

# Consuming Music in the Digital Age

Technologies, Roles and Everyday Life

Raphaël Nowak

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## Consuming Music in the Digital Age

*Pop Music, Culture and Identity*

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Technologies, Roles and Everyday Life

Raphaël Nowak

*Griffith University, Australia and University of Bristol, UK*

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# Introduction

On a Tuesday afternoon in April 2007, I sat in a TGV (French fast-speed train) departing from the train station of Douai, in the North of France, where I was living at the time. The train was taking me to Paris where I was going to attend a sociological seminar on the topic of 'mediation and culture' at the Ecole des Mines, conducted by French sociology Professor and leading music sociologist Antoine Hennion. Like many people of my age, I accompanied any of my commute or travels with music. I was at the time the owner of a USB MP3 player that contained 512Mb of storage space, and which I could fill with about 120 songs. Before the train even left from the platform, a middle-aged man sitting across the passage asked me to turn down the volume of my MP3 player. He justified his request by saying: 'I cannot hear the music'. I apologized for the disturbance and lowered the sound of my MP3 player. In looking towards his seat, I noticed that he was not in fact listening to any music, but he was reading a music score. I then assumed that this man was a conductor, and he was on his way to Paris to lead a recital or a symphonic concert.

This anecdotal encounter encapsulates many issues related to the diffusion of recorded music within contemporary society. First, music was omnipresent inside the train carriage – through my MP3 player and low-quality earphones, and through the conductor's reading of his music scores. Second, both the conductor and I were using music as a resource for a particular everyday activity. It was an accompaniment of my journey to Paris and a resource to my thought process. It consisted of an active cognitive work of repetition for the

conductor. In reading the music scores, he was probably picturing the whole orchestra in front of him and imagining the gestures he would make to direct each section of the orchestra to play each note as perfectly as possible. The difference of engagement with music resulted in specific intentions and expectations we each had when interacting with it – the conductor was rehearsing, I was enjoying a sonic accompaniment. Thus, a third element to consider is how music was mediating our personal experience of traveling by train. Musical experiences as mediating everyday life are often depicted as inherently positive because they represent a resource that helps individuals pass the time, concentrate on a particular task, make the moment more enjoyable and so on. In this particular situation, my musical experience was impinging onto the conductor's private cognitive sphere and represented a case of noise pollution within a social and confined space. A fourth and last remark to draw from this anecdote is that music mediated the encounter between the conductor – a middle-aged man reading classical music scores – and me – a 22-year-old Masters' student listening to independent rock and discovering the enchanting character of ambient and electronic music.

This book is an attempt at capturing the issues that are symbolized within this encounter. Back in 2007, I was a junior researcher investigating practices of illegal downloading of music. I had myself discovered and rediscovered music through the burning of blank Compact Discs (CDs) with digital files in the early 2000s, and then through the access of free content through various forms of online downloading options later on. While my passion for music increased because of such novel modalities, I wanted to know whether other people of my generation had had similar experiences. Over the course of my Masters' studies – and as symbolized by the encounter with the conductor in the train carriage – I realized that issues of music consumption are much broader than the mere access to digital technologies and illegal downloading. By using Napster, Kazaa, Emule (all peer-to-peer applications) or Deezer and Spotify (music streaming services), individuals enjoy new possibilities of access to music content. Potentially, they can listen to more music than they would if they were restricted to buying CDs.

Nevertheless, accessing music only represents one facet of the broader issues of the diffusion of music in contemporary society. Indeed, music is consumed in action. Individuals hear or listen to

sounds within particular everyday contexts that mediate their consumption practices. The textuality of music is fused and made sense of within the contexts of its diffusion. Since the advent of recorded music with the Edison phonograph in 1877, the 'proper' ways of listening have been debated over by theorists. For instance, Theodor Adorno (1990) and theorists from the Frankfurt school were critical of the pleasures that individuals feel from listening to popular music, which they regard as superficial and alienating. Following such perspective, the art of music can only be conveyed through the right setting and individuals' receptivity to it. In that regard, the technological upheavals that commenced with the advent of digital technologies in the early 1980s only further the questioning of the conditions of music's diffusion, of its place and roles within individuals' everyday lives, and of its various mediations of space, time, and social encounters.

### **The contemporary challenges of music's diffusion in modern society**

Music has become an essential part of human societies. Its production and diffusion are inherently associated with the capitalist systems that regulate Western societies (see Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Weber, 1958). The digital age of music technologies has generated a number of changes in production and consumption patterns, coupled with a set of discourses on the nature of such changes. Figures are usually advanced to grasp upon the span of the digital phenomena. The increase in the number of downloading users or in the number of files exchanges is often contrasted with the decrease in the number of CD sales and industry revenues. The 2000s were marked by the assumption that music technologies were mutually exclusive, and that one had to naturally replace another one. In fact, more than a decade after the initial drive towards the free and almost unlimited access to music content, the situation regarding the fate of music industries, the ways to produce and market music, and the various fashions to consume it in everyday life, present the digital as multi-modal and rather uncertain in its evolution (see Nowak, 2014a; Nowak and Whelan, 2014).

One of the major outcomes of the digital age's upheavals, which started in the 1980s with the advent of the CD and amplified in

the late 1990s with the advent of online downloading, is that it places the technological and material issue of the diffusion of music at the core of analysis on consumption. The sound of music and the technologies that diffuse it are part of the same problematic. In fact, the term 'diffusion of music' comes to be enriched by two meanings. First, it traditionally refers to the way music inhabits space and time. The sound of music mediates context as much as context mediates the sound of music. The second meaning relates to the technological intermediaries that broadcast the sound of music. While the various material options of sound carriers like the vinyl disc, the cassette tape, the CD, and the digital file are contrasted and compared, each in fact induces a different configuration of listening. Consumers of music have long understood how diversifying their material interactions with sound results in experiencing music differently. Figures regarding modes of consumption highlight the multiplicity of material modalities that individuals engage in (see American Assembly, 2012; Bahanovic and Collopy, 2009, 2013; IFPI, 2011, 2012, 2013; Nielsen, 2013; Statista, 2014). As such, the digital is not a solution of replacement per se. It diversifies the ways individuals consume music. Thus, it further emphasizes the necessary focus on material objects and technologies in contemporary analyses of music reception.

Turning now to research on the diffusion of music in modern society, there seems to be a consensus about the increasing (omni) presence of music throughout the different aspects of everyday life. Anahid Kassabian (2002, 2013), for instance, talks about the 'ubiquity' of music (see also Stockfelt, 1997). In raising the questions 'what is the meaning of music?' and 'what is the function of music in human life[?]', Christopher Small emphasizes that these issues affect 'every member of the human species' (1998, p. 2; see also 1987). Small accounts for every human activity related to music as 'musicking' – from production to consumption practices (see also Hesmondhalgh, 2013). This inclusive definition states that activities that people engage in, with, around, or about music further its omnipresence and role in modern societies. Thus, Kassabian (2002, 2013) adds to this issue by raising the question of individual intersubjectivities when 'receiving' and 'responding' to ubiquitous music. However, little is said about the interconnection between the increasing presence of music and its technological components that enable

this very ubiquity. Nick Prior (2010) fills the gap by tackling the problematic of the digital and the increasing variety of activities of 'musicking'. He calls consumers of digital technologies 'new amateurs'. He argues: 'Digital technologies and corresponding practices have twisted, stretched, and radicalized older tendencies in modern culture, for sure, but they have also extended the very notion of production into realms previously estranged from academic and cultural analysis' (Prior, 2010, p. 400). One change induced by the digital upon which analysts can agree is that music and technologies go hand in hand to reinforce their mutual presence in modern societies.

This book attempts to discuss issues of music consumption in the digital age of technologies which is increasingly characterized by the multiplicity of forms of material interactions with music. In other words, I investigate the ways in which individuals hear, listen to, and are accompanied by music, throughout the various contexts of their everyday lives. Their consumption practices draw on the use of material objects, which contribute in creating a musical experience within everyday contexts. Thus, it is essential to locate the significance of such modes of consumption within both the material interactions with technologies and the subjectivities of individuals who hear, listen to, and are accompanied by music. In order to delineate the theoretical framework of this research, the next section briefly outlines the sociological research that has been carried out on issues of music consumption and music and media.

## **Music and sociology – a theoretical framework**

The sociology of music has empirically and conceptually developed over the last few decades. Various aspects related to 'musicking' (Small, 1987, 1998) have come under the scrutiny of researchers. On the consumption aspect of recorded music and its diffusion – which is the core interest of this book – a myriad of concepts and theories now frame the various ways in which audiences choose music, listen to music, are affected by music, use music, create meanings of music, and develop lifestyles around music. One instance is how the various concepts of 'subculture' (see Clarke et al., 1976; Cohen, 1980; Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1979; Willis, 1978), 'neo-tribe' (see Bennett, 1999), or 'scene' (see Bennett, 2004; Bennett and Peterson, 2004; Straw, 1991) aim to account for the collective grouping of

individuals with similar inclinations towards a particular musical style. They have attracted a lot of attention and triggered debates over their validity (see Bennett, 1999, 2005; Blackman, 2005; Frith, 1983, 1996a; Hesmondhalgh, 2005; Longhurst and Bogdanović, 2014; McRobbie, 1980). The force of music to aggregate a number of people together is a major issue for the sociology of music. While stylistic groupings remain important, both the increasing ubiquity of music (see Kassabian, 2002, 2013) and the multiplicity of 'sound environments' (see Martin, 1995; Nowak, 2013; Nowak and Bennett, 2014) that individuals find themselves in raise the question of the diversity of content and amount of music that they interact with.

The processes through which music brings people together, and the nature of these gatherings are what trigger debates among social scientists. Critical towards the concepts of 'subculture', 'neo-tribe', and 'scene' (see Hesmondhalgh, 2005), David Hesmondhalgh (2013) defends the position that music has the possibility to make people collectively 'flourish'. He intends to provide a 'critical defense of music' by interconnecting it with social processes within capitalist societies. This book is interested in a similar question, but departs from a different standpoint. Thus, I investigate how music represents the possibility of a resource in everyday life, through a scrutiny of contemporary modes of consumption. I commence from an investigation of individuals' interactions with music through technologies in order to lay the principles upon which a collective flourishing of music is possible. Thus, my research is deeply rooted within a different paradigm to those mentioned above. I call this paradigm 'music and everyday life'.

The paradigm on music and everyday life that emerged in the 1990s draws a lot of discussion about its inputs and limitations. In locating music within everyday life, researchers emphasize the individual practices of music listening. Primarily supported by the research conducted by Tia DeNora (1995, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2006) and Antoine Hennion (1993, 1995, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2009; Hennion et al., 2000), the paradigm on music and everyday life establishes the affects of sounds as mediated by the conditions of listening practices, and rooted within individuals' cognitive processes in their interactions with music. These analyses offer greater insights into how music can enrich the lives of individuals and provide a much-required accompaniment resource. However, they are also

critiqued on a number of grounds, and primarily on the basis of an overemphasis of individualistic patterns of listening. Thus, this would lead such research to not only neglect the collective forms of music consumption, but also to overestimate the array of agencies that individuals possess. There is indeed little concern for the ways in which individuals are constrained by a number of variables within their everyday lives (see Hesmondhalgh, 2013). In this regard, the sociology of music that focuses on everyday life develops an endogenous way of researching music. As noted by Lee Marshall (2011), the sociology of music remains quite separate from traditional social theory, and, therefore, fails at incorporating its main ideas and inputs. Andy Bennett (2008) concurs when he argues that the relationship between popular music and culture has long been investigated through the tools from cultural studies rather than from sociology.

In general, the sociology of music emphasizes the significance that music has in the modern lives of people. It develops a standpoint that is rather positive towards the consumption of music as a form of leisure in everyday life. It also widely acknowledges that individuals actively form their own interpretations of music (see Grossberg, 1992). Thus, Hennion (1993) argues that music's meanings are inter-textual and located in individuals' inter-subjectivities. This argument acts as a principle of research when looking at the ways in which music is used by individuals and affects them. Principles of interpretation root the mediated nature of music's meaning as unfolding over the course of everyday life. Moreover, both its increasing presence and individuals' personal interpretations of it result in an interconnection between what music people consume and how they construct their self-identities. One instance is provided by Simon Frith (2003, p. 46), who argues that 'what people listen to is more important for their sense of themselves than what they watch or read'. Once again, criticisms of such theories highlight the possible overestimation of the place of music within people's lives and identities.

The problems associated with the paradigm on music and everyday life can be overcome by a greater scrutiny of the various structural elements at play within issues of music consumption. In this book, I develop two ways to account for the structural aspects of music consumption. First, I introduce the technological and material variable within issues of consumption. Second, I look at the structures



of individuals' everyday lives as constraining their array of agencies. Thus, the theoretical framework of this book is particularly informed by, but critical of, the music and everyday life paradigm defended by DeNora (1999, 2000, 2003); the phenomenological focus on affective responses to music in context, notably developed by Michael Bull (2005, 2007) and Hennion (2003, 2007; Hennion et al., 2000); and the critical defense of music as social flourishing of Hesmondhalgh (2002, 2008, 2013). Moreover, it borrows from sociological theory, notably by outlining some conceptual notions on everyday life from the sociology of time (Burkitt, 2004; Gasparini, 2004), and locating how individuals make sense of their 'constrained agencies' (Hesmondhalgh, 2013) through their emotional reflexivity (Archer, 2003, 2007; Holmes, 2010).

Departing from individual experiences, it is possible to build upon a discourse on the diffusion of music in modern societies, and account for the ways in which music offers the possibility of flourishing, on a personal scale first, but also within the social components of individuals' everyday lives. In all, this book captures the problematic of music consumption by discussing its place and roles within individuals' everyday lives. In other words, it aims to address the following points made by Hesmondhalgh more than a decade ago: 'We need more research on what people value in particular texts and genres and why, and any future research project concerned with music in everyday life might usefully address this issue' (2002, p. 128). I do so by attempting to conciliate the materiality of modes of music consumption with their diffusion and mediation by everyday contexts. As such, this book is concerned as much with individuals' agencies when engaging in practices of music consumption as with framing the structural variables that constrain their agencies in the first place. The next section explores the methodological aspect of the research, upon which the book is based.

## **Methodology**

The research detailed in this book draws on a qualitative methodology. I interviewed young individuals of Generation Y to understand the place that music holds in their everyday lives. This entangles questions of access, listening, and affects. I draw on two empirical samples. The first inquiry was conducted between 2010 and 2011

and gathered the accounts of 24 individuals during 23 interviews. Besides one interview that was conducted with two informants at the same time, all other encounters took place in one-to-one settings. The second sample of interviews was conducted in June and July 2014. I then interviewed 11 individuals in the course of 10 encounters. Once again, one interview was conducted with two informants at the same time. During the second set of data collection, I met with five individuals whom I had already interviewed in my first sample (Scarlett, Carlos, Mike, Laurie, and Rodney). These five interviews were follow-up interviews and compared their practices of music consumption over time, between 2010–2011 and 2014. Overall, the research draws on 35 interviews conducted with 30 individuals over 33 encounters. Half of these individuals are women, and half are men. Contrary to a similar study conducted by DeNora (1999, 2000) that only interviewed women respondents, my empirical study respects a gender balance. All these individuals belong to Generation Y, which roughly consists of people born between the late 1970s and the early 1990s. All informants were met with and interviewed in Brisbane and on the Gold Coast (Queensland, Australia). Encounters mostly took place in bars or coffee shops.

I chose to interview individuals from Generation Y because this is the generation of people that first engaged with digital technologies such as the downloading of MP3 files in the late 1990s. One iconic example is the creator of Napster, Shawn Fanning, who was born in 1980 and was therefore 19 years of age when his peer-to-peer application came out and met tremendous success (see Coleman, 2003). The assumption that I had before interviewing informants from Generation Y was that they had been acquainted with music downloading during their (late) adolescence, while also knowing other music formats such as CDs, cassettes and eventually vinyl discs. Thus, my intention was to interrogate the level of penetration of digital technologies in their everyday modes of music consumption, and whether the proliferation of these new alternative options to access and listen to music had replaced any other interaction with 'physical' format in the long run. In measuring the adoption of new technologies in context and in practice, I was thus able to gather accounts about the longitudinal performative penetration of these technologies and how they co-exist, rather than replace, other material means to consume music. While younger generations may