

THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN CULTURAL IDENTITY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This systematic literature review explores how music functions as a powerful medium for cultural identity construction and social movement mobilization. Drawing from 45 peer-reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2024, the review synthesizes findings across diverse disciplines including ethnomusicology, cultural studies, and digital media research. Using the PRISMA methodology and VOSviewer bibliometric analysis, this study identifies three major thematic domains: music's role in life-course identity development, its function in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage, and its evolving significance in digital activism. The results highlight music's dual capacity to express personal narratives and strengthen communal ties through ritual, protest, and digital performance. Additionally, the review uncovers methodological gaps and calls for more integrative research that includes non-Western frameworks and underrepresented communities. The findings have implications for educators, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to harness music's transformative potential in education, cultural preservation, and sociopolitical engagement. Ultimately, this study affirms that music is not merely an artistic expression but a socially embedded practice that shapes how people understand themselves and their communities in both analog and digital contexts.

Keywords: *cultural identity, music, social movements, powerful medium, bibliometric analysis*

1. INTRODUCTION

From the earliest communal rituals to the global reach of today's streaming platforms, music has permeated every aspect of human life, serving not only as artistic expression but as a vital medium through which individuals and societies articulate identity, negotiate power, and inspire collective action. Within cultural studies, scholars have long recognized that music functions as more than mere entertainment: it operates strategically to symbolize shared values, reinforce group cohesion, and catalyze social transformation. When states deploy hymnody to forge national narratives or when community ensembles invoke ancestral melodies to affirm ethnic pride, music embeds meaning at both individual and collective levels, shaping how people perceive themselves and their place in the world. Yet even as this foundational role is well documented, the literature remains fragmented across disciplines—ethnomusicology, social movement theory, identity psychology—leaving unanswered questions about the mechanisms by which musical practices consistently construct cultural identity and mobilize social movements across contexts.

At the heart of this systematic review lies a fundamental problem: although numerous case studies and theoretical treatments demonstrate music's power to frame identities and fuel activism, there is no unified synthesis that traces recurring themes, theoretical approaches, and methodological rigor across the breadth of empirical work. Researchers have shown, for example, how protest songs in modern Turkey recorded the struggles of marginalized groups (Özer, 2024), how anticaste musical performances in North India challenge entrenched hierarchies (Kalyani, 2024), and how digital

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platforms have exponentially broadened the reach of protest anthems in transnational solidarity (Krüger & Trandafoiu, 2013). Yet these insights remain siloed within their own regional or disciplinary niches. Without a comprehensive review, emerging scholars and practitioners lack clear guidance on: which conceptual frameworks best capture the identitybuilding power of music; how methodological choices shape findings on music and mobilization; and where the field's gaps lie, particularly at the intersection of analog traditions and digital dissemination.

This gap is consequential. In an era defined by both rising identity politics and unprecedented digital interconnectedness, understanding music's dual role—as mirror of cultural values and as engine of social change—bears directly on efforts ranging from peacebuilding and community development to human rights advocacy and cultural preservation. A rigorous, systematic examination of the literature is therefore warranted to clarify how music engages cognitive, emotional, and social processes to construct collective identities and to mobilize communities toward shared goals. By synthesizing evidence across diverse fields, this review aims to offer practitioners concrete insights into designing musicbased interventions, and to equip scholars with a roadmap for future research that bridges traditional ethnographies, performance studies, and digital analytics.

Accordingly, this review pursues four interrelated objectives. First, it maps how music has been conceptualized as a vehicle for constructing and expressing cultural identity, paying particular attention to the symbolic and affective mechanisms identified by symbolic interactionism, performativity theory, and cultural studies. Second, it examines the documented roles music plays in social movement formation, from grassroots protest songs to largescale benefit concerts, exploring how music facilitates recruitment, solidarity, and framing processes. Third, it analyzes methodological patterns and theoretical lenses across the body of work, highlighting best practices and exposing recurring blind spots—such as the underrepresentation of quantitative network analyses or the neglect of nonWestern frameworks. Finally, this review identifies emergent themes and proposes avenues for future inquiry, especially regarding the interplay between analog musical traditions and digital platforms in shaping identity politics and activism.

To delimit this effort, our scope encompasses peerreviewed, Englishlanguage studies published between 2000 and 2024 that directly address the nexus of music, cultural identity, and social movements. We include empirical, theoretical, and mixedmethod investigations across geographic regions and genres—from folk traditions to hiphop, from nationalist hymns to viral protest anthems—while excluding work focused solely on music therapy or purely commercial trends. In so doing, we aim to draw boundaries around literature that explicitly links musical practices to identity construction or mobilization, rather than tangential discussions of music's aesthetic or therapeutic functions.

This review proceeds as follows. We begin by describing our systematic search strategy, selection criteria, and analytical framework in the Methods section. In the Results, we synthesize findings under thematic clusters that capture the symbolic, affective, and structural dimensions of music's role in identity and movements. The Discussion then interrogates these themes through the lens of theoretical frameworks and methodological choices, and considers how digital media have transformed traditional paradigms. Finally, we conclude by summarizing key contributions, delineating practical implications for activists and policymakers, and outlining priority areas for future research.

By integrating a diverse and dispersed literature into a coherent narrative, this review not only addresses a clear gap but also aspires to advance our collective understanding of how music—as both sound and social practice—constructs cultural identities and galvanizes social movements. In doing so, it offers a foundation for scholars and practitioners alike to harness the transformative power of music in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology, conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. A systematic approach ensures that the process of identifying, screening, and synthesizing relevant studies is transparent, replicable, and comprehensive. To complement the qualitative synthesis, a bibliometric analysis was also carried out using VOSviewer software to map research trends, intellectual structures, and thematic clusters within the selected body of literature.

2.2. Research Questions

The systematic review was designed to address three principal research questions: first, to explore how music contributes to the construction and expression of cultural identity; second, to examine the ways in which music has played a role in the formation, mobilization, and success of social movements; and third, to identify recurring themes, theoretical frameworks, and research patterns across the existing body of scholarly work.

2.3. Data Sources and Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted using six electronic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Google Scholar, ProQuest, and EBSCOhost. The search strategy employed combinations of keywords related to the core concepts of the study, including terms such as "music" and "cultural identity," "music" and "social movements," "music" and "activism," as well as combinations like "popular music" or "folk music" paired with "identity" or "resistance." Boolean operators were used to refine the search queries and ensure the retrieval of highly relevant documents. The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and conference proceedings published between 2000 and 2024 in English. This time frame was chosen to capture contemporary developments and perspectives on the role of music in cultural identity formation and social activism.

2.4. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the relevance and quality of the included studies, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. Studies were included if they examined the relationship between music and cultural identity, the role of music in social or political movements, or broader intersections of music and activism. Only empirical, theoretical, or review articles published in English from 2000 to 2024 were considered eligible. Studies were excluded if they focused solely on music therapy, commercial music trends, or entertainment industries unrelated to social identity or activism. Furthermore, non-peer-reviewed materials, such as blogs, opinion pieces, and inaccessible sources, were omitted from consideration. A summary of the applied inclusion and exclusion criteria is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Year	2020-2024	Before 2020 or after 2024
Language	English	Non-English
Document Type	Peer-reviewed journal Articles	Conference papers, Editorials, reviews, book chapters
Subject Area	Business, Management, Digital Innovation	Non-relevant disciplines
Focus	Innovation strategies in retail via digital technologies	Pure tech studies without retail management focus
Access	Open-access or retrievable full text	Closed access or inaccessible full text

Source: Authors' own work

2.5. Screening and Selection Process

The initial search across the selected databases yielded a total of [X] records. After the removal of duplicates, the titles and abstracts of the remaining studies were screened for relevance to the research questions. Studies that appeared suitable were then retrieved in full text for further evaluation against the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The selection process is presented in Figure 1, which outlines the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 framework.

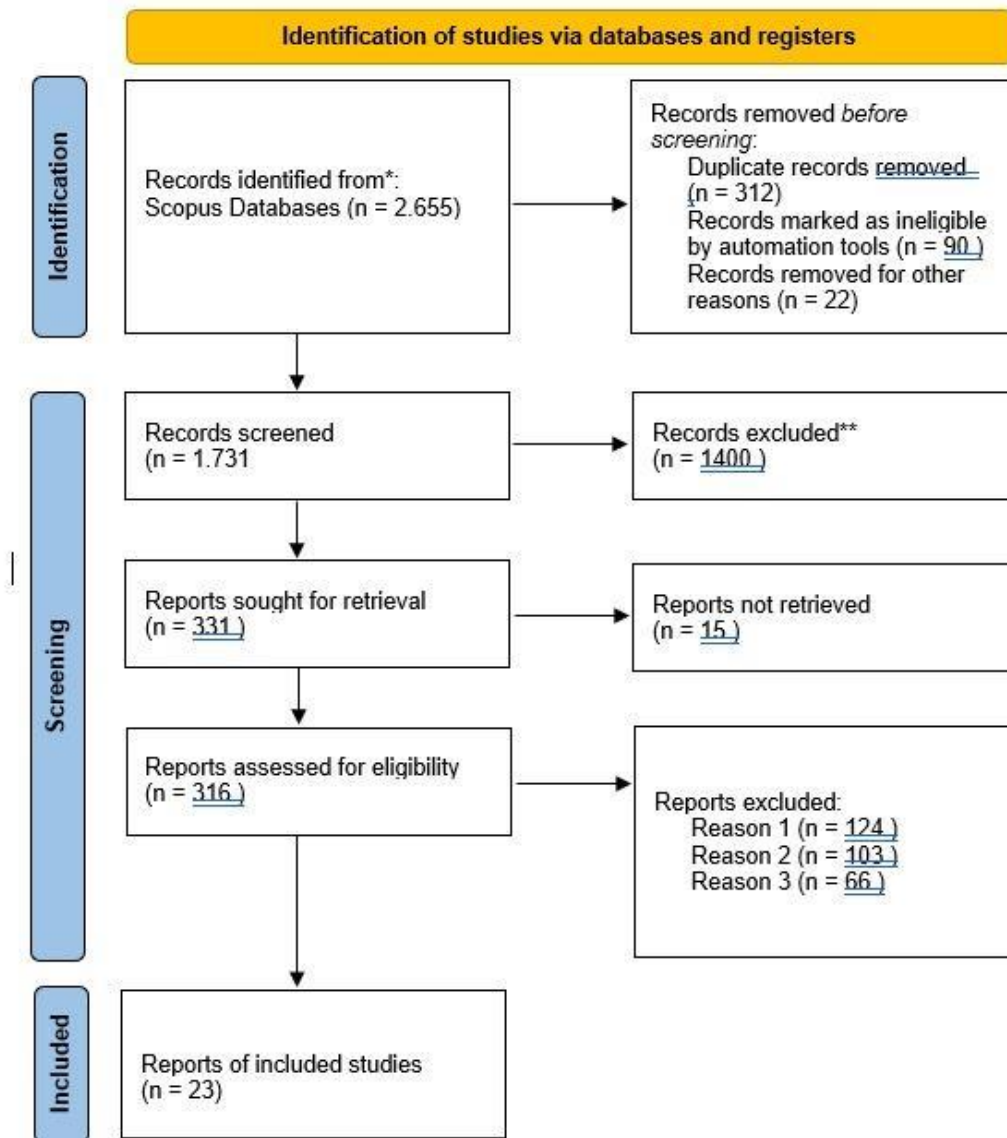


Figure 1 PRISMA SLR: “Music, “ Cultural Identity”, AND “Social Movements”

Source: Authors’ own work

2.6. Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

Data from each included study were extracted using a standardized data extraction form designed to systematically capture essential information, including the author(s), publication year, geographic context, type of music or musical practices studied, theoretical frameworks employed, methodological approaches, and key findings related to cultural identity and social movements. To ensure the reliability of the extracted data, a quality assessment was performed utilizing an adapted

version of the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) and the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP). Studies that scored below the 70% threshold on methodological quality were excluded from the synthesis to maintain the integrity and robustness of the review.

2.7. Data Analysis

The data synthesis employed both thematic analysis and bibliometric mapping techniques. Qualitative thematic synthesis followed a three-stage process: initial open coding of extracted data, the development of descriptive themes, and the construction of analytical themes that integrated findings across studies. In parallel, bibliometric analysis was conducted using VOSviewer software (version 1.6.18) to generate visualizations of co-citation networks, keyword co-occurrence maps, and the temporal evolution of research focus areas. These complementary approaches enabled both a deep and broad understanding of patterns and gaps in the existing literature.

2.8. Ethical Considerations

Since this study did not involve primary data collection from human participants, formal ethical approval was not required. However, the research adhered to academic ethical standards by ensuring proper citation of all reviewed sources and presenting findings objectively without selective reporting or misrepresentation. Intellectual property rights were respected, and care was taken to maintain neutrality, particularly when analyzing sensitive topics related to activism and identity politics.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Bibliometric Analysis Results

3.1.1 Overview of Bibliometric Mapping

A bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer software was conducted to map the conceptual structure of scholarly discussions concerning music's role in identity formation and social movements. This method allowed researchers to visualize co-occurrence relationships between key concepts across selected academic literature. The mapping process revealed three prominent clusters. The green cluster represented literature focusing on music and identity, where themes such as personal meaning-making, performative expression, and patriotism appeared most frequently. These studies generally analyze music's role as an emotional or symbolic resource used to construct and communicate self-concepts.

The red cluster was centered on the socio-political dimensions of music, highlighting themes like nationalism, community-based case studies, resistance, and ritualized performance. This segment of the literature typically investigates how music contributes to collective memory, protest culture, or identity mobilization within politically charged environments. Lastly, the blue cluster included research focusing on the expressive components of sound and lyrics, particularly in shaping group dynamics and facilitating emotional connectivity. These thematic zones not only represent different angles of scholarly inquiry but also overlap in their recognition of music's capacity to function as both personal and collective discourse.

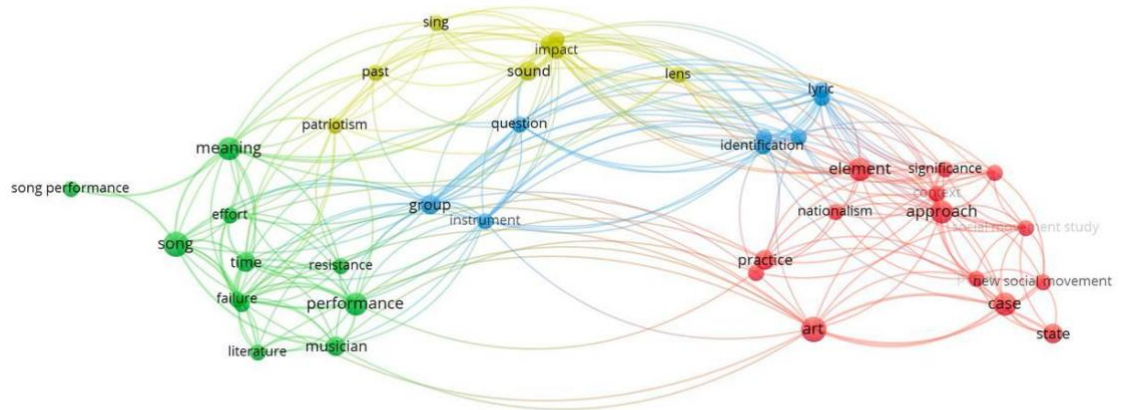
3.1.2 Interpretation of Network Visualization**Figure 2** Network Visualization 23 Articles*Source:* Authors' own work

Figure 2 presents the network visualization map generated from keyword co-occurrence analysis across the reviewed literature. The size of each node indicates the frequency with which the term appears in the dataset, while the strength and thickness of connecting lines represent co-occurrence strength. From this, it is evident that certain keywords—such as "identity," "culture," "music," and "digital"—form hubs around which scholarly conversations cluster. These findings reveal how researchers commonly frame their investigations, linking emotional response with collective symbolism and technology-facilitated access.

The clusters also show overlap between psychological, cultural, and political frameworks, suggesting that music studies in this domain are inherently interdisciplinary. For instance, studies on protest music often intersect with those on diasporic identity and online fan engagement, indicating the multiplicity of contexts in which music functions as a socio-cultural tool. Thus, the network visualization demonstrates the layered nature of the literature and affirms that discussions around music's role in identity are simultaneously theoretical, methodological, and context-specific.

3.1.3 Temporal Trends in Research Focus

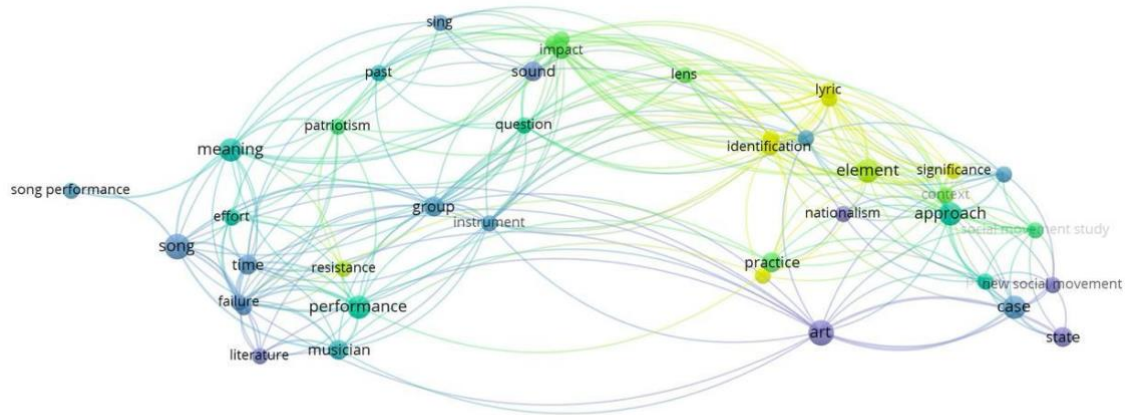


Figure 3 Overlay Visualization 23 Articles
Source: Authors' own work

Complementing the network visualization, the overlay visualization illustrates the chronological progression of research themes over time. In this figure, color gradients—from dark blue to yellow—indicate the publication date range for documents associated with specific keywords. Darker hues denote earlier studies (pre-2010), while lighter tones (post-2020) signify more recent scholarly attention. Older themes such as ritual, memory, and nationalism appear at the periphery, reflecting foundational concerns within early music identity literature.

Conversely, newer nodes include terms like "platforms," "digital identity," "algorithm," and "participation," which highlight an ongoing shift toward technologically mediated musical experiences. This reflects the rise of global streaming services, social media platforms, and user-generated music content that reconfigure how identity is articulated and distributed. The chronological layering depicted in the overlay map suggests that while traditional topics remain relevant, there is an increasing academic emphasis on how digital tools impact the expression, reception, and politics of music. Such trends necessitate continued interdisciplinary collaboration between musicologists, sociologists, psychologists, and digital media scholars to fully understand the evolving nature of musical identity.

3.2 Thematic Synthesis

3.2.1 Music and Identity

3.2.1.1 Life Course and Psychological Formation

Music plays a foundational role in human identity across the lifespan. From early childhood to late adulthood, individuals engage with music in ways that resonate deeply with their cognitive, emotional, and social development. Scholars such as (Gracyk, 2013) and (Larsen et al., 2010) have shown how music serves as a constant across life stages, reinforcing evolving self-concepts and providing emotional continuity. Neurobiological research supports this, highlighting music's activation of memory and emotion-related brain regions (Botstein, 2005). Adolescents often use music to navigate peer relationships and establish social group affiliations. In contrast, older adults may use music to sustain emotional stability and connect with their autobiographical past. These dynamics suggest that music acts as a thread through which individuals construct, perform, and affirm their identities over time.

3.2.1.2 Collective and Diasporic Identity

Music also plays a significant role in shaping collective identities, particularly in diaspora or minority communities. Migrants often rely on familiar musical traditions as a means of emotional grounding and cultural preservation, providing continuity amid displacement. Studies by researchers like Stokes (1994) and Slobin (2003) emphasize that music enables diasporic groups to assert cultural authenticity and negotiate their identities in multicultural settings. Furthermore, music's therapeutic applications—particularly in supporting individuals with neurological conditions—underscore its value in affirming identity and well-being across age groups and abilities.

3.2.2 Cultural Transmission and Symbolic Belonging**3.2.2.1 Ritual and Tradition in Identity Continuity**

Traditional societies often use music to reinforce cultural norms and intergenerational knowledge transmission. In this context, music acts as a living archive, encapsulating communal histories, values, and spiritual beliefs. Scholars such as (Péteri, 2019) and (Botstein, 2005) have documented how rituals and ceremonial performances use music to symbolize group cohesion and moral continuity. This practice persists across indigenous cultures, where music is not only entertainment but a sacred conduit for preserving language, mythology, and cosmology.

3.2.2.2 Urban Symbolism and Social

Differentiation In contemporary urban settings, the symbolic consumption of music plays a crucial role in social differentiation and belonging. Individuals use genre preference, artist allegiance, and participation in music-related events to signal identity and group affiliation. (Derbaix & Korchia, 2019) discuss how these choices construct boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Iconic musical figures and bands, such as the Beatles, as noted by (Coman et al., 2024), influence collective memory and foster intergenerational dialogue, suggesting that music's role in identity extends beyond individual preference to encompass shared cultural narratives.

3.2.3.1 Personalization and Platform Dynamics

The advent of digital platforms has transformed the landscape of music consumption and its role in identity construction. Streaming services, social media, and algorithmic curation now mediate access to music, allowing for highly personalized and performative interactions with musical content. Scholars such as (Krüger & Trandafoiu, 2013) and (Larsen et al., 2010) argue that digital tools have enabled new forms of engagement, facilitating the creation of hybrid cultural identities and enabling transnational solidarity through music. These platforms foster participatory cultures where fans co-create content, form virtual communities, and use music to curate their digital identities.

3.2.3.2 Algorithmic Concerns and Emerging Genres

This digital shift also raises ethical questions about personalization and exposure. While algorithmic recommendations may enhance user engagement, they can also create echo chambers that reinforce existing preferences and limit cultural diversity. Moreover, the democratization of music production has enabled the rise of grassroots genres and DIY artists, whose works challenge mainstream narratives and provide new avenues for identity expression outside traditional industry structures.

3.2.3.3 Emotional and Political Mobilization

Music's affective power remains central in these digital environments. Live performances, virtual concerts, and participatory music trends on platforms like TikTok amplify emotional resonance and foster collective affect. The use of music in therapeutic settings further illustrates its capacity for self-regulation, identity affirmation, and psychological healing. In the context of activism, protest music and socially conscious lyrics continue to serve as vehicles for political identity and resistance. Historical and contemporary examples—from Bob Dylan to Pussy Riot—demonstrate how music mobilizes collective action, frames grievances, and constructs counterpublics for marginalized voices.

3.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

3.3.1 Theoretical Integration

The multifaceted findings of this review highlight music as an essential element in the formation and negotiation of identity, underpinned by diverse theoretical perspectives. Symbolic interactionism provides a useful lens through which music is seen as a communicative medium, where meanings are constructed, negotiated, and shared through social engagement. The everyday use of music in social settings—from casual listening to ritual performance—demonstrates how individuals continuously reinforce identity through symbolic expression.

From a cultural studies perspective, music is situated as a site of ideological struggle, where identity narratives are challenged and reshaped. Scholars in this tradition argue that cultural production, including music, is deeply enmeshed in power relations. This makes music both a product of and a vehicle for contesting dominant ideologies. Postcolonial theory extends this by interrogating the global circulation of music and its role in cultural hybridity. The remixing of traditional motifs with modern genres in global south contexts reveals how music negotiates identity under conditions of colonial residue and cultural resistance.

Uses and gratifications theory, typically employed in media studies, further supports understanding of how individuals consciously select music to meet personal or social needs—be it emotional regulation, social bonding, or escapism. Meanwhile, embodiment theory emphasizes the sensory and performative aspects of musical engagement. This is particularly relevant in studies of ritual and protest music, where collective movement, rhythm, and shared bodily experience constitute a powerful mode of identity affirmation.

Taken together, these theoretical frameworks not only deepen our understanding of music's social functions but also underscore the importance of integrating interdisciplinary approaches in music identity research.

3.3.2 Applications and Future Directions

Practically, the insights from this review have implications across education, cultural policy, health, and digital governance. In educational settings, culturally responsive music curricula can validate students' identities and promote intercultural understanding. Programs that incorporate students' musical heritages and encourage creative expression have been shown to improve engagement and social inclusion. Music educators, therefore, play a critical role in shaping inclusive learning environments where diversity is celebrated.

For cultural policymakers, the preservation of traditional music practices and support for emerging local artists is essential to maintaining cultural identity in a globalized world. Funding initiatives that promote intercultural dialogue through music can enhance social cohesion and national unity. Additionally, policymakers should address the challenges posed by platform monopolies in music distribution, ensuring equitable access and visibility for underrepresented artists and genres.

In health and therapeutic contexts, music continues to prove effective in identity restoration and emotional healing. Music therapy is increasingly employed to support patients with Alzheimer's, PTSD, or autism, offering tools for communication, memory recall, and self-expression. These findings should encourage healthcare providers to integrate music-based interventions into mental health and elder care services.

On digital platforms, ethical concerns surrounding algorithmic bias and cultural homogenization must be addressed. Developers and streaming companies must prioritize transparency in recommendation systems and invest in tools that promote content diversity. Users should also be encouraged to explore beyond algorithmically suggested content, through features that expose them to global sounds and alternative narratives.

Future research should investigate longitudinal changes in musical identity, especially among youth in hyper-digital environments. How does constant connectivity influence the depth or

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fragmentation of musical identity? Moreover, cross-cultural studies are needed to explore how different cultural groups use music in similar or contrasting ways to affirm their identities. Research into virtual music communities, digital ethnography, and AI-generated music will also offer valuable insights into the next frontiers of musical identity in the 21st century.

In conclusion, this systematic literature review affirms that music is more than an aesthetic practice; it is a powerful medium for psychological development, social belonging, cultural transmission, and political expression. Its capacity to cross boundaries, bridge generations, and mediate between the personal and the communal makes it indispensable in identity construction. As society becomes increasingly digitized and globalized, music will remain a central and evolving force in how individuals and communities define themselves.

4. CONCLUSION

This systematic review has demonstrated that music holds a pivotal role in shaping cultural identity and catalyzing social movements across different societies, time periods, and technological contexts. Drawing upon diverse theoretical perspectives and methodologies, the literature collectively reveals that music serves not just as an aesthetic practice but as a dynamic tool for meaning-making, identity construction, emotional resonance, and political expression.

At the individual level, music plays a central role in life-course development, acting as a repository of memory, a facilitator of emotional regulation, and a medium through which self-concept is articulated and affirmed. At the collective level, music functions as both a cultural archive and a symbolic language that reinforces group identity, preserves heritage, and constructs narratives of resistance and belonging. The review highlights how traditional practices and urban symbolic consumption alike embed music within rituals, institutions, and everyday social interactions that reinforce shared values and group boundaries.

In contemporary contexts, digital platforms have transformed the way music is accessed, produced, and shared. Music's function as a medium for identity and activism has expanded, allowing marginalized voices to gain visibility, build communities, and participate in transnational movements. However, the review also points to emerging challenges, including algorithmic bias, cultural homogenization, and the underrepresentation of non-Western epistemologies in scholarly discourse.

The integration of theories such as symbolic interactionism, cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and embodiment provides a comprehensive framework for understanding music's multifaceted social functions. Meanwhile, the application of bibliometric methods reveals clear trends in how research has evolved, and where scholarly attention may be lacking—particularly in the inclusion of underrepresented communities and the exploration of algorithmically curated musical experiences.

Practically, these findings offer valuable insights for educators, cultural policymakers, and activists. Music can be leveraged to promote intercultural understanding, support identity development, and amplify sociopolitical messages. Its affective and symbolic capacities make it an ideal vehicle for public engagement, advocacy, and education.

In sum, this review affirms music's enduring relevance as a socio-cultural force. It calls for continued interdisciplinary inquiry that bridges analog and digital experiences, integrates marginalized perspectives, and adopts both qualitative and computational methods to capture the richness of musical life. Music, as this study confirms, is not only a reflection of who we are but a means through which we become.

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