

‘I’m also slightly conscious of how much I’m listening to something’: Music streaming and the transformation of music listening

Media, Culture & Society

1–17

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DOI: 10.1177/01634437231219142

journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs**Michael James Walsh** 

University of Canberra, Australia

Abstract

Drawing on Erving Goffman’s microsociology, this article explores the networking of music streaming technologies and their convergence with social media. Acts of privatized music listening that were once seamlessly secluded in back regions like the home and therefore removed from the view of others can now become presented more widely in front region contexts. Reporting on in-depth qualitative interviews with users of music streaming and how they perceive their musical listening has been altered, I investigate some of the affordances of streaming as it contributes to an unravelling or collapsing of demarcations between front and back region activity. As a result, users of streaming services describe how they become mindful of how they undertake their music listening and how these technologies consequently require careful management.

Keywords

Goffman, interaction, listening, music, Spotify, streaming

Introduction

Music streaming services can transform elements of personalized listening into a seemingly public activity. While the advent of sound recording enables music performances to become transposed into ‘back regions’ like bedrooms and other secluded spaces of the

Corresponding author:

Michael James Walsh, Faculty of Business, Government and Law University of Canberra, Building 11, University Drive, Bruce, ACT 2617, Australia.

Email: Michael.Walsh@canberra.edu.au

home (Arditi, 2018: 303), streaming cultures enable music reception to function as a way of conveying a listener's identity to networked audiences (Kang, 2023; Nag, 2018). Music streaming technologies, therefore, can render music reception as part of a digital 'interaction order' in which privatized music and its associated 'information preserve' (Goffman, 1971: 38) or 'personal information' (Zerubavel, 1982) are used to divulge knowingly or inadvertently a user's music listening activity to communicate dimensions of the self (Hagen, 2016). Music streaming services and the information presented via a listener's profile are implicated, with the possibility of connecting with and influencing other users, while simultaneously being risky and intrusive if not managed appropriately (Hagen and Lüders, 2017: 657).

In exploring music streaming technologies, Goffman's (1959) microsociology assists in understanding how individuals use these services to convey their identity to networked audiences. Dramaturgy articulates how situationally appropriate behaviours occur in contingent ways that align with specific regions; that is, what is considered socially appropriate interaction in a culture of connectivity where digital technologies are crucial for staging mediated interactions (Walsh, 2022). Rather than static, expressions of identity are manifest in front of segregated audiences (Goffman, 1959: 106) with a distinction between 'front' and 'back' regions being vital. Front regions comprise situations such as formal workplace settings or formal ceremonial contexts that typically are differentiated by barriers to perception from back regions, these being 'backstage' areas (for example bathrooms, restaurant kitchens, private offices and bedrooms) where individuals can relax and prepare themselves for future interaction (Smith, 2006: 42). Back region behaviours are symbolic of intimacy between actors and while regions commonly overlap with physical locations in that one is more likely to be able to relax in a private space, back regions are nonetheless not completely synonymous with private space (Hogan, 2010: 379). What is critical is that by segregating interactions and social information into different regions, these processes work as 'psycho-social shock absorbers' (Meyrowitz, 1986: 41) ensuring interruptions are reduced that have the potential to drain energies of people while avoiding ambiguous definitions of a situation (Loh and Walsh, 2021; Marwick and Boyd, 2014). Crucially music can help listeners manage regions and frame social activity (Bull 2007; de la Fuente and Walsh, 2021; DeNora, 2013; Walsh and de la Fuente, 2020). However, as I argue in the following, the affordances of music streaming also can contribute to an unravelling or collapsing of experience typically demarcated between front and back regions which loosely aligns in some ways with notions of 'public' and 'private' social life (Bovill and Livingstone, 2001; Kumar and Makarova, 2008; Meyrowitz, 1986; Walsh and Baker, 2017; Zerubavel, 1979).

As the physical goods that functioned as symbolic markers in collecting music recordings recede in importance, music *listeners* have become increasingly music *users* of streaming services (Arditi, 2018: 305). Music distribution shifts from physical artefacts to digital downloads and then to streaming; overturning previous consumption models predicated on a perpetual subscription requirement (Arditi, 2018: 315). This has implications for listeners as they use music technologies to undertake personalized listening in back regions; they become mindful of how their music consumption can become more visible to networked audiences via streaming services. To explore this argument, I first discuss the role of music recordings and their dematerialization and integration into

streaming cultures. A brief overview of the methodology underpinning the empirical elements of the project is provided. I then canvas implications for social interaction and music listening that arise from using streaming services as a networked public by reporting on the results of interviews conducted with users of music streaming. I consider how users navigate music streaming services and demonstrate an awareness of how their activity is captured and viewed in this information environment. The contribution provided in this article is one that extends our understanding of music reception as it becomes reimagined via streaming cultures.

From personalized listening to listening via music streaming services

Music streaming services are the primary way listeners now access music recordings (Arditi, 2018: 302; Nowak and Bennett, 2022: 49). They have become central information hubs that connect various stakeholders of the music business together (Maasø & Hagen, 2020: 29). But before streaming, music recordings were generally accessible only to those who could obtain physical access to material artefacts. Music was retrievable by purchasing or borrowing copies of a recording or serendipitously listening via radio. With the invention of sound recording, music activity that was conducted in front regions like listening to music in a performance space (Johnson, 1995; Small, 1998), had the potential to become transposed into a private act (Arditi, 2018: 303). This is not to deny the possibility of intimate acts of musical experience prior to sound recording, but to point to the way sound recording disarticulates performance spaces from listening contexts (Nowak and Bennett, 2022: 53). As Botstein (1999: 482) describes:

We now can listen to music entirely alone in private without a live performance, not openly as spectators, but entirely unseen with the aid of all types of electronic devices. While we are listening undisturbed and unobserved at home to pristine edited performances, we can do anything we wish – sit as we wish and where we want to; we can read, doze, eat, doodle, talk, exclaim, and move along with the sound.

Music recording through its social and technological mediation can reconfigure the relationship between public and private experience (Born, 2013: 24). Moreover, with the miniaturization of music recordings and the advent of the Walkman and later other mobile music technologies, the privatization of musical listening in public was possible (Bull, 2000, 2007). Music in this personalized format allows for the reconfiguration of different social spaces, where music is used to take elements of privatized sound into what could be considered a front region. As Bull (2000: 9) explains: ‘Just as radio use transforms the space of the living room so personal-stereo use transforms the urban spacing of the street. The transformed social dynamics of the living room is taken out into the street’.

Easy access to music recordings enabled via mobile media afford users the opportunity to cultivate personalized soundtracks that navigate everyday situations that manage mental states; a sense of auditory control over interpersonal experience is provided by creating islands of communicative warmth in oceans of urban chill (Bull, 2000: 9).

Music recordings, therefore, can be instrumentalized, enabled by solitary modes of listening that become highly representative and intimately experienced in a personal way (Hennion, 2001: 6). In this context, privatized listening becomes a mechanism for individuals to deploy music to navigate front regions through the creation of privatized sound atmospheres (Bull, 2007: 11; Walsh, 2009). This represents a more widespread tendency that Kumar and Makarova (2008: 332) describe as taking aspects of the home into the public sphere, where we ‘boldly and almost shamelessly parade our private selves in public’.

As music technologies were integrated into mobile telephony, this extended the use of music throughout everyday life, naturalizing secondary listening; a form of listening to music while doing some other activity (Lüders, 2021: 2351; Weber, 2009). This ensured that music listening enabled via music recording that was once more spatially restricted (e.g., listening in a living room or in a bedroom), enabled music recordings to be consumed in novel situations; upending previously spatially anchored listening cultures and expanding mobile listening practices (Weber, 2009: 69). Mobile listening and playback technologies, therefore, enhance forms of sonic furnishing that humans have used for centuries (DeNora, 2013: 63). But critically, these technologies transform how music was able to inflect space in two central ways. As DeNora (2013: 63) argues, digitization first enables music to become ubiquitous and second, while the capacity to layer public and private has always been achievable through pre-digital and non-musical means, with digitized music and its coupling with miniaturization, listeners are afforded many more ways to musically inflect and manage space.

For listeners born into an era of the mobile music device, privatized listening was viewed as a tool for sociability and a medium of world furnishing (DeNora, 2013: 71). These personalized technologies, therefore, help reconfigure social space by redefining how listeners perceive the world around the user. Critical to music’s ability to function in this way and enable privatized music in public was the requirement of miniaturization; to carry digital files and portably house music recordings at scale (DeNora, 2013). Integral to this shift were the changes associated with the materiality of music recordings themselves; from physical to digitized artefacts or as Beer (2008: 79) suggests: ‘The movement from the physical artefacts of the past, which adorned our homes, filled the spaces of our everyday lives, toward digitalized and compressed – mobile and virtual – cultural artefacts’.

Streaming cultures and the networking of music listening

The compression of music recordings is also synonymous with streaming cultures and impacts how listeners can garner social esteem through the music they consume. The upending of consumption practices associated with streaming does not mean listeners expect less. Rather the absence of material culture and other paraphernalia means streaming services must tout greater personalization and other features to offer a ‘value-add’ in the absence of tangible commodities; the support structure that is the platform becomes the commodity (McCourt, 2005: 252). A critical dimension of this is the provision of social features provided by streaming services that can now easily render music reception as a visible digital phenomenon that shifts listening activity to a user’s front region.

Emitting the music a user engages with via their profile, friend activity, or by sharing other dimensions via convergences with social media services, users of music streaming can, directly and indirectly, share aspects of music listening to wider networked audiences (Hagen, 2016). They are afforded the capacity to present themselves by portraying the music they stream (Nag, 2018). While situationally removed from the context in which the actual act of listening occurs, streaming services enable a mediated following and browsing of other user's recommendations that afford music streaming information to be purposefully displayed (Johnson and Ranzini, 2018).

Hagen and Lüders (2017) offer a compelling analysis that explores how users negotiate their disclosure of music streaming and manage the display of their information as something private or potentially more public. Their argument is that streaming platforms are inherently places where sharing occurs (explicitly and implicitly) and that the disclosure of information about music listening practices is perceived distinctly by different sets of users. They suggest that users of streaming services can be placed in one of three sharing ideal type categories: those that *share all* their music listening practices; those that are *selective* in terms of what they share; and then finally, those that *refrain* from disclosing listening habits and recommendations (Hagen & Lüders, 2017: 248). These differences in sharing practices and their associated sensibilities connected to music consumption are also informed by a need for impression management. Users are mindful of how they navigate streaming services and respond to the collapsed social context in which music reception occurs which renders it difficult to deploy heterogeneous taste preferences (Hagen & Lüders, 2017: 655). These different listening approaches are suggestive of the altered information environment resulting from the affordances of music streaming services and the features available to users.

To assess these dimensions of listening in this new information environment the following explores how users adopt these services and examines the networked nature of music streaming services. Although not usually viewed as a social network technology (associated with the likes of other social media services like Facebook or Instagram) the following nonetheless explores these social dimensions of music streaming. Music streaming's affordances and its convergence with social media come to impact the experience of using these technologies. Here a continual 'situational negotiation of self and of music as personal or social and a heightened awareness of others in relation to one's own music listening are among the social consequences of the use of music-streaming services' (Hagen & Lüders, 2017: 657). The affordances and social features of music streaming therefore mean a potential to unsettle the apparent capacity to seclude music listening, rendering it as back region activity. Users of these services therefore articulate that listening via streaming services requires careful management.

Methodological overview

The following draws on 49 in-depth extended qualitative interviews undertaken with regular users of music streaming services conducted in late 2021 during a period of lockdown in parts of Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ The in-depth semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for some considerable variation in the conversations conducted with participants, with the topics exploring the uses and perceptions

of music streaming services, the incorporation of music listening with social activities, and comparisons of using older music formats throughout everyday life. The main research question considered was how participants use and integrate music streaming across their everyday lives (successful or otherwise) and what meanings were generated from this use.

Online in-depth interviews were conducted to produce verbatim transcripts, with the data then organised into themes that were arranged around the different affordances of music streaming practices. Due to space constraints, I report on only two themes from this larger project (see Walsh, 2024): first, the awareness of listening to music as part of a networked public and data-capturing activity and second, the experiences of users who perceive listening as an increasingly front region activity that requires consideration and careful management. Thematic analysis was undertaken abductively to arrive at themes with Goffman's microsociology informing the refinement process. The limitations of this study pertain to the extent to which the information reported cannot necessarily be generalizable to wider populations. Moreover, the majority of participants in this study used Spotify as their main (although not sole) way to access music recordings and this means the following analysis is mostly focused on this service and its affordances. I have therefore been unable to compare systemically or explore differences across services, and given the size of the sample, I have also been unable to examine variations in variables like gender or age. Indeed, future research could determine if some of these variables are associated with different experiences for users and their adoption of music streaming.

Perceptions of listening via music streaming services

While streaming services continue to court controversy in relation to questions of fairness for musicians as well as the macrostructure implications of the reorganisation of the music industry, the transformation of music reception as a networked public is less explored (exceptions include Alba, 2018; Hagen & Lüders, 2017; Kang, 2021; Pegoraro, 2021; Wong, 2018). The network configuration of listening renders it a more ambiguously situated activity from the perspective of users. Acts of seemingly privatized listening are no longer understood as uniformly experienced as contained in back regions because streaming services as network technologies and data-capturing ventures lead to an awareness that all platform interactions are monitored. Streaming services have demystified individual acts of listening to recorded music because platforms like Spotify render all listening as a data-generating activity; every signal listening experience informs an algorithm that works towards building a listener profile (Prey, 2016: 41). Streaming platforms bring about a 'datafication of listening'; music itself becomes a tracking device which—combined with demographic information – is reflected back onto users in the form of ads (Prey, 2018: 1094). Users of these services produce an array of digital traces that they make as they go about their everyday lives (Drott 2018; Prey, 2016: 43). But as Prey (2019: 18) observes it remains an open question as to whether – or to what degree – this knowledge about the state of perpetual monitoring occurring on streaming services might affect listening behaviour itself. In this context users describe their awareness of how services track their activity; suggesting a mindfulness of how listening to music represents a process governed by data capture.

For example, when asking Ben² if he is concerned with how streaming services – in this case, Spotify – capture information about his music listening, he indicates:

. . . not compared to every other piece of information that's captured. So yes, I have a concern, but not disproportionate to the rest of my digital footprint.

Similarly, users like Sue – a YouTube Music subscriber – also suggest their experience of using streaming services is akin to the use of other online services, which in general are worrying:

Yep. Well, I guess, no more than the general level of concern about how many places you put your details and your information these days. It's pretty concerning, right across the board, really.

In this respect, the exposure of personal information as connected to music streaming is seen as commonplace for participants of this study because of its status as a type of networked technology. As Dianna explains:

My personal information's out there in everything. So I don't see what difference it makes. Nothing's private anymore so . . . it's out there. You know, it was out there from when I created my Facebook account in 2009 or whatever it was and, you know you kind of said goodbye to privacy then. So, no, I don't really have many concerns about my music streaming.

Others also comment that being connected to digital networks through other technologies seemingly already undermines any presumption of privacy. In this vein users like Alessandro note that because he constantly subjects himself to auditory forms of surveillance through the integrated use of home assistants, he has little hesitation when it comes to his use of music streaming:

I generally don't have very much concern at all with regards to sharing my streaming information. Not just that, but clearly we've got Alexa in every room, she's always listening, so . . . I wonder what she's picking up.

Amy too explains that while aware of how music streaming services like Spotify track available information about the use of her services, she believes the value that she obtains from the service outweighs these concerns:

I am very well aware of algorithms and stuff like that and I'm not naïve to the fact that I am being followed pretty much wherever I go and everything I consume. But in saying that for me it's probably no different to everything I do on Instagram and Facebook as it is . . . so I sort of put Spotify in that bucket. I absolutely know that they are watching everything I do but I am not willing to give up my Spotify account. My Spotify account is far more important than my concerns in terms of that which sounds absolutely ridiculous when I say that. That is outrageous. But, yeah, I had already shared all of my information via Instagram and Facebook far before I got Spotify, and everything I do I have to sign up, provide an email address and all of that stuff. So in this day and age I've just accepted that it is what it is.

Users seemingly reach an acceptance where they sacrifice their data to the streaming service; the inability to control one's data footprint appears as par for the course. Here users remain acutely aware of the algorithmic nature and recount that they endure this state of being monitored. While expressing an unease regarding this status quo, users also explain that this is the reality of using streaming services; they indicate they remain unable to change these arrangements. As Mia describes:

I do acknowledge that our data is being mined and repackaged and sold off to various entities for a combination of reasons I think that if you think about the extent to which your private data has been used you are going to spiral because it's used everywhere in everything, all the time. And so it doesn't concern me . . . because, I mean, what can I do?

While recognising the extent to which streaming services capture and exploit user interactions, many users in this study at the same time articulate helplessness in changing the status quo. Several users even contrasted their current use of streaming with previous music formats. Peter for instance reflects on his experience of using CDs and contrasts this with the experience of streaming:

That is something that you didn't have to worry about when buying CDs from Sanity that much. Whenever you move on to these services where you're just borrowing stuff off other people's computers. You always do bring that, what's all that information they learn about you and I know that Spotify has its ads in order to make money from their ads they have to profile you. And even if you pay them they're probably still profiling you because they are ready for you to stop paying them and to hit you with ads straightaway that actually make them a little bit of money.

The comparison that Peter observes between physical media and streaming is suggestive of the way a 'data shadow' or representation of the user is employed by the sociotechnical system in question (Andrejevic, 2014: 182). Here most users in this study articulate some sense of the shadow they produce in the system and the value it has for the service in question.

Other users even go further and note they have integrated streaming and engrained it to such an extent into their daily lives that it has become second nature. Simultaneously, concerns about what streaming services do with their data recede from importance given the extent to which the service has become integrated. Users in this instance acknowledge the bind in which they find themselves. As Julian explains:

I shared my music, but when you stop to think about it, you know, one should probably be concerned about it. At the end of the day some of it I don't really care about it, you know? (laughs). I'll do it anyways you know? Like, I'll still sort of blindly or gladly hand out my data, sign up for something if I want something, I guess, you know? So, yeah. I guess it's kind of foolhardy I guess. It's one of the things about it. But, you know, I'll still do it.

A compact of sorts is therefore entered into with the streaming service; convenient access to music is provided with attractive features in exchange for access to user data. In this sense, users tend to understand how the extent of the data they provide also reflects the quality of recommendations and features that are then offered to them on a service

(Lüders, 2021: 2353). This sentiment is expressed by users like Edwina who likens the way she provides her data to a ritual offering in return for increased service:

I have reservations about, you know, data collection and stuff. But for example, you don't get the service that you want if you don't sacrifice some of your data to the data Gods you know.

In explaining the pact that users must enter into with music streaming services, a type of compelled barter is apparent. Users are increasingly aware that the recommendations provided by streaming services are a consequence of their every action being monitored and assessed (Prey, 2019: 18). As a networked technology, this knowledge of how streaming services trace and follow users comes to frame the experience of using the service itself. One must implicitly release elements of their data and share this with the platform to effectively engage and use the service. This is suggested by users like Mary who describes the impact of having to use the networked dimensions of streaming compared with using earlier music formats. In this case, when using a streaming service – in this case Apple Music – a change is noted in terms of the experience of listening to music and the extent to which a sense of seclusion is attainable:

One thing I really liked about the iPod is the fact that you could store a lot of songs and that it wasn't as connected to, you know, you didn't have to stream. You just downloaded it, and it didn't matter what it was. You could keep it forever in that thing. And it was sort of a bit anonymous as well. I like that you could just sort of you know . . . I could just be in bed, for example, with the headphones in listening and it wasn't sort of necessarily recorded online. And I suppose I have to admit there's a part of me that feels a little bit resentful that you can't just sort of download things the way you could in the past and have it sort of . . . listen indefinitely.

Streaming appears to render aspects of listening as a recorded activity that is perceived by users arising from its network configuration. While users are provided with increased opportunities to listen, the networked nature of these technologies undercut some of the dimensions of previous music formats that enabled users to relish in a secluded way the personalized experiences of music reception. Users demonstrate an understanding of the differences 'around private and public listening, and being observed, or even surveilled by both the platform and other listeners' (Freeman et al., 2022). Notwithstanding the social features now afforded by music streaming services, the experience of users like Mary suggests how users sense they are being monitored by non-human elements of these socio-technical systems and this consequently possesses implications for how acts of listening are experienced. But as we will see subsequently, the network configuration of these services also impacts how users go about engaging music platforms given the possibility of conveying and presenting the music a user listens to via a music platform.

Music listening as a networked activity; seepage between regions

To use streaming services like Spotify, users must construct profiles, share with the platform information about the music they listen to and also possess the option of sharing

playlists that inform other users about the music they stream. Music streaming therefore represents a type of networked public that provides an imagined collective that emerges from the intersection of people, technology and practice (boyd, 2011: 39). Users of a network public can access a variety of social relations that must be negotiated (Marwick and Boyd, 2010: 130), but also experience affordances that while not dictating how a user engages with a given service, nonetheless inform the environment that shapes a user's engagement (Boyd, 2011: 39). In this instance, users while not collocated, nonetheless monitor and react to one another (Hogan, 2010: 381). Networked publics provide for a locus of interaction because of their social and often semi-public nature; users are required to consciously shape profiles that will be viewed by others (Boyd, 2011: 43).

In this vein, platforms like Spotify enable a convergence with social media services that allow users to follow others and that consequently renders music reception more acutely social. Listening habits potentially can be shared privately, in an open fashion or even inadvertently (Morris & Powers, 2015: 113). Users of Spotify and Tidal can link with Facebook friends and receive feeds of the music that they listen to in an asymmetrical fashion within the music streaming service itself. In this case, followed friends on Spotify do not even necessarily have to follow back on the service to obtain access to another person's streaming information (Hagen and Lüders, 2017: 644). Streaming services like Spotify, therefore, can represent a type of networked public in that they make actions visible that previously remained secluded; they can further complicate and unmask interactions never necessarily intended to be public (Boyd, 2011: 52). Music streaming services therefore impact users who stream music given the way personal information ascribed to music listening can become conveyed in seemingly more visible ways. Recalling Goffman's observation that modern technologies increase the possibilities for interaction that 'now include vast distal audiences and a widened array of materials that can be platformed' (Goffman, 1983: 7), streaming services can extend the 'line of visual regard' and 'intensity of our involvements' (Goffman, 1983: 4) given users can view and browse other's listening activity. In addition to the new possibilities for musicians to gain visibility via an online presence, for example, through different social media sites that became an imperative if not injunction (Nowak and Bennett, 2022: 46), users of streaming services also must manage their own networked presence.

Consider Damien's experience. He describes the way his streaming activity is displayed to others while also feeding back into how he considers what then to listen to next:

I think there's also a slight social pressure to . . . because, you know, my friends can see what I'm listening to, but also, there's that wrap up at the end of the year. So, I'm also slightly conscious of how much I'm listening to something and, you know, like it's not . . . is it embarrassing, but is it? Am I listening to it too much? Should I be listening to more varied music because I want to seem, I don't know, like should I listen to more varied music (laughs)? And so that kind of plays around in the back of my head as I'm choosing music as well.

While streaming might occur in Damien's back region (for example, at home or via earphones), the information about what he streams is now discoverable via streaming platforms. The impact of this means that users like Damien now contemplate how their

streaming might be viewed by others situationally removed from the original context of listening. Although not all participants expressed the same sensitivity towards this increased visibility of streaming, this nonetheless illustrates how networked listening can create environments where information originating in back regions can become shared more widely. Other users also express some similar unease about the potential display of their streaming activity. Amanda for example perceives their own music preferences as unconventional and consequently recoils from the notion that her streaming could be seen by other users:

Like I get why people do it [share their streaming information] and I think it's a really cool function, but for me when I have like, quite eclectic taste I think I would feel little bit of an invasion of privacy if I knew people were actually using that function and checking out what I was listening to. I might feel a bit self-conscious. But I would probably be guilty of doing that with my friends too so (laughs) . . .

The perception of having one's listening viewed by others while described as 'cool' is qualified by indicating it would present an awkward situation given the extent to which Amanda's listening is varied. Moreover, Amanda notes it would make her own listening 'a bit self-conscious' but would perhaps not stop her from browsing her friend's streaming information. This suggests a somewhat uncertain situation, with users themselves desiring some sense of seclusion while not necessarily affording this to others. The capacity to remotely display and view another user's music listening information in this respect can be understood in part as a type of context collapse (Davis and Jurgenson, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2010). This occurs when people, information, and norms from different social settings collapse into one context (Meyrowitz, 1986). Or when activity from one's back region finds its way into a user's front region, with various modes of music listening – social, personal, functional – flattened into a single representation of the users' musical identity (Kang, 2021: 14).

Unlike interactions contained in public locations, on social network sites and now music streaming services (dependent on how a user configures their activity), boundaries between otherwise discrete social groups that are typically managed via the segregation of audiences become undermined and can result in an inability to present a view of the situation confidently (Hodkinson, 2017: 277). Performances, therefore, can take place in either front regions where observers expect the individual to adhere to certain conventions, or in back regions where such adherence to conventions is experienced in a more relaxed manner (Nag, 2018: 22), representing a residual and ancillary relationship to front region activity (DeNora, 2013: 36). Critically then streaming services that afford these social features have the potential to unsettle some of the situational norms regarding music reception and its segregation. This is registered by users like Amanda and Damien above who appear less likely to experience listening with the type of discretion that one might assume as being likely when solely situated in a back region.

But at the same time, another group of users note that the increased visibility of information about music streaming can also be viewed positively when physical contact with friends was less possible. As Edwina notes, during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Well, I can see the good applications of being able to see what other people are listening to and I can see the bad applications. But I think generally good. Particularly across time and space. And being locked up in COVID, you can share music, you can both be listening. It'd just be like playing a game, playing video games or computer games with people. Just another thing you can do to share things with people. I think you'd have to be trusted, wouldn't you? You'd have to be a trusted friend. So I'm hoping the application has controls around that. You can either allow people to do that or not allow them to do that. Yeah, that would be important.

Music streaming services, therefore, allow users to experience music reception at a distance. In this case, as Edwina notes, the social features of music streaming allow users to emulate playing games with friends in a remote manner, allowing for socializing to occur remotely through network configurations. But in addition to providing a new avenue to engage with friends remotely, the capacity to witness another person's streaming information is viewed as necessitating careful consideration. As Natalia suggests:

... sometimes you listen to things in a personal context, you know, I guess if the music you're listening to is reflective of how you're feeling, you don't necessarily want to reflect how you're feeling or communicate how you're feeling with other people. Yeah, and if that's being broadcast, it's a little bit off, isn't it? Awkward, you know. I mean, not that any of my friends I think would be like, 'Oh, you know, why are you listening to X, Y and Z?' but I imagine for other people it might.

The ability to view another person's streaming information therefore seemingly has the capacity to upend some of the region-specific sensibilities that approximately half of users in this study experience when listening to music. This connects to several reports where music streaming account information has been searched for and followed by any user on the platform (Wong, 2018). An incident reported by Buzzfeed (Alba, 2018) relays a troubling story of a woman who, after ending a relationship after months of emotional abuse, actively sought to extricate herself and her digital connections with their ex-partner. But as reported, the behaviour of the ex-partner made the woman feel afraid in that they sought to stalk her via social media through the creation of fake profiles to continue contact. The woman in question then sought to block the individual on every profile possible but at that time had no such option to do so on her Spotify account; her former partner was still able to explore the music she engaged with and then sent emails to her about how the music she listened to ostensibly indicated that she wanted to resume the relationship.³ This reinforces Natalia's observation above that streaming practices can provide glimpses into one's back region, depending on the circumstances. Even in less fraught situations, other users like Jessica note the visibility of streaming can result in situations that users across this study prefer to avoid:

I think it's more – this is going to sound like I'm very closeted – but because I'm more interested in the sound of music, and not that interested necessarily in artists, but I'm more interested in the music. I don't really want to get into a conversation about 'oh have you listened to this particular album'. And then get drawn into the whole like, 'oh they've done a really good album in 2002, have you listened to it'. Like I don't kind of get it. I just want to listen to what I want to listen to. And I don't want to be judged on that and I don't want to have to explain myself as

to why I am listening to particular bits of music and you know, not the back catalogue of when this particular band was really, really good. And ‘now you are listening to that shit’. I just want to listen to it, I don’t want to be drawn into the politics of music.

In a context where users can view their friends’ listening activity, most users across this study remain cautious about the potential for presenting their listening activity in seemingly front regions; audiences that may scrutinise or demonstrate curiosity about a user’s music reception are therefore avoided. This suggests that while music platforms and their network configuration compel users to become accustomed to being watched by services themselves and can allow for platform connections between users, the open and exposed information environment nonetheless impacts how some users go about using these services given their perceived departure in terms of interactional possibilities afforded compared to previous music technologies. Where experiences of privacy appear contingent, users seek to manage their streaming information and remain aware of its potential transmission into different regions via the features provided by streaming services. Users of streaming services appear to aspire to discretion as is suggested by the diverse attitudes regarding sharing practices canvassed above. Spotify also remains aware of these sensitivities regarding audience segregation, offering a ‘private mode’ that limits the amount of information knowingly shared with other users (Spotify, 2021). However, the onus seemingly is placed on users to ensure their listening activity remains private, rather than inherently secluding all elements of listening from the outset. This is because private mode at the time of data collection was not defaulted to and presumes some familiarity with using the service’s affordances to retain listening in one’s back region. This is because Spotify renders a user’s listening activity (that is the artist and song title), visible by default for users viewing the application on the desktop version of the platform (Pegoraro, 2021). This also is in the context of Spotify’s own previous practice of disclosing the listening activity of users without their permission as Kant (2020: 132) documents in her book on algorithmic personalisation; a non-negotiable condition of using Spotify between 2011 and 2013 was to permit auto-posting about the music a user was listening to on to their Facebook account (Kant, 2020: 132).

Conclusion

Music streaming transforms how listeners access music recordings and consequently can render the social dimensions of music listening ambiguously situated. Prior to music streaming, the information connected with a context of listening was able to be spatially confined to the region in which music reception occurred. However, with streaming services and their convergence with social media, music reception has the potential to become disclosed and seep more easily across regions. The digital traces that users of these services generate leave behind an indication of interactions they have with songs, artists and other users via platform technologies. Data traces associated with music streaming services represent elements of the interaction order and can become part of the information preserve associated with the use of a streaming service that users provide knowingly and even sometimes unwittingly to others in different contexts. A user’s engagement is not merely documented in platform interactions but comes to mediate

their sense of self (Hogan, 2010: 377) through a networked public. In considering the role of music streaming we can appreciate that despite seemingly engaging with music in a manner that may appear solitary, music reception has the potential to become an aspect of our mediated 'response presence'. Representing a part of the mediated interaction order, some users are acutely aware of how they consume music with consideration of how this listening appears to distant audiences. The use of these technologies arguably represents a continuity in the tendency that first electronic media and then social media have had with breaking down or reconfiguring elements of the public-private distinction. Where aspects of listening to recorded music that was once easily secluded in back regions now can find its way into front regions with little effort. While the consequences arising from the transformation of music listening may appear to only present minor compelled disclosures or embarrassments, this exposure of personal information warrants consideration given access to particular social information usually indicates the degree of intimacy and status of one's relationships (Zerubavel, 1982: 101). Moreover, the lack of obtaining discretion over what is exposed or secluded has implications for how individuals manage the propriety of their interactions; it is only by making some part of ourselves accessible to some people in some times and places that then enables us to deny access at other places and times (Nippert-Eng, 2010: 6). Notwithstanding the interactional ambiguity produced by users of these technologies, the exposure of personal information connected to streaming also provides the possibility for future harvesting of listening information that could be employed in ways yet unrealized (Prey, 2016).

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Michael James Walsh  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1919-8312>

Notes

1. Participants' ages ranged from 72 to 20, with the mean age of participants being 34. There were slightly more female participants, representing 55% of participants compared with men who accounted for 45% approximately. Music streaming services used by participants also varied with most using Spotify at 39 of the 49 participants (overwhelmingly paid accounts). Other services used were Apple Music (14 participants), and YouTube Music (8 participants).
2. Pseudonyms have been adopted.
3. Spotify introduced a feature to make it possible to block other users from seeing a user's activity in 2021 (Ion, 2021).

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