



Evolution of musical preferences among youth: A comparative study of old and modern music

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Abstract

Music is an important component of individual identity, emotional expression, social interaction, and cultural continuity. The rapid expansion of digital media and streaming platforms has substantially increased access to music from different periods, potentially changing the relationship between younger listeners and older musical traditions. The present cross-sectional study examined preferences for old and modern music and explored the factors associated with these preferences. Data from 100 respondents were analyzed using demographic characteristics, music-listening frequency and duration, overall music preference, 14 five-point Likert-scale items, reasons for musical preference, and willingness to continue or recommend the preferred music. The sample comprised 74% females and 26% males, with 65% residing in rural areas and 35% in urban areas. Postgraduate respondents constituted the largest educational group (47%). Overall, 81% of respondents reported an equal preference for old and modern music, 15% preferred old music, and only 4% preferred modern music exclusively. Lyrics (25%) were the most frequently reported reason for music preference, followed by emotional connection (20%), melody (15%), and cultural value (13%). A large majority of respondents (83%) indicated that they would continue or recommend their musical preference. The overall mean score across the 14 Likert items was 4.18 ± 0.42 , indicating generally favorable responses. A significant difference was observed in total Likert scores across the three preference groups (Kruskal–Wallis $H = 11.83$, $p = 0.003$), although the small size of the modern-music-only group limits interpretation. The findings suggest that contemporary listeners do not necessarily replace older music with modern music; instead, many demonstrate an integrative preference in which lyrics, melody, emotional connection, rhythm, and cultural value contribute to musical choice. Because the study is cross-sectional and includes respondents outside the conventional youth age range, longitudinal research among strictly defined youth populations is recommended.

Keywords: Musical preference, youth, old music, modern music, music listening, nostalgia, emotional connection, cultural value, lyrics, contemporary music

Introduction

Music is more than an entertainment medium; it is closely associated with identity, emotional experience, social relationships, memory, and cultural expression (Frith, 1996)^[8]. Musical preferences can reflect personal characteristics as well as the social and cultural environments in which individuals develop (Radocy and Boyle, 2012)^[12]. Research on adolescence has identified musical preference as an important component of identity formation and social interaction (North and Hargreaves, 1999)^[11]. Musical styles may function as symbolic markers through which young people express aspects of their self-concept and establish relationships with peers (Abrams, 2009).

The development of musical preference is also associated with age (Bonneville-Roussy *et al.*, 2013)^[3]. Large-scale research involving more than a quarter of a million individuals has shown that younger people tend to engage with music more frequently than middle-aged adults, while some dimensions of contemporary and intense music preference tend to decline with age (Bonneville-Roussy *et al.*, 2017)^[4]. Preferences for more sophisticated and unpretentious musical characteristics may increase across adulthood (Bonneville-Roussy and Eerola, 2018)^[2]. These findings suggest that musical taste is not static but is influenced by developmental stage, personality, social experience, and exposure.

The contemporary music environment differs substantially from earlier generations. Digital platforms have made music from multiple decades available to listeners almost instantaneously (Briot, 2026)^[5]. Consequently, younger listeners can encounter older music independently of the period in which it was originally released (Siedenburg *et al.*, 2026)^[13]. Recent research on adolescents in the streaming era emphasizes that contemporary youth music tastes are increasingly shaped within a digital environment in which multiple musical styles are readily accessible (de Brito *et al.*, 2026)^[7].

At the same time, older music may retain or regain popularity because of emotional associations, cultural familiarity, family influence, reinterpretation, and nostalgia. Streaming data have demonstrated that listening to older music can increase under circumstances in which listeners seek familiarity and positive emotional experiences. Musical memories can also remain particularly influential because music encountered during adolescence may contribute to long-term musical identity (Tabit, 2026)^[14].

Despite these observations, the common assumption that young people have simply shifted from “old” music to “modern” music may be overly simplistic. The availability of extensive digital catalogues allows listeners to combine musical periods rather than selecting only one. The present study therefore examines whether respondents demonstrate

a clear preference for old or modern music or instead maintain an integrated preference for both.

Rationale of the Study

The relationship between older and contemporary music is particularly relevant in the digital era (Liang, 2025) [10]. Young listeners can access songs from different generations through streaming services, social media, video platforms, and digital archives. Consequently, musical preference may increasingly reflect the characteristics of the song—such as lyrics, melody, rhythm, emotional resonance, and cultural meaning—rather than simply the period in which the song was released (Johansson *et al.*, 2017) [9].

Understanding these preferences may provide insight into cultural continuity, changing entertainment practices, intergenerational interaction, and the psychological functions of music. The present study aimed to examine patterns of preference for old and modern music and to identify the major factors associated with musical preference, with particular attention to the youth-age subgroup. Specifically, the study assessed respondents' preferences for old music, modern music, or both equally; examined the frequency and duration of music listening; identified the principal reasons underlying musical preferences, including lyrics, melody, emotional connection, cultural value, and rhythm; compared response patterns among the old-music, modern-music, and both-equally preference groups; investigated the relationship between selected demographic characteristics and musical preference; assessed the overall response pattern across the 14-item Likert-scale questionnaire; and explored the broader implications of these findings for understanding changing musical preferences in the contemporary digital era.

Materials and Methods

1. Study Design

A cross-sectional comparative study design was used. The analysis was based on a dataset containing 100 individual respondent records. The supplied dataset included age, gender, education, residence, music-listening frequency, daily listening duration, overall music preference, 14 Likert-scale responses, preferred music type, main reason for preference, and willingness to recommend or continue the preference.

Because the dataset was collected at one point in time, the study assesses differences and patterns of preference rather than longitudinal evolution.

2. Study Population and Sample

The dataset consisted of 100 respondents. Ages ranged from 11 to 60 years, with a mean age of approximately 29.93 ± 9.87 years. Therefore, the available dataset represents a mixed-age population rather than a strictly defined youth sample.

For interpretation of the youth dimension, respondents aged 18–29 years were considered the youth-focused subgroup. There were 45 respondents within this age range.

3. Variables

The principal variables included age, gender, educational level, residence, music-listening frequency, daily music-listening duration, overall music preference, preferred music type, main reason for musical preference, fourteen Likert-scale questionnaire items, and willingness to recommend or continue the stated musical preference. These variables were

selected to capture the respondents' demographic characteristics, music-listening behavior, preferences, and attitudinal responses. The fourteen questionnaire items were retained and reported as Likert Item 1–14, as the supplied dataset did not include the substantive wording of the individual items; therefore, no specific or unverified interpretation was assigned to the individual Likert items during the analysis.

4. Measurement Scale

The 14 questionnaire items were recorded on a five-point Likert scale, with scores ranging from 1 to 5. A total Likert score was calculated by summing the 14 responses, giving a possible range of 14–70.

5. Statistical Analysis

Data were entered and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical variables. Means and standard deviations were calculated for continuous and Likert-derived scores.

The distribution of total Likert scores was compared across the three preference categories using the Kruskal–Wallis test. Chi-square tests were used to explore associations between overall music preference and selected demographic/listening variables. Statistical significance was considered at $p < 0.05$.

Because the modern-music-only group was small ($n = 4$), comparisons involving this group were interpreted cautiously.

Results

1. Sociodemographic Characteristics

Among the 100 respondents, 74 (74%) were female and 26 (26%) were male. Sixty-five respondents (65%) lived in rural areas, whereas 35 (35%) lived in urban areas all over west Bengal.

Postgraduate respondents represented the largest educational category (47%), followed by undergraduate and higher-secondary respondents (22% each), while 9% belonged to the other educational category.

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents ($n = 100$)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	74	74
	Male	26	26
Residence	Rural	65	65
	Urban	35	35
Education	Higher Secondary	22	22
	Undergraduate	22	22
	Postgraduate	47	47
	Other	9	9

The demographic information is consistent with the individual case records in the supplied dataset.

2. Music-Listening Frequency and Duration

Most respondents reported listening to music daily. Daily listening was reported by 84% of respondents, while smaller proportions reported listening several times per week, once a week, or occasionally.

Regarding duration, 30% reported listening for more than two hours per day, another 30% reported 1–2 hours, 28% reported 30–60 minutes, and 12% reported less than 30 minutes.

Table 2: Music-listening pattern

Variable	Category	n	%
Listening frequency	Daily	84	84
	Several times a week	4	4
	Once a week	3	3
Daily duration	Occasionally	9	9
	<30 minutes	12	12
	30–60 minutes	28	28
	1–2 hours	30	30
	>2 hours	30	30

These findings indicate that music represented a regular part of respondents' everyday media consumption.

3. Preference for Old and Modern Music

The most important finding was the predominance of an integrated preference.

Table 3: Overall music preference

Preference	n	%
Both old and modern music equally	81	81
Old music	15	15
Modern music	4	4
Total	100	100

A large majority of respondents (81%) preferred both old and modern music equally. Old music was preferred exclusively by 15%, while only 4% reported an exclusive preference for modern music.

This finding challenges the assumption that contemporary listeners necessarily reject older music. Instead, the dominant pattern was one of coexistence between musical generations.

4. Reasons for Musical Preference

Lyrics were the most frequently reported reason for music preference, accounting for 25% of responses. Emotional connection was reported by 20%, melody by 15%, and cultural value by 13%.

Table 4: Main reasons for musical preference

Reason	n	%
Lyrics	25	25
Emotional connection	20	20
Melody	15	15
Cultural value	13	13
Lyrics and melody	10	10
Rhythm/beat	10	10
Everything	5	5
Words and melody	2	2
Total	100	100

The predominance of lyrics and emotional connection indicates that respondents' choices were influenced by meaningful and affective characteristics rather than solely by the age of a musical composition.

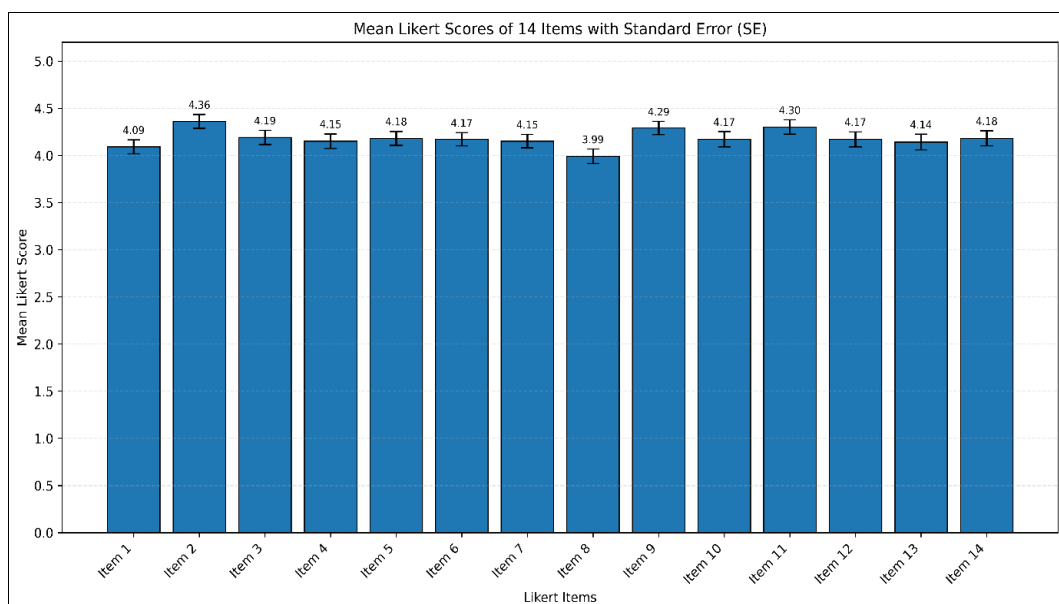
5. Likert-Scale Responses

The mean scores of the 14 Likert items ranged from 3.99 to 4.36.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics of the 14 Likert items

Item	Mean $\pm$ SD
Likert Item 1	4.09 $\pm$ 0.74
Likert Item 2	4.36 $\pm$ 0.73
Likert Item 3	4.19 $\pm$ 0.75
Likert Item 4	4.15 $\pm$ 0.77
Likert Item 5	4.18 $\pm$ 0.74
Likert Item 6	4.17 $\pm$ 0.70
Likert Item 7	4.15 $\pm$ 0.72
Likert Item 8	3.99 $\pm$ 0.77
Likert Item 9	4.29 $\pm$ 0.70
Likert Item 10	4.17 $\pm$ 0.80
Likert Item 11	4.30 $\pm$ 0.76
Likert Item 12	4.17 $\pm$ 0.79
Likert Item 13	4.14 $\pm$ 0.83
Likert Item 14	4.18 $\pm$ 0.80

The overall mean across the 14 items was approximately 4.18 ± 0.42 , demonstrating generally favorable responses across the questionnaire.

**Fig 1:** Mean Likert Scores of 14 Items with Standard Error (SE)

6. Total Likert Score According to Music Preference

The mean total Likert scores were:

- **Both equally:** 58.01 ± 3.28
- **Old music:** 60.33 ± 2.77
- **Modern music:** 62.25 ± 1.71

Table 6: Total Likert score by music-preference group

Music preference	n	Mean total score	SD
Both equally	81	58.01	3.28
Old music	15	60.33	2.77
Modern music	4	62.25	1.71

The Kruskal–Wallis test indicated a statistically significant difference in total scores among the three preference groups ($H = 11.83$, $p = 0.003$). However, the modern-music group contained only four respondents, so the finding should not be interpreted as evidence that modern-music preference produces higher questionnaire scores.

7. Willingness to Continue or Recommend the Preference

A substantial majority of respondents expressed a positive attitude toward continuing or recommending their musical preference.

Table 7: Willingness to continue/recommend music preference

Response	n	%
Yes	83	83
Not sure	14	14
No	3	3

Thus, 83% demonstrated a clear willingness to continue or recommend their preferred musical choices.

8. Youth-Focused Subgroup Analysis

Among respondents aged 18–29 years ($n = 45$), 32 (71.1%) preferred both old and modern music, 10 (22.2%) preferred old music, and 3 (6.7%) preferred modern music.

Table 8: Music preference among respondents aged 18–29 years

Preference	n	%
Both equally	32	71.1
Old music	10	22.2
Modern music	3	6.7
Total	45	100

The youth-focused subgroup therefore showed the same broad pattern as the total sample: an integrated preference was more common than exclusive preference for either musical period.

Discussion

The principal finding of the present study was that respondents did not demonstrate a simple transition from old music to modern music. Instead, 81% of respondents reported an equal preference for both old and modern music, while more than seven in ten respondents in the 18–29-year subgroup also expressed a preference for both categories. This finding suggests that musical preference in the contemporary digital environment may be characterized by integration rather than replacement. Such a pattern is consistent with evidence that musical tastes are multidimensional and influenced by developmental, social,

and personality-related factors rather than being determined solely by the chronological period in which music was produced (Bonneville-Roussy *et al.*, 2013) [3]. Large-scale research has demonstrated that musical engagement and preferences vary across the life course, with younger individuals generally showing high levels of musical engagement and distinctive contemporary preferences, while also retaining preferences for other musical characteristics.

Previous research has established that musical preferences play an important role in adolescent identity and social relationships. North and Hargreaves (1999) [11] demonstrated that musical preference can function as a symbolic “badge of identity,” through which adolescents communicate aspects of their self-concept and form perceptions of others. Their findings further indicated associations between musical preference, self-concept, self-esteem, and expectations concerning people who share particular musical tastes. The present findings extend this perspective by suggesting that identity-related musical preferences do not necessarily require exclusive attachment to a single musical generation. Instead, young listeners may incorporate elements of both older and contemporary music into their personal musical identities.

The strong preference for both old and modern music may partly reflect the increased accessibility of music in the streaming era. Digital music platforms have substantially expanded the range of music available to contemporary listeners, allowing adolescents and young adults to encounter songs from multiple decades alongside newly released material. Carbone and Vandenbosch (2025) [6], in their study of adolescents' music tastes in the streaming era, emphasized that contemporary musical taste develops within a digital environment characterized by extensive access to music and diverse taste profiles. Their findings demonstrate that youth musical tastes should be understood in relation to identity, social characteristics, and digital media environments rather than as a simple preference for contemporary music.

Another important observation in the present study was the role of lyrics, which represented the most frequently reported reason for musical preference, followed by emotional connection and melody. This finding suggests that respondents may evaluate music according to its perceived meaning, expressive qualities, and emotional resonance rather than simply according to its production era. Music can serve important emotional and identity-related functions, particularly during adolescence and emerging adulthood. Recent research among adolescents has demonstrated relationships between music listening, emotional regulation, emotional experiences, and identity-development processes (van der Meulen *et al.*, 2026) [15]. In particular, openness to emotional experiences through music listening was associated with processes of identity reflection, highlighting the role of music as a resource for understanding and expressing the self.

The importance of emotional connection may also help explain the continued relevance of older music among contemporary listeners. Older songs may become associated with childhood experiences, family environments, cultural celebrations, interpersonal relationships, and personally meaningful events. Consequently, the age of a musical composition does not necessarily determine its relevance to the listener. Instead, the emotional and autobiographical

meanings attached to a song may sustain its appeal over time. Empirical evidence from music-streaming data supports this interpretation. Yeung (2023) ^[16] found increased listening to older music during the first COVID-19 lockdown in the United Kingdom and interpreted the pattern as consistent with nostalgia-seeking behavior. The study showed that listeners were more likely to listen to older songs during the lockdown period, suggesting that previously familiar music can become particularly attractive when individuals seek emotional familiarity and positive experiences.

The present findings are also consistent with evidence that musical preferences formed during adolescence can have long-lasting effects. Bonneville-Roussy *et al.* (2013) ^[3], using data from more than a quarter of a million individuals, reported substantial developmental patterns in musical engagement and preference from adolescence through middle adulthood. Their findings indicated that young people listen to music more frequently and in a wider range of contexts than middle-aged adults, while age-related changes occur across different dimensions of musical preference. These findings support the interpretation that musical experiences during adolescence can contribute to relatively enduring patterns of musical taste.

The relatively small proportion of respondents who preferred modern music exclusively (4%) should not be interpreted as evidence that modern music is unpopular. Rather, the broad categorization of music into “old,” “modern,” and “both equally” may have encouraged respondents who enjoy music from different periods to select the integrated category. Contemporary listeners may simultaneously consume newly released music and older songs through the same digital platforms. Thus, modern music may coexist with older music rather than replacing it. The streaming environment provides listeners with unprecedented opportunities to move across musical periods and genres, potentially reducing the importance of chronological boundaries in everyday music consumption (Carbone & Vandenbosch, 2025) ^[6].

The high frequency of daily music listening was another notable finding. In the present sample, 84% of respondents reported listening to music daily, indicating that music remains a significant component of everyday media consumption. This observation is consistent with the findings of Bonneville-Roussy *et al.* (2013) ^[3], who reported that young people engage with music more frequently than middle-aged adults and listen to music in a wide variety of contexts. Music therefore appears to remain an important component of everyday life, even as the technological means of accessing it have changed.

The statistical comparison of total Likert scores demonstrated a significant difference among the three music-preference groups. However, this result should be interpreted cautiously because the modern-music-only group contained only four respondents. The statistical finding should therefore be considered exploratory rather than definitive. The observed difference indicates that the response profiles varied among preference categories, but it does not establish that preference for modern music causes higher attitudinal scores or that modern music is intrinsically more valued. Larger samples with more balanced representation of old-music, modern-music, and mixed-preference groups would be required to confirm these differences.

Overall, the findings indicate that contemporary musical preference is better understood as a pluralistic and integrative phenomenon than as a generational replacement process. The coexistence of old and modern music preferences may reflect the combined influence of digital accessibility, emotional attachment, cultural continuity, lyrics, melody, and identity formation. Rather than abandoning older musical traditions, contemporary listeners appear capable of incorporating them into broader and increasingly individualized musical repertoires. This interpretation is particularly relevant in the streaming era, where technological access has made music from different historical periods simultaneously available to younger generations (Carbone & Vandenbosch, 2025) ^[6].

Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that contemporary musical preference is more complex than a simple shift from old music to modern music. Among the 100 respondents, the dominant pattern was an equal preference for old and modern music, while exclusive preference for modern music was uncommon. Among respondents aged 18–29 years, the majority likewise preferred both musical categories. Lyrics, emotional connection, melody, and cultural value emerged as important reasons for musical preference. The findings indicate that musical choice is likely shaped by a combination of aesthetic, emotional, social, and cultural factors rather than by the chronological age of the music alone. The study therefore suggests that the contemporary digital environment may be facilitating musical coexistence, allowing younger listeners to combine older cultural traditions with modern musical expressions. Rather than viewing old and modern music as opposing categories, future research should examine how listeners construct hybrid and personalized musical identities across generations. Longitudinal research using a clearly defined youth population, larger samples, genre-specific measures, and detailed information on digital music consumption is recommended to establish how musical preferences actually change over time.

Ethical Statement

As the present study involved a non-invasive questionnaire-based survey and did not involve the collection or analysis of blood, tissue, biological specimens, or other clinical samples, no laboratory or medical procedures were performed. The study did not require the collection of sensitive personal information beyond the survey responses necessary for the research objectives. Participation was voluntary, and the responses were considered for research purposes only. Confidentiality and privacy of the respondents were maintained throughout the data analysis and reporting process.

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