


## SPOTIFY: listening mediators and algorithmic arrangements

SPOTIFY: mediadores de escuta e arranjos algorítmicos  
SPOTIFY: mediadores de escucha y arreglos algorítmicos

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### ABSTRACT:

The essay develops a brief history of the practices of production and fruition in the platformization of musical experience and aims to understand how new digital environments change the conditions of experience with music in the contemporary world. The focus of the analysis is the Spotify platform, as a mediator of listening, based on the changes in the modes of recording, distribution, and consumption of music through digital platforms - and its complex processes of dating and orientation by algorithmic logic.

**KEYWORDS:** Spotify; Mediation; Platforms.

## Introduction

Changes in the environments of music production, distribution and consumption occur through complex social experiments involving materialities, formats, languages, practices, economic models, political decisions, appropriations, resistances, etc. This essay will develop an analysis of a particular form of musical fruition experienced in the contemporary urban world: the form of fruition based on digital phonogram recording, platforms and network connection.

The construction of the experience in these new digital environments did not occur in a linear form towards a specific format or business model. New cultural forms, capable of considerably reconfiguring previous processes, but also of resignifying them, marked these new environments.

The experience analyzed here refers to the consolidation of *streaming* and access to music resulting from a dominant model adopted by *Spotify*. To understand this process, it is necessary to introduce the development of digital mp3 formats, file transfer models, commercial negotiations and interface solutions produced by *Spotify*.

## The process of transition to *streaming*

Hesmondhalgh and Meier (2018) note that, at the end of the 20th century, there was a shift and integration between the appliance industry and the information

technology industry. Its development articulates capitalism, culture and music in data platforms ("cloud"), advertising, services and device production, which have guided the emergence of a new type of enterprise/organization (SRNICEK, 2017). In the case studied here, a new type of environment for musical enjoyment.

A format that has reoriented the music sharing experience on the Internet is mp3 (*MPEG Audio Layer-3*). It emerged in 1997 and is an electronic way of compressing audio files so that their storage size is considerably reduced. This format facilitates the *online* exchange of these files without diminishing the pleasure of enjoyment for the average listener. For some theorists, mp3 was created for casual listening and for the purpose of massively accumulating files/listings, as the losses in the process of compressing the recordings would not be as noticeable. (STERNE, 2010, JANOTTI, 2009).

Internet and file hosting and sharing platforms, the struggles around the specification of standards, the interests of electronic device companies and record labels, software developers and telecommunication companies, in short, the integration of this production chain with circuits and scenes have intensified a practice that has changed many of the habits about music consumption: the online sharing of digital files (KISCHINHEVSKY and HERSCHMANN, 2011; HESMONDHALGH and MEIER, 2018).

On June 1, 1999, Shawn Fanning, a 19-year-old American college student, launched the *Napster program*, which allowed users to exchange music files via a platform. Platforms are spaces created through software, often open to developers through APIs (*Application Programming Interfaces*), i.e. they are programmable spaces and produce a particular type of "intermediation" between various types of agents (HELMOND, 2015; VAN DIJCK, 2018).

Soon, with the rapid spread of file-sharing culture, issues of copying and reproduction rights came to the forefront and, as a result, the Napster platform was sued by the RIAA (*Recording Industry Association of America*) after less than a year of existence. (RICHARDSON, 2014). Despite the efforts of the big names in the music industry to curb the spread of this file-sharing habit, every day a new platform appeared that made the idea that access to music should somehow be free more intense (SHAPIRO and VARIAN, 1999; ANDERSON, 2009).

Since then, the *majors* have tried on multiple occasions to create systems for the consumption of music online in an official and regularized *way*. Interestingly, these first attempts worked as a form of *streaming*. The consumer would subscribe to a service to have access to a given company's catalog to listen to it over the Internet. None of these attempts was well accepted by the public, who continued to digitize their own music collections and share them on the web. The *big companies* never imagined the

possibility of integrating and sharing their collections and failed to gain public acceptance due to poorly designed interfaces and the convenience of what they called "piracy". The public's expectation of free digital music files was already established.

To understand the magnitude of these changes, Lessig (2005) identified some important motivations by the users that should be considered: 1) some were using the sharing networks as substitutes for buying CDs; 2) others, were using the sharing networks to listen to samples before buying CDs, which had led physical stores to develop totems where it was possible to listen to these CDs; 3) many used file-sharing networks to access content that was no longer sold, but was still *protected by copyright*, or even content that was very difficult to obtain by legal purchase over the Internet; and 4) in addition to these motivations, other users used these file-sharing networks to access products that were not protected by copyright or whose use was fully endorsed by the copyright owners.

This conflict between the ease of dissemination of digital audio and reproduction rights was addressed by the development of a specific business model and by a corporation that had no direct relationship with the music industry: Apple's *iTunes Store*. Steve Jobs' idea was to present to major label executives a model that would unify the catalogs of the various companies and sell albums and single tracks as digital *downloads*. Initially, \$0.99 was designated for single songs and \$9.99 for full albums. In doing so, the *iTunes Store* was a resounding success in the United States and exceeded initial expectations. (RICHARDSON, 2014). An important step stimulated the culture of digital music consumption and enjoyment.

### The *freemium* model: free music?

The singularity of enjoying music from digital platforms has been relevant to understanding the business models experienced recently:

"Economists say that a good is an experience good if consumers must experience it to value it. Virtually any new product is an experience good, and marketers have developed strategies such as free samples, promotional pricing, and testimonials to help consumers learn about new goods" (SHAPIRO and VARIAN, 1999, p. 18).

The model of music consumption through streaming, in which the consumer does not own a digital copy of the product he/she consumes, is the logic of *Spotify*, but what, perhaps, has been its differential, has been the possibility of consuming it for free and legally, at the same time.

Although the French platform *Deezer* was one of the pioneers in introducing the same model in the market, the figures show that *Spotify* was more accepted by consumers on a global scale. The differential of this success, in relation to other platforms, was the use of the *freemium* model (SWANSON, 2013). The term combines the word *free*, which means free access, with the term *premium*, which represents something special, exclusive. In practice, this model offers to the listener the availability of access to a huge music catalog in exchange for certain conditions.

In the "free" mode, the first condition is control. The listener has limited decision-making power in this model. Despite having a library with millions of songs to listen to, he cannot "browse" the platform at will. The user chooses the artist, album or *playlist* and listens to the songs in the order the platform provides. Every hour, *Spotify* still offers the possibility of 5 skips (the option to skip the song) for non-paying listeners. Then, they have to wait for the song to end until the next song starts, just like on the radio.

Another feature of this model is the presence of advertising content between songs. One of the ways to finance the *freemium* model is to find other forms of payment for them (PREY, 2016). In the case of *Spotify*, those who pay are the advertisers, that is, in exchange for the attention of millions of listeners, a large part of them with headphones, companies close deals with the Swedish *startup*, ensuring that the rights to the songs are paid, while the listener can enjoy the experience freely. Although some authors consider this model as a risk for the viability of the company when it comes to generating real profits (RICHARDSON, 2014), the number of *Spotify* users reaches increasingly high levels, both paid and non-paid.

Another aspect to highlight about the platform is the way in which it has become attractive for advertising due to a process of taste monitoring with its registration system, data analysis and identification of patterns. This relationship makes it possible to deal with a certain degree of predictability in their consumption expectations (PREY, 2016). It also contributes to the understanding of the ways in which major record labels have tried to find their place within the *streaming* platform, securing their economic interests in the digital market.

The disputes in the forms of appropriation of this environment have generated an increasing difficulty to identify and distinguish between organic content and advertising content on the platforms. Based on the consumer's better acceptance of advertising content disguised as a service, the authors compare the recommendation system with a possible way of targeting the listener for motivations that are not only centered on his or her musical taste.

Our hypothesis about the content recommendation policies on Spotify and Youtube is related to the appropriation, by the professional layer of the recording industry, of the sociability potential of the structures of music platforms in order to create user navigation routes that favor the interests of record labels and artists. These are appropriations that end up in an influential, but not overt presence: one of the great objectives of contemporary advertising is to merge with the organic aspects of digital platforms to the point of not being recognized as advertising (DEMARCO and SANTOS, 2019, p. 8).

Wagner *et alii* (2015) add an important element to the model used by *Spotify*. The *premium* modes allow the *downloading of* songs to be listened to *offline* on the platform itself as long as the user maintains his subscription, which allows them to be enjoy it without the need for an internet connection.

Sá (2019) addresses other behaviors of the music industry in the digital era that have to do with recommendation policies and music consumption through *playlists* that will be analyzed below. These interactions, software developers' projects and attempts at commercial exploitation of digital environments and platforms have opened a space to experiment with the logic of music consumption. The environments formed around analog technologies built their specific business models, in which users, broadcasters (stations/radios), stores and manufacturers found diverse spaces of musical fruition.

These new cultural techniques (SIEGERT, 2013; TELLES, 2016; GIRARDI, 2017) implied the act of "listening to music", went through the materiality of vinyl, the art of the covers, their cleaning and conservation, the quality of the vitrolas, amplifiers, turntables and needles, the act of listening to music alone, with family or with friends, listening to music at home or on the mobile devices of the time (portable radios, tape players, *walkman*), the creation of *mixtapes*, the recording of songs directly from the radio at specific moments of the program, etc.

This communicational environment that implied musical fruition depended, fundamentally, on radios and critics as one of the main disseminators of trends and had enormous weight in the construction of the listener's taste (JANOTTI, 2009). The prefilters or pre-policies of recommendation, based on *gatekeepers* and on the control of copyright managers by record labels, were accompanied by curatorial actions by DJs and music programs that were particularly involved in the relationship between the artist, the *majors* and the listeners. Today, the economy of abundance, in which *streaming* practices are inscribed, leaves particular traces in this experience, which turns platforms into a logistical and organizational intermediary of content and experiences (MORRIS, 2015).

Music on *Spotify* is the product of materiality and cultural techniques different from those constructed for the universe of records, K-7 tapes and radios. They are

different, even from the practice of *digital downloads* that marked the beginning of this transition.

### ***Spotify for artists, search engines and categorization***

The platform's relationship with artists and their representatives has been increasingly close. Since the launch of the *Spotify artist* page, the Swedish company is increasingly investing in the production of content specifically focused on the direct channel it has with artists and creators. This content includes interviews with top singers, music marketing experts, producers and influential names in the phonographic world.

By this channel, the platform *has* opened a direct interchange between artists and curators. With each new release, content producers can make a *proposal* directly to the platform's curators, sharing details about the featured music and other relevant information. The aim of this procedure is to expand access for less prominent artists, in terms of audience, to the platform's editorial *playlists* that can generate some visibility and notoriety.

Artists have gained the traditional and classic search function, *Search*, identified with a small magnifying glass logo. It allows the user to search for music content by entering the name of the artist, track or album. On the same page, you will find music genre categories, *charts* and editorial *lists*. If you want to listen to, for example, a playlist of *rock* songs from the 80s, it is possible to find this editorial content already prepared and categorized. The topics of the lists are very diverse and increasingly personalized as the user consumes music within the *Spotify* platform itself. This curation tends to gather more and more fans and followers.

The term dynamic *playlist* means that the more a song is listened to within the list, the more likely it is to rank higher. Otherwise, the tendency is for the track to fall in its position and end up dropping off the list. In the case of Brazil, the "Brazil Top 50" list ranks the fifty most played songs on *Spotify* in a given period. This same pattern is reproduced in all *playlists* available on the platform.

The *Home* category concentrates the platform's suggestions based on each listener's listening, track selections, the most listened artists and personalized lists that collect the daily consumption, i.e. a specific list of what has been listened to during each day. With this resource are the release notifications. Through it, the user can have a broader view of how their music consumption during certain periods was and have access to the recommendation generated by the platform's algorithms. The design of this space is similar to the *timeline* of a social network.

Morris (2015) prefers to call the platforms, their algorithms and curation system as infomediaries<sup>1</sup> due to their ability to establish data-driven environments and connections between the different agents and musical assets in the music domain. With this, they can explore:

[...] the algorithmic potential of digital products by collecting and compiling data that can be put at the service of creating new ways of recommending, preserving and experiencing cultural goods. [...] Endpoint providers (Spotify, Rdio, etc.) manage the complexities of music rights, while infomediaries extract and manage data rights for a spectrum of stakeholders (i.e., digital music service providers, music publications, labels, broadcasters, etc.) using a variety of commercial applications (e.g., Song Science, Trend Analysis, Strategic Planning, etc.). Many digital music services act as both end providers and infomediaries (MORRIS, 2015, p. 454).

### Algorithmic fixes and human curation

The platform's design is intuitive, simple and immersive, and is geared to address key issues related to the economics of attention. The goal of this configuration is to ensure a longer time spent on the platform, as *Spotify* brings together in the same digital environment the acts of music discovery, storage and organization of listeners' personal libraries, the act of enjoying music itself, interaction with information about artists and albums, etc.

This mode of consumption encouraged by *streaming*, coupled with the speed of distribution and access among Internet users, makes it less profitable for a *major* label to invest time and money in strategies to disseminate classic formats such as albums. As a result, labels are increasingly focusing on smaller releases, such as *singles* and *EPs*<sup>2</sup>, which facilitates the presentation of "new releases" by the artist, reinforcing their presence in editorial *playlists*, algorithms and recommendation policies. *Streaming* platforms and new fruition environments become the object of symbolic disputes and acquire very particular cultural forms (GILLESPIE, 2018; STRIPHAS, 2015).

Some changes that *Spotify's* model brings to music production and consumption can be seen in the increasing collaboration between artists of different genres (SÁ, 2019) as a way to leverage both within the platform's distributive design. This means that if a pop artist collaborates with a *rapper*, for example, the chances of the song being included in various *playlists* increase. The reason is that the song in question could be included in both pop and rap/hip-hop *playlists*.

<sup>1</sup> A complex reconfiguration of what Bourdieu (1996) called "cultural intermediaries" (GIRARDI, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> In a way, it would be important to point out that this strategy reproduces, in a totally different environment, the experiences with single and double compacts of the vinyl era.



In the abundance of music catalogs made available by *Spotify*, human curation is a decisive factor in the reachability of each song within the platform (MOSCHETTA, 2017). The lists created by the platform's team are the most followed by users. Then it appears those created by influencers, bloggers and services belonging to major labels, such as Digster, which is owned by *Universal Music*.

The editorial *playlists* assembled by Spotify curators are separated into genres, themes, "energy" of the songs, among others. This orientation offered to the listener ends up guiding not only consumption, but the very logic of *mainstream* music production. Considering that half of the total time spent on *Spotify* is spent within *the playlists*, both those made by the platform and those created by the users themselves, this way of listening is well accepted by consumers and begins to influence the practices of various parts of the production and distribution process.

Despite personalized recommendation systems, the most used resource by participants are ready-made playlists, created mainly by the service's curatorial team, but also by publishers, artists, brands and other users. Half of the time on Spotify is spent listening to *playlists*<sup>1,3</sup>, whether created by users themselves or by publishers. Top playlists appear on the home screen of the service, sorted by genre or mood. *Playlists* are suitable for times when the listener doesn't know exactly what they want to listen to, or simply wants a background track for whatever they are doing (MOSCHETTA, 2017, p. 26).

Another important point about consumption through playlists is that the position that songs occupy in the selection made by the curators (ranking) depends on the interaction that is established with the listeners of these songs. If a song does not generate engagement, it is likely to lose positions and end up being removed from the list.

Another category of lists is algorithmic lists, automatically assembled by *Spotify's* artificial intelligence system. They are similar to the platform's recommendation system and appears as "Radio" of artists, songs or albums, which the *streaming service* starts playing automatically when the content chosen by the listener ends. In this category are lists such as "*Discover Weekly*" and "*Daily Mix*". The former, collects the new songs that the listener is likely to like based on his past activity within the platform, and the latter is a kind of retrospective made on the user's listening routine.

Among the subcategories of the algorithm-driven lists are also the songs that stand out as the most listened to by region and worldwide. The "Top Brazil"



and "Top World" lists, for example, are automatically updated with the most listened tracks saved by listeners and classified in a list of 50 songs.

### Listening mediators and advertising agreements

What have enabled *Spotify's* expansion as a platform that uses data to drive listener music consumption - in its connection to the advertising market - are the information technology and data analytics companies the Swedish *startup* has acquired along the way.

Collecting and interpreting data has not always been *Spotify's* goal. The platform's success in recent years coincides with some efforts to leverage customizable services, the result of analyzing and combining the digital "footprints" that listeners leave all the time. In 2014, the little-known *The Echo Nest*<sup>3</sup>, a company that captures and models data related to music consumption, was bought by *Spotify*. The contact with this information related to user consumption not only contributed to the adjustment of recommendation algorithms, but also helped in the advertising targeting process (PREY, 2016). *Spotify's* own information about its users is modeled by "*The Echo Nest*" to achieve possible predictions about their behavior on the platform. This is of great interest to advertisers, as campaigns can be developed and delivered to music taste profiles that are more likely to interact with brands.

In this context, the platform maintains its *freemium* model sustainable. Although most of its users do not formally pay for access to the platform's library, they "pay" with their data all the time. The cost of this model is similar to other *online* services offered "for free". Increasingly targeted advertising relies on what Gillespie (2018) has called *networked audiences*, and the platform's users seem willing to adopt this form of payment (consciously or not) for the apparent gratuity of cultural products.

The changes that the consumption model proposed by *Spotify* is causing in the cultural forms assumed by musical fruition are already detected. In 2019, the British magazine, *The Economist*, published an article entitled *Don't stop me now*<sup>4</sup> analyzing

<sup>3</sup> Paul Lamare, a software engineer at the company, has created a curious anti-recommendation system called *The Wreckomender* that automates the recommendation of music as far away as possible from what the user likes or is looking for. It has also developed Music Popcorn as a folksonomy (social tagging) model and hundreds of music-related applications. The company collects and catalogs its data from "mechanical listening" combined with text search on songs and artists on the web (profiles, reviews, etc.), generating what it calls a "music brain".

<sup>4</sup> The streaming economy is changing pop songs, October 5, 2019. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2019/10/05/the-economics-of-streaming-is-changing-pop-songs>. Accessed: 15 out. 2019.

the *hit* songs at the time of *streaming* compared to those that triumphed in the charts before this model. The songs analyzed were released between 2000 and 2018.

Due to the constant competition for the listener's attention, amidst millions of tracks, *lead songs are getting* shorter and shorter and reaching the chorus faster and faster. In a universe where the cultural product needs to capture the listener's attention to avoid skipping tracks, this information is of critical importance to its commercial performance.

Therefore, as this can be "measured" in real time by the algorithm, it is possible to know how the music track is performing within the platform. Some of these factors are the number of times the track is saved in the listener's library, the number of *skips* it receives in a *playlist*, the average listening time, the ability to fit into editorial lists and others.

Another possible change, already mentioned above, is the intensification of the *featuring* culture noted by Sá (2019). The tactic of joining artists, often from different genres, in the same song is successful on *Spotify* for a few reasons.

Along with this, the data provided by the platform is increasingly valuable to the cultural producers themselves. In turn, they can interpret this information to guide the types of songs that are most likely to perform well on the platform. With this data, it is possible to recognize patterns that stand out in each of the music genres.

## Final considerations

It is possible to imagine a record store as a very particular environment related to the distribution of musical products. A physical place where releases arrive and are organized by categories (some of them highlighted), where not only records are sold, but where it is possible to acquire certain kind of information with sellers and fans about bands, records, concerts, etc.

The user experience within *Spotify's* platform - and the particular strategies for capturing that experience - involves a mix of processes/stages that were separate in conventional forms of music production, distribution and consumption. These strategies, in addition to the algorithmic layer of the platform, fit a very particular business model, which makes these questions relevant to the research by integrating reflections on the economics of streaming platforms and their cultural relevance.

The interference of commercial interests in music recommendation is not a new problem in this industry and has been approached from many different angles. Today, this process goes through a complex combination of data production, human curation and algorithmic. These new fruition environments focus on capturing the attention of

the application user and producing data that can give algorithms a predictive function on musical taste. Changes in platform interface design and algorithmic management follow user practices and, at the same time, can drive them silently and invisibly.

As stated above, *Spotify* playlists, especially those characterized as editorial, produced by the platform's own team, already have a direct impact on the position of songs on official charts, such as *Billboard* in the United States. The complexity of digital environments, i.e. the number of resources they bring together in one place, seems to have fostered until now the monopoly of certain types of experience with music through the platforms. The company that stores and organizes phonograms in *streaming* format is the same company that owns the most powerful broadcast channels within the platform.

As Spotify has become an environment for growing communicative experiences and music enjoyment, taking on a cultural form, the biggest challenge for Spotify has been to find a way to translate musical taste into metrics of interest to advertisers. In doing so, they bring to cultural production their logic of relevance and their driving criteria as models of "successful" production.

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**RESUMO:**

Este artigo desenvolve uma breve história das práticas de produção e da fruição no processo de plataformação da experiência musical e procura entender como os novos ambientes digitais alteram as condições de experiência com a música no mundo contemporâneo. O foco da análise é a plataforma digital de streaming Spotify, como mediador de escuta, no contexto de transformações trazidas pelos modos de registro, distribuição e consumo de música por meio de plataformas digitais – e seus complexos processos de dataficação e orientação pela lógica algorítmica.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Spotify; Mediation; Platforms.

**RESUMEN:**

El ensayo desarrolla una breve historia de las prácticas de producción y frucción en la plataformación de la experiencia musical y busca comprender cómo los nuevos entornos digitales cambian las condiciones de la experiencia con la música en el mundo contemporáneo. El foco del análisis es la plataforma Spotify, como mediador de escucha, basada en cambios en los modos de grabación, distribución y consumo de música a través de plataformas digitales - y sus complejos procesos de datafificación y orientación por lógica algorítmica.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Spotify; Mediación; Plataformas.