

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Re-conceptualizing music education in the older adult life course: A qualitative meta-synthesis

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Abstract

The Seoul Agenda by UNESCO has set goals to develop arts education, ensuring that learners from all social backgrounds have lifelong access to arts education in a wide range of community and institutional settings. However, the purpose of lifelong learning for individuals beyond labor-market age has been largely overlooked, making it challenging to convince institutions, funders, and policymakers of its worth. The value accorded to the complex forms of lifelong learning in later life and the widely recognized health impacts of music on aging body and brain are the principal considerations to take into account when studying the effects of music education on older adults. In this study, we address the state-of-the-art research concerning older adults and music education in studies published in major peer-reviewed music education journals since the Seoul Agenda by UNESCO. We present the findings from a systematic literature review, followed by a qualitative meta-synthesis, focusing on the values, beliefs, and key concepts conveyed in the included studies. The findings of this study indicate that older adults are often portrayed narrowly and stereotypically, corroborating the issues in the sociology of aging. Our study highlights insights into the conceptualizations of music learning and participation in later life course and what these might mean for the policy and practice of later-life music education and the educational opportunities for older adults more broadly.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary gerontological researchers (e.g., Estes *et al.*, 2003; Baars *et al.*, 2006; Cann & Dean, 2009; Walker, 2017) generally agree that attitudes toward aging in (Western) post-industrial societies have become harsh, positioning older persons as societal burdens rather than resources for social and cultural capital. Many people over the age of 60 are at risk of social isolation, often due to the loss of a work-related identity after retirement, coupled with a limited sense of purpose in the community and society at large (Landeiro *et al.*, 2017). As a result of the generally negative attitudes toward aging, new trends and phenomena are emerging in many fields that aim to treat aging as a problem or a deficiency. In the field of music, this deficit perspective has promoted an increasingly popularized focus on the health benefits of music for the aging body

and brain (e.g., Cohen, 2009). While cultural and musical participation opens wide possibilities for meaningful experiences and social connectedness (Creech *et al.*, 2014a; 2014b), a primary focus on social, emotional, cognitive, and physiological well-being would risk ignoring older adults' right to lifelong education, which may successively safeguard an experience of a meaningful later-life more effectively and sustainably than focusing on aging in terms of productivity and well-being (Pfaller & Schweda, 2019, p. 46). This study aims to interrogate the values and beliefs concerning lifelong music education, focusing on the latter part of the adult life course and exploring the ways, in which musical learning and creativity in later life have been positioned, researched, and discussed.

As observed through the UNESCO *Developmental Goals for Arts Education* (UNESCO, 2010, p2), as well as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 1996) *Lifelong Learning for All* report, the purpose of lifelong learning for individuals beyond labor-market age continues to be overlooked (Schuller & Watson, 2009), consequently making it difficult to convince policymakers of its worth. Indeed, "the fields of lifelong learning and later life tend to lead separate lives, and it is only recently that policies on lifelong learning and population aging have been awarding space to each other" (Findsen & Formosa, 2012, p. 1). Simultaneously, in 2010, UNESCO's Seoul Agenda set goals for the development of arts education, including ensuring that learners from all social backgrounds have lifelong access to arts education in a wide range of community and institutional settings. Aligned with the stated commitment to accessible, high-quality, and sustainable lifelong arts education, two goals that concern music education for older adults in particular were:

- Point 1a: Affirm arts education as the foundation for balanced creative, cognitive, emotional, esthetic and social development of children, youth *and life-long learners* (our emphasis)
- Point 1c: Establish systems of lifelong and intergenerational learning in, about and through arts education (UNESCO, 2010 pp. 3–4).

In the specific domain of music education, the ideas of lifelong and inclusive learning and participation, as expressed by the Seoul Agenda (2010), have been in contradiction tension with the traditional paradigms, where the scholarly focus has always been placed on training younger generations within a dominant European conservatory tradition with an emphasis on early identification of talented children and training toward professional paths. While informal environments for older adults' musical participation have been increasingly

established, for example, through community music and so-called care or health music, formal music education institutions are still limited in their offer of wider lifelong opportunities for the aging populations (e.g., Dabback, 2010; Creech & Hallam, 2015; Laes & Schmidt, 2021). It is not clear who is given or taken away the opportunities for music learning and participation across the adult life course and specifically against the backdrop of the UNESCO goals for the development of arts education. Furthermore, much of the research associated with later-life music learning and participation, including non-professional adult learning programs, has emerged from dominant discourses concerned with potential links between music, health, and well-being (e.g., Creech *et al.*, 2013). It is now a timely moment, more than a decade since the publication of the Seoul Agenda (UNESCO, 2010), to explore the emergent research themes and questions concerning the ways older adults are portrayed in music education research.

In this article, we aim to address the state-of-the-art research concerning older adults and music education, published between 2010 and 2020 after the release of Seoul Agenda. Utilizing a sequential design comprising a systematic literature review followed by a qualitative meta-synthesis, we interrogate the primary phenomena of interest, the rationales, and the key concepts that comprise the recent research on later-life music learning and participation. Through an examination of the main focal points of this body of research, we consider the contribution of research focused on later-life music learning and participation to the wider international scholarship concerned with older adult education practices (Findsen & Formosa, 2016) as well as lifelong education perspectives, particularly in music education.

1.1. Theoretical and conceptual starting points

1.1.1. Life course perspective as a starting point for defining "old"

Conventionally, human life is divided into stages based on chronological age, to which many life course theorists have responded with more flexible alternatives (e.g., Bengtson *et al.*, 2012). While different stages from childhood and adolescence to middle age and old age may be viewed as socially defined and constructed, increased life expectancy, changes in work life and economy, and increased diversification of lifestyles and family relationships also require that the lifespan must be viewed differently. Thus, human lives are no longer regarded as linear, moving from childhood to adulthood, work career, retirement, and death. Instead, according to the life course approach, a human life course forms within transitions and important life events. Life course theory encompasses

the micro approach of understanding life as a personal experience alongside macro factors, such as historical time and place of individuals in particular age cohorts (Hunt, 2017). This ontological pluralism is advantageous also for the considerations of older adult music education, as it abandons the expectations of old age identity and considers social transformation and personal experience (Hunt, 2017).

Bengtson *et al.* (2012, pp. 10–12) designate five principles for the life course perspective. The first one is “linked lives,” which refers to the recognition of interconnectedness and fluctuation in human relationships. Interestingly, it has been predicted that transformations in home and work relationships will foster more intergenerational friendships as people from different age groups may pursue similar lifestyles (Gratton & Scott, 2017, p.14). We find this concept of ‘linked lives’ relevant to music participation being related to life course experiences, and the idea of music being deeply embedded with social connection rather than excluding older adults in their own silo. The second principle emphasizes the impact of *social* and *historical* contexts on individuals’ lives, which again strengthens our understanding of social connection as an underlying value attached to music learning and the idea of life history based on how earlier life-course experiences related to music influence later modes of participation.

The third principle reminds us of the (sometimes unpredictable) life transitions and their timing that connects to music as self-fulfillment and personal growth, for example, the potential of music learning in navigating significant transitions, such as retirement from work. Referring to the well-established health and well-being discourse in music (MacDonald *et al.*, 2016), we argue that music may have more substantial potential as a vehicle for protection, resilience, and strengthening self-knowledge rather than “traditional” health effects. The fourth principle stresses agency, in other words, the significance of having a sense of control over making decisions that affect personal change and continuity – hence, issues of identity become central to questions of navigating a long life, including the capacity to develop oneself, make individual choices, and navigate through transitions, self-fulfillment, personal growth, and also a developmental possibility. The fifth principle highlights that aging and personal development is cumulative: relationships, behaviors, and life events have consequences for later life statuses, relationships, and well-being. This principle seems to connect health and well-being with valuable lifelong experience, resulting in a self-defined definition of well-being derived from music learning and participation. These changes in experiences and perceptions of the life course are fostering increasing

attention, including music educators, to focus on questions concerned with how this prolonged lifespan can be spent in a most self-determined and meaningful way.

There is no single definition of how a person experiences aging or when old age begins. Some aging theories articulate continuity and others change (Hunt, 2017, p. 259). Some older people might look for continuity, simultaneously finding it difficult to come to terms with the physical, psychological, and social changes of aging. They might develop a disintegrated identity or a passive-dependent identity, which means that they have little confidence in their own abilities to cope with on a daily basis. Some individuals develop a defended identity through which they live independently but are fearful of growing older and fight to stay fit and youthful in ways that may engender stress and disappointment. Change, on the other hand, refers to how many older people actively seek to meet new people and reappraise themselves through new challenges, which plausibly have positive or negative consequences, thus developing an integrated identity. They retain their personal integrity and optimism while accepting that growing old is inevitable (Hunt 2017, p. 265).

1.1.2. Justifications for music education in older adult life course

Adult education is becoming increasingly important for economic, social, and political reasons (Biesta *et al.*, 2011). At the same time, while lifelong learning has been acknowledged as an important part of educational policies and strongly recommended, for instance, by UNESCO (Faure *et al.*, 1972), it is increasingly understood in terms of economic development and formation of human capital, in other words, through a neoliberalist agenda, rather than as a personal good and an inherent aspect of democratic life. According to educational theorist Gert Biesta, this transformation “is not only visible at the level of policy; it also has had a strong impact on the learning opportunities made available to adults, partly through a redefinition of what counts as legitimate or ‘useful’ learning” (Biesta, 2006, p. 169).

The recent changes in the lifelong learning discourse also raise important questions for music educators as to why older learners remain so widely underserved by our educational institutions that generally are thought to be open and inclusive. While several projects providing musical activities for older adults are taking place, they are mostly residing within the field of community music. However, community music as such is lacking critical reflection and scholarly analysis of its pedagogical principles. The individual and social meanings of adult music learning that justify its *pedagogical* relevance have not yet been seen as so

distinct as to merit attention in music education research (e.g., Creech & Hallam, 2015). Therefore, we investigate in this study the discourse associated with music and older people, whether health and well-being benefits, evidenced by “music and health” networks, the emergence of “music in care,” and “arts on prescription,” have been considered in the research. The underlying risk in these discourses is that they might emphasize physical and cognitive decline and how music may fix or hide the natural processes and human characteristics of aging, thus perpetuating the pathologized identities assigned to older individuals. In other words, even if musical activities were made *available*, the justifications for older adult music education may remain narrow and limited.

Therefore, we ask the following research question: What is the state-of-the-art research on older adults and music education in the studies published since the Seoul Agenda?

This research task was approached by three sub-questions:

- (1) Who are the older adult participants in these studies and how are they portrayed?
- (2) What kinds of research methods and processes are used in the studies, and what are the principal phenomena of interest?
- (3) How are music learning and participation in the older adult life course conceptualized in these studies?

2. Methodology

We adopted a sequential design, beginning with a systematic review and followed by a meta-synthesis. While systematic review offers filtered and unbiased information of the respective field as it comprises the systematic selection and appraisal of the quality of the included studies (Jahan *et al.*, 2016, p. 6; Page *et al.*, 2021), meta-synthesis is used to yield a more comprehensive view i.e., “theory development, higher-level abstraction, and generalizability to make qualitative findings more accessible for application in practice” (Zimmer, 2006, p. 313). The systematic review paired with a meta-synthesis provided a methodological framework for interpretive analysis of the grand narratives or interpretive translations emerging from the integration and comparison of the key findings of the studies.

2.1. Systematic review

Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses guidelines provide the roadmap for the systematic review, including developing search protocol and establishing inclusion criteria to be applied in the screening of identified articles (Moher *et al.*, 2015). To evaluate the rigor of the studies, we used the JBI Checklist for Qualitative Research (JBI, 2017), for example, to check

within each paper for coherence across research questions, theoretical framework, methods, and interpretation, establishing whether participants’ voices were adequately represented, whether researcher positionality was acknowledged, and whether ethical issues were addressed (Lockwood *et al.*, 2015). Articles retained for full-text analysis were analyzed systematically, with extracted data being coded according to the SPIDER (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation [i.e., key findings], Research Type) tool (Jahan *et al.*, 2016).

2.1.1. Criteria for inclusion and search protocol

The criteria for inclusion and the search protocol were refined over several reflective discussions between the two researchers, grappling with the question of how to define with precision a search protocol within a topic area that itself is not well-defined. For example, the question of how to define “older adult” was critical yet ambiguous, leading us to abandon chronological age boundaries and instead rely on the language used to describe participants in each study. Where it was agreed that the language indicated study participants were deemed by the researcher to be in the later part of the adult lifespan, studies were included in the study (Table 1 for examples).

The retained articles were limited to peer-reviewed empirical studies published in English that addressed older adult music learning and/or participation in natural research settings. This analysis was conducted by two authors who are proficient in multiple languages, although studies published in non-English language were excluded from analysis. Besides, we also excluded theoretical articles, music therapy-related studies, or clinical studies focused on the cognitive, physical, or psychological effects of music and conducted in laboratory environments. Because our rationale for the study was framed by the goals expressed in the UNESCO’s Seoul Agenda (2010), we limited our

Table 1. Inclusion criteria

Year of publication	2010 – 2021
Language	English
Type of article	Full-text peer-reviewed journal article reporting empirical study
Context	Music education in a real-world context (excluding professional training, professional development, music therapy in clinical contexts, clinical or experimental music interventions where the focus is on clinical outcomes and higher education)
Key concept	Music learning and/or participation among adults
Participants	Participants (learners and/or facilitators of learning) in music learning and/or participation. Participants identified as older adults (e.g., older adult, senior, elder, and retired).

search to articles published between 2010 and 2021 (when the search was finalized). The complete list of inclusion criteria is set out in Table 1.

We searched for abstracts in three relevant databases: (i) Academic Search Complete (multidisciplinary database); (ii) ERIC (education database); and (iii) Web of Science (multidisciplinary database). The full search protocol is set out in Table 2.

2.1.2. Screening of papers

The first search of three databases yielded 341 records. Following removal of 8 duplicates and a further 200 records whose titles indicated that the study did not meet the inclusion criteria, 143 records were retained. The abstracts of these records were read and a further 51 were excluded from the study. Ninety-two records were therefore retained, and these were read in full-text and assessed for eligibility by two researchers. Following detailed analysis of the papers according to the review criteria and extraction of the data using the SPIDER tool, the two researchers initially recommended retaining 60 of the 92 papers, excluding 22 papers, and marking the remaining ten as “unsure.” Following further review and discussion, 68 papers were included and 24 papers were excluded from the study (Figure 1).

The reasons for excluding papers at the abstract and full-text stages of screening were varied, and some papers were excluded for more than one reason. First, 65 papers were not empirical but rather were theoretical discussions or accounts of practice, while four offered no account of a research methodology. Two papers were not concerned with music learning and participation, while eight papers were not studies on older adults or aging and ten papers did not specify the age of their participants.

2.1.3. Final retained papers

The final 68 articles were journal publications representing a variety of academic fields. The majority of them were in the field of music education or community music/leisure studies. Other represented fields were psychology and health studies, education and lifelong learning, musicology, aging studies, nursing, and qualitative research (Table 3).

2.2. Meta-synthesis as an approach to analysis

Meta-synthesis was used to interrogate and further synthesize, at a conceptual level, the findings from the 68 retained studies that had been retrieved through the

systematic review and to use these as data for a third-level interpretation (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015). As such, meta-synthesis added a further level of analysis, allowing us to add an interpretive synthesis of the themes represented in the systematic review data set.

Our approach to the interpretive synthesis began with thematic coding of the key findings of each individual paper. Second, we undertook a “horizontal analysis,” whereby relationships among the values and beliefs expressed in the papers were identified through the reciprocal translation of themes across the research papers. These themes were then collated, and, through a dialogic process, a consensus was reached regarding the labeling and definitions of higher-order concepts that united the themes.

3. Findings

3.1. Who are the older adult participants in these studies and how are they portrayed?

In this section, we set out the findings derived from the systematic review concerned with the contexts within which the research was carried out, the characteristics of research participants, and the ways in which “aging” was conceptualized in the retained studies.

3.1.1. Country where the studies took place

Most of the publications were studies carried out in the USA, UK, or Australia (52 in total). Three studies were collaborations that took place in more than one country (Figure 2).

3.1.2. Year of publication

The publication dates ranged from 2010 to 2020, with the median being 2017 and the mode being 2018 (Figure 3).

3.1.3. Research contexts

This group of 68 studies included research concerned with older adult music learning and participation in formal (2), informal (12), and non-formal (54) contexts (Table 4). In the non-formal category, the music learning and participation took place in further education, community music, music schools, senior centers, professional development, and everyday life settings. In the informal category, the music learning and participation took place in community music and everyday life settings, while the formal category was concerned with music learning in music schools.

Table 2. Search protocol

Aging OR Ageing or “Older people” or “Older Person*” or elder* or Senior or “Third age” or “Fourth age” or Adult* or “Later life” or “Later adulthood” or retir*	Music* Musicking Or Musicing	Pparticipat* ORor Llearn* or educat* or teach* or pedagog* Education	Life* Lifelong Lifewide Lifecourse
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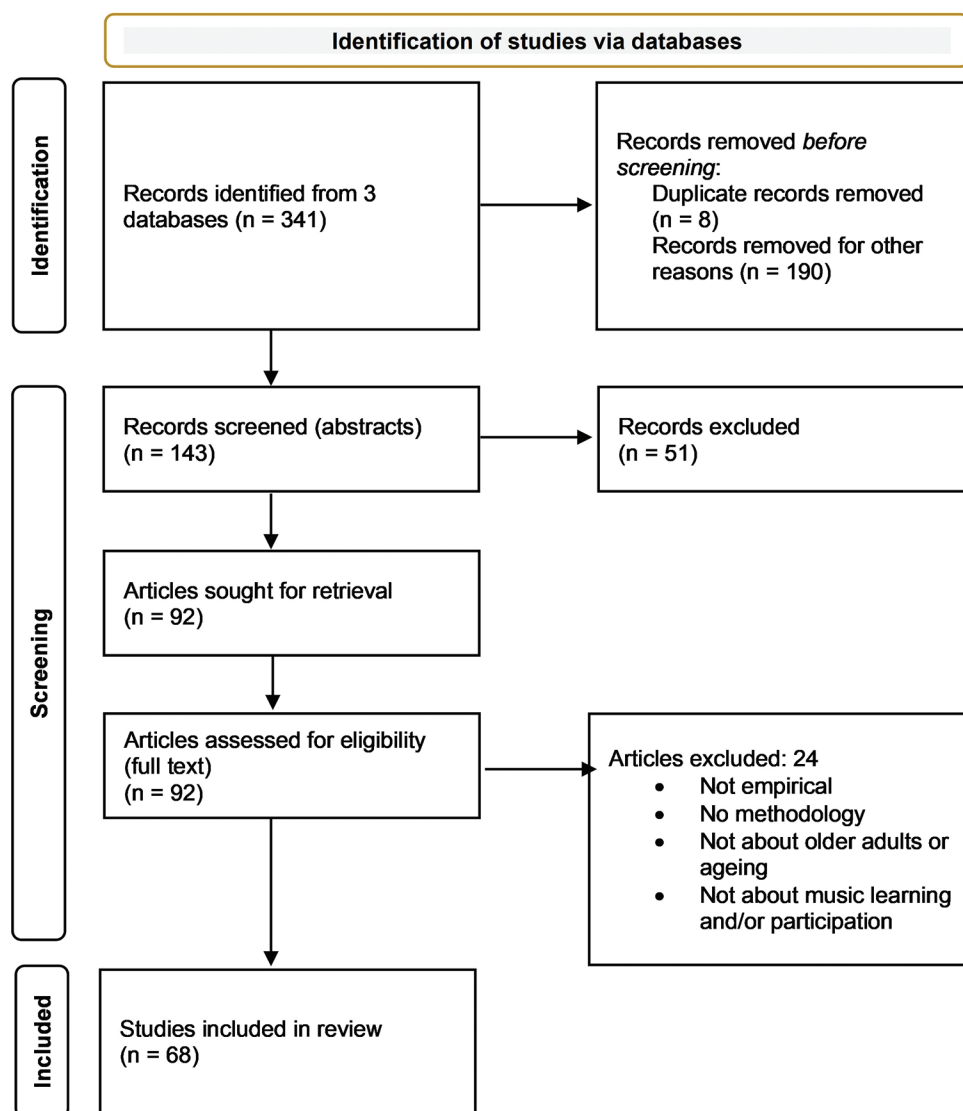


Figure 1. Identification of studies

Table 3. Journal main disciplines and number of publications (Total=68)

Journal discipline	Number of publications
Music education	29
Community music/leisure	22
Psychology/health	8
Education/lifelong learning	3
Musicology	2
Ageing/quality of life	2
Nursing/medicine	1
Qualitative research	1

Table 4. Research contexts

Context	Formal	Non-formal	Informal	Total
Further education	0	4	0	4
Community music	0	38	9	47
Music school	2	1	0	3
Senior center	0	5	0	5
Healthcare setting	0	1	0	1
Professional development	0	5	0	5
Music in everyday life	0	0	3	3
Total	2	54	12	68

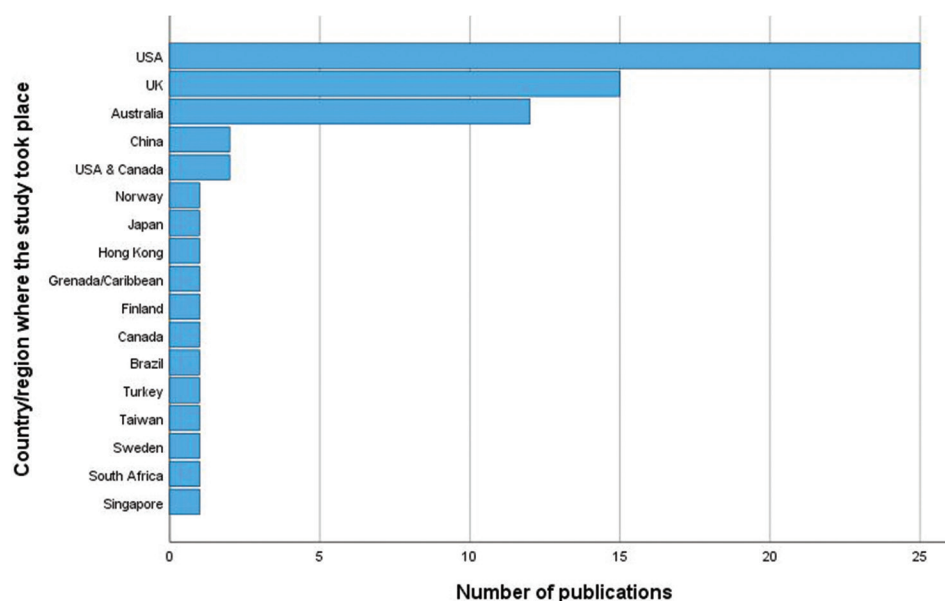


Figure 2. Origin of the retained papers

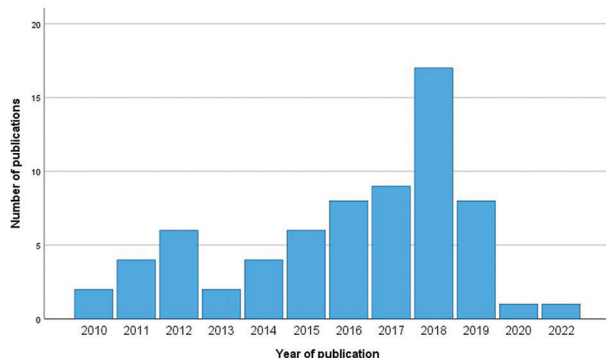


Figure 3. Year of publication

3.1.4. Research participants

Sample sizes were known in 67 out of the 68 studies. Among those 67 studies, sample sizes ranged from just one to 35,735 (one “outlier” study), with over half of the studies reporting sample sizes of 21 or less. The median (mid-point) sample size was 16, while the mode sample size (most frequent) was 11. Overall, among the 67 papers where sample size was reported, there were a total of 39,890 research participants. This total includes the one “outlier” study where data were analyzed from 35,735 survey respondents. Without that one study, the total number of participants in the research where sample size was reported was 1,152.

The number of male participants was reported in 43 papers comprising a total of 1,079 male research participants. Among the 41 papers where the number of female participants was reported, there were a total of

1,359 female research participants. No papers reported any other genders apart from male or female. The median number of male participants was 6, while the median number of female participants was 10. Means and standard deviations for the number of male ($M = 25$, $SD = 85$) and female ($M = 33$, $SD = 89$) participants were skewed, due to the one study with a very high sample size.

Twenty-one papers provided the mean age of their participants. Among those 21 papers, the mean age was 68 ($SD = 6$), with a median age of 70. Among those papers where data were provided concerning the specific ages of research participants, the mean lower age was 46 ($SD = 19$), with a median age of 52, while the mean upper age was 82 ($SD = 10$) with a median age of 82 (Table 5).

3.1.5. Constructions of aging

Within those contexts, older adult participants were defined in a number of different ways. The most common attributes related to their chronological age (“older” in 29 publications, “senior” in 8 publications, “Third Age” in 4 publications, and “elderly” in 1 publication). The participants were stated “lifelong learners” in 18 publications, “retired” in 6 publications, and older defined by chronic illness in 2 publications.

3.2. What kinds of research methods and processes are used in the studies, and what are the principal phenomena of interest?

In this section, we report findings from the systematic review concerned with the phenomena of interest

addressed in the retained studies, as well as the research paradigms, designs, methods, and approaches to analyses employed.

3.2.1. Topics and specific phenomena of interest

The broad topic areas and phenomena of interest addressed in the retained papers were categorized. Four overarching topic areas emerged (note that some studies addressed more than one phenomenon of interest): (i) Music, health, and well-being (53 studies); (ii) lifelong music learning (46 studies); (iii) continuing engagement (18 studies); and (iv) personal development (10 studies). These topic areas were further categorized into more specific phenomena of interest (Table 6).

3.2.2. Research paradigms and designs

The majority (49) of papers were carried out within a qualitative paradigm. Fifteen were mixed methods, while there were only four quantitative studies. Within those

broad paradigms, a range of research designs (as defined by the authors) was detected, the most frequent being case study (31 studies); the second most frequent descriptive (6 studies); and the third most frequent quasi-experiment (5 studies). In addition, we detected qualitative exploratory studies (4), participatory action research studies (2), ethnography (2), correlational studies (2), narrative inquiry (2), and sequential studies (1). Research design was not discussed in 13 papers.

3.2.3. Methods of data collection

Methods of data collection, as described by the authors, included interviewing (semi-structured, in-depth, structured, narrative, open-ended, focus group), observations (video, in-person, participant), journals, documents and photographs, and questionnaires (Table 7). Twenty-six of the 68 papers included reference to, or discussion of, ethical issues or procedures for gaining approval from a research ethics board.

Table 5. Sample characteristics

	Mean age of sample	Lower age in the sample	Upper age in the sample	Number of males	Number of females
Number of publications providing data	21	39	36	43	41
Number of publications with missing data	47	29	32	25	27
Mean	68.20	46.21	81.64	25.09	33.15
Median	70	52	82.50	6	10
SD	6.06	19.07	10.05	84.64	88.74

Table 6. Topic areas and phenomena of interest

Topic category	Phenomenon of interest	Number of studies*	Total
Music, health, and well-being	Meaning of music-making	22	51
	Well-being	17	
	Health	6	
	Quality of life	6	
Lifelong music learning	Lifelong learning	15	46
	Musical development	11	
	Role of facilitator	8	
	Role of institution	2	
	Learning motivation	10	
Continuing engagement	Lifelong engagement	6	17
	Social engagement	1a	
Personal development	Identity work	5	10
	Confidence	2	
	Spirituality	2	
	Creativity	1	

Note: *Number does not add up to 67, as some studies identified more than one phenomenon of interest.

Table 7. Methods of data collection

Data collection category	Method	Number of studies	Total number of studies*
Interviews/focus groups	Semi-structured interview	33	57
	In-depth interview	4	
	Structured interview	2	
	Open-ended interview	2	
	Narrative interview	6	
	Focus group	10	
Questionnaire	Questionnaire	26	26
Observations	Participant observation	8	17
	Video observation	6	
	In-person onlooker observation	3	
Documents, journals and photographs	Journal	6	9
	Document analysis	2	
	Photographs	1	

Note: *Total exceeds 68, as many studies used more than one method.

3.2.4. Approach to analysis

Approaches to analysis of qualitative data (as reported by the authors) included thematic analysis, interpretive phenomenological analysis, narrative analysis, phenomenological analysis, content analysis, and comparative analysis. Quantitative approaches to analysis included time sampling and event sampling approaches to analysis of observational data, as well as inferential and descriptive statistics (Table 8).

3.3. Summary of findings from the systematic review

Overall, the studies reported in this group of retained papers were typically derived from anglophone countries and carried out in the contexts of community music. Sample sizes were usually small, and the studies have an overrepresentation of female participants over male participants. The participants were generally described as: older, lifelong learners, retired, third age, elderly, senior, and/or chronically ill. Most of the studies revolved around music, health, and well-being, while a substantial number also investigated questions concerned with lifelong learning in music. A qualitative research paradigm prevailed, with a majority of studies employing qualitative designs, methods, and approaches to analysis.

3.4. How are music learning and participation in the older adult life course conceptualized in these studies?

In this section, we report the findings from our meta-synthesis, where analysis of the critical conclusions revealed that five higher-order conceptual themes that conveyed

Table 8. Approaches to analysis

Approach to analysis	Number of studies
Thematic analysis	27
Interpretive phenomenological analysis	15
Narrative analysis	5
Phenomenological analysis	5
Content analysis	4
Comparative analysis	1
Time sampling	1
Event sampling	1
Inferential statistics	2
Descriptive statistics	7

an account of how music learning and participation in the older adult life course have been conceptualized and discussed in the research literature (Figure 4).

3.4.1. Social connectedness derived from music participation

The social nature of music-making and resultant social connectedness derived from music participation was prominently communicated as a higher-order concept across 23 papers. For example, drawing on a qualitative methodology, Abell *et al.* (2017) reported that social connectedness was a key benefit attributed to group singing among 11 older adults (mean age 70) living with Parkinson's disease. This study echoes the findings of several others (e.g., Balsnes, 2017; Clements-Cortes, 2014, de Araujo & Rocha, 2019), who have reported that

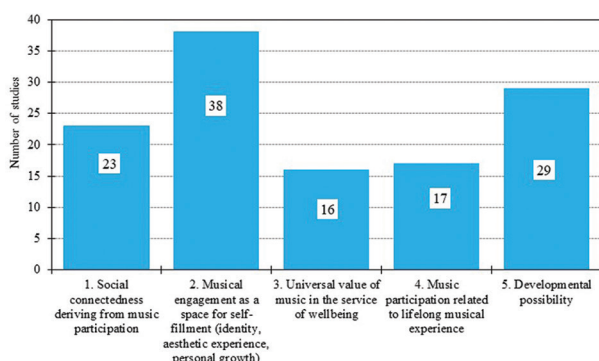


Figure 4. Higher-order conceptual themes. Numbers indicate the number of papers communicating each of the five themes. The numbers do not add up to 68, as some papers conveyed more than one of the five higher-order conceptual themes.

social interaction and an ensuing sense of belonging and connection are critical contributing factors to the positive quality of life benefits attributed to singing together. Social connection manifested as friendship, mutual respect, companionship, spiritual connection, a sense of belonging, and acceptance has likewise been described by participants in choirs researched by Kaynak (2018), Lee *et al.* (2016), and Joseph & Southcott (2014; 2015; 2017; 2018), Joseph *et al.*, 2018; Li & Southcott, 2018; Southcott & Nethsinghe, 2019). These studies have consistently reported that a sense of connection, fellowship, and social engagement motivate continued participation in later-life choral singing, promote social development and set a positive outlook on aging. One study highlighted the prominence of community and connection in the longer-term evolution of a choir; interviews and focus groups with older adult community choir participants, at two separate periods four years apart, revealed that connection with others was a core facet of the choir's identity and sustainability (Lamont *et al.*, 2018).

Social support in the form of companionship, emotional support, practical assistance, and sharing of information was similarly found to be experienced widely within the context of New Horizons Bands (Carucci, 2012) and other community instrumental ensembles. Community music-making within instrumental ensembles has reportedly functioned as a vehicle for mutual support (Glen, 2018). The social bonds and harmonious relationships forged within such contexts are fundamental to community-building (Giebelhausen & Kruse, 2018; Goodrich, 2019; Rohwer, 2017).

A few studies have used quantitative measures to explore potential relationships between social connections within choral contexts and well-being among older adults. For example, Pearce *et al.* (2016) reported that although singing, as compared with other leisure activities, did

not directly result in a more significant improvement in health and well-being, the collective bonding experienced by choir participants “predicted increased flourishing, reduced anxiety and improved physical health” (p. 518). This reinforced earlier studies where, for example, Perkins & Williamon (2014) reported social connection to be one mechanism by which music learning could support enhanced well-being, and Varvarigou *et al.* (2013) reported that seniors experienced feelings of rejuvenation attributed to their participation in intergenerational songwriting and musical performance.

3.4.2. Musical engagement as a space for self-fulfillment

Thirty-eight of the retained studies explored and discussed how music learning and participation in later adulthood may be experienced as a space for self-fulfillment. In contrast to the first higher-order theme concerned with social connection, the second theme focuses on the individual level. It involves lifelong learning, exploration, or rediscovery of musical identity, aesthetic experience, and personal development. For example, community choral singing among adults aged 60–90 has reportedly fostered a sense of personal validation, purpose, fulfillment, and spiritual growth (Joseph & Southcott, 2014; 2017; 2018; Lee *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, 19 older adults from an inclusive elderly care center (serving older adults from lower socioeconomic groups) were found to derive a sense of purpose and joy from choral singing (Petrovsky *et al.*, 2020), while in other contexts, older adults have been found to experience music-making with a traditional instrument as an outlet for spiritual development (Matsunobo, 2018), to derive empowerment and agency from making music in a rock band (Laes, 2015), and to find that songwriting was a vehicle for emotional expression and healing among older adult male prisoners (Cohen & Wilson, 2017).

Self-fulfillment was also expressed as identity work achieved through music participation, in some cases related to strengthening cultural identity through music (e.g., De Araujo & De Rocha, 2019; Joseph & Southcott, 2018; Sirek, 2018), while in others, related to reinforcing, rediscovering, or developing musical identities through choral participation or instrumental groups (e.g., Jenkins and Southcott, 2016; Laes, 2015; Reese, 2019; Woody *et al.*, 2019). For example, Söderman and Westvall (2017) investigated the meaning of community music for older adult members of a Finnish association in Sweden. The music-making, which took the form of a three-piece band that wrote and performed their songs and accompanied a senior dance group, was a source of strengthened personal and cultural identity and provided a sense of purpose and empowerment.

Finally, self-fulfillment achieved through lifelong learning in music was a prominent theme among the retained papers. Several researchers have focused on adult piano learners (e.g., Haddon, 2017; Kang, 2016; Pike, 2011; Taylor, 2010; 2011; 2012), demonstrating that learners were highly engaged, open to learning new things, and self-directed and that personal growth and identity construction were closely entwined with the learning itself. Consistently, these studies have positioned lifelong learning in music as a space for self-fulfillment through aesthetic experience (Redman & Bugos, 2019), the achievement of personal goals (e.g., Schmidt-Jones, 2018), or as an expression of personal motivation (Lee, 2013; Li and Southcott, 2015; Pitts *et al.*, 2015; Pitts & Robinson, 2016; Varvarigou *et al.*, 2011; Woody *et al.*, 2019), in turn contributing to enhanced quality of life (e.g., Kaynak, 2018). For example, Perkins & Williamon (2014) argued that subjective feelings of pleasure and satisfaction in musical progress impacted positive well-being, while several studies (Southcott and Joseph, 2015; Southcott and Li, 2018; Southcott and Nethsinghe, 2019) exploring the perceptions and experiences associated with choir participation have reported that exploring new musical horizons and learning new things contributed to the quality of life. Almost no papers critiqued the narrative of self-fulfillment through music participation, although Barbeau & Mantie (2019) explored the phenomenon of music performance anxiety among 35 New Horizons Band participants. As expected at any age, those with higher trait anxiety did experience higher MPA. Nonetheless, the benefits, articulated as staying active cognitively and feeling self-fulfilled, were deemed to outweigh any negative experience of music performance anxiety.

3.4.3. The universal value of music in the service of well-being

Seventeen of the retained studies supported the idea of the universal value of music in the service of well-being. For example, Roy *et al.* (2019) investigated the implications of group drumming sessions for 27 older adults (mean age 76), 18 of whom lived with mild dementia. Through self-report measures, mood and demeanor among all participants improved. Focusing on singing, Abell *et al.* (2017) attributed improvements in well-being (comprising physical, mood, cognitive functioning, social connectedness, “flow-on” effects, and sense-of-self) to group singing among eleven older adults living with Parkinson’s disease. Others have linked group singing to enhanced health and well-being among older adults, referring to positive outcomes such as enhanced cognitive, emotional, and physical well-being, spirituality, resilience, autonomy, fellowship, and overcoming disease

and hardship (Balsnes, 2017; Joseph & Southcott, 2014; 2015; 2018; Li and Southcott, 2015; Southcott and Li, 2018; Southcott and Nethsinghe, 2019), including those living with cognitive impairment (Clements-Cortes, 2014).

Attempts have been made to compare music-making with other leisure activities. For example, Maury and Rickard (2022) explored whether choral participation yielded more significant benefits for well-being in the long term (7 months) compared with the effects of involvement in an exercise group similarly characterized by opportunities for social interaction and exposure to music. A choir comprising 27 adults with a mean age of 66 was compared with an exercise class with a mean age of 74. Quantitative measures indicated that the emotional well-being of both groups improved but that there were no significant differences between the groups. Qualitative data showed that choir members considered singing together an intrinsically rewarding activity that contributed positively to their overall well-being. Likewise, over 7 months, Pearce *et al.* (2016) compared group singing to other group activities (creative writing and crafts classes). While all groups, comprising adults with a mean age of 60, did experience improvements in mental and physical health and life satisfaction, there was no evidence that singing, in comparison with the other group activities, had a more significant impact on positive health and well-being. A further comparative study (Perkins & Williamon, 2014) explored the intersection of lifelong learning in music, well-being, and older adulthood, contrasting 32 older adult instrumental learners (drums, keyboard, recorder, learning in one-to-one or small group instruction or creative workshops) with 30 members of the University of the Third Age involved in a shared learning project. Quantitative measures suggested that all groups experienced increases in overall health-promoting behaviors over 10 weeks. Follow-up interviews were undertaken with 21 music learners, leading to the conclusion that enhanced well-being could be attributed to specific facets of music learning that included: “(i) subjective experiences of pleasure; (ii) enhanced social interactions; (iii) musically-nuanced engagement in day-to-day life; (iv) fulfillment of musical ambition; (v) ability to make music; and (vi) self-satisfaction through musical progress” (Perkins & Williamon, 2014, p. 559).

Finally, some studies have attributed more general well-being to music learning and participation (e.g., De Araujo & Da Rocha, 2019). In this vein, and drawing on 1 year of observation as a leader of a band for senior citizens, Smith (2012) discussed the therapeutic benefits of performance in later-life contexts, both for the band participants and the older adult audiences they performed for.

3.4.4. Coherence in lifelong musical experience

Several studies have highlighted a lifelong learning perspective in their later-life music learning and participation accounts. Accounts of lived experiences, including the link between specific moments and significant songs, have illuminated the complexity, depth, and uniqueness of meanings embedded in participants' musical lives, personhood, preferences, and history (Cho, 2018; Cohen & Wilson, 2017; Sirek, 2018), with lifelong musical experiences connecting past, current and future learning (Kang, 2016). Likewise, several studies have demonstrated how music may be entwined with meaning-making over time (Lamont *et al.*, 2018), nostalgia, or reminiscence (De Araujo & da Rocha, 2019).

Some researchers have investigated whether music education earlier in the life course may predict adult musical engagement. For example, 35,735 survey responses concerned with public participation in the arts revealed that "lifelong engagement with music and the arts is one measurable outcome of school-based music education in the United States ... even after controlling for socioeconomic status, sex, and race/ethnicity" (Elpus, 2018, p. 155). In the context of a New Horizons Band for older adults, Glen (2018) too identified a potential relationship between early music education and later-life music participation. Likewise, participation in choral singing or instrumental learning as an older adult has been found to have roots in childhood experience and lifelong musical interests (Joseph & Southcott, 2015; 2018; Petrovsky *et al.*, 2020; Rohwer, 2017) and earlier musical ambitions (Perkins & Williamon, 2014). A Taiwanese survey study (Lee, 2013) similarly found that lifelong musical interest and pleasure in music-making was a characteristic of older adults who were most likely to engage with music learning. However, the relationship between early music education and lifelong learning in music is not necessarily predictable nor is it linear, with multiple issues such as opportunity, attitudes, and skills as well as "confidence, personality, emotional and social needs [and] as well as the complexities of everyday life" (Pitts *et al.*, 2015, p. 132) intersecting in complex ways (Pitts & Robinson, 2016).

3.4.5. Developmental possibility

The idea that there may be potential for lifelong musical development emerged from these studies as the fifth higher-order concept. This broad idea expressed in 29 of the retained papers, encompassed sub-themes somewhat in tension. For example, a belief in the possibility of development (e.g., Coutts, 2018; Creech *et al.*, 2014; Laes, 2015; Pike, 2011; Redman & Bugos, 2019; Woody *et al.*, 2019) co-existed alongside interrogations of age-related issues

that were deemed to demand specific types of facilitation (e.g., Hallam *et al.*, 2016; Talbert & Edelman, 2018; Varvarigou *et al.*, 2013; Wehr & Coffman, 2018). Several studies focused on the specific expertise in facilitation that is, as it is positioned in these studies, necessary support for personal and social musical engagement in later life to be achieved fully (Bonshor, 2017; Coutts, 2018; Creech *et al.*, 2014; Giebelhausen & Kruse, 2018; Haddon, 2017; Harrington, 2018; Lee *et al.*, 2016; Lum, 2011). Overall, this higher-order concept of developmental possibility was founded on the idea that lifelong musical development can be achieved and sustained through later adulthood, but this is dependent on access to expert, differentiated facilitation and peer support, particularly about age-related physical, cognitive, or attitudinal constraints.

4. Discussion

In this article, we have addressed the state-of-the-art research on older adults and music education, identifying and analyzing studies published since the release of UNESCO's Seoul Agenda (2010). As stated in the agenda, the division into "children, young people, and lifelong learners" (UNESCO, 2010) inadequately addresses treating adults as the only lifelong learners – indeed, lifelong learning skills are already developed in childhood. Based on our findings, especially in the case of music, a previous musical engagement predicts active musical participation in later life, and correspondingly, a lack of musical experiences in earlier life makes musical participation difficult and/or less likely in old age. Furthermore, our findings show that majority of older adults' music learning takes place in informal/non-formal settings. Hence, the goal of establishing systems of lifelong and intergenerational learning in [...] arts education" (UNESCO, 2010) continues to be relevant in the 2020s.

Throughout the research process, we confronted the challenge of defining an older adult. Research participants were consistently described as "older" or retired, but little information was found regarding other dynamics of their identities, such as socioeconomic status, educational background, professional identity, or previous roles in work life. Perspectives of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) were completely missing from the data. In the same vein, gender was consistently conceptualized in a binary way, raising questions about the persistent lack of sex-gender and body politics discussions concerning older individuals (Woodward, 1999). An explicit limitation of this body of research concerning older adults in music learning and participation is that it reinforces a message of the aging population as a homogenous group whose identities are reduced to chronological age, thus perpetuating the numeric discourse of aging (Woodward, 1999, p. x). Although

identification of research participants as older adults was a criterion in the selection of studies in this study, this does not eliminate the fact that older people represent all forms of intersectional identities, not just their age, which seems to be ignored entirely in the field of research.

Alongside the analysis of the design of the studies included in the systematic review, we noted a lack of discussion about ethics and approaches to learning and teaching, in other words, the pedagogical needs of older adult participants. A great majority of the studies reported relatively positive findings without critically evaluating the possible anxieties or discomfort related to musical participation. Instead, it seemed to be a recurring surprise for the researchers that older people can successfully take part in learning processes and gain musical skills and knowledge. This finding highlights our critique that a well-being discourse alone does not necessarily recognize the varying needs of individuals and communities.

Regarding the conceptualization of lifelong learning in and through music, we found an emphasis on self-fulfillment and developmental possibility as critical parameters of a successful music learning experience. Second, social connectedness was distinctive in the analysis as a consistent signifier of meaningful learning in later life. We could compare this to music education with younger participants that often emphasizes more individualized meanings such as musical development or musical identity. Third, the universal value of music in service of well-being was a cutting-edge discourse in several studies, if not in terms of the study aims or main findings, at least as a general key outcome mentioned in musical activities with older adults. Finally, the coherence in lifelong musical experience can be summed up in key ideas about music as a bridge between the past and the present and as a builder (or preserver) of identity. Path dependence was also somewhat emphasized, that is, the fact that a previous musical background is thought to predict a more active commitment to music in old age. Much research has been about older adults as a distinct group that can be defined, categorized, and studied. As our focus in this study was on the later phase of the adult life course, we did not look deliberately for studies of intergenerational learning. However, it must be noted that in music education research in general, intergenerational contexts are often located in the field of community music, while research related to music *learning* — one of the main foci of this research — is largely based on the idea of age-specific pedagogy. For example, age-specific approaches to pedagogy are reinforced by silo thinking that is inspired by the conservatory tradition, where teaching activities aimed at children and young people typically

have different aims and objectives than those for adults particularly as beginner learners. Hence, we call for more participatory intergenerational perspectives that could address the voice and the power of aged participants first and foremost as music learners among other dynamics of their intersectional identities (Holman & Walker 2021).

Our qualitative meta-synthesis offers a basis for further development of older adult music education research and practice (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015), which may, in turn, have a significant impact on currently changing societal attitudes, as manifested in the new discourses on aging that support the exploration of different types of political action and identity formation in later life (e.g., Powell & Gilbert, 2009) for which music and its different creative forms offer a fruitful ground (e.g., Dabback, 2010, Laes, 2015; Creech, 2019; Creech *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, acknowledging that “understanding how older adults have been portrayed would provide a foundation on which future scholarship can build” (Chen *et al.*, 2008), this study presents a critical stance on the underlying assumptions and rationales relating to the later-life and the relevance of music learning and participation, as represented in the research literature. As a practical implication drawn from this study, we propose positively highlighting the older adults’ right to age in terms of self-defined well-being and a sense of meaningfulness in and through music learning and musical participation. As life expectancy increases along with prolonged active leisure time, *re-creation* becomes more critical than *recreation* (Gratton & Scott 2017, p. 10). In other words, increased leisure time cannot be just idle waste of time, but filling life with *meaningful* experiences and creating a sense of purpose through social networks and devoted activities become central to the pursuit of “good aging.”

5. Conclusions

Our systematic literature review of articles concerning older adults and music learning/participation published between 2010 and 2020 showed that the predominant values and beliefs were expressed through five higher-order concepts that conveyed the importance of social connection, the fulfillment of personal goals, the universal value of music as a promoter of well-being, music participation and its relationship to lifelong musical experience, and developmental possibility. The agency and the intersectional dynamics of identities regarding gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, cultural background, or disability among the older adult participants described in the studies appeared to be predetermined and narrow.

The findings of this study must be seen in the light of some limitations. The databases used as well as the selection

criteria set for the studies limit our study in many ways. First, we only searched for papers written in English, which may imply a bias related to academic publication systems and language spheres. Second, to guarantee scientific quality, we only included peer-reviewed empirical publications, thus omitting other types of publications which may have been relevant. However, our dataset of 68 final selected studies represents a significant body of the literature, considering that meta-synthesis usually comprises 10–12 studies (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015). Furthermore, meta-synthesis is not only a summary of existing research on a topic but a *third-level interpretation* (p. 84) that involves the researchers' critical evaluation and reflection, resulting in a new body of knowledge that offers a comprehensive and even generalizable view on the phenomenon.

In sum, we conclude that while developmental possibility and personal development are acknowledged in the predominant literature concerned with later-life music learning and participation, this is entwined with understandings of lifelong learning among older adults that are framed by the significance attached to social participation and a belief in the universal value of music in the service of well-being, coupled with intersectional perspectives on the later life course that are generally weak and narrow. These remarks are not necessarily a critique of the scholars in our field but, hopefully, point to new directions in generating research knowledge that considers the multiple needs of lifelong learners in music education and, more broadly, across the life course.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

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