

“Keep Smiling!”:

Time, Functionality and Intimacy in Spotify’s Featured Playlists

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Abstract

As one of the world’s largest online music providers, the streaming service Spotify has a profound capacity to shape everyday realities through digital technology. This article explores how both openness and control are embedded in Spotify’s ways of delivering recommended playlists to users. After analyzing over 500 pre-designed playlists, we argue that Spotify’s music recommendations evoke individual freedoms and flexibilities, at the same time as they prescribe normative temporalities, neoliberal subjectivities, functional approaches to music, and monetizations of intimacy. Such tensions between freedom and control speak of the dual inheritance of the digital and its potential to both liberate and constrain human action.

Introduction

Digital technologies are often said to have transformed music distribution and music consumption, making music “intangible” (Styvén 2007), and shifting focus from product and ownership to practice and access (Johansson 2013; Barr 2013). In the wake of this development, a wide range of digital music services have been launched, and today the Swedish streaming service Spotify stands out as one of the most well-known providers of digital music. Founded in 2006 as a service that promised user-initiated and search-centered access to vast amounts of sounds, Spotify has later come to re-organize its platform towards providing music recommendations and curated musical deliveries. The company is now frequently voicing a desire to provide “music for every moment”, and offers a wide range of pre-packaged playlists that promise everything from “Smooth Mornings” and “Workday Zen”, to “The Cure for Loneliness” and “A Confidence Boost”. As one business representative put it in May 2015, Spotify has become “obsessed with figuring out how to bring music into every part of your life, wherever you are, whatever you’re doing, whatever your mood” (Spotify Press Release 2015).

In June 2017, Spotify claimed to have about 140 million active users, and as people increasingly turn to streaming platforms, there is a need for a deepened understanding of the realities these services promote and materialize. Rather than neutrally channeling sounds, platforms such as Spotify take an active role in framing music, which includes the promotion of certain values and subjectivities. Like digital technologies in general,

streaming music services simultaneously draw on a vision of free and unlimited access, and on regulatory practices that select and privilege certain content, collect user metrics, and deploy algorithmic ways of organizing information (Cheney-Lippold 2011). Such shifts between openness and control have surrounded Internet technologies since the very beginning. Associated with democracy, participation and emancipatory values on the one hand (Shirky 2008; cf. Turner 2006), and authoritarian control and surveillance on the other (Morozov 2011; Fuchs et al 2012), digital platforms occupy a contested position in today's media landscape.

In this article, we set out to investigate how these dual logics of freedom and commercial-institutional power are played out through Spotify's music recommendations. More specifically, we focus on one moment in the "social life" (Appadurai 1986)¹ of streamed music files by studying how Spotify's so-called Featured Playlists are presented to users in three different countries during one week's time. At the time of the writing of this article, Featured Playlists were selections of 12 readymade, curated lists of songs delivered to users upon login, together with a short greeting—such as "Kick start this Tuesday!" or "Enjoy time with friends and family". These are designed to cater to the expected everyday life of Spotify's users and depend on three broad variables: users' registered language, country and date/time.²

Occupying a central place in Spotify's new strategy for delivering music, Featured Playlists are fascinating entities that map and provide musical context (Seaver 2015, 2012)—both in the sense of creating an affective aura around sounds, and in the sense of approximating listener behaviors and preferences. Acknowledging that such contextualizations are always socially constructed and linked to interpretation (Dilley 2002), we approach Spotify's framing of playlists as an activity whose politics needs to be explored. Following Lev Manovich's (2001) call to study how software interfaces organize data in particular ways and hence "privilege particular models of the world and the human subject", we therefore ask: In what ways are musical contexts constructed through Featured Playlists and how are they entangled with the expected everyday life of users? What ideals, assumptions and subjectivities are (re)produced in Spotify's organization and presentation of music? And how are such elements tied to the dual logics of freedom and regulation?

In answering these questions, we focus on three aspects which we view as central to the way music is contextualized in Featured Playlists: temporality, functionality and intimacy. Whereas the Spotify platform builds on a logic of user participation, flexibility and freedom of choice—meaning that people are always given the option to rearrange, select and ignore any playlist—our argument is that the specific contextualizations of Spotify's readymade playlists are suggestive of neoliberal or radical individualist ideologies. In particular, we claim that Spotify's promotion of prescriptive temporalities, its presentation of music as functional for productivity and well-being, and its structures for producing and monetizing intimate expressions exemplify how systems that provide freedom and flexibility for the individual user, might also be bound up with "productive constraint" (Stanfill 2015) and market-driven attempts to monitor and regulate audiences.

Spotify and the provision of “free music”

Spotify was founded in 2006, and has rapidly grown to become one of the world’s largest streaming services for music. Streaming services commonly give users access to archives of content—often film, music, or books—either for free (on an advertisement based platform) or against a subscription fee (which removes advertisements). In many ways, Spotify pioneered this way of distributing music, and its business model was originally celebrated for building a “sustainable” revenue model for artists in the digital age. The company early on presented itself as a user-initiated and search-centered platform offering free access to vast amount of sounds (Fleischer 2015). Its initial major feature—an empty search box—was described as a gateway to endless possibilities of musical pleasure, and a portal promising unrestrained access to millions of tracks. In this way, Spotify quickly came to associate itself with the progressive and liberating visions of digital technologies (e.g. Barbrook & Cameron 2007; Turner 2006). Entangled in notions of democracy, openness, and freedom of choice, Spotify branded itself as the antidote to online piracy and a platform giving fans relief from the immorality of illicit file-sharing activities. In part, the company’s capacity to do so, needs to be understood in relation to the medium specificity of its service. Because of its digital grounding and organization, the Spotify platform embodies many of the open characteristics of new media. Music items from its archive can be singled out, shuffled, and reassembled according to the user’s wishes and needs (cf. Manovich 2001), which opens up for different types of participatory media use (Jenkins 2005 [1992]), and the kinds of freedoms and flexibilities that are often associated with digital platforms.

Structured playlists and content recommendations

Around the year of 2013, however, Spotify reorganized its platform to focus more on music recommendations and curated music deliveries, and less on encouraging “free” botanizations among musical works. In part, such a turn took place as the result of critique against the platform leaving its users without guidance (Dredge 2013a). If the company had initially built its corporate image around the user’s capacity to bend a giant musical archive according to their own wishes, customers were now instead portrayed as being bereft of truly pleasurable musical experiences, and therefore in dire need for a “fix” in the shape of musical guidance. Spotify’s curatorial turn implied that the company simultaneously formulated a problem (musical disorientation, and a lack of musical enjoyment), and its solution (music recommendations), thereby tapping into “solutionist” discourses aimed to offer universal relief from distress by technical means (Morozov 2013).

To a large extent, Spotify’s new role as a provider of tailored musical experiences has come to center on the delivery of pre-designed playlists—that is, themed collections of songs that users can enjoy and save in their private music collections on the Spotify platform. Like lists in general, Spotify’s playlists are devices for taste-making, but also entities that carry a “dynamic capacity... to be both open and closed, to suggest both action and the ordering of action” (Phillips 2012, 97). As Phillips has put it, (play)lists

are simultaneously fixations, aesthetic objects and theatrical pieces; they are “at once endless... and restrictive” (ibid., 104). While playlists can be transformed, extended, and edited according to the user’s wishes, they come in a pre-packaged format that transports affectual ideals, notions of “the good life,” and conceptions of time (and time well spent).³

In this article, we are particularly interested in exploring how Spotify’s Featured Playlists (which are non-personalized) take shape in relation to discourses of personalization on the platform.⁴ This focus on the non-personalized implies going in another direction than much recent research on online recommendation systems, which has mostly focused on algorithmic dimensions of content curation, and how algorithms foster certain personalized cultures (Hallinan & Striphos 2014; Galloway 2006), networks (Ananny 2016), humanities (Berry 2011), identities (Cheney-Lippold 2011), ideologies (Mager 2012), publics (Crawford 2015), performativities (Introna 2016), accountabilities (Neyland 2016), and forms of governance (Ziewitz 2015). While Spotify’s Featured Playlists partly come about by way of algorithmic data management,⁵ we emphasize instead the humanly curated and descriptive texts and images that frame them. These musical wrappings are central to the process of turning digital, abstract and coded music into attractive goods and something that resembles physical commodities (Morris 2011). They are also fundamental for the ways in which music becomes entangled with ideas about everyday life, since playlist descriptions actively invoke different subject positions and notions about how, when, and by whom certain sounds could (or perhaps should) be enjoyed. Rather than discussing the implications of algorithmic music recommendations, then, we focus on how such collections are presented and framed—which we believe can be traced through playlist descriptions and the greetings that surround them.

Collecting playlists: Methods and materials

Methodologically, our study is inspired by Taina Bucher’s (2012) “technographic” approach, where technography refers to an interpretative-descriptive account of software that makes use of ethnographic methods to understand the life-worlds that technologies generate. This method puts technology itself in focus—rather than the people who use it—asking what “software can be said to be suggestive of, and which underlying assumptions, norms, and values are embedded in the technologies used in everyday life” (Bucher 2012, 71).⁶ Importantly, this is not to say that user practices are determined by software and interface design; users can of course listen to a playlist without caring about how it is framed, or choose to find music in other ways. The point, however, is that software produces certain norms through the actions it allows and encourages, and users will have to negotiate these norms in one way or another.

For the purpose of technographically studying Featured Playlists, we created three Spotify user accounts that would allow us to make observations and collect information on the kinds of content shown to each user.⁷ Besides the short greetings that meet users upon login to Spotify, we were interested in playlist titles, cover images, and playlist descriptions, and in monitoring their change over time. The user accounts had identical

settings: they were registered on the same day, and were listed as 25-year-old females. Because we wanted to explore and compare content delivered in different countries, they were respectively assigned a Swedish, an American and an Argentinean identity. The selection of nationalities was limited by the actual countries in which Spotify is available, and motivated by an interest in exploring data from different continents. Furthermore, Spanish, Swedish and English languages are known to us, thereby facilitating the analytic process.

With the technical assistance of Roger Mähler and Fredrik Palm at Humlab, Umeå University, we used an automatic script to log into each account once every hour during one week’s time, starting at 8 am on September 1 and ending at 7 am on September 9, 2015. After logging in, we documented the presented greetings and recommended playlists, and signed out again. This process was repeated every hour, starting at 8 am on September 1 and ending at 7 am on September 9, 2015. In total, empirical data was collected on 168 different occasions during the course of this week. The data consisted of 142 unique greetings (the Argentinean user received 42 different greetings, the American user 52 and the Swedish user 48). We were further recommended 542 different playlists (the Argentinean user received 117 unique playlist recommendations, the American 213, and the Swedish user 212). Noteworthy is the fact that on average, 72% of the greetings were repeated more than once. In a similar way, 91% of the playlists were delivered on multiple occasions during the week.

The collected material—images and texts translated to English—was coded using qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti. This software facilitates organization and categorization of unstructured empirical data and offers functions for search and retrieval as well as for visualization of co-occurring categories. Building on a thematic approach, we analyzed the material in terms of both form and manifest and semantic content. More specifically, greetings, playlist titles, playlist descriptions and playlist covers were categorized according to content, weekday, time of day, musical genre, and mode of address. In this way, three main patterns of music contextualization began to emerge, as we further outline below.

The temporality of playlist recommendations

In his classic work *Hidden Rhythms*, Eviatar Zerubavel (1981) identifies four major forms of prescriptive temporal regularities: rigid sequential structures (i.e. in what order events take place), fixed durations (how long events last), standard temporal locations (when events take place), and rates of recurrence (how often events happen). All of these prescriptive temporalities can be seen in how the Spotify client sequentially structured how the day and the week was organized; how each playlist recommendation had a more or less fixed duration and temporal location; and how many recommendations seemed to recur with regular intervals. Time, then, was a key element affecting the delivery of music on the Spotify platform. And importantly, time is not a neutral category. Instead, we understand the temporality of playlist recommendations as suggestive of a patterning of social life with strongly normative effects as regards how time is supposed to be spent. While the selection of presented

playlists changed repeatedly—between six and nine times each day—for the sake of simplicity, we suggest the circulation of recommendations can be seen to structure the day in three broad phases: mornings, afternoons, and nights.

Spotify Mornings

Mornings were, quite expectedly, defined by the Spotify client as the start of the day, when it is time to get out of bed, have breakfast, and go to work. “Welcome to a brand new week!” we were greeted early on a Monday, and on Thursday we were urged to “Wake up to good vibes”. The playlists accompanying such greetings explicitly related to the time of the day, with titles such as “Sunny Side Up”, “Songs to Sing in the Shower”, and “Wake Up and Smell the Coffee”. Many of the playlists presented on weekday mornings also revolved around work and commute—such as when we were encouraged to “Make it to work the right way”. Several of these work-related playlists were illustrated by imagery showing indoor, office-like environments. Hence, they primarily portrayed work as a postindustrial, white-collar activity.

During weekends, the circadian rhythm slightly shifted: according to the content of messages and playlists, evenings lasted longer on Fridays and Saturdays. Hence, Saturday and Sunday mornings also began later and were typically described as lazier than weekday mornings. During this time of the week, work was not mentioned at all, and emphasis was instead put on sociability, recreation, and “chill-out.” Furthermore, certain moods and activities appeared to be particularly distinctive for weekend mornings. For instance, Spotify delivered a number of “Hangover Friendly” playlists on Saturday and Sunday.

Spotify Afternoons

As the days proceeded, new activities were brought to the fore by the client. Afternoons generally exhibited a wide range of activities but overall, users seemed expected to feel less energetic at this time of day, with Spotify promising to deliver an “Afternoon energy boost, coming right up!”, or rhetorically asking “A bit slow during the afternoon?”. Here, the most commonly occurring themes centered around work and concentration, presenting playlists such as “Keep Calm and Focus”, “Intense Studying” or “Work Work Work.” Music related to exercise and physical performance also tended to appear during afternoons, as we were greeted with playlists like “Adrenaline Workout” and “Hard Exercise”. This was similar on weekends, when we were expected to engage in different kinds of exercise, although always combined with “indulging in lazy afternoons”, or enjoying “a long Sunday dinner”.

After 4 pm, weekdays were typically associated with commuting, returning home and winding down. Playlists such as “Evening Commute”, “Long Way Home”, and “Relax & Unwind” speak to this theme, as well as exclamations like “How nice it is to get home and enjoy Home Sweet Home!”. Weekends were somewhat different in this respect, as they were clearly favored above weekdays and often characterized in more celebratory ways. On Friday afternoon, for example, Spotify in the three countries cheerfully called out: “Happy Friday with V of Viva la Vida!”, “Let the weekend begin!” and “Feel the Friday fever!”

Spotify Nights

When afternoon turned into evening, Spotify encouraged us to chill out. Obviously, the time after 6 pm was meant for time on the couch listening to playlists such as “Autumn Evening” or “Cozy Time at Home.” Evenings also appeared to be the proper time for sociality, for instance in the form of dancing (especially in the Argentinean context), or in the form of relaxed dinners which, according to Spotify, are “an important part of the day”. The significance of mealtimes—also as a social event—was further emphasized in many playlist descriptions. This included relations with friends, family and romantic partners, as suggested in titles like “Dinner Romance” or playlist descriptions claiming to provide “Encouraging pop for you and your friends in the kitchen”. Weekend nights—typically espoused by the client—were in addition characterized by a focus on partying, as we encountered playlists like “Party to go” or “Cocktails & Dreams.”

After 11 pm, the Spotify client appeared to think it was time to sleep, at least on weekdays. Nighttime playlists were mainly devoted to help users unwind, as demonstrated in titles insisting on sleep: “Sleepify”, “Sleep Tight” and “Jazz For Sleep”. However, weekend nights seemed to stretch much longer, as users were encouraged to “shake their booties” and “dance until sunrise”. Another significant activity, only mentioned at night, had to do with sex. One playlist, for example, prompted us to “Get cozy and make time for some kissing and cuddling!” In the same vein, other playlists urged us to “Close the door... and turn off the light” or boldly asked “Getting laid?”.

Featured Playlists as Regulated Temporalities

As indicated above, Featured Playlists organize music recommendations according to specific rhythms—indeed, they jointly create their own micro temporalities. Spotify’s regular shifts between different sets of playlists can thus be seen as a form of dayparting bearing similarity to how the day is divided in traditional broadcast programming (Ellis 2000; Spedale et al 2014). However, in contrast to dayparting and more in line with the logics of social media, we argue that Featured Playlists contribute to the construction of “realtimeness”—that is, an experience of certain modes of content delivery, whose “new” and “updated” feel supports open and participatory notions of digital technologies. Weltevrede et al (2014) explain that “the notion of real-time... is used to describe media characterized by fresh, dynamic or continuously processed content”, and stress the need to understand ‘real-time’ as a market device and a social construction. Hence, they write that “[m]edia do not operate in real-time, devices and their cultures operate as *pacers of real-time*,” (ibid., 127, our emphasis).

The specific ways in which reallimeness is produced through Featured Playlists includes not only the everyday rhythms demonstrated above, but also references to seasonal changes and current events, such as the Pride parade and the death of a popular Argentinean musician. Such timely playlist deliveries can be seen as an attempt by Spotify to embed itself in the everyday lives of its users and uphold an image of being constantly up to date. However, as previously mentioned, it turned out that 72% of the greetings and 91% of the playlists were actually repeated more than

once during the course of our one-week data collection. Moreover, the Argentinean user received several greetings that declared “August has never sounded better”, although the month was in fact September. These time lags, we argue, are excellent examples of how realliveness is a precarious construction which may be undermined and contested by instances of delay.

Furthermore, we suggest that the ways in which realliveness is produced through Featured Playlists reproduce ‘chrononormative’ assumptions related to everyday life. Freeman (2010, 3) uses the notion of chrononormativity to describe prescriptive temporalities, and more specifically “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity”. She defines “temporal mechanisms” as those social and political processes that reproduce time-related norms of work, health, citizenship and family life. Such temporal regulations—expressed in the form of life course expectations—must be adhered to so that one’s embodied existence becomes socially meaningful from the point of view of capitalist and heteronormative ideologies. In our case, Spotify’s chrononormative effects were most evident in how the different dayparts did not only privilege certain updated musical content, but also included the explicit designation of activities and moods to different time slots. Together with the personal and imperative user address, this served to embed strongly prescriptive temporalities into the platform.

Music as a means: The functionality of playlists

Streaming platforms, according to Paul Allen Anderson (2015, 811), increasingly work to create musical moodscapes for their users in which music recommendations can be understood as “products for affect management and mood elevation”. In our study, this could be seen in how music was promoted not only as an aesthetic object but as a performative one. Although playlist descriptions typically included brief characterizations of the music genre they contained, more than half of our collected items pointed to a presumed function of the particular playlist. In this section, we will look closer into this issue of “functional” music. More specifically, we suggest that Featured Playlists, through their emphasis on music as a means, may serve as a disciplinary technology that promotes neoliberal subjectivities and attitudes.⁸

Significant for playlist descriptions invoking this view of music was their reference to what users can achieve by listening to a particular list. The type of achievements—or the everyday areas in which music was suggested to be of help—largely corresponded to the main “genre categories” found on Spotify: workout, party, focus, chill, sleep, travel, dinner and romance. For instance, we were offered energy boosts so as to perform better when exercising, prompts for heightening our productivity at work, or repeated suggestions to use music for increased focus and concentration; Spotify recommended “rock to help you relax and concentrate”, and “Epic All-Nighters” that would help us “power through” our night time studies. Music was generally described as performative of motivation and energy—regardless of whether it had to do with dancing, getting up in the morning, or getting in the mood for partying. In part, this disciplining towards heightened performance and productivity was

dependent on time regulation; hence, this too can be seen as contributing to the politics of chrononormativity, where playlists served as promises of time-bound, idealized lifestyles.

This is not the first time that music has been treated as a functional device for the purpose of increasing productivity. Much research has for example focused on the use of music in the workplace in order to increase efficiency (see Prichard, Korczynski & Elmes 2007). As Jones (2005, 724) has shown, there is a long tradition of using music as a means to “impact upon worker output” rather than appreciating it for its “aesthetic or artistic ‘value’”. Others have pointed to how workplace music upholds order in post-Fordist, capitalist societies (Jones & Schumacher 1992) or, conversely, how music consumption is a dialectical cultural practice through which workers can partly express their resistance to a routinized and alienating structure (Korczynski 2011).

We concur with the latter perspective in acknowledging that Spotify users can make sense of music in their own ways and may also freely choose between differently themed playlists. At the same time, however, we want to stress that we were repeatedly invited to view music consumption as an accompaniment to other, more significant tasks, rather than as an activity in its own right. The goal, here, was not only increased productivity but also a general improvement of one’s mental state and attitude to life, something seen in playlist descriptions like, “Get happy with this pick-me-up playlist full of feel good songs!”, “Stay focused and smart with these house tracks”, and “Nothing hurts as heartbreak. These songs will help you have a good cry.”

By providing such sketches or maps of emotional states, Spotify creates a certain type of mood environment for its users. For Anderson (2015, 838), musical mood environments “point toward a fantasy of intentional and while-you-wait mood treatments and manipulations, as if moods could be put on and shed as easily as winter hats and mittens”. In line with Anderson’s view, Spotify’s Featured Playlists can be seen to educate users on how to classify themselves according to their temper. At the same time, the playlists also encourage treating cognitive and emotional states as garments which can be pulled out of a closet, tried on, and easily be put back again. The delivery of playlists thereby serves to guide users toward particular treatments of their mental lives.

However, based on our specific study, we argue that Featured Playlists do not primarily encourage the exploration of or cycling between a wide range of moods in the way Anderson (2015) has proposed. Instead, Spotify’s promotion of music as functional primarily privileged a subject determined to strive toward well-being. This was evident in the many calls to use music for personal improvement, and in greetings and playlist descriptions such as “Conquer your morning”, “Like a boss” and “You’re on top of the world. Don’t forget it.” The positioning of the user as a boss, a potential conqueror, or someone on top of the world, we argue, is clearly connected to the notion of music as contributing to enhanced performance. These and other examples illustrate how Featured Playlists promote a type of subjectivity informed by positive thinking as a contemporary ideology (Ehrenreich 2009), and the related investments in unattainable fantasies of “the good life” that subjects are propelled into by neoliberal

society (Berlant 2011). There were indeed a few examples in the material showing how playlists can offer accompaniment to the dark sides of life, such as when the Featured Playlists sympathetically claimed to want to “reduce insomnia and anxiety”, or provide music to cure “Morning Melancholia”. Even here, however, focus tended to be on overcoming hardships by listening to the right playlist. In this respect, Featured Playlists not only push users towards increased productivity, but also privilege a mode of entrepreneurial subjectivity in which users are encouraged to direct their desire for change inwards and “relate to themselves as if they were a business, are active, embrace risks, capably manage difficulties and hide injuries” (Scharff 2016, 108).

Intimacy and its monetization

Intimacy has always been mediated in the sense that emotions and personal relations have frequently been filtered through objects, literature, sound, images and technologies (Hjorth and Lim 2012). In this section, we focus on Spotify’s ways of producing and mediating intimacies and establishing (or approximating) personal connections to users. Here, intimacy is primarily produced through discursive modes of address, and we argue that Spotify’s language use may be understood as an attempt to establish close relations and turn them into monetary value.

As seen in the previous sections, the presentation of Featured Playlists often addresses users in a highly personal tone. Spotify frequently promotes collections of sounds by using imperative moods, by posing questions, or by invoking an explicit “you”. Thus, we were met with seemingly personal greetings like “What’s for dinner tonight?”, or playlist descriptions humbly asking “Trouble sleeping?”. While these questions are open for multiple answers and interpretations, they are clearly also suggestive of specific scenarios. In particular, by hailing a “you” and bringing up topics that in many other contexts would be seen as belonging to the private sphere, the client suggests a close and cordial relationship to the user(s) which in turn may produce a sense of intimacy on the platform.

Despite this personal address (and unlike much other content on the Spotify platform), Featured Playlists are not personalized but mass broadcasted elements which depend on country, time, and date. On one level, modes of address that approximate personal relationships and interactions have been part of mass-media communication for a long time (Durham Peters 2010; Horton & Wohl 2006 [1956]). Such discursive strategies may for example be found in TV shows or radio broadcasts, and as Horton & Wohl (2006 [1956]) noted already in the 1950s, intimate speech in these contexts has traditionally worked to simulate a sense of participation and belonging, despite the fact that communication is often one-sided. Horton and Wohl argue that intimate speech serves to establish guidelines for audience behavior, since intimate language creates a sense of sympathy, sociability and friendship, and thereby constructs audiences who behave in a similar way (even though this might certainly backfire and create detachment and rebelliousness). Spotify’s personal tone of language may thus be understood as adopting classic rhetorical strategies of mass media in order to pave way for friendly attitudes amongst its audiences.

The intimate speech that surrounds playlists also borrows from other earlier media formats that have circulated within private spheres. In particular, playlists have much in common with the intimate, eclectic tropes of mixtapes, that is, analogue cassette tapes filled with self-recorded music, which were commonly circulated amongst friends in the pre-digital era. As Drew (2005) has pointed out, the positive and emotive associations of mixtapes have frequently been picked up by creators of commercial music mixes, who capitalize off of their personal and homemade feel—and the same could be said of playlists. By being structured and named in ways that are akin to personally crafted music collections, playlists borrow their aura—a process which can be seen as a kind of appropriation of non-commercial social relations and practices of sharing amongst music fans.

Most importantly, however, Spotify’s attempts to produce and mobilize different modes of intimacy need to be understood as part of larger market logics, and in particular the company’s ways of gaining ad-based revenue. Rather than solely guiding and catering to the needs of listeners, playlists occupy a central role in Spotify’s strategy to attract advertisers and thereby keep the free—and advertisement-based—version of the service afloat. At the time of data collection, Spotify offered advertisers the possibility of reaching users according to at least eight different activities and moods that are found in playlists, such as: workout, party, chill, focus, dinner, kids & family, travel and romance.⁹ In this way, Featured Playlists serve as preparations for behavioral marketing—an advertising strategy aimed at segmenting audiences based on their conduct, emotional states and personality traits (Connolly 2015; Peterson 2015). This targeting ensures that advertisements can be sent out to particular clients at particular points in time, based on what music they are listening to. Spotify thereby makes it possible to broadcast health and fitness ads to someone who is listening to a workout playlist, or food oriented ads to someone who is listening to a dinner playlist, for example. Through such processes, Featured Playlists become embedded in larger strategies for creating ever-more granular market divisions of audiences.

One way of understanding these strategies of turning playlists into objects for consumer segmentation, is to view them as expressions of how “public display and mediation of personal emotion and affect” becomes linked to monetary value (Hearn 2010, 429). As the Spotify machinery gears more towards the provision of playlists that evoke intimate moods, the service becomes (financially) dependent on users’ willingness to disclose their feelings by selecting a playlist that suits them. Here, we might again think about the functional, mood-oriented playlists that urged us to “get happy”, “stay focused” and “have a good cry”. On the one hand, the act of providing playlists that speak to a user’s private life is in itself constitutive of intimacy; on the other, intimacy is also produced and monetized as users are expected to share their activities and emotional states by selecting preferred playlists.

Concluding remarks

This article has investigated how the dual logics of freedom and accessibility on the one hand, and commercial-institutional power on the other, are played out through

Spotify's music recommendations. In many ways, Spotify is a service that allows for greater audience agency than earlier forms of music delivery. By providing access to a seemingly infinite archive of songs, Spotify invites its users to freely pick and choose, save, and rearrange music according to their individual preferences. In terms of promoting its business, reminding users of this flexibility has also been a central strategy for Spotify. As the story goes, the platform grew out of a desire to envision a different future for music distribution, where non-piracy as well as users' preferences, creativity, and imagination, would guide how music is consumed. In many ways, then, Spotify is a service that seems to embody the open characteristics of new media. Judging from the popularity of Spotify and similar streaming services, such possibilities for individual choice are also perceived as attractive and highly valued by users.

However, as demonstrated in this article, flexibility and freedom for individual Spotify users is—in a wider perspective—also bound up with control and disciplining of audiences. We have argued that such regulatory effects are primarily produced in three ways: through specific organizations of time, through the promotion of music as a means, and through connecting intimate patterns of listening with revenue through ad sales. By drawing on prescriptive temporalities in the packaging of playlists, Spotify suggests chrononormative organizations of everyday life that privilege some lifestyles over others; for example, attending to social relations in the evenings, engaging in intensive and white-collar labor during the day, and upkeeping a romantic life at night time. These normative ideas of everyday life are further advocated in the promotion of music not only as an aesthetic object but a functional tool for entrepreneurial subjects who strive to lead better, happier, and more productive lives. Further, the framings of playlists serve to produce a sense of intimacy that, in turn, generates revenue for the service. The connection between playlists and advertising strategies, reveals how capitalist logics merge with (both real and imagined) mundane life and personal spheres.

In this sense, we argue that the musical contexts discovered in this study—in terms of temporality, functionality and intimacy—point to how the Spotify client is driven by market logics and tends to promote neoliberal or radical individualist ideologies. Featured Playlists, it seems, may work to discipline audiences and (re) produce particular subjectivities as well as normative ideas about “the good life”. While Spotify's playlist deliveries open up free spaces for music exploration and subversion, they can thereby also be read as expressions of institutional-commercial power that users need to relate to—in one way or another.

Notes

- 1 Following Appadurai's call to analyze “the social life of things”, means we recognize that our study can only grasp a momentary slice of the cultural biographies of streamed music.
- 2 See <https://developer.spotify.com/web-api/get-list-featured-playlists/> (retrieved 3 January, 2018).
- 3 Importantly, such packagings build on a much longer history of structured music deliver-

ies that compile and frame music according to pre-established notions of taste, listening and pleasure. Some of the most relevant precedents to playlist deliveries might be found in classic jukebox technologies (Attali 2009 [1985]), radio broadcasts (Tacchi 1998), cassette tapes (Skågeby 2011; Drew 2005), and compilation albums (Wikström & Burnett 2009).

- 4 By personalization, we refer to the ways in which users’ behaviors on a platform come to underlie the content that is presented to them.
- 5 In an interview from 2013, a chief product officer at Spotify described how their playlists “draws on three ‘pillars’ using data from a subscriber’s friends, personalised recommendations and real music experts” (Warman 2013). Spotify’s playlists can thereby be described as a result of the joint labor of human music editors (who describe, label, and put music in context), users (whose everyday activities and social networks are monitored and analyzed), and algorithms (whose labor consists in sifting through large amounts of data, and sketching out connections between sounds).
- 6 Hence, our study says nothing about how playlists are actually experienced or put to use by Spotify listeners (for such accounts, see e.g. Nylund Hagen 2015; Werner & Johansson 2016).
- 7 With the public interest in mind, we appreciate Spotify’s forbearance with any trespassings of the user agreement that this data collection involved.
- 8 While the performative power of music was a major theme in the material as a whole, the extent to which it was referred to differed slightly between the three countries: it was most common in the Swedish material, and a little less so in the American and Argentinean data.
- 9 See <https://www.spotify.com/us/brands/targeting/> (retrieved 3 January, 2018).

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