Negotiating Cultural Identity: Experiences of Musicians with Migration Backgrounds in The Netherlands

Music, like identity, is both performance and story, describes the social in the individual and the individual in the social, the mind in the body and the body in the mind; identity, like music, is a matter of both ethics and aesthetics.

– Frith, 1996, p.109.

Student: Bianca Oliveira Dantas Cassali
Student ID: 1277448
Supervisor: Dr. Meghann Ormond
Date: March/2025
MSc Program: Tourism, Society and Environment
Chair Group: Cultural Geography

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Abstract

Mobile populations have become a defining and permanent feature of contemporary societies (Chun, 2012). In the Netherlands, the reception of newcomers, often associated with forced migration, has contrasted with the country's reputation for tolerance and multiculturalism (Rath, 2009). The rise of populist movements has underscored widespread resistance to immigration and ethnic diversity, complicating integration efforts. In this study, I explore how musicians with migrant backgrounds in the Netherlands use music to negotiate and express cultural identity, bridge cultural divides, and foster a sense of belonging in a society that is both increasingly globalized and fragmented. Music serves as a means of expression and a bridge between past and present cultures, enabling individuals to connect with their heritage while navigating new cultural landscapes (Baily & Collyer, 2006). To gather diverse narratives and perspectives, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews, observations, and music elicitation with 12 musicians from various migrant backgrounds. The results show that, for the participants in this study, music is not merely a tool for adaptation but a fundamental aspect of their existence. Having engaged with it from an early age, they view music as transcending functional or instrumental definitions. It operates as a form of identity, expression, heritage, connection, and performance, an essential medium through which they articulate and affirm their place in the world.

Summary

1. Introduction

Growing up in a middle-class family in Brazil, I often heard from older family members about how life in the global North is better and how everything seems to work perfectly there. As a result, I grew up dreaming of one day visiting and experiencing that way of life for myself. Although most of my family has never left Brazil, the stories of those who have emigrated have always fueled my imagination. Now, my imagination aligns with my reality, as I live in the Netherlands. In the process of adapting to a new culture, I often find myself reevaluating my behaviors, how I dress, or how I move my hands. I constantly observe others to learn how to fit in and avoid attracting strange looks. I catch myself negotiating and reinterpreting my perception of self. For much of my life, I identified as a Brazilian white woman, not Latina, but simply Brazilian. Now, I often describe myself as Latina. Living in Europe has made me recognize the many traits I share with those from neighboring Latin American countries, such as food, weather, social realities, and music, more than with most Europeans. Those shared meanings are stronger than the difference in vocabulary between us. Life in the Netherlands has led me to downplay certain aspects of myself, while also reinforcing some habits, such as listening to Brazilian music, as a way to reconnect with myself: my memories and culture.

According to Hall (1997), culture relies on shared meanings, facilitated by our common access to language. Language encompassing the use of signs and symbols - such as sounds, written text, digital images, musical notes, or even physical objects - to convey our thoughts, ideas, and emotions to others. Hall (1997) emphasizes that in any culture, there is always a wide range of meanings surrounding any topic, as well as multiple ways of interpreting or representing it. Music is one of the most accessible ways to connect to a culture, as “musical pieces, like performers, are saturated with contextual, social memory” (Trehub et al., 2015, p.01). Music, as a form of language and symbolic meaning, is facilitated and at the same time shaped by culture rather than being inherent. It is built from practices, ideas, and interpretations that are rooted in specific social interactions and structures (Cross, 2001).

Music can serve as a bridge to the past, evoking memories of one’s homeland, and through migration and the diverse cultural elements it brings - such as music, art, and food - the encounter of different backgrounds often inspires cultural evolution and enrichment (Baily & Collyer, 2006). This process can lead to the emergence of new musical forms that both reflect the challenges immigrants face and support them in adapting to life in their new home, enabling them to express and shape evolving identities (Baily & Collyer, 2006). As Titon (1992: 2) says, “every human society has music. Although music is universal, its meaning is not”.

In this study, I focus on musicians with migration backgrounds, recognizing that for them, music is not merely an interest but an integral part of their identity. Music serves as a means of expression and a bridge between past and present cultures, enabling individuals to connect with their heritage while navigating new cultural landscapes (Baily & Collyer, 2006). It also provides a medium to explore and shape new perspectives listening through different “music-cultures” and genres. For musicians, this connection runs even deeper, as the process of music-making allows them to embed their voices, thoughts, and personal stories directly into their art. In Back’s (2024) study with sociologist-musicians, the author described how making music helped a participant to navigate and process challenges he found both difficult and enlightening. This highlights how the act of music-making can provide a lens into internal processes, such as constructing and deconstructing identity within a new social environment.

Music often holds a profound emotional connection to the private self, functioning as a cultural practice deeply intertwined with personal and subjective experiences (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). At the same time, Hesmondhalgh (2013) emphasizes that music also serves as a foundation for shared, collective moments - whether through live performances or the energetic dancing of social gatherings. Thus, music is both an individual and a communal process, offering valuable insights into the identities of musicians.

Back (2024: 450) highlights that “music is a resource to understand what culture is but also to point to utopian possibilities of what it might become.” By "utopian", he refers to the aspirations and hopes for society. Building on this perspective, I argue that musicians with migration backgrounds actively shape and expand these cultural possibilities and influences through their music-making. According to Golemo (2020), engaging with music within a community fosters social cohesion by fulfilling the fundamental need for connection to something shared, familiar, and collective. It also creates a sense of stability and reassurance through belonging to a group that shares common values, lifestyles, and artistic expressions (Golemo, 2020). In this way, music continually reaffirms and strengthens group solidarity while bridging social divides.

For migrants, the experience of migration often involves losing the familiarity and closeness of their former homes, along with the cultural practices and networks tied to those places (Kaiser, 2008). These intangible losses reflect the specific social networks, relationships, power dynamics, and community structures that previously shaped their daily interactions with others and their surroundings (Kaiser, 2008). According to Baily and Collyer (2006), during the 1950s, Chinese migrants in the USA often used public performances as a way to help broader society gain a deeper understanding of their identities, while also fostering mutual cultural appreciation and understanding between different groups, by carefully curating their musical repertoire, drawing on both their own perceptions and public ideas of what Chinese music represented. In this way, migrants musicians’ narratives offer valuable insights into perceptions of both the self and others within a social framework. As storytellers, they assert elements of their identity within a culturally different reality, offering an alternative perspective to the dominant culture (Golden & Lanza, 2013). From a cultural standpoint, migrants contribute unique perspectives as they move from a familiar cultural environment to one that is unfamiliar, often finding themselves in the minority within their new setting (Baily & Collyer, 2006).

Mobile populations have become a defining and permanent feature of contemporary societies (Chun, 2012). These groups, encompassing immigrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, and others, form part of and contribute to producing what Arjun Appadurai calls "ethnoscapes", dynamic spaces where identities are fluid, hybrid, and going beyond formal borders of a place (Chun, 2012). These populations are shaped by global disruptions that create new, decentralized connections, detaching individuals from traditional roots and reshaping the cultural landscapes (Chun, 2012), changing how we used to know and perceive places. Ethnoscapes as a transnational social perspective helps to view various groups—whether migrants or non-migrants, from the past or present—as participants within interconnected spaces and networks (Kiwan & Meinhof, 2011).

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), ‘migrant’ is a broad term, not specifically defined by international law, commonly used to describe someone who moves away from their usual place of residence. This movement can occur within a single country or across international borders, may be temporary or permanent, and can happen for various reasons (*About Migration | International Organization for Migration*, n.d.). Here I focus specifically on international migrants (including people having experienced forced migration across borders

(i.e., asylum-seekers and people with refugee status)), considering that immigration has provoked intense debate in many Western countries, including the Netherlands. Immigrants are frequently viewed as threats to community cohesion, national identity, and job security for native-born citizens (Boateng et al., 2021). Negative perceptions of immigrants are often rooted in failures of migration governance, which frequently overlooks systemic issues like racism, sexism, and colonial legacies (UN Women, 2022). Such failures exacerbate marginalization, further entrenching negative attitudes towards immigrants.

In the Netherlands, the reception of newcomers, often associated with forced migration, has contrasted with the country's reputation for tolerance and multiculturalism (Rath, 2009). The rise of populist movements has underscored widespread resistance to immigration and ethnic diversity, complicating integration efforts. As Grillo (2017) argues, national governments face increasing difficulty managing cultural differences within increasingly globalized and diverse societies. Multiculturalism encompasses policies and practices that aim to embrace diversity and recognize polyethnicity within national frameworks (Grillo, 2017). The author stresses, however, that, historically, nation-states often suppressed differences by assimilating immigrants - encouraging them to adopt the culture, values, and behaviors of the dominant group - viewing "otherness" as incompatible with the nation-state. Multicultural policies, once seen as solutions, are now criticized for fostering separateness rather than unity, often reinforcing cultural divisions instead of promoting integration, which involves mutual adaptation, where both newcomers and the host society adjust to create a cohesive community (Grillo, 2017). Differing inclusion, which according to Pötzsch (2018) focus on the space, aiming to create an environment of deliberative democracy and distributive justice based on equality. The very term itself implies a distinction between those who are "inside" and those who are "outside", potentially leading to new forms of exclusion (Pötzsch, 2018).

Cantle (2006) argues that while multiculturalism once emphasized respect for difference, it has lost much of its original meaning by failing to distinguish between various types of diversity. This has led to further fragmentation in transnational societies, where people and communities connect, operate, and perceive their identities beyond the confines of traditional nation-states, leading to the emergence of parallel lives between communities. The author emphasize that people do not belong to fixed, genetically determined groups, instead, the ethnic, religious, and other distinctions we establish (and uphold) are largely shaped by social and political factors. When identity is used as a tool and feels threatened, whether among majority or minority groups, people tend to adopt an exaggerated, often stereotypical version of themselves (Cantle, 2006). Cantle highlights that as a result, people focus more on their differences rather than their shared commonalities. The search for identity, then, is like chasing shadows, and much greater emphasis should be placed on how we actually relate to each other, allowing relationships to grow (Cantle, 2006). This should develop in the form of a commonsense of belonging , as equally legitimate members, and is not restricted to 'common culture'. This can be linked to the idea of identity politics as emotional labor, aimed at transforming isolation, fear, and shame into anger, solidarity, pride, and collective action to empower and mobilize marginalized groups (Bernstein, 2005). Society also develops through political interactions, both between individuals and the state and among individuals themselves. (Cantle, 2006). Grillo (2017) also emphasizes the need for new approaches to integration that bridge cultural divides while preserving diversity.

According to Ormond and Vietti (2022), for people with migration backgrounds to move beyond being seen as 'outsiders' and become acknowledged as part of the local community - or attain what the authors call 'localhood'- their unique experiences and diverse memories must be

integrated into mainstream narratives. For the authors, this involves recognizing how deeply immigrants' lives and stories are woven into the social fabric of the places where they reside. Kiwan and Meinhof (2011) stress that by focusing on the personal life stories and career paths of individual migrant musicians, we can shift away from discourses that reduce ethnicity to fixed categories, an approach often found in studies centered on densely populated areas with migrant "communities". For the authors, this method allows us to explore migrant experiences through individual perspectives, where they are not defined solely by ethnic or national identities, whether actual or perceived.

I explore in this study how musicians with migrant background in the Netherlands use music as a means to negotiate and express cultural identity, bridge cultural divides, and foster a sense of belonging in a society that is both increasingly globalized and fragmented. How do musicians connect with their cultural backgrounds through music while realigning their identities to fit within their new social realities?

This study is organized in five parts. First, I briefly discuss the concepts of culture, identity, belonging, the role of music in relation to those concepts, and immigration in the Netherlands, to reflect the layers underpinning the experience of musicians with migrant background negotiating their identity in Dutch society and how they use and connect through music throughout this process. Second, I present the research objective and question guiding this study. Third, I discuss the research design and methods used in this study. Fourth, I present the findings. In a concluding section, I discuss the broader implications of the findings.

2. Literature review

2.1. Culture, Identity & Belonging

To better ground my study of musicians with migrant background and their negotiation of culture, identity, and belonging through music, each of these concepts is first examined separately in the following sections, followed by an analysis of their interrelatedness. These concepts help us understand the complex layers involved in arriving in a new country, the encounter with different cultures, and how this process influences one's identity and sense of belonging.

2.1.1. Culture

Culture encompasses everything that individuals learn from one another that persists to form customs and traditions, profoundly influencing many aspects of human life (Whiten et al. 2011). Whiten et al. (2011) argue that the accumulation of cultural advancements, ranging from technological innovations to societal structures, has enabled humanity to inhabit and utilize nearly every corner of the Earth. Hall (1997), meanwhile, says that "culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings - the 'giving and taking of meaning' - between the members of a society or group" (p.02). He states that culture relies on its participants interpreting the events around them in meaningful ways and understanding the world in generally similar terms, encompassing not only concepts and ideas but also feelings, attachments, and emotions. Whiten et al. (2011) approach culture from an evolutionist and adaptative perspective, while Hall's approach focuses on shared meanings and learned subjectivities. They are not exclusive but, rather, complementary perspectives. Culture is both cumulative, with progressive change building on what came before it, and derived from interaction, organization and regulation of social practices.

Culture comes from the exchange of meanings and knowledge through language. Hall (1997) perceives language as all forms of verbal and non-verbal communication, including images, sounds and dance. Many studies on language and culture (Lazear, 1999; Jiang, 2000; Whiten et al., 2011) explore it in a more pragmatic perspective as a system of shared sounds and symbols used by people to communicate with one another (Lazear, 1999). In both approaches, language is a primary aspect of culture, serving as one of the main mediums through which thoughts, ideas, and emotions are expressed (Hall, 1997). Language both mirrors and is molded by culture. More broadly, it serves as a symbolic expression of a community, encompassing their historical and cultural heritage, along with their worldview, lifestyle, and thought patterns (Jiang, 2000). A specific language represents a unique way of creating and communicating meaning, as well as interpreting and defining situations. This can also manifest as unspoken codes, signs, and gestures that, while not explicitly voiced, are still understood by those who share the same semiotic context (Antonsich, 2010). Trade and interaction between individuals are simplified when all parties share a common culture and language. A shared culture enables direct transactions without intermediaries. This is especially evident with language: if two parties speak the same language, they can negotiate a contract without needing a translator (Lazear, 1999). Whiten et al. (2011) cite Darwin to draw parallels between biological and cultural evolution regarding language: “We find in distinct languages striking homologies due to community of descent, and analogies due to a similar process of formation. The manner in which certain letters or sounds change when others change is very like correlated growth” (p. 939). This quote shows how language changes as culture and societies get modified and adapt through time, as well as their close interconnection.

Another common approach to understanding culture is through the concepts of individualism and collectivism. A key argument in cultural and cross-cultural psychology is that societies vary in their levels of individualism and collectivism, and these differences affect what people find meaningful and valuable, what they consider worth sustained effort, and how they perceive themselves and others (Oyserman & Lee, 2008b). Oyserman and Lee (2008a) stress that, within any society, both individualism and collectivism may coexist, with the difference lying in how often each is emphasized depending on the situation. Triandis et al. (1988) observe that, in collectivist cultures, an individual’s connection to their group is typically stable, and they remain loyal even when the group’s demands are high. In contrast, in individualist cultures, people often leave groups that become too demanding and seek out new ones. Oyserman and Lee (2008b) add that individualism is characterized by comfort in interacting with strangers and a preference for direct communication, while collectivism emphasizes relationships within the in-group and often involves behaviors aimed at preserving social harmony or saving face. The authors observe that the distinctions between individualism and collectivism have been linked to different experiences and have, arguably, highlighted both within-society and between-society diversity in the tendency to favor certain cognitive processes. These include assimilation, where individuals adopt and blend into the dominant culture, or inclusion, where spaces are created for all individuals to feel welcomed and respected, embracing diversity and equal opportunities. Other processes, such as contrast—emphasizing differences between oneself and others—or exclusion, which involves actively or passively preventing individuals or groups from participating in or accessing certain spaces or opportunities, are less favored (Oyserman & Lee, 2008b). Collectivism and individualism in cultures are often rooted in broader cultural elements such as philosophy, religion, or language, which directly influence relationships, self-identity, well-being, and typical motivations (Oyserman & Lee, 2008b).

McBreen et al. (2011) emphasize that culture functions through various mechanisms, such as direct instruction and the punishment of nonconformity, that encourage individuals to embrace the practices of their group. This process, known as socialization, establishes and effectively maintains the social norms of a culture over time. Horne and Mollborn (2020) explain that norms can promote positive social change by discouraging harmful actions like violence and fostering constructive behaviors that enhance health. However, they can also lead to destructive behaviors, uphold inequalities, and worsen social conflict. Norms arise when individuals have expectations regarding how others perceive certain behaviors. Social norms play a crucial role in maintaining order within natural societies (McBreen et al., 2011). Norms are typically understood in two ways: (a) as conventions, or what is commonly practiced, and (b) as rules that dictate what is approved, disapproved, prescribed, or sanctioned. In both interpretations, norms shape agents' expectations of others' behavior and encourage conformity through incentives (McBreen et al., 2011). According to Bonvillain (2019), even though people within the same culture (such as national, religious, racialised, classed, etc.) share many norms and common assumptions about the world, they are not entirely uniform.

Much of our behavior, both consciously and unconsciously, is embedded in the context in which we grow up and live, as we learn norms and social roles influenced by culture. Culture not only offers ideologies, giving people a sense of human value, but also shapes behavior in practical ways. People's actions are influenced by the physical demands of navigating spaces like schools and museums, affecting how they walk, dress, speak and more (Yúdice, 2003). Glenn (2004) stresses that “human behavior produces cumulative change in human environments, and continually changing environments require continuing behavioral adjustments” (p.133). According to Matsumoto (2007), individual behavior results from the interplay between culturally defined social roles and unique personal role identities, being explained by three primary sources: basic human nature (through universal psychological processes), culture (through social roles), and personality (through personal role identities). According to the author, social roles consist of expectations and normative behaviors shaped by the psychological meanings assigned to particular situations, which are constructed by and through culture.

From a constructivist perspective, culture is not a static, unchanging entity that individuals automatically belong to through socialization, nor does it exist independently of them (Kramsch, 2014). Instead, culture is a dynamic process expressed through language and intertwined with other forms of symbolic systems, such as rituals, dance, music, gestures, posture, and styles of walking and talking (Kramsch, 2014). A system where individuals interact and adapt to one another can lead to various stable social arrangements or equilibriums. These distinct social structures often correspond to unique cultural frameworks, including rules, norms, and shared meanings and expectations that evolve over time (Cohen, 2001). Hall (1997) points out that it is the people within a culture who assign meaning to individuals, objects, and events. On their own, things seldom, if ever, possess a singular, fixed, or unchanging meaning. Cultures interact through invasion, migration, or mere exposure. In these intercultural spaces, cultural traits, leading to the borrowing, adoption, rejection, or modification of patterns that are selectively integrated (Cohen, 2001). Tully (1995) stresses that cultures are continuously challenged, reinvented, and reshaped by their members, as well as through their engagement with other cultures, leading to ongoing evolution and negotiation.

2.1.2. Identity

Identity can be understood from two main perspectives: (i) social and collective; and (ii) personological sense, or the self (Deaux, 1993). In the former, identity is perceived based on the ´sameness´ among members of a group; it is similarly experienced, felt, and perceived (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Sökefeld, 1999). In the latter, identity is "conceived as an internal process, holistic and stable across time" (Deaux, 1993, p.5). According to Erikson (1994), "the feeling of having a personal identity is based on two simultaneous observations: the immediate perception of one's selfsameness and continuity in time; and the simultaneous perception of the fact that others recognize one's sameness and continuity" (p.22). In this study, I choose to center the attention on the social and collective conception of the term, understanding that "the group to which a person belonged constituted an important part of the social environment in which and through which personal identity was formed" (Sökefeld, 1999, p.417). The term 'identity' embodies a mutual relationship, signifying both a consistent selfsameness within an individual and an enduring sharing of essential characteristics with others (Sökefeld, 1999). According to Deaux (1993), there is a "temporal trade-off between a sense of personal identity, when one feel different from others, and social identity, when one focuses on shared group characteristics" (p. 5).

According to Tajfel (1979), who proposed the Social Identity Theory (SIT), a key element of social reality is that many social systems are made up of groups of individuals who vary in numerous ways. Some of these differences - such as variations in gender, age, wealth, power, types of work, leisure activities, clothing, and language - are easily recognizable by an external, neutral observer. The social aspect of identity refers to the part of a person's self-concept that is shaped by their belonging to groups with shared characteristics. These social identities influence how people form connections, as they often choose to associate with those who share these similarities and may avoid interactions with individuals who are different from them (Kalin & Sambanis, 2018). Madsen and van Naerssen (2003) stress that individuals are part of different social networks, including families, communities, and religious organizations, each with its own structure, hierarchy, and levels of equality. These networks, made up of parents, friends, and colleagues, are essential in shaping one's identity. The main aim of the SIT is to understand and explain how individuals adopt and act based on social identities, rather than just personal ones (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012). According to Ellemers and Haslam (2012), the SIT approach has three main aspects: (i) the psychological processes that differentiate social identities from personal identities; (ii) various strategies individuals use to develop a positive social identity; and (iii) main features of the social structure that influence which strategy is most likely to be adopted in a specific situation. This framework allows for an exploration of the different layers involved in identity negotiation, in this case on musicians with migrant backgrounds, including the interplay between personal and social dimensions, the strategies for achieving a positive social identity, and the impact of specific social structural factors.

When individuals are grouped together, they tend to be viewed through the lens of shared group traits that shape their social identity, while their personal characteristics, which make them unique, are often overlooked (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012). Social identity motivates behaviors, and an individual experiences satisfaction when that person engages in activities that align with the typical behavior of that person's group (Kalin & Sambanis, 2018). Taijfel (1979) writes that "the notion of social identity is based on the simple motivational assumption that individuals (at least in our culture) prefer a positive to a negative self-image" (p.185).

Identity, based on similarities and differences within a social group, as briefly mentioned above can be based on several different aspects, such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, and more. According to Deaux (2018), in a diverse population, many identity categories become accessible, both for individuals who belong to different groups and for those seeking to divide the larger population into smaller, supposedly more similar groups. Here I choose to unpack ethnic identity briefly, considering it a relevant aspect when exploring immigrants' perceptions and adaptations. Ethnic identity refers to a person's cultural or ancestral background. According to Chandra (2006), ethnic identities are a type of identity category where membership is based on characteristics tied to, or thought to be tied to, ancestral traits. The author specifies the role of ancestral traits and descent in four key ways: (a) shared ancestry, (b) a belief in shared ancestry, (c) a belief in a shared place of origin, and (d) a rule for determining membership based on descent. These aspects are linked to other elements such as a shared culture or language, a common history, and the notion of self-governance (Chandra, 2006). These may include, according to Horowitz (1985), "groups differentiated by color, language, and religion; it covers tribes, races, nationalities, and castes" (p. 53). In contrast, racial categories, which are externally imposed, often include inaccuracies and stereotypes. Ethnic classifications tend to be more accurate because they are self-defined (Horowitz, 1985). This accuracy arises from their alignment with an individual's self-understanding and self-identification, rather than being based on external perceptions or constructions imposed by others.

Ethnicity and race can be analyzed through a social constructionist lens, where categories are not naturally fixed but instead represent and reinforce specific beliefs about the world or reflect a particular approach to addressing societal issues (Deaux, 2018). Baumann (2004) points out that ethnicity is assigned at birth, but the cultural traits of an ethnic group are typically defined by the group itself. According to Baumann (2004), in recent colonial and migration history, the term 'ethnic' is divided into "Us" and "Them." The majority group, or "Us," is seen as 'non-ethnic', while "Them," comprising immigrants or minorities, are considered 'ethnic'. This perception is based on an ethnocentric view of society, whereby the belief that one's own cultural group or heritage is superior to others leads to animosity or contempt toward any customs, behaviors, or physical traits that differ from one's own (Baumann, 2004).

According to Sökefeld (1999), "shared sameness is today often discussed with reference to difference. Difference points to the contrastive aspect of identities and thereby emphasizes the implicit condition of plurality" (p.417), meaning that difference is what creates and comes before identity. Identity includes elements of social structure and system, where a person can assume different identities influenced by different social settings (Deaux, 1993). Tajfel (1978) describes that social identity is a component of an individual's self-concept that arises from their awareness of belonging to one or more social groups, along with the significance and emotional value attached to that belonging. Where the value a person places on their identities can vary, and the higher the importance of a particular identity, the more likely they are to act in ways that reflect that identity (Deaux, 2018). Drawing on Kimberle Crenshaw's notion of 'intersectionality', Bonvillain (2019) stresses that people are not defined solely by their gender, class, race, or ethnicity. These and other social constructs intersect and shift depending on the context, circumstances, and objectives of the individual. In any interaction, a person may express different aspects of these constructs to highlight certain identities or a combination of them, while in other situations, some aspects may be emphasized and others minimized (Bonvillain, 2019).

People are involved in various social networks, such as families, communities, and religious institutions, which differ in structure, hierarchy, and equality. These networks—composed of parents, friends, and colleagues—play a crucial role in identity formation (Madsen & van Naerssen, 2003).

2.1.3. Belonging

Stillman and Baumeister (2009) say that "belongingness is an essential factor in creating meaning in life" (p.249). The authors state that, unlike other species, humans rely primarily on their social group, rather than directly on the natural environment, to obtain most of the resources they need for survival. Baumeister (2012) stresses that there is a need to belong, an inherent drive that people have to establish and sustain a minimum level of social connections, which is based on two central aspects: (i) individuals seek a foundation of mutual care and concern that spans both the past and future; and (ii) they desire a pattern of positive or neutral interactions. The author points out that the need to belong cannot be fulfilled by mere social interaction, unless a meaningful bond is present. Block (2018) also presents belonging as "related to and a part of something. It is a membership, the experience of being at home in the broadest sense of theiphase. […] the opposite of belonging is to feel isolated always (all ways) on the margin, an outsider" (p. xvii). A sense of belonging is shaped by how individuals perceive the quality of their social interactions. It reflects one's personal view of their participation or inclusion within a social system or environment (Allen & Kern, 2017).

Feelings of uncertainty are often linked to a perceived threat to belonging. Stillman and Baumeister (2009) argue that, if asked to describe an emotionally uncertain moment, many people would likely recount an experience related to belonging or rejection. According to Collisson (2013), people use various strategies to fulfill their need for belonging. To build social connections and meet this need, individuals become more aware of signals of social acceptance, show a strong desire to form relationships, and keep an eye on their social surroundings for opportunities to connect with others. Watt and Badger (2009) state that, just as physical pain helps us avoid danger, social pain encourages us to act in ways that prevent exclusion. The pain of rejection motivates us to speak and act in ways that gain the loyalty, affection, and respect of others, promoting social acceptance and, ultimately, survival. Haim-Litevsky et al. (2023) emphasize that the importance of social connectedness and a sense of belonging is underscored by the various health risks associated with social isolation and loneliness, including a higher prevalence of mental health disorders, exposure to violence, and poor physical health, among others. The authors point out that individual social skills and cognitive development play a role in shaping experiences of social connectedness and belonging. However, the community and environment are also essential for fostering and sustaining these feelings over time (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023).

Sense of belonging is relevant not only through the perspective of an individual, but also as a group. Block (2018) shows belonging through the perspective of community: to belong to a community is to act as a creator and co-owner of that community, to build and nurture it. According to Liebenberg et al. (2019), engagement with culture and community can lead to beneficial outcomes, such as increased civic involvement, enhanced social capital, improved social development, and greater well-being. Taking part in meaningful daily activities has been identified as a way to strengthen social connectedness and a sense of belonging, while, in turn, these social bonds also encourage continued participation in those activities (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, Youkhana (2015) points out that objects, infrastructures, artifacts, and material culture are part in the creation of belonging, along with the ongoing process of appropriating and reshaping space. The authors stress that the diversity of participants in collective processes highlights the immediacy and context-specific nature of belonging, while revealing the spatial and temporal interconnections that underpin it. For Antonsich (2010), considering that the emotional connection tied to belonging is feeling at home in a place, this concept expresses a sense of rootedness or discussed alongside ideas of place attachment. Autobiographical factors pertain to an individual's personal history, experiences, relationships, and memories that connect them to a specific place, fostering a sense of place-belongness (Antonsich, 2010). According to Trudeau (2006), landscapes are intentionally shaped to reflect specific appearances, thereby reinforcing particular relationships, values, aesthetics, and worldviews associated with the dominant ideology. They visually symbolize what is deemed to belong. In other words, landscapes encode membership within a society and its territory. A sense of place-belongingness is intertwined with power dynamics and the practices of socio-spatial inclusion and exclusion, as it contributes to the (re)production of a specific social order and the notion of cultural unity and completeness (Antonisich, 2010).

Landscape, citizenship, and belonging have been discussed through the concept of the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2016; Trudeau, 2006; Hall, 2013; Youkhana, 2015). According to Yuval-Davis (2016), belonging from a social and political perspective has three main facets. The first aspect involves social positions; the second focuses on individuals' identities and emotional connections to different communities and groups (as discussed above); and the third deals with the ethical and political values people use to evaluate both their own and others' sense of belonging. The author stresses that "belonging tends to be naturalized, and becomes articulated and politicized only when it is threatened in some way" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 197). People frequently rely on ideas of belonging that are linked to specific places, memories of landscapes, ways of life, and cultural influences, which are often strengthened in the context of migration (Youkhana, 2015). The politics of belonging focuses on the boundaries that define a political community, drawing lines that divide the global population into "us" and "them" (Yuval-Davis, 2006), to claim who belongs where. It involves political debates and conflicts over various forms of belonging, such as ethnic, national, cultural, religious, or cosmopolitan identities. People with migrant backgrounds engage with different political frameworks of belonging, reflecting the struggles that shape both inclusive and exclusive social realities (Youkhana, 2015). Simplified and fixed notions about the collective are perpetuated, rooted in ideas of ancestry and original identity (Youkhana, 2015). Trudeau (2006) emphasizes that membership in a (territorially defined) community is often a political matter, as the opposite of belonging is exclusion. As a result, the politics of belonging and exclusion significantly shape the creation of social spaces like landscapes and places. Yuval-Davis (2006) references Manuel Castells (2004) to illustrate how the concept of belonging is changing. In today's world, society has transformed into a 'network society' (Castells, 2004), where meaningful belonging has shifted from national and state-based civil societies to newly formed, defensive identity-based communities (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Belonging is now often linked to the dynamics of connectivity through social media and various online platforms, where people engage with one another and with diverse interest groups. According to Castells (2004), "A network society is a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronics-based information and communication technologies" (p.3), which influences how people, here immigrants, use digital and social networks to connect with both their home cultures and new local communities, shaping and expressing their

identities in a world where "us" and "them" boundaries are fluid and constantly negotiated, and consequently their belonging.

2.1.4. Culture, Identity and Belonging

In the previous chapters, I discussed the concepts of culture, identity, and belonging separately. In this section, the main goal is to explore how these concepts are interconnected. In everyday life, these concepts often blur together, being used interchangeably or mixed.

Culture encompasses all practices that are not hardwired into us biologically, but instead hold meaning and value for us. These practices need to be understood by others or rely on meaning to function effectively. In this sense, culture permeates every aspect of society (Hall, 1997). Culture influences how we think, feel, and act, and we cannot separate ourselves from it. Ignoring culture would mean overlooking a crucial factor that shapes people's identities and lives (McGannon & Smith, 2015). Meaning, in turn, shapes our sense of identity, helping us understand who we are and where we "belong." Therefore, culture is closely tied to how identities are defined and preserved both within and across different groups (Hall, 1997). In this way, culture, identity and belonging are shaped and influenced by each other.

Culture and identity are intrinsically related, as culture is based on meanings and norms that shape much of our social identity and understanding of the self. Throughout life, every individual integrates a unique combination of practices, rituals, beliefs, meanings, and ways of experiencing, feeling, and imagining into their existence (Grimson, 2010), all of which form identity and are influenced by culture. Zou (2012) emphasizes that “culture can shape the individual and the individual is able to create himself or herself through culture” (p. 466). This means we express ourselves through, utilize, consume, or adopt cultural objects; by integrating them into our daily rituals and practices, we assign them value and significance (Hall, 1997). Culture serves as an important building block of our social identity, while society as a dynamic system of collective practices and relationships also influences culture. Both are in constant change. However, cultural boundaries do not always align with those of identity, raising a theoretical issue: a social group may not be culturally homogeneous, even though all its members may feel a sense of belonging to it (Grimson, 2010). People may connect through different notions of themselves.

The way we identify ourselves, whether socially or individually, shapes how we connect with others and our surroundings. As a result, our sense of belonging is influenced by both our identity and the context we find ourselves in. According to Anthias (2013), identity involves the concept of being as a practice or performance, such as in daily lived experiences or impression management. This idea is based on the existence of shared aspects of life with similar individuals, often highlighted in the related but less complex idea of identification (Anthias, 2013). This idea connects to Judith Butler's (2009) notion of gender performativity, where the "appearance" of gender is often misunderstood as a reflection of its internal or inherent truth. Butler argues that gender is shaped by compulsory norms that require one to conform to a particular gender, usually within a rigid binary framework. The reproduction of gender, therefore, is always a negotiation with power, not existing without the continuous reproduction of norms (Butler, 2009).

Belonging refers to a feeling of a shared connection. Grimson (2010) stresses that all humans experience a sense of belonging to various groups, such as a community, city, country, or region,

as well as to age groups, social classes, genders, generations, and specific cultural or social movements. These identity categories, and how we relate to them, are often embedded in culture. At the same time, we each make choices about which groups we identify with and which we see as "others" (Grimson, 2010). Belonging to a group is partly a decision but also shaped by various external factors that are not chosen, such as nationality, ethnicity, and family background.

Culture and belonging are interconnected, as culture provides the framework through which individuals develop a sense of belonging to groups, communities, and societies. Grimson (2010) explains that “culture alludes to our routine of strongly sedimented practices, beliefs, and meanings; identity refers to our feelings of belonging to a collective” (p. 63). Hall (1997) elaborates that when people say we "belong to the same culture," it means we interpret the world in similar ways, allowing us to create a shared set of meanings. This shared understanding helps construct the social world we collectively inhabit. Grimson (2010) stresses that culture is a complex arrangement of numerous diverse elements that are interconnected in complementary, opposing, and hierarchical ways. The author emphasizes that a key aspect of culture is the sense of belonging, with identity tied to a specific category playing a crucial role.

Culture, identity, and belonging are complex concepts that were explored individually in previous chapters. However, their meanings are deeply interconnected and mutually dependent. My aim here is not to develop these topics and their connections extensively, but rather to briefly explore how they intersect, acknowledging that in society and social dynamics, it is often difficult to separate them. According to Lidskog (2016), “global processes – political, social, and cultural – crisscross each other, resulting in a cultural patchwork of identities and belongings” (p.23).

2.1.5. Culture, Identity and Belonging: Immigrants

Culture, identity, and belonging are important parts of who we are as individuals and social beings. But what happens when our context and social references change, such as when we move to a new setting? In this section, I aim to explore the relationship between immigrants, culture, identity, and belonging.

According to Scott (2016), “we may think we know who we are, but these ideas are constantly changing, shaped by our experiences, relationships and interactions: who I am is not the same as who I was yesterday or who I will be tomorrow” (p.1). When migrants leave their previous country of residence, they reframe and renegotiate their previous social status, familial ties, and established social networks. Upon arriving in the receiving country, they often experience a disruption in terms of personal history and identity (La Barbera, 2014). According to Foner (1997), immigrant families do not fully replicate their original cultural practices when they relocate, though these traditions still significantly influence the family’s values, norms, and behaviors in the new environment. Tully (1995) emphasizes that the identity and meanings of any culture are not fixed but are instead dynamic, diverse and continually reshaped by people, offering different perspectives depending on the viewpoint from which they are observed. Like other complex human phenomena, such as language and games, cultural identity evolves and shifts based on the different angles or aspects that come into focus (Tully, 1995). Therefore, migrants’ culture and social identities and their perceptions of these are often (re)constructed and negotiated in a new setting based on the new social reality. For Tully (1995), cultures not only overlap geographically and vary in type, but they are also intricately interconnected in their formation and identity. They develop through complex historical interactions with other cultures.

Scott (2016) stresses, “we think, feel, and behave not as isolated individuals, but as social actors with a relational consciousness” (p.01).

According to Puplampu and Tettey (2006), in their work on the identity of African-Canadians, identity in Canada and other diverse societies is shaped by the interaction of various assigned and socially influenced factors, which affect both how individuals perceive themselves and how they are treated or positioned within the broader community. For the authors, ethnicity and citizenship are two key elements in defining one’s identity. Puplampu and Tettey (2006) also note that, in addition to individuals openly identifying with a particular ethnicity, ethnic labels can be assigned to groups by others. The relational nature of ethnic group formation involves power dynamics, and how power is distributed and employed among various groups has significant implications for inter- and intra-group relations (Puplampu & Tettey, 2006), which influence how immigrants perceive themselves and their sense of belonging in relation to others.

The process of categorization plays a crucial role in shaping identity (Domalewska, 2016). Migrants are often subject to stereotyping, which, according to Domalewska (2014), involves several key steps: grouping individuals based on easily identifiable characteristics such as gender or race that distinguish social groups, assigning certain traits to the group as a whole, and applying those traits to any individual within the group. Domalewska (2014) further explains that national stereotypes are widely held perceptions of other groups and nations—culturally ingrained beliefs that are deeply rooted and resistant to change. Stereotypes function as cognitive frameworks that help process information about others. They represent mental structures encompassing individuals' knowledge, beliefs, and expectations, naturally arising from the human tendency to categorize (Domalewska, 2014). Categorization is often based on perceived differences. As Netto (2015) highlights, “difference is always a social construction. What may be seen as different for one culture may be imperceptible to others” (p. 12). In the context of migration, the notion of difference is frequently associated with exoticism. Within the discourse of difference, the culture being referenced is often framed as the culture of the "Other," reinforcing a sense of separation (Netto, 2015). While exoticism claims to celebrate difference, it does so within a framework where European culture is positioned as superior, and the so-called "exotic" cultures are viewed as inferior in comparison (Netto, 2015).

Youkhana (2015) argues that “people often resort to notions of belonging that are tied to territoriality, memorizations of landscapes, lifestyles, and cultural imprints, which are even reinforced in the context of migration” (p.10). Madsen and van Naerssen (2003) stress that borders are a key component of identity. Since identities are not fixed but are constantly being shaped, the process of constructing identities involves ongoing acts of establishing borders and distinguishing between "us" and "them". Borders between nations highlight and signify the distinct identities on either side. Madsen and van Naerssen (2003) highlight how the migration process can differ from one’s origins: in a stable border context in which cross-border flows of people are effectively regulated, the impact is quite different from a context in which cross-border flows are transient and being actively discouraged. Borders are relevant when considering the politics of belonging. Yuval-Davis (2006) uses the concept of ‘imagined communities’ developed by Benedict Anderson (1983) to illustrate how, even in the smallest of nations, most members will never meet, know, or even hear of one another, but the idea of their shared connection lives on in each person's mind. According to the author, any process of creating boundaries or defining a specific group—whether physical or abstract—that includes certain people and excludes others involves an intentional and context-dependent act of imagination (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The author stresses that the politics of belonging entails not only the

dominant political powers maintaining and reinforcing the boundaries of the community but also involves other political actors challenging and contesting those boundaries (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Immigrants are also challenging the notions of boundaries, moving and adapting to a new setting, by not staying where they are perceived as 'supposed' to belong.

According to Grimson (2010), if culture is connected to habitus, everyday practices, ways of perceiving, and meaning-making, and if identities are tied to a sense of belonging, then cultural differences between two groups do not necessarily correspond to the perceived distance in terms of their sense of belonging. This means we may feel a stronger sense of belonging to geographically distant places because we identify with their everyday practices and worldviews, rather than necessarily feeling connected to those who are physically close to us. Antonsich (2010) explains that people who choose to live in a place different from where they were born—immigrants—are motivated by various factors, such as seeking a better quality of life, greater material or intellectual opportunities, or even aesthetic enjoyment. According to the author, a sense of belonging, called 'elective belonging,' arises when the chosen place aligns with the individual's personal life story (Antonsich, 2010). Similarly, Grimson (2010) states that just as we learn languages, we always have the potential to learn and adopt a different culture as our own. However, this becomes increasingly difficult as we age, since each person is shaped by their own culture and the cultures they have interacted with. In shaping identity, individuals are not merely passive participants but, rather, they actively engage in the process at both personal and collective levels (Madsen & van Naerssen, 2003).

2.2. Music

Music is deeply woven into our daily lives and understood in this study as form of language. In the first part of this section, I provide a brief reflection on the significance of music and its various meanings for individuals. The second part focuses on the role of music in shaping identity, culture, and belonging, which are the central concepts explored in this study.

2.2.1. Music's role

Music is so deeply associated to our social world that often songs are attached to memories of places, people and moments. According to Rentfrow (2012), we encounter music almost everywhere: at home, work, the gym, grocery stores, malls, cafés, and restaurants. With an average of eight hours of sleep each night, people spend over 15% of their waking hours with music around them. The author stresses that numerous studies have shown how emotions are expressed, perceived, and evoked through music. People can recognize emotions in music, and often, listeners perceive similar emotions from the same musical pieces. Emotions felt by listeners often match those intended by the composer or performer (Rentfrow, 2012).

While musicality is deeply embedded in human nature, likely due to an evolutionary past where sound-based communication was crucial for survival and reproduction, our experience of music is influenced by specific sociocultural contexts (Welch & McPherson, 2018). For Welch and McPherson (2018), what stands out in music for each person is shaped by interactions with sounds within these social settings, as well as by personal factors such as individual perspective, life experiences, and stages of growth. Rentfrow and Gosling (2006) argue that studies have shown that people believe that their music preferences reflect aspects of their personalities, often using these preferences intentionally to communicate something about themselves, a connection between tastes in music and personality traits.

Brown and Volgsten (2005) describe music as a tool that enhances group-level communication through association, with four key implications: (i) music acts as an emotional reward and reinforcer from a psychobiological perspective, helping to regulate arousal, emotions, and mood; (ii) culturally, music operates through association, often linking musical structures with social meanings; (iii) the scope of these associations is broad, connecting to elements such as language, group identities, social ideologies, and commercial products; and (iv) music serves as an effective tool for persuasion and influence. Folkestad (2002) adds that music serves various functions for people: it can facilitate daily tasks, provide a means for celebration and dance, serve as a form of protest against oppression, and aid in spiritual connection. For the author, it can recount historical narratives, inspire visions of the future, motivate those who are struggling, and soothe the anxious. Additionally, music can express pain and evoke the joy of love, ward off worries, and lull babies to sleep (Folkestad, 2002). In this study, I focus on the first three aspects proposed by Brown and Volgsten (2005), where music is (i) a means to connect with emotions, (ii) shaped by social meanings and history, and (iii) linked to language and social identity. This focus allows for an exploration of how music is used by people - here immigrants - as a medium for self-expression and connection. Cavdir and Wang (2021) highlight that musicians communicate not only through sound but also through movement. According to the authors, in musical and movement-based interactions, the body serves as a bridge, physically connecting the performer to the instrument. The instrument can be perceived as an extension of the performer's body, just as the body itself can extend into or, as with singing, be the instrument (Cavdir & Wang, 2021).

Scott (2010) emphasizes that each person needs the ability to express themselves to achieve personal fulfillment as a human being, which self-expression is crucial for building and sustaining interpersonal relationships. The author says that, to maintain inner well-being, it is essential to express our feelings and emotions in a way that is both sufficient and appropriate. Rentfrow (2012) states that “music provides a medium for self-exploration, where individuals are able to reflect on who they are, where they came from, and who they aspire to become” (p. 409). Music can mirror both verbal and nonverbal language in its expressive features. Just as in literature, dialogue can unfold within a musical composition (Scott, 2010). Music has also been recognized as a coping mechanism, as highlighted in a study by Ramesh (2020) on the effects of music as a coping strategy during COVID-19. The author noted that during the pandemic, music helped alleviate the stress of social distancing, isolation, and separation from loved ones. While the pandemic and migration are distinct phenomena, both create similar experiences of distance and disconnection. Ramesh (2020) emphasizes that engaging in musical activities, such as making or listening to music, can foster co-apathy, the social function of empathy, where an individual's emotional state is influenced by the shared emotions of a group. This process strengthens social cohesion. Additionally, music that evokes happiness and optimism can promote positive emotions and a sense of hope for a better future (Ramesh, 2020).

According to Rentfrow (2012), people who enjoy similar music tend to view and experience the world in like-minded ways, leading to more shared perspectives compared to those with different tastes. For the author, this reasoning implies that music itself is not the primary factor in social bonding; rather, it serves as a reflection of personal values and characteristics that bridge the connection between shared musical preferences and attraction. In music, the themes and imagery that arise from listening to preferred genres resonate with listeners because they either see these traits in themselves or aspire to embody them (Rentfrow, 2012). People often use their favorite music as a badge of identity, sharing insights about themselves with others. Studies even suggest that young people feel music communicates their identity more effectively than their clothing, favorite movies, books, or hobbies (Rentfrow, 2012).

2.2.2. Music's role in Culture, Identity and Belonging

Music, culture, identity, and belonging are very deeply interrelated. Music can be seen as a cultural construct rather than a natural one, consisting of practices, ideas, and interpretations shaped by specific social interactions and structures (Cross, 2001). According to Bolhman (2005), the study of music allows us to understand more about cultural contexts, ideologies, politics, the role of language, gender and sexuality, and the identities of communities, from small groups to major nations. For Folkestad (2002), "the development of musical identity is not only a matter of age, gender, musical taste and other preferences, but is also a result of the cultural, ethnic, religious and national contexts in which people live" (p.151).

Musical texts and performances - such as recording, music videos, concerts, radio broadcasts, and film soundtracks - carry cultural meanings and interpretations woven into them (Shuker, 2013). Titon (1992) uses the term "music-culture" to refers to a group's entire relationship with music, encompassing ideas, activities, institutions, and material items—essentially, all things related to music. According to the author, a music-culture can be as intimate as an individual's personal music world or as expansive as one shared by a transnational community. We might talk about the music-culture of a family, a neighborhood, a region, or even a country (Titon, 1992). Music-cultures can also be associated with specific genres: for example, there is a hip-hop music-culture, a classical music-culture, and a jazz music-culture (Titon, 1992).

National identity can be seen as a top-down approach, where an official sense of national identity draws upon the various cultural and ethnic identities within the regions that form the nation (Folkestad, 2002). The author says that nationality acts as the unifying element, holding together regions despite their mutual cultural and ethnic differences. In parallel to national music, there is the popular music, "the term popular has meant 'of the ordinary people'" (Shuker, 2013, p.05), by concept being a more bottom-up process. According to Shuker (2013), popular music is a blend of diverse musical traditions, styles, and influences, and it also functions as an economic product that holds ideological meaning for many listeners. Central to most forms of popular music is an underlying tension between the inherent creativity in the act of "making music" and the commercial focus driving much of its production and distribution (Shuker, 2013).

While music is a universal aspect of human experience, its meanings vary widely, unfolding across diverse contexts and involving various actions that organize sound to convey meaning (Lidskog, 2016). Meanings arise not only from the musicians who bring different forms of music to life but also from how audiences experience and interpret it (Shuker, 2013). As Lidskog (2016) explains, musical performance is not simply a one-way exchange from musician to listener; rather, it is an interactive process influenced by cultural and contextual factors that create, sustain, and transform meanings.

Music also evokes a multitude of memories and is closely tied to three key systems within long-term memory: episodic memory, which allows us to recall specific events; semantic memory, which connects ideas and concepts that shape our understanding of the world; and procedural memory, which enables us to learn and retain skills and actions (Shelemay, 2006). Brandellero and Janssen (2014) conceptualize music as cultural heritage, viewing heritage as a source of identity that communities, institutions, and individuals recognize as valuable. Heritage links us to the past, offering a sense of history while simultaneously serving as a resource in the present. The authors stress that cultural heritage is an active choice, where certain elements are selected as symbolic and relevant to ensure continuity. Graham (2002) asserts that, "if heritage is the

contemporary use of the past, and if its meanings are defined in the present, then we create the heritage that we require and manage it for a range of purposes defined by the needs and demands of our present societies" (p. 1004). Thus, heritage is deliberately defined and shaped through choices about what to include, making it a 'political act'—one that involves selecting elements seen as representative of the past and reflective of a desired continuity rather than an essential one (Brandellero & Janssen, 2014). Similar to identity, heritage is constantly reconstructed and re-evaluated based on what is considered important to preserve by those who hold it. Music, likewise, is constantly changing and reshaping its meanings according to the social context in which it is situated.

Music, both as a singular concept and through its varied forms across cultures, takes on diverse expressions, even within a single culture (Bohlman, 2005). Lidskog (2016) highlights that music is a fundamental element of culture, playing a significant role in shaping both individual and collective identities. He emphasizes that music provides a shared space and practice that unites group members, fostering a sense of belonging and sometimes even a shared purpose. Through the act of making music, emotional, social, and cognitive bonds form, facilitating the creation and expression of a shared identity and collective memory that intertwine personal and social dimensions (Lidskog, 2016).

Music serves as an effective means to identify various ethnic or social groups, carrying strong emotional meanings that can be utilized to express and negotiate identity with significant impact (Baily & Collyer, 2006). In the context of immigration, Lewis (2010) states that music and dance are recognized for fostering a sense of identity and belonging among migrants, particularly refugees. In situations of exile and longing for their previous lives, defending identity boundaries through music and dance may become increasingly significant in their host country (Lewis, 2010). In contexts where societies contend with the impacts of colonial history and contemporary migration, music serves as a key element in shaping identities and promoting reconciliation in postcolonial processes (Golemo, 2020). Music plays a crucial role in memory and the preservation of identity, as well as in fostering emotional connections within a community, where collective memories are created, maintained, and protected through musical expression (Lidskog, 2016). However, Baily and Collyer (2006) emphasize that, in many contexts, music is employed to communicate with the broader community, helping to establish a group's identity in the perceptions of others. Lidskog (2016) argues that songs convey stories and recount shared experiences. Consequently, music serves as a means of passing down historical awareness through generations and preserving and cultivating a diasporic identity, which is a vital aspect of a group's cultural identity (Lidskog, 2016).

Music can also serve as a means of reclaiming the narrative of an individual or a group. Through music-making and performance, people can share their stories and experiences from their own perspectives. According to Sahin-Mencutek (2020), narratives shape both individual and collective identities (such as self/us versus other/them), influence emotions (including frustration, uncertainty, fear, hate, and empathy), impact attitudes (such as understanding, acceptance, rejection, and xenophobia), and drive behaviors (such as solidarity and discrimination). Migration narratives are not solely about migration; they intersect with other historical and social narratives, such as those of colonialism and slavery (Sahin-Mencutek, 2020). Musarò et al. (2022) emphasize that allowing the "other" to present and represent themselves symbolically acknowledges them as individuals with rights and responsibilities, as well as potential contributors to positive social change and development. Media, arts, and culture play a crucial role in fostering communication; through artistic and cultural expressions, we can

recognize both our shared experiences and our differences (Musarò et al., 2022). Thus, music becomes a powerful form of expression, a marker of identity, and a means of fostering connection and belonging.

2.3. Receiving context: The Netherlands

In this chapter, I provide context on migration in the Netherlands, focusing on the significant influx of immigrants following the Second World War, particularly due to the independence of former Dutch colonies. Later, I differentiate the concepts of integration, assimilation, and inclusion, which are essential for understanding how immigrants integrate into a host society.

2.3.1. Migration

Migration is a highly debated topic in Western countries, making it essential to examine this issue specifically within the context of the Netherlands, where this study is based, to gain a clearer understanding of the Dutch social system. According to Grimson (2010), current migration levels are not higher than in the past; the differences are instead rooted in political and cultural dimensions. Contemporary migration involves new destinations, practices, and territorial perceptions, leading to a transformed understanding of migration today (Grimson, 2010). Rath (2009) notes that the Netherlands has long held an international outlook, balancing practical needs with moral values, and has welcomed a significant number of immigrants. However, it does not fully identify itself as an immigrant nation (van Amersfoort & van Niekerk, 2006; Rath, 2009). The rise of populism has highlighted limited support for immigration, as well as for ethnic and religious diversity (Rath, 2009). In fact, the Netherlands was among the first Western European countries to see an anti-immigration party, the Centrum Partij, win a parliamentary seat in 1982 (van Heerden et al., 2014). To explore the multiple layers of immigration in the Netherlands, the following sections provide a brief overview of key periods in Dutch migration history.

According to Zorlu and Hartog (2001), migration has long been a part of Dutch history, with immigrant percentages actually higher in the 17th and 18th centuries than in the 1990s. The authors stress that during the Dutch Golden Age, the Netherlands experienced considerable prosperity and tolerance relative to neighboring countries, drawing many immigrants. Numerous migrant workers, along with religious and political refugees, came to the Netherlands, some for temporary stays and others to settle permanently (Zorlu & Hartog, 2001).

Dutch colonization is central to understanding immigration in the country, as the Netherlands established colonies in parts of Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Oostindie (2008) explains that by the 16th century, Dutch ships were making sporadic explorations and engaging in trade throughout the tropics. With the founding of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in 1602 and the Dutch West India Company (WIC) in 1621, the scale and organization of overseas expansion increased significantly. Oostindie (2008) emphasizes that these companies went on to establish numerous trading posts and several fully administered colonies, which they primarily managed. Some Dutch colonies were what is today known as Indonesia, Suriname, Sri Lanka and others.

Post-Second World War immigration to the Netherlands is closely tied to its colonial legacy. Immigrants from (former) colonies are often collectively referred to as (post)colonial immigrants, implying a uniformity among them. However, in reality, there are significant differences in the migration experiences of these groups, each shaped uniquely by the specific history of Dutch colonialism (van Amersfoort & van Niekerk, 2006).

According to Hoogveld (2000), political and economic factors have largely driven immigration waves to the Netherlands. During the Second World War, Japan's occupation of what is today Indonesia accelerated the decolonization process, which concluded by the end of 1949, leading later to the repatriation of about 250,000 people (Van Amersfoort & Van Niekerk, 2006). Since the 17th century, interactions between Indonesia and the Netherlands had been ongoing, with Dutch individuals living in the colony (Hoogveld, 2000). Many Dutch men formed relationships with Indonesian women, and by 1848, mixed marriages were legally recognized. Consequently, a significant portion of Indonesian migrants to the Netherlands were of mixed Dutch-Indonesian descent or Indonesians married to Dutch individuals (Hoogveld, 2000). Legally, they were considered Dutch citizens, yet this label covered a socially diverse group of people who arrived in the Netherlands (Van Amersfoort & Van Niekerk, 2006).

The independence of Dutch colonies led to the first significant waves of migration to the Netherlands. In the early 1950s, more than 4,000 soldiers who had served in the Dutch army in the South Moluccan Islands arrived with their families. This migration was not the result of any formal immigration policy, as no such policy was in place or even considered at the time (Yoffe, 2013). According to Hoogveld (2000), after the Indonesian war of independence, 4,000 Moluccan soldiers brought their families to the Netherlands.

The second wave of immigration due to decolonization occurred in the early 1970s, with Suriname's transition from a Dutch colony to an independent state (Hoogveld, 2000). According to Hoogveld (2000), Suriname officially became a republic in 1975, and by 1980, the Dutch government introduced a visa requirement for Surinamese citizens seeking to settle in the Netherlands. Before 1970, small numbers of upper- and middle-class Surinamese had already migrated to the Netherlands. However, during the 1970s, political unrest associated with decolonization triggered a large migration of less-educated groups, peaking just before Suriname's independence (Hoogveld, 2000). In the late 1980s, a new wave of postcolonial migration began with the arrival of residents from the Dutch Antilles, since the Dutch Antilles remain part of the Netherlands, Antilleans are Dutch nationals and have unrestricted access to the country (Van Meeteren et al, 2013). Antillean society mirrors its colonial past, with a population primarily composed of descendants of white Protestant and Jewish colonial elites, black lower classes descended from enslaved Africans, and a middle layer of mixed-ancestry individuals (Van Amersfoort & Van Niekerk, 2006). By 2012, the number of Antilleans residing in the Netherlands reached 143,992 (Van Meeteren et al., 2013).

Besides colonization, after the Second World War, guest workers contributed substantially to the influx of migrants settling within Dutch borders. Over the decades, this migration continued in various forms, and today, a large portion of the non-native population in the Netherlands can trace their heritage back to these labor migrants, originally recruited to support economic rebuilding efforts after the war's destruction (Yoffe, 2013). Initially, guest workers, along with the Dutch government and employers, believed their time in the Netherlands would be temporary, with plans for them to return home once labor shortages eased (Hoogveld, 2000). However, like in other labor migration processes, this evolved over time. Family reunification became the next phase, occurring mainly between the mid-1970s and early 1980s, particularly among Turkish and Moroccan communities (Hoogveld, 2000).

In the late 1980s and particularly in the early 1990s, the Netherlands saw a significant increase in asylum seekers (Siegel & De Neubourg, 2011). While only a few thousand asylum seekers had arrived annually throughout the 1970s and 1980s, their numbers rose to 14,000 in 1988 and surged further, reaching annual peaks of 53,000 in 1995 and between 45,000 in 1999 and 2001

(Siegel & De Neubourg, 2011). The authors stress that in 2001, when the Netherlands and other countries tightened the criteria for refugee status and reconsidered cash-based social assistance, the number of asylum applications declined significantly. Throughout the years, asylum seekers have come largely from countries like the former Yugoslavia, the former Soviet Union, Turkey, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Sri Lanka, Angola, Somalia, and Sierra Leone (Van Meeteren et al., 2013). More recent flows, the Syrian conflict significantly influenced migration patterns, with nearly 28,000 Syrian refugees settling in the Netherlands in 2016 alone, contributing substantially to the growth of the migrant-origin population (Lubbers & de Valk, 2020). Similar to many other migrant groups, Syrian migration often began with men arriving first, followed by family reunification, leading to a predominantly young demographic structure (Lubbers & de Valk, 2020). Since 24 February 2022, Ukrainians, mostly women and children have been fleeing their country in large numbers due to the Russian invasion to many countries in EU, including the Netherlands, also shaping and influencing the migration system and dynamic in the country (Woerkom, 2024).

Last but not least, in recent years, a significant number of immigrants to the Netherlands originate from Western countries, particularly those within the European Union (EU), as a result of the EU's expansion and strengthening. According to Wachter and Fleischmann (2018), following the 2008 economic crisis, immigration from Southern Europe also saw an increase. In the Netherlands, specifically, the population of immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe quadrupled between 2004 and 2015, while the number of Southern European immigrants rose by one-third over the same period (Wachter & Fleischmann, 2018). The authors stress that the unique legal status of EU immigrants, which grants them the freedom to move between all EU member states, has been linked to more "fluid" migration patterns. This means their migration is often more complex, dynamic, and unpredictable compared to that of non-EU immigrants.

2.3.2. Inclusion, Integration and Assimilation

As discussed in the previous section, immigrants have long been part of Dutch society to varying extents. It is therefore important to understand the differences between inclusion, integration, and assimilation of immigrants into the host society. Taking into consideration that an individual's personal sense of belonging to a place must always reckon with the social and spatial dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that shape that environment, inevitably influencing one's belonging (Antonsich, 2010). According to Van Heerden et al. (2014), in many Western European countries, immigration and integration have grown in importance as social issues. The authors emphasize that anti-immigration parties play a central role in politicizing these topics, either by bringing them to public attention or by influencing mainstream parties to shift their language and stance on these matters.

Inclusion, integration, and assimilation are often used as synonyms; however, they refer to different aspects of interaction between a certain group and society, here immigrants and the host society. Houtkamp (2015) explains that in studies on minorities, inclusion generally refers to feelings of belonging, acceptance within institutions (such as the military, judiciary, and political systems), or the level of societal participation. Houtkamp stresses that an inclusive society supports the cultural and linguistic expression of all its citizens—potentially by integrating minority languages into education or offering multilingual services in public institutions. For Houtkamp (2015), inclusion emphasizes a reciprocal relationship where minorities adapt to their host society while also being supported in preserving their distinct identities.

Assimilation, on the other hand, is a complex process aimed at reducing boundaries and fostering interaction, thereby diminishing or eliminating ethnic distinctions along with associated cultural differences and identities (Rumbaut, 2015). Rumbaut observes that assimilation often leads to the blending of previously distinct ethnocultural groups into a single entity. On a group level, assimilation entails integrating one or more minority groups into the dominant culture, which typically requires immigrants to give up their cultural identity (Houtkamp, 2015). Historically, the term has rationalized selective, state-enforced policies aimed at eliminating minority cultures to promote the 'benevolent' dominance of other populations (Rumbaut, 2015). Advances in communication, transportation, and media technology today, however, have made it easier for immigrants to stay connected with their home countries and other immigrant communities in Western societies, making assimilation an increasingly complex process (Houtkamp, 2015).

According to Verdía Varela et al. (2020), integration contrasts with assimilation, emphasizing the building of positive intercultural relationships grounded in shared values like mutual respect and the right to cultural diversity. This approach, the authors argue, promotes social dynamics that encourage interaction, dialogue, and exchange among different groups. Recognizing the interconnectedness of migration and globalization is crucial to understanding shifting perspectives on multiculturalism, integration, and citizenship. Rather than focusing solely on national frameworks, European countries are increasingly collaborating to promote secular liberalism in a globalized context, even as they place renewed emphasis on national identity (de Leeuw & van Wichelen, 2012). According to these authors, since March 15, 2006, certain groups of foreign nationals have been required to pass an integration exam (the Dutch Civic Integration Exam Abroad) to qualify for a temporary residence permit before arriving in the Netherlands. De Leeuw and van Wichelen (2012) suggest that the new integration discourse aims to regulate migrants, shaping them into 'recognizable' and 'acceptable' citizens. Houtkamp (2015) stresses that integration and inclusion are closely tied to the concept of the nation-state.

Historically, civic rights and responsibilities have defined citizenship. However, European nation-states now place growing emphasis on the expectation that migrants will assimilate into the host country's culture (de Leeuw & van Wichelen, 2012). This demand for cultural allegiance is evident in political and public discussions and is especially prominent in the rituals and procedures tied to citizenship requirements. Fouka (2023) emphasizes that laws and policies influence behavior not only by their actions but also by the messages they convey. A policy can reflect the underlying attitudes of the society that implements it, shaping the behavior of targeted groups through psychological reactions to these signals. This symbolic role of state policy is seen by political scientists and sociologists as crucial to the integration process. Scholars often categorize policies as either inclusive or exclusive, focusing on their symbolic meanings rather than their practical effects (Fouka, 2023).

3. Research Objective and Questions

This study aims to explore how musicians with migrant backgrounds in the Netherlands use music as a means to negotiate their identity, reflect on their cultural heritage, and foster a sense of belonging within a socially fragmented landscape.

Therefore, my main research question is:

How do musicians with migrant backgrounds in the Netherlands negotiate their identities through music within fragmented communities, considering music as a medium for cultural representation and identity formation?

Sub questions:

- How do musicians with migrant backgrounds negotiate identity through music?
- How do they use music to express themselves and connect in a new cultural environment?
- How do musicians with migrant backgrounds they use music to navigate external cultural perceptions imposed on them?
- How do they use music to make the Netherlands feel like home?

4. Methodology

4.1. Research approach and positionality

This research was conducted using interpretivism as the central approach, as it "emphasizes the meaningful nature of people's character and participation in both social and cultural life" (Chowdhury, 2014, p. 433). The focus of this study is to explore the identity deconstruction and reconstruction of musicians with migrant backgrounds as they adapt to the dynamics of a new society, and how they use music to reconnect and realign with previous background and new setting. Ablett and Dyer (2009) highlight that "interpretation is not simply a matter of conveying an already transparent understanding to where there is none, but also of unraveling misunderstandings, rectifying errors, and actively constituting a coherent meaning" (p. 216). In this context, interpretivism serves as a tool to reveal the experiences and stories of musicians with migrant backgrounds, and how they use music to express and reflect on their culture of origin, identity, and sense of belonging.

From an interpretivist perspective, social interactions and practices are collaboratively shaped by individuals who actively participate in interpreting and negotiating meaning (Lin, 2015). Thus, the researcher, as a participant observer, co-creates meanings with those being studied. The way individuals perceive themselves, others, and the world is likely influenced by factors such as the researcher's positionality, personal experiences and the environment in which they live (Pulla & Carter, 2018). For this reason, understanding the researcher's background is a relevant way to acknowledge potential bias. This study was conducted through my lens as a Brazilian, white, middle-class immigrant woman living in the Netherlands. I have limited experience with playing or performing music, but I perceive music as a way to connect to one's own culture(s), identities, and values, whether by attending concerts or listening music on streets or through streaming platforms. My own background as an immigrant offers the possibility of better connecting with the participants of this study. It is also acknowledged that my lack of experience in playing music present a challenge in understanding its deeper layers. However, this challenge was addressed through further study on the topic, active listening, and observation, and, most importantly, through participant observation and semi-structured interviews conducted during this research.

4.2. Research design

4.2.1. Sampling

For this study, the sample consisted of first-generation immigrants, defined as foreign-born individuals currently living in the Netherlands, who identified themselves as musicians. If the

musicians were part of a band, the interviews were conducted individually, considering that identity is a personal aspect. Taking into consideration that most identity formation happens in early adulthood, between 18–25 years of age (Arnett, 2000), I understand 18 as the minimum age to explore and reflect on the topic. The languages used with research participants included Portuguese, as two of the participants lived in Brazil, and English as a common language between myself and the others I interviewed with different backgrounds. The fieldwork was between December 2024 and beginning of January 2025. The participants, musicians with migrant backgrounds, were selected through snowball sampling, a nonrandom and nonprobability method. In this approach, the current studied participants recruit future participants from their social networks. This method was effective because it not only saves time but also allows the researcher to communicate more easily with participants, as they are familiar with the initial sample, who already has a connection to the researcher (Naderifar et al., 2017). The first contact was made through research online (Instagram and Google) of music events with musicians that could have a migrant background. This method was used until sample size was achieved, leading to a total of 12 participants. Moreover, the sampling was not limited by gender, sexuality, race, ethnic, or music style, but aimed to achieve as much diversity as possible to encompass a wide range of experiences and perspectives. All participants come from different countries of origin (see Table 1 – Participants (Names and Pseudonyms) and interviews in the in-depth semi-structured interview section below). According to Kiwan and Meinhof (2011), studying musicians as individuals rather than solely as representatives of specific ethnic or geographic communities in both "host" and "home" countries allows for a richer understanding of the complex translocal and transnational connections they form. While it does not downplay the strong ethnic and national ties many of these musicians maintain, it provides a new context for exploring the layered complexities of their identities (Kiwan & Meinhof, 2011). As a qualitative study with a smaller, non-probability sample, the results cannot be used to make generalizations. Nevertheless, the goal of this research was not to generalize musicians with migrant background perceptions, but to deepen the discussion around immigrants adapting and actively engaging into a new culture.

4.2.2. Data Collection

In-depth semi-structured interviews

According to Brinkmann (2014), for many years now “people talk with others to learn about how they experience the world and how they think, act, feel and develop as individuals and in a groups; in recent decades, such knowledge producing conversation have been refined as discussed as qualitative interviews” (p.424). Semi-structured interviews encompass a set of pre-determined open questions regarding the topic to be explored, to be asked at some point of the interview. Which allowed additional questions to arise throughout the conversation, enabling a deeper exploration of the topic and the participants' perspectives. It is an important method for allowing the researcher to gain insights into social life from the viewpoints, experiences, and language of those who live it. They give participants a chance to share their stories, knowledge, and offer their personal perspectives (Boeije, 2010). Musicians with migrant backgrounds living and performing in the Netherlands were interviewed to gain an in-depth understanding how they use music to negotiate their identity considering their background, experiences, and stories in a new setting. In this study, the interview explored meanings towards the cultural heritage represented in the music choice, performance, identity, music memory, adaptation process and aspirations, taking around 45 minutes of duration. Informed consent was asked before each interview. When allowed by the interviewee, the audio of interview was recorded to better ensure the quality of the data collection. For the one interview where recording was not agreed

upon, notes were taken and later sent to the interviewee for verification to ensure their accuracy. The location of the interview was chosen by the participant, which allow the interviewee to choose a place where they feel comfortable. Most interviews were face to face, which allows to better connect with the participants and also collect information in "terms of gestures, body language and face expressions" (Brinkmann, 2014, p.442). However, participants preferring online interviews were also accommodated, as one of the participants, for example, was not in the Netherlands. Fieldnotes were taken right after each interview to better recollect and keep important nonverbal data. The places where the interviews took place according to the participant is described below in Table 1:

Participants (Names and Pseudonyms)	Background	Where the interview took place	Means
Andrew	Uganda	Utrecht	In Person
Spock	United States/Belgium/ Mexico	Wageningen	In Person
Nizar	Palestine	Utrecht	In Person
Felipe	Colombia	Wageningen	In Person
Rose	China	Wageningen	In Person
Marc	Spain	The Hague	In Person
Ayaz	Turkey	Wageningen	In Person
Katy Morag	Scotland	Wageningen	In Person
Dan	Israel	-	Online
Mr. Soekroe	Suriname	-	Online
Pedro Vieira	Brazil	-	Online
Rami	Syria	Wageningen	In Person

Table 1 – Participants (Names and Pseudonyms) and Interviews.

Participant Observation

Participant observation involved the researcher actively engaging in a predefined role within the environment being studied. It is a useful method for allowing the researcher to grasp the perspectives and lifestyles of people from within, by exploring the settings of their daily, lived experiences (Flowerdew & Martin, 2005). Participant observation "is considered essential in detecting meanings, feelings and experiences" (Boeije, 2010, p.59). Atkison and Hammerley (1998) argue that all social research inherently involves participant observation, as one cannot examine the social world without being part of it. According to Merrill et al. (2023), a classical concert is a structured event influenced by social traditions and the evolution of Western music, containing several relevant frame components, such as: programming (choice of music), the multimodal nature of the event (musicians creating it in the moment), and the environment or venue where it takes place. Therefore, to better understand the elements involved in an immigrant musician's performances or practices, and to better comprehend their connection to music, I attended three concerts, observing and taking notes on the music performed, instruments used, clothing and stage setup, as well as interactions. Notes were taken in written form (paper and online). Informed consent was asked before each observation. Here I wish to acknowledge the challenges of this method, as Boeije (2010) stresses that it taxes the researcher's social skills as well as their memories. The researcher continually selects, is insider and outsider at the same time, joins and observers, participates and takes notes. Due to the time frame of the fieldwork, which took place in December 2024 and early January 2025, the number of observations was lower than initially intended. This was primarily because of the holiday season and winter break, during which many participants were on vacation, resulting in fewer performances. I observed three distinct performances: one in Utrecht and two in Wageningen. In one of the performances in Wageningen, three participants performed alongside other musicians, allowing me to observe five participants in total. All observations took place after the interviews with the participants. While this was not intentional, I often asked if I could attend a performance following our conversation, which led to these observations. The order of these

events may have influenced my perception of the performance. Rather than experiencing it as a neutral audience member, I approached it as someone who had already gained insight into their lives, which allowed me to connect more deeply with the performance and understand the narrative behind it.

Music Elicitation

Music elicitation is a qualitative method that aligns with other established elicitation techniques (e.g., photo, video, object, mapping, and others) as it aims to enhance research data by using a medium to provoke discussion and stimulate responses (Allet, 2010). According to Allett (2010), these methods serve as tools to access insights that may otherwise be challenging to uncover, helping to explore areas or themes that might receive limited or subdued responses in traditional qualitative interviews. For the author, the focus is often on eliciting narratives about experiences, memories, emotions, and the significance participants attribute to the elicitation material, here music. Using music elicitation in qualitative interviews can provide access to respondents' emotions, sensory experiences, and affective memories. The insights gathered may extend beyond music to encompass various aspects of life, such as relationships, daily routines, personal experiences, and collective social memories (Allet, 2010). In this context, I used music elicitation as a complement to semi-structured interviews. It served as a tool to initiate discussion and connect with participants, rather than being analyzed independently. Instead, the insights from it were integrated as part of the broader interview data, enriching the depth and scope of the study. Through this method I hoped to improve communication and interaction between researcher and participants, making the research process more effective and engaging. Music is deeply tied to memory and space, Bohlman (2005) emphasizes that music holds the power to represent cultural contexts, ideologies, identities, sexuality, and much more. Its capacity to evoke emotions and encapsulate complex social and cultural dynamics makes it a powerful tool for exploring and understanding human experiences. To enrich the depth of this study, participants were invited to choose a song that they feel represents them. This could be an original composition, an existing piece, or a combination of both. Participants could choose to record their selection, perform it live, or share it in any format they felt most comfortable with. At the beginning of the interview, they were asked to share their choice, as well as the emotions and meanings the song evokes and has for them. To ensure a safe and supportive environment, participants will be reminded that they could withdraw from this process at any time. Acknowledging the deeply personal and potentially emotional nature of sharing personal stories through music, as a form to respect participants' comfort and boundaries.

4.2.3. Data Analysis

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed using two software programs: Good Tape and Otter.ai. The transcriptions were then cross-checked by the researcher. Two different tools were used because Otter.ai only transcribes interviews in English, whereas Good Tape was necessary for transcribing interviews conducted in Portuguese, as preferred by two participants. A verbatim transcription was used, as it transcribes nonverbal behavior, such as pause and laugh, helping to simply the data analysis by allowing researchers to engage more directly with the data (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). According to Halcomb and Davidson (2006), "a combination of verbatim transcription and researcher notation of participants' nonverbal behavior has been cited as being central to the reliability, validity, and veracity of qualitative data collection" (p.40). After transcription, the data collected through observations and interviews were segmented and reassemble considering the problem statement, through open, axial, and selective coding. Deductive codes based on the main concepts of the research and inductivities codes emerged from the data were used. Through the transcription process, notes were taken on prominent

topics and reflected on how to organize and group them. Therefore, the following codes were used (Table 2 - Coding: Deductive and Inductive Codes) and later became sub-chapters of this research:

Deductive Codes	Inductive Codes
Balancing Heritage and Adaptation	Music as a Coping Mechanism
Identity through Music	Music as a Universal Language
Reflecting on Cultural Practices	Stereotypes and Expectations
Echo-Roots: songs grow up listening to	Reclaiming Narratives Through Music
Music as Heritage	Exoticism and Othering
Connecting with Audiences	Music or an instrument as a Home
Local Influences	
Functions of music	
Power Dynamics	
Intercultural Connections	
Local Networks	

Table 2 – Coding: Deductive and Inductive Codes

All the data coming from observations and interviews is confidential and anonymized (in the case of participants who choose to use pseudonyms). Following Boeije (2010) suggestion, the data does not include participants' names or other unique identifiers, and only the researcher conducting the analysis is able to identify participants using a codebook. Pseudonyms were chosen to protect participants' identities while keeping their stories personal and relatable. According to Allen and Wiles (2016), pseudonyms are no longer just a tool for confidentiality; they now involve complex considerations of power, voice, methodology, and audience. The authors emphasize that this shift raises questions about how pseudonyms should be chosen and whether researchers can move from a top-down approach to a more participatory process with participants. Taking this into consideration, each participant was asked which pseudonym they would like to use and could choose any name they felt comfortable with. Some opted to keep their real names, others selected names they liked, and a few did not respond. In such cases, until the moment, a pseudonym was assigned to them. The codebook and all related materials are securely stored and digitally protected on the computer.

4.2.4. Ethical Considerations

According to Golemo (2020), “unquestionably, identity dilemmas and blurred, indeterminate national identification of immigrants and their children may be a source of anxiety, frustration, and confusion” (p.116). Migration experiences and narratives, particularly those of forced migrants such as refugees and asylum seekers, are often emotionally and culturally sensitive, evoking painful or challenging memories. Therefore, given the focus of this study, ethical considerations are a vital component to ensure that data collection is conducted without causing harm or compromising the well-being of individual participants (Decker et al., 2011). To minimize potential harm, interviews were conducted in a location of the participant’s choosing. Participants were informed that they could pause or stop the interview at any time and may skip any question they find uncomfortable, fostering a safe and respectful environment. In addition, all participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, with their identities anonymized to protect their privacy. Informed consent was obtained before the interviews, ensuring participants understand the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw. Finally, the research was conducted with cultural sensitivity, respecting the unique backgrounds and

experiences of each participant. For this study, I will use the American Association of Geographers (AAG) *Statement of Professional Ethics* as a guiding framework. The AAG emphasizes that "geography is a field of study that examines the relations among people, places, and the more-than-human world" (AAG, 2024, p. 1). This aligns with the study's focus on exploring how musicians with migrant backgrounds navigate and express their identities in a new setting and society through music. The AAG underscores the importance of conducting research "with," rather than "on," participants as a sign of respect and care. Adopting an interpretivist approach, this study recognizes knowledge as a co-production between the researcher and participants, fostering a reciprocal relationship. To honor this principle, the results and final report will be shared with the participants. Additionally, the AAG highlights the need to remain mindful of unconscious biases, automatic associations shaped by socialization and activated without conscious awareness, to avoid prejudgments and ensure ethical research practices.

5. Results

This chapter explores the perceptions and reflections of the participants, musicians with migrant backgrounds in the Netherlands, examining how music shapes their personal and professional journeys in a new social environment. This study does not seek to generalize migrant musicians' experiences but rather to amplify their voices, shedding light on their self-reflection processes, challenges, and opportunities within a globalized and fragmented society. Through this exploration, the chapter identifies recurring themes in their narratives, offering insight into the role of music in identity formation, adaptation, and belonging. The themes discussed in this chapter were identified not only through recurring patterns in participants' narratives but also in relation to the conceptual framework of this study, ensuring a dialogue between empirical findings and theoretical perspectives. The musicians featured in this study come from diverse backgrounds, countries, ages, and life trajectories. Yet a common thread unites them: music has been part of their lives since childhood, and they now reside in the Netherlands, identifying as musicians.

The themes presented here reflect not only participants' narratives but also, acknowledging that my researcher positionality inevitably shapes the analysis, the aspects that stood out most to me as a researcher engaging with their stories.

5.1. Cultural Identity as a Fluid Process

Hall (2015) asserts that "instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (p. 392). Building on this perspective, this section explores the multiple layers that shape the cultural and social identities of musicians with migrant backgrounds, acknowledging identity as a dynamic and evolving process and how music is used in this context.

5.1.1. Balancing Heritage and Adaptation

Moving to a new country can be an exciting adventure for some and a deeply challenging process for others. It often prompts reflection on personal identity, cultural roots, and the ways in which one adapts to a new environment. While migration occurs for many reasons - whether for education, seeking a better life, or escaping conflict - this study focuses on how musicians with migrant background in the Netherlands navigate their emotions, reflections, and sense of self in this new context. Hall (2015) emphasizes that cultural identities have historical origins and are shaped by their contexts. However, he stresses that, like all aspects of history, they are constantly evolving. Rather than being permanently rooted in an essentialized past, cultural identities are

continuously reshaped by the dynamic interplay of history, culture, and power (Hall, 2015). For Hall (2015), a new place introduces new historical narratives, cultural influences, and power dynamics, all of which contribute to this ongoing transformation.

Migrants often find themselves balancing the preservation of what they perceive as their heritage with the expectations of their new host society. One of the most frequently discussed aspects of this adaptation among participants was language, not only in daily life but also in artistic expression. Choosing which language to sing in, associated with the challenges of performing in an unfamiliar language, or connecting to people in a foreign language becomes part of their identity negotiation. In one of the interviews, Andrew, a musician with Ugandan background reflected on the multilingual nature of his performances and the challenge of using Dutch:

> I sing in English. I sing in Teso, mainly Teso, my mother tongue. I mainly sing in English and Swahili—those are my main languages. But sometimes, depending on how I feel, it can be Dutch, although that's really the worst language you could ever try to play music in… I don't know, I tried. (Andrew)

This quote demonstrates how expressing oneself in a new language can be a challenging process. According to Ożańska-Ponikwia (2012), emotional expressions and frameworks vary across cultures and languages, with some concepts remaining untranslatable, as they encompass both feelings and cognitive interpretations, connecting individuals, their actions, and the social environment. Emotions can be understood as personal, partly physical reactions that simultaneously reflect moral and ideological perspectives (Ożańska-Ponikwia, 2012). Therefore, singing as an act of expression also embodies this challenge of translating emotions, feelings, stories, and experiences, ultimately serving as a means of expressing one's identity.

For some, language is less of a barrier due to historical connections, as one participant from Suriname explained:

> Suriname was a Dutch colony, so when we moved from Suriname to the Netherlands, the language was not a problem for me because it was the same language. (Mr. Soekroe)

As Suriname was a Dutch colony until 1975, Dutch remains the official language of the country, making linguistic integration smoother for some migrants. However, for others, language presents a significant challenge in the migration process:

> We decided to go back to the old country. We had family in Belgium, so when we moved, I was 13 and had to relearn the language. We only spoke English, so we had to learn Dutch and French. In the end, it worked out. I now speak everything fluently, but at first, it was rough. Not speaking the language made it hard to connect with people. We were the migrants in that sense, immigrants returning to Belgium, back to our roots. (Spock)

These reflections highlight language not only as a tool for communication but as a key factor in social integration and belonging. Beyond spoken language, music itself functions as a form of language, carrying meanings, histories, and traditions. As Slevc (2012) suggests, both speech and music are powerful ways in which humans make sense of sound. Nizar, who has a Palestinian background shared his thoughts on how his musical identity and language reflects his background:

> I think my musical language is deeply rooted in where I come from, and that's important to me for maintaining my identity. At the same time, I am open to change. What I'm doing here now is trying to find musical partners—whether Dutch or from other backgrounds—so that I can collaborate with them. My music is strongly tied to my origins, but in a way, it is also contemporary and modern. I see myself integrating while still preserving my musical identity, which, of course, is part of my cultural identity. (Nizar)

Language and music, then, are not only mediums of expression but also crucial elements in how migrants negotiate their identity in a new cultural landscape, connecting them to their culture of origin while also reflecting on the diverse aspects of a different social context. According to Adserà and Pytliková (2016), language significantly impacts various economic and non-economic aspects of a migrant's life, including social integration, the breadth of their social network, political involvement, civic participation, educational achievements, health, and family dynamics. For the authors, being familiar with the language(s) of the host society not only lowers both financial and emotional migration costs but also provides valuable insights into other factors that shape the migration experience. Capstick (2020) draws on Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of the linguistic market, which suggests that communication always occurs within specific social contexts. Bourdieu argues that individuals with greater linguistic capital impose their language norms on those with less capital, reinforcing social hierarchies. In migration, this often means that newcomers must navigate a dominant linguistic landscape, where the language of the host society becomes a marker of inclusion, exclusion, and resistance.

Language is one of many aspects that participants often reflected on during interviews and continue to reflect on in their daily lives when considering cultural heritage and adaptation in a new social environment, alongside music, food, social norms, behaviors, religion, and other cultural elements. In one conversation, Andrew shared his thoughts on planning a concert and whether he should select different songs based on his identities, his new environment, and what the audience might be receptive to:

> So, should I play different songs? Initially, I thought so. First of all, I carry multiple backgrounds with me—I have a background as an African musician, and I have a background as a Christian musician. I was deeply influenced by my pastor, and, in fact, I attended music college through a part-time scholarship from my church.

Andrew's quote demonstrates his self-reflection process regarding his diverse background and the different identities he carries, as well as which aspects of himself he should present in this new space. According to Safdar et al. (2020), surface-level behavioral changes are also important when adapting to a new social context. These changes refer to modifications in how individuals speak, dress, and eat, which can shift when people from different cultural backgrounds interact (Safdar et al., 2020). While these surface-level changes are more noticeable than deeper cultural shifts, the authors emphasize that behavioral changes are just as important as these deeper shifts. Andrew, also reflected on his clothes, and how he wants to present himself:

> I try to maintain really what I find important that identifies me, and I'm not always thinking so much of what other people are thinking about how I'm dressed? Yeah, once in a while, I've reflected, oh, I don't know what I think about me when I'm dressed like this, but I like that. I like to challenge them, because this is me. Yes, I heard one of the musicians in Kenya once telling me, Oh, I wish you could - would

> dress a bit more youthful. But I say, No, that's not how I want it. I really want to dress like this. (Andrew)

For Rose, a singer with a Chinese background, clothing serves as both inspiration and representation. She shared that, during performances with her band, they wear traditional Chinese attire, which not only connects them to their heritage but also inspires their artistic expression.

Safdar et al. (2020) emphasize that clothing is one of the most visible and widely used forms of self-expression, communicating aspects of an individual's personality, group affiliation, and the social context they navigate. For the author, clothing is part of a dynamic social process, deeply intertwined with ethnic and religious identity, as well as self-esteem. Therefore, it becomes a significant element in shaping one's identity and influencing how individuals present themselves and are perceived by others.

Nizar reflected on the challenge of balancing identity and adaptation, and how much to immerse in the new cultural environment:

> I try not to immerse myself too much in the Dutch way of doing things because I've noticed that foreign musicians who come to the Netherlands often get absorbed into the local scene. They start circulating exclusively within the Dutch music industry, influenced by the funding structures and how the cultural sector operates here. I don't know if you're familiar with this, but I believe there's something flawed about the system—it encourages musicians to assimilate rather than grow. So, I try to keep some distance. I engage in projects and take part in the scene, but I make a conscious effort not to lose myself in it. I want to keep my musical journey broader.(Nizar)

In Nizar's quote, one can observe his reflection on the balance between absorbing elements of Dutch culture and the local music scene, while also preserving his own cultural heritage and identity. He reflects on the pressure musicians face to adapt to the local culture and its dynamics. His use of the word 'assimilation' also reflects his perception of the process of adopting the culture, norms, values, and behaviors of the dominant or majority group, often leading to the abandonment of elements of one's original identity or culture. For Nizar, maintaining his distinct approach to music-making and self-expression allows him the freedom to remain authentic, enabling him to be true to himself. This process involves not merely absorbing influences, but selectively choosing what aligns with his personal identity.

For musicians with migrant backgrounds, the interplay between language, culture, and identity is not just theoretical. Rather, it is lived and felt through the songs they perform, the lyrics they choose, and the collaborations they engage in. Their music becomes a space where heritage and adaptation coexist, allowing them to forge new ways of belonging while staying connected to both their past identities and their evolving sense of self in a new place. Hall (2015) stresses that "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (p.394).

5.1.2. Identity through Music

Hesmondhalgh (2008) highlights the multifaceted nature of music, emphasizing that "music often feels intensely and emotionally linked to the private self" (p. 2). As previously discussed, identity is not a fixed entity but an ongoing process. Frith (1996) takes this further, arguing that identity is an experience best understood through music. Music acts as a powerful gateway to

identity, as it deeply evokes a sense of both individuality and connection to others, blending personal expression with collective experience (Frith, 1996). Therefore, it is a medium for self-discovery and expression.

Andrew shared his journey, reflecting on his different identities as musician, the expectations of his musical path:

> I have a background as an African musician. I have a background as a Christian musician. I was very, very, very, very much taught by my pastor, actually, I went to college of music through a part-time scholarship of my church. And so if you are somebody like that, going through a missionary music school, you are expected to come out and produce a certain kind of music. Yes. No one issue. But this was not exactly how my music was coming out. The elements of music or the genre that I chose to use are not very conventional music genres there, and it was leading me in a certain direction, which I, kind of, it was more like my guide, what kind of music and what and initially I thought, what kind of message also, but when I realized that I don't need to change so much, because I have a goal in this life, and my music helps me to pursue this goal wherever I am, whether it is in Uganda or here. (Andrew)

Music is more than just sound; it carries the essence of identity—shaped by culture, place, and even faith. It is deeply influenced by past experiences, like studying in a Christian school, which shaped how this musician learned and connected with music over the years. Research by Keller (2023) on college students and their relationship with music supports this idea, as she found that "many of my respondents expressed that their musical identity was an essential mode of self-expression. The way they engaged with music helped shape and refine their personality" (p. 22).

For Pedro Vieira, a musician from Brazil, music became a way to tell stories and carve out an identity from an early age:

> It was always the ability to tell a story through music. And I thought it was really cool, you know. Like, I don’t know, I think I was seven years old when I played the guitar for the first time. So, it was very much a thing of... At school, that thing, like, the kid who’s good at sports. The kid who is really pretty. I was the kid with the musical instrument.(Pedro Vieira, translated from Portuguese)

Peery et al. (2012) suggest two main aspects for understanding the influence of music on children. First, music holds significance due to its intrinsic value. As an essential aspect of life and a reflection of human culture, many believe in introducing, educating, and immersing children in music simply because it is meaningful and enriching. Second, acquiring musical skills can also bring additional advantages, extending to various aspects of personal and social competence (Peery et al., 2012). As a result, music plays a significant role in identity formation during childhood and adolescence.

For Marc, a musician with a Spanish background, music is an avenue for self-expression through composition, improvisation, and collaboration:

> I'm a clarinet player, and I'm also a composer, and I produce projects and music. I like to organize, to put together pieces of music and pieces of, like, information or people that create a bigger, that allow me to express myself through music. Basically, that's the bigger picture. And how do I do that? By putting musicians I like

> together, by composing my own music, by performing the repertoire that I feel familiar with, and mainly with improvisation. So I'm a Latin jazz clarinet player overall. That's what I studied. But I like all the music genres, including improvisation, that's my field. Like in between. I always say I'm in between jazz and world music, everything in between kind of thing. (Marc)

Music is also deeply tied to emotional authenticity. Dan, who has an Israeli background, shared how staying true to the present moment keeps his music honest and alive:

> Every day, I find myself feeling different things. And I think part of being a musician is being honest with those feelings, acknowledging them in the moment. That's how you keep your music fresh. It's not about learning patterns and repeating them on stage; it's about truly exploring and opening up ideas so you can express yourself as you genuinely feel in that instant. (Dan)

These perspectives illustrate how music is not just a creative outlet but a fundamental way of navigating identity. Whether shaped by cultural heritage, personal experiences, or emotional states, music remains a deeply personal and transformative force in the lives of these musicians.

5.1.3. Reflecting on Cultural Practices

This section is based on the literature review, but also grounded in my personal experience as an immigrant. Therefore, I was personally curious about if and how the participants reflect on their own cultural practices, reevaluate, reenforce or change them. Hall (2015) argues that when moving to a new country, the past continues to influence us, but no longer in a straightforward, factual way. For the author, our relationship to our previous culture, much like a child's bond with the mother, is always shaped by what has come after the rupture, in this case, the act of migrating. It is constructed through memory, imagination, stories, and myths. Hall highlights that cultural identities serve as points of reference, unstable points of connection, shaped within the frameworks of history and culture. They are not fixed essences but, rather, positions. Therefore, identity always involves politics, a politics of positioning, which is not secured by an unquestionable, transcendental "law of origin" (Hall, 2015). In this sense, both identity and cultural practices are continuously challenged by our past and present, influenced by where we stand, both geographically and politically. By cultural practices, I mean the set of practices, beliefs, and objects that embody the most broadly shared meanings of a social system (reference).

Dan reflected on how moving to a distant place fundamentally challenges his sense of self, giving him the freedom to decide what aspects of his identity and which cultural practices he wishes to preserve or transform. He expressed how migration forces individuals to make conscious choices about their cultural identity:

> First of all, when you're far from your culture, from your family and friends, your whole personality and set of values are being tested in in a very interesting way, especially in what's going in the crazy situation that's going on over my country in the last year. But, yeah, yeah, I think, I think moving on from, from Israel, or from whatever country, makes you build up your own, your own personality better. I mean, the fact that that you have to choose to do everything you do, and not because it just, it's around you, you know, whatever. It's, it's holidays, or just any gesture that are traditionally more common in your country. So you really have to

> choose everything you do, and also to choose whatever you don't want to do, what you want to leave behind, which is also okay.

Dan later added:

> I think, in general, it makes your it makes your identity crisis facing your life stronger, but at the same time more meaningful, because you see you see yourself choosing every ingredient that you want to be part of your life by all means, like, but everything it takes, whether it's you as a person or as the surrounding - of the people who surround you. So I think the element of choice in this one is clearer. (Dan)

Censi and Paniconi (2022) emphasize that the dynamic nature of migration reshapes identity, moving beyond the idea that migrants belong to a fixed, homogeneous, or monocultural group. This also applies to self-reflection, as migration invites individuals to explore new ways of being and living. For some participants, moving to a new country provides a fresh perspective on their homeland's culture and music. For Marc, who has a Catalan background, he describes how living in the Netherlands has given him a renewed appreciation for the music from his first country:

> Another difference that I think is also important to mention is that, how to say, I'm noticing that more and more that there is a lot of talent in Spain, like, I think, southern countries, and I include, of course, south of Europe, but also obviously Latin America, Central America, of course. But there is a lot of blood. There is in a good way. There is a lot of music that is very much alive. You know, it's a tiny bit different way to produce music, to make music, in the sense that it comes out more of a meat. It comes more of, of the inside of the belly, or, you know, the gut feeling. (Marc)

Marc's reflection highlights how being in the Netherlands has altered his perception of music from Spain and Southern countries, allowing him to see it as more emotionally driven and personal, serving as a profound expression of identity. He describes this music as embodying raw intensity and life, stating that "there is a lot of blood" and that it emerges from the "guts". This perspective aligns with Fernández et al.'s (2000) view on emotions and their expressions, which are not purely internal or private experiences but are socially constructed and shaped by both personal and cultural influences. Consequently, different cultures express emotions in distinct ways, which may be reflected in the depth and intensity of emotions conveyed through their music and music-making.

In a similar way, For Rose, a musician with a Chinese background, migration made certain cultural elements stand out more sharply:

> I think everything becomes more evident when you are in a different culture, country. […] Dutch people are very direct, and Chinese people are very polite. Both can be very extreme. In connecting with music, Chinese music can talk about the moon and the night, meaning love. Chinese Folk can be very bold, although it is [part of the] daily life of people. It would be used naturally, it is used to date, to meet people in mountain villages, which represents a lot of how they feel and how they are inside. (Rose)

Rose's reflection highlights how different ways of communicating are also reflected in how various cultures create music and channel meanings. She explains that Chinese music is used in an indirect and poetic manner, from social interactions to courtship.

For Pedro Vieira, a musician with a Brazilian background who lived in Argentina and Chile before The Netherlands, migration allowed him to discover Brazilian artists through the lens of his host countries, deepening his connection to his musical roots:

> When I arrived in Buenos Aires, people would say, 'Oh, you're Brazilian, right? Rita Lee, Jorge Ben.' And honestly, I had never really listened to them. I knew my mom had, but I hadn't. So I stopped to listen. Within a year, I was thinking, 'Argentina is amazing, but they didn't have Tropicália, did they?' That made me realize something: from the Modern Art Week to Tropicália, Brazil's strength has always been in reinterpreting foreign influences and making them uniquely ours. That's why our rock sounds so distinct, why we have bands like Skank and Novos Baianos. And I think, like many Brazilians, I carry this inventiveness with me. it's in everything we do, even in something as simple as chocolate pizza. (Pedro Vieira, translated from Portuguese)

Being in a new place opens a person up to seeing one's own culture through a different lens, in this case, through the perspective of the multicultural fabric of his host societies, allowing a person to step outside the bubble of one's familiar reality. It often enables us to discover new aspects of our culture that we appreciate and want to embrace.

Another topic that emerged in some interviews was the difference in how being a musician is perceived in the Netherlands compared to one's country of origin. Ayaz, a musician with a Turkish background, reflected on the contrast between being a musician in Turkey and in the Netherlands. He explained that in Turkey, being a musician is not recognized as a formal profession, with many people viewing the time and dedication invested in it as "in vain". For Rami, a musician with a Syrian background, the context is different. He sees little distinction between Syria and the Netherlands in this regard, as making a living from music remains a challenge in both countries:

> And it's little bit difficult in Syria to be a professional musician. You depend on the money that you got from music. That's really difficult. Also, in the Netherlands, almost all the musicians that I know, they do something else.

What makes societies recognize musicians as professionals is most often directly related to the values, norms, and cultural practices within the society. Just as every society determines what is considered appropriate for communication and self-expression, so too do these same cultural paradigms guide the way music is conceived and evaluated. While in some societies music may be seen as primarily an art or profession, in others it may be seen as a hobby.

For Frese (2015), the concept of descriptive norms, common behaviors within a society, provides insight into cultural practices. The author stress that norms shape both shared reality and behavior, influencing how individuals act. These norms are closely linked to cultural practices, functioning both as guiding principles and as outcomes of these behaviors. Once certain behaviors become socially ingrained, they evolve into established practices (Frese, 2015). My goal was not to draw strict distinctions between norms and values but rather to explore how these aspects manifest in the migration experience. From the ability to choose one's own personal influences to the ways emotions are expressed, the music people enjoy, and what it

means to be a musician in different cultural contexts—all these factors influence the journey of migration and adaptation of these participants.

5.1.4. Music as a coping mechanism

It is crucial to recognize that migration is a highly diverse experience, and not all migrants go through the same challenges before or after relocating. Rather than being a single event, migration is an ongoing process shaped by various factors over time. Each stage of this journey is further influenced by both social and individual aspects, such as language barriers, loss of social connections, and the stress of adapting to a new environment, among others (Bhugra, 2004). This theme emerged strongly in some of the interviews. Through conversations with multiple participants, one insight that stood out to me was the potential of music-making to serve as a coping mechanism, not only for the challenges of adapting to a new place but also for broader life difficulties. I was particularly inspired by the ability of these participants to use music to navigate adversity. Laszlo (1968) argues that music alleviates rather than intensifies emotional distress. For the author, affect is processed and channeled through musical experiences, providing a means of emotional regulation and resilience. Affect is understood here as collective emotions or the way emotions are shaped by cultural and social contexts. Anderson (2013) highlights that affects and emotions are inherently collective, as they arise from and reflect the ways in which life unfolds and is structured.

In a conversation with Felipe, he described a day he was feeling sad and he saw someone walking with the instrument on the back and decided to follow the musician:

> One day, I was feeling kind of down at home, it was a Sunday afternoon, and I thought, I think I'll go downtown, take a walk. So I went for a walk in the city center, and I saw a guy walking with some kind of instrument on his back. Turns out it was Jan. Then something in my head said, "Go after this guy. Follow him." So I started following him. But there were a lot of people, and I ended up losing him. I didn't see where he went. But after a while, I started hearing music in the distance. Somewhere. It was a really weird sound. I was like, what is that? And I followed it. Turns out it was a reed organ I was hearing from far away, which is why it sounded so strange to me. When I got there, I saw this table full of musicians sitting around it, all ages—kids, young people, adults, elderly. Everything! At first, I thought, wow, this must be a huge family of musicians getting together here. I sat down next to them and started filming and recording them. After a while, a percussionist, a guy playing the cajón, a guy from Suriname, Mr. Soekroe, looked at me and said, "Hey you, come!" [...] Look, at that time when I met these people, I was in a really bad place. I was alone, feeling really lonely. And I was struggling with my supervisor at work. Man... (Felipe, translated from Portuguese)

These quotes convey not only the association of music with something positive - a certainty that a musician with an instrument can only lead you to a welcoming, familiar place - but also how music and its connections helped him overcome the challenges of a new environment, cope with loneliness, and manage work-related stress.

Spock shared some hard journeys he went through, and how music helped him to express himself, and to focus on the good and enjoying the moment:

> [A]lso recognize that all that pain and hardship and difficulties and struggles that I've had through life, all the change that's also made me who I am, and that's the

> value I bring to the stability here in this household and in Wageningen. I've seen some really fucked-up shit in my life. I had really messed-up things happen to me, and all throughout that journey, I'm able to tell that story through some of my songs, but also just being cheerful and saying, “Hey, you got problems, but let's, let's have fun right now”. (Spock)

Silverman (2021) highlights how listening to music is a widely practiced behavior that helps individuals regulate their internal states, cope with negative emotions, and amplify positive feelings. He explains that music plays a significant role in emotional regulation by fostering emotional experiences, promoting social connection, enhancing well-being, encouraging relaxation, and serving as a form of distraction. Additionally, research suggests that listening to music can aid in processing negative emotions, fostering a sense of empowerment, and facilitating introspection, catharsis, and cognitive shifts (Silverman, 2021). This is evidenced in how Spock describes his use of music as a protective shield, allowing him to be social while still maintaining a sense of introspection. He described using music to cheer up his ex-girlfriend during moments when she was upset:

> I have to connect to myself before I can even engage with you or others. And that's what that that's what that masking coping mechanism is with the music, it's sort of a protective barrier. I have something physical in between me, and it needs my attention so you don't get my full attention at the same time. Playing music is also a really good way for me to authentically connect somebody. Sometimes somebody is feeling so angry or pouty or sad, and I'll grab the guitar, and then I'll be like, I had this with my previous girlfriend a lot. So when she would come over sad, I'll be like, maybe she got sad because her mom was angry at her or something, and I'll be like [Pablo starts singing and playing guitar]: “Your mom's so angry with you. What are you gonna do right now? Your mom's gonna yell and throw some bricks into your little house”.

Music and being a musician allow Spock not only to navigate through challenging times but also to support those around him.

For another participant, Mr. Soekroe, who was born in Suriname and moved to the Netherlands as kid, music was a support through the process of staying clean.

> Before I was I was addicted for very long time. I don't know if [they] tell you about that. No, I used for 35 years. I was addicted in cocaine and in heroin and drugs and marijuana and hashish. And now I am, 17 years I am clean. So in my period when I was using the drugs, the music, you couldn't feel it. You couldn't. It was not like now. Now I can feel it, but I can play the music. But I play only to play and to earn some money and to go and to buy your shit. But now, now when you are clean, you can do it. You can feel it you, you know it is different. It's a lot of difference between playing music when you are addicted and when you are clean. (Mr. Soekroe)

As noted by Silverman (2021), adults with substance-use disorder benefit from effective and practical approaches to help manage and positively regulate their emotions, which can assist in managing stress, preventing relapse, and improving recovery outcomes. Given its accessibility and ability to be personalized, music-based emotional regulation has been shown to serve as a valuable self-management tool (Silverman, 2021).

Music emerges as a powerful tool, helping individuals navigate their emotions by channeling stress, sadness, loneliness, struggles, and pain, preventing these feelings from staying trapped inside. It transforms and reshapes these emotions into stories and connections. Each participant used music in their own way but, for all of them, it served as a means to feel a little better. In the context of migration, music becomes a bridge, allowing individuals to cope with the emotional challenges of displacement, build connections in unfamiliar environments, and also cope with daily stress of life.

5.1.5. Echo-Roots: songs we grew up listening to

We all have songs that transport us to specific memories, stories, or moments in our lives. Music is so deeply woven into our existence that it becomes a part of us. Through conversations with several participants, I had the privilege of joining their stories for an hour, and I could sense that many of their experiences had a clear soundtrack, playing and singing through the stories they shared. According to Jäncke (2019), when we listen to music or talk about music and the moments in our lives where it played a significant role, autobiographical memories tied to melodies are brought to the surface. The author stresses that hearing music linked to our past often triggers a strong sense of familiarity, where we feel we know the song, even if we do not remember its title or lyrics. This section explores how participants' musical memories shape their identities, their unique and, at the same time, relatable stories, where past and present are deeply connected.

Marc, a clarinet player from the Catalan region in Spain, shared how songs from his childhood continue to resonate with him years later:

> So I realized that part of my identity, musical identity, or at least what music I feel totally connected to is much of the [music] my mom used to put on in the car or at home or on Sundays in the morning. So that, for me, was I realized recently that was a one Catalan singer, Lluís Llach, very much. Also a Cuban singer, Company Segundo, and actually, interestingly, love but I realized that a couple of years ago, this album had three clarinets playing there. But for me, it was so natural to hear that like it's just nice music I enjoy. I deeply like it, but I never realized it was a clarinet. It sounds so stupid. Maybe I thought I, of course, I saw there was a clarinet. But then I was once in the car looking the booklet of the album. There are three clarinets. You know, you don't put it into rational words. (Marc)

Some songs feel as familiar to us as the people in our lives. They become part of our personal stories, sometimes even containing the very instrument that later becomes a part of our daily lives.

Spock, another participant, reflected on how music, whether from his mother's love of country and bluegrass or the video games that shaped his childhood, became an integral part of his memories and identity:

> But my mom, she would sing the Dixie Chicks a lot. Oh, she loved the Dixie Chicks. So I grew up on some very famous country and bluegrass songs through my mom, who's into that stuff, but on the radio, we would just hear like, you know, ACDC or whatever classic rock tunes that were going on and that wasn't really interested in concerts. Another very important, impactful thing in my life though, Pokemon. Pokemon, no joke, through my childhood and my teenage years, Pokemon was my thing, and Super Mario Bros video games. But, yeah, but you got to remember that

> all these video game tunes, and I think you know as well, yeah, it immediately invokes some sort of happy feeling, right? It's our generation. It's our thing. All these video game tunes, and these video game tunes I memorized in my head, and I could probably play most of them, thinking about how it would go, because I know how they I know how the melody lines run. And then all of a sudden, you discover we're living in a digital world. (Spock)

Music is often intertwined with memories that shape our sense of identity (Jakubowski et al., 2020). This connection may stem, in part, from the tradition of associating music with meaningful life events, as well as the heightened engagement with and significance of music during key stages of identity development, particularly in adolescence (Jakubowski et al., 2020).

Dan also reflected on how musical diversity influenced his journey:

> I think also diversity gave me a lot of a lot of choice inside my playing. Of course, as a very young kid, my dad just gave me, like, a CD of The Beatles, and I found myself, like, when I was six, going back from school every day, listening to every tune and learning all the lyrics by heart. Later on, it felt like it's been in two ways, because the one hand, like when I was a teen, like a young teenager, I liked rock, and I also played guitar, which is cool. […] I also listened a lot to jazz, mostly, yeah, from the '60s and later, like really hardcore. And for me, like the moment when you feel musicians are really catching each other, and there's a lot of energy when they're playing together, I find it, like, always something that makes me crazy. Besides that, I have a huge love for salsa music, for Latin music, for Afro-Cuban and Afro-Peruvian, for Colombian and Argentinian as well. And also Brazilian, which I found myself more in Amsterdam, playing in Roda de Samba. (Dan)

For Mr. Soekroe, music has been a lifelong passion shaped by Latin and jazz influences:

> when in my childhood, I was I was playing a listen a lot of Latino music, Latin rock or Latin jazz, Brock, especially Santana. You know, Santana, of course. The percussion, the percussion players from Santana, they are great. You know, they are my idols. Yes. So I like Santana, but I like also jazz. A lot of jazz, Spiro Gyro. I like the Eagles as also but Santana. Carlos Santana is my idol. (Mr. Soekroe)

In Mr. Soekroe, Dan, Spock and Marcs' stories it is possible to see how many of their favorite songs or bands come from various countries, such as Mexico, Australia, England, and Cuba. This not only reflects the global circulation of music but also underscores its ability to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. Just as people migrate and carry their identities with them, music travels across borders. This fluid movement fosters connections between people from different backgrounds, shaping personal and collective identities in the process. These quotes also illustrate how certain songs have the power to transport the participants to places and moments that now exist only in memories, serving as a bridge between who they are and who they once were. Music often intertwines with our evolving identities, linking past and present while revealing both the transformations experienced, the constants that continue to shape us, and the things we still enjoy.

5.1.6. Music as Heritage

Beyond its societal role, music becomes a form of personal heritage, shaped by lived experiences and the people they have encountered and chosen to carry with them, continuing to influence who they are today. Heritage is an evolving process that includes both tangible elements (such

as instruments) and intangible ones (such as memories), passed down through generations and valued not only for their historical or cultural significance but also for the personal stories they hold (Harrison, 2010). For the participants, music represents more than tradition; it is a collection of personal moments, emotions, and connections that remain part of them. Therefore, this section explores the dual role of music as both cultural and personal heritage.

For some participants, their instrument is more than just a tool, it carries the essence of their cultural background and personal journey as musicians. Nizar, a musician and oud player, shared:

> I play the oud, which is kind of very common lute-like instrument in the Middle East, North Africa. It's quite popular. It's almost like Middle Eastern guitar there. It's like everybody, almost not everybody, but a lot of people play. (Nizar)

Pedro, a music producer from Brazil, reflected on the significance of the guitar in Brazilian culture, not only as a staple of social gatherings but also as an accessible instrument that many people can engage with, including himself, as a means of personal expression:

> I think every Brazilian has this connection with the guitar. It's very special, right? The guitar is like the soccer ball. Have you ever thought about it? Everyone has it, it's there, it's easy. You just need it to make the party happen. When I trained in a punk band, there were already a lot of guitarists, because there's always a guitarist. And then, I think I was about 15, my mom gave me a bass. And I love bass. Today I play bass and drums. But my instrument for writing is the guitar. (Pedro Vieira, translated from Portuguese)

Felipe, for example, is a musician of Colombian heritage and a harp player. His connection to music began at a young age. Influenced by his father, who is also a musician, his journey with the harp is deeply intertwined not only with his family but also with the instrument's cultural significance in South America:

> I am the son of a musician because my father is a singer. So, back when I was a child and teenager, he was very active in music at that time, so he would go to many festivals and take me along. And in the type of music he played, he used the harp as the main instrument. The harp in Latin America has a long history, going back to the Jesuit missionaries in the 17th century who brought it to America to evangelize to the indigenous people, and it ended up staying in some specific areas of Latin America, such as Mexico, Venezuela, Peru, and especially Paraguay. (Felipe, translated from Portuguese)

For Mr. Soekroe, cultural heritage is evident in the diverse musical genres he plays. His music not only reflects his personal heritage but also represents Suriname's rich history. After slavery was abolished in 1863, a significant number of indentured laborers from China, India, and Indonesia were brought to Suriname to sustain the production of sugar and other essential goods for exportation (Hassankhan, 2016), shaping the country's cultural and musical landscape.

> I play also different kind of music. This. I play Suriname music. I play Hindu music. My parents, they are from India. My grandparents are from India, but I was born in Suriname. And so I play also Indian music, Bollywood, like Bollywood, but I play also funk and reggae. And I play […] different kind of music, yes. So it means, it means a lot of for me and how it is to be a musician. (Mr. Soekroe)

For Spock, heritage is deeply personal. Each instrument he owns carries a story, a connection to the people who shaped his life:

> And my grandfather back in the States, when we went to visit him one time, he said, "Hey, Spock, you're getting, you know, you're turning 16, normally, I think about getting you a car, but you're not interested in driving. You're not interested in that. Shall we get you a guitar? Like a good one?" Fuck yeah. Let's do it. He got me $1,200 or something with this guitar, beautiful acoustic guitar. Right now it's in a repair shop here in Wageningen, good. There's some dings that needed to be looked at. Ah, but I'm so glad I didn't give that [away]. So, I have my father here [showing an instrument], and have my grandfather there in that guitar. This is something very important when you're traveling that you have those memories, those people with you?

Through his instruments, Spock's heritage is intricately woven from multiple cultural threads:

> Father is from Belgian Flanders. My mom's American, Mexican roots, so my Abuelita and stuff, she's from Mexico, right there. Wow. Santana's guitar. This is the, this is the one Santana would play, not his actual guitar, but yes, with the birds and everything, yeah, yeah. I mean, I got this in the Netherlands.(Spock)

Beyond music, Spock carries his father's words as a guiding philosophy:

> Just be silly. Be a happy camper. That was what my dad told me before he died. Be a happy camper. Be silly. Look at life a bit more bright and light like that song, Always "Look on the bright side of life", basically that song is sort of the heritage I want to pass on. You always have the ability to choose if you want to be dark and gloomy or happy. (Spock)

Benhamou (2020) explains that heritage is a socially constructed concept with fluid and shifting boundaries, shaped by both historical developments and the expanding definition of what is considered heritage. I appreciate this definition because it allows us to understand heritage beyond the tangible and intangible elements of a culture or society, such as the significance of the oud in Arab culture, the football and guitar for Brazilians, the harp for Colombians and Paraguayans, and Hindi and Bollywood music for Surinamese. It also encompasses the meaningful moments and personal objects we acquire throughout life, like a cherished guitar gifted by a grandfather on a 16th birthday or a song shared with a father that continues to shape one's outlook on life. Ultimately, heritage here consists of all the things we strive to keep alive.

5.2. Music as a Cultural Bridge

Hesmondhalgh (2008) describes music as a unique bridge between personal and collective experiences, enabling individuals to explore their sense of self—both who they are and who they are not—while also engaging with shared social identities—who *we* are and who *we* are not. While various cultural products, such as films, television, fashion, and automobiles, can contribute to this process, Hesmondhalgh (2008) emphasizes that music's deep emotional resonance makes it a particularly powerful medium for such interactions. Building on this idea, this section explores how participants engage with music as a means of connection and identity expression.

5.2.1. Connecting with Audiences

As mentioned previously, in Section X 'Music's Role in Culture, Identity and Belonging', music performance is not a one-way transmission from musician to listener. Rather, it is an interactive exchange shaped by context and culture, continuously creating, preserving, and reshaping meanings (Lidskog, 2016). For Toelle and Sloboda (2021), music performance is a live experience for everybody present. These live experiences are produced through the interaction between musicians, audience members, and the environment; as experiences, they are spontaneously co-created by all actors (Toelle & Sloboda, 2021). In this section, I aim to explore how the participants use music performances to building cultural bridges.

Rose, a singer with Chinese background, reflected on the significance of live music and its ability to create connections across different cultures:

> That's why I started the group: to bring live music to communities, not only to TV or expensive concerts (that people do have opportunity in the Netherlands), but live, so you can feel the power of live music. When I was young, my mom exposed me to different music (Madonna, rock, jazz) and different concerts, so I could open my mind to different cultures. I remember getting enlightened by it. Live music has a different color. And I hope that I can open other people to new cultures. (Rose)

For Nizar, a musician with Palestinian background, performances serve as opportunities to share the stories and context behind the songs being played:

> I need to, I like to, talk to the audience, to tell stories. And I always, when I do a new project, I choose a name. Always like the Arab name, something that refers to my culture, but try to explain, bring some text about why this name and connect it to different stuff. And you find everything, like, from culture, from politics, from feelings, from whatever, like tradition. (Nizar)

Similarly, for Rami, who moved to the Netherlands from Syria, performing is a way to share both Arab cultural heritage and personal experiences:

> I tell that all the time in my concerts about this song, I say that the first time I listened to it, I was 12 years or something like that, and then I asked my father about the meaning, yes, because I didn't understand all the words different time. It's in old Arabic language, as the difference between Shakespeare and Dan Brown. […] And I tell this story all the time, all the public, and then my father started to speak about it. Yeah, sometime before that, the two cultures exist together in Spain, and it was it's was between the 12th century, the 11th century, until 17th or 18th century[1]. So it's was almost 800 years. And in this 800 years, there was also a lot of good people and musicians and writers and philosophy, and there was also a lot of war. (Rami)

In this quote, Rami reflects on the heritage of Al-Andalus, the period following the Muslim conquest of Iberia in 711, when a diverse and complex mix of cultures, each with its own musical traditions, came into contact (Reynolds, 2020). These traditions endured for centuries, shaping and influencing one another through ongoing interaction and exchange (Reynolds, 2020).

[1] It is important to highlight that, according to Reynolds (2020), Andalusian music in the Iberian Peninsula can trace its development from the Islamic conquest in 711 to the expulsion of the Moriscos (Spanish Muslims who converted to Christianity) in the early 17th century. Therefore, it spans from the 8th century (not the 11th century as previously mentioned) to the 17th century.

Through the stories shared by Rami, Nizar, and other participants, people can connect with their history and even recognize parallels within their own cultural experiences.

For Marc, the process of making music goes beyond simply writing a song; it also involves reflecting on how to convey it and how to connect with the audience:

> I try to think of the art and try to – okay, an idea, how to turn it into a reality? How to share with the audience? How to actually execute it? With musicians or with a computer or with only solo whatever, or with boys, with lyrics? You choose however, and then how to share it with me. Do you record it? Do you do a concert? Do you do a video? Whatever, you know. So, for me, music is, like, this complete process from hopefully my inner self to the inner self of the audience. (Marc)

Inskip et al. (2008) stress that for music to convey meaning and communicate, people must be involved. As they note, the surface differences between musical works hold no real significance without understanding how music connects to emotions, both in its creation and interpretation (Inskip et al., 2008). Mr. Soekroe highlighted for him the value of the music expression and audience engagement in the performance:

> the expression of the music is, you know, that's very important, how you express the music when you are playing. And I think the very important thing is that the people who are listening and who are looking that they have to be satisfied. They have to […] like this music, something like that. If the people are not satisfied, then you are doing something wrong on stage, you know, because they don't like you or they don't want that kind of music, you see. (Mr. Soekroe)

Similarly, Spock expressed his excitement about conveying his music and identity through different instruments, using them as a means to connect with people:

> I like to find many shapes and forms of sounds and instruments and looks to connect to people, I get such a kick out of seeing how people lighten up or react when there's weird-ass instrument that's being played, like, what the fuck is this? (Spock)

Lamont (2012) stresses that performing music has significant potential to enhance well-being. According to the author, musicians derive great satisfaction from their ability to create music, master technical challenges, and build connections with fellow performers and the audience. Felipe reflected on how, in the Netherlands, after concerts, the audience engages with him to better understand his music and express their gratitude:

> The courage to go there and talk to you, for example, later, “Oh, this has been interesting”. I see that here people really make an effort, for example, to go talk to me afterwards, right, to try to understand a little, to thank. (Felipe, translated from Portuguese)

Music is an integral part of culture and plays a key role in shaping both individual and social identity. It can act as a unifying force, fostering a sense of belonging among group members and even reinforcing shared goals or purposes (Lidskog, 2016). Shelemay (2006) explains that “music-making and subsequent recollections of the musical experience also bridge the divide between individual and collective memory” (p.22), therefore music-making through performances is an important tool to bond and share stories.

5.2.2. Music as a universal language

According to Inawat (2014), although music is not a "physical" object, it is just as important in representing a culture as physical items like paintings, sculptures, and funerary objects, both in the past and present. The author suggests that music functions almost as the opposite of language: while language can create barriers to understanding a culture, music has the power to open doors and invite others in (Inawat, 2014). In this section, I discuss how many participants described music as an essential means of connection when arriving in a new place, for transcending differences, and for creating shared understanding.

During our conversation, Felipe shared his experience and feelings about playing for the first time in a jam session at a bar in Wageningen (NL):

> We had many different musicians. So the idea was like this: one by one, each person had to introduce themselves and present a song. You play a song, and the others try to follow along, right? They try to play with you. So it was a really cool thing. And one interesting thing—when it was my turn, I was kind of scared. I thought, "I don't think these guys are going to like my music because it's so different from what they're playing here, right?" But in the end, I played a song from Buena Vista Social Club, remember? And I felt like I was breaking some kind of barrier or something because I could sense some resistance. But in the end, everyone really liked it. Then, the next people who had to present a song said, "No, I want to hear another song from him, this guy who just arrived." So that's how it was—I had to play several songs because they got super curious about me, you know? Because I play the harp and I sing too, you know? So it was something they had never seen before, and even less so playing Latin music. (Felipe, translated from Portuguese)

Later, when I asked if playing his music makes him feel more understood, he added:

> I don't know, but at least yes... More considered, yes, definitely yes. Sometimes I feel like I'm cheating, you know? I don't know if people would be as nice to me if I weren't a musician—I wonder about that sometimes. So yes, people do consider me a lot. I really do feel more valued, I actually feel privileged, to be honest. Because, like I said in the beginning, for me, it's a door-opener. I don't know if it's because people have some kind of bias, like, someone who can do something like this must be a good person, probably. Maybe it's unconscious—I don't know if it's conscious or unconscious—but maybe that's what's happening, I'm not sure. (Felipe, translated from Portuguese)

As seen in Felipe's quote and Inawat's (2014) study on music as cultural heritage, music can transcend biases, language barriers, and social divisions, making it easier to connect with emotionally than direct interactions with individuals from different backgrounds. A song can be appreciated without the need for personal connection or shared experiences, providing a safe and accessible form of engagement. In this way, music can encourage people to open up to one another more easily, at least as a first step.

In a similar way, Mr. Soekroe shared his thoughts and perceptions about music:

> Music is international. You know, it's not especially, I don't have especially aspects, because the music is, when you are playing music in Australia, the music will be the same. It's a language everybody can understand, you know. And if you are playing

> in North America, or Latin America, Europe or in Africa, music is music, and that's the beautiful thing of music - that everybody can understand. (Mr. Soekroe)

For Spock, music is a powerful tool for connecting with others:

> For me, it's one of the more important things for breaking the ice, or if I want to connect on a deeper level with somebody again, I'll pull out an instrument that I wouldn't pick so readily, pull out and show it to them and let them mess around with it. And it works with kids, teenagers, adults. It doesn't matter. Uh, I'm always ready to give it out. (Spock)

Using music to break the ice is a common practice in many cultures. According to Zhang (2024), musical icebreaker activities allow participants to express their emotions through collaborative music-making, dancing, and performing. For the author, by doing so, they form meaningful emotional bonds while interacting with others. These connections help reduce barriers and feelings of unfamiliarity, making it easier to build trust and close relationships (Zhang, 2024).

For Rami, music became a way to engage with others before he had learned the local language:

> Music helped me, because it's made a lot of connection the first days, the first month when I didn't speak those because it's as a global language, actually. So because when you are speaking, when you are playing music, you don't need letters. You don't need alphabet. There is no task. And if you read notes, it's so good. But even if you don't read notes, and you can just you hear a song, and then you can play it, or you would like to play it after a couple of times, you can do it, so it's enough. (Rami)

For Katy Morag, who was born in Scotland, playing in folk sessions became an important part of her free time after moving to the Netherlands:

> Having moved here, that it's become a more important part of what I choose to do is my spare time, and I've become more interested in it, weirdly, even though, yeah, maybe because I'm in a different country and further away and, yeah, and because it is that interesting point of connection with other people who are also folk musicians (Katy Morag)

For Rose, music provides an easy way to connect with others, especially fellow musicians:

> I connect with people who do music more easily, because through music you know others really well. Sometimes, you might not have much to talk [about], but after playing/performing, you have so many topics. I appreciate how music connects. (Rose)

Kasinitz and Martiniello (2019) argue that music is one of the most widespread and accessible art forms in modern life. Unlike more traditional arts, popular music has lower barriers to entry, fewer gatekeepers, and is relatively easy for newcomers to engage with. The authors add that migrants often become familiar with the music of their new country before mastering the language, while locals frequently encounter a newcomer's music before learning much else about them. In many ways, music transcends borders, even when people themselves cannot, serving as a universal language that fosters connection and understanding.

5.2.3. Interwoven Cultures

For Kasinitz and Martiniello (2019) music, especially popular music, creates a space where the distinction between insiders and outsiders becomes less rigid. Artistic expression often serves as a platform for redefining ethnic boundaries, allowing outsiders to become part of the cultural fabric (Kasinitz & Martiniello, 2019). For the authors, it is within this blending of identities and musical styles that some of the most celebrated and innovative works emerge. Cultures interact and influence each other through various processes. Below, I explore how this interaction unfolds through music.

For Rami, who has a Syrian background, Arab and Dutch cultures intersect and intertwine through the formation of a band.

> I chose that name, I didn't speak any word in Dutch. I asked them, what's the meaning of '[the name of the band] in Dutch? They said it [the name of the band]. That's the name, because Nora and Johan, they play Dutch traditional music almost 30 years ago, or since 30 years until now. I play classical music. […] The classical music is a little bit, yeah, because 'folk', what's 'folk' in Dutch folk music? Yeah? Because they play folk music. Yes, I play Arab folk music. […] We make our own mixes between Dutch and Arab - Nora, Johan, Keyan [and I]. Keyan is from Iran - Kurdistan, Iran. Nora and Johan from the Netherlands. I came from Syria. So we speak three languages, and we think in three languages. That was a nice combination between three cultures, and we started to learn from the music of each other, because now, after five years, Nora and Johan know almost 20 or 30 Arab songs. Also, when I'm not there, they play Arab songs, and the people or the public things, sing with them, and they like that. […]I start to make some things actually. When I play something that I used to play it in Syria, I noticed that I start to do something different. And, yeah, that's because of the new connection, new experience, also because I'm almost nine years in the Netherlands. And that makes, of course, an effect. And I think it's a positive, because you cannot forget your own culture, but you can make some. (Rami).

In Rami's quote, it is possible to see how cultures intersect, blending languages and traditions. It also highlights how Arab culture has become part of the band's identity, as well as that of the Dutch musicians, who continue to perform Arab songs when Rami is unable to join their concerts. This exchange of influences flows both ways: Rami incorporates Dutch folk songs into his repertoire, while musicians from the Netherlands embrace songs from Arab traditions.

For Felipe, who has a Colombian background and plays a Paraguayan harp, living in the Netherlands also allowed him to connect with Indonesian culture and history, which remains deeply present in the country due to its colonial past:

> Yeah, [music] start opening doors for you, you know? Things I never even imagined. Just like with Indonesia, when I started looking for things about Indonesia, I'm watching videos about Indonesia, I'm on... what's it called, on Duolingo with Indonesian there, trying to understand. So many incredible things, especially a song from Indonesia about a river there. The river is called... the river there, the river is called Solo River, and they have a very beautiful song called *Bengawan Solo*, which means Solo River. It was [an Indonesian Lady] who showed me this song, and I learned it with her to accompany her. We played it many times. Then one day, at another event, I was alone with a lady who plays the violin, and some people from

> Indonesia arrived. I thought, 'I'm going to play this song for them, they're from there.' I played it, and wow, their reaction - they started crying, they were so moved, like, wow, this really touched them, you know, that song. (Felipe, translated from Portuguese)

In that moment, music became a bridge to Indonesian culture and its diaspora. It unfolded at the intersection of Colombian, Dutch, and Indonesian cultures, highlighting the power of music to connect and influence different cultures through encounters. According to Evkuran (2014), migration, along with social mobility, has significantly influenced not only migrants but also the communities they join. The author stresses that it brings social and historical changes in both the processes involved and their outcomes. In this context, music reflects a small yet significant part of a much larger process shaping social dynamics in a globalized society.

5.2.4. Functions of music

As previously mentioned, music is deeply embedded in everyday life—especially for musicians, who not only listen to it but also actively create and perform it. Music serves a variety of roles, from entertainment and relaxation to prayer, concentration, self-expression, and social connection. North and Hargreaves (2008) emphasize that music exists within a social framework, where the ways people create, perform, experience, and respond to musical sounds are profoundly shaped by their environment. These interactions are influenced by specific locations, time periods, and the presence of others, as well as by broader historical and cultural contexts that define musical practices. Therefore, this section aims to explore the significance of music for the participants, musicians with migrant backgrounds, while considering that its meaning may evolve depending on different life stages and circumstances.

Nizar sees music as his own language, a deeply personal way of expressing himself through the oud, allowing him to connect and communicate with his audience:

> So it's all connected to music, you know, like they say music is a language, which is true, but you have to really be into it to understand how much it is actually a language, and it could be a valid language as well, not only just the note. So, so, so hard. The way you listen to it, the way you feel with it. […] So I am a composer, creator myself, not only as a player. So, for me, creating music for the specific instrument. This is all about that. Yes, and to do that there, okay, on the one and you have the best audience, because I feel my music comes from there, and the people there will understand it fully, they will be the closest to it (Nizar)

Felipe shares that music for him is expression and the best way to connect with someone:

> So, yeah, it's a form of expression, a path opener, and a way to connect with people - a way to connect with people in a way that I don't see anything else doing. I've never seen anything that brings people together as quickly as music does. So I don't know what it is, but it's something that clearly connects people. And such different people, right? People from completely different backgrounds, from different countries, in different situations. And yet, we end up understanding each other really well (Felipe, translated from Portuguese)

For Marc, music holds a broader role in social expression, translating moments, history and emotions into songs and different genres:

> it's the expression of, it's the sonic expression of a human need, because that can be singing, of course, composition, with notation, anything, all the expressions to that are based on tonics. I'm not saying musical ideas, because it includes the term, but tonics is about sound. Music is about sound, and that includes whatever. That includes humans throughout history to express their self, their society, their thoughts, their emotions, everything and depends on the on the period, style, genre, whatever it takes a different form. So it depends on the art historical like in the musical moment, historical moment, emotion was more important to express, like romanticism, or more impressions, or more form, like classicism, or more, you know, connected to church, connected also to love nowadays, you know, or with so every, every music genre, I think it dedicates to one topic, of course, not one, but like one spectrum of meaning and topic that all the compound of those little genres, their little world in itself, they, for me, that's music, I guess. (Marc)

Similarly, as we see in Nizar, Felipe and Marc's quotes, Golemo (2020), in her study on migrant musicians, emphasizes that music serves a wide range of functions in people's lives. However, in an intercultural context, its most prominent roles are communication and integration. Beyond its aesthetic value, music plays a vital social role by fostering dialogue, expressing collective emotions, and strengthening emotional bonds among diverse groups.

For Rose, music plays a role of enjoying the moment and connecting to people:

> I think my goal with my group is to enjoy it. I am performing in a group, people come and goes, and each person has their goals. So, if we can be happy now, it counts. We live in a life with a number of days. So if one day can be a happy one, it is good. Some people have their own perceptions of aspirations and goals. For me, if I can be happy one more day and connect, it is worth it. (Rose)

Katy Morag shared the amusement of music – playing, sharing and learning it:

> I think it's just a very enjoyable, it's just an enjoyable experience to be playing music with other people and sharing that, and learning, in fact, to be able to sit for however many months after, month after month. And then you kind of, you're listening to the same tunes again and again. And eventually, your fingers and your brain, is kind of like you try and play along a bit. And then eventually, you can play it. And that's really nice as well. Feels really, really good, yeah, good for the brain, especially, like, different from work, yeah, yeah. So it feels very positive and healthy in that respect. (Katy Morag)

For Rose and Katy Morag, music is strongly associated with positive moments. Weinberg and Joseph (2017) emphasize that music is one of the most enjoyable and rewarding daily activities, providing numerous benefits for health and well-being. The authors highlight that music is believed to reduce stress and evoke positive emotions such as joy, relaxation, and empowerment. It is also closely linked to emotion regulation, as people often turn to music as a tool to manage and improve their mood (Weinberg & Joseph, 2017). These aspects are particularly significant when adapting to a new social context.

Pedro Vieira emphasizes the role of music in providing a collective meaning to the phenomena and processes in life:

> We give meaning to things. The night is mysterious. The day is good mood. The sun is good mood, the cold is introspection. We created music to give meaning to many things. I think we created music to give meaning to time. And then maybe, when I also started to get into academic research, I started to think that, for example, when you look at the role music had in Africa, it had a much more collective function of giving rhythm to human activities. So I think that between giving meaning to time and giving meaning to our existence, we created music. Man, music is a technology for telling stories. Perhaps even before... Perhaps even before writing, right? (Pedro Vieira, translated from Portuguese)

Music and its meaning can be examined through the contexts of its creation, performance, and reception (Cook, 1994). According to Cook (1994), the central idea is that music derives its meaning through its interaction with society. The author also emphasizes that we can navigate between these perspectives, suggesting that meaning emerges from the reciprocal relationship between music and society. The goal here, however, is not to explore what music means to society at large, but rather to understand its significance and purpose for the participants themselves inside their context.

5.3. Challenges and Opportunities of Representation

Moving to a new country involves navigating both challenges and opportunities in how a culture and its people are perceived. Migrants do not arrive with a clean slate; instead, they must engage with existing social perceptions to express who they are or who they wish to be seen as. This chapter explores how musicians with migrant backgrounds perceive and negotiate these dynamics in relation to their country of origin, their sense of self, and their music in the Netherlands.

5.3.1. Stereotypes and Expectations

Stereotypes simplify complex realities into fixed notions, shaping expectations about individuals and groups while reinforcing social divisions (Domalewska, 2016). According to Domalewska (2016), stereotypes emerge through the process of enculturation and are deeply embedded in culture. The author highlights that they are shaped and reinforced by influential figures, particularly parents, whose perspectives and behaviors contribute to their formation. Additionally, institutions such as the media and educational systems play a crucial role in transmitting specific perceptions and emotional responses toward others (Domalewska, 2016).

Stereotypes are also shaped by socio-motivational and cultural factors within a given social context. Their evaluative nature is often complex, as a single stereotype may encompass both positive and negative attributes (Domalewska, 2016). This section is based on insights from participants, as the topic of stereotypes emerged naturally in their reflections.

For Andrew, a musician with an Ugandan background, being an African migrant presents additional challenges:

> if you're an immigrant from Africa, there are a lot of shocking and surprising obstacles that are there that you can only sometimes laugh about, like, what's that? So definitely, it's not an easy thing to come from nowhere and establish yourself, but again, it depends on who. I managed to do it.

He later added, also commenting on the color of my skin and how it might have helped me:

> This is not an easy environment for everybody coming out, as you're an immigrant yourself. Maybe because you can disguise as a white person, maybe you can pass some obstacles. I can assume. (Andrew)

Andrew's words resonate with me. I also feel that being perceived as white has influenced my migration experience in the Netherlands. Since my appearance often resembles of some Southern Europeans, people commonly assume I am from that region, which in turn shapes their expectations and behavior towards me. Andrew's reflection underscores how skin color is linked to assumptions about one's origins, stereotypes, and the challenges faced. According to Georgi (2019), social and political conflicts shape border policies, institutions, and state mechanisms, they arise from structural contradictions tied to migration within a capitalist and racially stratified global system. For the author, Europe's so-called migration crisis can be understood as a complex, multi-faceted transnational social conflict, with racism and racist forces playing a central role. Although the goal is not to delve deeply into the structure of political systems or institutional frameworks, it is important to illustrate the different layers of racism present within the migration dynamics.

For Felipe, he perceived being from a different culture as a positive asset, where you become a reference:

> In other words, it's a value, an added value to a person when you are in a place that is not your own. You become a reference for that. So, for example, in Brazil, people always… I was a reference for Latin music for those who asked, "How do you do this? How do you do that?" one day, another day. You end up becoming a cultural ambassador. Here, it's even more so because I ended up… I end up being a reference for various things, not just Hispanic culture but also aspects of Brazil and this mix that I create. (Felipe, translated from Portuguese)

While living in Brazil, Felipe's identity as a Colombian musician became a reference for Latin culture. Later, after moving to the Netherlands, he found that he was seen as a representative of both Brazilian and Latin cultures. Although this perception may be simplified, it holds some truth, as he has lived in both countries (Brazil and Colombia). According to Neguţ and Sârbescu (2014), the associative models of stereotype structure suggest that stereotypes are formed through connections between a central concept, representing a social group (such as rock and hip-hop music culture), and the evaluations attached to these music cultures. Therefore, stereotypes and expectations surrounding Latin and Brazilian music in the Netherlands opened up more performance opportunities for him.

In a conversation with Marc, he reflects on the expectation of people towards the music, performances, and the musician with migrant background:

> Would they be happy if I would play Brazilian music in a concert with this outfit? [he was wearing a black sweater] Do you understand what I mean? Of course, is another topic. But would they be open to a little bit more just being open to what the artist has to say, rather than what the expectations of what the artists should be doing. […] an open reflection to what extent audience and we are all audience we want to see fulfill our expectations. I am paying a ticket for seeing this art, like this type of music, or am I paying a ticket to see what the artist has to offer? (Marc)

Music and culture are influenced by stereotypes and expectations that influence the people who engage with them. In Marc's quote, it is possible to reflect on how musicians with migrant

backgrounds are often expected to perform specific types of music or dress in particular ways that align with these perceptions. This can, in turn, limit both their artistic expression and professional opportunities, especially when reflecting on their own identity after moving to a new social environment. Domalewska (2016) stresses that the process of categorization inherent in stereotyping plays a significant role in shaping identity.

5.3.2. Exoticism and Othering

bell hooks's reflections in *Eating the Other* (2000) remain relevant today, as discussions on race and difference continue to shape mass culture. According to hooks, mass culture serves as a space where racial diversity is both acknowledged and commodified, reinforcing the idea that engaging with Otherness can be an exciting and pleasurable experience. She argues that the commercialization of Otherness has been particularly effective because it is presented as something novel and enticing, perceived as more intense and fulfilling than conventional ways of living and feeling, often framed as *the exotic*. This perspective is especially relevant when considering the consumption of foreign cultures, such as music. This section, which emerged from conversations with participants, explores their experiences of exoticism and othering in relation to both their identities and their music.

Nizar, who has a Palestinian background, reflected on being recognized solely as a Palestinian musician rather than as someone who embodies a diverse range of musical experiences:

> But on the other hand, I cannot make a living or have a normal musician life because of all what's happening politically with my background, like being a minority within the State of Israel, being Palestinian. So I moved here eventually, and here, I feel you have all the options, but it has its own problems, because they look at our music or our culture in kind of exotic. I am not an exotic type, you know. I don't even look exotic. People think I am Polish or whatever, you know. So this is kind of my struggle, and I am not. […] I wanted to play any chance [I got], so I found myself invited to Palestinian events. Slowly. I hated that I am a Palestinian product. Doesn't matter the quality. You're Palestinian. That's it. So that was kind of… Luckily, now I can, I don't I do stuff by some charity or, like, some initiatives, especially in the last year, trying to really sincerely help. So I took part of some events, but I mostly say no, I don't want to be part of an event where I'm looked at only Palestinian. I prefer to play a concert. (Nizar)

For Felipe, being from a distant place with different culture makes you appreciated by the host culture:

> Well, everywhere you go, you have these things, right? You have these connections and these dynamics. Now, what's interesting is that when you're a musician from another place, it becomes even more intriguing because you bring something that others have no idea about. And then you become something exotic, right? And the music you make becomes something valued. (Felipe, translated from Portuguese)

Marc, reflects on how music is consumed by northern countries:

> Countries like the Netherlands, they're wonderful because they have a very big appreciation for world music, but I'm not sure to what extent they hold on to cliches. […] to what extent northern countries, or a country like the Netherlands, absorb so many cultures, but maybe not in a deeper level, maybe in a super a bit more superficial, they are not interesting to see. What's the root they want to see -

> flamenco? You know what? I mean, it's enough. Do they want to see flamenco with, with a dancer? Flamenco? I'm just putting an example. Would they be open to, for example, to see a Brazilian act without any flower, flower t-shirt? (Marc)

Clichés and simplified perceptions of a culture are closely linked to stereotypes, as briefly discussed in the previous section. However, here I choose to focus on the lens of cultural consumption and exoticism, which reinforces perceptions of 'eating the Other' rather than fostering genuine understanding and learning about different cultures. According to Golden and Lanza (2013), the concept of culture has been so deeply tied to a colonial agenda - used to justify the intellectual, military, and political dominance of Western powers over the rest of the world - that it inevitably reinforces simplistic and misleading divisions, such as the binary of 'us' versus 'them.' Migrants in a new country naturally compare their past and present ways of life, illustrating that culture is ultimately shaped by how individuals navigate and adapt to their surroundings (Golden & Lanza, 2013).

5.3.3. Reclaiming Narratives Through Music

The linguistic act of reclaiming serves as a tool to challenge the dominant group's ability to dictate how individuals and their communities are perceived, preventing them from being categorized in a rigid or all-encompassing manner (Godrej, 2011). Bohlman (2011) emphasizes that "migration is always political, and the forms of aesthetic expression that arise from it are necessarily politicized" (p. 151). According to Lidskog (2016), musical performance and music-making allow marginalized groups to actively resist being reduced to an objectified and negative "other." Engaging with history in a dynamic and participatory way, performance can serve as a healing practice, enabling these groups to reclaim agency and develop a sense of "response-ability." Lidskog (2016) further highlights that cultural performance is a powerful means of expressing identity and shared experiences, particularly through narratives of displacement and migration. This theme emerged during conversations with participants, leading me to realize that music-making and performance are not only ways to reclaim the narrative in a divided "us and them" society but also a means of asserting ownership over their own culture and heritage.

For Felipe, performance is a chance to share his heritage and the story of the instrument he plays:

> It really has a lot to do with heritage, what I do, right? Because, for example, just from the perspective of the instrument. Whenever I'm going to play, if I have time, right? [18:10] If I see that people have the patience to listen, I tell a little bit. I always try to give context to things, right? I don't just start playing, but I try to provide some context. So, first, why do we have harps in Latin America? Then I tell the whole story, right? About the Spaniards who brought them and so on. And then, right? That we received this one from Venezuela and so on, that it remained in Venezuela, right? So there's always a lot of history, always. (Felipe, translated from Portuguese)

Sharing the story behind a song, an instrument, or a band allows those who live it and are part of that heritage to own and shape the narrative, making it a more tangible and relatable reality for those who listen. Since *Othering* is often tied to perceptions of difference (Paré, 2022), this act of storytelling can serve as a bridge, fostering understanding and connection.

For Andrew, music is a way to stand up for those who are not heard, to represent the African continent, and to share his own story along with the stories of others whose voices go unnoticed:

> There are people who are considered less than others, who are not heard, and other people dominate and want to say everything for everybody. And specifically, I defend the African continent. I defend Africa with all my guts, because there are many things which are crappy, which are being done and which have been said, I really want to contribute to this process. I am also, I am a social entrepreneur. I like to put up projects to bring people together and to, yeah, like, empower people who call them the least, the last and the lost in the community. So that's really my cause. I like to bring people along so my music can be talking about this child on the street whom I met, and I've been trying to do something with. Them. It can be talking about just what I think about refugees, what's going on with refugees. (Andrew)

Andrew's quote highlights the role of music as both expression and resistance, especially in contexts where power dynamics between Africa and Europe remain deeply influenced by a colonial history and perspective. Music can serve as a tool for political expression, playing a role in both the discrimination and stigmatization of an ethnic group, as well as in the mobilization and empowerment of that group, while highlighting issues of social injustice and inequality (Lidskog, 2016).

For Spock, leading a Bluegrass band provided a way to reconnect with and embrace his American roots through music, lyrics, and the stories they tell:

> I was way more interested in that because that was my American heritage, and I was here in Europe, and I was the only authentic American. So I felt this. I felt the freedom to fill up that space, because others couldn't, even though they were interested in that, I had the freedom to fill up that space because I could authentically say, "Hey, I'm from there. I've seen those music, I've seen that genre, I've seen it played live. I know, I know the I know the lyrics they're talking about". That's also a thing, like, when you say, on a southbound train taking the Greyhound bus, I've been on a greenhouse Greyhound bus. I know exactly what it's like. It's horrifying. And, yeah, that helped me. And that's also the bluegrass band. I'm the only American in that bluegrass band, and the band also the so they're all Dutchies in this band, except for one lady, she's from Germany. They all know like, I'm the authentic American here. And they're always looking to me for tips I have. Is this real? Is this true? (Spock)

For Dan, meanwhile, music means a way of sharing stories and reflect on your own roots:

> it's not only about introducing new things to other people who are not aware of your background and your heritage, I can in a music sense, but also the fact that they have to explain them about it. And when you have to explain something to other people, you find yourself understanding the topic better. It's like, I don't know when, when you have to define a certain thing. And you're like, I don't know, like, like a circle, and you don't mention the middle, because, like, the middle, sometimes it's too obvious. But you have to find the borders when you have to decide, like, half millimeter to the left, it's no longer that thing. So the way that you have to define new stuff definitely is super interesting, because you get more roots to your knowledge. (Dan)

For both Spock and Dan, music becomes a way to reclaim their identities and heritage, allowing them to connect not just with others but with different parts of themselves. "Reclamation requires the capacity to tell stories about ourselves and our world, stories that in turn resonate

with us and acquire the authority to define us" (Godrej, 2011, p.116). Therefore, reflecting on your own migration journey and background helps in the process of self-identity.

For Rose, moving to a new country allowed her to look through a different perspective at Chinese music and reflect on how she wants to show it:

> By moving to the Netherlands, I could start appreciating Chinese music in a different way, what my culture is. The realization of so uniqueness and beautifulness of it, I felt the responsibility to show people traditional Chinese music, without the stereotype of it. (Rose)

Music can serve as a tool for social mobilization, enabling groups to challenge and resist social inequalities and imbalances in power (Lidskog, 2016). Godrej (2011) stresses that counter-narratives can reshape how marginalized groups perceive themselves by highlighting overlooked details and moral perspectives that the dominant narrative downplays or omits, offering a retelling that challenges mainstream conclusions. Lidskog (2016) highlights that regardless of the political agenda, music serves to amplify a group's presence within broader society.

5.3.4. Spatial and Geo-cultural Experiences

Lidskog (2016) stresses "recognition requires space, especially public space" (p.31). For the author, musical practices not only utilize and explore public spaces but can also carry political significance. The right to access public space is closely tied to which cultural expressions are deemed acceptable in a given context (Lidskog, 2016). Furthermore, the author emphasizes that performing music in public spaces not only increases a group's visibility but also asserts its place within the larger social fabric. The notion of spaces and visibility, can also be analyzed through the politics of belonging, of who belongs to where. According to Trudeau (2006), landscape is a visual concept that shapes how social relationships are viewed and how land should be utilized in a specific area. For the author, it provides a perspective on a given territory, reflecting the community's relationships and the identity of the group connected to that land. This section is based on interviews with participants, and by "public spaces", I refer to spaces with public access. This broader definition expands the discussion to include various spaces and encounters, beyond those managed by the government. The goal is to explore the spaces where participants feel most comfortable playing their music, expressing themselves, and performing, places where they prefer to connect with other, their music and identity.

For Andrew, music performance is a way to convey a message; therefore, he does not identify with spaces like clubs for this purpose:

> There are instances when I have been confronted I went to a club. I don't, for your information, I don't go to club, club, club. I'm not really that kind of musician. I'm really just somebody's trying to put my message across. But I'm not a club, club, club kind of musician. I'm not a musician- musician. Yes, I'm a musician with a cause. I am. It's just a normal work. I am not trying to, I don't I'm not too deep into being the artists. (Andrew)

Rose shared that she prefers more concerts dynamics where the audience goes to enjoy the music and connect:

> I would prefer to perform in a concert setting, when people are there to enjoy the music. I am not here to entertain solemnly. I prefer to meet people who are there to enjoy it, to meet in this music environment, to connect. I prefer spaces with more

> acoustic and facilities, because of the quality of the product in the end. You care about what comes around, the lights, the stage, the music mainly, but everything. On stage, I am more a traditional classical Chinese. (Rose)

In a similar way, Spock expresses the importance of spaces where music can be a connection, and not a background sound:

> if I'm performing for a bunch of people who I think, like, yeah, they're taking me for granted, or they're not really listening. I don't want to play there. I want to play when people come to listen to the songs, not to make noise. (Spock)

In Andrew, Rose, and Spock's interview excerpts, we can see the importance for them of space that enables interaction with the public. Underscoring Music is inherently interactive, fundamentally relying on the engagement between artists and audiences (Crossley & Bottero, 2015).

Mr. Soekroe expresses his joy in performing in diverse spaces, whether at festivals, cafés, or street performances, for him, it's all about the music:

> I like the festivals, the big stage with the big sounds, but the small things also are very good. Like small, you know the De Zaaier cafe, De Zaaier, yes, yes. Like that is very cute. And you are playing with, maybe, when you play that with a band of eight or nine peoples, then the people who are listening are maybe 30 or 35 and it's full, you know, the place is full. That is also okay. But the big stage is - it's also good, you know. Or in street, I like to play music, especially with percussion, in the street. We have in Wageningen, we have one festival. It's called the Leef festival. And this is, yes, this is in the main street of the of the city. And there we play in the street, in the shopping street, in the whole straat, yes, and that is also very good, because the children like percussion, you know, we can play with the children. (Mr. Soekroe)

Mr. Soekroe highlighted a street festival as a particularly meaningful performance setting, as it enables a more direct and spontaneous connection with the audience, particularly children. This aligns with Tanenbaum's (1995) analysis of street performances as an "urban ritual that challenges the way we think about public spaces by promoting spontaneous, democratic, and intimate encounters in one of the city's most routinized and alienating environments" (p. 1).

Street performances also emerged in Pedro Vieira's reflections on the different ways music and urban spaces are occupied across countries. He considered his migration journey through Brazil, Argentina, and Chile before eventually moving to the Netherlands.:

> There's also a relationship between us and the public spaces that is complicated. We only occupy public spaces during Carnaval when we take over the streets, but the subway, for example, is forbidden. I lived in Chile too. In Chile, the subway is forbidden. But there are musicians in the subway. And in Argentina? Oh, musicians in the subway all the time, really good people, who are there with their CDs, playing their own music, wanting to show their work. You know, the street is the stage in Buenos Aires, it's really crazy. (Pedro Vieira)

Pedro's quote illustrates his enjoyment of seeing musicians perform in public spaces in Buenos Aires, especially when contrasted with the Brazilian and Chilean realities, where such performances are not permitted.

Considering the significance of space and performance as the places we occupy and connect, I attended three performances by participants during my fieldwork. Andrew performed at Podium Oost community center in Utrecht with Dutch musicians, and four participants in Wageningen: Marc at the public library during the Melting Pot festival with his duo project with another musician with migrant background. Felipe, Rami and Ayaz at the small theater Wilde Wereld in the Wageningen city center in a project with Dutch and musicians with migrant backgrounds. Notably, all of these spaces were relatively small, accommodating around 50 people, and had a relaxed atmosphere. The stage was positioned close to the audience, creating a more intimate dynamic between the musicians and the attendees. In Utrecht, the community center performance was recorded and included an interview, allowing the audience to gain a deeper understanding of the participant, beyond what one might typically experience in a concert setting. The community center was situated in a residential area, which attracted a more local crowd. In contrast, Wageningen, being a small city, tends to host most events near the city center, making them easily accessible to the broader public, which often involve a mix of international and Dutch students and locals. In the case of Daniel's performance in Utrecht and the one by Felipe, Rami, and Ayaz in Wageningen, the majority of the audience was Dutch. As a result, the language used throughout the performances was primarily Dutch. Some participants also interacted with the audience in Dutch, while those who did not were able to present their parts in English. Utrecht and Wageningen are both cities with a diverse, international population, which is reflected in their music performances featuring musicians from varied backgrounds. Migrants occupying public spaces is a way of co-owning these sites. According to Trudeau (2006), belonging is central to understanding how space is socially regulated. The author emphasizes that belonging is often framed as membership within a community or political entity. In this context, to belong means sharing the traits and qualities that are fundamental to the identity of that group (Trudeau, 2006).

Vasudevan (2015) stress that it is crucial to redefine the right to the city as a concept that operates across various spaces and territories, driven by a deep desire to actively participate in the creation of urban spaces. For the author, this requires recognizing that the right to the city encompasses a wide range of political perspectives, necessitating a conceptual framework that can accommodate this diversity. The act of occupation becomes the basis for shaping a shared spatial environment, where the ongoing interactions of participants generate emotions, ideas, values, and practices that foster and encourage new modes of existence (Vasudevan, 2015).

5.4. Community and Belonging through Music

This section explores how music helps develop connections between communities and a sense of belonging in those involved. Engaging in music within a community enhances social cohesion by fulfilling the fundamental need to participate in something familiar, accessible, and shared collectively (Golemo, 2020). Golemo stresses that music also fosters a sense of stability and security tied to being part of a group with shared values, lifestyles, and forms of artistic expression. As a result, music facilitates the ongoing reinforcement and renewal of group solidarity, helping to bridge social divides, and fostering a sense of belonging (Golemo, 2020).

5.4.1. Intercultural Connections

Social networks play a vital role in fostering a sense of belonging, particularly for immigrants who migrate independently rather than as part of a group (Martinez-Callaghan & Gil-Lacruz, 2017). According to Martinez-Callaghan and Gil-Lacruz (2017), these networks among migrants often

form based on shared racial or ethnic identities, as well as the social structure of their communities. The authors emphasize that factors such as a common place of origin or effective communication channels within a community or organization can facilitate the development of these connections. In this section, I examine how a shared interest - music - serves as a powerful tool for connecting the participants to other migrants from different backgrounds, fostering a sense of belonging. This analysis is based on interviews with participants and a review of relevant literature.

In a conversation with Felipe from Colombia, he shared how meeting Mr. Soekroe, who comes from a Surinamese background, profoundly changed his experience of being in the Netherlands:

> And I wasn't playing because I didn't have anyone to play with and all that. Then that thing came up, and it changed my life. Completely, really. Especially because I met that... Mr. Soekroe was great because he immediately took me in and said, "No, we're going to work together, hold on." He quickly arranged a bunch of shows for us, took me there, brought me back, organized everything, you know? It was something like that. And we just clicked right away, you know?

He later shared his experience of meeting an Indonesian couple:

> Yeah, people from Indonesia weren't really on my radar until I got here, and that was another really interesting exchange I had with the Indonesians. I got to know several Indonesian songs, especially through a lady named Lulu, who played the guitar—such a lovely person—and an elderly gentleman named Eddy, who played the bass. They introduced me to this Indonesian musical world and even invited me to play in Wageningen. (Felipe, translated from Portuguese)

In Felipe's quote is possible to perceive how meeting musicians with migrant background form opened up a new community and social circle for him. In a similar way, Spock shared how learning a Surinamese songs opened up and connected him to a Surinamese community:

> I was getting exposed to all these lyrics because I had to learn the songs to jam, or to play, collaborate, to give a show, and I was learning all these lyrics in Surinamese. So Surinamese, it looks a little bit like Dutch like, there we go. "Teddy den de Maru Terry, den yario, Teddy Dende", and that means, "Count the days and count the months, count the years and count the days. Teddy, Teddy, Teddy". Then they obviously, yeah, it was so all of a sudden this whole Suriname community opened up in Wageningen. It was so weird. They wanted to talk to me. They wanted to get to know me, because I was able to sing their song. (Spock)

In both Spock and Felipe's stories, we can observe how music deeply connected them to other migrants. Kyratsou (2023), in a study on how music fosters belonging among refugees in Greece, explains that the ability of sound to be physically felt and evoke emotions creates a bridge between past and present sonic experiences, allowing for emotional connections that transcend location. This means that even when a sound is heard in a new setting, it can still trigger memories and emotions tied to previous experiences (Kyratsou, 2023). For both Felipe and Spock, music played a crucial role in building strong intercultural connections.

For Marc, moving to the Netherlands allowed him to connect with musicians from different nationalities, transforming not only his personal interactions but also the way he engaged professionally.:

> For me, as one of the bigger discoveries in the Netherlands, to be open to other immigrant musicians, you know, like other cultures. And I think the Netherlands is very powerful in this regard, that it's open to collaborations from other cultures. So I think that's fantastic here, and I've done that myself, and we actually have a project with like quartet that we investigate, that we investigate music like we put together two cultures, and that's the one we played in Wageningen as a duo. Yeah, we may play in may actually we are talking about possibilities, but, yeah, basically, project that combines several influences and how to again is the same the same topic. How do you do that? How do you put in my experience? It works very well when it's through original arrangements or compositions, because it's the space where there is the most freedom involved. (Marc)

Mr. Soekroe explains how much he enjoys playing music and connecting with people from diverse backgrounds, highlighting the unique blend that arises from these interactions:

> I love that, because the way the people are coming from different cultures. And to mix, look Suzi, She's Hungarian, but the way she plays the violin is great. Spock is Mexican and Belgian mixed with American, you know, it's okay. I have some… My friend, Felipe, played a harp from Colombia and stayed in Manaus in Brazil. This is where, you know, the way we mix ourselves with different cultures is very good.

For Katy Morag, learning from and engaging in musical exchange with migrants from diverse backgrounds is a fundamental aspect of the dynamic and connections she fosters with those within her network:

> it is that interesting point of connection with other people who are also folk musicians and comes from different places around the world. And I like learning stuff from them, and people like learning stuff from you, yeah, exactly. It's that sort of mutual exchange that you can have, yeah, but yeah, this becomes more important, weirdly, maybe not weirdly, maybe this point, maybe you'll find out, like, actually, this is what happens. (Katy Morag)

Each of these narratives highlights the importance of intercultural connections mediated by music for the participants, encompassing mutual support, knowledge exchange, and the enhancement of their experiences in a country distinct from their country of origin. Kyratsou (2023) emphasizes the role of sound in shaping space by embedding narratives within it. The interaction between sound and space helps construct meaning, transforming the space into one imbued with cultural and social significance (Kyratsou, 2023). For the author, this transformation occurs because certain sounds are linked to specific socio-cultural identities, reinforcing shared imaginaries and understandings of the environment. For Mattes and Lang (2021), belonging is defined by the sharing of history, values, and practices, and, most importantly, by feeling acknowledged and valued as an equally important member of a community. These are aspects that we can recognize in some of the participants' stories.

5.4.2. Local Networks

Local networks play a crucial role in fostering a sense of community and belonging to a place. As Block (2018) states, "the opposite of belonging is to feel isolated and always (all ways) on the margin, an outsider" (p. xviii). To belong is membership. Roy and Dowd (2010) argue that groups use music as a means of constructing and reinforcing their collective identity, cultivating a sense of "us." This process operates in two directions: on one hand, both members and outsiders

recognize specific musical styles as emblematic of the group; on the other, engaging with this music serves as an affirmation of belonging within the community. This sub-section examines how music enables some participants to forge connections with the local population, specifically the Dutch.

For Dan, being able to perform with Dutch musicians makes him feel welcomed:

> I think the fact that both you get to play with local musicians that accept you and want you to be part of the local culture, and also when you play with different strangers, and then, like you're not alone, you're not the only stranger in the room, which is also cool sometimes. But yeah, I think in general, it makes me feel very welcome and like being part of everything that goes on going on here. (Dan)

Dan's quote highlights how making music with local musicians gives him a sense of belonging, allowing him to feel included rather than an outsider.

Spock shared his experience of bonding to a Dutch couple through music:

> I was a gardener, by expertise, so I was always doing the gardening and stuff. And the neighbors came one day, one day, and they said, "Who trimmed the hedges?" He looked you look kind of serious. "You want to know?", I was like, "I did". "Could we ask you for some help?" "Sure". Get to the neighbors. What do I find out? Bram and Julia, his wife. They have beautiful, big house there. I became the gardener for five years. I could still go back if I wanted to, because they need the help. But they both play in a bluegrass band, and he plays banjo. And I had just, I just sort of learned banjo a little bit. It was picking it up a little bit. It was right before COVID. I was sort of picking up the banjo. [...]It's COVID lockdown. I want to learn something new, Banjo, because that's weird. But he taught me. He taught me stuff. They own a church as well that they converted into a giant Event Center. So gospels and choirs sing there, but also his bluegrass band and other really cool, it's called the Erika Kerk.[…] they were the first Dutch people I met. (Spock)

Spock's story illustrates how a shared interest in music, specifically bluegrass, fostered his first connection with Dutch people after moving to the Netherlands. Through learning and sharing music together, their bond grew, even during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

For Felipe, his musical connections with both Dutch locals and foreigners became like a family:

> So, they became... these musicians, they became almost like a family to me here, you know? So, for example, I just got back, I was having trouble finding a house. [11:35] They found out that I was looking for a house. Then this lady, she started talking to the neighbors, asking around until she found a house for me, and it was really difficult. I found it unbelievable, you know? (Felipe, translated from Portuguese)

Felipe's story illustrates how receiving support translated into a sense of family. According to Block (2018), belonging to a community involves actively contributing to its creation and development, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and emotional connection. This process entails both building and sustaining the community, nurturing a deeper sense of collective ownership and mutual investment (Block, 2018). This idea is reflected in his Dutch friend's effort to help him find a place to live, demonstrating the tangible ways in which communal support fosters belonging.

Nevertheless, in spite of good experiences, some participants also felt that was difficult to connect with some locals, for example, through collaboration:

> What I'm trying to say, is, most of the connection is kind of, you know, there is one friend told me once: Dutch culture is about give and take. It's all about business. (Nizar)

In a similar way, Pedro described the difference of culture towards working together:

> My exchange with the Dutch was very much in this sense. I didn't have an exchange of being with them in the studio, creating music that was outside of a relationship. I was paid to produce. But when I was with Italians and Spaniards, we were at home. (Pedro Vieira, translated from Portuguese)

For Mr. Soekroe the approach towards money and working together can be challenging:

> Dutch people, it's okay, okay, the Dutch people, they are especially very greedy. You know, they come and they - not all of them, not all of them - but they are. They are when you are talking about, especially when you have a gig, and they ask you to play, then normally, you come and don't, don't speak about the money or the payment or something. (Mr. Soekroe)

The three excerpts from Nizar, Pedro Vieira, and Mr. Soekroe illustrate how culture and approaches to communication can vary, also in professional settings, such as the musical environment in this case. According to Verschueren (2008), both intercultural communication and communication in general shape meaning in two key ways: through context and structure. The author states that context is shaped by socialization processes that help individuals interpret interactions. Structure, on the other hand, involves contextualization cues, which indicate how words derive meaning from their surroundings (Verschueren, 2008). Understanding these cues is largely habitual and developed within specific communities (Verschueren, 2008). Therefore, people from different backgrounds may have distinct contexts for interpreting interactions and making meaning, which in turn influences how they communicate and connect.

Kohlbacher et al. (2015), in their study on social ties between migrants and natives in neighborhoods, emphasize that both formal and informal social connections are closely linked to social capital and embedded within the local social environment. According to the authors, a person's attachment to a place is significantly shaped and reinforced through interactions with others. These connections provide subtle forms of support and are generally experienced positively, as they help individuals maintain relationships and foster higher levels of trust. Furthermore, Kohlbacher et al. (2015) highlight that social connections function not only as a valuable resource for individuals but also as a unifying force that strengthens the social fabric of the broader urban community. While this discussion focuses on social networks between migrants and the Dutch in a broader sense, specifically how music has facilitated connections between some participants and locals, Kohlbacher et al.'s (2015) insights offer a valuable perspective on how relationships between people, in this case, locals and migrants, contribute to community cohesion and foster a stronger sense of belonging for all. These networks benefit not only migrants but also locals, contributing to the development of stronger, more connected communities.

5.4.3. Music, or an instrument as a Home

This section is based on conversations with the participants and their deep connection to music and their instruments. Through these discussions, I came to understand that their instruments are almost an extension of their bodies, so much so that when they go without playing for a while, they physically miss them (the music/the instrument). Many carry their instruments wherever they go, reinforcing this intimate bond. This subchapter explores how playing music and engaging with their instruments help these participants feel at home. For them, music and their instruments are a form of home in many ways, serving as a profound connection to themselves.

This realization first struck me during a conversation with Nizar after the interview. While discussing his winter vacation plans, he mentioned a trip to Central America. When I asked if he would bring his instrument, he immediately said yes, explaining that he misses it whenever he doesn't play. As he spoke, he instinctively moved his hand and fingers, as if mimicking the act of playing, highlighting his deep connection to it. During the interview he said:

> Music is everything. It's my life. My life is about music. And I cannot imagine it otherwise. It's like music leading my development as a person as well. So that's how I see it. (Nizar)

For Ayaz music is an essential part of his life:

> music is very important in my life. I try to play an instrument for its list. Sometimes, if I stay away from music for a while, I feel very, very bad. So music is a part of my life. (Ayaz)

According to Nijs et al. (2009), the fusion between the musician and their instrument suggests that the musician no longer perceives a separation between themselves and the instrument. Instead, it is experienced as an extension of their own body, felt internally as if it were an organic part of them. For the authors, this integration means that the instrument becomes embedded within the musician's bodily coordination system. The specific movements required to play it become ingrained in the body's dynamic structure (body schema), forming an essential part of the musician's embodied knowledge.

In Felipe's interview, he described his deep connection to his harp and how music serves as a constant companion, taking his instrument with him wherever he goes:

> In other words, it's truly a companion for you. It's a companion. It's a companion, it's a hobby for you, yes, but it's also something very important. It's so important that I go through a lot of trouble traveling with my instruments, my things, it's complicated, expensive, and especially dealing with layovers and fitting everything into cars, it's really difficult, very stressful. But that's the price you have to pay, and I pay it, right? So, it must be something really good that I get in return to go through all this trouble, you know? So, really, I do feel it, I get a lot of personal benefits from it, right? I think it helps me a lot with my mental health, with my social life as well, it helps me a lot. And yes, even to ease the longing for certain things. And music is something interesting, something that never truly ends. (Felipe, translated from Portuguese)

Similarly, Rose describes music as a complete, immersive experience and a companion:

> First, for all people who makes music, no one will deny that music is such a good companion, it is such a good friend. In some way, it almost feel that you don't need others, for being so emotional satisfying. (Rose)

Schäfer et al. (2020) suggest that private music listening can evoke a sense of another person's presence. Persona theory argues that listeners instinctively and unconsciously interpret music as an expression of an imagined person's state of mind (Schäfer et al., 2020). The authors stress that shared affective motion experience theory proposes that music offers a sense of companionship by conveying the presence, actions, and emotional states of another individual. In the case of musicians and their own compositions, the music reflects their own emotions and feelings. In the context of migration, understanding music as a companion helps us grasp the complexities of building a social network in a new environment. At the same time, it allows us to explore music as an internal connection, where it becomes a reflection of the self.

Marc shares that music for him feels like home:

> I think music for me, whatever I would do, it feels home, you know, like because I placed myself in the center of the equation. I feel home, whatever kind of thing you know. […] if I do my compositions or my music and I play with the string quartet, it doesn't need the space. I mean, it needs a space, a workplace, hopefully, but like if I would be in Colombia, or that would be in Spain or Italy, or Netherlands, or whatever, these five minutes moment of sound, and I think this is home for me also. So, I think I'm sure many people have this feeling here when they perform their music (Marc)

Home is described by Duyvendak (2011) as a secure and familiar environment, a refuge where individuals can unwind, find comfort, and nurture themselves. For the author, the bond with a home is often rooted in a deep, instinctive connection, shaped by everyday routines and the consistent spaces where activities and social interactions occur. Duyvendak's perception of home aligns with Marc's description of music as home, as music is often seen not only as an emotional regulator but also as a space for relaxation and a source of safety. Here, "place" refers to a moment in time, a point of connection with one's music, one that can happen in any geographical space.

In Rami's conversation, he shared that, as soon as he got to the Netherlands, his family sent his instrument to him:

> when I studied and then I came to the Netherlands, yeah, after 15 days in the first AZC[asylum seeker centre], I didn't have my instrument with me. And after that, I was in Budel, that's in the south of Netherlands. And then my family sent my instrument to here. (Rami)

Rami's quote highlights his deep connection to his instrument and music, which serves as a source of comfort after arriving in a new country. The shared experiences of the participants illustrate the significant role music plays in their daily lives, not only as a link to their roots but also as a powerful tool for making a new (or any) place feel like home.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, I reflect on the findings of this study and discuss their broader implications. My research set out to explore how musicians with migrant backgrounds use music to negotiate their identity, reconnect with their cultural roots, and create a sense of belonging in the Netherlands. This discussion is framed by the central research question: *How do musicians with migrant backgrounds in the Netherlands negotiate and express their identities through music within fragmented communities, considering music as a medium for cultural representation and identity formation?* A central theme in this study is the role of culture in shaping social identity. Culture is not merely something owned by people, it is a process that is lived by people. Elliot (1990) emphasizes this by stating that "culture is not something that people have, it is something that people do" (p.149), highlighting its evolving and transformative nature. As explored in the literature review, culture has a profound impact on how people think, feel, and behave, hence playing a very influential role in identity construction. Ignoring culture means disregard a basic force that influences how individuals comprehend themselves and their place in society (McGannon & Smith, 2015). Throughout life, individuals intertwine a unique combination of practices, rituals, beliefs, and meanings, all of which contribute to identity formation while simultaneously being shaped by cultural influences (Grimson, 2010). Building on these ideas, this chapter will address the research sub-questions, analyzing how the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between music, culture, identity, and belonging in the context of migration. The study has made it clear that music plays a powerful role in self-expression, social connection, and as a vessel for memory and cultural heritage. These themes emerged consistently throughout the study and are deeply intertwined in the experiences of migrant musicians. However, for reasons of clarity, I have chosen to address each sub-question separately. This structure offers a way to explore each aspect of the research in depth while keeping a clear and focused discussion. By examining each sub-question individually, I aim to provide a more detailed analysis before finally synthesizing the findings to answer the central research question.

How do musicians with migrant backgrounds negotiate identity through music while living in the Netherlands?

The process of arriving in a new social and cultural context prompts reflections on one's roots and cultural background. As Hall (2015) argues, cultural identities are not fixed but are continuously reshaped through historical, cultural, and social contexts. This study explored how musicians with migrant background in the Netherlands navigate and express their social identity within this evolving landscape. Conversations with participants revealed that music-making has played a crucial role in their identity formation from an early age. Engaging with music becomes a way for them to negotiate their past and present, consciously shaping how they connect with both their own heritage and their new surroundings. Elements such as language, clothing, and musical instruments emerge as key aspects of their self-expression, reinforcing identity as both a personal and social, evolving construct.

Not surprisingly, language was a central theme for some participants, as music is often regarded as a form of language (Hall, 1997; Cross, 2001). In a new country, the process of learning a new language (Dutch) and translating emotions, stories, and self-expression can be not only challenging, at times even untranslatable (Ożańska-Ponikwia, 2012). Language and music serve not only as means of communication but also as fundamental tools in how migrants navigate and construct their identities in a new cultural setting. As Pytliková (2016) emphasizes, language

plays a crucial role in shaping social integration, economic opportunities, and various aspects of daily life.

The interviews also highlighted music's role in reflecting and shaping intersectional identities, encompassing nationality, ethnicity, culture, and faith. This is evident in statements such as, *"I have a background as an African musician. I have a background as a Christian musician."* Music accompanies individuals through different life stages, from childhood, as *"the kid with the musical instrument"*, to significant life transitions, such as moving to a new place, while also reflecting personal beliefs and faith. Beyond its role in life transitions, music serves as a vital means of self-expression, manifested through composition, improvisation, and collaboration. Hesmondhalgh (2008) emphasizes the deep emotional connection between music and personal identity, noting that *"*music often feels intensely and emotionally linked to the private self*"* (p. 2). Shaped by cultural, geographical, and personal experiences, music carries profound significance. It acts as both a mirror of past experiences and a transformative force in the present. For the participants, music is not merely a creative outlet but an essential part of their ongoing identity negotiation.

For some participants, moving to a new country provided an opportunity to reflect on which cultural practices they wished to maintain or adapt. As Dan described, *"You see yourself choosing every ingredient that you want to be part of your life by all means".* Censi and Paniconi (2022) argue that migration reshapes identity, challenging fixed cultural notions and fostering self-reflection. Experiencing a new environment offers a fresh perspective on one's own culture, as seen through the lens of the host community. The distance from familiar surroundings makes it easier to recognize and appreciate cultural elements that may have previously gone unnoticed. As Marc observed: *"I'm noticing that more and more, there is a lot of talent in Spain. I think southern countries have a certain intensity—in a good way. Music is very much alive there".* Some participants also reflected on differences in food, time management, and how being a musician is perceived in their culture of origin compared to the Netherlands.

Music frequently plays an important role in rituals, ceremonies, politics, and social control, and is also involved in various other aspects of human life (Herndon & McLeod, 1981). For Herndon and McLeod (1981), music is humanly structured sound; its particular aspects vary from culture to culture. For some participants, their instrument is more than just a tool, it carries the essence of their cultural background and personal journey as musicians. Through the interviews, it became evident that, in addition to its societal significance, music serves as a personal heritage, molded by individual experiences and the people encountered along the way, continuing to shape who a person is today, being deeply personal: "*So [I] have my father here [showing an instrument], and have my grandfather there in that guitar. It this is something very important when you're traveling that did you have those memories".*

Music is so deeply woven into human existence that it becomes a part of one's identity. Conversations with participants revealed how songs from their childhood continue to evoke strong memories, some of which remain meaningful in their lives today. Music is deeply linked to memories that influence our sense of identity (Jakubowski et al., 2020). Spock shared: "*Another very important, impactful thing in my life though, Pokemon. Pokemon, no joke, through my childhood and my teenage years, Pokemon was my thing, and and Super Mario Bros video games. […] it immediately invokes some sort of happy feeling, right?".* This connection may arise from the tradition of associating music with significant life moments, as well as its heightened emotional impact during key periods of identity formation, especially in adolescence (Jakubowski et al., 2020).

For many participants, music also served as a coping mechanism—not only to manage the challenges of migration but also to navigate life's broader adversities. As Laszlo (1968) noted, music alleviates rather than intensifies emotional distress. The participants' stories demonstrate how music offers a sense of familiarity and comfort. It also illustrates how musical connections helped them overcome the challenges of adapting to a new environment, cope with loneliness, foster relationships, and manage work-related stress. As Spock described, *"I had to connect to myself before I could even engage with you or others. That's what that masking coping mechanism is with the music - it's sort of a protective barrier. I have something physical in between me".*

For these musicians, music has served as a means of self-reflection, allowing them to reconnect with who they were and understand who they have become. It provides a sense of continuity and self-awareness, especially in the context of migration, where familiar cultural references shift, and the need for personal grounding becomes even more essential.

How do musicians with migrant backgrounds use music to express themselves and connect in a new cultural environment?

Throughout the study it became clear how music serves as a cultural bridge, connecting people from different backgrounds. Through live performances, it connects musicians to their audiences, transcending language barriers with its universal appeal. Collaborative experiences allow for the exchange and absorption of diverse cultural references, fostering deeper connections and mutual understanding.

Musical performance is not a one-way transmission from musician to listener. Instead, it is an interactive exchange shaped by context and culture, continuously creating, preserving, and reshaping meanings (Lidskog, 2016). Performances are spontaneously co-created by all participants involved, including musicians and audiences (Toelle & Sloboda, 2021). Rose described founding a music group with the goal of bringing live music directly to communities, stating, *"not only to TV or expensive concerts (which people already have access to in the Netherlands), but live, so you can feel the power of live music […] I hope that I can open other people to new cultures."* For these musicians, performances serve as a way to tell stories and share experiences. As Nizar expressed, *"I need to, I like to talk to the audience, to tell stories".* For some, concerts are not just about performing but also about engaging with the audience - listening to their feedback, answering their questions, and fostering a shared musical experience. Through interviews, it became evident how music-making and the recollection of musical experiences help connect personal memories with collective memory, bridging the gap between individual and shared cultural narratives (Shelemay, 2006).

Many participants described music as a universal language that helps overcome differences, fosters shared understanding, and eases initial interactions. Felipe recounted his experience of playing music for the first time with other musicians in the Netherlands, saying, *"I played a song from Buena Vista Social Club, remember? And I felt like I was breaking some kind of barrier."* This aligns with Inawat's (2014) argument that a song can be enjoyed without requiring a personal connection or shared experiences, making music a safe and accessible medium for engagement. Rami reflected on how music helped him navigate the early days of migration, stating, *"Music helped me because it created a lot of connections in the first days, the first month when I didn't speak [Dutch]."* This supports Kasinitz and Martiniello's (2019) assertion that, compared to traditional art forms, popular music is more accessible, with fewer barriers to entry, less gatekeeping, and an easier path for newcomers to participate and engage.

Participants described music as a profoundly intimate form of self-expression. Nizar reflected, *"The way you listen to it, the way you feel with it. […] So I am a composer, a creator myself, not just a player".* Felipe emphasized its broader impact, stating, *"It's a form of expression, a path opener, and a way to connect with people".* This reinforces Golemo's (2020) argument that, beyond its artistic value, music plays a crucial social role by fostering dialogue, conveying shared emotions, and strengthening connections among diverse communities.

The musicians with migrant backgrounds in this study use music in various ways: through performances to communicate, share, and create joyful experiences; through music-making as a means of expressing deep emotions; through playing to break the ice when connecting with others; and as a tool for communication, especially before mastering the language of their host country.

How do musicians with migrant backgrounds use music to navigate external cultural perceptions imposed on them considering a fragmented society?

Through the research it became clear that migrants are often seen as the other, as exotic, where people carry specific stereotypes and expectations of the other. To navigate this context of fragmented society, seen by Jeong and Seol (2022) as a specific stage of social differentiation, that often entails a hierarchical relationship between the differentiated elements and individuals within society (Jeong & Seol, 2022). The participants describe reflecting on how their origin, clothes, music and performance are perceived by locals, being perceived not only as negative, but also as positive aspect, as a reference.

Andrew reflected on the challenges he faces, stating, *"If you're an immigrant from Africa, there are a lot of shocking and surprising obstacles that you can only sometimes laugh about."* This highlights how skin color is often tied to assumptions about one's background and reinforces racial stereotypes. For Felipe, however, being a musician with a migrant background was seen as an advantage: *"It's a value, an added value to a person when you are in a place that is not your own. You become a reference for that."* This perspective emphasizes the dual nature of identity in a new cultural environment, both as a challenge and as an opportunity.

Additionally, some interviewees expressed concerns about whether audiences were open to them as individuals or if their reception was shaped by preconceived stereotypes about their culture. The word *"exotic"* was mentioned by several participants, carrying with it an element of *othering*, where engagement with cultural difference is seen as exciting and pleasurable but also reductive. As Nizar explained, *"I moved here eventually, and here, I feel you have all the options, but it has its own problems because they look at our music or our culture as kind of exotic."* This perception risks confining musicians to a limited, predefined space of *exoticism*, rather than recognizing them as artists with whom deeper, more personal connections can be formed.

To overcome the perception of exoticism and stereotypes, many participants use music as a way to reclaim their own narrative. They do so by sharing the stories behind their songs, explaining their cultural significance, and recounting personal experiences. As Dan stated, *"It's not only about introducing new things to people who are unfamiliar with your background and heritage in a musical sense, but also about having to explain it to them."* This aligns with Lidskog's (2016) assertion that through musical performance and creation, underrepresented groups can actively challenge and resist being reduced to an objectified or negative *"other."* Additionally, some participants highlighted that this process is not only about educating others but also about self-reclamation—recognizing and reaffirming their own experiences and cultural heritage. Rose expressed this sentiment: *"The realization of its [Chinese music's] uniqueness and beauty made*

me feel a responsibility to show people traditional Chinese music—without the stereotypes attached to it".

How do musicians with migrant backgrounds use music to make the Netherlands feel like home?

According to Wiles (2008), people experience home in diverse ways, it can be a physical place, daily routines, social connections, or an emotional and symbolic concept. Socially, home is created through relationships that affirm a person's identity or bring individuals together as a group (Wiles, 2008). The author stresses that, symbolically, it emerges through emotional investment, personal meaning, familiarity with past experiences and future aspirations, and the expression of individual or collective identity. Here I use home as a sense of belonging, a membership to a group. Through the interviews and conversations with the participants it was clear the music is an essential form of connection for them, with other migrants from diverse backgrounds, with locals, and with themselves.

As previously mentioned, Martinez-Callaghan and Gil-Lacruz (2017) suggest that migrant networks often form around shared racial or ethnic identities and the social structures within their communities. However, connections can also emerge through other shared experiences, such as being a foreigner in a new country. Felipe described this process, stating, *"People from Indonesia weren't really on my radar until I got here, and that was another really interesting exchange I had with the Indonesians. I got to know several Indonesian songs".* In this case, although Felipe does not share an ethnic background with his new Indonesian friends, their mutual experience as migrants and their connection through music fostered a new bond. Dan reflected on how living in the Netherlands broadened his musical and collaborative outlook, saying, *"For me, one of the biggest discoveries in the Netherlands was being open to other immigrant musicians, you know, like other cultures".* In this case, the Netherlands provided an environment where he could connect with fellow migrants, expanding both his network and his musical perspective.

Connecting with locals, in this case, the Dutch, was also mentioned by some participants as a way to feel welcomed: *"I think the fact that both you get to play with local musicians who accept you and want you to be part of the local culture, and also when you play with different strangers, then you feel like you're not alone."* This aligns with Roy and Dowd's (2010) perspective that music serves as a tool for groups to build and strengthen their collective identity, fostering a shared sense of belonging. On the other hand, some participants described a more practical dynamic, which made connection more difficult: *"What I'm trying to say is, most of the connection is kind of, you know, there's one friend who told me once: Dutch culture is about give and take. It's all about business".*

As Wiles (2008) mentions, home can also be symbolic, shaped by personal meaning. This was evident in the conversations with the musicians, where they emphasized the significance of playing their instruments. Nizar described, *"Music is everything. It's my life. My life is about music. And I cannot imagine it any other way. It's like music is guiding my development as a person as well*". Felipe referred to music as *"In other words, it's truly a companion for you. It's a companion".* For these musicians with migrant backgrounds, music and musical instruments serve as a way to connect with themselves, their memories, desires, and emotions. In line with Blunt and Varley's (2004) view, the concept of home includes both physical and symbolic dimensions, existing at the crossroads of memories and nostalgia for the past, everyday life in the present, and hopes and anxieties for the future. For these participants, music is also home.

To conclude, drawing from the interviews, conversations with participants, and observed performances, it becomes evident that music constitutes an intrinsic aspect of these musicians' identities. One that, as a non-musician, I can analyze but never fully comprehend. However, as a migrant myself, I recognize the broader process of adapting to a new social environment, negotiating one's sense of self, and building up a new social network while questioning the extent to which a place can be considered home. In navigating these challenges, people rely on the resources available to them throughout their lives. For the participants in this study, music is not merely a tool for adaptation but a fundamental aspect of their existence. Having engaged with it from an early age, music transcends functional or instrumental definitions. Rather, it operates as a form of identity, expression, heritage, connection, and performance, an essential medium through which they articulate and affirm their place in the world. Therefore, it is used by these participants as a reflection of their internal process, as voice.

Music, as an integral part of migrants' expressive practices, fosters a sense of belonging and reinforces ethnic identity in response to the challenges of living in a foreign country. According to Golemo (2020), the national culture of a state with a significant migrant population abroad, such as the Netherlands, is shaped through a multi-local process that involves both the homeland and the host countries. Since identity is continuously constructed and reconstructed through social interaction, the relationship between these two spaces, the country of origin and the diaspora, plays a crucial role in shaping national identity (Golemo, 2020). Stevenson (2017) emphasize that places are shaped by both lived and imagined experiences, causing dominant (authoritative) narratives of truth to give way to a variety of perspectives. The diversity of these narratives highlights the dynamic nature of place, emphasizing the simultaneous existence of individuals, each with their own journeys and unique stories to share (Stevenson, 2017). With the rise of extreme-right parties, migration has become a highly debated topic, often discussed as if migrants were not already an intrinsic part of society and the national identity of these countries.

Migrants represent a key segment of society, deeply connected to its transformation and development (Censi & Paniconi, 2022). For Censi and Paniconi (2022), migration beyond being a central issue in daily life and political discourse, migration challenges a number of rigid categories that are now outdated and inadequate for understanding contemporary reality. The authors stress, that specifically concepts such as nation, belonging, and identity should no longer be viewed as monocultural, fixed, and uniform, but rather reexamined in terms of fluidity, diversity, and openness. The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of migrants through their narratives, focusing specifically on musicians, as music serves as a powerful medium for expressing identity, culture, heritage, and a sense of belonging through music-making and performance. My intention was not to generalize but rather to illustrate some of these lived experiences. Given that most participants are male and reside in Wageningen or its surrounding areas (Ede and Renkum), a highly international context due to the presence of Wageningen University, migrants living in less diverse societies may have significantly different experiences. While this study does not seek to generalize, the limited diversity in terms of gender and place of residence highlights the need for a broader range of voices and greater representativeness in future research. I have sought, with this study, to highlight how migrants are active participants in society, both shaping and being shaped by their surroundings, therefore contributing to a more dynamic and nuanced understanding of social structures.

Recommendations

For future research, I propose three key recommendations: enhancing diversity among participants, conducting comparative studies, and adopting a transnational approach.

Expanding participant diversity is crucial for capturing the complexity of migrant experiences. Variations in gender, nationality, socioeconomic background, and educational level all significantly influence an individual's experiences. A more diverse sample would provide a richer and more nuanced understanding of the intersections of these factors, ultimately leading to more comprehensive narratives.

Secondly, a comparative study could offer valuable insights by examining the experiences of migrant musicians across different social contexts. Comparing those in international, cosmopolitan cities with those in smaller, less diverse towns could illuminate the ways in which the surrounding environment shapes identity and belonging. Additionally, such research could challenge the common perception that migrant communities are predominantly urban, highlighting their presence and contributions in smaller localities as well.

Lastly, a stronger transnational perspective is essential in understanding the role of digital connectivity and transnational networks in shaping migrant musicians' identities. While this study has considered elements of network societies, the increasing interconnectedness of the world through digital technologies necessitates further exploration. The reconfiguration of distance due to online communication has transformed how migrant musicians maintain ties with their home countries, influencing both their musical expression and sense of identity in their new social environments.

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Annex

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I'd like to introduce myself briefly now in person: my name is Bianca, and I'm a second-year Master's student in Tourism, Society, and Environment at Wageningen University, I am Brazilian and I have been living in the Netherlands for over a year now. As I mentioned in my first contact, my thesis focuses on the experiences of musicians with migrant background negotiating identity in the Netherlands. I am not a musician, but music has a relevant role for me, to help me connect to my own culture.

The aim of this interview is to understand more about your experience as an immigrant musician, and how you connect and perceive yourself through music while living in the Netherlands. The interview is structured in several questions, and it will last about an hour. There are no right or wrong answers, and you are free to skip any question or stop the interview at any time if you feel uncomfortable.

First things first, I would like to ask you permission to record this interview as it could be harder for me to listen and take notes at the same time. I will use the information from the interview as a foundation for my thesis, which will be published online after it's completed. I will keep your identity anonymous.

Do you have any questions before we start?

Opening Questions:

1. Could you introduce yourself?

2. Could you share your feelings and thought toward the song you chose? What does it represent? [Regarding the idea of the musician choose a song]

3. Could you describe how you started playing music?

4. Could you describe what music means to you?

5. How it is be a musician in [your previous country of residence]?

6. Do you perceive any difference/similarities between performing here and in [previous country of residence]?

Culture [as a dynamic process]

7. Can you share a bit about your musical background (e.g., how you learned, what kinds of music you grew up considering important/listening to, etc.)? How do you think your cultural roots might have influenced your style or choice of music?

8. Are there specific aspects of your culture and/or cultural heritage that you aim to represent or keep alive through your music?

9. Has your experience in the Netherlands shaped how you relate to your culture and/or cultural roots? If so, how?

Identity

10. Do you feel that living (and adapting to) a different culture has changed you? If so, how are these changes reflected in your music? (language, clothing, instruments, or style)

11. Can you share an experience where arriving in a new place reshaped your understanding of yourself or the way you perceive others?

12. Are there aspects of your identity or culture that have become more/less prominent in your music since moving abroad?

Belonging

13. What role does music play in your personal journey toward feeling "at home" here in the Netherlands?

14. Have you collaborated with other immigrant or Dutch musicians? How has that influenced your sense of belonging?

15. Are there particular spaces or events where you feel most comfortable expressing your musical identity?

16. Does sharing your music with others help you feel more accepted or understood?

Role of music

13. What are your aspirations with your music?

14. What emotions or ideas do you feel most compelled to express through your music?

15. Has your immigration journey influenced the way you approach music-making or performance?

INTERVIEW WRAP-UP

We have reached the end of the interview. Is there anything else you would like to add, or do you have any additional remarks?

Thank you so much for taking the time to have this interview with me! Your insights were incredibly valuable and will greatly contribute to this research. If you ever feel like sharing anything else, please don't hesitate to reach out. Additionally, if you know any musicians with migrant backgrounds who might be interested in sharing their experiences, it would be amazing if you could connect us. Thank you again!