Musicking on Social Media: Imagined Audiences, Momentary Fans and Civic Agency in the Sharing Utopia

Raquel Campos

London South Bank University

3,992 words

Introduction

Since peer-to-peer platforms appeared in the early 2000s, sharing music files has propelled the expansion of online networked culture (boyd and Ellison 2007; Nowak 2016). Social media platforms have also played an increasing role in the creation and maintenance of sociality (Miller et al. 2016), wherein music has a central function. Private listening and public performance have become intertwined with music activities on social media such as live streaming. However, besides the promotion-oriented uses of social media by musicians (Suhr 2012), or platform-centric studies (Burgess and Green 2009; Bonini 2017; Durham and Born forthcoming), the social dynamics of music media circulation remain an under-researched area. I aim to address this gap in the existing research by investigating why people post music on social media, and in which ways music is an important element in online sociality, particularly for music audiences. Based on extensive online and offline fieldwork and interviews among Spanish migrants in London, and conceptualising music-related social media practices (such as posting, circulating, commenting, and rating music) as 'musicking' (Small 1998), I apply the concept of 'imagined audience' on social media developed by Eden Litt and Eszter Hargittai (2016) to shed light on the social dynamics and the meaning of music circulation online. This essay outlines three perspectives that contribute to understanding why music is shared and circulated on social media. First, the performative character of social media and the use of music to articulate identity and subcultural affiliations. Second, the particularities of the social media and streaming mediascape and its influence on how users engage with music. Third, the moral economies of music circulation on social media and their relationship with understandings of civility and musical citizenship.

Performativity, Identity and Subculture

A first perspective that explains musicking practices on social media is performativity. Based on the performance theory of Judith Butler (1990; 1997) and the concept of 'technologies of the self' developed by Maria Bakardjieva and Georgia Gaden (2012), it can be argued that

2

identity is performed through curating the musical contents of a personal profile on social media. When music media such as links to songs and videos and music-related images are digitally embodied in a personal profile on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, they help users build their online presentations to others and publicly articulate their identities. However, since social media platforms only provide limited resources to users to manage their reach, these music activities are directed towards an imagined audience (Litt and Hargittai 2016), targeted or abstract, as the real audience cannot be known.

This performative capacity of social media profiles includes, but is not limited to, the production of music or video covers and their associated performances of locality and gender, as demonstrated in the case studies of Howard (2015) and Stock (2016). When a piece of music media is produced and circulated, the musical politics of the genre and the song are incorporated into the personal narrative performance of users, including the cultural and political identities that people articulate within social groups. The semiotic capacities of music media and their circulation within social media platforms enable conversational dynamics between users, and meta-conversations that respond to the politics of music genres and communities. Similarly, posting and circulating music from a personal profile on social media or a streaming platform allows users to articulate subcultural affiliations. Musicking on social media can be part of taste performance and subcultural capital maintenance as Bourdieu (1984) analysed, and it contributes to boundary-making practices of subcultural groups, internally and externally (Thornton 1995; Thornton and Gelder 1997). In addition, curating and distributing a playlist as an informal DJ via social media and streaming platforms generates cultural capital vis-a-vis other users that can be put to work for relational purposes. Informal music selectors become nodes of online music circulation that benefit from the dynamics of social and cultural capital. At the same time, they also contribute to the subcultural sharing utopia yearned for by fans (Jenkins 2006).

From these perspectives, it can be inferred that people post music on social media because it helps them articulate their cultural identities and fandom memberships of subcultural groups.

Consequently, music's relevance on social media is linked to its capacity to illustrate personal narratives and to maintain socially distinct groups. However, a performative approach to social media musicking has its semiotic limitations. These were highlighted by participant's insights from my case study of Spanish migrants in London. To begin with, assuming that certain music media define a given identity is problematic, as music is subject to varied culturally-bounded interpretations, and the polysemic character of music media such as videos can articulate varied discourses for different people. Likewise, dynamics of subcultural capital seemed somehow too utilitarian and secondary in a context of migration, where most participants oriented their musicking activities towards the maintenance of ties with friends and family, rather than policing the boundaries of subcultural groups or profiting from the accumulation of cultural capital to climb up the social ladder. The liminal character of migrant lives raises questions about the fitness of Bordieuan theory in contexts of economic deprivation, where support from relationships that are firmly established may become safer social investments than the often-unattainable expansion of local ties through music taste. Indeed, fieldwork showed that for Spanish migrants, "achievements of wealth and status are hollow unless they can display them before an audience living elsewhere, in the authentic heartland of their imagined collectivity" (Werbner 2002: 10). In this sense, if users' agency on social media platforms is consciously oriented towards an imagined audience, in my case study users seemed to address imagined social groups that were not the manifestation of subculture: not necessarily aggregated by music taste and without clear class boundaries. This indicated that to explain why people post and circulate music on social media, performativity and subculture do not fully render the whole picture.

Algorithmic and Momentary Fandom

The crucial aspects that revealed the need to move beyond a performative interpretation of musicking practices on social media in this research project were linked to the distinctive characteristics of the web 2.0 mediascape (Appadurai 1990), such as their orientation towards

imagined audiences and their algorithmically-constructed affordances. Social media and streaming platforms are based on an algorithmically-mediated simulation of social liveness, which circulates media content such as music and video independently of human activity, and influences the speed and context of online social interaction. While 'mediatised liveness' (Auslander 2006) was already a feature of music consumption in the context of live performance before the advent of the internet, what social media algorithms attempt to recreate through the recirculation of songs and music videos is social liveness itself: the illusion of non-stop human activity. Therefore, algorithms shuffle and circulate music content to convey an idea of human liveness, but in turn people may share and circulate music in response to these prompts, contributing to the liveness of platforms as well. These systems of 'algocracy' (Aneesh 2006) influence the timeframes of social media activity and push sociality to develop asynchronically through a series of short interactions around music media, rather than promoting long engagements around a piece or album. They also encourage temporary engagements with a wealth of music genres, promoting classifications by moods and marketing narratives of discovery, instead of drawing out recommendations from a single genre to reinforce subcultural affiliations. In addition, this algorithmically-crafted liveness promotes the intensification of individual fan engagement, but only insofar as it can be monetised, rather than helping to create closely-knit communities, as is the case with listening practices on streaming platforms such as Spotify and YouTube. At the same time, as Matt Hills (2018) points out, these systems normalise algorithmically-authorised forms of music fandom that exclude both ends of the spectrum: the casual- and the super-fans, for instance, gatekeeping the purchase of concert tickets.

In this mediascape, momentary and temporary fandom dynamics (Hills 2018; Jenkins et al. 2013) emerge both as a result of, but also against, algorithmic mediation. Users engage in ephemeral forms of music fandom and genre sampling such as posting songs on social media and crafting shared playlists because they provide a greater experience of agency, ownership and flexibility in listening practices. They also perceive that these momentary engagements

with music are harder to classify and monetise by platforms, helping them avoid the 'filter bubble' effects (Pariser 2012) in their music knowledge generated by following strictly the algorithmic rabbit. Informal music selectors also contribute to these temporary practices by curating this sense of ownership for themselves and others. However, even in the cases of research participants who have intense engagement with platforms and circulate music between their contacts several times per day, this role as informal DJs is not consistently maintained over time. Rather, such users generally engage in intense sessions of music circulation focused on particular moments of the day. Overall, these human and machine dynamics give rise to momentary fandom and ownership without owning as normalised ways of engaging with music in this mediascape. Therefore, another possible explanation of why music circulates on social media is because liveness, discovery and temporary engagements with music have come to be the new social approach to mediatised music such as online video and streamed songs. However, this acceleration of music circulation online and its associated practices of temporary engagement with music have further consequences for social media musicking.

Ubiquitous and Silent Music Media

Temporary forms of fandom and imagined ownership are also both cause and consequence of the ubiquitous presence of music (Kassabian 2013) on social media, which makes it easy to find, circulate and listen to music at any given time. On one hand, the ubiquity of music media online makes it a handy resource to articulate sociality, so its use and circulation is widespread. On the other, its ubiquitous presence is something taken for granted by users so actual engagement with music is not a priority, potentially disconnecting listening practices from the moment when a piece of music media, such as a music video, is encountered online. This goes beyond practices of selective inattention in which music may be just used as background noise. Music on social media falls within the paradox of being so abundant in online interaction that most of its circulation is silent. Playlists remain unheard and music links

are not clicked, because users are unable to listen to all music that reaches them, even just from friends and family, besides algorithmic recommendations:

> "In general people do not react much to songs (…). Maybe most of them don't even listen to them. But that's not only for me. I have seen that for other people that share music; they almost never have reactions. I think that on Facebook people are just scrolling down all the time and when they see something that requires stopping and listening, they don't even check it. (…) When I share something on Facebook I know that people are not going to listen to it. I give people the chance, but I know that they are not going to listen to it." Javier, 5 December 2017

> "If someone wants to listen to it and likes it, fine. If not, so be it. (…) because everybody has their Twitter timelines full [of information], so the probability [of someone listening] is low." Sandra 26 November 2017

However, just seeing the name of a song or a thumbnail preview may be sufficient to understand the reference, message or mood intended. In this sense, I argue that music circulates as a visual object that evokes sound and provides users with a ready-made intertextual object to help with articulating messages. The semiotic capacity of music media objects is indeed a result of its visual and sonic aspects, as Goodwin (1992) points out, but in social media this may happen through practices where music may not be listened to at all. While ubiquitous music in offline environments generated a "ubiquitous mode of listening" (Kassabian 2013: 10) related to the attention economy of the shopping mall-like spaces (Sterne 1997), I argue that ubiquitous music in online environments characterised by mediatised liveness, algorithmic mediation, and temporary fandom, generates imagined listening, or even lack of listening, which is related to the attention economy of social media spaces, as the emerging mode of listening characteristic of social media musicking. Therefore, imagined listening, more than imagined audiences or imagined communities (Anderson 1991), is the tacit cultural norm that governs music circulation online. As my participants explained in

interviews, this can happen through evoking the memory of musical sound with visual references:

 "(…) I posted that Cindi Lauper GIF [soundless moving image] from 'Girls Just Wanna Have Fun' in response [to a conversation about feminism] (laughs)… (…) but you fill it in with your mind (laughs) (…). In an imaginary way, you sing the song for yourself in your mind (…) this is because some songs are so iconic" Sandra, 26 November 2017

In other cases, practices of imagined listening do not develop through musical memory, but rather through imagining that the audience is listening, or will listen. This is ultimately why participants share and circulate songs and music videos:

"Because I am optimistic! (laughs)…, and I think that at some point people will remember and say: 'let's listen to that song that Cynthia posted'. I don't know, …it's leaving the door open, so if they remember, they can have access. Even if they don't listen to it in the end. (…) they don't have time. (…) I don't care getting home and finding that I don't have a single 'like'. I know that someone is going to listen to it, (smile)… I know it is a strange thing (laughs)… (…). I think that it goes like this: thinking that someone is going to watch it [music video], someday." Cynthia, 17 January 2018

From a critical perspective, it may be argued that these dynamics of silent music circulation show how sharing utopias are corporate fabrications to encourage users to interact with platforms and monetise their activities, as suggested by Fuchs (2014), Terranova (2016) or Lovink (2010), rather than social constructs that explain online music cultures. These utopias are promoted to extend the datafication of social life, consequently creating a mediascape where music is commodified and reified as an object that presupposes the listeners' response, in the same manner that Sterne (1997) outlined for mall music. From this point of view, music is circulated on social media because corporate agents push users to be musically active. Therefore, in a mediascape where music is not listened or engagement with music is ephemeral, and where users do not have control of algorithms and all the additional

mediations between them and their contacts, it bears asking why posting, circulating and sharing music with others is relevant to them. However, these musicking practices can also be read as people's conscious adaptations based on their moral understandings of social media and on the value given to music in the online mediascape, rather than as signs of corporate domination.

The Moral Economies of Music Circulation

To understand people's motivations for undertaking online musicking activities in a mediascape of ubiquity and imagined listening, it is necessary to consider these practices as 'cultures of circulation' (Lee and LiPuma 2002), where music sharing is "the stuff of (social media) culture" (Small 1998), rather than simply manifestations of identity performance or algorithmically-mediated forms of music fandom. Three principles govern the moral economies of music circulation on social media: solidary fandom; exchange and gift-giving rituals; and musical civic duties. First, users engage in practices of what could be called 'solidary fandom': musicking activities oriented towards helping emerging artists to promote themselves. By recirculating music media and promoting the shows of emerging artists, users hope to help them expand their fan base and achieve greater recognition. Within these practices of solidary fandom, there are two further aspects of its moral economy to consider. On one hand, users are conscious of the relative impact of their musicking practices in terms of data traffic within their social media contacts and understand their activities as part of a sharing utopia to help redress corporate and algorithmic influence on music circulation. On the other hand, their awareness of algorithmic and corporate mediation leads them to assume that their publications may not reach those intended. However, the former argument is held because it enables that potential impact. As my participant explained:

> "(…) For small bands these little things are useful. The more people post about it and the more you publish on your social networks, the more they become known, which is ultimately free advertising. But if the band is worth it, it doesn't cost a thing to help them. (…) I know that Pearl Jam does not need my support (…)" Sandra, 26 November 2017

Second, gift-giving economies and exchange rituals also play a role in online musicking practices. When users circulate music with an imagined audience in mind, they are sending music media gifts into an abstract social exchange system. Their musicking activities develop within a social system of music circulation where they do not always know who the recipient will be, and from which they may not receive anything in return. They also understand that music may not be listened to at all. Yet, the abstract goal of redistributing abundant music goods prevails as the cultural logic behind these musicking practices:

> "So, it is a sort of… the same way you share information or opinions through Twitter, you share music with the same purpose: that the other person, that you think would like it or could be interested, receives it. (…) In fact, when I put something like 'for my girls' or 'for my friends', for me they are like presents. (…) They are like small moments of happiness that you share with people. (…) Not thinking about someone in particular or a specific moment, you simply say 'I am going to share this', like a present, 'I am going to send a present to the world, so that someone sees it'." Teresa, 6 October 2017

These cultures of circulation further come to the fore on ritualised musicking practices, such as online music games, daily salutations and celebrations of local festivities, where users effectively salute an imagined audience, or each other, through posting a piece of music or a media object of music iconography.

Third, these musicking practices of solidary fandom and gift-giving rituals are also based on moral economies of civic duty. Even if music is not listened to, users still feel that through circulating music they contribute to a common good and fulfil their role as musical citizens. Moreover, within this abstract civic duty, an educational discovery narrative was evoked by many of my participants. Providing access and musical knowledge for others was often mentioned as the underlying motivation for them to circulate music on social media. In this sense, even if music circulates as silent, or it is not listened to, it is still upheld as a symbol of citizenship, education and collective harmony.

"(…) (Y)ou can imagine the face (does happy face), but [online] it is a bit impersonal. However, I think that if they receive it as I do, like 'wow what a great find', then I think that someone else is having the same reaction somewhere else. So, it is a little bit that, imagining it [that you could make someone happy]." Cynthia, 17 Jan 2018

"I post things that have provided me some sort of benefit, so that others can also have it. (…) So, I think: 'people would like to see this'. Like that: 'people', everybody, humanity. (…)" Diana, 10 October 2017

"It's quite rhetorical (sic). I can't say that it has a specific objective. The general feeling that I have when I share any kind of song (…) the purpose would be the same as for sharing a beautiful picture: to share beauty, good feelings. That is what is behind anything I share. (…) It's like… 'this song is awesome, you are welcome'. I know that they are going to be thankful for it" Javier, 5 December 2017

Playlists are paradigmatic of this approach as users invest significant time and care to curate and prepare music selections that they subsequently share with friends and family, even when they admit that they may not be listened to by their recipients more than a couple of times. Therefore, the conscious acknowledgement of ubiquity and practices of imagined listening does not represent an obstacle to circulate music on social media, because the emergence of these moral values and norms about musical citizenship provides these kinds of music cultures of circulation with societal value.

Consequently, in contrast with subcultural sharing utopias and critical analyses of social media as exploitative datafication of social life, I argue that users critically assess the platforms' affordances and algorithmic mediation when they exchange, post and circulate music media as temporary fans and informal music selectors. Their awareness of the mediated character of online sociality by algorithms and other technical aspects of platforms, and their understanding of the circulation of music as silent because of ubiquity and ephemeral engagement, gives rise to specific moral economies of music circulation. These moral

economies explain why online musicking activities are worth pursuing even when there does not seem to be a cultural capital gain such as a direct social or economic benefit. Users navigate these limitations by imagining abstract audiences and internalising musical citizenship duties. In this algorithm-mediated sharing utopia, where dynamics of public sphere, artistic championship and corporate exploitation collide, music shows its social relevance by becoming part of culture-making processes such as gift-giving and informal music redistribution. In this sense, music is circulated on social media because users consider it a practice for the common good, in reference to the specific environment of social media, but also in general societal terms. Therefore, instead of conceptualising the contemporary mediascape as a place where music has lost relevance and it has been increasingly commodified, as if algorithmic and internet technologies could have voided music of its aura, I argue that music and its iconography are ingrained in social life to such an extent, and its cultural references are so widely shared, that they do not need to be listened, and that they are thought time and again as articulations of morality and civic values.

Conclusion

To conclude, this essay has provided three perspectives from which to investigate why people post music on social media. First, a cultural studies perspective has outlined how the performative character of social media, and musicking activities within it, serve identity and subcultural articulation, and contribute to a subcultural fandom sharing utopia that is oriented towards an imagined audience. However, this approach has proven to be limited, particularly in a context of international migration. Second, a technocultural approach has explained how the characteristics of 2.0 technologies are both cause and consequence of the dynamics of music media circulation. Engagement with music is temporary or ephemeral, yet music is ubiquitous in this mediascape, even if it sometimes appears as a silent object. Algorithmic mediation plays a role in these dynamics by ensuring constant liveness and determining the recipients of music media circulated for corporate interest, but this is understood and

navigated by users. In this sense, a technocultural approach can shed light on social dynamics without falling into determinism. Finally, rather than explaining music circulation in terms of subcultural or corporate sharing utopias, I propose a third approach, which considers the conscious agency of users in this mediascape and provides a better understanding of the moral economies that explain the relevance of music in contemporary online environments. Users are aware of temporal, algorithmic, corporate and subcultural dynamics. Yet, they nevertheless still circulate music on their social media profiles as acts musical citizenship. These three perspectives are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, their dynamics are interconnected, showing the multi-layered character of musicking practices on social media and the importance of humanistic perspectives over simplistic arguments about virality.

References

- Anderson, B., 1991. *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

- Aneesh, A., 2006. Virtual Migration: The Programming of Globalization. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Appadurai, A., 1990. Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 7(2-3), pp.295 – 310.

- Bakardjieva, M. and Gaden, G., 2012. Web 2.0: Technologies of the Self. In Bolin, G. ed., *Cultural Technologies. The Shaping of Culture in Media and Society*. Oxon: Routledge.

- Bonini, T., 2017. *Convivial Algorithms: Music Consumption in the Digital Age*. Seminar at King's College London, 14 November.

- Bourdieu, P., 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- boyd, D and Ellison, N., 2007. Social Networking Sites: Definition, History and Scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13 (1), article 11.

- Burgess, J. and Green, J., 2009. *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Butler, J.,-

  1990. *Gender Trouble* (Revised Edition). London and New York: Routledge.

  1997. *Excitable speech: A Politics of the Performative*. Routledge.

- Durham, B. and Born, G. (forthcoming). Online Music Consumption and the Formalisation of Informality: Exchange, Labour and Sociality in Two Music Platforms.

- Fuchs, C., 2014. *Social Media. A critical introduction*. London: Sage.

- Goodwin, A., 1992. *Dancing in the Distraction Factory. Music Television and Popular Culture.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Hills, M., 2018. Algorithmic Challenges to Fan Agency? The 'Netflix Discourse' of Fandom and 'Authorised' Participatory Culture. Paper at the *MECCSA Annual Conference*, London South Bank University, 12 January.

- Howard, K., 2015. Politics, Parodies and the Paradox of Psy's 'Gangnam Style'. *Romanian Journal of Social Sciences,* 1/2015, 8: 13 – 29.

- Jenkins, H., 2006. *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*. London: New York University Press.

- Jenkins, H.; Ford S.; and Green J., 2013, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. London: New York University Press.

- Kassabian, A., 2013. *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press.

- Lee, B. and LiPuma, E., 2002. Cultures of Circulation: The Imaginations of Modernity. *Public Culture* 14 (1): 191-213.

- Litt, E. and Hargittai, E., 2016. The Imagined Audience on Social Network Sites. *Social Media + Society*, January - March, 1 – 12.

- Lovink, G., 2011. *Networks without a cause. A Critique of Social Media*. Cambridge: Polity.

- Miller et al., 2016. *How the World changed Social Media*. London: UCL Press.

- Nowak, R., 2016. *Consuming Music in the Digital Age. Technology, Roles and Everyday Life*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Pariser, E., 2012. *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You.* London: Viking.

- Small, C., 1998. *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. Wesleyan University Press.

- Sterne, J., 1997. Sounds like the Mall of America: Programmed Music and the Architectonics of Commercial Space. *Ethnomusicology*. Vol. 41, No. 1 (Winter 1997), pp. 22 – 50. DOI: 10.2307/852577.

- Stock, J. P. J., 2016. Sounding the Bromance: The Chopstick Brothers' 'Little Apple' Music Video, Genre, Gender and the Search for Meaning in Chinese Popular Music. *Journal of World Popular Music*, Vol. 3, n. 2, pp. 167 – 196.

- Suhr, C., 2012. *Social Media and Music*. New York: Peter Lang.

- Terranova, T., 2004. *Network Culture. Politics for the Information Age*. London: Pluto Press.

- Thornton, S., 1995. *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. Cambridge: Polity.

- Thornton, S. and Gelder, K., eds. 1997. *The Subcultures Reader*. London: Routledge.

- Werbner, P., 2002. *Imagined Diasporas among Manchester Muslims*. Oxford: James Currey.