Digital Expressions:  An Examination of the Role Music Technology Plays in the Formation of Adolescent Musical Identities

Lindsay Weiss, Teachers College, Columbia University

Jordan Mroziak, Duquesne University

Lisa Hoak, Duquesne University

The main goal of adolescence is to transition out of one’s childhood self and into their adult self. People between the ages of 12-18 typically do this by shifting towards independence (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984) while managing a balance between their current and future selves (Davidson & Burland, 2006). The experiences that adolescents live through during this period greatly influence the development of their identities.

As music educators, who frequently incorporate digital technologies into our own pedagogy, we believe that students who have grown up with an iPad in their hands have established an amplified connection to technology.  We have experienced how our own adolescent students create songs with mobile devices and score homemade films on their computers.  In many ways these compositions are musical expressions of their own internal feelings, thoughts, and motives. We have observed this most commonly through the teaching of a music technology class comprised of thirteen high school students.

The purpose of our study was to investigate how adolescents use music technology to shape and express their own musical identities.  The participants include thirteen adolescent music students, who are enrolled in a music technology course at the City Music Center (CMC) at Duquesne University.  The goals of this course include a basic mastery of sequencing and sound design through projects such as remixes, original compositions, and small film scores.  Data for this case study include: a) student projects, b) class observations, and c) semi structured in depth interviews. The data were analyzed using thematic coding (Charmaz, 2006).

Our preliminary findings include that: 1) the CMC adolescent students created media that they found would have favorable effects with regard to their external peer groups and 2) the CMC adolescent students who were more at ease with the technology were more likely to experiment with genres and styles outside of their current preferred musical tastes. Individual student musical profiles and implications for our research will be shared during the Research Presentation Forum II on Friday, March 27, 2015.

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**Contact Information:**

Lisa Hoak, hoakl@duq.edu

Jordan Mroziak, mroziak415@duq.edu

Lindsay Weiss, law2150@tc.columbia.edu