

# LISTENING TO MUSIC: PEOPLE, PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCES

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## Accounting for genre: how genre awareness and affinity affects music streaming use

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## Abstract

The focus of this chapter is to address current debates around the impact of music streaming on music use and listening. In particular, this research explores the application of genre as a way of codifying, categorising and choosing music on music formats and digital platforms in 2015. With reference to previous research on genre, I will predominantly draw upon the work of Frith (1996), Negus (1999), Borthwick and Moy (2004), Holt (2007) and Avdeeff (2013) to apply the broad idea of genre as a fundamental organising principle in the production and consumption of music. The chapter will first provide a short history of genre's changing relationship to digital music use (Kibby 2011, Kassabian 2013 and Nowak 2016) and place genre in the wider context of industry and technology (Sterne 2012 and Anderson 2014). This historical analysis provides a rationale for the primary research, which assesses the music use of 45 music users to ascertain, since the emergence of music streaming, the relevance of

genre to the practice of choosing and listening to music. The chapter concludes by proposing that the number of genres a music user expresses an affinity for could broadly align with different attitudes toward, and ways of engaging with, music streaming.

## Introduction

### 1985–1999 – the CD

As Anderson has stated, ‘From the late-1900s to the late 1990s the U.S. music industry had been built around the production, distribution, and sale of mass produced and mass distributed objects.’<sup>1</sup> As the last mass-produced object and first commercially successful digital audio format, the CD rose to commercial prominence in 1985. In 1999, when the CD dominated consumer use and drove what was to be the peak of annual global record sales,<sup>2</sup> Keith Negus published *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*. In this exploration of the workings of the record industry, Negus argued that record company strategy was structured around the portfolio management of music catalogues. He then sociologically analysed the music genres of rap, country and salsa to establish that genre cultures played a significant role in how new recordings were selected, created, acquired, financed, managed, marketed, promoted, distributed and sold to consumers by major record labels. Negus defined genre as: ‘The way in which musical categories and systems of classification shape the music that we might play and listen to, mediating both the experience of music and its formal organisation by an entertainment industry.’<sup>3</sup> In many aspects of the present day record industry, Negus’s theory remains evident. As Rossman concluded, in his 2012 analysis of how songs become popular on American commercial radio, ‘Genre conventions and record label promotions’<sup>4</sup> continue to be the primary forces that drive hit records.

This conservation of the twentieth-century corporate hit culture operated between record companies and radio stations, and other mainstream mass media, continues to deliver a ‘Narrowness of playlists and the exclusion or otherwise of particular idioms.’<sup>5</sup> The general corporate conservatism<sup>6</sup> of the object era record industry persists in many aspects of the record industry today. However, as Warner Record executive Stan Cornyn reflected on the corporate culture Negus described:

*The CD and MTV made our world juicier than ever. Underlying weakness in the business had been well covered by a ‘double the*

*price' rise in the CD and the euphoric product demos by MTV ... in a few years we'd realise our business still stood on underlying weakness ... for now however the eighties was the decade to rake it in.*<sup>7</sup>

The weakness the CD initially shrouded was that digitisation enabled almost perfect replication of master recordings. By the late 1990s, as consumers acquired more user-friendly and ever-cheaper digital copying technologies, the major label strategies that relied on the maintenance of product scarcity, media conservatism and used genre distinction to 'Weed out whatever does not fit into this framework in advance'<sup>8</sup> began to weaken. Furthermore, as Taylor has observed, this weakness in the unit-based business model was compounded by the wider socio-economic issues of globalisation and the emergence of a neoliberal capitalist ideology. Both of these market forces served to empower consumers and intensify competition amongst producers.<sup>9</sup> For the music economy, the impact of these changing market conditions was most evident in the rise of the MP3.

## 1999–2014 – the MP3

In the very year that Negus defined how the record industry strategically operated a unit-based business model that delivered huge sales and profits, Napster, the illegal file-sharing site, launched. Napster ushered in the popularisation of the MP3. The limitations of availability, affordability and accessibility, which defined the unit sale of physical music formats and their related corporate structures, were replaced by virtually instantaneous, unlimited, and often free, digital song choice. As Sterne observed:

*MP3s act as if they had been received in exchange for money – and yet in most cases, they were not in any direct sense acquired for a price. By definition, a thing is only a commodity when its exchangeability for some other thing is its socially relevant feature.*<sup>10</sup>

In the post object era,<sup>11</sup> the MP3 changed how the experience of music was mediated, which challenged the formal organisation of the music industry Negus had defined.

The major labels' strategic response was to attempt to impose 'An artificial scarcity of intellectual property on the internet'.<sup>12</sup> As Hesmondhalgh recognises, up until this point the ownership of the retail and distribution channels had enabled the major record

labels to ensure a scarcity of availability of recordings was achieved.<sup>13</sup> However, even as iTunes emerged in the mid-2000s as a legal and effective retailer of audio files, Apple's 'A thousand songs in your pocket' promotional strapline encapsulated how the shift in the format, from CD to MP3, had irrevocably affected consumer behaviour. As Tschmuck observed, 'The change from pure bundles (albums) to mixed bundles, where the user has the choice to buy the whole bundle (album) or just parts of it (single songs) causes a sales decline.'<sup>14</sup> Moreover, this new disaggregated immaterial experience, which enabled music users to carry their entire record collection with them, had moved the cultural emphasis on recordings from the physical unit to the MP3 player.<sup>15</sup> As O'Hara and Brown observed of this phenomena, 'Not only does this change listening behaviour and circumstances, it also affords the social value of the portable device as a projection of a person's musical identity.'<sup>16</sup>

Despite these considerable industrial and social upheavals<sup>17</sup> Fabian Holt's *Genre in Popular Music*, published in 2007 just as legal downloading was becoming economically significant, asserted:

*The concept of music is bound up with categorical difference ... and genre is a fundamental structuring force in musical life. It has implications for how, where, and with whom people make and experience music.*<sup>18</sup>

From an industry perspective, Hesmondhalgh argues, copyright, the star system and genre remained key ways of artificially maintaining scarcity. 'Many cultural products promoted and publicised primarily via genre also carry author names, but until the author becomes a star, genre is paramount.'<sup>19</sup>

Seemingly, the shift from a tangible to intangible music format had not diminished genre as a system of classification for producing and consuming music. As Leyshon reports, 'By 2009 the iTunes catalogue had indexed more than ten million songs'<sup>20</sup> and one of the iTunes key characteristic identifiers was, and remains, genre. As Kibby reported when analysing how young people used their iPod's in 2011, 'The ease of acquisition and intangibility of the format (MP3) did not appear to lessen the affective attachment to the collection.'<sup>21</sup> Either as actual objects or digital files, the fact music was sold and stored as individually identified units meant genre distinction remained an effective way in which to categorise catalogues, both as industry inventory and individual collections.

## 2015 and the emergence of streaming

By 2015, 30 years after the CD digitised music consumption, smartphones were challenging MP3 players as the primary mobile device for digital music playback. Since 1999 the exclusivity of music's relationship to a device and format has diminished. On constantly web-connected 'always on and always on you'<sup>22</sup> mobile devices, storing and listening to music becomes just one choice consumers have, among many other applications, to enhance and manage their day-to-day social experience. Streaming music services complement smartphone use by enabling access to recordings without the need to fill the limited data storage capacity of the multifunctional device. This shift from MP3 format to streaming platform means music users no longer need to acquire recordings. While access is a more passive act than acquisition, the hyper-choice the streaming platform presents poses new questions for choosing what to listen to. As Wikstrom observed, 'The music consumer's problem is not to access the content, it is how to navigate, manage and manipulate the music in the cloud or on their digital devices.'<sup>23</sup> Solving these music selection problems has become a key aspect in the battle for subscribers between competing streaming services,<sup>24</sup> as they seek to deliver curated listening experiences that keep customers connected.

Despite competition for subscribers, the key challenge for all streaming services remains establishing the long-term economic viability<sup>25</sup> of selling music access, as opposed to units, as a business.<sup>26</sup> This means convincing enough consumers to pay to subscribe by converting freemium<sup>27</sup> users to become premium subscribers.<sup>28</sup> Competing streaming services have adopted different corporate strategies toward securing sustainable and successful businesses.<sup>29</sup> However, the diversity and divisiveness of approaches remains a contested area of debate<sup>30</sup> and, at the time of writing, is the cause of an ongoing tension between the record industry and the competing technology companies that have assumed the role of music retailer.<sup>31</sup>

For the 2015 music user, increasingly, the functionality of the mobile device enables them to deliver information to the streaming service, as to the location and context of their listening. The algorithms of the service then serve up a playlist of music that fits the user's taste and situation, predicated upon preferences previously expressed by the user's prior listening on the platform. As Anderson describes:

*This ecosystem devoted to capturing user interactions and feeding them back into systems dedicated to optimising user experiences are the key to social networks, search engines and the likes of iTunes, Spotify, and Pandora as they make their*

*services much more flexible and attentive to specific user needs and desires.<sup>32</sup>*

The streaming access model can flip the formatting of music preferences from the user to the platform – a function that has considerable implications for a user’s motivation to identify an artist or act as the performer of a song, a process that was implicit in format acquisition. Likewise, for streaming services, music is just as readily categorised by the contexts in which it is played, as much as by the artists who perform it or genres by which it is identified. Arguably, streaming services are diminishing the primacy of the actively chosen listening experience by promoting experience listening, where identifying the artist and even the song is secondary to the activity and situation of the listener. Of Spotify’s top 100 used playlists, in 2014, 41 were named by context, whereas only seventeen were named by genre.<sup>33</sup> Jose van Dijck proposed that ‘The indexical function of the musical sign is bound up with its auditory materiality.’<sup>34</sup> If so, then streaming platforms are moving the index beyond genre by enabling systems of classification based directly around individual user situations and experience. This data mining and interrogation also aggregates out across platforms. As Alex White, of online music analytics company Next Big Sound, explained:

*We now have six-plus years of data and trillions of data points and can finally build a statistical model of the music industry, as well as access a kind of ‘social crystal ball’ about which artists are likely be popular in the future.<sup>35</sup>*

The granular level at which digital platforms can assess and predict user taste calls into question if genre remains ‘A driving, meaningful force’<sup>36</sup> corporately and culturally or if, as Kassabian suspects, ‘Genre has receded significantly in importance?’<sup>37</sup> Collins and Young argue that digitisation has dissolved the mass market into a multitude of smaller niche markets that are accessed via genre cultures.<sup>38</sup> They use the online dance music store Beatport, which listed 23 sub-categories of music genre EDM, as an example of how the internet was ‘Accelerating the splintering of popular music into a range of distinctive genres.’<sup>39</sup> This fragmentation of genre into increasing numbers of sub-genres begs the question whether this ongoing nuancing of genre distinction renders genre increasingly meaningless as a form of categorisation. Avdeeff’s focused research, on digital music engagement and taste, explored how music users navigate the genre complexities of the digital music landscape. Her findings propose:

*Just as the subjective nature of genre definitions results in eclecticism promoted by immense musical choice, various*

*technologies promote differing ways of listening and interacting socially.*<sup>40</sup>

Avdeeff's iPod research suggests that many music users have less awareness of their taste and a more varied taste than they are able to self-report. Therefore, in line with van Dijck's and Avdeeff's proposition that musical classification and categorisation is closely bound up with, and potentially masked by, the mediums and formats of use, the following sections of this chapter will present some semi-structured empirical research on the impact of music streaming to how listeners apply genre classifications to their music use.

## Asking musicians about music use

### Definitions of genre and technology within this research

As Holt asserts:

*Genre draws attention to the collective and the general, and a great deal of genre research forgets that a culture cannot be adequately understood without paying attention to the individual and the particular.*<sup>41</sup>

More recently, Nowak theorised individual music taste as an, 'Assemblage of preferences, social connotations, material engagements with technologies, and the roles assigned to music.'<sup>42</sup> Therefore, this small initial survey, on the broad self-reported music use of individuals, assessed how individual taste aggregates collectively in an attempt to better understand the relationship between genre, as a categoriser of taste, and the use of technologies. The research primarily considers the two aspects of genre Negus identifies in his 1999 definition. Firstly, genre's formal organisation by the record industry will be assessed through the participants' combined genre awareness. By comparing the total number of genres the participants collectively identified to the numbers in previous studies, the genre awareness section will evaluate the effects of genre fragmentation on genre's continued usefulness for categorisation. Secondly, the survey analyses how participants mediate their own musical experience. Referred to as 'genre affinity', this element explores the relationships between the formats and platforms participants use and the number of genres they personally identify with. For the purposes of this research, I will use a variety of terms to describe mediums and technologies. References to devices will

mean iPods, record players, smartphones, and so on. Formats will mean CD, vinyl, MP3, and so on. Platforms will refer directly to digital music services, whereas services will broadly refer to streaming platforms and broadcast media combined. The actual genres each participant named, their genre preference, will be discussed to a lesser extent. Finally, Tschmuck's (2012) distinction between pure bundles for album listening and mixed bundles for playlist listening will also be employed.

## The research design

Building upon the approach and findings of previous research by Juslin and Isaksson,<sup>43</sup> I considered musicians a feasible group to survey. As part of a seminar task, I had 60 second-year BA Honours music students observe and record their recorded music use in the third week of October 2015 and prepare a short presentation that recounted their experience. Each student presented their findings to me and a seminar group of eight fellow students. During each presentation I recorded within individual fields on an Excel spreadsheet: which devices, formats and platforms the participant used and how and why they used them; which music genres they listened to; and the context of their listening. Each set of presentations was followed by a ten-minute audio-recorded group discussion, which I opened with the same question, 'What have you learned from the process of observing your own listening?' I then loosely facilitated voluntary contributions from participants as to similarities and differences in music use, and their observations and opinions of the various technologies and methodologies they employed.

After completing the task, 45 students voluntarily agreed to be participants in the research, allowing me to draw upon the data they had presented and use the comments I had recorded. Among the participants there was an even gender balance, ages ranged between nineteen and 27 and, although all participants resided in the UK, the group represented a range of nationalities. The majority were from the UK, but a significant number of Norwegians and lesser numbers of Americans, South Koreans, Japanese and Singaporeans were represented. Having listened to the discussions and matched individuals' comments with their presentation data, I removed students who did not want to be included in the research before anonymising all the participants in the Excel spreadsheet.

## Dealing with design flaws



Obviously, all the issues of the accuracy of the data in self-reporting and my own subjective reading of the data and opinions expressed pose potential problems for the impartiality and validity of the research. I recognise there are numerous empirical constraints to my methodological approach. However, this was exploratory research designed to establish if genre awareness and affinity affects the choice of devices, platforms and formats of music listening in a nascent streaming driven record industry. The findings provide some direction as to where future research could focus on how genre preferences imply preferred mediums of music use. The results and discussions as to how the findings relate to the existing literature and what can be learned from the analysis are considered in the following sections.

## The genre awareness of streaming users

Demonstrating that streaming is a default medium for most of these music users, all but two of the 45 participants used at least one music streaming platform, either Spotify, YouTube or Soundcloud, in the week surveyed. In fact, streaming was so ubiquitous that 39% of the participants used more than one streaming platform. The table below shows how many participants used each platform, service or format at least once in the week.

*Table 1: Participants' use of platforms, services or formats<sup>44</sup>*

<b>Playback source</b>	<b>Total % of at least one use</b>
Spotify Premium – monthly paid for unlimited service	33%
Spotify Freemium – free version with limited functionality and adverts	35%
YouTube – free video streaming service	44%
iTunes – repository for ripped and purchased audio files	37%
Soundcloud/Bandcamp – free streaming platforms	25%
Vinyl – LP format	13%
Radio – broadcast and online	8%
CD – album format	4%
Shazam – phone app music recognition software <sup>45</sup>	2%

In their presentations the participants reported listening to a total of 40 distinct genres, almost one genre for every participant. The table below lists each genre reported. Then the No. column shows the number of participants who recounted listening to music in that genre in the week surveyed.

*Table 2: Genres listened to by participants*

	<b>Genre</b>	<b>No.</b>		<b>Genre</b>	<b>No.</b>
1	Pop	10	21	80s session players	1
2	Rock	8	22	Alt Rock	1
3	Indie	6	23	Chart	1
4	Jazz	5	24	Cinematic	1
5	Singer/songwriter	5	25	Composers	1
6	Blues	4	26	Dream rock	1
7	Hip hop	4	27	Experimental	1
8	Classical	3	28	Female artists	1
9	Folk	3	29	Film soundtrack	1
10	Musical theatre	3	30	Grime	1
11	R&B	3	31	Grunge	1
12	Soul	3	32	Indie pop	1
13	Dance	2	33	Indie rock	1
14	Electro	2	34	J-Pop	1
15	Electro pop	2	35	Jazz fusion	1
16	Metal	2	36	Krautrock	1
17	Rap	2	37	Motown	1
18	Psych	1	38	New music	1
19	Punk	1	39	Post hardcore	1
20	Trip hop	1	40	Prog rock	1

Given that Holt's genre research considers nine mainstream genres, Borthwick and Moy's book *Popular Music Genres* counts eleven<sup>46</sup> and Avdeeff's research includes 20, 40 is a result that chimes with Collins and Young's assertion that popular music categorisation is splintering into ever-increasing niches. *The Echo-Nest* blog listed and mapped 500 genres in 2013 and referenced 1,461 genres on Spotify in total.<sup>47</sup> As Borthwick and Moy assert:

*Genres have a degree of elasticity, but there invariably comes a point when they split under the pressure of some force or another – be it musical, technological, commercial or social.*<sup>48</sup>

The downward pressure of technology on genre classification could be part of the explanation for the number of genres reported, but a closer reading of the data also suggests musical and social possibilities. Of the 40 genres reported, only seventeen are cited more than once, with only five genres – pop, rock, jazz, indie and singer/songwriter – being listened to by five or more participants. One perspective on the 23 genres singularly identified is that digitisation has brought about the personalisation of taste classification. Although Lena would consider these non-genred categories<sup>49</sup>, the self-naming of categories is evident in some of the genre titles expressed. Some are too specifically named, for example, 80s session player, Motown and female artist, whereas others are too generic – new music, composers and chart. However, seventeen of the 23 once only identified genres, such as grunge, grime, indie rock, punk and trip hop, would be widely recognised by most music consumers. Furthermore, some of the more specifically named non-genre categories could be a symptom of musicians' greater attention to detail in stylistic and performative musical distinctions.<sup>50</sup> Conversely, this same enhanced awareness could explain why this very small sample group of 45 musicians, compared to the 689 general participants in Avdeeff's research, identified 40 genres as opposed to just the twelve listed in the self-reported section of Avdeeff's survey. As Avdeeff summarised about her participants, many 'Were confused about genre classifications'.<sup>51</sup> This certainly is not the case with these musician participants. As one participant in this survey observed of the results in their presentation group, 'Musicians are more willing to listen to other genres.' These results may indicate that levels of genre awareness play some role in how 'Musical categories and systems of classification shape the music that we might play and listen to.'<sup>52</sup> Therefore, the next phase of the research was to explore if there was any link between genre affinity and the technologies used for consuming music.

## Genre affinities and their mediums of use

## Levels of genre affinity across the survey

Given the complexity of 40 genre classifications, I started by simply assessing the number of genres each participant had self-reported having listened to in the week. I used the filter function on the spreadsheet to isolate participants into groups by the number of genres they had listened to. I then looked for any commonalities in the formats and platforms used for listening within the distinct groups and any significant difference between the groups. The data suggests a potential theme between the number of genres participants identified with and the mediums used for listening.

The table below shows: the number of genres; the number and percentage of participants who reported listening to that number of genres; the most and second most used mediums by each group; and what they are mainly used for. An overview and explanation for each category is given in the following section.

Table 3: Participants' mediums of use

<b>Genres listed</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>	<b>As a % of the total participants</b>	<b>First medium</b>	<b>Second medium</b>	<b>First use</b>	<b>Second use</b>
0	7	16%	Free/premium Spotify	YouTube	Playlists	New Music
1	6	14%	Free Spotify	iTunes / Vinyl	New music	Genre-specific albums
2	12	27%	Premium Spotify	YouTube	Artists	Channels
3	13	30%	YouTube	iTunes	Live music and channels	Tracks
4	6	13%	iTunes/Vinyl	YouTube	Favourite albums	New music

No genre reported

Those participants who didn't identify any specific genre affinity all used freemium or premium streaming to predominantly select playlists and channels that support their social experience. This genre-neutral group mainly 'Felt their preferences changed according to mood/location/other outside factors.'<sup>53</sup> A feature of this group not represented in the table was that they spent a lot of time listening. Several of the premium paying participants presented their Spotify year in music data<sup>54</sup> that totalled between 20 and 55,000 minutes of listening, between one and two and half hours a day. These findings further suggest, as Avdeeff's already has, there are groups of music users who 'Would listen to anything.'<sup>55</sup> Kassabian has termed this type of music use 'ubiquitous listening', music as 'Background accompaniment to their routines and activities.'<sup>56</sup> These listeners use streaming like personalised radio and view its function much like controllers of daytime radio programmes, with music as, 'A secondary activity... to what they're doing.'<sup>57</sup> However, unlike radio, the playlists aren't narrow but as diverse as the user wants them to be. Marshall has been critical of this type of experience listening. He protests:

*There is no time for desire, and no time (or need) for labour. Think of a song, play it instantly. But when everything is equally available, rarity as a form of distinction disappears.*<sup>58</sup>

Arguably, this group doesn't even think of a song, they request algorithmically pre-designed playlists that suit the context of their listening. And, as long as the music doesn't offend them or their situation, they are happy to ubiquitously listen. This approach to listening is very different to that of the group who identify with the authentic rarity of one specific genre.

## One genre reported

This group identify very specifically with one genre and collect it on vinyl or iTunes, and only use freemium streaming for discovery and general listening. Again, Avdeeff's research recognises this type of listening behaviour as 'Those who only listen to one type, but are open to suggestions.'<sup>59</sup> Frith's assertion that authenticity relates to some kind of sincerity or commitment<sup>60</sup> is clearly evident in this group, as identifying with a single genre is clearly a very individual process. As one participant observed, 'Most of the stuff I have on vinyl is 70s or 80s, so it feels a bit more authentic listening to it.' This personal commitment is demonstrated by the fact that of the five genres identified – 80s session players, jazz, rock, indie and grime (which was collected as playlists on Soundcloud not iTunes or vinyl) – only rock was reported twice. This is a group that

passionately collect and catalogue their genre, a process that is, somewhat surprisingly, quite distinct to those that identified with two genres.

## Two genres reported

Seventy-five percent of the twelve participants that reported two genres use Spotify premium as their main platform for listening. Of the other four participants, two use Spotify freemium and the rest a combination of YouTube and Soundcloud. Two participants also bought vinyl albums of music that was a particular favourite or special edition. Like the genre-neutral users, this group uses Spotify's personalised radio discovery functions or specific YouTube channels, such as Majestic Casual or the Mahogany Sessions. However, they then select tracks by artists who they like, which they then almost exclusively access through and within Spotify, as mixed bundles organised by artist. Unlike the genre-neutral group, who treat streaming like personalised radio for background to a secondary activity, this group exerts some degree of labour in their music choice. They use the unlimited access of premium streaming to toggle between the radio and their virtual record collection. As Atton states, 'Curation is concerned with taking care and taking control.'<sup>61</sup> In paying a monthly subscription, clearly these users care about music. However, unlike the participants who identified deeply with one genre, they are not interested in rarity. Moreover, there was a clear divide in attitudes and practices between this group and the group that identified with three genres. The two-genre participants collect music by building playlists within the streaming platform. They favour being able to access music over those who identified with three genres who seem to, quite clearly, prefer acquisition.

## Three genres reported

The group that named three genres predominantly use freemium streaming to access live versions of songs, but then mainly collect tracks by artists on iTunes for quality off-line listening. As Kibby observed of young MP3 listeners:

*Their collection was not defined as the music currently being played, but as the music owned, even if it might never again be accessed. It had been tagged and classified and belonged to the collection.*<sup>62</sup>

Even though they are building largely intangible music collections of mainly mixed bundles of tracks separated out from the originally released formats, the notion of ownership is important to these participants. They are 'Treating the music as a thing when they discuss it in terms of possession.'<sup>63</sup> This approach to listening is very similar to the final group, which aligned with four genres, with one small but notable difference.

## Four genres reported

The small group that identified with four genres each use YouTube to discover music but also privilege ownership and spend most of their time listening specifically to favourite albums they have collected on iTunes, CD or vinyl. It is the dedication to pure bundle album listening, and a value system that dictates that music should be programmed and listened to the way the artist intended, which demarcates this group as distinct. Psychologically, if not always physically, this group is invested in maintaining the sanctity of the album format because they place a high value on the listening experience. This participant comment on buying albums sums up the attitude of this group, 'It depends on what has come out that month, if it's a good month I can spend thirty to forty pounds.'

## Genre affinity analysis

The groups that identified with either one or four genres, a combined 25% of the survey, share a commitment to collecting and a sincerity in their approach to cultivating a listening experience. These two groups accounted for four of the six participants who used vinyl during the survey, and generally both had an affinity for listening to the album format. As Shuker has observed of these types of music connoisseurs, 'Many collectors appear to value the process of gathering music more than the actual possession of it.'<sup>64</sup> Likewise, for participants who had an affinity for one or four genres, music streaming was not considered an authentic listening experience and only deemed useful for discovering new music or convenience. These participants represent music users that will be difficult for streaming services to convert from freemium to premium subscribers, as they value collecting and cataloguing units, mainly in the pure-bundle album format. For these participants, 'A collection without order is not a collection'<sup>65</sup> and genre continues to play a significant role in the ordering.

The two largest groups that associated with either two genres, 27% of the participants, or three genres, 30%, exemplify the shift from format to platform listening that music streaming has heralded. Those that identified three genres had much in common with

the album dedicated groups but they predominantly collected artist tracks as mixed MP3 bundles (not albums) stored on iTunes. Although there was no physical format collecting, treating music as a thing that belonged to them was fundamentally important. As Kibby has observed of MP3 collectors:

*The music that they possess all holds certain meanings specific to each individual and all serves as a connection to their pasts or a reminder of different people or events in their lives.<sup>66</sup>*

They mainly used streaming, and specifically YouTube, to access otherwise unavailable live recordings or to listen to genre-specific music channels. Only two of the thirteen participants subscribed to Spotify premium and one used it for album listening; the other used it for discovery but had iTunes for albums. Again, this hunt and buy group will be difficult to convince that paying a £5–10 monthly subscription is good value for money. Why pay to access music they either already get for free, prefer to buy as downloads or already own and have organised in a way that connects with them?

Conversely, the group that identified with two genres paid to stream access and only one of them still used MP3s. For this group the concept of ownership is almost redundant. For these users, ‘Sharing on Spotify and watching what my friends are listening to’<sup>67</sup> is what is important. These users are ‘Constantly listening to music’ and have bought into the streaming model fully, so much so, that 65% of the fourteen participants that subscribed to Spotify premium used it exclusively for all their listening in the week. For their volume of music use, the subscription fee offers good value for money. This type of user lock-in is what the streaming services are banking on long term. However, at its current £5–10 per month price point, perhaps what premium streaming has to offer only appeals to around a third of streaming-savvy heavy music users, who know the few genres of music they like, but remain keen to be regularly introduced to new music.

The other type of user the premium tier appealed to was half of the 16% of the survey that expressed no genre affinity. This risk-free approach to listening is far removed from the principled dedication to the album expressed by those with one or four genre affinities. However, this group are heavy music users, but for genre neutrals music is a labour-less, inoffensive soundtrack to other social experiences and neither ownership nor curating their own music is important. As one participant expressed, ‘I listen to music all the time and if I don’t have my headphones with me I’m devastated, I’m always listening to playlists of chart music.’ This type of user is ideal for the contextually-based curatorial features of the streaming platforms, but on this evidence



the platforms have work to do to convince them all that the services they offer are worth paying for.

## The need for further research

The distinctions drawn between genre affinity could also be to do with the genre preference. There is anecdotal evidence within the data that those who named two genres predominantly favour pop and indie. This is contrasted with those who identified three genres, who seem to lean towards an array of niches such as hip hop, rap, jazz, R&B, soul, singer/songwriter and folk, whereas the four genre group identified with various idioms of rock and metal. As Frith asserts in his exploration of genre rules, 'Genre discourse depends ... on a certain shared musical knowledge and experience.'<sup>68</sup> While entitling classifications of new combinations of sounds and styles aims at greater clarity, the seeming simplicity of sub-genre names masks the complexities behind the derivations of the actual musical and aesthetic combinations. Without clarifying my shared understanding of the genre titles expressed, I could only guess at the types of sounds, styles and, more importantly, acts and music to which the participants refer. Therefore, further research would seek to have participants allocate the diversity of genres named in the genre awareness section into a smaller number of broader classifications, so genre preference themes could be written into the research. Until then, this survey suggests that despite a shift toward music streaming, and the algorithmically and personalised music choices those platforms offer, genre remains a core way of mediating the experience of music.

## Conclusion

While genre fragmentation increases the number of genres to unfathomable amounts, this research suggests it is the number of genres a music user mainly identifies with that is significant. The survey data shows a breadth of listening behaviour and mediums used by all the participants. However, there were broad identifiable collective patterns of use apparent within distinct groups of music users defined by the number of genres they recalled listening to. This research suggests that music users who express an affinity for none or two specific genres of music are far more likely to pay to stream music than those who identify with one specific genre, or who have tastes that extend to three or four. These groups still prefer to pay to acquire music on vinyl and MP3 and use free streaming for discovery and convenience. Despite a drive toward facilitating music choice predicated upon the mood, location or activities of the listener by streaming platforms, on this evidence genre remains a core concept in how music

users identify with music and themselves. As streaming access challenges unit ownership to become the dominant medium for music use, the number of musical genres users have an awareness of and affinity for may not only shape the music we play, but also the mediums we use to play it and whether or not we pay for it.

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