Challenges facing musical engagement and taste in digitality

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ABSTRACT

The ways in which technology mediates the relationship between people and music has increasingly evolved since the advent of playback devices. With the arrival of digital music, and its inherent culture of digitality, new issues have emerged regarding musical engagement at the level of fan and/or consumer. This paper will explore what and where people are engaging with music, as mediated by technology. These two issues will be categorized by: (1) the immense quantity of popular music available digitally is promoting a culture of eclecticism, whereby people are not tied to specific genres when defining their tastes. Personal genre alliance has fallen out of favour, and replaced by fluid definitions of genres and artists, that are user-driven and highly personalised and subjective: for example, folksonomies. (2) One of the primary ways in which people consume music is through portable media devices, such as the iPods. My data shows that people are predominantly utilising these devices in three sites of engagement: mobile, immobile and quasi-mobile activities. These issues are explored through the results of a large-scale, international study, utilising both quantitative and qualitative approaches, in the form of interviews and surveys, both conducted online and in person. Throughout this paper, I make distinctions between how digital youth, or digital natives, those under the age of thirty who have grown up entirely immersed in digitality, and those over thirty, or digital immigrants, have developed diverse systems of musical engagement. I argue that digital youth, whose relationship with music is increasingly mediated by digital technologies, such as the iPod, are no less emotionally engaged with music than their older counterparts, but their tastes are less genre-focused.

INTRODUCTION

Music remains a ubiquitous presence in contemporary society, with digital technology propelling the production, distribution, and consumption towards a saturation level akin to technological invisibility. This begs the question: how does a high level of music availability translate into music engagement which, like musical taste, is subjective in nature. In response, this paper empirically explores two aspects of musical engagement in digital culture through the following questions: how are listeners defining their musical tastes in the digital age, and how does technology affect engagement?

The empirical data is taken from a research study conducted at the University of Edinburgh (Avdeeff 2011). The dataset is comprised of 1243 surveys and 216 interviews. Based on interdisciplinary methods, drawn from the fields of media and technology studies, musicology and sociology, this paper first explores an eclecticism of musical taste, before examining sites of musical engagement for iPod users.

MUSICAL TASTE: A CULTURE OF ECLECTICISM

Music is an important aspect of cultural consumption, primarily because it is also an important aspect of everyday life for a strong majority of people. Numerous studies have documented the role of music in everyday life, from sociological examinations, such as Tia DeNora (2000), to psychological studies, such as those done by North and Hargreaves in their examination into the psychology of taste and the importance of music to youth (in particular North et al. 2004; North et al. 2000; North and Hargreaves 1999). Their findings, which were corroborated by my research, have found that music is important for a variety of reasons: the primary ones being mood alteration and regulation, memory formation, identity, relaxation, motivation and identity portrayal.

North's and Hargreaves' (ibid.) research into taste has helped define the field. Utilising sociologically influenced methods, within the field of psychology, it has been successful in examining how people define and acquire tastes, in relation to their leisure activities, socio-economic status and age. This approach builds on previous research conducted by Bourdieu (1984), by incorporating quantitative data, a much-needed addition to the field.

Peterson and Kern's (1996) work concerning omnivores continues to be influential in genre theory. Their theory states that omnivores, those who enjoy a wide variety of genres, as opposed to a select few, garner higher cultural capital. I, however, question if this remains true in digital culture and would argue that a culture of eclecticism has redefined the notion of cultural capital as it relates to musical taste.

This culture of eclecticism is influenced by the ease in which people discover, acquire and consume music. Stereotypically, youth tend to be the most active con-

sumers and downloaders of online music, which was confirmed by my findings. An ANOVA test showed that those under the age of twenty were statistically more likely, by a significant margin, to download music than those over twenty. The data also revealed that they are not cognisant of how much time they spend online, or with digital technologies. When asked how long they are online in a day, most students provided vague answers, such as:

> Female/Grade 10: Sometimes when I get home, and then in the evening after I'm done homework, or after dinner, just kinda off and on when I have nothing else to do.

One of the difficulties in assessing time spent with a technology is due to its sense of *invisibility*. The Internet has moved past being indispensible (Hoffman et al. 2004), to the point of common place, as it has become a part of our every day landscape. Youth, especially, who are highly involved in digital culture, having grown up fully immersed in digital technologies, do not *see* the technology, only its outcomes (Tapscott 2009; Palfrey and Gasser 2008). The Internet, as well as mobile music playback devices, become a backdrop to the content accessed and an extension of their physical selves. While those not as well-versed in digital technology may initially feel intimidated or hindered by it, for others, it is as natural as turning on the TV is for the baby boomer generation.

This invisibility of technology translates into how people define their genres, especially youth. There is a difficulty expressing one's tastes, as they do not follow any conventional patterns. To address this issue, respondents were asked to name their top three favourite genres, as shown in *Table 1*. The following results are for all respondents, regardless of age, and demonstrate a very "safe" and "general" description of musical taste:

Table 1: Self-reported favourite genre responses.

Genres	No.	Percentage of total responses
Rock	189	18
Indie/Indie Rock	134	13
Alternative/Alternative Rock	89	8
Pop	56	5
Rap/Hip-hop	34	3

Genres	No.	Percentage of total responses
Metal/Heavy Metal	32	3
Folk	30	3
Country	29	3
Classical	24	2
Electronica	24	2
Punk	24	2
Jazz	20	2
Total	689	65

Respondents were also asked to select, from a tick-box style survey, how often they listen to different genres. When comparing these results to the top genres responses, there are some noticeable contradictions:

Table 2: Mean frequency of use, musical genres.

Genres	No.	Mean
Rock	1109	3,97
Singer/songwriter	1125	3,24
Pop	1112	3,14
Indie Rock	1126	3,11
Classic Rock	1128	3,1
Soundtracks	1106	2,74
Brit Rock	1124	2,67
Punk Rock	1035	2,67

Genres	No.	Mean
Punk	1035	2,62
Brit Pop	1125	2,62
Classical	1116	2,62
Blues Rock	1126	2,61
Folk	1115	2,56
Progressive Rock	1125	2,51
Jazz	1115	2,49
Dance	1114	2,48
Top 40 Pop	1127	2,48
Hip-hop	1128	2,45
Hip-hop/Rap	1117	2,44
Electronic	1126	2,41

Most noticeably is singer/songwriter as the second most selected genre, when it is not even present in the "favourites" list. Then there is the large number of rock sub-genres, as well as soundtracks at number six, which is not even a genre, *per se*, but a collection of music used for film or TV. This leads me to believe that (1) people are not aware of how they are defining their tastes; (2) their tastes are more varied than they self-report.

In the follow-up interviews, I asked respondents how eclectic they perceived their tastes to be. No one felt that they listened to only one type of music, and a variety of taste categories emerged. These included: (1) those who would listen to anything, regardless; (2) those that mentioned specific genres/artists in their preferences; (3) those who felt their preferences have changed with age; (4) those who felt their preferences changed according to mood/location/other outside factors; (5) those who were confused about genre classifications; (6) those who would listen to everything, except a few specific genres; (7) those who go through fads/phases in their musical tastes, and finally, (8) those who only listen to one type, but are open to suggestions. This is not meant as a way to essentialise one's experiences with music, but merely a representation of the various answers the interview statement

received. Many responses could fall into more than one category, while others do not fit accurately into any.

ENGAGEMENT THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

While an established field of work exists, documenting technology's influence of musical engagement (Millard 2005; Coleman 2003; Kenney 1999; Hosokawa 1984), a subset of that field, examining the iPod's role in this relationship, is developing. Numerous studies examine the iPod and its role in musical engagement, most notably, Michael Bull's (2007) study of iPod culture in the urban environment. Bull found that the participants primarily used iPods to "warm up" unfamiliar environments or make the public space more private. The iPod can invest users with a sense of control over unknown situations, which is empowering in strange environments. The iPod can also be used as a shield from the urban landscape.

As discussed previously, I have found that people mediate their listening experience through their iPods for much the same reasons that they listen to music. My study also identified three sites of engagement: mobile, immobile and quasi-mobile.

MOBILE

Mobile situations are what the iPod was originally intended for; it is when users, and their devices, are mobile. In these instances, users are bridging the gap from one location to another through a personalised soundscape. Respondents noted a variety of mobile situations: travelling, commuting, biking, walking, and on planes, trains, and other forms of public transport:

> MALE/29: I only use my iPod when on the train, whether commuting to/from work or travelling generally.

There were a select few respondents who noted that they did not use their iPods in mobile situations. These responses can be grouped into two categories:

• Those who preferred ambient noise/silence when in transit:

> FEMALE/54: I personally like to hear nature when walking, so don't have an iPod.

• Those who felt that it was dangerous to use an iPod while in transit:

> FEMALE/26: I rarely use my iPod walking around – I find it annoying to be that disconnected to what's going on around me – and the risk of getting hit by cars is the greater.

IMMOBILE

Even though the iPod is essentially a mobile device, a variety of ways to use iPods while not "in transit" emerged. I call these the "immobile" reasons, which is not to imply that the users are devoid of movement, but that the device is stationary. In immobile activities, the iPod may be plugged into external speakers, a docking station, or used in work settings, where the user sits at a desk for long periods of time. A small group of respondents also noted that they use their iPods while falling asleep. As with all these categories, though, they are not mutually exclusive. It is not likely that users only listen to their iPods when falling asleep, or while walking, but rather, tend to use their iPods in a variety of situations, both mobile and immobile:

> MALE/36: I usually have to listen to something just before I go to sleep.
> FEMALE/26: I also bring it with me to friends' houses and plug it in to speakers.
> FEMALE/40: I'm a graphic designer, I use it when I want to get some work done.

QUASI-MOBILE

Finally, people tend to use their iPods quite frequently during what I call "quasi-mobile" activities, or more specifically, during exercise, typically at a gym. In this scenario, users are mobile, in that they are "moving" about, but in a confined space. They are not in transit, but are nonetheless mobile:

> MALE/37: Actually, [I use it] only when exercising. I don't find it worthwhile just going from the parking lot to my office.

This research has shown *where* and *how* people are using mobile music devices, but the next step would be to bridge the gap between *what* people are listening and when they are involved in these activities.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

In one sense, digital technology can be conceived as both an enhancer and excluder of sociability. The Internet is used to download, discover and share music, and then the iPod is used to block out excess media and provide a buffer from the world. On the other hand, there are many consumers who use mobile music technologies as a way to share their musical tastes with others. There is no doubt that the symbiotic relationship between technology and music will continue to change notions and norms of sociability. Convergence of mobile technologies also ensures that music is readily available for consumption, as well as both personal and corporate dissemination. The widespread adoption of cloud computing will further enhance dissemination of digital music, as streaming becomes the dominant site of engagement.

Returning to my original question, how are people engaging with the large quantity of readily available online music, a cursory look would show that YouTube has

high levels of engagement especially with youth. Popularity is now marked by You-Tube "hits", instead of record sales, and in Twitter "mentions", instead of magazine reviews.

Musical engagement, just as musical taste, means different things to different people, but what we must keep in mind is, because of their subjective natures, we cannot impose value judgments. The way in which one person engages with music may be very meaningful to them, but appears superficial to another. For many, music is an important facet of their life: how they spend their time, how they define their personality.

This paper has laid the groundwork for the development of a typology of listening behaviours associated with digital music devices. Although this research focused mainly on iPod/MP3 player use, the framework can be applied to any digital media device, in order to explore the symbiotic relationship between technologies and media consumption. The research suggests that mobile music devices are not socially isolating, but are instead encouraging a range of ways in which people can engage with technology, and each other. It can be noted that these relationships occur within a culture of eclecticism: just as the subjective nature of genre definitions results in eclecticism promoted by immense musical choice, various technologies promote differing ways of listening and interacting socially, as demonstrated by the survey and interview responses. The respondents reported a high level of emotional musical engagement, in spite of the incredible amount of music freely available on the Internet, and the perceived loss of traditional music gatekeepers.

In close, two of the considerable amount of responses received from respondents discussing their personal engagement with music:

> FEMALE/14: I think music is life. You can express yourself through music in so many ways and I just can't go without music. There's always something going on in your life, and you might as well have music help you out.
> FEMALE/29: It's not only like going to church, but it's having God come down from heaven and pulling you into his lap.

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