

'What are you listening to?'

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Remember live music? Sharing music experiences good and bad with other human beings? I am writing from the middle of Covid-2021. I hope that you dear reader, in the post-pandemic utopia of 2022 and beyond – if you have time to read this – with all of this seeing other people and unobstructed breathing, are well. You are hopefully rediscovering the social joy that is music. We need others for music. To harmonise when we play it, to dance with (badly) when we experience it to validate our tastes, co-create and communicate our (sub) cultural identities and ultimately to share the emotional experience of it – joy, despair, disgust. The perception, if anything, is that the digitisation (Spotifisation) of music consumption has eroded the qualities of this experience. We listen to more music now¹ but it is increasingly experienced through earphones, via a hyper-individualised algorithm² and the specific circumstances of our own everyday lives ('my running playlist', 'Monday motivator', 'songs to listen to while I go through a break-up and try to wash the dishes without crying' etc.). Perhaps the pandemic has accelerated this trend. There may be an argument that this diminishes the social aspects of music consumption but this is not the point I want to discuss in this piece. The argument that I want to make is that this experience of music consumption (both private and social) has been hijacked by surveillance capitalism and we as consumer researchers have little to say about it.

There is a contradiction at play here. I am arguing that music is increasingly individualised, hence that would indicate a more private type of engagement. Ironically, our private interaction with music, the deeply personal relationship we develop with our favourite music, the times in our lives it is connected to, its power as a means of reflection is now a public commodity for sale. Every song clicked and skipped and sorted into a playlist is another piece of data³. With every step you make and every move you make they (not Sting this time) will be watching you. The data is used to create the product, to provide recommendations, new music etc. It is also used as a selling point. Spotify actively boast about how much they know about our listening habits in marketing communications⁴.

However, there are other more lucrative means by which the data is put to work. The data on music taste is of course revealing of age and other demographics as well as a predictor of personality and beliefs. That in itself would make the seismic amount of music streaming data generated every day valuable. The marketplace has long had a good feel for the commercial advantages of music as a tool for segmentation and symbolic communication, minus the sophistication of big data analytics. Now, we have figured out how to quantify this knowledge, this type of affect. This music experience data is valuable in the contemporary age of algorithms and sophisticated machine learning but it is not just what the music taste reveals about a person, it is the real-time tracking of mood and context when listening that is particularly revealing and ultimately what makes companies such as Spotify worth so much despite the fact they regularly post substantial losses⁵. Poor Adorno was moaning about the popularity of jazz and what the commercial forces of radio would do to the artistic integrity of music. Manufactured boybands, charts and the neoliberal nightmare of cyclical commercialisation of subcultural and outsider music genres such as punk, grunge and rap would have positively made his head explode. The point is that there is a long history of commercial interference infiltrating our relationship with music whilst also exploiting artists. The fact that we refer to music 'consumers' is revealing in itself. However, the surveillance infrastructure that now seeks to extract and monetise every aspect of that relationship is unprecedented and should not be something that we accept uncritically.

I am presuming thoughts along the line of ‘who cares?’ are being entertained at this junction. Who could blame you. Early research in this context⁶ indicates that consumers don’t. This is due to a lack of knowledge of how streaming data is collected and used but there is also a sense that we have been suffocated in every other aspect of our consumer lives in order to accept the surveillance narrative. ‘They use my data to improve my experience with the service’, ‘I have nothing to hide’, ‘these companies don’t mean to hurt me. They can change I swear[sic]’ and for this context a reluctance to believe that their music taste is worth salt to anyone. The Facebook-type cases have garnered the attention of consumers and raised potential concern, although evidence of meaningful consumer action at this point is up for debate. Each privacy scandal reduces outrage and erodes memory of the previous one. Before we know it, the whole surveillance model will be completely normalised and accepted (if it isn’t already)⁷. This is why music streaming and other contexts within the arts are important. They have the potential to re-jig the momentum of the privacy backlash. If communicated correctly, they can help consumers understand the true scope and future nightmare we are walking into as the sophistication of the data analytics and consumer futures markets improves further⁸. Music has the cultural gravitas in which to provoke more imaginative articulation of the scope of this invasion of privacy while also providing a vehicle in which to resist it. It is the perfect context in which to frame the surveillance issue as it is something that is so ingrained in our everyday lives. It is oxymoronically both an intensely private and collective experience. Even the most mundane consumption is loaded with psychological and sociological significance⁹.

The contexts we choose to engage with as consumer researchers are important for communicating resistance to the consumer surveillance model. At the moment, we are leaving research in this area to the quants and the privacy calculators who seek to rank the different factors that impact consumer privacy perceptions and measure to the nth degree what level of surveillance consumers will accept. This type of research serves the corporate voyeurs rather than the consumer. Questions of ethics are raised as afterthoughts and are no better than the perfunctory CSR titbits companies feed consumers about issues like this when they are caught looking through the peephole. There is a reluctance for researchers in our field to take the gloves off here and call out the dark reality of what consumers are being exposed to. There is a lack of immersive engagement that documents the everyday cultural experience of consumer surveillance. Our colleagues in media studies and sociology¹⁰ are speaking for us here and it is time we stood up too in a meaningful way. My suggestion is that the arts and music are a good place to start.

Bibliography

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³ Eric Drott, “Music as a technology of surveillance”, *Journal of the Society for American Music*, 12, no. 3 (2018): 233-267.

⁴ <https://www.adweek.com/creativity/spotify-crunches-user-data-fun-ways-new-global-outdoor-ad-campaign-174826/>

⁵ Patrick Vonderau, “The Spotify effect: Digital distribution and financial growth,” *Television & New Media*, 20, no.1 2017: 3-19.

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⁷ Shoshaana Zuboff, *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power* (London: Profile Books, 2019)

⁸ Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*

⁹ Tia DeNora, “Music as a technology of the self,” *Poetics*, 27 no. 1 (1999): 31–56.

¹⁰Tarleton Gillespie, *The relevance of algorithms. In Media technologies: Essays on communication, materiality and society.* (eds) Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo Boczkowski, and KirstenFoot. (MIT Press, 2014).