

**JUST PRESS PLAY: THE ROLE OF PLAYLISTS IN DIGITAL AGE MUSIC
CONSUMPTION AND DISTRIBUTION**

by

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University of Pittsburgh, 2018

Within the last decade, music streaming services such as Spotify, Youtube, Pandora, Apple Music, and Tidal have profoundly impacted distribution networks for music media. The behavioral changes of producers, consumers, and distributors of music media as a result of streaming music platforms are indicative of largescale developments in the way digital age societies consume art and media.

Using prior research on streaming services as a point of departure, this thesis will provide an in-depth examination of a particularly dynamic aspect of music distribution networks: the Spotify playlist. Spotify curates a number of both human and algorithm generated playlists, which are quickly becoming the preferred method of music consumption amongst streaming music listeners. Due to the unique characteristics of the Spotify playlist in the changing media distribution landscape of the digital age, this thesis considers the Spotify playlist as the latest development in a lineage of recorded music formats and examines its roll in both changing and preserving economic and aesthetic relationships to music. These relationships are considered in light of shifting behavior patterns in the digital age.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	vi
Introduction	1-3
I. Background and Overview of Spotify Playlists	4-13
II. Theoretical Basis	14-20
III. The Spotify Playlist	21-38
IV. Further Implications	39-49
Conclusion	50-51
Bibliography	52-54

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure 1. Spotify Desktop Platform</u>	8
<u>Figure 2. Spotify Desktop Platform: Charts</u>	9
<u>Figure 3. Global Top 50 Chart Playlist Detail</u>	9
<u>Figure 4. Spotify Desktop Platform: Genres & Moods</u>	10
<u>Figure 5. Hip Hop Genre Detail</u>	10
<u>Figure 6. “Off the Strength” Hip Hop Playlist Detail</u>	11
<u>Figure 7. Spotify Desktop Platform: Radio</u>	11
<u>Figure 8. Spotify Desktop Platform: Daily Mixes</u>	12
<u>Figure 9. Pandora Desktop Platform</u>	23

INTRODUCTION

Spotify playlists are an increasingly dynamic element of the music distribution landscape. Not only are the listening patterns of social networks becoming increasingly tied to these playlists, the popular success of artists seems to be similarly dependent on placement in playlists. By assessing these trends along with casual observations of the listening habits of many University of Pittsburgh undergraduates on a triweekly basis, I began to notice a change in the aesthetics of media consumption amongst “digital natives.”¹ For many of the listeners I spoke to, Spotify playlists were central to their interaction with music media. An interest in the media consumption of digital natives, or individuals for whom internet based digital technology was integrated into their childhood, stems from the notion that these users more robustly seek out and utilize technology to optimize their consumption of media than prior generations. Mark Prensky (2001) among others has helped to situate the differential ways in which generational users interact with technology.²

It is with these ideas in mind that I examine the Spotify playlist as a manifestation of several elements of digital age popular media culture including dematerialization, curation, aesthetic regulation, format, ubiquitous consumption, collective consumption, and automated production. I will quickly introduce these topics before beginning the discussion. The dematerialization of the consumable object in the digital age refers to the process, whereby digital natives (among others) are accepting the increasingly convenient idea of renting access to a product rather than owning it. As products are increasingly available online, interactions with

¹ Marc Prensky. “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1.” *On the Horizon*. 9.1. Web. (2001):1.

² Marc Prensky, “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 2.” *On the Horizon*. 9.6. Web. (2001): 5-6.

digital objects are changing human perceptions of physicality. This paper will also address process of curation of the digital age, whereby consumers are increasingly relying on technology to mediate the constant stream of digital media that they receive through the various media outlets with which they interact on a daily basis. This paper will discuss how such curations have economic, aesthetic, and political implications. Curation also includes the regulation of an aesthetic experience. Using mobile devices with screens and other technology such as headphones, digital natives are increasingly able to mediate and curate their own aesthetic experience of the world around them, changing the use value of media such as music.

Despite their status as novel digital age formats, I will describe how Spotify playlists are a natural extension of prior music distribution formats such as vinyl LP, cassette tape, CD, and digital album, and as such also continue to perform similar roles for distributors as these prior mediums. Playlists continue the notion of a set physical vessel for music. Organized around a consistent theme, these vessels are recognized as individual units by consumers, who can distinguish between them, allowing a consumptive choice. I will also describe how they function similarly to their predecessors as coded objects of identification, whereby through their consumption, listeners express their own social identity to themselves and their social networks. Playlists can be shared between listeners to facilitate collective listening experiences, much like prior formats of recorded music. Such collective listening practices are often used to strengthen social bonds amongst individuals. I will show how playlists allow for this specialized collective listening, however the implications of collective listening in the digital era imply changing experiences of physical and temporal “being together.”

This thesis examines Spotify playlists as an example of streaming music playlists (SMP's) in regard to the aforementioned topics in relation to the change and continuity of digital

age media topics by way of media studies, economics, and musicological theory provided from a number of different sources. Due to the dynamic nature of streaming media and of Spotify itself, most of these resources come from recent press and scholarship. The thesis is structured in the following way. Part I begins by briefly discussing the development of digital music streaming and the rise of SMP's in comparison to other streaming services. It also acquaints the reader with the Spotify interface and many of the various features embedded within. Part II is an overview of the theoretical modes of analysis through which SMP's will be analyzed. This includes the various elements of digital media culture as discussed above and draw from relevant media and cultural studies scholarship. Part III will trace the specific elements of SMP's as they relate to the various theoretical modes of analysis developed prior. Part IV will examine the consequences of SMP's on the music industry and culture at large by analyzing societal reactions to streaming services through critical press releases and other data inputs. The final section will feature concluding remarks and discussion of the future manifestation of music distribution forms in the context of a larger scheme of digital age consumption.

While digital natives are the primary users of SMP's and the changing societal values are most readily reflected in their behavior, many of these values have seeped into other generations of digital media consumers. As such, the discussion that follows is not intentionally limited to a specific age demographic, however it may be most readily applicable therein. Today's "digital natives" are tomorrow's digital immigrants, as such these values are fluid and continually developing.

I. BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW OF SPOTIFY PLAYLISTS

Several researchers have described the history of digital streaming audio sources, including the MP3 revolution and ensuing crisis of the music industry as well as the turn to streaming as a multifaceted response to the changing landscape of the music industry. Such economic and historic concerns with digital music have been addressed thoroughly by Leyshon et. al (2005)³ and Dolata (2011)⁴ among others, and these discussions have helped to situate music streaming services as extensions of prior distribution formats. This paper takes this prior research as a point of departure by analyzing a feature of streaming services that seems to be, at the time of writing, a dynamic force in the distribution of music. While streaming music services been described as the listening experience of the future, it may be time to declare that the future has arrived. In 2017, 54% of total audio consumption can be attributed to on-demand audio streams, with physical albums (21%), digital albums (13%), and digital track sales (11%) lagging behind and decreasing in popularity.⁵ The turn to streaming is not exclusive to audio, as the streaming of both video and social media has similarly become the dominant form of media consumption in their respective fields. Changing consumption patterns in relation to technological development will be tracked throughout this paper.

³ Andrew Leyshon et al., "On the reproduction of the musical economy after the internet," *Media, Culture & Society* 27, no. 2 (2005).

⁴ Ulrich Dolata. "The Music Industry and the Internet," *SOI Discussion Paper 2011-02*. Stuttgart: University of Stuttgart (2011).

⁵ Nielson Music "2017 Year- End Music Report," (2017): 31.

Streaming music platforms have changed music industry revenue flows drastically, as musical artists receive compensation for their work on a royalty per stream basis. Stewart (2013)⁶ and Paradise (2014)⁷ among others outline the various rights, compensation, and distribution networks that have existed historically and developed recently in relation to streaming music services. While related to the discussion of playlists, concerns with royalty structure and artist compensation are not the central to this paper. However, awareness of streaming's disruption of industry revenues is essential to understanding Spotify's impact on music production and distribution. Prior research on this topic is useful to help understand the changing properties of music as a consumable good among its other characteristics.

The two giants of music streaming services are Pandora and Spotify, both of which are streaming music services that utilize ordered streams of musical content such as playlists or digital radio (at least in part) to deliver music to listeners. Edison Research's "The Infinite Dial" has collected data on the usership of streaming music services. According to the data taken from 2017, Pandora is used by 32% of all listeners over the age of 12 while Spotify enjoys an 18% usership. However, among the 12-24 age demographic, Spotify has a higher listenership of 45% to Pandora's 39%.⁸ The inclusion of the 12-24 demographic statistic is important because it deliberately isolates a certain age demographic known as "digital natives." The behavior of digital natives is notable for a study on digital consumption because their digital behavior tends to differ from other generations of technology users, or "digital immigrants" as described by Kirk,

⁶ Sarita M Stewart. *Artist- Fan Engagement Model: Implications for Music Consumption and the Music Industry*. Diss. University of Alabama, 2013. Web. 15 March 2018.

⁷ Kaitlyn Paradise. *Digital Music Streaming in the 21st Century: The Music Industry Becomes Radio-Active*. MA Thesis. Florida Atlantic University, 2014. Web. 15 March 2018.

⁸ Edison Research, "The Infinite Dial 2017," March 15 2018.

Complexity resulting from new communication elements will impact digital natives and digital immigrants differently. Digital natives, who tend to have greater expertise with digital environments will process new Web technologies faster. They more likely will enjoy the flow experience, a happy feeling resulting from experiencing a balance between challenge of the environment and personal capabilities.⁹

Due to this noted difference in both behavior and ability to navigate digital environments, the fact that digital natives are using Spotify more than digital immigrants points to the notion that Spotify may be the near future of music streaming services. As digital natives seek higher levels of stimulation than digital immigrants,¹⁰ Spotify appears to be the platform of choice for meeting these demands. Taking into consideration the noted differences between technological usage habits of digital natives and immigrants,¹¹ Spotify seems to be a clear due to its highly personalized interface that creates a digital marketplace of sorts. It also functions as a social network, where users can interact with each other in a variety of ways such as sharing playlists, sending tracks, and viewing each other's listening activity. For digital natives who use technology to fully integrate their social and consumptive life, Spotify offers a thorough and intuitive platform. For digital immigrants, whose use of technology is a smaller aspect of their social behavior, Pandora's interface may be more appealing. The difference between Spotify users and Pandora users is in part generational, and Spotify's popularity seems on track to proliferate in the future. At the age of 24 and on the edge of Nielson's "digital native" age demographic, I'm situated at an ideal vantage point for this study straddling both native and

⁹ Colleen P. Kirk et al. "How do Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants Respond Differently to Interactivity Online?" *Journal of Advertising Research*. 2015: 85.

¹⁰ Ibid, 85.

¹¹ Ibid, 85.

immigrant perspectives. This paper will consider concepts of continuity and innovation as constant themes for the developing musical industry.

Spotify is an application-based internet music streaming service that provides access to a library of recorded audio on-demand as well as curated playlists. Users have several choices as to how to interact with its media. Ultimately this choice boils down to a curation decision. Spotify users can choose to perform the “work” of curation by personalizing their own listening experience with a specific song or album choices and even organize these choices into their own playlists of music. Or they can choose to delegate the work of curation to Spotify by selecting a precomposed playlist or “radio station.” Recent studies show that these precomposed playlists are becoming the preferred method of listening amongst Spotify users, and especially amongst digital natives.

Spotify says 50% of its more than 100 million users globally are listening to its *human-curated* playlists, which cumulatively generate more than a billion plays per week. According to an industry estimate, 1 out of every 5 plays across all streaming services today happens inside of a playlist. And that number, fueled by prolific experts, is growing steadily.

“All the signs point to playlists being the dominant mode of discovery in the near future,” says Jay Frank, senior vice president of global streaming marketing for Universal Music Group, the largest of the major label conglomerates. “When it comes to trying to find something exciting and new, more people are going to want to go to trusted playlists.”¹²

Following the data trail, playlists are becoming a highly used feature of the most popular music streaming platform (for digital natives) in the most popular music distribution medium. SMP’s are emerging as a dominant format for the distribution and consumption of media, and an examination of their features is useful in assessing changing human behavior in relation to consumptive behaviors.

¹² Reggie Ugwu. “Inside the Playlist Factory.” *Buzzfeed*. Web. July 13, 2016. Accessed 15 March 2018.

Spotify offers several membership options, including a paid full subscription of \$10 monthly, which guarantees access to all Spotify features without interruptions from advertisements. A student priced full subscription is also available for \$5 monthly. A family plan of \$15 monthly allows up to six users within a single household to use individual premium accounts. Spotify’s free account allows users to access many of the features of Spotify Premium with periodic advertisements and the omission of several features such as the ability to download music for offline listening. Spotify recently filed an Initial Public Offer, and in doing so disclosed information regarding its subscription information. “According to Spotify's filing with the SEC, the streaming music service boasts 159 million monthly active users and 71 million premium subscribers as of December 31, 2017, which Spotify claims is "nearly double the scale" of its closest competitor, Apple Music.”¹³

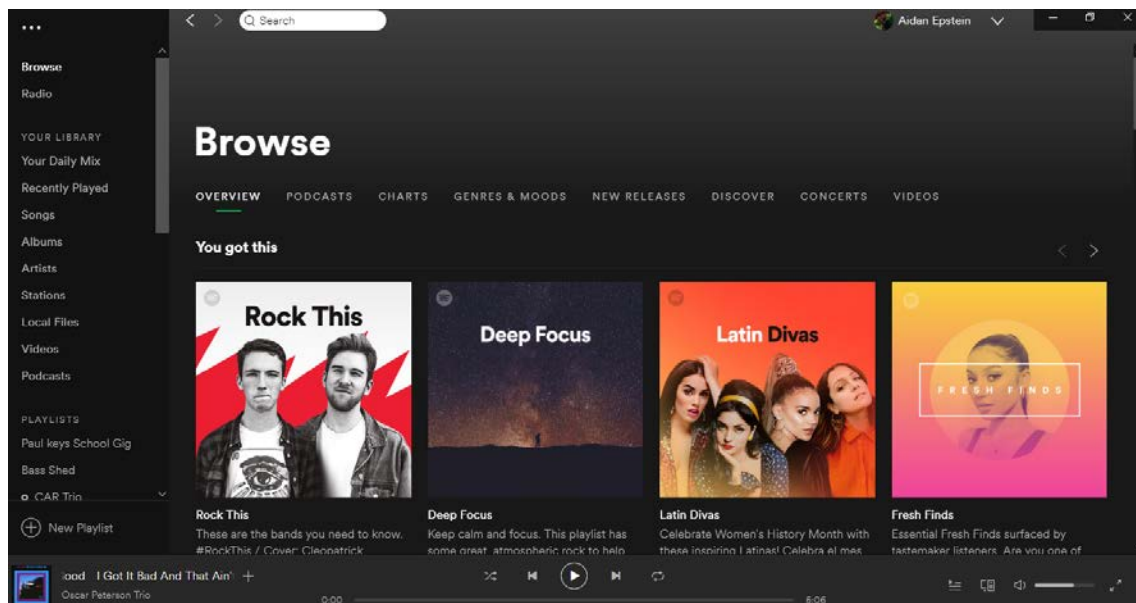


Figure 1. Spotify Desktop Platform¹⁴

¹³Juli Clover. “Spotify Officially Files for IPO with 71 Million Premium Subscribers and 159 Million Monthly Active Users.” February 28, 2018. *Macrumors*. Accessed 15 March 2018.

¹⁴ Spotify Desktop Application. Web. 25 March 2018.

Figure 1 demonstrates that upon opening the Spotify desktop platform, users are confronted with a number of different consumptive choices, many of which encourages browsing through playlists instead of browsing through a set library of musical tracks. Spotify’s playlists are organized into several different areas, including popular music charts, genres and moods, and “discover” (recommendations based on prior listening choices).

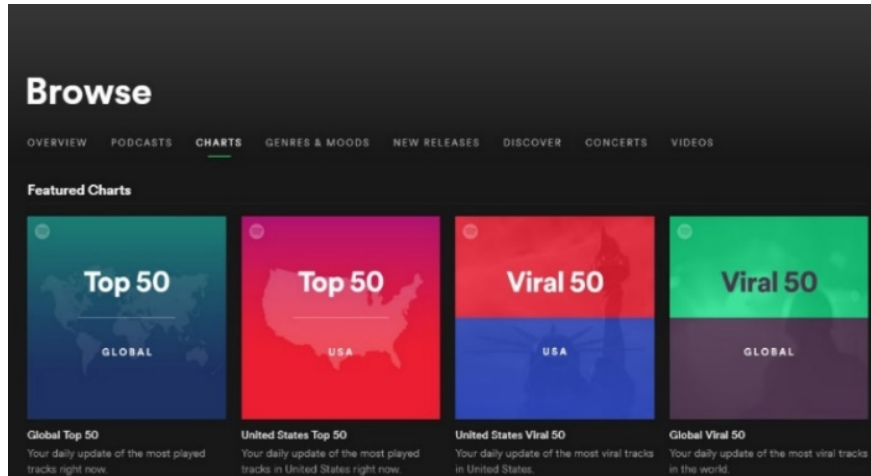


Figure 2. Spotify Desktop Platform: Charts¹⁵

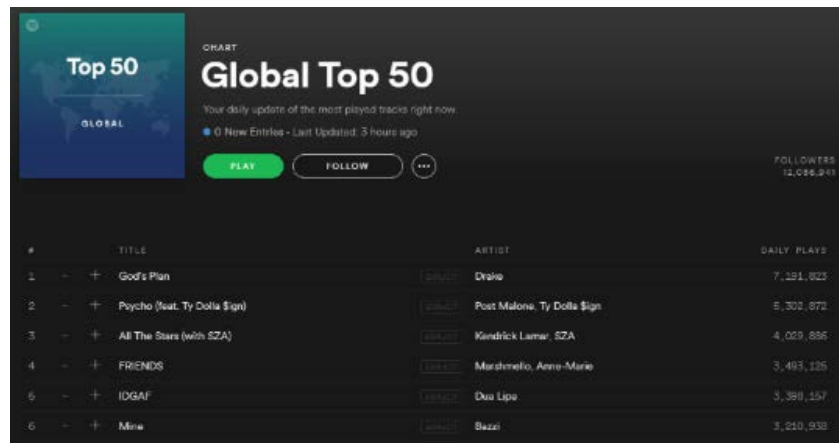


Figure 3. Global Top 50 Chart Playlist Detail¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid 14.

¹⁶ Ibid 14.

Within the Genres & Moods section, users chose between larger scale thematic categories that house various playlists.

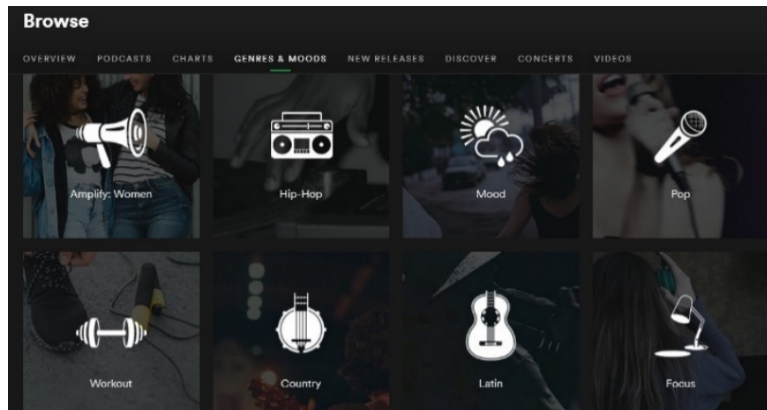


Figure 4. Spotify Desktop Platform: Genres & Moods¹⁷

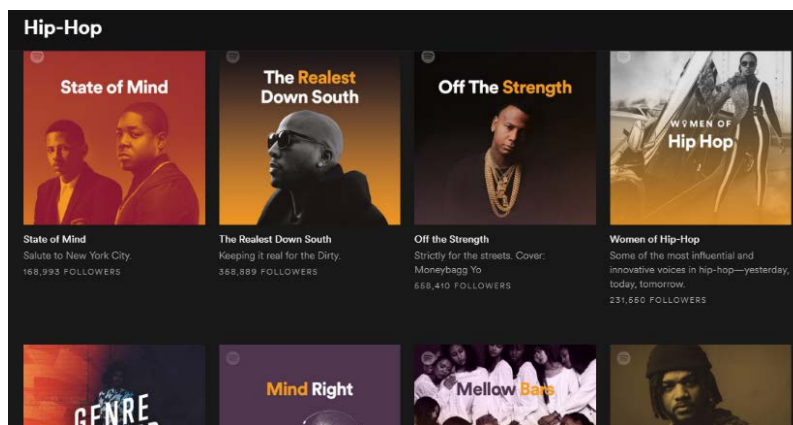


Figure 5. Hip Hop Genre Details¹⁸

The following information is given for each playlist: the number of subscribers (or followers), the creator of the playlist, the number of tracks in the playlist, the length of the playlist, track information (title, album, artist), and the date which the track was added to the playlist.

¹⁷ Ibid 14.

¹⁸ Ibid 14.

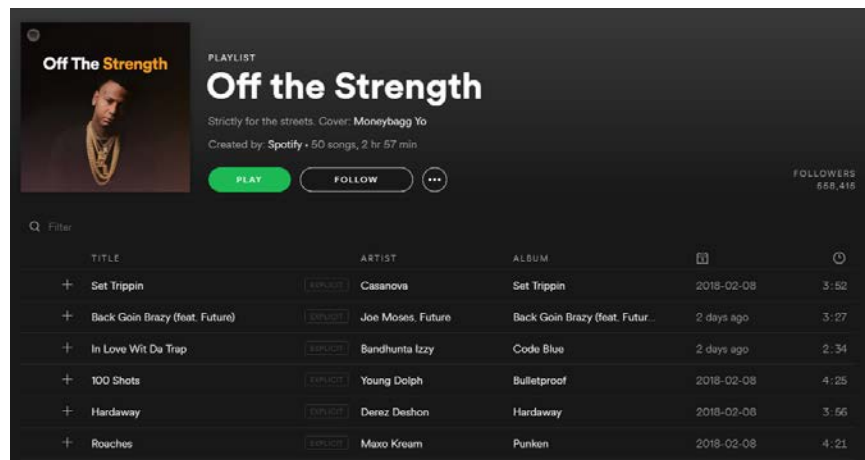


Figure 6. “Off the Strength” Hip Hop Playlist Detail¹⁹

Additionally, Spotify offers a radio service, where musical content is streamed to the user without a set playlist style presentation and is organized around a specific, artist, or track title. It also offers a “Discover Weekly” service, where Spotify curates a unique playlist based on former selections by the listener and new recommendations.

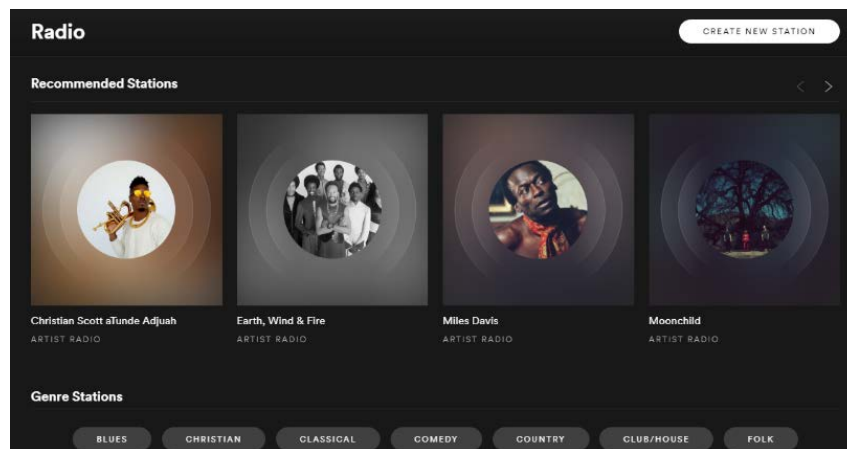


Figure 7. Spotify Desktop Platform: Radio²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid 14.

²⁰ Ibid 14.

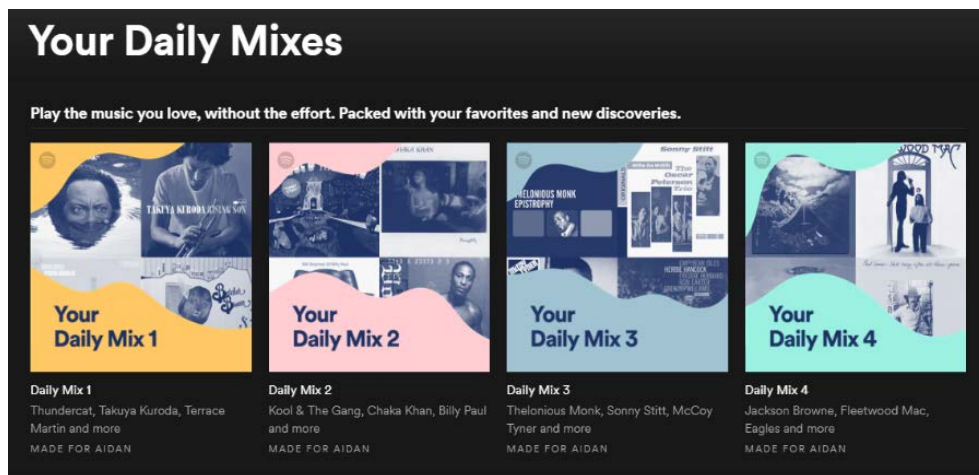


Figure 8. Spotify Desktop Platform: Daily Mixes²¹

Beginning with Pandora’s Music Genome Project,²² various streaming services including Spotify use algorithms to codify and classify music in order to serve thematically organized content to users. In short, algorithm-based software classifies music in accordance with its aesthetic characteristics and then creates playlists of music that would appeal to a certain aesthetic preference. The details of music-based algorithms function have been addressed by Kashyap (2017)²³ among others. Despite the wealth of user-selectable playlists and radio channels, Spotify does not publicly display which of its playlists are human or algorithm generated, however it seems to have branded those playlist with a set number of tracks as human curated, while the radio type services, which generate a seemingly infinite amount of content, appear to

²¹ Ibid 14.

²² Bradley Spiers. *Dreams of an Infinite Dial: The Aesthetics and Economics of Personal Online Radio*. MA Thesis. Tufts University. (2014): 44-45.

²³ Abhay Kashyap. *Deep Representation of Lyrical Style and Semantics for Music Recommendation*. Diss. University of Maryland. (2017).

be algorithm based. The differences between human and algorithm generated playlists will be explored in regard to the different curation options presented to digital age consumers.

II. THEORETICAL BASIS

Both forward and backward-looking modes of analysis are important to media studies, as technological and societal development happen as a consequence of both past human behaviors and cutting-edge innovation. Bradley Spiers in his thesis “Dreams of An Infinite Dial: The Aesthetics and Economics of Personal Online Radio” (2014) situates the following frame for viewing issues related to online distribution of media, “[T]hemes of constancy and personalization are integral components to how personal online radio services are designed to function.”²⁴ As SMP’s are a natural extension of the personal online radio format which, according to Spiers is “an online radio stream that individually collaborate with listeners to create what is experienced as a uniquely personal stream of music,”²⁵ the themes of constancy and personalization will be applied to the features of SMP’s as personalization includes a wide range of topics that constitute a forward-looking view of technology, and constancy refers to the view of changing media formats in light of prior developments. Various topics including dematerialization, curation, aesthetic regulation, format, ubiquitous consumption, social identity, production, and collective listening will be discussed first theoretically in Part II, and then in Part III in relation to SMP’s to form the notion of the SMP as dynamic digital age format. Through interactions with SMP’s digital age consumers reveal patterns of digital age consumption, and these interactions serve as a window into the future of human interaction with media and their environments.

²⁴Ibid 22, 9.

²⁵Ibid 22, 4.

It is necessary to first establish music as an economic unit in order to discuss its distribution and consumption. Since the digital revolution, the rights structure of the distribution of music has shifted, and various scholars have noted the changing exchange value of music. Leyshon et al. (2010) trace the primary difference in the pre and post digital music consumptive patterns: that consumers no longer expect to purchase individual tracks or albums. “Consumers have shown a great reluctance to pay for music in digital form. A quasi-gift economy of music has developed since the mid-1990s.”²⁶ This article points to the expectation that music will be essentially provided to listeners for free. Meanwhile, others such as Hubbs (2016) situate digital music exchanged in peer-to-peer networks as a public good, “for digital music in a peer-to-peer network is neither a rivalrous nor an excludable good. It lacks these features because it is, in a sense, spaceless.”²⁷ Music in SMP’s is also neither rivalrous nor excludable, and in this way can also be considered a public good. Yet another source, Wlomert and Papies (2015) describe music as an experience good, “whose true utility is only revealed to the consumer after it has been consumed.”²⁸ With three slightly varying definitions of what type of economic character recorded music exhibits, it is evident that music’s role in modern digital economies is still being debated. Yet despite the status of music, regardless of the format through which it is transferred, consumers no longer believe that they should directly purchase music.

It’s also important to note that transactions of recorded music do not provide a transfer of the rights to the music itself, but a transfer of the rights to access the music. For example, when a CD is purchased, the owner of the CD does not own the rights to the songs on the CD. They

²⁶ Ibid 2, 180.

²⁷ Graham Hubbs. “Digital Music and Public Goods. *21st Century Perspectives on Music, Technology, and Culture*. Edited by Richard Purcell and Richard Randall. Palgrave Macmillan, (2016): 136.

²⁸ Nils Wlomert and Dominik Papies. “On-demand streaming services and music industry revenues- Insights from Spotify’s market entry,” *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 33 (2016): 316.

simply own the right to a copy of the music, and thus consume the tracks at their leisure. Purchasing access to a good without purchasing the good itself presents an interesting theoretical quandary, situating recorded music as somewhere between the physical and ephemeral realm. As such, “the physical embodiment of music in a medium-sized body”²⁹ such as a CD, vinyl LP, digital album, or playlist allows for efficient transfer of access to the music. In a sense, it optimizes the ability to consume such access. Put another way,

Much of our common sense and everyday practice is constructed around “things.” The material object-by its brute physicality- stands in for the “legal thing.” Traditionally we have referred to the vinyl disc or CD as the “carrier” of the rights; however, in legal terms the MP3 is also a carrier. The rights question does not change, although apparently the carrier has “dematerialized.”³⁰

In addition to the semi-physical status of recorded music, the general cultural trend of digital age consumption is towards dematerialization. The prestige of owning specific physical objects is diminishing, as seen by various good sharing services including rideshares, apartment shares, and bike shares. Ownership, as described by Tariq (2017) is no longer the preferred mode of consumption, “Consumers living in contemporary society see access, or non-ownership based consumption, as a more economically feasible, socially responsible, and environmentally friendly option.”³¹ It is no longer optimal to own everything that one wants to have access to. As we will soon discuss, access-based ownership is one of the main factors in the popularity of Spotify playlists.

²⁹ Ibid 27, 143.

³⁰ Andy C. Pratt. “Music Rights.” *The Production and Consumption of Music in the Digital Age*. Edited by Brian J Hracs et al. Routledge. (2016): 209.

³¹ Ayesha Tariq. *If I Don't Have It, Is It Still Me? An Exploration into the Relationship Between Access-Based Consumption and Identity*. Diss. University of Alabama. (2017): 7.

The issue of curation is paramount to the digital age where media streams serve large amounts of incoming noise. Digital age consumers are constantly looking for ways of parsing through the “wide, nearly un-navigable flood”³² of incoming media. In order to meet this consumer need, the development of services that sort information on behalf of humans has proliferated. Lange (2016) describes a new form of information categorization designed for this purpose known as the “semantic web.”³³ Technology that operates in the semantic web categorizes data partially in terms of its significance (semantics) to humans. The development of semantic web systems is the root of technological based curation of media, which serves the goal of connecting those who share similar semantic goals. “The purpose of the Semantic Web is to outline personal profiles based on machine-readable websites which themselves are able to establish connections between profiles.”³⁴ With the development of the semantic web, services that perform these tasks efficiently and intuitively are the future of human consumption and interaction with media.

As software is developed to interpret human semantics, and as human semantics simultaneously shape the semantic web through feedback, it can be useful to consider this dialogue in the context of a post-humanist discourse, such as the cybernetic interface. The concept of a cybernetic interface, or a digital environment whereupon human and machine interactions are part of a large web of interactive decision making is useful in the context of streaming music curation. Others including Spiers have discussed the cybernetic nature of personalized online radio services such as Spotify. Spiers cites Nichols (1988) “(Nichols) argues

³² Bastian Lange. “The Evolution of Music Tastemakers in the Digital Age.” *The Production and Consumption of Music in the Digital Age*. Routledge (2016): 238.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid, 242.

that the key to cybernetic interactions rest in the simulacra; we no longer engage with fixed and unmoving reproductions, but instead today's culture is given shape and form through interactive simulation."³⁵ As interactive simulation is the means by which humans direct their technology towards the consumptive end they desire, streaming music users engage in interactive simulation through their listening behavior. As we will see, listening behavior as recorded data provides input into the cybernetic curation flow of SMP's.

Cybernet systems are often used for aesthetic regulation. Humans use technology to create their own cognitive, emotional, and consumptive environment, so that they can exist in a highly curated "inner world" while also being in a shared exterior, physical world. Technological extensions such as headphones and personal screens allow users to block the external environment through the broadcasting of a desired media stream. Various studies have assessed this notion. One such study conducted by Newman (2016) discusses the use of such environmental curation in the workplace. According to Anneli Haake as quoted in Newman, "[T]he key is control ... when people chose to listen there can be positive effects. But when its imposed, they can find it annoying and stressful."³⁶ Newman continues to describe the notion that personal MP3 players and headphones give the listener the control they desire over their environment. As humans increasingly curate their own experiences of the world, they rely on technology to aid them by creating the environment they desire. Spiers' describes this notion as the "sonic envelope"³⁷ whereby the acoustic environment created by a specific stream of audio media creates a personalized bubble in the physical reality of the exterior world. The sonic

³⁵ Ibid 22, 24.

³⁶ Kathy Newman. "Headphones are the New Walls: Music in the Workplace in the Digital Age." *21st Century Perspectives on Music, Technology, and Culture*. Edited by Richard Purcell and Richard Randall. Palgrave Macmillan, (2016): 173.

³⁷ Ibid 22, 71.

envelope is one example of the cybernetic experience of using technology to constitutively perceive the external world. As digital natives attempt to develop their own aesthetic experience of the world, the technology they use is increasingly developed for the same goal.

Despite an ever-present desire to maintain a controlled internal world, the desire for social recognition remains strong amongst digital consumers. Recorded music has been a central part of social identification ever since the advent of its production and distribution. In the digital age, consumers turn to music for self-expression in similar ways to prior generations of music consumers. Tariq's work on social identification and music brings together social interaction theory with media studies and describes among other things how, "music helps individuals establish expressions of personality and group identity and helps display these aspects of their identities." Furthermore, "Consumption rituals are employed to express identity and "own" the meaning associated with music, thereby proving that music is an important avenue of symbolic consumption."³⁸ Additionally, "Beyond social activities, music helps individuals shape and define their environment in accordance with their personalities and self-concept. Music provides a means not only of identity expression but also of identity reinforcement."³⁹ So we see that individuals use music to express their identity. They do so through consumption patterns that are socially recognizable. These consumption patterns not only express an outward identity but reinforce an internal identity to the individual.

But how specifically does music provide means for identity expression and group reinforcement? Burkner posits that music carries "sonic capital," a reference to the productive, consumptive, cultural, and economic values that fold multifacetedly into music as it is distributed

³⁸ Ibid 22, 47

³⁹ Ibid 22, 50.

throughout society. The concept of sonic capital is useful when thinking about how music carries multiple value systems. “Sonic capital is a capacity acquired by professional agents and users/consumers by creating, modifying, distributing, and consuming musical goods.”⁴⁰ Tracing the influence of sonic capital as it manifests in streaming services and is sought after by consumers is one lens through which the expressive and performative behaviors of consumers can be viewed. These elements of self-expression and group identity maintenance are important in considering the SMP as an explicit consumptive choice.

⁴⁰ Hans- Joachim Burkner. “Exploring the 360 Degree Blur.” *The Production and Consumption of Music in the Digital Age*. Edited by Brian J Hracs et al. Routledge, (2016): 164.

III. THE SPOTIFY PLAYLIST

The Spotify Playlist is an important development in the lineage of recorded music formats, simultaneously responding to the novel demands of digital age consumers and serving a traditional role as medium for the transmission of access to music. In this way, SMP's are a site of both personalization and constancy. The first concern regarding the SMP as a music format is materiality. SMP's are products that have been created as a response to the dematerialized, access-based consumption patterns gaining popularity among digital age consumers. This is due in large to the spatial layout of the Spotify interface and how it presents SMP's to consumers in terms of the spatial layout of the Spotify digital interface. The question of materiality in spatial terms is described by Hubbs, "digital music in peer to peer networks occupies practically no objective space... descriptions such as these carry an air of paradox, for they suggest that music is a spaceless object or exists in an objectless space... to the extent that listeners find themselves operating with and in these (non)-spaces, it affects their interactions with music."⁴¹ Notions of physicality in peer to peer networks are useful for assessing streaming music, because Spotify's music library is stored in the cloud and similarly does not occupy objective space. In this sense, digital music is different than some prior formats because neither the physical, consumable object providing access to the music, nor the consumptive activity of listeners exists in the traditional human experience of physical space. Music transactions occur in the non-objective digital realm. Hubbs' seemingly self-contradictory point (listeners find themselves operating in non-spaces) reveals an alternative to the binary of the physical exterior world and the "spaceless" digital world, as digital interfaces such as Spotify create an interactive digital space for their

⁴¹ Ibid 27, 136-137.

users. Digital applications create notions of physical space through developing a graphic user interface (or GUI). Spotify's GUI creates a quasi-physical entity for each playlist by giving it a large, selectable icon with a name, an image-based brand, and an aesthetic directive (see figures 3-6). Such identifying features of SMP's establish them as virtual representations of the "medium sized box" that had existed in prior forms audio media distribution. Through icon-based GUI's, digital age media consumers experience and are explicitly steered towards a physical-digital marketplace.

Consumers navigate digital interfaces and landscapes with such frequency and skill that the experience of navigating a digital space has become as normalized as navigating a physical space. As such, the digital landscape is becoming "inhabitable" by consumers as the requirement of physicality is becoming increasingly removed from objectivity. In the digital landscape, the physical space occupied by SMP's attempts to simulate prior music distribution formats that occupied objective space with physical containers, and the creation of this digital experience of objective space is an integral part of Spotify's interface design. This can be seen when considering Richard Randall's point, "material physical formats such as LPs, CDs, musical stores, and piano rolls, allow us to exercise political and financial control over what music is and how it can be used."⁴² By establishing playlists as a "physical" format in the lineage of music distribution formats, streaming services such as Spotify are able to impose these elements of political and financial control over the music they are curating, as we will discuss later.

"Objective" digital spaces depend on intuitive software that affords users the ability to occupy them. Spotify is one example of software that has created an inhabitable, objective digital space. For example, the "browse" section of Spotify (Figure 1) can be considered a sort of

⁴² Richard Randall. "A Case for Musical Privacy." *21st Century Perspectives on Music, Technology, and Culture*. Edited by Richard Purcell and Richard Randall. Palgrave Macmillan, (2016): 127.

digital marketplace, where consumers have the ability to choose from a selection of products and services. It features “tangible” icons and multilayered “paths” through its content. By comparison, Pandora’s interface does not allow for a similar explorative experience. Rather than creating a navigable digital marketplace with a selection of physical icons or deep navigable paths through its content, it takes the appearance of a one-dimensional media player.

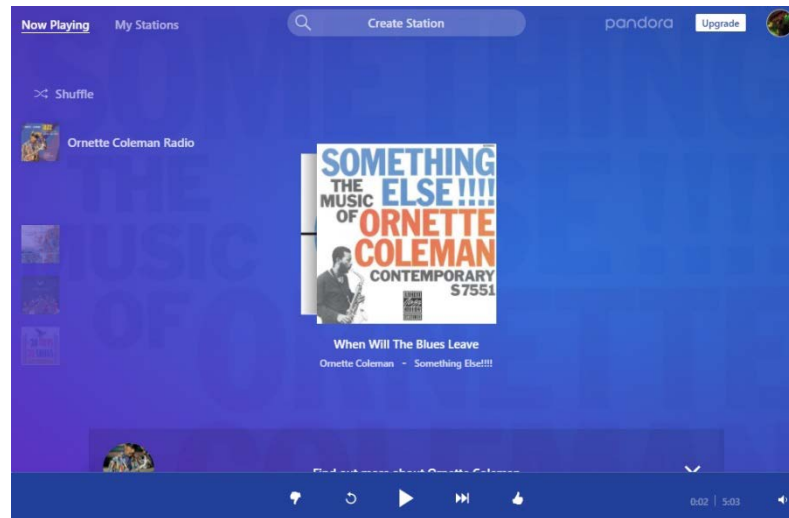


Figure 9: Pandora Desktop Platform⁴³

For digital natives who seek higher levels of stimulation and interactivity from technology, it is evident that Spotify’s interface is more appealing. Pandora’s interface requires less navigation, allowing a more direct route to the use of its features.

Within Spotify’s layout, it is important to note that the consumptive choices are primarily playlists and radio stations. While Spotify does catalogue a vast quantity of digital albums and tracks, its GUI is constructed to direct users to playlists that appear as selectable items. As such, I argue that despite the dematerialization of music in the form of digital albums, SMP’s are popular because they partially re-materialize the music consumption experience in objective

⁴³ Pandora Web Player. 25 March 2018.

digital space. Spotify's popularity amongst digital natives can be in part attributed to its intuitive GUI that facilitates an explorable consumptive experience. It seemingly occupies a deeper digital space than the user interface of Pandora and other music streaming services.

The listening public seems to derive higher levels of utility from playlist listening than album listening, because through either human or algorithm-based curation, playlists are more likely to deliver precisely the aesthetic experience that the listener desires. Playlists add value to the listening experience by curating an experience termed "controlled serendipity," where according to Roessner, "the object is to deliver music that fits a certain mood or preference without exceeding certain defined parameters."⁴⁴ Playlists are constructed to homogenize the listening experience, which is highly desirable to digital age consumers. In order to facilitate satisfactory homogenization, Spotify uses semantic web technology to track user preferences such as subscriptions and track skips. This technology creates playlists that contain tracks that adhere to its overall aesthetic character and fulfill an optimal level of homogeneity.

The popularity of homogenized playlists is in part due to the conditions of modern life for consumers and the resulting change in individual listening behavior. To discuss the consumptive behaviors of digital age consumers, it is important to distinguish between levels of listening. Spiers' discussion of macro and micro level listening and the further application of these topics to modern streaming services is applicable to the concept of homogeneity in playlists. Music consumers are increasingly employing different listening behaviors for different environments. Spiers situates macro level listening as a listening activity that is more centrally focused on the music wherein the act of listening to the music is a consumptive end in and of itself. Micro level

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Roessner. "Radio in Transit: Satellite Technology, Cars, and the Evolution of Musical Genres." *21st Century Perspectives on Music, Technology, and Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan, (2016): 63.

listening, which is becoming more prevalent as both a result of and a cause of music streaming services, is somewhat disengaged, where “the constant presence of the sound emanating from (a music streaming service) allows the music to fade into the background and become ‘ubiquitous.’”⁴⁵ For terminological consistency, the term “active listening” will be used to discuss what Spiers calls macro level listening and “passive listening” in place of micro level listening. Many Spotify playlists seem to be constructed as products that suit the demand of the passive listening habits of digital age consumers. Spiers’ discussion of ubiquitous listening invokes the work of Anahid Kassabian, who has described the notion of ubiquitous listening as constant stream of homogenized music that is a consequence of the sensory experiences of modern life.

Those of us living in industrialized settings have developed, from the omnipresence of music in our daily lives, a mode of listening dissociated from generic characteristics of the music. In this mode, we listen “alongside,” or simultaneous with, other activities. It is one vigorous example of the nonlinearity of contemporary life.⁴⁶

Modern consumers demand a homogenized stream of music that can be consumed in a ubiquitous fashion. For this reason, playlists and streaming radio stations that curate desirable content to the listener are currently the preferred modes of consumption. Ubiquitous consumption is an important factor in the digital age, and playlists and radio stations that are developed to suit this demand are unique in that they facilitate such consumptive behavior.

The creation of homogenized experiences for listeners can be seen as a curation service being performed by Spotify. In light of earlier discussions about the nature of the good or service that streaming music seems to provide, Randall seeks to provide a humanistic approach to

⁴⁵ Ibid 22, 65.

⁴⁶ Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2013): 9.

valuing music in economic systems. Central to many economic theories is the assumption that humans are rational, profit maximizing actors despite the notion that in practical terms, humans make decisions based on emotions and often exhibit irrational behavior. Thus, it necessary to allow for humanistic dialogue in the course of economic discussion. To this end, Newman situates the following discussion,

Much has been said about how digital formats recast music as a public good. But to confuse music with its medium of transmission (formats or services) is a fallacy of misplaced concreteness and avoids critical humanistic issues. In the case of music, we must resist treating listening as an exercise in material engagement and appreciate that music is not a thing, but a fundamental and critical human activity.⁴⁷

Despite the rather economic appraisal of music consumption thus far in the paper, it is useful to consider Newman's humanistic perspective. While music might be distributed in an economic fashion, it is not always consumed as such. Human consumptive behaviors often follow emotional trajectories, and this must be taken into consideration in such discussions. In accordance with Randall we must realize that by discussing SMP's we're are not discussing the music itself, but the format or mode of transmission of a vibrant artistic practice.

When addressing concepts of materiality in terms of SMP's, it might be useful to consider the economic activity in question as a service, rather than a good since consumers purchase subscriptions to Spotify not for access to music (which as described earlier is assumed to be free), but for the value-added service of curation. According to Randall, "[T]hese streaming services mediate our access to music and in doing so are situated in a position to observe how listeners behave."⁴⁸ The tradition of curation-based services stems from the history of radio, where radio DJ's select music along various formats or thematic categories. Often times, these

⁴⁷ Ibid 36, 131.

⁴⁸ Ibid 36, 127.

formats target specific demographics. For instance, the “album-oriented rock” format targets specifically middle aged white men. Aaron J. Johnson discusses concerns related to radio formatting and genre:

In practice, radio programmers create, copy, and modify formats. Sometimes though, formats can be only described after the fact, such as when an innovative radio station’s programming practices are copied by another station. While radio formats and musical genres can share many attributes, they differ in construction, use, specificity purpose, maintenance, and authorship.⁴⁹

These elements of construction, use, specificity, purpose, maintenance, and authorship are points where SMP’s can be seen to straddle the notions of physical music formats and radio formats. However, by viewing the various SMP’s offered, it seems as though there is a greater emphasis on aesthetic preferences than those based on demographics. This is because Spotify, unlike terrestrial radio is able to monitor the listening preferences of its audience with precise detail and can curate content that responds to these preferences. Traditional broadcasting must “push” programming to certain categories and hope that it catches on. The notions of push and pull in interactions between distributors and consumers of media is discussed by Randall, “With the ability for users to make requests and initiate delivery, content providers do not have to create programming for users in hopes that they will be able to sell their attention to an advertiser.”⁵⁰ As Spotify has already created an identifying profile for each listener, they rely less on targeting demographics through playlists than terrestrial radio formats because they already possess some demographic information on their listeners. Of more interest to Spotify is the success of their

⁴⁹ Aaron J. Johnson. *Jazz and Radio in the United States: Mediation, Genre, and Patronage*. Diss. Columbia University. (2014): 212.

⁵⁰ Ibid 42, 125.

specific content (how their content is pulled by consumers), as assessed by user behavior such as number of skips or plays a certain playlist or song has.

SMP's are also unique in the sense that an undisclosed, yet seemingly large amount of curation labor is invested into their success. Both investment in algorithm-based software services such as Spotify's \$100 million purchase of the music intelligence company Echo Nest⁵¹ in 2015 and investment in human curation capital are widespread. There have been several insights into the nature of Spotify's curation techniques, notably Reggie Ugwu (2016) has done some work in exposing this process. Ugwu recognizes that playlist construction is mainly delegated to humans despite the extensive work being done by algorithm-based music categorization services. This is due to the fact that certain desirable aesthetic streams have not yet been effectively programmed by computers. A way that SMP's differentiate themselves from algorithm-based playlists is that they add a "human touch" to the selection, as evidenced by the stylized titles and descriptions of the playlist. Using colloquial language of those who fit the social profile of consumers of that playlist, the selection of a playlist is a self-identifying consumptive activity that is designed to feel as though the user is joining a collective community of consumers. Doug Ford of Spotify describes this process, "Every curator has to come with a hypothesis. You brand it with an image and you give it a cool description that gives you an indication of what you're diving into if you're about to listen."⁵²

⁵¹Alex Heath. "Spotify is getting unbelievably good at picking music- here's an inside look at how." *Business Insider*. Web. Accessed 15 March 2018.

⁵² Ibid.

As fans navigate these digital environments they create and share what Arriagada calls a “digital habitus.”⁵³ Arriagada describes how website creation and maintenance in musical subcultures of Santiago, Chile are the performance of a digital habitus.

In the making of music websites, ICT’s (information and communication technologies) are mediated and assembled through a set of practices of discourses. Bourdieu’s conceptualization suggests that “habitus” is an essential condition of a social setting, a field where individuals can relate to each other as in a music scene.⁵⁴

Spotify playlists are one manifestation of the ICT where music fans display and perform their digital habitus as a means for performing identity within a scene, or a social web where certain behaviors are recognizable.

The experience of using Spotify places users in a web of social identity, which contrasts to the aesthetically austere experience of the Pandora radio station, an echo chamber of an endlessly repeating algorithm-based content by comparison. Human based curation is crucial for developing aesthetically pleasing consumptive options in the form of SMP’s to consumers. According to Ugwu, “That job has fallen to an elite class of veteran music nerds- fewer than 100 working full-time at either Apple, Google, or Spotify.”⁵⁵ These individuals can be seen as the modern disc jockey or tastemaker, which places them in a powerful position. Artists who appear on these playlists will automatically be played more. For up and coming musicians, for whom the indicator of success is no longer album sales but track plays, placement on these playlists is essential.

⁵³ Arturo Arriagada. “Unpacking the “Digital Habitus” of Music Fans in Santiago’s Indie Music Scene.” *The Production and Consumption of Music in the Digital Age*. Edited by Brian J. Hrats et al. Routledge, (2016): 225.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid 12.

SMP's are popular because effectively create the ubiquitous listening experience desired by modern media consumers. They place listeners in a highly personalized sonic envelope and give the listener optimal amounts of control over their aesthetic state. The ubiquitous listening experience is desirable precisely for this reason. Digital natives are increasingly seeking to regulate their emotional state as well as other internal environments. This leads to increased stimulation and optimal mood experience. Much like a compilation CD, the SMP is constructed to give the listener one pleasing song after another, which would deliver more satisfaction than having to either skip undesirable tracks or accept a lower level of stimulation from less desirable tracks. The constant hit after hit format of SMP's delivers a regulated high level of stimulation to consumers.

The nature of human curation also places the listener into a relationship with the creator of the playlist, as the playlist maker engages in the social activity of sharing music with the playlist followers, an activity that forms part of the collective listening experience. As SMP's claim to deliver authentic and worthwhile listening experiences ("this is the best in alternative and underground hip hop")⁵⁶ listeners place a certain amount of trust in the curators, making a listener more likely to perceive the music they are hearing as enjoyable and fitting their aesthetic criteria. Communal listening and trust-based relationships are what distinguish SMP's from other streaming services available in the digital marketplace.

Following Randall's humanistic appeal, there is a risk in removing low level stimulation music from listening experiences. While high level stimulation is seemingly optimal, stimulation is relative to a spectrum of reward. Both high and low levels of stimulation are necessary to differentiate different reward payoffs for consumption. That is, without low levels of stimulation,

⁵⁶ Spotify Desktop Player Urban Poet Playlist Description. Web. Accessed 15 March 2018.

there are no longer high levels of stimulation. In a “perfect world” where an SMP or algorithm-based radio playlist delivers a maximally stimulating listening experience, the consumption of music will become an increasingly passive homogenized experience. The constant high-level reward will fade to the background as per the psychological phenomenon of habituation, whereby the response to repeated stimuli decreases through repetition. As a result, passive listening will continue to proliferate.

Passive listening, as reinforced by Spiers should not necessarily be placed on a hierarchy with active listening, as it has many distinct purposes especially for today’s consumers.⁵⁷ However, passive listening may be changing the perception of music-as-art in modern society. This is because the traditional conception of art rests on the premise that the experience of its consumption delivers a high level of stimulation in comparison to the relatively low levels of stimulation from mundane daily tasks. When art is delivered with a regulated, homogenized level of stimulation, it changes the way art is perceived and thus produced. As we will see in part IV, artistic production is already being shaped by the homogenized listening experience of playlists and modern life.

The homogenized listening experience is troubled when music is considered more than an economic exchange of sonic capital but within the context of an ethics of cocreation. Described by Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz, the notion of an ethics of cocreation describes the behaviors of playing and listening associated with music as community centered practices that carry with them ethical responsibilities. In the context of improvised music, the authors state,

The implication of the actions of the listener or receiver of the improvised performance are every bit as significant here as the performance, for to discern the performance the listener must in a sense cocreate it. The musical “disturbance” of improvisation shakes not only the conventions that have evolved around passive

⁵⁷ Ibid 22, 65.

listening and the reduced agency of the listener, but also conventions about the one-sided nature of creation.

In these terms, the cocreative, interpenetrative engagement of both the agency of the performer and that of the listener signals a potentially productive model of encounter, one in which the rights of both are at stake and complicated in ways that enhance the mutual responsibility of one to the other.⁵⁸

By consuming a musical performance, the listener is entered into a social contract and incurs a social responsibility with the entity that has produced the music and those around them simultaneously consuming the music. Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz would argue that according to this social contract, the homogenized and aestheticized listening as practiced by digital age consumers via streaming services is problematic because it removes the social contract between the listener and the artist by stripping away the artist's unique identity through homogenization. Furthermore, "the ability to listen deeply, critically, attentively, creatively, curiously, and intensively to the others around you is a profoundly sensitive register of a broader set of commitments to social responsibility and cooperation."⁵⁹ Fischlin et al. advocate for active listening in the digital age as a means of maintaining and fulfilling ethical social interactions with those around us. While SMP's may not isolate consumers from each other, they may isolate consumers from the producers of music, whose output becomes a uniform element in a homogenous aesthetic stream. Perspectives such as this are useful reminders of the ethical concerns that are attached to patterns of consumption and distribution. As the digital age continues to forge new patterns of economic transaction and spatial experience, it is useful to consider such developments in light of the continued dialogue of human rights and the ethical cocreation of social environments.

⁵⁸ Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz. *The Fierce Urgency of Now*. Duke University Press. (2013): 63.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 196.

Next, we turn to the socially constitutive nature of music. Playlists take the notion of a mixtape or compilation CD, where music is curated specifically around a chosen aesthetic category even further by creating a homogenized listening experience that is both highly portable, extended (yet finite) and socially recognizable. The notion of social recognition is what differentiates SMP's from other streaming services. SMP's are part of a social network which places the consumptive activity of its users in a visible platform. For those who consume music as means of performing identity (as established before as a widespread behavioral practice for humans), Spotify allows the work of sharing such consumptively constituted identity to be performed seamlessly as integrated into the process of listening. This is because Spotify integrates with Facebook and other social networks, allowing users to view the activity of their friends and interact with them by collaborating on playlists, sending tracks or albums with personalized messages, and viewing the listening behavior of peers in real time. These social features allow users to form a connected web of listeners and to accumulate, share, and display sonic capital.

The practice of listening to music communally is a central part of the experience of enjoying music as it is often performed publicly. The notion of "being together" as an activity of bringing two or more people into physical and temporal contact as they consume simultaneously forms strong social bonds (such as tradition of sharing a meal). Communal listening to music in this way is an intimate experience of social bonding. In the digital age, some have theorized that communal listening experiences have gone by the wayside, and in their place is the isolated experience of headphones and individually curated playlists where individuals listen in isolated behavior patterns. Take Roessner's discussion for example, "(Headphones) ensure sonic isolation. Seemingly no locale is an inappropriate listening space while you're consuming your

music privately: walking on the street, riding the bus, lounging in a café, or even dining.”⁶⁰

Roesnner describes how with the use of headphones and streaming music technology, music consumers are able to create “private” listening spaces in public areas, isolating their inner consumptive experience from the external experience of a physical space.

In a traditional sense of “being together” this may be true. However, just as notions of physical objectivity have been shifted by the digital age, so are notions of physical and temporal “being together.” Social media disrupts notions of physical and temporal coincidence by allowing users to consume the same media, yet in their own time and environment. It also allows dialogue about the media to occur through a form of messaging. Even if two individuals listen to the same track on different days and share a dialogue of communication about the track through a series of messages that are not occurring in real time, the core activities of collective listening are being accomplished in that the same product is consumed by two or more individuals who share a dialogue about it in order to reinforce or perform social identity. While the actual listening experience is not happening in the exact same physical space and time, the notion of digital “being together” disrupts these traditional expectations because it does not require the consumers to be in the same physical or temporal location to have the same consumptive experience and to share it with each other. In this way, the social network tools of Spotify allow for collective listening experiences between users.

In early digital music platforms such as iTunes and other streaming services such as Pandora, such social tools were not readily available and collective listening in the digital sense required the use of several social networking and communication platforms. Spotify can be understood as a digital age adaptation of the aspects of music consumption culture that have been

⁶⁰ Ibid 44, 56.

occurring since the beginning music consumption, adapting them to fit its consumption model. Spotify's advantage is the ability to perform these tasks in more efficient ways than its competitors by allowing users the ability to create unique solutions to consumer demands such as sharing and making consumptive choices. Transformed notions of physical objectivity, temporality, and human presence will continue to proliferate in the digital age as various technologies allow for the augmentation and disruption of traditional ways of experiencing these elements. Ultimately humans still desire the same consumptive goals as before the digital revolution, however they seek different methods for realizing them. SMP's allow for greater customization, personability, and ease of use are therefore an innovative platform that satisfy digital age demands.

Spotify's platform is one example of enhanced technology that is bringing the cybernetic relationship systems to light. In cybernetic systems, social environments are created through interactions with and between human and digital actors. As human actors navigate Spotify, they reveal their consumptive preferences to the interface, which in turn responds by providing content that meets the user criteria. This process is constantly in dialogue as users communicate their consumption preferences through their actions and the interface alters its output to match the user's preferences.⁶¹ Media consumption in the digital age is situated in a cybernetic environment, and it is important to note the mutually constitutive behavior of both humans and technology at the various stages in the transaction of media.

As technology is increasingly able to respond to human behavior and work collaboratively with humans to achieve various consumptive goals, the digital landscape is markedly posthuman. According to Mike Featherstone as quoted by Jason Robinson, "[I]f

⁶¹ Ibid 22, 24.

technology is increasingly embedded in our everyday activities, from means of physical communication involving movement, to mediated forms of communication at a distance, then technology is part of the material structure of everyday life in the sense that it provides a familiar range of objects with which we associate and that our bodies have become accustomed to feeling at home with.”⁶² The human is becoming increasingly comfortable in its digital environment and with its digital possessions. The concept of finding a home in the digital environment is rather striking, but in viewing the layout of various GUI’s including Spotify’s is quite applicable. The concept of an intuitive system is one in which the user feels “at home.” Home invokes not only visual and navigable familiarity, but an emotional connection as well. In fact, deep emotional attachment to digital artifacts is evidence of the presence of a posthuman environment. Tariq’s qualitative study on sentiments of ownership in regard to streaming music playlists provides evidence of emotional attachment to technology amongst the various survey subjects.

Even though respondents recognize they do not own streamed music in a true legal or physical sense, they still engage in claiming symbolic ownership of the content by spending time and energy into building playlists. The owners claim that they represent their identity and taste affiliations and that they will experience distress if the playlists were somehow lost. Their relationship with these playlists fulfills the criteria of attachment.⁶³

Tariq’s study situates ownership and rights distribution in relation to emotional attachment over digital products. Digital age consumers recognize that they do not own the physical rights to the product when engaged in access-based consumption such as streaming music from a playlist, however they perform a simulated version of ownership through cybernetic customization and categorization of the digital elements with which they are

⁶² Jason Robinson. “The Networked Body.” *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, sound and Subjectivity*. Edited by Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman. Duke University Press. (2016):107.

⁶³ Ibid 22, 34-35.

interacting. Cybernetic systems allow humans to achieve the sense of ownership they seek over their environments, even in the case that such ownership is nonexistent. Through ownership and consumption, users develop an emotional attachment to the content as it represents an identifiable part of the self. As the self becomes increasingly networked and defined through technology, it is evident that digital age consumption is developing within the scope of posthuman dialogue.

Posthumanism points to the notion of a melding between a dualistic perspective of the human and technological things. According to Borgo, “[C]ybernetics rejects the modernist dualism of things and people. It insists that “we” are plunged in medias res into a lively world that we cannot control.”⁶⁴ While this paper has at times maintained a dualist perspective between technology and its user, Borgo’s perspective is useful for moving forward in the study of future systems of consumption. SMP’s give consumers the feeling that they have some consumptive control and that they can assert ownership over their consumptive choices despite delegating the bulk of these choices to playlists. However, as discussed prior, even the playlists being selected by users are subject to the curation of a third party. Put a different way, “In the case of digital technology, listening often has the *appearance* of increased choice and empowerment, but at the cost of increased mediation.”⁶⁵ As consumption is increasingly access based and provided by digital platforms, questions of authority and ownership come into question. Who is providing the access, and what are they providing access to? In the instance of music, Spotify has made

⁶⁴ David Borgo. “Openness from Closure.” *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, sound and Subjectivity*. Edited by Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman. Duke University Press. (2016):114-115

⁶⁵ Richard Randall and Richard Purcell. “Introduction: Listening in on the 21st Century.” *21st Century Perspectives on Music, Technology, and Culture*. Edited by Richard Randall and Richard Purcell. Palgrave Macmillan, (2016): 4.

deliberate choices about which music will be included in its overall library. If Spotify becomes the sole source of music consumption, then the consumer is using an inherently limited and mediated source to access music media.

IV. FURTHER IMPLICATIONS

Spotify's curation service may come at a higher cost than simply the price of subscription; users pay with their behavior. The consumptive habits of Spotify users are recorded and interpreted by various programs as described here;

One frequently used application is a performance tracker called PUMA, which breaks down each song on a playlist by things like number of plays, number of skips, and number of saves. PUMA also collects data on the overall performance of the playlist as a whole, with colorful charts and graphs illustrating listener's age range, gender, geographical region, time of day, subscription tier, and more.⁶⁶

Such morsels of data are useful feedback for Spotify to determine the efficacy of various features including SMP's. Spotify tailors its programming to the preferences of its users, expressed as aggregated data. In this way, a cycle of feedback is established between consumer behavioral preferences and the features of the product. This relationship demonstrates consumers interacting with Spotify are truly part of a cybernetic system. Such relationships are an example of the possible future of human consumption and interaction. Furthermore, Spotify is clearly part of the semantic web of technology that aggregates and responds to human behavior.

It is useful to frame this discussion in the context of economics to bring light to what may seem as previously hidden transactions. By using Spotify's interface to navigate products, consumers are performing what has been described as "selection labor." According to Randall, "[L]istening becomes a transaction whereby a user's selection labor is converted into a commodity that has exchange value."⁶⁷ The commodity achieved from consumers performing selection labor is their preferences. Consumer preferences are quite valuable to producers and

⁶⁶ Ibid 12.

⁶⁷ Ibid 42, 121.

distributors, and they are increasingly being aggregated by virtue of the digital mediation of consumption. As consumers purchase goods, services, and otherwise enact their consumptive behavior through mediated outlets such as websites, search engines, and content providers, their exact preferences can be codified. SMP's are maintained through the aggregation of user data in this way. According to Doug Ford of Spotify, "You can tell instantly if it's a win or not because we're so fed by data. All of the playlists live or die by the data."⁶⁸ The massive amount of consumer preferences enacted online has been given the colloquial term "big data." As media consumption and access to services online is becoming increasingly inexpensive (and often free), consumers are paying with selection labor. It is clear to see that this labor is more valuable to companies than the immediate financial value of the product. Furthermore, as consumption transitions to increasingly digital platforms, consumers have fewer options to avoid the tracking of their consumptive behavior. The tracking and aggregation of consumptive preferences is not only an economic issue, but one of political and ethical consideration as well.

Such considerations are evident when consumptive acts are considered as execution of free will. Human consumptive choices are made as a result of selection power, which according to Randall, "is a property of human consciousness and represents a variety of human experiences and desires."⁶⁹ Humans exercise their consciousness and experiential memory through their consumptive behavior. In fact, it is one of the most powerful means of expression for humans in consumption-based societies. This is to say that aggregating the consumptive behavior of humans should not be taken lightly. In fact, it seems morally problematic that such properties of human consciousness, desire, and experiences are being cataloged by both private and public

⁶⁸ Ibid 51.

⁶⁹ Ibid 42, 125.

entities. As the number of digital platforms for consumption is relatively limited to the average consumer, there is less of an ability for humans to avoid the aggregation of their selection labor. This pattern of feedback and consumptive decision making on behalf of humans will continue to be manifested in the future, with the concept of human autonomy in consumptive decision-making becoming increasingly questionable.

Another cautionary point regarding SMP's is the power that their curators hold in directing consumption towards various products. As listeners trust SMP's to deliver the content that they desire, and since the number of playlists to choose from on Spotify is relatively limited, high amounts of listening traffic are routed to the tracks on these playlists in comparison to the other tracks that are contained within the overall Spotify library. For a musical artist, as one who produces the consumptive good, the ultimate incentive is to have your product placed on one of these playlists as it will be guaranteed to be consumed at a higher rate than otherwise. The playlists makers hold high levels of curation power in this structure and act as the metaphorical gate keepers to success.

The power differential between musical artists and curators of the content to consumers is not a new concept, in fact it closely resembles the dynamics between the DJ's of terrestrial radio and music artists in the "golden age" of recorded music. If an artist's song was played on the radio, it was guaranteed popularity as a built-in audience of radio listeners consumed the product. The power differential of terrestrial radio was exploited by record companies who had the resources to influence the curation behavior of DJs in a practice that came to be known as payola.⁷⁰ When comparing the terrestrial radio and streaming music markets, the same power

⁷⁰ Kerry Seagrave. *Payola in the Music Industry*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, (1994): 172.

differential exists. Thus, the incentive for a payola type influence on both human and algorithm generated playlists on music streaming services is present.

As the practices of SMP listening and curation are still in their infancy, there has been little information about whether payola type practices are occurring, albeit some speculation. Record labels and streaming services widely deny the influence of payola into playlist making, such as Doug Ford of Spotify who is quoted by Ugwu as saying, “[E]veryone on my team is so far removed from anything like (pay for play).”⁷¹ Despite this, other sources indicate otherwise. According to the article “How ‘Payola’ is Infiltrating Streaming Services” by Glenn Peoples, “Pay for play ‘is definitely happening,’ claims a major-label marketing executive... According to a source, the price can range from \$2,000 for a playlist with tens of thousands of fans to \$10,000 for the more well-followed playlists.”⁷² In a similar scheme as payola for radio DJ’s, curators of today’s media streams are in powerful positions to place products in front of a public, who through an established trust with the curator will formulate their tastes around the content they receive.

While it may be difficult to prove the presence of payola for playlist makers, Peoples notes that the major labels of the music industry still have a powerful grip on the content served in playlists. “Spots on many of the largest Spotify playlists are already controlled by the three major music companies (Universal Music Group, Sony Music, Warner Music).”⁷³ As such, major media conglomerates influence the playlists of digital media providers in the same way that record companies influenced the playlists of radio DJ’s, and corporations such as Clear

⁷¹ Ibid 12.

⁷² Glenn Peoples. “How ‘Playola’ is Infiltrating Streaming Services: Pay for Play is ‘Definitely Happening’” *Billboard*, (2015). Web. Accessed 24 April 2017.

⁷³ Ibid.

Channel standardize the radio listening experience. While social media platforms provide a forum for which listeners can enact and express their preferences, these preferences are being simultaneously formed by curators who can be influenced by outside actors.

Another concern related to playlist curation is the ideological agenda by which music is chosen for inclusion (or exclusion) in libraries and playlists. As mentioned before, Spotify is not an exhaustive container of all recorded music available to consumers. The music contained within its platform is the result of deliberate choices, which according to Spiers among others has direct political consequences.

POR companies are often forced to make distinctions about what music will best serve the user population. As a result, there is typically a great deal of music that belongs to the service's "target demographic" but music that falls outside these group listening behaviors is often lacking... Listeners that fall outside these norms are left ostracized from the service, and specific musics become removed from the perception of the listening public.⁷⁴

As modes of consumption transition by way of access-based digital providers, it is important to note the ways in which access to this consumption is provided. It seems as though the trend in digital consumption is towards aggregation of popular tastes, and these incentives are logical extensions of curation trends. However, the concept of tailoring to consumer demand in the digital age in accordance to the long tail concept as described by Anderson (2004) might suggest otherwise. The long tail argument is that the consumption performed by niche consumers is just as valuable as the mass consumption of popular products. Especially when the ability to offer a wide range of products, such as through digital music distribution, is present with relatively low cost there is an incentive to "embrace niches" and as a result, capture the consumption of niche customers.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Ibid 22, 40-41.

⁷⁵Chris Anderson. "The Long Tail." *Wired*. 2004. Web. Accessed 15 March 2018.

It is to my observation that Spotify has embraced the notion of the long tail by curating a seemingly wide range of musical choices by offering many niche playlists within popular US musical genres. However, it should be noted that the lens of this paper and almost all prior modes of inquiry on the topic has been specifically western centric. What may seem like a diverse range of consumptive choices to a western consumer may not align with populations that exist outside this reference point. Again, we turn to Spiers,

Classifications arise less from objective musical values, and more from subjective and inter-subjective ideals about what constitutes meaning... (the musical parameters assessed by Echo Nest) conform to many contemporary Western ideals of music making, and as such, any music that fits outside these parameters becomes either omitted or adapted to fit into these conventions.⁷⁶

It is important to note the western centric appraisal of music by algorithm-based music curation software. Due to the increasingly globalized nature of consumption, the music of many music consuming cultures may not align with these ideals. It would be to the advantage to the creators of curation-based algorithms to consider such global notions in order to code for music that falls outside of western traditions. However, the concept of codifying such music at all raises its own set of ethical concerns. Many nonwestern musical cultures transmit music aurally in the sense that the conventions of musicmaking that allow for written transcription and audio replication are absent. This would make the music of aural music cultures inherently much more difficult to codify than others. For this reason, the attempt to codify them at all might be considered a form of music colonialism. While further discussion on the politics of playlists formation is developing, a global perspective on the design of digital content curation is necessary.

⁷⁶ Ibid 22, 41-42.

Up to this point, the distribution and consumption of music in the form of SMP's has been considered from a number of different angles. However, there has been minimal consideration of the production of musical content from the perspective of artists. As an integral part to the exchange of music, the production process of music is also reacting to the demands of digital age media distribution. Several patterns have emerged including homogenization of content and the creation of music in direct consideration of its end use.

In order to view the artist in the context of the music distribution scheme, it should be noted that as producers of a good they are sensitive to the demand preferences of the market. Producers tailor their products so that they meet demand and are thus sold and consumed. The consequence of this in the modern musical landscape in regard to SMP's is that consumer demands call for emotionally homogenized aesthetic experiences. The logical response to this demand would be for increasingly homogenized artistic output. Walter Benjamin points out these concerns, "[T]o an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility."⁷⁷ Artists are increasingly aware of the end use of their product and the ways in which listeners interact with it, as provided by the aggregate selection labor of SMP's. As this awareness increases, the incentive for artists to create according to the desired end use of their product is evident. Take the example of the up-and-coming artist. In order to attain a high level of recognition, the artist desires to have their music on a SMP. Since SMP's are curated around aesthetic categories, the artist produces output that aligns with the aesthetic connotation of a playlist that their music might appear on. As such, a criterion for creating music is established and work that attempts to fit the criteria is produced. This defines precisely the

⁷⁷ Walter Benjamin. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and other Writings on Media*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings et al. Harvard University Press, (2008):24.

nature of popular music, and it is interesting to see how in the age of SMP's this incentive is present to an even greater extent. These concerns are also brought to light in Spiers' discussion. Spiers takes this analysis one step further to describe how "standardization in the age of cybernetic systems manifests in the automation of automated artist."⁷⁸ The notion of the automated artist, which has the air of digital apocalypticism is in fact relevant to this discourse.

The notion of automated art in regard to music is also not necessarily a new development. Muzak is a classic example of art that exists in limbo between what is considered "authentic" artistic output and automated "filler." Muzak is music that is created with a highly specific end use in mind, and it aligns with the aesthetic requirements of this end use. As such, there seems to be a direct relationship between the known end use of the artistic output and the level of standardization or automation that occurs in the process of creating it. It appears evident that automated music would become a part of the digital streaming experience, especially when considering the royalty payout scheme involved with streaming music. While little discussion thus far has been given to royalty schemes, we have discussed how Spotify does pay royalties to the rights owners of the music which is being consumed on a per play basis. Despite the low "per-stream" rate of payout (about \$0.004) Spotify paid out about \$70 million in royalties in 2016.⁷⁹ Spotify's pays out about 69% of its revenue in royalties.⁸⁰ Furthermore, Spotify has yet to operate at a net profit in the time of its existence. As Spotify pays out a majority of its profit to music on labels, there is an incentive for Spotify to host music that it owns the rights to, and not have to pay royalties on.

⁷⁸ Ibid 22, 72.

⁷⁹ Daniel Sanchez. "Exclusive Report: Spotify Artist Payments are Declining in 2017, Data Shows." *Digital Music News*. Web. Accessed 15 March 2018.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

In July of 2017, a number of articles began to gain popularity on the internet describing behavior precisely along those lines. Music Business Worldwide (MBW) published a list of names of artists whose tracks appear on popular playlists several of which have attracted millions of streams. Yet these artists did not seem to exist elsewhere in digital space besides Spotify. MBW was able to track the licensing rights to many of the songs created by “ghost artists” to a Swedish production duo by the name of Romdhane and Svedlund. This evidence, along with anecdotes from music business insiders such as the following; “[W]e’ve been told that third parties are involved, and at least some of the people behind the fake artists agree to insanely low margins, which obviously has a financial benefit to Spotify,”⁸¹ seem to suggest that Spotify is in fact facilitating the creation of music to place in high exposure playlists in order to cut down on royalty payouts. Spotify has denied creating “fake artists,”⁸² but this answer does not absolve the company from the claims against them. The music that is credited to “fake artists” is indeed real music that is created by real people. However, it is music that is created to fit the very explicit purpose of occupying a playlist. While this process is not automated per say, it seems to inhabit a grey area between artistic automation and the notion of creative artistry, very much in the way the Muzak straddles these realms.

Consumer dismay over the use of music composed specifically for use on SMP’s (as evident in the tone of the MBW articles and the comment sections) reveals that consumers have inherent expectations about the way artistic content is distributed to them, and that they place a certain amount of trust in Spotify to fulfill these expectations. One expectation is of music as art. Consumers believe that the music they are consuming is an intentional work of art in the sense

⁸¹ Tim Ingham. “Spotify denies it’s playlisting fake artists. So why are all these fake artists on its playlists?” *Music Business Worldwide*. Web. Accessed 15 March 2018.

⁸² *Ibid.*

that it was created out of some sort of creative impulse by an identifiable entity whom is expressing their experience of the world through the work. Music created explicitly for Spotify playlists may violate the concept of creative impulse and artistic expression of an experience of the world. When the composition of music has explicit commercial motives, it seems to express a prescribed aesthetic rather than an open-ended exploration of creative impulses. Furthermore, such music created explicitly for SMP's lacks a concrete identity, removing the social contract between listener and musician as described in the ethics of cocreation. This depersonalization of music violates the consumer expectation of consuming a work of art with an identifiable auteur.

Consumer expectations of “controlled serendipity” where playlists are constructed from songs that appear in disparate places yet are brought together due to similar aesthetic qualities are also potentially disrupted by music that is created explicitly for SMP's. This is because SMP users have an expectation that the service of curation is being performed on their behalf, which includes “going out” to find music and bringing it “in” to the playlists. When music is created for SMP's there is no “going out” in the sense that there is no curation work being performed. In fact, compositional work is being done in place of curation work. However, this is not the service that Spotify users expect to be paying for. Disrupted expectations lead to unhappy customers, and for this reason it seems as though Spotify has intentionally not publicly admitted to accusations of arranging for music to be created explicitly for its playlists.

As consumptive activities continue to lead music listeners towards ubiquitous listening, the incentive for Spotify to continue the practice of having music created for its playlists will only strengthen. I believe that Spotify is currently testing this feature out by “sprinkling in” a few songs of this sort to its playlists to see how they are received and perceived by consumers and critics. Ultimately the incentive is for every song on ubiquitous listening playlists (playlists that

are primarily used as background music) to be of this nature, and in my opinion, this is the future of many Spotify playlists. This will require a readjustment of consumer expectations and most likely public recognition of this practice on behalf of Spotify. Debates about this practice flourish, as some argue that it is a devaluation of music⁸³ while others state that the music services a specific purpose for certain consumers. Andrew Flanagan frames the discussion in the following way, “Most people welcome easy ways to fill their silence with sounds — “the bulk of people are, at best, casual music fans,” as leading Echo Nest researcher Paul Lamere states. Lamere continues, “For many, the source of these sounds is less and less important. The ease of finding them, more and more so.”⁸⁴ Such dialogue brings light to the changing notions of music and modes of listening. The gap seems to be widening between passive and active listeners, and as a result, the music that is being produced for different types of listening is also becoming different. The distinction between type of listener will be manifested in the production of music. Fully automated production of music for passive listening, according to these trends, is the future.

⁸³ Adam K. Raymond. “The Streaming Problem: How Spammer, Superstars, and Tech Giants Gamed the Music Industry.” *Vulture*. July 15, 2017. Web. Accessed 15 March 2018.

⁸⁴ Andrew Flanagan. “Spotify is Accused of Creating Fake Artists- But What is a Fake Artist?” *NPR*. July 12, 2017. Web. Accessed 15 March 2018.

CONCLUSION

This paper began by describing the various features of Spotify Playlists, establishing them in a lineage of influential music distribution formats. The various features of SMP's and how they relate to digital age consumptive behavior has also been discussed. SMP's are indicative of the growing trends of access-based consumption and dematerialization. Their proliferation has been traced to curation demands of digital age consumers, who crave curation in the face of a multitude of consumptive options. They also manifest the digital representation of physical marketplace behavior such as navigation, browsing and product selection and in this way forecast future digital environments that will recreate experiences of the physical world. They are a useful model of the posthuman cybernetic experience of the world, as SMP's create a network of feedback between the user and the technology to provide optimal results. SMP's are an example of how social media will continue to be integrated into consumption as individuals use their consumptive behaviors to demonstrate and perform a social identity. They also allow for the time-honored practice of collective listening to occur in new realizations of spatial and temporal immediacy. SMP's are also an example of the selection labor of consumers being accumulated as data and being used to further market products.

Through the discussion of SMP's it is evident that political and ethical considerations of the development of modern media consumption on digital platforms is necessary. The spaces for delivering and transferring art are politicized through the perspective in which they are curated. SMP's are also changing the way that artists conceive of creating music and demonstrate a trend for homogenous popular music, and even the automation of music that will be explicitly used for background purposes. This points to changing notions of art in modern culture. SMP's also

reveal a generational divide between digital natives and digital immigrants. While today's digital natives are tomorrow's digital immigrants, it reveals the notion that the rate of technological development continues to increase. Each generation will use technology in different ways, shaping the future of human interaction with technology. Due to increasing rates of technological innovation, generation turnover will be increasingly quick, meaning that platforms such as Spotify must quickly adapt to the consumptive needs of new users. Companies providing consumptive services to digital age consumers must be able to recognize shifting societal values and how they relate to preferred modes of consumption and be able to continue to develop along these lines. Otherwise they risk the migration of consumers to other platforms that better suit their needs. The long run success of Spotify depends on these factors. As for SMP's, they are currently the format of a generation. How following generations will experience music will be a mutually constituted process that seems to be trending towards automated music for passive listening.

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