evidence of publication bias.

Finally, our findings should be contextualized within the changes in the contemporary media landscape that are crucial for how people consume music and, subsequently, how they are influenced by such consumption. The advent of music streaming platforms and of social media such as Instagram and TikTok has occurred at the expenses of traditional media, such as the radio (Bonini & Gandini, 2019), but also of specific channels where music was previously consumed, such as on MTV (Edmond, 2014). Accessing music on streaming platforms, such as Spotify, and sharing it on social media means that music lyrics have become more central in listeners' everyday life compared to music videos. This does not mean that listeners pay more attention to the lyrics than before, but simply that lyrics have acquired a more central position while music videos have become less central. As such, the effects of music videos versus lyrics should be contextualized within this landscape, where lyrics and audio, rather than videos, seem to guide the music experiences of contemporary audiences. Future research is therefore recommended to better understand the role of music streaming platforms in boosting the exposure to music lyrics and their potential effects on audiences' beliefs.

We envision two potential ways—one theoretical and one methodological—in which the role of music streaming platforms can be taken into account. Articles using various media theories to study music effects have often considered music listeners as passive agents that receive music messages and are expected to internalize them dependently on the length and modality of exposure (e.g., Greitemeyer, 2011). Yet, few efforts have so far been invested to contextualize such effects within the existing and fast-changing music industry, in which listeners have endless opportunities to consume music and recommendation algorithms recommend users relevant music



according to their listening profiles. Such changes generate questions about choice, self-selection, and reciprocal effects between selected contents and beliefs. Theoretical frameworks that directly deal with reciprocal selection effects (e.g., self-reinforcing spiral model, Slater, 2015) might better tackle questions that come with the advent of new platforms and streaming services than the current used theoretical frameworks in the field (e.g., ELM model). Individuals might be influenced by music because of the constant reinforcement of previously existing beliefs that are present in songs or represented by artists who are continuously selected by users and are recommended to them by algorithms. Taking this selection process into account would shift the focus from the length and modality of music exposure, which considers users as passive, to a contextualization of audiences and platforms as active agents in the selection, consumption, and interpretation of music contents. This also means that the (yet) unexplored relationships between algorithmic recommendation systems, self-selection, and music effects can open up new opportunities for theoretical developments of music effect models that integrate different media theories within the particular context of music.

Methodologically, most of the existing literature has focused on experiments, few studies have adopted survey designs, especially longitudinal, and no study reported the use of computational designs (e.g., network). The overarching majority of experiments increases the confidence in the results presented in this study, as they are more robust than survey designs in manipulating and detecting media effects (Barabas & Jerit, 2010). The use of cross-sectional surveys is not, per se, problematic. Yet, it should be noticed that measuring effects requires designs that are capable of tackling questions about causality. Future research should therefore strive for a wider variety of causal designs (e.g., network, experience sampling methods, conjoint experiments) that are better able to incorporate the fleeting nature of

music experiences going beyond single measurements, not only in surveys but also in experiments (Knudsen & Johannesson, 2019).

Taken together, the results of this meta-analysis indicate a variegated and effervescent area of research, with many potentials for new developments. Exposure to music is related to audiences holding message-consistent beliefs, which vary according to the type of belief studied, music modality, design choices, and sample characteristics. Interdisciplinary efforts are thus required to systematically address the various axes along which music is expected to socialize and influence audiences. Importantly, these quantitative efforts should take advantage of the availability of free technologies (e.g., open repositories such as OSF, free statistical software such as R or Python) to preregister, share, and promote collaborations in order to take stock and further advance the research on this topic.

## Chapter 5

### **The Internalization of a Performance-Oriented Self-Concept among Adolescents through their Favorite Music Artists<sup>15</sup>**

Music is a highly popular, yet understudied element of adolescents' media and cultural consumption that functions as influential agent of socialization. Past work has showed the presence of performance-oriented worldviews promoted in popular music products, such as in the lyrics, videos, and social media posts of artists. Drawing on social-cognitive theory as well as on the concepts of (wishful) identification and biographic resonance, the present three-wave survey study among Belgian adolescents ( $n = 405$ ,  $M_{\text{age}} = 15.1$  [ $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.5$ ], girls = 64%) tested the effects of performance-oriented messages that young people consume in the music products of their favorite artists on their performance-oriented self-concept, and theorized boundary conditions. Random Intercept Cross-Lagged Panel Models with moderation designs did not confirm the hypotheses. We conclude by reflecting about the potential causes of the null-findings and provide theoretical and methodological suggestions to further illuminate the role of popular music in adolescents' formation of beliefs and identity.

#### **Introduction**

Adolescence is a key period for the development of youth's identities (Erikson, 1968). In these formative years, youth develop social (e.g., perspective taking) and cognitive (e.g., abstract thinking) skills that are particularly important to build a coherent sense of the self, a so-called self-concept (Schwartz et al., 2011). A self-concept is a complex and malleable construct composed by personal attributes, such as beliefs and competencies,

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<sup>15</sup> Based on: Carbone, L., Klimmt, C., Vandenbosch, L. (under review). The Internalization of a Performance-Oriented Self-Concept among Adolescents through their Favorite Music Artists

that are brought together to form a narrative description of the self (Dunlop, 2017). Today, youth are searching for and developing their self-concept in societies that are increasingly focused on meritocratic principles of performance and individual efforts (Mijs, 2018). In these societies, individual efforts and achievements are conceived as central elements to define self-worth and deservingness (Lamont, 2019). Contemporary youth are therefore expected to grow up developing a performance-oriented self-concept, namely a view of the self strongly characterized by principles such as ambition, hard-work, and productivity. The development of a performance-oriented self-concept might have several repercussions for the later developments of youth, such as bringing a heightened sense of agency and control (Disabato et al., 2019), but also an increased pressure to perform and an overly internal attribution of responsibilities (Madeira et al., 2019). These, in turn, could affect their mental health, such as bringing a better quality of interpersonal relationships (Becht et al., 2017) and a higher self-esteem (Wong et al., 2016), but also potentially leading to anxiety and stress (Ritchie et al., 2011).

Social comparisons play a key role in the definition of youth's self-concept (Crocetti et al., 2016), arguably also in relation to a performance-oriented self-concept (Mijs et al., 2022). In particular, youth learn about and define a self-concept by observing and mimicking examples provided by their parents, peers, and teachers (Van Dijk et al., 2014; Lodi-Smith & Crocetti, 2017). Media figures, such as celebrities and athletes, are also potentially important sources for the definition of a self-concept (Dajches, 2022). Yet, the research investigating the role of media and media figures for the development of adolescents' performance-oriented self-concept is scarce and mostly correlational (Petre, 2021). Moreover, while more research has focused on the role of televised and social media content in the development of performance-oriented views of the self (e.g., Devos et al., 2022), scarce attention has been given to music and its artists. Three lines of research suggest that music

products are potentially key transmitters of performance-oriented messages. First, music products (e.g. lyrics, videos, music artists' social media posts) serve as fundamental sources of identity building, especially during adolescence (Hird & North, 2021). Second, interactions with music products affect listeners' attitudes and values (Carbone & Vandenbosch, 2023). Third, performance-oriented narratives regularly occur in music products, such as lyrics and videos (Barton & Turman, 2009; Carbone & Mijs, 2022). The present research therefore explores the role of music for the formation of adolescents' performance-oriented self-concept.

A three-wave study was organized among Belgian adolescents ( $n = 405$ ,  $\text{Mage} = 15.1$  [ $\text{SD}_{\text{age}} = 1.5$ ], %girls = 64%) to understand whether and why exposure to performance-oriented messages in the lyrics, videos and social media posts of favorite artists brings adolescents to hold a music-consistent (i.e., performance-oriented) self-concept. In particular, we built on identification and resonance theory (Hoffner, 1996; Klimmt & Rieger, 2021) to understand whether identifying with one's favorite artist moderated the influence of music performance-oriented messages on adolescents' performance-oriented self-concept over time and whether similarities with their favorite artists further contributed to such internalization.

### **The Search for Adolescents' Identities in Performance-Oriented Societies**

The need to define oneself and to compare to others is an intrinsic process of adolescence (Christie & Viner, 2005). During this period, youth live developmental transitions that bring them to confront questions about their own identity and position in the world, such as in terms of who to become, what dreams to pursue, and how to understand and realize one's potentials (Karabanova & Bukhalenkova, 2016). While this is a process documented among adolescents throughout the ages (Erikson, 1968), contemporary adolescents live these typical developmental transitions in societies that are increasingly focused on concepts like performance, productivity, and

deservingness (Gorodnichenko & Roland, 2011). They are living fundamental processes of identity building and definition of the self in socio-cultural climates that reward a view of the self as increasingly focused on performance and productivity (Mijs, 2018).

The development of a performance-oriented self-concept might be particularly beneficial for some adolescents to develop a sense of agency and control over their lives (Duckworth & Gross, 2014). By emphasizing grit and resilience, a performance-oriented view of the self could help some adolescents to see themselves as agentic and capable to influence and direct their life choices and outcomes (Disabato et al., 2019). This, in turn, might have several benefits for their well-being, such as increased happiness and self-esteem (Kwon, 2021a; Weisskirch, 2019). Simultaneously, a performance-oriented self-concept might pressure other adolescents to narrowly define themselves as worthy based on their level of performance to achieve their goals, even if their lived conditions disadvantage them and hamper competitive performance (Curran & Hill, 2019). This, in turn, could be potentially conducive to a decreased well-being and life satisfaction, bringing about feelings of performance pressure, stress, and anxiety (Weinberg et al., 2020). Especially in the current era, where increasing feelings of perfectionism and performance pressure are often used as evidence of a mental health crisis lived by youth (Bor et al., 2014; Gunnell et al., 2018), it becomes essential to study how adolescents develop a performance-oriented self-concept, and which groups are more likely to do so, in order to better understand potential determinants of youth's well-being.

### **Music Products and Adolescents' Identity**

Today, media are ubiquitous tools in adolescents' lives and play an important role in the construction of their identities (Davis, 2013). Among the many forms of media consumption, music products consistently score as one of the most frequently and intensively used, especially among adolescents

(Fitzgerald et al., 1995; IFPI, 2023b). Existing literature considers music products as the artistic (e.g., lyrics and videos) and personal (e.g., social media posts) outcomes of music production (Askin & Mauskapf, 2017). As for artistic music products, previous literature has mostly looked at the socializing role of music by considering the worldviews offered in the content of music lyrics and videos (Carbone & Vandenbosch, 2023). For example, Primack and colleagues (2011) showed that the idea of humble beginnings—a key aspect of performance-oriented messages, used to highlight the need to work hard to overcome difficulties—was present in almost 40% of the studied lyrics. Adopting a more hermeneutic approach, Sköld and Rehn (2007) discovered the presence of similar redemptive narratives in rap lyrics. More recently, Carbone and Mijs (2022) found the presence of two performance-oriented frames in popular music (i.e., ‘Rags-to-riches’ and ‘Bragging rights’) using computational methods.

As for personal music products, existing research suggests that performance-oriented messages also appear frequently in the social media posts of celebrities, music artists included (Evans, 2022). In the contemporary music industry, music artists are increasingly depending on their social media presence to reach and enlarge their fanbase (Evans & Baym, 2022). As such, their personal and artistic views about success are not anymore confined to their artistic products but take shape also on their social media profiles (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2021). To become successful, today’s music artists are pressured to become social media celebrities (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2021). In this context, concerns about performance, self-branding, and authenticity become paramount for artists to relate to their fanbase (Evans, 2022). Music artists are therefore expected to provide visual and textual cues about their achievements and success that highlight their efforts, talents, and deservingness. While we still know little about the production of performance-oriented messages on the social media posts of celebrities, few studies provide

hints in this direction. For example, Eyal and colleagues (2020) show that the most frequently occurring topics in celebrities' social media posts relate to their professional lives and self-promotion and that the most common topics in the comments to these posts relate to their talents and capacities. Similarly, Evans and Baym (2022, p. 2679) show that music artists use the term "corralling" to refer to "the necessity of 'the posse' in being a rapper, the number of hours required [with] the collective, the amount of sheer effort involved in being in the studio as a unit." Celebrities therefore display performance-oriented messages and are evaluated on social media for their professional performance, invested efforts in their musical craft, and personal talents (Balestrini, 2015). Together with lyrics and videos, social media posts can therefore be seen as a new form of music products in which artists present their professional lives and lifestyles to promote themselves and to achieve clout (i.e., the "leverage [of] digital tools in building social and professional status," Evans & Baym, 2022, p. 2669). In the contemporary music landscape, artists can convey performance-oriented messages not only in their music lyrics and videos, but also on their social media.

The presentation of performance-oriented messages in the music products of adolescents' favorite artists can be particularly important for their identity developments (North & Hargreaves, 1999). By presenting various sources of information, music products equip adolescents with visual, audio, and textual information that they can acquire to form their own identity. Existing research has particularly highlighted the key socializing role of music artists during adolescence, providing scripts and narratives that can be mimicked in the formation of worldviews (Boon & Lomore, 2001). This is particularly relevant considering that adolescents frequently mention music artists as their favorite media role models (Ivaldi & O'Neil, 2008; Hammond et al., 2024). For example, Chia and Poo (2009) report that 51% of their respondents mentioned pop singers as their idols, constituting the highest share among other



celebrities, such as actors, fashion models, and TV hosts. Yet not every musician and not each single song is profoundly important to an individual listener. Indeed, fandom for one's favorite artist is an important aspect in the formation of adolescents' self-concept (Dajches, 2022).

### **Music Effects with Media Figures**

Music effects involving favorite media figures (e.g., artists) have been frequently explained by media effects theories such as social cognitive theory (Carbone & Vandenbosch, 2023; Bandura, 2001). The theory assumes that audiences can learn through observation of media content when they mimic beliefs and behaviors from media characters and personae considered as role-models, such as one's favorite music artist. Bandura explains that users are selective in their attention to role models and favor "favorites", mimicking those beliefs and behaviors perceived as particularly salient for themselves (Bandura, 2001). Especially young people assign great personal relevance to some pieces of music and to some music artists (e.g., Derbaix & Korchia, 2019). Because of their function as role models, music artists can provide performance-oriented messages of the self that are ready to be taken and internalized by adolescents in the definition of themselves (Hammond et al., 2024). Moreover, music artists are often seen as the embodiment of success, constituting privileged sources to learn about what it means to be successful and how to become successful (Derbaix & Korchia, 2019). As such, the first hypothesis postulates a *positive within-person relationship between exposure to performance-oriented messages conveyed in the music products of adolescents' favorite artists (including artists' lyrics, videos, and social media posts) and their performance-oriented self-concept (H1)*.

Yet, the sole presence and prevalence of performance-oriented messages in the music products of a favorite artist is unlikely to bring about equal internalization processes among all young listeners, as the same message will be consumed differently by different audiences (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013;

Carbone & Vandenbosch, 2023). For instance, rap videos that celebrate luxury consumption may speak to economically disadvantaged youth in a way that differs from well-situated adolescents (Evans & Baym, 2022). Further theorizing (and adequate empirical testing) is thus required to illuminate the boundary conditions that may apply to the effect of music on performance-oriented self-concept, as suggested in H1.

## **When and Why Music is Important to Adolescents: The Role of Identification and Resonance**

### ***Wishful Identification with Music Artists as a Boundary Condition***

Social cognitive theory theorizes that the learning process stemming from the exposure to media messages is stronger when audiences identify with represented role models (Cohen, 2001). Such identification processes are further explained in identification theory. Identification is one of the main processes of audience involvement with media characters (such as music artists or fictional characters in a story; Cohen & Klimmt, 2021). According to Cohen (2001, p. 247), identification is based on the idea that audiences “forget [themselves] and become the other,” developing the feeling of “sharing the perspective of the character” (p. 251). Identification with media personae may influence audiences because of the increased absorption and reduced counterarguing that facilitate the acceptance of the values and beliefs held and represented by the character (i.e., entertainment overcoming resistance model, Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

A particular type of identification, that is wishful identification, implies that audiences desire and aspire to become like media characters (Hoffner, 1996). While most of the literature about identification has focused on (fictional) media characters, we instead follow Kistler and colleagues (2010) and focus on performers (i.e., music artists) as the central “characters” of music content. This choice is guided by the consideration that music artists, more than characters mentioned in their music, are important role models for their fans

(Ivaldi & O'Neill, 2008) and that today's adolescents are increasingly exposed to information about music artists in a variety of situations beyond music videos and lyrics, such as on social media, talk shows, book biographies, or documentaries (Fraser & Brown, 2002). In other words, when considering music products, artists are the personae at the center of their fans' attention (Ivaldi, 2013). Following the theory of wishful identification and Moyer-Gusé's (2008) entertainment overcoming resistance model, we therefore hypothesize a *stronger positive within-person association over time between exposure to performance-oriented messages in the music products of adolescents' favorite artists and adolescents' performance-oriented self-concept when they experience stronger feelings of wishful identification with their favorite artists (H2).*

### ***Biographic Resonance of Musical Narratives as Boundary Condition***

Wishful identification theory further posits that feelings of identification are stronger for individuals who share similarities with media personae and characters, for instance, in terms of life experiences or background characteristics, such as one's gender or race (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Yet, as suggested by Cohen and colleagues (2018), existing research about the relationship between wishful identification and similarity has showed mixed results. Such impasse primarily derives from a scarce theorization about the relationship between identification and similarity. In this chapter we aim to further clarify this relationships by drawing from biographic resonance theory and by distinguishing two aspects of similarity, related to actual (i.e., one's gender) and perceived (e.g., similar life experiences) forms of similarity.

As noted by Bonus and colleagues (2022, p. 11), "the experience of identifying with a character requires audiences to recognize similarities between themselves and that character, which likely elicits varying degrees of autobiographical reflection." The importance of autobiographical reflection in processes of media engagement and persuasion is a central tenet of resonance

theory. Recent accounts of biographical resonance defined this concept as “the emotionally loaded experience that a received entertainment content has something important to do with oneself, one’s situation, one’s life history, and/or one’s (biographically rooted) current questions about life” (Klimmt & Rieger, 2021, p. 384). Understood in this sense, resonance is a eudaimonic mediated experience, different from hedonic experiences because promoting reflexive and appreciative rather than thought-free and uplifting experiences. Such meaningful eudaimonic experiences do not necessarily depend upon exposure to positive or serious content, as anti-heroes and lighthearted entertainment (e.g., pop songs) can also produce eudaimonic experiences of reflection and self-transcendence (Oliver et al., 2018). Instead, central in current approaches to biographical resonance is the process of meaning-making that audiences enact when elaborating connections between entertainment content and their personal life. Accordingly, in this chapter we argue that to better understand why and how identification promotes the internalization of music messages it is necessary to reflect upon the similarities of conditions between media audiences and music artists that facilitate biographical meaning-making.

Considered from a resonance perspective, identifying with music artists helps audiences addressing problems they are facing in their own lives. In particular, identification can be explained by the presence of shared experiences or characteristics (i.e., similarity) between artists and audiences that facilitate biographical meaning-making. Previous research in this regard has focused on two forms of similarity, resembling actual or perceived shared characteristics between media audiences and characters, which underly different reasons that motivate audiences to identify (Chen et al., 2016).

Actual similarity generally refers to socio-demographic characteristics shared between artists and their audiences, such as those related to one’s gender or race (Cohen & Hershman-Shitrit, 2017). Actual similarity might

help audiences address problems they are currently facing and that depend upon the shared characteristics under examination. In this chapter, we specifically focus on the role of gender as a key dimension of actual similarity for its importance in the identification with one's favorite artists in the formation of performance-oriented self-concept. In particular, we expect adolescents to develop a stronger performance-oriented self-concept when exposed to such narratives by artists of the same gender. Indeed, existing literature suggests that a performance-oriented self-concept has potentially different meanings for boys and girls (Mendick et al., 2015). Young boys typically define themselves as performance-oriented by aligning with widely available scripts related to traditional forms of masculinity through concepts like competitiveness and self-control (Halvorsen & Ljunggren, 2021). By means of hard work, boys can achieve what society is expected of them to become "real" men (Rice et al., 2021). A performance-oriented view of the self can also serve young girls in the definition of their own sense of worth, especially in the contemporary #MeToo era of battles for women empowerment and gender equality. By re-inscribing characteristics such as competitiveness and leadership to women, a group historically marginalized along these lines, a performance-oriented self-concept can provide a sense of agency and competence that challenges stereotypical views of how girls are expected to grow up as women in a patriarchal system (Seron et al., 2018). Because of their function as key role models, music artists of a similar gender as their fans can therefore be particularly important in the internalization of performance scripts (Canessa-Pollard et al., 2022). According to this reasoning, young boys whose favorite male artists display performance-oriented messages are expected to develop a stronger performance-oriented self-concept when they identify with their favorite male artist compared to girls identifying with their favorite male artists or boys identifying with their favorite female artists. On the other hand, young girls whose favorite female artists display performance-oriented messages are expected to develop a

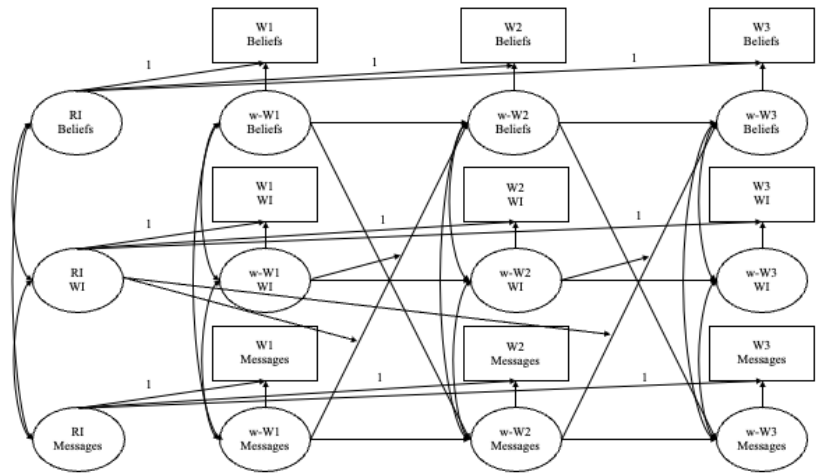
stronger performance-oriented self-concept compared to boys identifying with their favorite female artists or than girls identifying with their favorite male artists.

Apart from actual similarity, perceived similarity refers “to the desire to emulate the behavior and characteristics of others” (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005, p. 328). Perceived similarity can be a better predictor of identification when audiences aim to achieve goals or situations that are perceived as desirable but that are not yet experienced (Turner, 2011). In this chapter, we follow existing literature and specifically focused on respondents’ perceptions of their similarity with their favorite music artist, in terms of general characteristics (i.e., look, behaviors, beliefs) and life experiences (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). From a media entertainment perspective, audiences might experience identification through the perceived similarity with other characteristics than those related to one’s background—such as similar looks, behaviors, and life experiences—because they deem these non-background characteristics as more relevant to understand the content at hand and to address one’s current life issues (Klimmt & Rieger, 2021).

In distinguishing actual and perceived forms of similarity in relation to adolescents’ gender, we hypothesize two ways in which similarity can moderate the effect of identification in the internalization of the performance-oriented messages presented by their favorite artists (as per H2). First, we hypothesize a *stronger positive within-person relationship over time between exposure to performance-oriented messages by favorite artists and the development of a stronger performance-oriented self-concept among adolescents who identify more strongly with their favorite artist (as per H2) and have the same gender as the artist as compared to those with high levels of identification, yet different gender (H3a)*. We call this resonance of biographic starting conditions. Additionally, we hypothesized a *stronger positive within-person relationship over time between exposure to*

performance-oriented messages by favorite artists and the development of a stronger performance-oriented self-concept among adolescents who identify more strongly with their favorite artist (as per H2) and have similar perceived life experiences as the artist as compared to those with high levels of identification, yet different perceived life experiences (H3b). We call this resonance of biographic outcomes. Figure 2 shows the conceptual and statistical models used to address the hypotheses and RQs.

**Figure 2.** Visual representation of the model used in this chapter. The hypothesized effects are expressed in the logics of a three-wave longitudinal research design (see methods section).



Note: W1, W2, and W3 = number of waves of measurement in the current longitudinal survey design (see methods section). Beliefs = Performance-oriented self-concept; Messages = Performance-oriented narratives by favorite music artist; WI = Wishful identification. The interaction effect of WI was tested separately for BxW (interaction lines from RI-WI) and for WxW (interaction lines from wWI). When testing for multigroup comparisons, this model was estimated across similarity groups.

## Methodology

### Sample

Adolescents were recruited from 7 schools in Flanders, Belgium, over a 12-month period for a three-wave panel study where each wave was conducted after four months from the previous one. The period of four months was

chosen for several reasons, namely, to avoid major changes in the social media landscape (Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2022), to accommodate longer-term processes of belief development (Yang & Bradford Brown, 2016), and to distinguish between adolescents who are particularly attached to their favorite artist from those who are more fleeting. The study took place between 2021 and 2022 and received ethical approval of the review board of the host university. Parents and participants gave their consent to participate to the study and were extensively informed about the content of the study as well as about the confidential processing of their answers. In particular, all participants were informed that data would be anonymously stored in a secured server, that their survey answers would have been processed separately from their identification data, that they could end the survey at any moment without any consequence, and that, in case of full completion, they would receive a reward of 10 euros (W1), 12 euros (W2), and 15 euros (W3) in vouchers.

W1 was attended by 590 adolescents, W2 by 415, and W3 by 367. From the initial sample of all respondents across waves ( $n = 624$ ), we excluded those who failed the attention checks ( $n = 63$ ), resulting in a sample of 561. To maximize power and to keep as much data as possible in the analyses (Erreygers et al., 2018), we included in the sample all respondents who participated in at least two waves, resulting in a final sample of 405 adolescents (at W1:  $M_{\text{age}} = 15.1$  [ $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.5$ ], %girls = 64%). Missing data were imputed using multiple imputations (Li et al., 2015).

### ***Measures***

*Control variables.* We controlled for age, gender, parental education, and ethnic background. These variables were chosen to control for their potentially confounding effect on the two main variables of interest, namely the exposure to performance-oriented messages in music lyrics and the expression of a



performance-oriented self-concept (Elvers et al., 2018; Flanagan et al., 2014; Ghavami & Mistry, 2019).

Age was determined at W1 by asking participants their date of birth and by the year of birth to 2021 (the year in which the survey was conducted) ( $M = 15.13$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ).

Gender was determined at W1 by the item 'I am a...' (1 = Boy, 2 = Girl, 3 = Other, 4 = Prefer not to say) (Girls = 64.20%). 'Other' and 'Prefer not to say' were recoded as missing values ( $n = 8$ ).

Two items were used at W1 to determine the highest education obtained by participants' i) father/male guardian and ii) mother/female guardian (1 = No diploma, 2 = Primary education, 3 = Secondary education, 4 = College, 5 = University, 6 = I don't know, but my Dad/Mum works as a..., 7 = Doesn't apply to me). The qualitative responses to 'I don't know, but my Dad/Mum works as a...' were recoded based on the job information provided (e.g., a business manager would likely require a university degree), whilst 'Doesn't apply to me' was recoded as missing data ( $M_{\text{father}} = 4.59$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ;  $M_{\text{mother}} = 4.54$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ).

Ethnic background was measured providing the following categories (multiple responses were allowed): "West-European", "East-European", "African or Middle East", "North American", "South American or Latin American", "Asian", "Other, namely" (to be filled), "I don't know" (coded as missing response). Given the low number of participants with a non-Western-European ethnicity, the variable was recoded in three categories, namely Western-European (82.47%), non-Western-European (5.19%), and mixed (9.14%).

We also accounted for the amount of exposure to performance-oriented messages by favorite artists by controlling for the frequency of exposure to

each music product. Three items measured the frequency of exposure to one's favorite artist' lyrics, videos, and Instagram posts at each wave. Respondents were first asked to think about their favorite musician/singer/band in the past 4 months. Keeping in mind that artist, they were then asked how often ("Never", "Less than once a week", "Once a week", "Multiple times a week", "Every day", "Multiple times a day") in the past 4 months they read their favorite lyrics ( $M_{w1} = 4.43$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ;  $M_{w2} = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ;  $M_{w3} = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ), encountered Instagram posts ( $M_{w1} = 2.23$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ;  $M_{w2} = 2.11$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ;  $M_{w3} = 2.24$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ), and watched music videos ( $M_{w1} = 2.15$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ;  $M_{w2} = 1.99$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ;  $M_{w3} = 1.85$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) of their favorite artist.

*Performance-oriented messages by favorite artists.* Respondents reflected about their favorite musician/singer/band in the past 4 months. Keeping their favorite artist in mind, they were asked to evaluate on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (=Never) to 5 (=Very often) how often they encountered the following situations in their favorite lyrics, Instagram posts, and music videos of this artist (the items were repeated for each music product): "Someone who has struggled in the past (e.g., they were poor, drugs problems, criminality)?", "Someone who is now very rich (for example with a lot of money and luxurious cars)?", "Someone who has worked hard to reach their success and richness?", "Someone who is proud about their success and richness?". This scale was developed following popular representations of performance as depicted through the overcoming of struggles and hardships by means of hard work and resilience (Mijs, 2018). The items were further selected based on existing literature about music portrayals of success, where being successful has been frequently depicted through materialistic and individualistic markers that frequently feature performance-oriented messages (Podoshen et al., 2014). The items show medium-high, positive, and significant correlations

with each other for each medium and across waves as shown in Figures 2.1-2.3 in Appendix.

The variable used in the analysis consisted of an averaged score across all music products (i.e., lyrics, videos, Instagram posts), measuring general levels of exposure to performance-oriented messages in the music products of favorite artists ( $M_{w1} = 2.36$ ,  $SD_{w1} = 0.78$ ;  $M_{w2} = 2.42$ ,  $SD_{w2} = 0.74$ ;  $M_{w1} = 2.33$ ,  $SD_{w1} = 0.69$ ).

*Performance-oriented self-concept* was evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = “Does not describe me at all” to 5 = “Describes me perfectly”) “How much do you think these adjectives describe yourself?”. The adjectives were: “Intelligent”, “Ambitious”, “Talented”, “Dedicated”, “Hard-working”, “Lazy”, “Motivated”, “Disciplined”, “Bright”, “Productive”, “Perseverant”, “Determined”. All the items were developed by the authors to capture a dimension of performance close to adolescents’ view of themselves (Smith & Skrbiš, 2017). Items were chosen based on a survey among international experts working in sociology and communication science ( $N = 10$ ) on the topic of performance and effort. Experts were asked to rate how much, in their opinion, a list of positive and negative adjectives represents performance-oriented concepts (answer categories were “No”, “Maybe”, “Yes”, “Totally”). They subsequently suggested additional terms about performance that were not previously included. The wording was further adapted to be suitable for contemporary adolescents and their cultural context.

EFA on a pilot study demonstrated a one-factor solution (initial eigenvalue = 7.46, explained variance = 36%,  $\alpha = .87$ , 12 items). The following items were sequentially removed after running two EFAs because of low factor loadings (below .4): “Talented”, “Lazy”, “Bright”, “Determined”, “Disciplined”, “Dedicated”, “Intelligent”. A final EFA showed a one-factor solution (eigenvalue = 4.27, explained variance = 54%,  $\alpha = .81$ , 4 items) with

the following items: ambitious, motivated, hard-working, productive. A CFA conducted on the longitudinal sample showed an excellent model fit for each wave: (W1)  $\chi^2(2) = 2.23$ ,  $p = .33$ , RMSEA = .02, CFI = .99, TLI = .99, SRMR = .01; (W2)  $\chi^2(2) = 4.09$ ,  $p = .13$ , RMSEA = .05, CFI = .99, TLI = .98, SRMR = .02; (W3)  $\chi^2(2) = .95$ ,  $p = .62$ , RMSEA = .00, CFI = 1.00, TLI = 1.00, SRMR = .00. A one-dimensional factor structure was thus confirmed.

*Wishful identification.* To measure the identification with the favorite artist, we drew on Hoffner (1996) and asked “Thinking about ARTIST, how much do you agree with the following statements? (If you have a favorite band, please chose the artist you like the most of the band to answer the following questions.)”. Respondents answered on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (=Strongly disagree) to 5 (=Strongly agree) to the following items: “ARTIST is the sort of person I want to be like myself”, “Sometimes I wish I could be more like ARTIST”, “ARTIST is someone I would like to emulate”, “I would like to do the kind of things ARTIST does”, “I would never want to act the way ARTIST does”. EFA showed a one-factor solution (W1: eigenvalue = 2.74, explained variance = 53%,  $\alpha = .84$ , 5 items; W2: eigenvalue = 3.09, explained variance = 57%,  $\alpha = .89$ , 5 items; W3: eigenvalue = 2.97, explained variance = 62%,  $\alpha = .86$ , 5 items).

*Actual similarity of gender.* To code the gender of favorite artists, three research assistants coded the full population of artists that participants had mentioned ( $n = 430$ ) by drawing information from Wikipedia. Each coder was assigned, respectively 143, 143, and 144 artists, plus 100 randomly selected artists in common among coders, to establish inter-coder reliability. Coders were extensively trained by the first author before the coding tasks and the main analyses started once intercoder reliability was established among three coders (Gwet’s  $AC1_{\text{male}} = 0.9$ ; Gwet’s  $AC1_{\text{female}} = 0.9$ ). Since adolescents could name different favorite artist at each wave, the variable related to actual similarity of gender could potentially change across waves. Yet, we

dichotomized the variable and created two groups because a decomposition in between- and within-person variance (as in the case of wishful identification) and an interaction between latent variables (i.e., wishful identification and actual similarity of gender) was not allowed to be estimated by the only software that currently performs such analyses, namely Mplus. Moreover, we used this variable to conduct multigroup analyses (rather than modeling it as a time-varying moderator) because the current version of Mplus does not allow for the modeling of time-varying binary moderators. Therefore, we conducted multigroup analysis with actual similarity of gender as a binary grouping variable. The final variable used in the analyses groups participants with low levels of actual similarity (i.e., similarity in one or no waves, 46.42%), and those with high levels of actual similarity (i.e., similarity in two or more waves, 53.58%).

*Perceived similarity.* To define the perceived similarity with their favorite artist, we drew on Hoffner & Buchanan (2005) and asked “Think again about the favorite ARTIST that you listed above. How much do you think that... (If you have a favorite band, please choose the artist you like the most of the band to answer the following questions.)”. Respondents answered on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (=Strongly disagree) to 5 (=Strongly agree) to the following items: “... ARTIST is similar to you?”, “... ARTIST looks like you?”, “... ARTIST behaves like you?”, “... ARTIST thinks like you?”, “... ARTIST has had similar life experiences to you?”. EFA showed a one-factor solution (W1: eigenvalue = 3.88, explained variance = 55%,  $\alpha = .84$ , 5 items; W2: eigenvalue = 3.59, explained variance = 53%,  $\alpha = .82$ , 5 items; W3: eigenvalue = 3.67, explained variance = 53%,  $\alpha = .81$ , 5 items). For the same reason as for the variable about actual similarity of gender, we dichotomized the variable to create groups. To do so, we first averaged the scores across the three waves and then created two groups based on their median. We averaged across groups to account for the average level of similarity across waves (since

respondents could have potentially indicated different artists at each time, having different levels of perceived similarity for each). The final variable used in the analyses groups participants with low levels of perceived similarity (i.e., below the median, 49.63%), and those with high levels of perceived similarity (i.e., above or equal the median, 50.37%).

### *Analytical Strategy*

We first computed the means, standard deviations, alpha, ICC (Table 1 in Appendix), and zero-order correlations (Figure 1 in Appendix) for the variables of interest. Afterwards, we used Mplus (v. 8.9) and estimated 11 Random-Intercept Cross-Lagged Panel Models (RI-CLPM) (see Table 7 below). In these models, we used mean scores as manifest variables, each of them regressed on a corresponding latent variable with loadings constrained at 1. These latent variables represent the within-person factors between which auto-regressive, cross-lagged and concurrent paths were drawn. Moreover, we created a latent random intercept factor (RI) for each main variable in the model which had the manifest variables at the three time points as indicators, with loadings constrained at 1. Correlations between the RI's represent between-person associations. We further constrained the error variances of all manifest variables at 1<sup>16</sup>. MLR was used as estimator. Model fit for model 1 was considered acceptable if RMSEA  $\leq$  .08, CFI  $\geq$  .90, and TLI  $\geq$  .90 (Kline, 2015). Models with the decomposition of Between and Within components of the moderator, wishful identification, did not provide fit indices (Speyer et al., 2023). This is typical of models with latent interactions as modeled in the available versions of Mplus (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2020; Ozkok et al., 2022). As such, it was not possible to evaluate the model fit of models 2.1-2.2. In these models, evidence of moderation was evaluated based on the significance test of the respective regression paths. Instead, models 3 contain

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<sup>16</sup> Data, syntax, pre-registration, and Appendix can be found on OSF at this link: [https://osf.io/rpgmh/?view\\_only=013964615288470d96f733e4abedd20a](https://osf.io/rpgmh/?view_only=013964615288470d96f733e4abedd20a)

multigroup decomposition (across similarity groups) of the BxW and WxW moderating effect of wishful identification. As such, evidence of similarity moderation for models 3 was evaluated by comparison of information criteria (i.e., AIC, BIC) between constrained and unconstrained models. We detail next the three main modelling strategies used to test H1-H3.

The first model consisted of a baseline RI-CLPM model with control variables included as manifest variables, autoregressive, and cross-lagged paths between a performance-oriented self-concept and exposure to performance-oriented messages by favorite artist to answer H1 (1 model).

The second model included wishful identification as a continuous, time-varying, latent factor that functioned as a moderator in testing H2. In particular, we followed Speyer and colleagues (2023) in dividing wishful identification in its Between and Within component. This approach was followed because respondents could indicate different favorite artists across waves and, consequently, different levels of wishful identification. As such, it was important to distinguish a Between and Within component of the moderator wishful identification. This distinction allows to estimate two types of interactions. A Between x Within interaction (BxW) was obtained by using the random intercept (Between part) of wishful identification as moderator, in order to understand whether the within-person link between exposure to performance-oriented messages by favorite artist and a performance-oriented self-concept is stronger if a person experiences stronger wishful identification with the artist than the overall average. A Within x Within interaction (WxW) was obtained by using the Within part of wishful identification as moderator, in order to understand whether the within-person link between exposure to performance-oriented messages by favorite artist and a performance-oriented self-concept is stronger if a person experiences stronger wishful identification with the artist than their own personal average (2 models).

Finally, the third model reprised the interaction model used to test H2 and conducted multigroup analysis across similarity groups (i.e., perceived and actual) to test H3. To test for multigroup differences, we estimated a constrained and unconstrained model for each BxW and WxW estimated in the second set of models (8 models). To evaluate the best fitting model, we compared the information criteria between constrained and unconstrained models and selected the model with the lowest BIC and AIC values. An overview of the models used can be found in Table 7 below.



**Table 7.** Summary of the computed RI-CLPM models

Model #	IV	DV	Moderator 1	Moderator 2
1	Performance-oriented narratives by favorite artists	Performance-oriented self-concept		
2.1	Performance-oriented narratives by favorite artists	Performance-oriented self-concept	Wishful identification (BxW)	
2.2			Wishful identification (WxW)	
3.1.1	Performance-oriented narratives by favorite artists	Performance-oriented self-concept	Wishful identification (BxW, constrained)	
3.1.2			Wishful identification (BxW, unconstrained)	Group 1: Perceived Similarity (of life experiences)
3.1.3			Wishful identification (WxW, constrained)	
3.1.4			Wishful identification (WxW, unconstrained)	
3.2.1	Performance-oriented narratives by favorite artists	Performance-oriented self-concept	Wishful identification (BxW, constrained)	
3.2.2			Wishful identification (BxW, unconstrained)	Group 2: Actual Similarity (of gender)
3.2.3			Wishful identification (WxW, constrained)	
3.2.4			Wishful identification (WxW, unconstrained)	

Note: Based on N = 405 participants. IV = Independent variable, DV = Dependent variable. Moderator 1 is modeled as a continuous variable and moderator 2 is modeled as a multigroup. BxW indicates the Between part of the decomposed variance of the moderator Wishful Identification. WxW indicates the Within part of the decomposed variance of the moderator Wishful Identification.

**Results**

*Descriptive Analysis*

ICCs indicated that a moderate degree of variance in exposure to performance-oriented messages by favorite artists (ICC = .44) and wishful

identification ( $ICC = .49$ ), and a moderate to high degree of variance in performance-oriented self-concept ( $ICC = .65$ ) were explained by between-person differences. While in the main analyses we used a measure averaging the presence of performance-oriented messages among the three music products, we report here the means of each music product across the three waves for descriptive purposes. In particular, music videos had the highest average of performance-oriented messages ( $M = 2.42$ ,  $SD = .74$ ), followed by lyrics ( $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = .78$ ), and Instagram posts ( $M = 2.33$ ,  $SD = .69$ ). Yet, these differences were not statistically significant ( $F[2, 1212] = 1.36$ ,  $p = .26$ ). Moreover, adolescents expressed middle-high levels of performance-oriented self-concept ( $M_{w1} = 3.58$  [ $SD = .66$ ];  $M_{w2} = 3.55$  [ $SD = .67$ ];  $M_{w3} = 3.60$  [ $SD = .64$ ]) and middle-low levels of wishful identification ( $M_{w1} = 2.13$  [ $SD = .73$ ];  $M_{w2} = 2.16$  [ $SD = .78$ ];  $M_{w3} = 2.15$  [ $SD = .76$ ]).

### ***Hypothesis Testing***

Table 2 in Appendix shows an excellent model fit ( $\chi^2[12] = 12.58$ ,  $p = .25$ ,  $RMSEA = .03$ ,  $SRMR = .01$ ,  $CFI = .99$ ,  $TLI = .97$ ) for model 1. Because of the distinction between BxW and WxW moderations, model 2 only reports regression coefficients to evaluate moderation effects. Moreover, the same decomposition in BxW and WxW between similarity groups in models 3.1.1-3.2.4 only provide information criteria, which are used to compare constraint and unconstrained models based on the lowest values of BIC and AIC indices. Accordingly, we report below the results for model 1 (baseline), 2.1 (BxW, no multigroup), 2.2 (WxW, no multigroup), 3.1.1 (BxW, constrained, multigroup with perceived similarity), 3.1.3 (WxW, constrained, multigroup with perceived similarity), 3.2.2 (BxW, unconstrained, multigroup with actual similarity), and 3.2.4 (WxW, unconstrained, multigroup with actual similarity), as can be found in Table 3 in Appendix.

### ***Within-Person Associations***

In model 1, a positive autoregressive within-person relationship was found for performance-oriented self-concept between W1 and W2 ( $\beta = .32$ ,  $p = <.001$ ), but not replicated between W2 and W3. Moreover, a higher performance-oriented self-concept at W2 predicted lower levels of exposure to performance-oriented messages by favorite artist at W3 ( $\beta = -.20$ ,  $p = .04$ ), but not between W1 and W2. No other autoregressive or cross-lagged effects were significant at the  $p < .05$  level. As such, H1, expecting a positive relationship between exposure to performance-oriented messages and performance-oriented self-concept, was not supported.

In model 2.1, testing between-person moderation of wishful identification (BxW), we did not find evidence of moderation effects as the regression coefficients for BxW were not statistically significant (W1-W2:  $\beta = .02$  [SE = .07],  $p = .78$ ; W2-W3:  $\beta = .05$  [SE = .09],  $p = .63$ ). Similarly, we did not find evidence of within-person moderation of wishful identification (WxW) in model 2.2, as the regression coefficients for WxW were not statistically significant (W1-W2:  $\beta = .12$  [SE = .07],  $p = .08$ ; W2-W3:  $\beta = .15$  [SE = .08],  $p = .06$ ). Thus, H2, expecting a positive moderation of wishful identification on the relationship between exposure to performance-oriented messages and performance-oriented self-concept, was not supported.

In models testing the moderation of wishful identification across perceived similarity groups, the constrained models had lower information criteria than the unconstrained ones (model 3.1.1: BIC is 15423.86, AIC is 14799.26; model 3.1.3: BIC is 15820.20, AIC is 15195.59). This means that we did not find variations across participants with high and low perceived similarity. As such, H3a, expecting similarity group differences in the moderation of wishful identification on the relationship between exposure to performance-oriented messages and performance-oriented self-concept, was not supported.

To the contrary, the models related to actual similarity showed a better AIC fit for the unconstrained models (model 3.2.2: BIC is 15724.29, AIC is 15059.64; model 3.2.4: BIC is 15812.22, AIC is 15147.58). This means that actual similarity of gender moderates the moderating effect of wishful identification in the relationship between performance-oriented messages and self-beliefs. Yet, model 3.2.2, testing between-person moderation of wishful identification (BxW) across actual similarity groups, did not show evidence of moderation effects of wishful identification, as the regression coefficients are not statistically significant (low similarity group W1-W2:  $\beta = .01$  [SE = .07],  $p = .96$ ; low similarity W2-W3:  $\beta = -.01$  [SE = .11],  $p = .94$ ; high similarity group W1-W2:  $\beta = .03$  [SE = .09],  $p = .75$ ; high similarity W2-W3:  $\beta = .09$  [SE = .08],  $p = .29$ ). Similarly, also model 3.2.4, testing within-person moderation of wishful identification (WxW) across actual similarity groups, did not show evidence of moderation of wishful identification (low similarity group W1-W2:  $\beta = .05$  [SE = .15],  $p = .71$ ; low similarity W2-W3:  $\beta = .06$  [SE = .14],  $p = .71$ ; high similarity group W1-W2:  $\beta = .17$  [SE = .09],  $p = .09$ ; high similarity W2-W3:  $\beta = .16$  [SE = .27],  $p = .54$ ). As such, H3b was not supported.

### ***Between-Person Associations***

We uniquely found a significant positive relationship between exposure to performance-oriented messages by favorite artists and wishful identification in model 2.2, testing within-person moderation of wishful identification (WxW;  $\beta = .18$  [SE = .07],  $p = .02$ ). Yet this effect was rather weak. No other significant between-person association was found in the other models.

### **Discussion**

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first longitudinal study on the development of a performance-oriented self-concept through exposure to music products. In particular, we investigated the development of a performance-oriented self-concept among adolescents by exploring processes

of wishful identification and similarity with their favorite artists. While most of the existing literature studying music effects has adopted cross-sectional and experimental designs (Carbone & Vandenbosch, 2023), our three-wave panel design provides key results for the field, because of its capacity to disentangle between- and within-person effects. Although descriptive findings indicate the presence of performance-oriented messages in the music products of adolescents' favorite artists and substantial (albeit widely differing) performance-oriented self-concept among youth, we did not find empirical support for our hypotheses. As such, we reflect next about potential causes of these null results and provide directions for future research in relation to each hypothesis.

#### ***Understanding the Observed Non-Effects of Music on Performance-Oriented Self-Concept (H1)***

With regard to H1, expecting a positive effect of exposure to performance-oriented messages in the music products of favorite artists and the holding of a performance-oriented self-concept, we only found null results. The only statistically significant results were a time-inconsistent and positive autoregressive path for performance-oriented self-concept (W1-W2) and a time-inconsistent and negative within-person cross-lagged effect between performance-oriented self-concept and exposure to performance-oriented messages in music products (W2-W3). On the one hand, the positive autoregressive path indicates that occasions in which a person scored above their expected value on performance-oriented self-concept were followed by occasions in which they scored above the expected value on the same variable. On the other hand, the negative cross-lagged path indicates that holding a stronger performance-oriented self-concept brings adolescents to be less exposed to performance-oriented messages in music products at the next time point. From these findings, we envision three potential explanations for the

lack of support for H1, related to selection, habituation effects, and temporal effects.

Existing literature has remarked that a performance-oriented view of the self could have positive effects on well-being when individuals feel in control of their lives (Vainio & Daukantaitė, 2016). Yet, such literature has also remarked the potentially detrimental consequences for well-being, such as negative self-evaluations, internal attributions, and a lower school performance (especially in low-status and marginalized group members, Madeira et al., 2019). The lack of consistent paths related to the first hypothesis could indicate the presence of selection effects among those suffering from performance anxiety. Their media selective behavior may function as a buffer against the potentially negative effects of developing a performance-oriented self-concept. That is, these adolescents could select (out) music with performance-oriented messages at different time points, choosing when to avoid them to shield themselves from potentially negative felt consequences. This could be explained by our finding showing that adolescents who develop a stronger performance-oriented self-concept select less performance-oriented songs, potentially because experiencing negative consequences from such exposure. Yet, this result was not consistent across waves, developing uniquely between the second and the third wave. This could indicate that adolescents select out songs with performance-oriented messages only when their performance-oriented self-concept becomes strong enough over time to potentially trigger feelings of performance pressure. More research is needed to better understand the reasons to select performance-oriented messages, their relationships with the development of a performance-oriented self-concept, and the subsequent development of forms of well- and ill-being among adolescents.

Alternatively, this result could also indicate habituation effects (e.g., Grizzard et al., 2017). According to this interpretation, respondents could get

habituated to performance-oriented messages because of the development of a “new normal” (Dan & Brosius, 2021, p. 55)—namely a new threshold at which performance-oriented messages become salient—which brings them to lower their attention and recall of the same narrative over time. This explanation could be supported by our findings showing a positive, although inconsistent, autoregressive path of performance-oriented self-concept. Yet, our statistically significant findings (i.e., positive autoregressive and negative cross-lagged paths) were inconsistent across waves and unexpected from our hypotheses. As such, we encourage future research to account for selection (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015) and habituation (Krahé et al., 2011) effects more specifically to better understand the internalization process of music narratives with potentially detrimental consequences, such as those about performance.

The previous explanations of our null findings rely on the assumption that music influences adolescents’ beliefs, as documented in existing meta-analytical research (Carbone & Vandenbosch, 2023; Timmerman et al., 2008). Yet, meta-analytical evidence also pointed at the lack of longitudinal studies investigating the temporal developments of music-consistent messages. Most research in this field has adopted an experimental and cross-sectional study design (Carbone & Vandenbosch, 2023). The presence of effects in experiments might be due to the short-term nature of experimental exposure, potentially suggesting that music influences beliefs in the short term, rather than in the long term. Being one of the first studies adopting a longitudinal design to study music effects on beliefs, this study therefore recommends future research to conduct more short- and long-term studies to further explore the temporal development of music-consistent beliefs.

### ***Understanding the Observed Non-Effects of Wishful Identification Moderation in Music Effects (H2 and H3)***

Moreover, we did not find support for the moderating role of wishful identification (H2). Interestingly, this lack of moderation echoes the findings of Dajches (2022), in which identification among U.S. adolescents with their favorite music artist was also found to not moderate music effects on self-concept clarity. We provide two potential explanations for this finding, related to fandom and to the specificities of the sample analyzed. On the one hand, the low mean levels of wishful identification might indicate lower levels of relevance of the represented narratives for adolescents. This could be due to a scarce relevance given to music and to music artists in the sample or to a lower relevance given to music artists as socializing agents compared to other aspects of music, such as its narratives or the contextual experiences in which it is consumed (e.g., listening to music by oneself or with friends). We therefore recommend future research to explicitly survey different levels of music fandom (i.e., explicitly recruiting respondents with high and low levels of fandom) when investigating music effects, distinguishing between adolescents for whom music artists are important parts of their lives and those who are casual listeners. Moreover, alternative moderators could be used to better understand the internalization process of performance-oriented messages, for example by employing narrative transportation (Strick et al., 2015), or music appreciation, absorption, and enjoyment (Steinhardt & McClaran, 2022).

On the other hand, the lack of evidence for the moderating effects of wishful identification could be due to the specificities of the sample analyzed in the study. In particular, our sample is mostly composed by Western European adolescents with high levels of parental education. This is in contrast to popular representations of performance-oriented messages about success, which tend to be displayed by individuals from lower socio-economic



backgrounds or racial-ethnic marginalized groups (Barton & Turman, 2009). Indeed, typical stories where performance is represented through concepts like hard work and individual efforts (e.g., rags-to-riches stories) center around narratives of socio-economic struggles typically lived by members of marginalized communities (e.g., the poor, Black and Brown people; Barton & Turman, 2009). Particularly in popular music, typical success markers, such as buying expensive jewels and cars, are also typically represented by Black and Brown artists, especially male rappers (Carbone et al., 2024). As such, our respondents might feel less related to such representations because of their different socio-economic and racial-ethnic lived-experiences. This low relatedness with the individuals that are at the center of typical performance-oriented messages in popular media might further bring adolescents to consume music with performance-oriented messages but without necessarily considering such messages as applicable to themselves. To better study the effects of music exposure on the development of a performance-oriented self-concept, future research is therefore recommended to pay particular attention to the population of reference. In particular, studies among socio-economic and racial-ethnic privileged groups could more specifically focus on the temporal relationships between short- and long-terms effects of such narratives, disentangling the emergence and duration of such effects. Instead, studies focused on socio-economic and racial-ethnic marginalized groups could be better placed in understanding whether these narratives are seen as more applicable and relevant in the formation of their performance-oriented self-concept in the long run.

Finally, we did not find support for the moderating role of perceived similarity (H3a) and actual similarity of gender (H3b). In particular, model 3.1.1, testing between-person moderation of wishful identification (BxW) across perceived (constrained) similarity groups, indicated a better fit than model 3.1.2 (testing the same relationship with unconstrained group

differences), showing the lack of group differences across perceived similarity groups. The lack of support for the moderating role of perceived similarity could be explained by the discrepancies in the socio-economic and racial-ethnic lived experiences between the adolescents in our sample and the subjects typically represented in the performance-oriented messages, as explained in relation to H2.

At the same time, we found group differences across actual similarity groups, although not in the direction of H3b. In particular, model 3.2.2, testing between-person moderation of wishful identification (BxW) across actual (unconstrained) similarity groups, indicated a better fit than model 3.2.1 (testing the same relationship while constraining group differences), showing differences across actual similarity groups. Yet, it did not provide evidence of the moderating effect of wishful identification nor of a positive relationship between exposure to performance-oriented messages and performance-oriented self-concept. This result calls for additional analyses to disentangle processes of biographical resonance in the internalization of performance-oriented messages, not only in relation to different samples, but also to different similarity characteristics (e.g., age, race-ethnicity, social class).

### ***Limitations and perspectives for future research***

The null findings of this study might also be explained by several limitations in its analytical and measurement strategies. The analytical strategy of this study included multigroup moderations of actual and perceived similarity divided in a between and within moderating effect of wishful identification. In this study, we dichotomized the variables about similarity to form groups, because an additional decomposition of their variance in BxW and WxW (as in the case of wishful identification) and an interaction between latent variables was not allowed to be estimated by the only software that currently performs such analyses, namely Mplus. Since the expression of a favorite artist could potentially change between waves, the related forms of similarity

could also change. Future studies can therefore build from our results and further explore differences across music products to better model the role of similarity in its latent and time-varying components.

Second, this study employed a measure about performance-oriented self-concept that was focused on the self, with items measuring self-perceptions about being ambitious, motivated, hard-working, and productive. The different autoregressive paths for performance-oriented self-concept and for the exposure to performance-oriented messages are potentially indicative of different mechanisms at play when the higher-than-expected levels of performance-oriented self-concept are experienced in relation to oneself or to others (e.g., characters or artists in music products). Adolescents might support performance-oriented messages when related to themselves, and they might further support them in relation to artists, for example to explain why they are successful. Yet, they could perceive a discrepancy between the performance-oriented messages applied to the artists and those applied to themselves, for example because they perceive the those displayed by their favorite artists as not applicable to themselves personally or as outside of their reach. This is particularly important to recognize, as performance-oriented messages applied to the self could more easily elicit negative effects (e.g., performance pressure or perfectionism, Curran & Hill, 2019) than those related to others. As argued in the interpretation of our results, instead of internalizing performance-oriented messages, adolescents might select them out to shield themselves from their negative effects, get habituated to their salience, and / or perceive the messages as not applicable to themselves. As these effects are contextual to the type of belief studied (i.e., whether applied to the self or to others), future studies are encouraged to include additional measures that distinguish between a performance-oriented self-concept (as in this study) with performance-oriented beliefs about others, especially about role models like favorite music artists.

Finally, this study adopted a self-reported measure of exposure to performance-oriented messages in music. While important to understand the salience that such messages have for adolescents, self-reported measures are known to suffer from memory biases and misreporting compared to more objective measures such as those provided by log-data (Parry et al., 2021). As such, future research is encouraged to further explore the exposure to performance-oriented messages through more objective measures of music exposure. This could be achieved by means of content analysis of adolescents' favorite songs, either named in a survey or provided through a data donation design with log-data of their music consumption (Toth, 2023).

## **Conclusion**

This study conducts one of the first longitudinal examinations of music effects on adolescents' beliefs through processes of wishful identification and resonance in the development of a performance-oriented self-concept among adolescents. Results of this chapter do not support the hypothesis that exposure to music promotes the development of music-consistent beliefs. Particularly, future research is recommended (1) to better account for selection and habituation effects, (2) to better account for forms of similarity between audiences and music content, and (3) to adopt more short-term designs and objective measures to analyze music content. Because of its longitudinal design and its focus on adolescents, this chapter provides important contributions and future directions for the study of music effects, especially in relation to processes of narrative persuasion and resonance.

## Chapter 6

### The Internalization of Effort-Oriented Success Beliefs through Adolescents' Favorite Songs<sup>17</sup>

Music consumption has been frequently considered as a key socializing agent for youth. Yet, less is known about the temporal effects of music, especially in the current streaming era. Such socializing effects are particularly important to study in relation to effort-oriented messages, which are particularly present in contemporary societies and have been suggested to have potentially wide implications for adolescents' well-being. Drawing on theoretical approaches such as cultivation theory, narrative transportation, and biographic resonance, the present three-wave survey among Belgian adolescents ( $n = 405$ ,  $M_{\text{age}} = 15.1$  [ $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.5$ ], girls = 64%) tested the effects of effort-oriented messages that young people listen in their favorite songs on effort-oriented success beliefs. Random Intercept Cross-Lagged Panel Models with moderation designs did not support the hypothesized relationships. We conclude by providing potential explanations for these null-findings and reflect about theoretical and methodological directions for future research interested in the temporal effects of music on beliefs in the current streaming era.

#### Introduction

In contemporary Western societies, effort-oriented success beliefs are widely endorsed and diffused (Tašner & Gaber, 2022). In particular, Western societies typically characterize effort as a key component in the definition of why some people become successful while others do not (Radl & Miller, 2021). Because of their wide uses to explain individuals' successes and failures, such beliefs can be inspiring for some, providing a sense of agency

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<sup>17</sup> Based on: Carbone, L. & Vandenbosch, L. (under review). The Internalization of Effort-Oriented Success Beliefs through Adolescents' Favorite Songs

and self-efficacy to reach one's goals (Lim, 2013). At the same time, they can induce feelings of performance pressure and anxiety because of their focus on individual responsibility (Becker et al., 2021), at the detriment of other values such as solidarity and plurality (Lamont, 2019).

Scholars are therefore invested in understanding how individuals develop effort-oriented success beliefs, because of their potentially positive and negative effects on well-being (Weinberg et al., 2020) and because of their steady increase among the population of most Western countries (Mijs, 2018). In particular, the upholding of such beliefs has been argued to depend upon the circulation of widely available narratives, which are important sources of sense-making for many individuals (Roex et al., 2019). Narratives convey messages and values, model desirable beliefs and behaviors, and can potentially inspire and change their audiences (Murphy et al., 2013). For this reason, close attention has been given to popular media as important sources of narrative production and distribution (Walter et al., 2017). Music, in particular, is a key medium in the diffusion of popular narratives (Margulis, 2017). Music lyrics and videos have been shown to widely promote effort-oriented success narratives, such as meritocracy and grit (Barton & Turman, 2009; Chapter 3 in this PhD dissertation). Yet, scarce research has documented how the presentation of such narratives in popular music can influence the beliefs of their audiences (de Lenne et al., 2022; Devos et al., 2022).

This gap is particularly cogent among youth. Not only contemporary youth are living in societies increasingly rewarding individual effort (Mijs, 2018). They are also increasingly developing forms of mental ill-being that have been argued to derive from an overly individualistic pressure to perform, as documented by increasing levels of performance pressure and perfectionism (Anniko et al., 2019; Curran & Hill, 2019). In this study, we aim to better

understand the role of music, a key medium of identity developments among adolescents, in the formation of their effort-oriented success beliefs.

To do so, we used a three-wave panel dataset of Belgian adolescents ( $n = 405$ ,  $M_{\text{age}} = 15.1$  [ $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.5$ ], %girls = 64%) to understand the formation of music message-consistent (i.e., effort-oriented success) beliefs through the exposure to effort-oriented success narratives present in the lyrics of adolescents' favorite songs. In particular, we built on transportation and resonance theory (Green et al., 2004; Klimmt & Rieger, 2021) to understand whether feeling transported in music narratives moderated the influence of exposure to effort-oriented success messages in music on adolescents' effort-oriented success beliefs over time. In addition, we studied whether similarities between the represented narratives and adolescents' perceptions of hardships in their lives further contributed to such internalization.

### **The Search for Adolescents' Identities in Effort-Oriented Societies**

Contemporary adolescents living in Western societies are increasingly developing various forms of mental and physical health problems, such as anxiety, depression, sleeping and eating disorders (Bor et al., 2014; Gore et al., 2011). Performance pressure, "the urgency to achieve high performance levels because performance is tied to substantial consequences," (Mitchell et al., 2019, p. 532) is one of the most frequently cited sources of such problems, especially in relation to school, social, and sport achievements (Anniko et al., 2019; Souter et al., 2018). During adolescence, youth live developmental transitions in which they compare themselves to others, questioning who to become, what dreams to pursue, and how to understand and realize one's potentials (Karabanova & Bukhalenkova, 2016). Contemporary adolescents, in particular, live in societies that increasingly reward individual efforts and self-reliance as key elements to become successful (Gorodnichenko & Roland, 2011). While such narratives could provide a sense of agency and control among some (Disabato et al., 2019), they could also promote negative

effects due to their overfocus on individual responsibility and self-reliance (Becker et al., 2021). As such, today's youth might live key developmental transitions in socio-cultural climates that pressure them to work hard to become their best self, with serious consequences for their well- and ill-being.

The study of effort-oriented success narratives among youth is particularly important also because adolescents are challenged for the first time to develop an opinion on topics related to their own and others' position in society, such as around poverty and wealth, the achievement of personal goals, and the expression of solidarity for others (Flanagan et al., 2014). In particular, the formation of effort-oriented success beliefs takes a central stage during adolescence because of important socio-cognitive changes that characterize this period, such as an increased capacity of abstract thinking, the elaboration of beliefs about one's position in society, and changes in social bonding (Wray-Lake et al., 2016). In particular, effort-oriented success beliefs can be defined as those beliefs framing success primarily as a matter of individual efforts (e.g., hard work and individual responsibility) rather than due to external causes (e.g., inheritance or luck; Radl & Miller, 2021). Music narratives could serve as key socializing agents in the development of such beliefs, displaying images of success (Carbone et al., 2024) while providing scripts and models that show how to reach success (Steinhardt & McClaran, 2022).

### **Music and Success Beliefs among Adolescents**

Media are ubiquitous tools in adolescents' lives and play an important role in the construction of their identities (Davis, 2013). Music, in particular, is a fundamental medium for adolescents' socialization, consistently scoring as one of the most frequently and intensively used (Fitzgerald et al., 1995; IFPI, 2023b). Music has indeed been frequently discussed as a crucial source of identity building among adolescents, especially as a badge communicating



one's values and beliefs (Franken et al., 2017; Miranda, 2013; North & Hargreaves, 1999).

While much is known about the uses of music, less is known about how the exposure to music narratives influences adolescents' beliefs, as a particular aspect of the socializing role of music (Carbone & Vandenbosch, 2023). Yet, music contains a wide and variegated presentation of messages about success that can potentially be internalized by adolescents. For example, Primack and colleagues (2011) showed that the idea of humble beginnings—a key aspect of effort-oriented success narratives, used to highlight the need to work hard to overcome difficulties—was present in almost 40% of the studied lyrics. Adopting a more hermeneutic approach, Sköld and Rehn (2007) discovered the presence of similar redemptive narratives in rap lyrics. More recently, Carbone and Mijs (2022) studied the presence of frames explaining social inequalities in music popular in 23 European countries, founding two effort-oriented frames, defined Rags-to-riches and Bragging rights. In this work, a Rags-to-riches frame typically provided a narrative of the artists' rise to fame, against-the-odds of a difficult context while growing up. Alternatively, the frame Bragging rights was used to depict artists' capacity to accumulate wealth despite of their lived hardships. Chapter 3 further conducted the first systematic content analysis of a specific effort-oriented narrative, namely meritocratic, in music that is popular in highly individualistic countries (e.g., US, Canada). Meritocracy is a type of effort-oriented success narrative that focuses on moral attributions by specifically considering worthy and deserving those who are hardworking, while labelling as unworthy and undeserving those who put in less efforts (Lamont, 2019). By studying 4117 lyrics, the authors found a wide and variegated presence of meritocracy in music, with one in four songs containing at least one of the five identified meritocratic frames (i.e., Rags-to-Riches, Deservingness-Reward, Deservingness-Punishment frames, No-Pain-No-Gain and Control-the-Ship).

In particular, the Rags-to-Riches narrative was identified when artists presented past difficulties (e.g., poverty, addiction) together with current instances of wealth (e.g., money, cars) to tell a story of personal and artistic emancipation. A Deservingness-Reward narrative emerged when artists stressed their personal characteristics to demonstrate deserving a high social status (e.g., rich because smart). Instead, a Deservingness-Punishment narrative was used to morally justify hardships based on personal characteristics (e.g., poor because lazy). The No-Pain-No-Gain narrative explicitly stressed hard work and dedication as a way to overcome various forms of current struggles an artist might face. Finally, artists using a Control-the-Ship narrative tended to set current difficulties in juxtaposition with the ostentatious display of their wealth and success, suggesting their resilience and control in difficult periods.

Knowing how and how frequently music represents effort-oriented success narratives is a first step to better understand the internalization processes of such messages in adolescents' beliefs. A recent meta-analysis (Carbone & Vandenbosch, 2023; see also Timmerman et al., 2008) has indeed shown that exposure to music messages is related to holding music-consistent beliefs. Yet, the literature on music effects falls short in explaining the temporal dimensions of such internalization process. That is, most of the existing literature on the effects of music on individuals' beliefs has predominantly adopted an experimental or cross-sectional design, impeding a deeper understanding of the temporal developments of music-consistent beliefs (Carbone & Vandenbosch, 2023).

This study is among the firsts to explicitly take this temporal dimension into account to explain music effects. To do so, it builds from cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1980). Cultivation theory departs from the idea that narratives are fundamental in orienting humans' beliefs and behaviors (Mosharafa, 2015). The theory was originally developed considering television as a key

source in the distribution of narratives, but it has been subsequently applied to other media, music included (Zhang et al., 2008). Gerbner and colleagues considered the development of message-consistent beliefs as gradually emerging in audiences upon the repeated exposure to televised content (Potter, 2014). According to cultivation, heavy consumers of media messages (i.e., with more frequent and longer exposures) are expected to develop stronger message-consistent beliefs compared to light viewers (i.e., with less frequent and shorter exposures). In this perspective, media narratives are considered to be normatively relevant for audiences to focus and orient their attention toward culturally relevant issues (i.e., cultural indicators, Gerbner, 1969). That is, media can provide audiences with (truthful and stereotyped) knowledge about the world and, simultaneously, select those cultural issues that are considered as important and relevant to highlight (Shanahan, 2004). Heavier consumption is therefore expected to construct value systems and ideologies that selectively constitute the worldviews of audiences. Especially among adolescents, who assign particular relevance to some pieces of music and to some music artists (Derbaix & Korchia, 2019), the exposure to effort-oriented success narratives in their favorite lyrics is expected to cultivate related beliefs over time. Building from this literature, the first hypothesis of this study expects a *positive within-person relationship between exposure to effort-oriented success narratives in one's favorite songs and adolescents' effort-oriented success beliefs (H1)*.

Yet, the sole presence and prevalence of effort-oriented success messages in music is unlikely to bring about equal internalization processes among all young listeners, as the same message will be consumed differently by different audiences (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). For instance, rap videos that celebrate luxury consumption may speak to economically disadvantaged youth in a way that differs from well-situated adolescents (Evans & Baym, 2022). Further theorizing (and adequate empirical testing) is thus required to illuminate the

boundary conditions that may apply to the effects of music on beliefs as expected by H1.

## **When and Why Music is Important to Adolescents: The Role of Transportation and Resonance**

### ***Narrative transportation as boundary condition***

While cultivation focuses on the frequency of exposure, it does not explain how audiences specifically internalize the narratives they are exposed to. To explain processes of narrative internalization, transportation theory has been developed as one of the main processes of audience involvement with media content (Brown, 2015). The concept of narrative transportation was coined by Gerrig (1993) within the context of novels to describe experiences of detachment from one's world and of engrossment in the received story. Green and Brock (2000) subsequently theorized transportation as a mediated experience in which audiences find enjoyment in imagining themselves in another world. In this theoretical account, transportation is a persuasion process expected to bring about attitudinal changes through the suspension of beliefs about the current world and the imaginative engagement of oneself with the consumed story (Green et al., 2004). In this sense, "the story receiver is not merely a reader of the story but also an active interpreter [...] receiving a story is actually an act of reading as well as authoring through which the story is processed." (van Laer et al., 2014, pp. 798-799) Existing meta-analyses indeed support the idea that narrative transportation can promote the internalization of media messages in audiences' beliefs (van Laer et al., 2014; van Laer et al., 2019).

Narrative transportation theory builds from a vast literature in the field of media entertainment theorizing processes of narrative engagement through concepts such as absorption, enjoyment, and imagining (Green, 2021). These concepts are also central in relation to music narratives, making transportation a key process of narrative engagement also in relation to music. Existing

literature has showed that exposure to music promotes engagement and absorption with the narratives (McAuley et al., 2021), experiences that are typical of entertainment persuasion processes (Vorderer et al., 2004). Enjoyment of media entertainment content refers to a complex (i.e., including pleasurable and uncomfortable feelings, Oliver et al., 2018) experiential state involving physiological (e.g., sensory pleasures), cognitive (e.g., sense of achievement and self-efficacy), and affective components (e.g., serenity, sadness) (Vorderer et al., 2004). Enjoyment is considered a central aspect of entertainment persuasion processes because it drives the motivation to consume, reflect on, and feel entertainment content (Halfmann & Vorderer, 2020). Absorption further describes states of deep involvement and flow (Rieger et al., 2014), characterized by a “total attention where all of an individual's attentional resources were consumed by the object of attention.” (Agarwal & Karahanna, 2000, p. 667) Together with engagement and absorption, exposure to music also promotes ease of imagining (Küssner & Eerola, 2019), a typical feature of narrative transportation into different worlds. Such imagining has been defined as a set of multisensory experiences related to “visual imagery, autobiographical memories, or kinesthetic sensations” (Margulis et al., 2022, p. 1), and found in relation to music with (Steinhardt & McClaran, 2022) and without (i.e., instrumental, Margulis et al., 2022) lyrics. Music therefore facilitates the process of detachment from one's world and the entering into other realities through entertainment processes of enjoyment, absorption, and imagining. These processes play a key role in the expected attitudinal and behavioral change happening through narrative transportation. As such, if listeners are transported in the songs they are listening to, a more substantial impact of the songs can be expected over time (Tchernev et al., 2023). Building from this literature, we therefore hypothesize *a stronger positive within-person association over time between exposure to effort-oriented success narratives in one's favorite songs and adolescents'*

*effort-oriented success beliefs when they experience stronger feelings of narrative transportation with the favorite song (H2).*

### ***Perceived similarity of hardships as boundary condition***

The existing literature about narrative transportation, in general, and about music transportation, in particular, has mostly regarded the attitudinal role of transportation as a process of detachment and return into different worlds. As noted by van Laer and colleagues (2014, p. 800) “the state of narrative transportation makes the world of origin partially inaccessible to the story receiver, thus marking a clear separation in terms of here/there and now/before, or narrative world/world of origin.” Yet, existing research supports the idea that transportation and attitudinal change happen when there is a match rather than a clash between the narrative world and the world of origin. Van Laer and colleagues (2014, p. 802) further remark in this regard that “identifiability is the property a character must satisfy such that story receivers understand the experience of the character by knowing and feeling the world in the same way (Escalas & Stern, 2003) [...] Imagery of story plot is vital to narrative transportation such that, through a mentally imagined plot, stories resemble real-life experiences [...] people assess analytical expressions in terms of their truth and stories in terms of their verisimilitude, which he defines as ‘lifelikeness.’” Indeed, empirical evidence has shown that a similarity of characteristics promotes transportation and attitudinal change. For example, Bowman and colleagues (2019, p. 461) studied the transportation with narratives in music videos and showed that men were less susceptible to narrative persuasion than women, potentially because of “a gender mismatch [given that the focal characters in the music video were women] or due to purposeful distancing from an antagonist.” The role of similarity has been theorized in cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1980) through the concept of resonance, conceived as a “‘double dose’ of meaning that comes from both real-world experience as well as TV messages.” (Potter,

2014, p. 1019) This could mean that when there is a congruence between music narratives and individuals' experiences, music messages could be more easily internalized, leading to stronger music-consistent beliefs. Indeed, Tchernev and colleagues (2023) showed that narrative transportation is more likely to influence audiences' beliefs when the narrative is perceived as congruent to their own lives, when it resembles and applies to one's own lived experiences. In popular media, effort-oriented success narratives are typically displayed as related to the struggles and hardships lived by media characters (Barton & Turman, 2009). Indeed, effort-oriented narratives, such as meritocracy, are often related to rags-to-riches stories, where life hardships are overcome through hard work and dedication (Mijs, 2018). As such, individuals who have lived similar hardships as those represented in effort-oriented success narratives, such as suffering economic difficulties or racial marginalization, are expected to be more likely to develop stronger music-consistent beliefs. Building from this literature, we therefore hypothesize a *stronger positive within-person association over time between exposure to effort-oriented success narratives in one's favorite songs and adolescents' effort-oriented success beliefs when adolescents experienced hardships in their lives (H3).*

### ***Resonance of music narratives as boundary condition***

According to cultivation theory, resonance “suggests that those people whose life experiences are more congruent [i.e., similar] with the experiences of the television world will be most affected by the television message.” (Shrum & Bischak, 2001, p. 191) That is, resonance expects different groups with content-consistent life experiences to converge toward the development of content-consistent beliefs (Calzo & Ward, 2009). In this sense, similar life experiences are expected to bring about stronger effects due to the intelligibility and applicability of consumed content to one's own life experiences (Bonus, Watts, et al., 2022). To illustrate, existing empirical

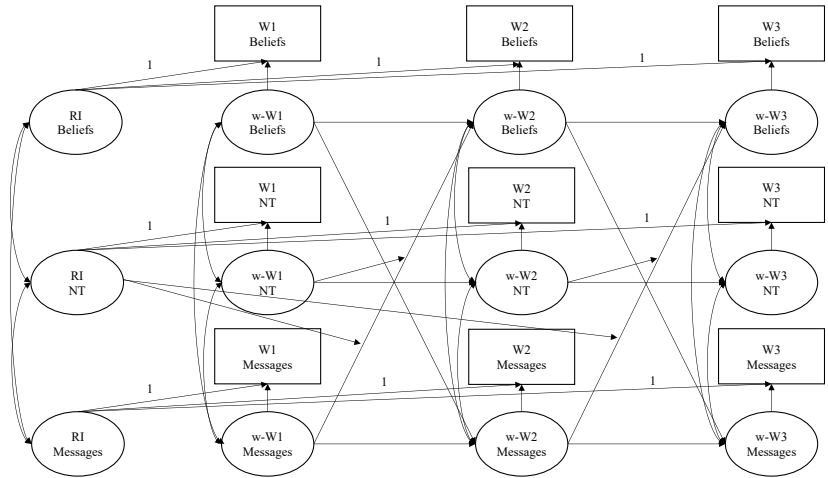
research has shown that individuals with life experiences that are similar as those represented in media narratives (e.g., grief and nostalgia) show stronger effects of transportation, identification, and appreciation than those with content-inconsistent ones (Bonus, Wing, et al., 2022; Das & Peters, 2022).

A resonant account of transportation therefore postulates that audiences experience stronger feelings of transportation and, consequently, a stronger internalization of consumed narratives when there is a correspondence between consumed content and audiences' life experiences. In particular, music has been frequently shown to facilitate feelings of transportation and absorption (Margulis et al., 2019), especially along culturally shared characteristics. This remarks the importance of cultural and personal experiences in the processing of music narratives, even in music without words: "music can generate remarkably similar stories in listeners' minds, but the degree to which these imagined narratives are shared depends on the degree to which culture is shared across listeners" (Margulis et al., 2022, p. 1). In other words, the exposure to music narratives can facilitate the internalization of such narratives when audiences feel transported and when they share similar life experiences as those presented in the music narratives. In this chapter, we focus on effort-oriented success narratives, which typically celebrate the overcoming of struggles and hardships by means of hard work and resilience (Chen & Berman, 2021). As such, we expect to see a stronger transportation among adolescents who consume such content while also sharing similar situations of perceived hardships in their lives. By drawing from similar experiences of hardships, adolescents could find effort-oriented success narratives as applicable to their lives and see them as viable ways to overcome their past and present difficulties. Stemming from this reasoning, our fourth hypothesis expects a *stronger positive within-person relationship over time between exposure to effort-oriented success messages in one's favorite songs and internalization of effort-oriented success beliefs among*



adolescents who feel transported by the narrative (as per H2) and have similar perceived hardships as the ones depicted in the narratives (as per H3) as compared to those with high levels of transportation, yet different life experiences (H4). Figure 3 shows the conceptual and statistical models used to address the hypotheses.

**Figure 3.** Visual representation of the model used in this chapter. The hypothesized effects are expressed in the logics of a three-wave longitudinal research design (see methods section)



Note: W1, W2, and W3 = number of waves of measurement in the current longitudinal survey design (see methods section). Beliefs = Effort-oriented success beliefs; Messages = Effort-oriented success narratives in favorite song; NT = Narrative transportation. The interaction effect of W1 was tested separately for BxW (interaction lines from RI-W1) and for WxW (interaction lines from wW1). When testing for multigroup comparisons, this model was estimated across similarity groups.

## Methodology

### Sample

We sampled adolescents from 7 schools in Flanders (Belgium) over a 12-month period. Adolescents completed a three-wave panel study where each wave was conducted four months after the previous one. We chose to conduct each survey after four months to avoid major changes in the media landscape

(Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2022) and to allow enough time for beliefs to develop (Yang & Brown, 2016). The study was conducted between 2021 and 2022 after receiving ethical approval of the SMEC review board of the host university. Informed consent was obtained by parents and participants, who received extensive information about the content of the study and about the confidentiality of their answers. Participants were informed that their data would be anonymously stored in a secure server, that their survey answers would be processed separately from their identification data, that they could conclude the survey at any moment, and that they would receive a reward of 10 euros (W1), 12 euros (W2), and 15 euros (W3) in vouchers, in case they completed each survey.

W1 was filled by 590 adolescents, W2 by 415, and W3 by 367. From the sample of all respondents in Belgium across the waves ( $n = 624$ ), we excluded failed attention checks ( $n = 63$ ), yielding a sample of 561. To maximize power and to keep as much respondents as possible (Erreygers et al., 2018), we finally included all respondents who participated in at least two waves ( $n = 405$ ,  $M_{\text{age}} = 15.1$  [ $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.5$ ], girls = 64%).

### ***Measures***

*Control variables.* We used age, gender, parental education, and ethnic background as control variables. They were chosen for their potential effects on the two main variables of interest, namely the presence of effort-oriented success narratives in music lyrics and the expression of related beliefs (Elvers et al., 2018; Flanagan et al., 2014; Ghavami & Mistry, 2019).

Age was measured at W1 by asking participants their date of birth and by subtracting 2021 (the year in which the survey was conducted) from this date ( $M = 15.13$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ).

Gender was measured at W1 by the item 'I am a...' (1 = Boy, 2 = Girl, 3 = Other, 4 = Prefer not to say) (Girls = 64.20%). 'Other' and 'Prefer not to say' were recoded as missing values ( $n = 8$ ).

Two items were used at W1 to measure the highest education obtained by participants' i) father/male guardian and ii) mother/female guardian (1 = No diploma, 2 = Primary education, 3 = Secondary education, 4 = College, 5 = University, 6 = I don't know, but my Dad/Mum works as a..., 7 = Doesn't apply to me). The qualitative responses to 'I don't know, but my Dad/Mum works as a...' were recoded based on the job information provided (e.g., a business manager would likely require a university degree), whilst 'Doesn't apply to me' was recoded as missing data ( $M_{\text{father}} = 4.59$  [ $SD = .64$ ];  $M_{\text{mother}} = 4.54$  [ $SD = .56$ ]).

Ethnic background was assessed through the following categories (multiple responses allowed): "West-European", "East-European", "African or Middle East", "North American", "South American or Latin American", "Asian", "Other, namely" (to be filled), "I don't know" (coded as missing response). Given the low number of participants with a non-European ethnicity, the variable was recoded in three categories, namely Western-European (82.47%), non-Western-European (5.19%), and Mixed (9.14%).

*Effort-oriented success beliefs* were measured by asking respondents to "imagine someone of your age to be successful later on in life. Think about what it takes for them to be very successful. Which reason, in your opinion, matters the most to become successful?" The range of answers is composed by structuralist causes (e.g., Having a family with a lot of money, indicated as A) and meritocratic causes (e.g., Being able to make your own money by yourself, indicated as B). Respondents are asked to choose on a 5-point bipolar Likert scale ranging from "Totally agree with A", "Agree with A", "Somewhat agree with A", to "Mixed feelings" to "Somewhat agree with B",

“Agree with B”, and “Totally agree with B”. The latent variable that this scale aims to capture is a single dimension of meritocratic beliefs (reference). All the items were developed by the authors to capture the importance that adolescents attribute to individual efforts about others, rather than about themselves, and specifically related to their peers, rather than reflecting more general ideas about, for example, poverty and homelessness (e.g., Flanagan et al., 2014). The wording was further adapted to be suitable for contemporary adolescents and their cultural context.

The dimensionality of the scale was assessed in a pilot study among 121 adolescents ( $M_{\text{age}} = 15$  [ $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.6$ ], 54% girls) recruited from three Belgian schools in June-August 2021. The EFA demonstrated a one-factor solution (eigenvalue = 8.67, explained variance = 26%,  $\alpha = .61$ , 5 items). No item was further removed, and the scale is composed by the following bi-polar items: Being born smart – Working hard to achieve good grades ( $n = 90$ ); Being born as a very social person so that it is easy for you to make friends – Trying as best as you can to help other people ( $n = 90$ ); Being born beautiful according to the majority of people – Working hard to get a fit body ( $n = 90$ ); Having a family with good connections with the right people – Being able to create your own network of connections ( $n = 90$ ); Having a family with a lot of money – Being able to make your own money by yourself ( $n = 90$ ); The CFA showed an acceptable model fit according to  $\chi^2(5) = 1.808$ ,  $p = 0.87$ , RMSEA = 0.000, CFI = 1.000, TLI = 1.183, SRMR = 0.029. A one-dimensional factor structure was thus confirmed ( $M_{w1} = 2.30$  [ $SD = .62$ ];  $M_{w2} = 2.44$  [ $SD = .64$ ];  $M_{w3} = 2.43$  [ $SD = .61$ ]).

*Effort-oriented success narratives in favorite songs* asked respondents the following question “Name (up to five) of your favorite songs (with artist and song name) that you have been recently listening to a lot over the past 4 months. If you do not have a favorite one, what songs have you been recently listening to a lot? You can check on your devices if you do not remember the

names. Please indicate also how often you have listened to this song on a weekly basis over the past 4 months. You can write a number which indicates 1 = less than once a week; 2 = one time a week, 3 = multiple times a week, 4 = every day of a week, 5 = multiple times a day.” In total, respondents indicated 3,228 unique lyrics. On average, adolescents listened to their favorite song multiple times a week ( $M_{w1} = 3.63$  [ $SD = 1.68$ ];  $M_{w2} = 3.42$  [ $SD = 2.10$ ];  $M_{w3} = 2.89$  [ $SD = 2.13$ ]).

To measure the presence of effort-oriented success narratives in these lyrics, three research assistants were extensively trained by the first author to classify the narratives present in adolescents’ favorite lyrics. Each coder was assigned 1076 lyrics, plus 100 randomly selected lyrics that were the same across coders, to establish inter-coder reliability. In particular, lyrics were classified following the coding schema developed in Chapter 3, which employs five different effort-oriented success narratives as described in the literature review, namely Rags-to-Riches ( $n = 117$ , 3.62%), Deservingness-Reward ( $n = 137$ , 4.24%), Deservingness-Punishment ( $n = 125$ , 3.87%), No-Pain-No-Gain ( $n = 164$ , 5.08%), and Control-the-Ship ( $n = 102$ , 3.16%). Coders were extensively trained by the first author before the coding tasks and the main analyses started once intercoder reliability was established among three coders (Gwet’s  $AC1_{\text{rags}} = .96$ ; Gwet’s  $AC1_{\text{roll}} = .97$ ; Gwet’s  $AC1_{\text{nopain}} = .84$ ; Gwet’s  $AC1_{\text{des\_rew}} = .80$ ; Gwet’s  $AC1_{\text{des\_pun}} = .85$ ).

To balance specificity and comprehensiveness of music diets, we studied the consumption of effort-oriented success narratives in relation to two categories of songs, namely in relation to adolescents’ general consumption of their favorite songs and in relation to their most favorite song. To increase feasibility, our measure for narrative transportation uniquely referred to the first song listed as respondents’ most favorite one. For these reasons, we constructed two different measures, one related to the general level of message exposure in all the listed songs and the other specifically related to the first

song. In both cases, we used the frequency of exposure to each song as a weight to account for cultivation effects. In particular, the first measure related to a general level of exposure to effort-oriented success narratives was calculated by multiplying the listening frequency for each song by the number of frames present in each of the five listed songs. This yielded five different scores, one for each of the five listed songs, which were then summed up to capture the level of exposure to each effort-oriented success narrative in all the listed songs. Theoretically, the highest potential score for this variable would be 5 (frequency) \* 5 (frames) \* 5 (songs) = 125, while the highest level detected among our respondents was of 38 ( $M_{w1} = 3.04$  [SD = 5.57];  $M_{w2} = 2.44$  [SD = 4.62];  $M_{w3} = 2.06$  [SD = 4.21]). We named this variable “effort-oriented success narratives in favorite songs (general)”.

The second measure related to the exposure to effort-oriented success narratives in the first favorite song was calculated in the same way, but uniquely considering the first song. That is, we multiplied the listening frequency for the first song by the number of frames present in the first song. While the theoretical maximum would be of 5 (frequency) \* 5 (frames) = 25, the highest level detected among our respondents was of 18 ( $M_{w1} = .78$  [SD = 2.57];  $M_{w2} = .48$  [SD = 1.75];  $M_{w3} = .42$  [SD = 1.65]). We named this variable “effort-oriented success narratives in favorite song (first)”. We explicitly mention when we used each variables for each model in Table 8 below.

*Narrative transportation* was measured by asking respondents to think about the first song they selected and to evaluate how much they agree or disagree to the following statements on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (=Strongly disagree) to 5 (=Strongly agree): “I can picture myself in the events described in the lyrics”, “I am involved in the events described in the lyrics”, “The events described in the lyrics affect me emotionally”, “I have a vivid image of the events described in the lyrics”. EFA showed a one-factor solution (W1: eigenvalue = 3.91, explained variance = 61.0%,  $\alpha = .86$ , 4 items; W2:

eigenvalue = 3.85, explained variance = 63.1%,  $\alpha = .87$ , 4 items; W3: eigenvalue = 3.55, explained variance = 64.7%,  $\alpha = .88$ , 4 items).

*Perceived hardships scale* was developed by Phillips and Lowery (2015) to measure respondents' perceptions of their own life struggles. The scale asks respondents to think about their past life and to assess, on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree") the extent to which they agree or disagree on five items: "My life has been full of hardships"; "There have been many struggles I have suffered"; "My life has had many obstacles"; "My life has been easy" (reverse scored); and "I have had many difficulties in life that I could not overcome". EFA showed a one-factor solution (eigenvalue = 3.50, explained variance = 58.0%,  $\alpha = .86$ , 5 items). The variable was dichotomized to conduct multigroup analysis according to a median split.

### ***Analytical Strategy***

We first computed the means, standard deviations, alpha, ICC (Table 2 in Appendix), and zero-order correlations (Figure 1 in Appendix) for the variables of interest. Afterwards, we used Mplus (v. 8.9) and estimated 9 Random-Intercept Cross-Lagged Panel Models [RI-CLPM] (see Table 1 in Appendix for a presentation of each model). In each model, we used mean scores as manifest variables, each of them regressed on the corresponding latent variable with loadings constrained at 1. Latent variables indicate the within-person factors across which were drawn auto-regressive and cross-lagged paths. We further created a latent random intercept factor [RI] for each main variable in the model with manifest variables at three time points as indicators, with loadings constrained at 1. Correlations between RIs represent between-person associations. We further constrained the error variances of all manifest variables to 0<sup>18</sup>. MLR was the estimator. Model fit for model 1 was

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<sup>18</sup> Data, syntax, pre-registration, and Appendix can be found on OSF at this link: [https://osf.io/7xg2e/?view\\_only=c8bc293db93f4601bf06a8b13c780b45](https://osf.io/7xg2e/?view_only=c8bc293db93f4601bf06a8b13c780b45)

considered acceptable if  $RMSEA \leq .08$ ,  $CFI \geq .90$ , and  $TLI \geq .90$  (Kline, 2016). Models with the decomposition of Between and Within components of narrative transportation (i.e., model 2 and 4) do not provide fit indices (Speyer et al., 2023). This is typical of models with latent interactions as modeled in the available versions of Mplus (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2020; Ozkok et al., 2022). Moreover, fit indices were not available for model 3, because mixture models only provide information criteria (Grimm et al., 2021). As such, it was not possible to evaluate the model fit of models 2 (transportation), models 3 (perceived hardships), and models 4 (moderation transportation with multigroup perceived hardships). In these models, evidence of moderation was evaluated based on the significance test of the respective regression paths. Instead, models 4 contain multigroup decomposition (across perceived hardship groups) of the BxW and WxW moderating effect of narrative transportation. As such, evidence of perceived hardship moderation for models 4 was evaluated by comparison of information criteria (i.e., AIC, BIC) between constrained and unconstrained models. In these analyses, we used measures of exposure to effort-oriented success narratives in favorite songs (first) in models also including narrative transportation, while we used the variable related to general exposure in the other cases. We detail next the three main modelling strategies used to test H1-H4.

The first model consisted of a baseline RI-CLPM model with autoregressive and cross-lagged paths between effort-oriented success narratives in favorite songs (general) and related beliefs to answer H1 (1 model). In this model, we used the general level of exposure to effort-oriented success narratives in favorite songs because it represents a baseline model interested in the general effect of exposure to such narratives.

The second model included narrative transportation as a continuous, time-varying, latent factor as a moderator to answer H2. In particular, we followed Speyer and colleagues (2023) in dividing narrative transportation in its



Between and Within component. This approach was followed because respondents could indicate different favorite songs across waves and, consequently, different levels of narrative transportation. As such, it was important to distinguish a Between and Within component of the moderator narrative transportation. This distinction allows to estimate two types of interactions. A Between x Within interaction (BxW) was obtained by using the random intercept (Between part) of narrative transportation as a moderator, to understand whether the link between exposure to effort-oriented success messages in favorite songs (first) and related beliefs is stronger if a person experiences stronger narrative transportation with the song than the overall average. A Within x Within interaction (WxW) was obtained by using the Within part of narrative transportation as a moderator, in order to understand whether the link between exposure to effort-oriented success messages in favorite songs (first) and related beliefs is stronger if a person experiences stronger narrative transportation with the song than their average (2 models).

The third model consisted in multigroup moderation analysis to answer H3, including the general exposure to effort-oriented success messages in favorite songs. It models perceived hardships as a group moderator in which group differences in perceived hardships were constrained and then released (2 models). In this model, we used the general level of exposure to effort-oriented success narratives in favorite songs because it represents a multigroup model interested in the general effect of exposure to such narratives across two groups with high and low perceptions of perceived hardships.

Finally, the fourth model reprised the interaction model used to answer H2 and conducted multigroup analysis across perceived hardships groups to answer H4, using the exposure to effort-oriented success messages in the first favorite song. To test for multigroup differences, we estimated a constrained

and unconstrained model for each BxW and WxW estimated in the second set of models (4 models). An overview of the models used can be found in Table 8 below.

**Table 8.** Summary of the computed RI-CLPM models

Model #	IV	DV	Moderator 1	Moderator 2
1	Effort-oriented success messages in favorite songs (general)	Effort-oriented success beliefs		
2.1	Effort-oriented success messages in favorite songs (first)	Effort-oriented success beliefs	Narrative transportation (BxW)	
2.2		Effort-oriented success beliefs	Narrative transportation (WxW)	
3.1	Effort-oriented success messages in favorite songs (general)	Effort-oriented success beliefs		Perceived hardships (constrained)
3.2		Effort-oriented success beliefs		Perceived hardships (unconstrained)
4.1		Effort-oriented success beliefs	Narrative transportation (BxW, constrained)	
4.2	Effort-oriented success messages in favorite songs (first)	Effort-oriented success beliefs	Narrative transportation (BxW, unconstrained)	Perceived hardships
4.3		Effort-oriented success beliefs	Narrative transportation (WxW, constrained)	
4.4		Effort-oriented success beliefs	Narrative transportation (WxW, unconstrained)	

Note: Based on n = 405 participants. IV = Independent variable, DV = Dependent variable. Moderator 1 is modeled as a continuous variable and moderator 2 is modeled as a multigroup. BxW indicates the Between part of the decomposed variance of the moderator Narrative Transportation. WxW indicates the Within part of the decomposed variance of the moderator Narrative Transportation.

## Results

### *Descriptive Analysis*

Table 1 in Appendix shows that a moderate degree of variance in effort-oriented success beliefs ( $ICC = .45$ ) and narrative transportation ( $ICC = .44$ ), a moderate-low degree in exposure to (general) effort-oriented success messages in favorite songs ( $ICC = .33$ ) and a low degree in exposure to (first) effort-oriented success messages in favorite songs ( $ICC = .13$ ) was explained by between-person differences. Adolescents expressed middle-low levels of effort-oriented success beliefs ( $M_{w1} = 2.30$  [ $SD = .62$ ];  $M_{w2} = 2.44$  [ $SD = .64$ ];  $M_{w3} = 2.43$  [ $SD = .61$ ]), middle-high levels of narrative transportation ( $M_{w1} = 3.19$  [ $SD = .99$ ];  $M_{w2} = 3.04$  [ $SD = .98$ ];  $M_{w3} = 3.03$  [ $SD = .94$ ]), and middle levels of perceived hardships ( $M = 2.78$  [ $SD = 0.63$ ]). Considering those in the highest quartile ( $> 3.2$  out of 5), 31% of respondents reported high values of perceived hardships. Looking at the average exposure to effort-oriented success messages (general), 42% of adolescents in wave 1, 35% in wave 2, and 30% in wave 3 reported to be exposed to at least one song (among the five favorites) containing effort-oriented messages. Looking at the average exposure to effort-oriented favorite songs (first), 12% of adolescents in wave 1, 9% in wave 2, and 7% in wave 3 reported a song containing at least one effort-oriented message as their most favorite one.

### *Hypothesis Testing*

Table 2 in Appendix shows an excellent model fit ( $\chi^2[1] = .37$ ,  $p = .54$ ,  $RMSEA = .00$ ,  $SRMR = .03$ ,  $CFI = 1.00$ ,  $TLI = 1.00$ ) for model 1. Models 2-4.4 use mixture models, which only provide information criteria that are used to compare constraint and unconstrained models based on the lowest values of BIC and AIC indices (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2020; Ozkok et al., 2022). Accordingly, we report below the results for model 1 (baseline), 2.1 (BxW, no multigroup), 2.2 (WxW, no multigroup), 3.1 (constrained, multigroup with perceived hardships), 4.2 (BxW, unconstrained, multigroup with perceived

hardships), as can be found in Table 3 in Appendix. Model 4.4 did not converge and, consequently, only results for model 4.3 were reported.

### ***Within-Person Associations***

In model 1 testing H1, a positive autoregressive within-person relationship was found for effort-oriented success beliefs between W1 and W2 ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $p = .004$ ) and between W2 and W3 ( $\beta = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Moreover, we found a positive autoregressive within-person relationship for exposure to effort-oriented success messages in favorite songs (general) between W1 and W2 ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $p = .005$ ), which was not replicated between W2 and W3. No other autoregressive or cross-lagged effects were significant at the  $p < .05$  level. As such, H1, expecting a positive relationship between exposure to music messages and adolescents' beliefs, was not supported.

In model 2.1, testing between-person moderation of narrative transportation (BxW; H2), we did not find evidence of moderation effects as the regression coefficients for BxW were not statistically significant (W1-W2:  $\beta = .04$ ,  $p = .08$ ; W2-W3:  $\beta = .04$ ,  $p = .58$ ). Similarly, we did not find evidence of within-person moderation of narrative transportation (WxW) in model 2.2, as the regression coefficients for WxW were not statistically significant (W1-W2:  $\beta = .06$ ,  $p = .33$ ; W2-W3:  $\beta = .06$ ,  $p = .49$ ). Thus, H2, expecting a positive moderation of narrative transportation on the relationship between exposure to music messages and adolescents' beliefs, was not supported.

Similarly, in model 3, testing multigroup moderation of perceived hardships, we did not find evidence of moderation effects as the constrained model showed the best fit (BIC = 14827.99, AIC = 14331.52). Thus, H3, expecting differences across perceived hardships groups on the relationship between exposure to music messages and adolescents' beliefs, was not supported.

To the contrary, the models expecting differences across perceived hardships groups on the moderating role of narrative transportation showed a better AIC and BIC fit for the unconstrained models (model 4.2: BIC is 18516.34, AIC is 17851.69; model 4.3: BIC is 16313.51, AIC is 15833.04). These models test differences across perceived hardship groups in the moderating effects of narrative transportation (BxW in model 4.2 and WxW in model 4.3) on the relationship between effort-oriented success messages and beliefs. Yet, model 4.2, testing between-person moderation of narrative transportation (BxW, unconstrained) across perceived hardships groups, did not show evidence of moderation effects, as the regression coefficients are not statistically significant (low hardship group W1-W2:  $\beta = .05$ ,  $p = .92$ ; low hardship W2-W3:  $\beta = -.15$ ,  $p = .85$ ; high hardship W1-W2:  $\beta = -.08$ ,  $p = .51$ ; high hardship W2-W3:  $\beta = .02$ ,  $p = .98$ ). Similarly, also model 4.3, testing within-person moderation of narrative transportation (WxW, constrained) across perceived hardships groups, did not show evidence of moderation effects (W1-W2:  $\beta = -.08$ ,  $p = .12$ ; W2-W3:  $\beta = .03$ ,  $p = .57$ ). For this reason, H4 was not supported.

### ***Between-Person Associations***

We did not find any significant between-person association.

### **Discussion**

To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the first longitudinal studies on the development of content-consistent beliefs through exposure to music songs. In particular, we investigated the development of effort-oriented success beliefs among adolescents through processes of narrative transportation and resonance. Adding to existing literature studying music effects mostly through cross-sectional and experimental designs (Carbone & Vandenbosch, 2023), our three-wave panel design provides key results for the field, disentangling between- and within-person effects. Descriptive findings interestingly indicate a balanced level of effort-oriented success beliefs among

adolescents when reflecting about their peers, as well as substantial levels of exposure to effort-oriented success messages in their (general) favorite songs and middle-high levels of narrative transportation. Yet, we did not find empirical support for our hypotheses. We reflect next on potential explanations for such null results and provide recommendations for future research in relation to each hypothesis.

### ***Understanding the Observed Non-Effects of Music on Beliefs (H1)***

With regard to H1, expecting a positive effect of exposure to effort-oriented success messages in adolescents' favorite songs on their beliefs, we only found null results. The only statistically significant results were a time-consistent and positive autoregressive path for effort-oriented success beliefs and a time-inconsistent and positive within-person autoregressive path for the exposure to meritocratic messages in adolescents' favorite songs (general) between the first and second wave. This indicates that while adolescents held a balanced level of effort-oriented success beliefs, such beliefs tended to become more individualistic over time. Moreover, while a substantial group of adolescents was heavily exposed to effort-oriented success messages in their favorite songs (general), their level of exposure did not change over time. Considering these factors together, we provide an explanation for these null effects related to the timeframe in which music effects are expected to develop.

Existing research on music effects on audiences' beliefs has mostly focused on experiments, disregarding the temporal developments of music effects (Carbone & Vandenbosch, 2023). The null results of this first long-term longitudinal study, especially in relation to between-person effects, might suggest that music does not influence beliefs in the long run or, alternatively, that it does so but only through a substantial number of repeated exposures. Being the average length of a song typically ranging between 2 to 4 minutes, the listening session of favorite songs might not be long enough for messages

to be internalized. That is, it is possible that we did not detect effects because the chosen timeframe for the development of beliefs was too long for the internalization of messages generally delivered in much shorter timeframes (Shehata et al., 2021). Instead, longer listening sessions or repeated exposures to the same song or messages might be more likely to influence beliefs in the long run. As such, this null result highlights the need to conduct more short-term studies to better disentangle when, eventually, music effects appear and for how long they last (Thomas, 2022). It further suggests that new approaches are needed to map music diets and their content, requiring more fine-grained approaches to measure music exposure, for example through linkage studies combining log-data with daily surveys (Toth, 2023).

#### ***Understanding the Observed Non-Effects of Perceived Hardship Moderation in Music Effects (H2-H4)***

Moreover, we did not find support for the moderating role of narrative transportation (H2), of perceived hardships (H3), and of their combined moderation (H4). In addition to the reason provided above, the lack of evidence for these moderating effects could be also due to the specificities of the sample analyzed in the study. In particular, our sample is mostly composed by Western European adolescents with high levels of socioeconomic status (as measured through levels of parental education). This is in contrast to popular representations of effort-oriented success narratives, which tend to be displayed as related to the struggles and hardships lived by individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds or racial-ethnic marginalized groups (Barton & Turman, 2009). Indeed, such narratives are often related to rags-to-riches stories, where past difficulties are overcome through hard work and dedication (Mijs, 2018).

In this regard, a lack of moderating effects related to narrative transportation might be explained by differences between the typical characters featuring effort-oriented success narratives in popular music and our more privileged



sample. Our respondents might feel transported by the narrative for entertaining purposes, without resonating with its content nor developing stronger effort-oriented success beliefs. They might perceive such narratives as entertaining, but not applicable to their lives because of key differences in how different socioeconomic and ethno-racial groups experience hardships and the related efforts needed to overcome them. For example, while White boys tend to perceive effort as natural and to depict their success as effortlessly achieved, Black boys tend to see effort as a proof of their deservingness, as something to prove in order to gain recognition for their successes (Warikoo, 2018). Similar differences have been found also in relation to socioeconomic status (Kantola, 2020; Jost, 2017). To better capture the resonant experiences lived by adolescents in relation to their identity changes (as those emerging from questions about success and efforts), future research is therefore encouraged to better sample adolescents from ethno-racial and socioeconomic privileged and marginalized groups and to match more precisely these characteristics with those displayed in the narratives of their favorite songs.

Resonant experiences through narrative transportation can be further studied by more closely understanding the dimensions in which adolescents experience hardships in their lives. Despite of their privileged backgrounds, a position that typically buffers against the likelihood of life hardships (Ettman et al., 2020), the adolescents in our sample reported middle-high levels of perceived hardships. Yet, we did not measure the domains in which adolescents perceived these hardships, whether in relation to economic struggles, racial profiling, or other developmental challenges typical of adolescence. A domain of hardships that would be particularly relevant to study in relation to effort-oriented success narratives would be mental health, especially considering the high levels of performance pressure lived by contemporary adolescents potentially because of highly individualistic worldviews (Anniko et al., 2019). Indeed, while music narratives might depict

individual efforts as a way to overcome specific types of difficulties, typically around socioeconomic deprivation or racial discrimination (Carbone & Mijs, 2022), our more socio-economically and ethno-racially privileged respondents might instead perceive their hardships in relation to other dimensions of their lives, such as mental ill-being (Kazdin et al., 2023). Such mental ill-being is indeed known to similarly affect members from ethno-racial and socioeconomic marginalized and privileged backgrounds, although for different reasons (Siddiqi et al., 2019). To better account for processes of resonance, future research is therefore recommended to precisely measure the life domains in which perceived hardships, typically defined as life crises in relation to resonance (Klimmt & Riger, 2021), are experienced and depicted.

## **Conclusion**

This study provides a first longitudinal examination of music effects on adolescents' beliefs through processes of narrative transportation and resonance with effort-oriented success narratives. Our results do not support the hypothesis that exposure to music featuring such narratives promotes the development of music-consistent beliefs. To better understand these null findings, future research is recommended to further theorize about processes of resonance in relation to three main aspects: (1) the temporal developments of music effects (i.e., when they appear and for how long do they last); (2) the similarity between adolescents' ethno-racial and socioeconomic characteristics, especially relevant in the context of popular narratives about success and efforts, with those depicted in their favorite songs; (3) the different domains through which perceived hardships are experienced and depicted (e.g., in relation to financial precarity or mental ill-being). This chapter provides important contributions and future directions for the study of resonance with mass media content and for its application in relation to music effects.

## Conclusion

The contemporary music landscape is undergoing tectonic changes due to the advent of music streaming platforms (MSPs) and social media. Platforms such as Spotify, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok are becoming essential tools for music artists and listeners to consume, share, and remain updated on the latest music trends (IFPI, 2023b). Thanks to these platforms, music artists today are offered increasingly lower barriers to distributing and promoting their music (Evans, 2022). Simultaneously, music audiences have access to an almost unlimited catalog of music on MSPs and can remain updated with the personal and artistic lives of their favorite artists on social media (Click et al., 2013). Two recent reports published by the International Federation for the Phonological Industry (IFPI) and by TikTok show that listeners worldwide are increasingly discovering music through social media platforms such as TikTok and YouTube (IFPI, 2023b; TikTok, 2024). Such an impact has global repercussions, as demonstrated by the emergence of Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa as the two fastest-growing regions for recorded music in 2023 (IFPI, 2023a). These regions are homes of “latin” and “world” music, the two genres that grew the most in 2023 due to their heavy social media presence (Luminate, 2023).

Overall, the music industry and its audiences seem to be thriving in the contemporary digital age: music artists are producing and distributing more music than ever, new music markets are emerging, and music audiences are spending more time listening to and discovering new music (IFPI, 2023b). The current music landscape further increases the personalization and tailoring of music content to each user (Prey, 2018) as well as the availability and consumption of new and more heterogeneous types of music (Bello & Garcia, 2021). All these factors suggest that today, music could be more important than ever in shaping the worldviews and identities of its audiences,

especially those of contemporary adolescents who are the most avid users of MSPs (IFPI, 2023b). Indeed, music has long been considered a key socializing agent for youth (North & Hargreaves, 1999), because of its capacity to signal group identity (ter Bogt et al., 2010), to define ingroups and outgroups (Franken et al., 2017; Rentfrow et al., 2009), and to promote learning from role models like music artists (Chia & Poo, 2009; Ivaldi & O'Neil, 2008). In the context of such rapid sociotechnological changes in the current music landscape, it is crucial to investigate the role that ubiquitous and digitized music (Arditi, 2018) plays in the identities of contemporary adolescents (Webster, 2019).

The present PhD dissertation is the first effort to assess the impact that the current music streaming era has on the formation of adolescents' beliefs, specifically in relation to neoliberal success beliefs. By means of quantitative and computational content analysis, meta-analysis, and survey research, it sheds light on several key aspects that nuance the role of music in the identities of contemporary adolescents. In particular, it provides key conclusions in relation to four macro areas: neoliberal success beliefs, music tastes, music content, and music effects. First, over a one-year period, contemporary adolescents in Flanders show medium to high and stable levels of performance-oriented self-concept (Chapter 5) as well as balanced but increasingly individualistic levels of effort-oriented success beliefs (Chapter 6). Second, Chapter 1 highlights significant gender differences in the adoption of MSPs and the omnivore consumption pattern of music macrogenres consumed on MSPs. Third, this PhD dissertation highlights important differences between the presence of neoliberal success narratives in the content of mainstream music and in the content of the music most liked by adolescents. While Chapters 2 (status) and 3 (meritocracy) show a wide representation of neoliberal success narratives in mainstream music, Chapters 5 and 6 indicate that these narratives are less present in the content of

adolescents' favorite songs (i.e., the song that they consider as their absolute favorite one), but more present among the songs that they generally like the most (up to five for each adolescent). Fourth, Chapters 5 and 6 do not show evidence of the internalization of neoliberal success messages in music into the belief systems of contemporary Flemish adolescents over a one-year period.

## **Key Conclusions**

### ***1. Neoliberal success beliefs increased among Flemish adolescents over a one-year period***

Most of the existing literature about the detrimental effects of neoliberalism on mental health has focused on beliefs related to individual efforts and performance as key defining aspects of achieving success in neoliberal societies (Weinberg et al., 2020). For this reason, this PhD dissertation was particularly interested in understanding the potential internalization of beliefs related to “how” to reach success (e.g., efforts and performance), rather than focusing on the internalization of beliefs about “what” success is (e.g., materialism and power). While primarily focused on the internalization of such beliefs through music consumption, this PhD dissertation is also uniquely positioned to shed light on the presence and prevalence of neoliberal success beliefs among a convenient sample of Flemish adolescents. While not representative of the general Flemish or Belgian population, this sample is particularly interesting because it is mostly composed of adolescents from privileged socioeconomic and racial-ethnic backgrounds. As such, it sheds light on the support for neoliberal success beliefs among privileged groups in the Belgian society.

In this regard, *the first key conclusion of this PhD dissertation is that between 2021 and 2022, contemporary Flemish adolescents from privileged backgrounds held a medium to high and stable performance-oriented self-concept (Chapter 5) and balanced but increasingly individualistic effort-*

*oriented success beliefs (Chapter 6).* In Chapter 5, adolescents were asked to reflect on their performance-oriented self-concept, namely, how much they think of themselves as characterized by performance-oriented values (i.e., ambitious, motivated, hard-working, and productive). Chapter 5 shows medium to high levels of such beliefs (around 3.6 points out of 5) that were stable across the three waves (between 2021 and 2022). Instead, Chapter 6 measures effort-oriented success beliefs by asking adolescents to imagine someone of their own age and express their opinions about why this peer could become successful later on in their life. These reasons included situations where adolescents perceived that, to reach success, their peers had to invest low individual efforts in some cases (e.g., having a family with a lot of money) and high individual efforts in other cases (e.g., being able to make your own money by yourself). Chapter 6 indicates medium levels of such beliefs, as adolescents tended to consider success as the product of both low and high investments in individual efforts (around 2.3 points out of 5). However, the longitudinal data further showed that the studied effort-oriented beliefs tended to become more individualistic over time, so high individual efforts became more central justifications to explain the success of peers (around 2.4 points out of 5). Such growth was especially observed at the within level, indicating that individuals with higher than usual levels of effort-oriented beliefs ended up holding stronger beliefs later on at the next waves. This could indicate a self-reinforcing characteristic of effort-oriented beliefs, which might become stronger when repeatedly reinforced. In other words, contemporary Flemish adolescents from more privileged backgrounds steadily expressed medium to high performance-oriented self-concepts and increasingly individualistic effort-oriented success beliefs over a one-year period.

This conclusion is particularly relevant when interpreted within the specific developmental period of adolescence and when contextualized within broader temporal and geographical contexts. Adolescence is a developmental period

during which youth undergo many important socio-cognitive changes within a relatively short period of time. The current PhD dissertation particularly focused on adolescents aged 11 to 19 because of key changes in relation to identity and music taste developments (Miranda, 2013; North & Hargreaves, 1999). While growing up, young adolescents (i.e., 11–14 years old) develop cognitive skills, such as abstract thinking and the definition of moral concepts (Christie & Viner, 2005), that are crucial for the elaboration of complex beliefs, such as those related to neoliberal success narratives. In this transition, adolescents face specific developmental tasks that overlap with values and pressures that are also central in neoliberal success narratives, such as those related to the development of vocational capabilities and financial independence (Christie & Viner, 2005). As such, the increased support for neoliberal success beliefs over a one-year period might capture the specific socio-cognitive developments that youth typically undergo when growing up from early to late adolescence.

While the relationships between developmental growth and neoliberal success beliefs remain largely underexamined, especially in their temporal developments, the findings from Chapters 5 and 6 might be informative to explain why holding neoliberal success beliefs has been previously connected to the development of various forms of mental well- and ill-being among youth (Cosma et al., 2020; Curran & Hill, 2019). Within the typical developmental changes lived during adolescence, the holding of neoliberal success beliefs might bring some adolescents to feel more empowered, while others feel increasingly pressured and anxious (Anniko et al., 2019). The differential experience of positive or negative mental health effects might likely depend upon the contextual characteristics in which these beliefs take shape, such as in relation to one's social class, race, and gender (Sand et al., 2021). While every adolescent struggles while growing up, some adolescents are more likely to suffer worse consequences because of the limited

possibilities available to them to develop a concept of the self as independent and autonomous. Others, instead, might benefit from narratives that emphasize individual agency and self-reliance because of better access to resources that allow them to fully embrace a view of the self as autonomous and self-reliant. Overall, adolescents are likely to feel the most empowered and agentic when holding a sense of self-efficacy, while also acknowledging the structural inequalities in which they are inserted. Such feelings should be further seen as socially embedded and as differently available to adolescents, depending on their socio-demographic backgrounds. In this sense, it is possible to expect a curvilinear relationship between the support for neoliberal success beliefs and well-being, with lower levels of well-being among those who strongly reject and those who strongly support such beliefs, and higher levels in between. The capacity to develop such a balanced view is highly dependent upon the possibilities available to adolescents to flourish in society and to see themselves as capable of fully embracing the challenges brought about by developmental changes within the context of neoliberal societies. As argued in the introduction, the study of how neoliberal success beliefs affect mental health requires an interdisciplinary understanding capable of integrating the psychological processing of neoliberal success narratives within broader systems of marginalization and privilege.

At the same time, the increase over a one-year period can be seen as part of a broader and ongoing individualization process characterizing Western societies. Indeed, the existing literature has shown that over the past 50 years, individuals in Western societies have developed more individualistic and meritocratic beliefs (Goudarzi et al., 2022; Mijs, 2018). So far, such literature has either focused on adults or on previous generations of adolescents, so-called Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) or Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996), both of which have been frequently found to hold strong meritocratic beliefs (Flanagan et al., 2003; Flanagan et al., 2014).



Emerging literature about the contemporary generation of adolescents, named Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012), potentially indicates a different trend. Contemporary youth seem to push back against indiscriminate support for such neoliberal ideals (Sanchez et al., 2022; Zilberstein et al., 2023). Facing increasing insecurities due to the global pandemic of Covid-19, increasing levels of income inequality, and a mental health crisis, contemporary adolescents are searching for viable alternatives to the dominant neoliberal framework. While some maintain strong meritocratic and individualistic beliefs (Franceschelli & Keating, 2018), others are either shifting their individualistic focus toward greater awareness and care of the self (i.e., therapeutic culture; Illouz, 2008) or transitioning toward more collectivistic and solidaristic values (e.g., ordinary cosmopolitanism; Lamont & Aksartova, 2002).

This literature has been primarily conducted in the US, the country that best epitomizes neoliberal success narratives through its deep faith in the American Dream (Bellah et al., 1985). The US is particularly characterized by a liberal welfare regime focused on individual entrepreneurship and market deregulation as values pursued in state–market relationships (Pankratz, 2014). Such welfare regimes are conducive to the minimal interventions of the state in regulating markets, leading to the privatization of key services, such as education and the healthcare system (Pankratz, 2014). This is crucially different from other redistributive welfare regimes, such as the social democratic regime in Scandinavian countries or the conservative familial regime in Southern European countries (Greve et al., 2021). With their heavier focus on state regulation and redistributive policies, these alternative arrangements better protect and buffer adolescents from the detrimental consequences of unregulated markets and hyper individualized responsibilities (Esping-Andersen, 1990). In this respect, Belgium has been characterized as a mixed regime, with elements of social democratic (e.g.,

redistributive benefits) and conservative (e.g., social insurance contributions) regimes (Kammer et al., 2012). The current PhD dissertation provides important evidence in this regard by showing that despite living in a country with a more protective welfare system than the US or the UK, contemporary Flemish adolescents from privileged backgrounds are increasingly considering individual performance and efforts, central elements of neoliberal success narratives, as defining components of themselves and for achieving success. This result aligns with existing research showing an increase in individualistic beliefs among previous generations of Belgians between 1960 and 2011 (Santos et al., 2017). Furthermore, it shows that Flemish adolescents are not necessarily following the trends of Gen Zers from more liberal countries, such as the US, where youth are including more collectivistic values as part of their belief systems (Zilberstein et al., 2023). Nevertheless, it remains important to remark that this PhD dissertation does not assess the relative importance assigned to neoliberal success beliefs compared to other success beliefs (e.g., care of the self or more collectivistic and solidaristic ones). Considering broader trends, this PhD dissertation can only conclude that while contemporary adolescents in more liberal countries seem to be more supportive of collectivistic values, contemporary Flemish adolescents are increasingly supporting individualistic values.

## ***2. Music tastes are patterned by gender differences and genre omnivorosity on MSPs***

This PhD dissertation is the first to map the music tastes of contemporary adolescents. Chapter 1 in particular finds three music taste profiles, defined as refined, practical, and mainstream (further theorized to be composed of a popular and a cultivated mainstream). Overall, Chapter 1 shows that contemporary adolescents tend to consume music on MSPs (98.9% on at least one platform), with frequent listening (72% for at least 30 minutes every day), and typically through paid subscriptions (60% with at least one platform). The

differences across the three profiles provide another key conclusion of this PhD dissertation, namely that *gender is a central component of the music tastes of contemporary adolescents consuming music on MSPs*. Chapter 1 demonstrates that a refined taste group was mostly characterized by girls, a practical taste group by boys, while the mainstream taste group was equally composed of boys and girls. The girls in the refined profile displayed characteristics in line with existing literature on cultural consumption (e.g., Bihagen & Katz-Gerro, 2000; Christin, 2012), showing higher levels of cultural capital, prowess in their music preferences, and cosmopolitan attitudes. They liked genres at the top of the cultural hierarchy (e.g., classical and blues) as well as those at the bottom (considered “cool” by younger generations, such as rap and latin). The boys in the practical group expressed higher meritocratic beliefs and lower levels of cultural capital. They further reported preferences for traditionally masculine genres (e.g., metal) as well as for more instrumental music (e.g., jazz and electronic). Important differences were further detected in relation to MSP uses, as girls in the refined taste group tended to have higher levels of MSP adoption and listening frequency, while the boys in the practical group expressed lower levels of adoption and listening frequency. Overall, Chapter 1 interprets these differences as a sign of refinement and curation in the first group (mostly girls) and as a sign of practicality and utility in the second group (mostly boys). The girls in the refined taste group expressed capacities to navigate institutionalized (e.g., preferences for classical) and non-institutionalized (e.g., preferences for latin) music in a context where MSPs are the new cultural intermediaries in the contemporary music industry (Webster et al., 2016). Instead, boys consume music sporadically on MSPs and do so by following traditionally masculine norms of goal-directedness (e.g., self-improvement) rather than by paying attention to content that might elicit cognitive elaboration (as indicated by preferences for mostly instrumental music). As such, this PhD dissertation

highlights the importance of gender differences in the use of MSPs and in the definition of music tastes among contemporary Flemish adolescents.

Such differences could be particularly relevant to studying the relationships between adolescents' music tastes, identity development, and mental health. The key differences highlighted above between the girls in the refined group and the boys in the practical group might be indicative of different pathways in which music tastes are connected to different gender socialization processes and different mental health struggles between boys and girls. In particular, the different music preferences (i.e., metal and electronic for boys, classical and latin for girls) and the different openness beliefs (i.e., higher meritocratic beliefs for boys, higher cosmopolitan beliefs for girls) between Profiles 1 and 2 might be the product of gender socialization processes that also relate to gender-specific mental health issues (Mendick et al., 2015). Indeed, existing research has documented important differences in the mental health of boys and girls, with the latter typically reporting worse mental health outcomes than the former (Yoon et al., 2023). Meta-analytical evidence shows that compliance to traditional masculinity norms has negative impacts on the mental health of boys, such as depression and loneliness (Wagner & Reifegerste, 2024; Wong et al., 2017). Importantly, traditionally masculine norms, such as stoicism and self-reliance, also form the core of meritocratic narratives, suggesting a potentially strong relationship between the holding of meritocratic and traditionally masculine norms and the concurrent experience of mental ill-being. Simultaneously, girls socialized in strongly patriarchal contexts are typically hindered from seeing themselves through meritocratic norms, such as competitiveness and leadership, and they are socialized instead toward openness and inclusion (Mendick et al., 2015). By re-inscribing characteristics such as competitiveness, self-control, and performance to women, a group historically marginalized along these lines, meritocracy can provide a sense of agency and competence that challenges stereotypical views

of how girls are expected to grow up as women in a patriarchal system (Seron et al., 2018). In an opposite way to boys, girls who support meritocratic beliefs might instead feel empowered and increase their sense of efficacy and self-control, with potentially positive consequences for their mental health. As previously advanced, these gender-specific effects should be seen as part of a curvilinear relationship between the holding of neoliberal success beliefs and well-being, so that girls might be more likely to experience positive effects because of their lower likelihood of erring toward extremely high support for meritocratic beliefs. Instead, because of their typical gender socialization, boys might be more likely to develop worse well-being when holding stronger meritocratic beliefs because they are likely to err toward stronger values of such beliefs. The results of Chapter 1 might therefore be particularly informative for the study of adolescents' mental health, as they show that the taste profiles in which adolescents cluster when expressing their music preferences on MSPs are characterized by gendered patterns of music tastes and openness beliefs previously shown to relate to specific mental health struggles among youth.

*Another important implication of this PhD dissertation is that, despite their different compositions, the three profiles tend to follow a similar omnivore consumption.* As documented in previous studies, omnivorousness is defined by the capacity to appreciate and consume different music genres (Brisson, 2019). Such consumption patterns have been typically considered a sign of openness and curiosity, as a desirable feature of individuals who are open to diversity and who embrace cosmopolitan attitudes (Rogers & Jost, 2022). MSPs can facilitate such cosmopolitan omnivore engagement by providing access to an almost unlimited catalog of music that is easily accessible at any time through portable devices, such as smartphones. However, Chapter 1 also indicates significant differences across the profiles in terms of gender, cultural capital, openness beliefs, and engagement with MSPs. The presence of

omnivore preferences across substantially different profiles might be a particular feature of the contemporary music landscape. Continuously exposed to new music products through recommendation algorithms, curated playlists, and social media content, contemporary adolescents might be increasingly prone to developing a fragmented consumption of music with a high song turnover and a lower attachment to specific artists or single music pieces (Bello & Garcia, 2021). This is further confirmed by the results of Chapter 5, in which adolescents typically express low levels of identification with their favorite music artist (i.e., around 2.13 points out of 5). The contemporary music landscape might also promote a fragmentation of music genres into increasingly specific microgenres (e.g., vaporwave or synth-pop; Lizardo, 2024), something that has also been documented in relation to television (Riles et al., 2017). As variously argued in existing sociological analyses of contemporary tastes (Lembo, 2017; Vlegel & Lievens, 2015; 2017), macrogenres (e.g., rock and pop) might be outdated to validly capture taste differences in the contemporary streaming era. Youth might instead focus on specific music pieces, artists, and playlists for short periods of time, continuously updating their music preferences (Childress et al., 2021). To better understand whether and how music functions as a status marker in the contemporary music landscape, a key challenge for the study of music tastes will be to develop a fine-grained understanding of what drives music selection (e.g., algorithmic recommendation rather than personal selection; IFPI, 2023b), of the characteristics potentially shared across the heterogeneous music products consumed (e.g., emotional valence, lyrical content, and microgenres; Lizardo, 2014), and of the contextual characteristics in which music is consumed (e.g., sad music for sad moods; ter Bogt et al., 2021). As consumption becomes increasingly fragmented, such efforts will need to account specifically for the segmentation of audiences, especially around the key features identified in Chapter 1 of gender, openness beliefs, and engagement with MSPs.

### ***3. Mainstream music popular on MSPs and among adolescents is rife with neoliberal success narratives***

In relation to the presence and prevalence of neoliberal success narratives in music content, this PhD dissertation provides two additional key conclusions. These conclusions are based on a comparison between Chapters 2–3 and 5–6. Chapters 2 and 3 focused on popular songs written in English and frequently streamed on Spotify in six highly individualistic countries (i.e., the US, UK, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands) between 2016 and 2019. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the favorite songs of Flemish adolescents between 2021 and 2022. The comparison between these chapters is moved by a similar focus on the mainstream. The music selected in Chapters 2 and 3 constitutes the mainstream because of its metrics, including music that is the most listened to on a national and global scale (Achterberg et al., 2011), and because of the legal arrangements between artists, major labels, and social media platforms (Arditi, 2020). In parallel, the Flemish adolescents studied in this PhD dissertation mostly display mainstream tastes (57%), as shown in Chapter 1, and tend to listen to many of the same artists present in Chapters 2 and 3, such as Taylor Swift, Olivia Rodrigo, and the Weeknd. Moreover, adolescents and young adults are the largest consumers of music on MSPs (IFPI, 2023b). Therefore, as already acknowledged in the previous literature, it is reasonable to assume that the music that is popular on MSPs heavily overlaps with the music that is popular among adolescents (Hammond et al., 2024).

*As shown in Chapters 2 and 3, a key conclusion in relation to the presence of neoliberal success narratives in mainstream music is that mainstream music contains a wide and variegated display of neoliberal success narratives related to status and meritocracy.* These chapters report that markers of status (i.e., “what” is success) and meritocracy (i.e., “how” to reach it) are present in around 24% of the studied lyrics. In particular, Chapter 2 shows that

mainstream music tends to represent success as the achievement of a high status in terms of materialism (e.g., luxurious jewels, cars, and hobbies, featured in around 46% of the songs), fame and popularity (e.g., knowing influential people, 26%), conspicuous consumption (e.g., having expensive hobbies and eating gourmet food, 16%), and power (i.e., sexual objectification, 6%). This chapter constitutes an important development in the literature on status markers in music, and in media messages more broadly. Previous literature has focused on materialism and forms of conspicuous consumption as key markers of status in popular media representations (Podoshen et al., 2014). The wide presence of such status markers is also confirmed in the content analysis performed in Chapter 2. In addition to these well-known markers, Chapter 2 adopts a Bourdieusian and intersectional lens to include fame, popularity, and power as additional key markers of status. Such a perspective further allows to introduce a gender and race component in the study of status representations in music, showing that Black and Brown male artists are the ones most likely to use status markers in their music. The chapter further contextualizes such findings within the contemporary mainstream music industry, where gender and racial stereotypes are frequently mobilized to increase corporate profit at the expense of artists' own interests (Stuart, 2020). To make it in the contemporary mainstream music industry, Black men are required to display success through a hypersexualized and hypermasculine presentation of themselves, where money, fame, and power define their worth as human beings and their value as sellable commodities (Avery et al., 2017). In the words of the famous hip-hop collective Wu-Tang Clan, Black male artists work in a mainstream industry where "cash rules everything around [them]" (Wu-Tang Clan, 1993).

Moreover, Chapter 3 shows that 24% of the songs depict success as legitimately acquired when achieved through meritocratic means. In particular, mainstream music represents meritocracy through five different



frames: Deservingness-Reward (12.8%), Rags-to-Riches (5.7%), Control-the-Ship (4.4%), Deservingness-Punishment (4.2%), and No-Pain-No-Gain (2.9%). These five frames present concepts of giftedness (having or lacking inner talents), perseverance, hard work, and resilience. United by a focus on individual responsibility and efforts, these characteristics represent the essence of meritocratic narratives, as displayed in mainstream music. By broadening and better characterizing the display of neoliberal success narratives in mainstream music products, Chapters 2 and 3 allow to inquire further about the presence of such narratives in other media formats (e.g., television and social media). While some research has focused on these media formats (Devos et al., 2024; McArthur & Reeves, 2019), it currently remains unclear what the presence and prevalence of such narratives are in the broader media landscape and how status markers are represented across formats. This impedes comparing the diffusion of such markers across media products and better understanding potential specificities and differences in the presentation of such narratives, as shown in Chapter 3, in relation to the different uses of the deservingness subframes between newspapers (i.e., moral blaming) and music lyrics (i.e., dissing).

*An additional key conclusion of this PhD dissertation comes from comparing the results from Chapters 2 and 3 with those from Chapters 5 and 6. In Chapters 5 and 6, adolescents indicated being less exposed to neoliberal success messages in their favorite song, compared to the prevalence of such messages in typical mainstream music (as analyzed in Chapters 2 and 3). At the same time, they indicated being more exposed to neoliberal success messages in the songs that they generally consider their favorite ones, compared to music that is popular on MSPs in previous periods (2016–2019). At first, it seems that Flemish adolescents do not consume music featuring many neoliberal success messages. Indeed, Chapter 5 reported that performance-oriented narratives do not appear frequently in the lyrics, videos,*

and Instagram posts of adolescents' favorite artists (with an average of 2.37 out of 5 points of self-reported frequency occurrence). Moreover, in Chapter 6, adolescents were asked to name their favorite song, and it shows that in such songs, meritocratic narratives do not feature as much (from 12% in W1 to 7% in W3 of adolescents mentioning at least one song with effort-oriented messages as their favorite one) as in the content of mainstream music, as shown in Chapter 3 (24%). From this perspective, this PhD dissertation finds that neoliberal success narratives feature more in the content of music that is popular on MSPs than in songs named as their most favorite one by Flemish adolescents.

At the same time, while neoliberal success narratives do not feature frequently in adolescents' most favorite songs (Chapters 5 and 6), they are much more frequently present in the music content of songs that they generally consider their favorite ones. Indeed, in Chapter 6, adolescents were also asked to name up to five of their favorite songs (in addition to their most favorite one). In the content of these five favorite songs, Chapter 6 shows that 42% of adolescents in W1, 37% in W2, and 30% in W3 named at least one song featuring neoliberal success narratives between 2021 and 2022. When compared to the results presented in Chapters 2 and 3, which focused on the presence of such narratives in music that is popular on MSPs, this result indicates that contemporary Flemish adolescents are surrounded by more neoliberal success narratives than those present on MSPs between 2016 and 2019 (around 24%). Together, Chapters 2, 3, 5, and 6 show the MainStreaming of Success, as success narratives are made widely available through variegated representations of what it means to be successful (i.e., money, fame, and power) and how to reach it (i.e., hard work and dedication). Chapter 2 specifically indicates that the MainStreaming of Success is constructed through the intersectional leverage of racial-ethnic and gender stereotypes, which typically depict Black men as hyperviolent and

hypersexual. By complying with such widely available stereotypes, Black male artists are assured that their music will be consumed and further promoted by algorithmic recommendation systems, securing their position in the mainstream (Avery et al., 2017).

***4. Music exposure generally relates to audiences' beliefs but does not reciprocally promote the internalization of neoliberal success narratives among Flemish adolescents over a one-year period***

*An additional key conclusion of this PhD dissertation is that music exposure is typically associated with the expression of music-consistent beliefs. As shown in Chapter 4, such an association was mostly found in relation to exposure to song-specific messages (rather than genres or general levels of music exposure), concerning the topics of gender (e.g., sexual objectification) and race (e.g., racial stereotypes), and especially stronger for younger age groups (i.e., adolescents and young adults). Interestingly, Chapter 4 also shows that lyrics and videos had similar effects, that most studies were experimental, and that most of the literature focused on WEIRD populations. An important caveat is that Chapter 4 does not assess causality, but rather uniquely relationships, even if most studies were experimental. That is, we can only conclude that being exposed to music messages is related to holding music-consistent beliefs, but not that one influences the other. It could be the case, for example, that individuals select music that is in line with their preexisting beliefs or that such selection is reciprocal and self-reinforcing over time. Since most of the literature is experimental, there is limited evidence to assess these reciprocal developments between exposure to and selection of music content and concurrent belief processing.*

To address this shortcoming in the existing literature, Chapters 5 and 6 conducted among the first studies on the long-term temporal developments of music's effects on beliefs. From these chapters, *a final key conclusion is that contemporary Flemish adolescents do not develop a stronger performance-*

*oriented self-concept or effort-oriented success beliefs when exposed to neoliberal success narratives in music over a one-year period.* In particular, Chapters 5 and 6 employed two key narrative persuasion mechanisms typically used to theorize about the internalization of media narratives into audiences' beliefs: identification with media characters and transportation with media narratives. These chapters explored whether exposure to neoliberal success messages in music products brings to the development of more content-consistent beliefs when adolescents identify with their favorite artist (Chapter 5) or feel transported into the narratives of their favorite song (Chapter 6). While Chapter 4 found that exposure to music content is typically associated with content-consistent beliefs among music audiences more generally, Chapters 5 and 6 did not find such a relationship among Flemish adolescents or in relation to neoliberal success beliefs. This PhD dissertation provides three main arguments for the lack of such effects, related to theoretical limitations in the study of persuasion mechanisms in music, discrepancies between music content and audiences' socio-demographic characteristics, and diffused music consumption in the contemporary digital landscape.

First, in Chapters 5 and 6, theoretical approaches are used, namely cultivation theory, social cognitive theory, biographical resonance, identification, and transportation. These theories were primarily conceived in relation to televised content (Brown, 2015; Klimmt & Rieger, 2021; Potter, 2014) and further developed mostly in relation to social media (van Laer et al., 2019). While the adoption of these theories has typically allowed for the detection of media effects in relation to these media formats (Hermann et al., 2021; van Laer et al., 2019), the lack of effects in relation to music might highlight the specificity of this medium. Music might be crucially different from other media, such as television and social media, in relation to average consumption times (e.g., few minutes for a song, 1 or 2 hours for televised

content; Shehata et al., 2021), different types of consumed information (e.g., texts in lyrics, videos, and images on Instagram; Powell et al., 2019), or different levels of fragmentation across media (e.g., high song turnover on MSPs, low tv-series turnover; Bentley & Lottridge, 2019). As also suggested in Chapter 4, to better understand why and how music influences beliefs, we need theoretical approaches specifically developed for music content that can account for specificities in the contemporary music landscape. Some key aspects in this regard might be the involvement of cognitive and emotional processing in relation to different types of information (e.g., videos and texts) and the development of beliefs through fast consumption rates and high song turnover.

Second, such theoretical efforts should also account for similarities between audiences and the represented content. In Chapters 5 and 6, the lack of effects might be due to discrepancies between the characteristics of the narrative and of music personae displayed in music content and those present among audiences, especially in terms of socio-demographic characteristics and their related lived experiences. In particular, this PhD dissertation sampled a group of Flemish adolescents, mostly from Western Europe and higher socioeconomic backgrounds. These characteristics are in discordance with those typically featuring neoliberal success narratives in popular music (Barton & Turman, 2009). As shown in Chapter 2, for example, most narratives about success were displayed by Black and Brown male artists. Moreover, Chapter 3 shows that meritocratic narratives typically entail conditions of economic deprivation and social marginalization, in contrast to those typically experienced by the respondents in the sample. As such, it is possible that the adolescents sampled in this PhD dissertation do not find such narratives relevant and applicable to themselves because they experience different types of hardships or different life experiences than those represented in music content. Indeed, Chapter 5 found that Flemish adolescents typically

express low levels of identification with their favorite artist and that even those who identify more strongly do not internalize performance-oriented messages. Adolescents might perceive important discrepancies between themselves and their favorite artists, for example, because of living different experiences related to their socioeconomic, national, and racial background, but potentially also because of living a more “normal” life compared to the luxurious lives represented by music artists on their social media profiles (Shehzala et al., 2024). Similarly, Chapter 6 found that even if adolescents typically express high levels of narrative transportation with their favorite song and report experiencing hardships in their lives, transportation and perceived hardships do not moderate the effect of consumption of effort-oriented success messages on the formation of effort-oriented success beliefs. While experiences of hardships are an essential part of effort-oriented success narratives, as shown in Chapter 3, the differences between the represented content in music and adolescents’ lived experiences might be key to explaining such null results. Indeed, groups with a more privileged socioeconomic and racial-ethnic background might experience different hardships (e.g., mental ill-being related to performance pressure) than those who live and are represented by members of more marginalized groups (e.g., racial profiling or financial insecurity). This discrepancy might indicate that adolescents assign relative importance to effort-oriented narratives, perceived as entertaining and as part of mainstream music content, but not as relevant to address their own hardships and, consequently, not relevant enough to be internalized. By better matching the specific content displayed in music and the characteristics of its audiences, future theoretical efforts might be better equipped to detect music effects in relation to neoliberal success narratives.

Third, the lack of music effects can also be the product of diffused music consumption in the contemporary digital landscape. As previously introduced, the contemporary music industry is undergoing profound changes due to the

advent of digital platforms, such as MSPs and social media (IFPI, 2023a). These platforms facilitate music production, distribution, discovery, and consumption more than ever before (IFPI, 2023b; TikTok, 2024). Today's adolescents, in particular, are continuously exposed to new music content, and increasingly so through incidental exposure (i.e., through recommendation algorithms and curated playlists; Anderson et al., 2020) rather than intentional selection (IFPI, 2023b). This could happen, for example, when scrolling TikTok or when playing curated playlists to match moods for specific situations (e.g., consuming sad music when feeling sad; ter Bogt et al., 2021). Quick song turnover and the increasing importance of curated content (e.g., through curated playlists) in processes of music selection might fragment and limit the attention dedicated to each single consumed content, favoring instead functional consumption through mood-based playlists, such as for background or for mood regulation (Marshall, 2019; Siles et al., 2021). In other words, the increasingly heterogeneous and incidental exposure to music content on MSPs could make consumed messages less salient and persistent in individuals' cognition, and consequently more difficult to internalize. This is particularly relevant, especially considering that media consumption more generally is also becoming more frequent and heterogeneous (Bello & Garcia, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2021). In a media landscape in which multiple media sources and devices compete to obtain the largest share of users' attention (Madore et al., 2020), messages that are easier to process, such as involving shorter texts (e.g., Tweets vs. lyrics) or faster information processing systems (e.g., visual vs. textual processing), might facilitate the internalization of consumed content (Powell et al., 2019). The null results of Chapters 5 and 6 might therefore be indicative of a more general attention fragmentation that makes music content more difficult to retain because of competition with more and more heterogeneous music content and media content from other sources, such as social media and TV (Steppat et al., 2022). A key challenge for future efforts in this direction, invested in the detection of music effects in a

fragmented and crowded media environment, will be to better capture the different temporal dynamics through which music effects unfold. This will require the study of different temporalities and, specifically, a focus on short-term fluctuations between music consumption and belief formation (Jakubowski et al., 2023).

Overall, these results point to a need for more research about the role of music in the identity development of contemporary adolescents, potentially suggesting reconsidering the relative position of music in the broader media landscape. Research conducted before the advent of MSPs and social media has widely documented the importance of music for adolescents' identities (North & Hargreaves, 1999; Schäfer et al., 2013). Moved by this literature, Chapters 5 and 6 investigated the role that the consumption of music products (i.e., lyrics, videos, and social media posts of artists) plays in the formation of neoliberal success beliefs among adolescents, finding null effects. The lack of effects in this regard might not necessarily signal a decline in the importance of music for contemporary adolescents, although this might also be a plausible hypothesis in need of further testing. It might also suggest that in today's digitized societies, only certain groups of adolescents might be particularly likely to elaborate and internalize music lyrics, such as among dedicated fans or among audiences who engage with music content because of specific similarities with represented content. More generally, it highlights the current shortage of theories able to detect music effects in today's streaming era. This PhD dissertation encourages us to better account for the relative position of music within the broader media ecosystem in which adolescents are currently immersed, for instance, in terms of amount of daily consumption, song turnover, and type of consumed content (e.g., videos on YouTube or lyrics on Spotify).



## **Future Directions**

This PhD dissertation was motivated by two main research questions: 1) How and how frequently do mainstream music lyrics represent neoliberal success narratives? and 2) Do contemporary adolescents internalize such narratives through their favorite music products? From the key conclusions detailed above, it is possible to summarize that while mainstream music popular on MSPs provides a wide and variegated representation of neoliberal success narratives, contemporary Flemish adolescents do not internalize such messages over a one-year period through their favorite music. The lack of effects is surprising, considering that the surveyed adolescents show increasingly higher support for performance- and effort-oriented beliefs, and high levels of exposure to neoliberal success narratives. While it is possible that in a highly fragmented digital landscape, music does not have a relevant role in adolescents' developments as in the past, Chapter 4 still remarks that being exposed to music is related to the holding of music-consistent beliefs. These conclusions spark several challenges and opportunities for future research in this area. Beyond the suggestions previously offered in relation to these conclusions, this PhD dissertation provides several theoretical and methodological directions to investigate the potential socializing role of music in the contemporary media landscape, specifically in relation to neoliberal success narratives.

## ***Theoretical Developments***

Generally speaking, the field of communication science has been variously characterized as ambivalent (Donsbach, 2006), complex and highly contingent (Rains et al., 2018), and debated as a field in crisis (Lang, 2013; Perloff, 2013). Within this complex field, the media effects literature has remarked on the prevalence of small-to-medium effect sizes (Rains et al., 2018), also reported in Chapter 4, in relation to music effects on beliefs. These limitations have typically been faced with remarks about the need for better

theoretical and methodological tools to study media effects (Perloff, 2013; Pouwels et al., 2023), especially considering the evidence from qualitative literature typically supporting the claims made in quantitative studies (Pittman & Reich, 2016). As such, the first important reflection in relation to the lack of effects in this PhD dissertation is the need to further sharpen our theoretical and methodological toolkit to study music effects in a continuously changing and complex media landscape.

Theoretically, this research area might benefit from additional efforts to understand the conditions under which narrative persuasion mechanisms become applicable to specific groups of audiences and types of music content. To do so, Chapters 5 and 6 specifically draw from biographic resonance theory to better characterize the boundary conditions of typical narrative persuasion mechanisms, such as identification and transportation. Chapters 5 and 6 specifically focus on biographic resonance because processes of similarity, typical of biographic resonance theory, have been central to the theorization of narrative persuasion mechanisms (Chen et al., 2016; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Resonance has been frequently theorized in the field of mass communication to explain media effects, such as in cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1980), media framing (Baden & David, 2018), and, more recently, media entertainment (Klimmt & Rieger, 2021). Across these perspectives, resonance has been generally conceived as the development of media effects when audiences share similar socio-demographic characteristics and lived experiences as those represented in media content (Vorderer, 2021). For example, living in a neighborhood with high levels of violence makes media content that displays similar situations of neighborhood violence more accessible and relatable and, in turn, more easily internalized (Gerbner et al., 1980).

Despite its wide uses, the literature on resonance lacks a coherent framework for studying resonant experiences, as the concept has been

differently conceived and theorized across different theoretical traditions. For example, cultivation theory conceives of resonance as a double dose of meaning (i.e., matching real-world and mediated experiences; Potter, 2014) and as a cognitive process through which media content is internalized when matching the configuration of information already present in audiences' cognitive schemas (Shrum & Bischak, 2001). Instead, the media entertainment literature primarily studies resonance as an emotional process through which audiences internalize media messages through eudaimonic experiences that are generative of emotions, such as hope and gratitude (Klimmt & Rieger, 2021). Between these two perspectives, the media framing literature considers resonance to be a process involving both cognitive and emotional processing (Baden & David, 2018). To avoid a situation of a "fractured paradigm," as in the case of framing theory (Entman, 1993), additional theoretical efforts are needed to systematically conceptualize resonant experiences with media content and to provide a more solid ground for empirical research in this domain.

Such theoretical efforts are particularly relevant in relation to this PhD dissertation. As previously argued, the field of music effects is encouraged to develop theories specifically tailored to the study of music as a medium with its own peculiarities. Resonance is a promising candidate for such theoretical developments because it captures autobiographical memory retrieval, as shown in various neuroscientific studies (Falcon et al., 2022), but also because of its capacity to address several peculiarities of music consumption. By focusing on both cognitive and emotional processing, a new theory of resonance that synthesizes existing approaches could account specifically for the activation of both processing systems in music effects. While Chapter 4 shows that audiences engage with music through cognitive elaboration, existing research also remarks on the importance of emotional elaboration for audiences' engagement with music narratives (McAuley et al., 2021). Such

engagement has been further shown to be highly dependent upon the cultural similarities shared by audience members, as a similarity in cultural background (e.g., similar nationality) prompts similar information processing and understanding (Margulis et al., 2022). Moreover, by further developing a theory of resonance in relation to music, future theoretical efforts can specifically account for the fragmentation of music consumption typical of the contemporary music landscape. This can be done by specifying the aspects that are expected to resonate across each consumption, such as in relation to socioeconomic and racial-ethnic background characteristics (like the neoliberal success narratives examined in this PhD dissertation), but also potentially in relation to gender or emotional tone (e.g., sad music for sad listeners; ter Bogt et al., 2021). For example, even if audiences continuously select different music products across genres and artists, they might select similar content in relation to the socioeconomic, racial-ethnic, gender, or emotional characteristics presented in the consumed content. They might listen to 10 different songs from 10 different artists, who nevertheless share the same emotional tone or represented message as present among audiences. Future research in the field of music effects, and media effects more generally is therefore encouraged to better theorize resonant experiences with media content to shed light on the process through which specific groups of adolescents come to internalize specific music messages. This research is further recommended to develop measurement strategies that capture resonant experiences. Indeed, resonance has so far remained a theoretical concept, as the previous literature has only assumed that the elaboration of content-consistent beliefs derives from resonant experiences, but it has not yet developed measures able to capture such experiences. To do so, future research in this direction is therefore recommended to better understand how audiences conceive of resonance (e.g., through in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups) and to develop psychometric scales to define the dimensionality of this measure, such as in relation to its cognitive and

emotional subcomponents. By developing measurement strategies to capture resonance, such research will be able to empirically study the development of music effects through processes of similarity and cultural matching with media content.

Finally, future theoretical developments could focus on the study of the reciprocal relationships between music messages, audiences' beliefs, and mental health. Existing meta-analytical research has documented the beneficial effects of music consumption on audiences' mental health (Dingle et al., 2021). Such literature shows that listening to music tends to decrease anxiety (Panteleeva et al., 2016) and increase overall well-being (Weinberg & Joseph, 2017). Most of the literature has focused on the physiological functions of music as key mechanisms that influence mental health. In particular, music is frequently reported as a unique source of emotion regulation (Miranda et al., 2018) because of its sound qualities, such as tempo and emotional tones, which primarily paint the emotional landscape inhabited by music listeners (Dingle et al., 2021). For the same qualities, music has also been found to negatively impact the mental health of its listeners, for example, by increasing depressive symptoms among listeners of Goth music (a genre particularly prone to sadder tones; ter Bogt et al., 2020) or by increasing feelings of sadness when listening to sad music (ter Bogt et al., 2021). Overall, this literature reports that music influences the mental health of individuals in a mood-congruent way, namely, by aligning individuals' emotional landscapes with the emotions and moods present in the consumed content (ter Bogt et al., 2017). Different from this literature, the current PhD dissertation focused on the cognitive components of music narratives rather than on their emotional elaboration. This is an important distinction considering the burgeoning literature currently invested in understanding the role of media narratives in the mental health of adolescents, especially in relation to social media messages (Shen et al., 2015; Yeo, 2021). Unlike other media sources,

such as social media or television (Dahlstrom et al., 2017), we currently lack research about the role of music narratives in the mental health of listeners. This research is particularly cogent, as narratives are important drivers of audiences' mental health (Shen et al., 2015) and arguably so in relation to neoliberal definitions of success. As documented in the introduction of this PhD dissertation, contemporary adolescents are experiencing a mental health crisis that is potentially rooted in neoliberal definitions of success, responsible for the dismantling of the social fabric (e.g., social segregation; Mijs, 2023) and for providing individualistic narratives that define deservingness, primarily focusing on individual effort and performance (Lamont, 2019; 2023). Simultaneously, other streams of literature point to the potential benefits that supporting neoliberal success narratives, such as in relation to grit and meritocracy, might have for adolescents' self-esteem and sense of agency (Passmore et al., 2018). By developing interdisciplinary approaches that explicitly account for music effects across specific audience groups, future research could better explain the process through which narratives, such as those about neoliberal success, are internalized and can subsequently affect the mental health of their audiences.

### ***Methodological Developments***

Methodologically, the study of music effects, especially in relation to resonant experiences, might benefit from a more precise measurement of temporal developments in music effects. The current PhD dissertation conducted two of the first long-term longitudinal studies to capture music effects on audiences' beliefs. This is an important contribution, as Chapter 4 highlights the prevalence of experimental research and the shortage of longitudinal studies to detect music effects, particularly in relation to changes in belief systems. Indeed, Chapters 4, 5, and 6 specifically build upon a connectionist definition of beliefs (Lakoff, 2012). Accordingly, beliefs are conceived as cognitive networks of interconnected information that depend

upon the accessibility and applicability of related information (Conrey & Smith, 2007). For such networks to change, existing literature in cognitive psychology and communication science has shown that information must be repeatedly and intensely encoded before old connections can be rearticulated into newer ones (Song & Ewoldsen, 2015). In other words, beliefs generally take time to change (Shehata et al., 2021). From this perspective, the short-term music effects typically detected in experimental research might hint at priming effects, where certain areas of such belief systems are made more salient and therefore more easily accessible for the expression of beliefs (Price & Tewksbury, 1997). However, these short-term experiments cannot guarantee that, in the long run, the same individual will express similar beliefs as those expressed immediately after the experimental exposure to music content. This might be particularly relevant in an age of fast consumption and fast music turnover in which MSPs and social media continuously introduce new songs and new artists into users' feeds that require shorter-term studies about the temporal developments of beliefs through music (Bello & Garcia, 2021). The lack of effects in the two longitudinal studies of this PhD dissertation therefore poses important challenges and opportunities for future research, which could benefit from more longitudinal studies both in the short term (e.g., daily diary studies) and in the long term (e.g., longitudinal surveys and repeated experiments).

Finally, such survey research is further recommended to improve the measurement of content and content exposure to match the measurement validity of typical experimental studies (Parry et al., 2021). To measure music consumption, surveys typically rely on self-reported measures (Timmerman et al., 2008), which are known to suffer from memory biases and inaccuracies (Parry et al., 2021). From this perspective, future studies could draw on recent legal (e.g., GDPR, DSA) and methodological (e.g., data donation of log-data) advancements in the treatment of personal digital traces to develop more

linkage designs, linking survey responses with more time-sensitive measures of content exposure. This would offer invaluable opportunities to better match the actual music consumed around the time of survey completion with measures related to various outcomes of interest, such as beliefs and mental health (van Driel et al., 2022). The availability of new computational methodologies, such as concept movers' distance (i.e., an automatic method to detect the closeness of texts to a focal concept of interest; Stoltz & Taylor, 2019) or the inferential network approach developed in Chapter 3, will be key for the analysis of large amounts of data, such as those garnered through the collection of log-data within intense longitudinal designs (e.g., daily diary studies). Computational methods will therefore be key tools for the future study of music effects that aim to move beyond coarse measures of macrogenres and of temporal developments toward finer-grained measures of music content and music exposure (Pouwels et al., 2023).

## **Overall Conclusion**

This PhD dissertation investigated the presence and prevalence of neoliberal success narratives in mainstream music products and their potential internalization into adolescents' beliefs. Overall, the six chapters of this PhD dissertation lead to four key conclusions. First, neoliberal success beliefs increased among Flemish adolescents over a one-year period. While the surveyed adolescents reported high and stable levels of performance-oriented self-concepts, they also showed balanced but increasingly individualistic effort-oriented success beliefs. This could be indicative of typical developments toward adulthood but also of a more general individualization process characterizing Western societies, and specifically, Flanders. Second, music tastes are patterned by gender differences and genre omnivorousness on MSPs. While the majority of respondents belong to a mainstream profile, two profiles show key differences in their gender and cultural composition, and in their engagement with MSPs. Contemporary Flemish girls in Profile 1



display a refined and curated involvement with music on MSPs, while Flemish boys in Profile 2 tend to adopt a practical and cursory engagement with such platforms. Despite these differences, the three profiles share an omnivore consumption indicative of taste fragmentation on MSPs, especially in relation to macrogenres such as pop and rap. Third, mainstream music is rife with neoliberal success narratives, and increasingly so. Music that is popular on MSPs frequently displays signs of materialism, utilitarianism, power, and meritocracy (around 24% between 2016 and 2019), which are even more present among the favorite music of Flemish adolescents (between 42% and 30% between 2021 and 2022). Fourth, music generally relates to audiences' beliefs, but did not promote the internalization of neoliberal success narratives among Flemish adolescents from more privileged backgrounds over a one-year period. That is, while contemporary adolescents are frequently surrounded by and increasingly supportive of neoliberal success narratives, typical processes of narrative persuasion do not explain the internalization of such narratives into adolescents' belief systems over a one-year period.

Overall, this PhD dissertation delves into the MainStreaming of Success, namely, the popularization of neoliberal success narratives through MSPs and the differential internalization (or lack thereof) of such narratives by adolescent music audiences. It shows that neoliberal success narratives are widely and variedly present on MSPs and increasingly upheld by Flemish adolescents from more privileged backgrounds. Yet, the exposure to such narratives in music products does not lead to their internalization into adolescents' belief systems. These results prompt considering the fragmentation of music consumption and the segmentation of music audiences as central aspects of the contemporary music industry, governed by MSPs and social media platforms. They further highlight the need to develop music-specific theoretical and methodological approaches that are better equipped to capture temporal and selection effects in a continuously changing music

landscape. This PhD dissertation sets an agenda for future research on music effects by highlighting the role of MSPs as key agents in the MainStreaming of Success and by suggesting their potential role in processes of cultural fragmentation. While broadening the access to music, the ubiquity of MSPs in our everyday lives might have long-lasting consequences for the capacity of music to remain a key socializing medium for contemporary and future generations of youth.

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