# Listening to Digital Media: Analysis of Music Consumption Pattern on the Example of Russian Social Networking Site VKontakte

## A user-focused research based on in-depth interviews

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## ABSTRACT

The present paper represents an overview of the most popular Russian social networking site VKontakte and its role in the formation of modern music consumption pattern in post-Soviet countries. Until spring 2017, it was known as the biggest platform for free music consumption in the region. The main distinctive feature of VKontakte was that it was providing free music content for its members and, as a result, was known for problems with international copyright law.

However, in 2017 drastic changes occurred in copyright policies of the network, which affected music content distribution in it. As a result, VKontakte users were experiencing new routines and rapid evolution of their daily consumption habits. This research provides extensive analysis of digital music listening practices, based on the in-depth interviews with the members of the network.

**Key words:** digital music, institutional approach, consumption, social networking site, Russia, Ukraine, habits, in-depth interviews, user experience, copyright, sharing, downloading, owning, prosumer, content, free.

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## INTRODUCTION

With the rise of the digital era and the evolution of web 2.0, music consumption has transformed significantly (North, 2016), (Manovich, 2009, p. 324), (Morris, 2015). The products of the music industry have become highly integrated in daily routines, with consumers getting the opportunity to listen to music at any time and place, using broad variety of devices (Morris, 2015). With the evolution of digital formats, the availability of music tracks has also expanded, and it is growing still.

Because of these rapid changes, issues of intellectual property rights as well as copyright protection problems have gained crucial importance (Wikström, 2009), partially due to the development of digital infrastructure, which allows music files to easily circulate across national borders, becoming subject to legal systems of various states (Hesmondhalgh, 2013 ). That is why, according to Jones, the broader implementation of the Internet and online services forced the music industry to struggle with controversies between the national copyright regulations and global trends of free file access, raising question of how to ensure reward for cultural goods consumption (Jones, 2002, p. 221). In such a context it is important to identify that regulations of copyright protection vary depending on geographical, economic and cultural environment, of a country where a track was produced and, even more importantly, of a country where it was consumed.

Nevertheless, even though there are debates dedicated to the decline of the artistic value of music with the introduction of digital carriers, copyright law is assumed to be necessary. It is accepted that regardless of whether such a process is accepted negatively or positively, law should protect art as a product of intellectual work and such an approach dominates in the Western Anglo-Saxon scientific schools (Cammaerts, 2011). However, by contrast there are still examples when in many countries illegal music consumption is normalized and is committed habitually on a daily basis. In the European region these are mostly countries of Eastern Europe and former USSR countries (Goldenzwaig, 2013) (Sherstoboeva, 2015).

In the present paper, it is assumed that the process of commodification in the music industry depends not only on official legal regulations in a country but also much on consumer behavior and cultural aspects together with the customs of a particular media market. This means that copyright violation actions are connected

not only to national law but also have an institutional nature (Sherstoboeva, 2015, p. 840). According to Elena Sherstoboeva and Ilya Kiriya and their research dedicated to Russian media piracy, copyright violation and media piracy are social institutional phenomena and take their roots in unofficial cultural practices, accepted for many years as normal (Sherstoboeva, 2015, p. 840). As a result, a conflict between official intellectual property regulations and real consumer behavior occurs in post-Soviet countries. Such consumer behavior might vary depending on the geographical region and specific features of a particular media market. Especially, these differences could be noticed on the example of contrast between the post-Soviet countries, and the western European countries or the US (Sherstoboeva, 2015, p. 839).

Given the circumstances described above, this thesis investigates a specific example in the post-Soviet media landscape – the Russian social networking site VKontakte (VK), examining it from users' perspective. VKontakte, or VK as it is often called, combines typical functions of a social networking site (SNS) as well as functions of a file sharing platform with an extensive music database. VK was launched in 2006 and since then has become an important player on the international music market, as well as the music market in post-Soviet countries (Smith, 2016) (Laura M. Steckman, 2017, p. 29). Especially, VK is notorious for its illegal content distribution, which has provoked numerous lawsuits from the biggest recording companies (IFPI, 2014). VK, likewise, is known to have the largest number of users among social networking sites in Russia and within the territory of post-Soviet countries such as Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and Georgia etc. (Teplinskaya, 2012). By 2015, VK had around 85 million active users, which made it one of the biggest social networks in Eastern Europe (Fanteev, 2015). This success might be explained partially by the availability of "audio service", which allows users to listen to music free of charge from VK database. As Russian scientists Elena Sherstoboeva and Ilya Kiriya indicate in their article "Russian media piracy in the context of censoring practices": "VK achieved its biggest audience after launching its famous audio service" (Sherstoboeva, 2015, p. 845). This proves the importance of the music service within VK's popularity.

In 2014 the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative identified VK as one of the worst "notorious markets" for piracy (RIAA News, 2014 ) (Dowling, 2014). In addition, VK violated not only copyright policy of singers or recording companies, but also, antipiracy law in Russia. This point is exemplified in the research conducted by

Katsiaryna Baran in 2015 dedicated to the acceptance and quality perceptions of social networks on the example of VK case study: "Regarding to our interviewees, the main advantage is free music and video sharing, which violates Russian law of N 230-F3, part 4, chapter 70, from 18.12.2006. The music and video sharing is "free," but is illegal for both, VKontakte users and for the SNS itself" (Baran, 2015, p. 44). However, in 2016 VK signed licensing deals with Warner Music Group and Sony Music Entertainment, in order to power a new mobile subscription-streaming app (Inghman, 2016); signifying the beginning of a new era for the Russian music market.

Yet, VK has been controversial not only in terms of legalities but also in terms of politics, showed by another big event connected to VK. It took place in May 2017, when Ukrainian government banned the network and other media platforms of Mail.ru holding from the territory of the country (Economist, 2017). It means that the second largest VK's market after Russian now is closed (RBK, 2017), as illustrated in the following screen shot. The reason for this ban is political; however, it might change practices of music consumption in the post-Soviet region.
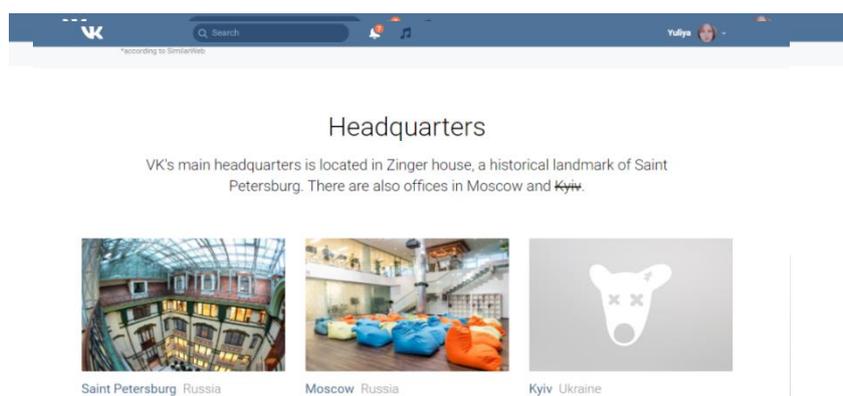


*Figure 1: Screenshot from VKontakte page "About"*

Finally, in May 2017 Mail.ru introduced new regulations of music consumption (Gerasiukova, 2017). According to new policies, users will be able to continue listening to music online from their PCs, however with pauses for advertising between tracks. If a user wants to listen to music from a mobile device on Android and IOS, she or he would need a special licensed app called Boom. The new application grants access to free streaming with advertising, however, to "cash" songs for offline listening a user needs to buy monthly subscription. These alterations created new paradigm for Russian market introducing western model of music consumption into

daily routines of people. Implementation of new policies creates certain challenges both for the future development of the SNS itself and for the users of the site. Unofficially it is known that the new system of copyright control is not always working effectively, and it has certain holes allowing users to continue listening to music for free.

In the context of these cultural and historical circumstances, there is a necessity to study VK as an important example of media products currently generated by the post-Soviet region, as well as for understanding its impact on music consumption in certain countries. It is of interest for the present thesis also as a less extensively researched media platform, in comparison to other popular platforms for online music (for example – Spotify), while still being a strong influencer on wider structural changes affecting the music industry and music consumers today. Taking the relationship between digital technologies and users' experiences of cultural goods' in view, this thesis focuses on VK as technological platform in specific geo-cultural contexts and its role in music listening practices.

## VKONTAKTE – A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF MUSIC FEATURES

Before investigating previous research dedicated to digital music and VK, it is important to provide a brief overview of the most important VK's technical features, based on the example of the author's personal account in the social networking site. Such an overview is necessary for a complete understanding of the platform. According to the information from the main page of the platform, VK was created as: "…a social network that unites people all over the world and helps them communicate comfortably and promptly. VK always aims to be the fastest, most modern and attractive way of communication in the network" (VK, 2017).
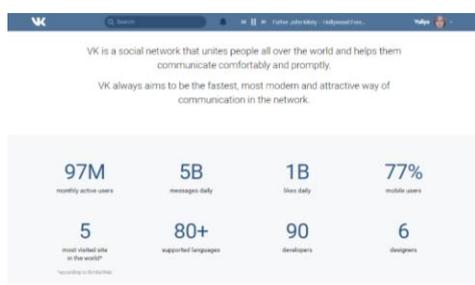


*Figure 2: Screenshot of VKontakte page "About"*

Generally, it is known that VK was developed off the Facebook template. The interface employs the same corporate blue colors; VK likewise supports messaging, a news feed and a user's timeline (P. Åker, 2017, p. 2). However, the distinguishing feature of VK is the availability of its own music and video databases. "Audios" is a separate menu page of VK's interface, where it has the same hierarchical value as "News", "Messages", "Friends", "Communities", "Photos", "Videos" and "Games" sections. Therefore, the audio function is one of the main features in VK.



*Figure 3: Screenshot of VKontakte profile home page*

However, VK is an SNS in the first place, which strongly affects interaction with music on the platform. For an average VK user the music function is both entertaining and communicational tool (P. Åker, 2017). For example, a member of the network can use tracks in timeline posts both on his or her own page and on a friend's page, exhibiting in such a way his or her taste and demonstrating music preferences. One can also send music in private messages supporting it by a relevant picture or text, if a user doesn't want to share a track publicly on a "wall".
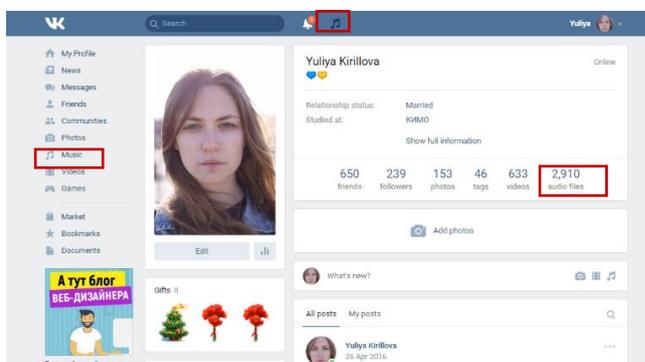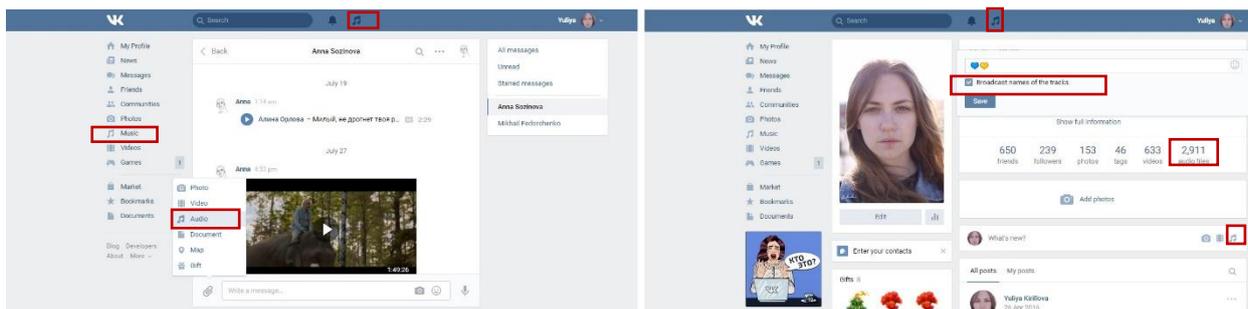


*Figure 4: Screenshot of VKontakte profile home page*

Another important aspect of music use in VK is the possibility to broadcast songs in the so called status of a user. Close to the profile picture a user has space, where he or she can write a motto or an inspirational phrase, which describes his or her current mood. But VK provides an opportunity to allow the status to broadcast a song, which he or she is listening to in the very present moment. A user can share songs not only on the personal page, but also in a community (or sometimes in VK slang, users just refer to such communities as "public" auth.), which a user moderates or is an administrator in. Friends or subscribers can thus see what this person is currently listening to. Such possibilities make a song more than just a musical unit – it acquires additional emotional context and textuality. It also emphasizes feeling of "the now" and creates an impression of real time presence in the network.
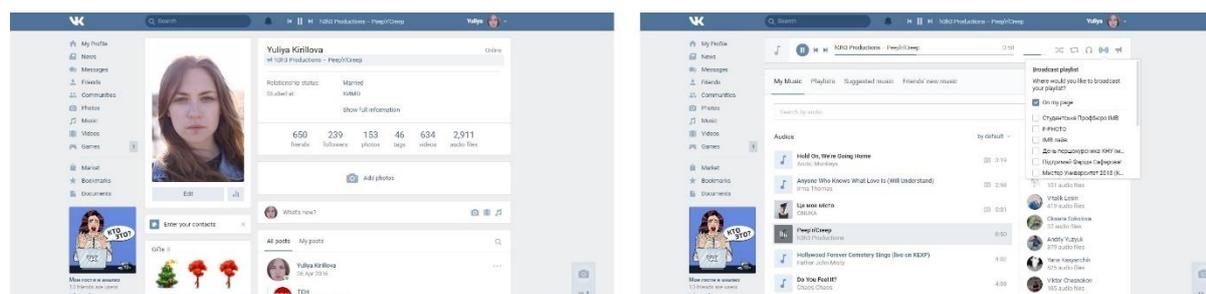


*Figure 4: Screenshot of VKontakte profile home page*

On the other hand, a user can limit the access of other network members to the whole music collection or to a particular playlist, which have special "intimate" meaning for him or her. One can also listen to friends' collections or search for so called "suggested music".
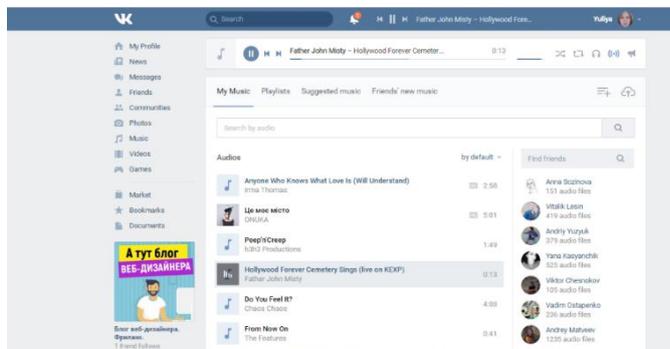


*Figure 5: Screenshot of VKontakte profile Music page*

A user has an opportunity to upload tracks so other users could search for them in the database. By contrast to a typical file sharing service, one can still listen to songs even if he or she has not uploaded a song (P. Åker, 2017). While uploading a track, a user can fill in a name of a singer and of a song. It is important to know that each track keeps the information about a user, who uploaded it. It means that one can trace who was the initial person to add an audio to the database.

User generated content results in the fact that VK has a lot of incorrectly named tracks, which makes search function less convenient in comparison to other, fully licensed musical platforms such as Spotify or Apple Music. For example, the soundtrack from the film "Requiem for a Dream" could be labeled as Mozart's "Requiem" (Goldenzwaig, 2013, p. 52). Another unusual feature is that some of the songs have information about lyrics. To access it a user needs just to klick on the name of a song and the lyrics will appear.
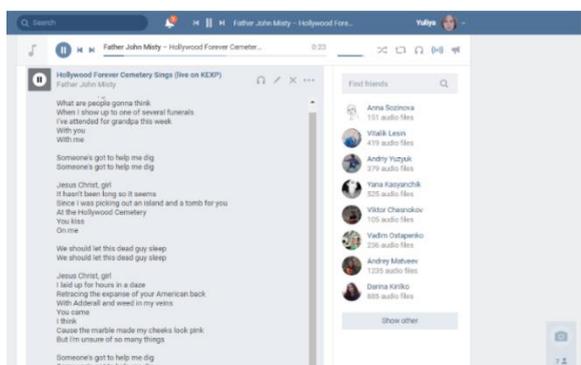


*Figure 6: Screenshot of VKontakte profile Music page*

Communities in VK play an important role in the promotion of music and in the process of filling the database with new tracks. They also generate playlists and serve as platforms for discussion within the network itself. Moderators of such groups thus play an important role, by uploading content and communicating with their public. They have their own "copyright" markers within the database demonstrating that songs were uploaded exactly by this group and not by any other. In addition, moderators of public pages have the possibility to share their current tracks to the group, and, as a result, subscribers will be able to listen to moderators' playlists in online mode. This function is reminiscent of a radio station, where a moderator plays the role of DJ host.

Finally, it is important to describe the mobile version of VK. Before changes in copyright policy introduced in May 2017 (Gerasiukova, 2017) VK periodically had various changes in policies regarding the access of music from Android and IOS mobile systems. There were times when it was possible not only to stream music, but also cash music and listen to it offline. However, currently the mobile app only allows users to stream songs which are not under copyright protection. Otherwise he or she will be suggested to download a new separate app called Boom, available both in Google Play Market and in App Store. The application is free of charge and it provides the opportunity to stream music for free, but a user will then have to listen to advertising every half an hour, similarly to Spotify. The application also offers up to 60 minutes of cashed music, but to access the limitless cashing function user is offered to purchase a subscription for 25 SEK (approximately 2,6 EUR), which is rather unusual feature within the Russian media market.
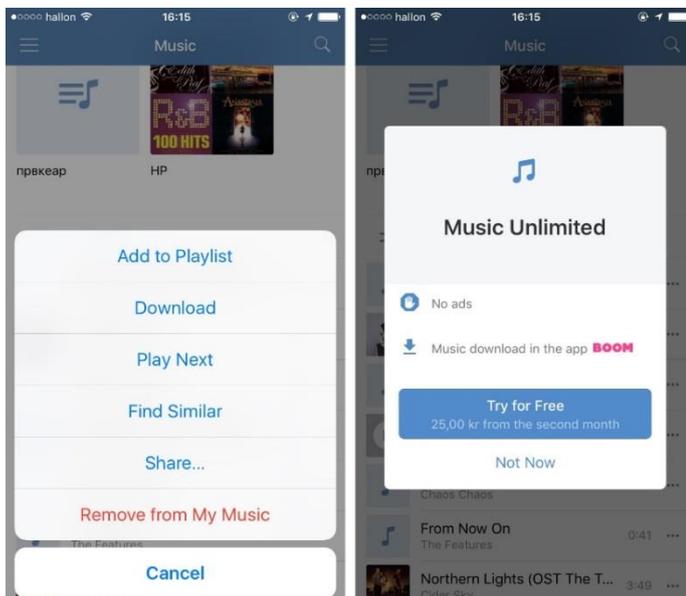
*Figure 7: Screenshot of VKontakte mobile application*

To conclude, VK offers users a wide range of features in relation to music, which appear in the context of VK as an SNS and undoubtedly contribute to users' overall experiences of music. As suggested before, music tracks in VK also have social value within the network, allowing users to interact with each other by music exchange. One can confess love, or express the current mood using a song as "meta text". VK is also characterized by freedom of actions performed with music. This flexibility can be perceived as the distinguishing feature, which shapes user behavior and creates relevant algorithms.

After giving an outline for VK key features in relation to its music database, we can now move further to an overview of previous research dedicated to VK and music consumption in the network.

## PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Giving more attention to the previous research, in the context of the present paper, it is necessary to mention that VK as SNS has been broadly investigated in scholarly discussion. There is no doubt that the biggest attention it received within the Eastern European academic circles, especially from Russian scholars.

The network has been studied broadly in the context of cultural identification in comparison to the Western model of social networking platforms, for instance in a recent research project "Personal Profile Settings as Cultural Frames: Facebook Versus VKontakte" introduced in the *Journal of Creative Communications* (Shanyang Zhao, 2017 ).

Another angle widely discussed by scholars is role of VKontakte in the formation of political activism and public engagement (B. Gladarev, 2012). Especially during the recent years, a great variety of research projects dedicated to political confrontation between Russia and Ukraine emerged (D. Duvanova, 2015), (I. Stewart, 2017), (O. Reuter, 2013). VKontakte has, likewise, been studied by several scholars in terms of ethnical, national and social identity formation (Suleymanova, 2009), (Morris, 2013), (Glukhov, 2017). In addition, as any other social networks VKontakte has been investigated in relation to digital marketing technologies and online consumerism (Ageeva, et al., 2016), (Vasilyeva, 2014). However, it should be stated that the research dedicated to the aspects of music and copyright in VK is rather limited.

Yet, Western media research, in its turn, demonstrates broad range of studies dedicated to the sphere of music consumption in digital age, in relation to for instance cultural aspects and identity (Hoeven, 2014), (Morris, 2015). There are also many studies of the music industry and digital technologies (Wikström, 2009), as well as papers dedicated to music and copyright law (Volgsten, 2012).

When it comes to VK, research particularly relevant for this thesis has been conducted within the cross-cultural research project "Music Use in the Online Media Age", conducted by a research group at Södertörn University, Sweden and published in the book *Music Streaming: Practices, Media, Cultures* (Johansson et al. 2017) – which involved analysis of VK as a music platform. Preliminary findings from this project, dedicated to the Russian segment of young digital music listeners, were

examined by Goldenzwaig (2013), who uses the metaphor of the "Cloud" presented by Wikström (Wikström, 2009: 5–9) as well as the theory of participatory culture introduced by Jenkins (Jenkins 2006)  when attempting to "identify how technological, social, cultural development affects music listening, music-related practices and, in a broader perspective, the role of music in the lives of young audiences" (Goldenzwaig, 2013, p. 39). Although the research was not limited only to music consumption in VK but rather music listening in Russia in general, a focus was the SNS, since at that time VK had become one of the major platforms for interaction and music listening.

The main results indicated that VK was not just a music platform but rather a universal space for interaction between young adults in Russia. The participants had strong emotional connection to VK not only as to a service, but also as to "nationally determined media consumption pattern" (Goldenzwaig, 2013, p. 52). In addition, reviews of users contained controversial remarks regarding VK music. Some of the participants were positive about having an "easy access to free music" others were critical towards lack of control over music flow and difficulties in the search process. Especially, many participants were irritated by the wide presence of incorrectly named tracks. But still, even with all the above-mentioned drawbacks in view, the participants were using VK regularly and didn't express determination to switch to the other music cervices with monthly fees (Goldenzwaig, 2013, p. 54). One of the important findings was also connected to the general perception of free music in VK. The participants referred to their practices putting a clear distinction between Russian and "Western" environment and justified some of the actions by "our mentality" and differences with the "world" (Goldenzwaig, 2013, pp. 54-55).

The second work of particular relevance, stemming from the same project, is Patrik Åker's chapter in *Streaming Music* (2017) investigating the landscape of music consumption on VK. It describes which actions users can do with audio files and how they can use music for interaction in VK, in order to discuss how the platform frames musical experiences. As a theoretical background, Åker refers to such concept as "post recorded culture". Post-recorded culture, according to the author, is "a situation whereby recordings and the forms invested in by the music industry are still important, but whereby a lack of control and a vernacular use of recordings break with how music is sorted, selected and presented by the industry" (P. Åker, 2017, p. 16).

Thus, even though VK is an important player within music industry in the regions of the Baltic Sea, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, there were only two relevant research projects dedicated to the music consumption in the network. Notably, these studies of VK have however been conducted before the recent changes in the copyright policies of the network, and they also focus specifically on a Russian context. Therefore, there is a necessity to study the shift in daily music consumption practices of consumers in the eastern European context provoked by the change of VK policies, and to continue with further exploratory investigation of the field. Moreover, as stated above, VK's music database strongly relies on user-generated content, which is why the interest of the research is focused not only on the official copyright policy of the platform, but also strongly on the behavior of its members.

# THESIS AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of the thesis is to use an exploratory, small-scale research framework to study VK users' everyday habits and experiences of music consumption on the platform in the eastern European region. Having wider theories of music digitization in mind, a further objective is to explore and map the relation between online technologies for music listening and users' perception of music relating to a certain technological platform as well as to specific geo-cultural contexts. Doing so, the thesis will, thus, provide insights into VK as an important example of post-Soviet digital media environment, and will help to outline the characteristics of contemporary music consumption practices in the above-mentioned region.

With VK's historical, cultural, technological and economic background in view, the analysis focuses on in-depth study of interviews with VK users in relation to their opinions about their daily music consumption practices in VK. There is a necessity to trace how music consumption is shaped through the discourse and algorithms presented in VK and how users place themselves within such an environment. Theoretical framework that guides the research contains overview of the previous studies dedicated to music consumption and digital technologies as well as studies grounded on consumer behavior and the role of custom in such a context.

### *The thesis will answer the following research questions:*

▪ How do users consume music in the environment of VK on daily basis?

While answering the first question the research will be dedicated to the everyday practices in VK: schedule of music listening; which user routines are accompanied by the music consumption in VK; with the help of which devices do users consume music from VK (mobile phone, PC etc.); what do they do with music (share, download, save playlists, stream, upload tracks etc.)

▪ How do users experience music consumption in relation to the technical affordances of VK as a platform?

The focus is concentrated on technical possibilities of the platform such as privacy settings; structuralizing of playlists; suggesting algorithm etc., as well as users' attitudes towards recent updates and how these factors have influenced their music consumption.

- What are users' attitudes towards the value of digital music in VK?

This question will help to study other factors that influence the process of music consumption in VK such as national and cultural identity, political affiliation, and location of a user.

## THEORY

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of user experience in VK, it is necessary to investigate theories related to music consumption and the development of new media.

In the first place, the relation between availability of new digital formats and evolution of consumption practices in the Eastern Europe will be reviewed. Since VK is an online platform, the influence of digital affordances on the structure of the network is crucial. It is important to remember that VK incorporates functions of SNS and of audio exchange database, which is reviewed in relation to the concept of media ecology and connectivity (Dijck, 2013). On the other hand, regarding daily user experiences and communicational practices one should refer to the concept of so-called "phatic culture" or "phatic interaction" (Miller, 2008).

And finally, with the geo-cultural background in mind, institutional approach to copyright violation practices in post-Soviet countries will be discussed to underline the specific distinctive characteristics of the platform (Sherstoboeva, 2015). In this context, special attention is paid to the concept of post-recorded culture (P. Åker, 2017).

### MUSIC AS DIGITAL COMMODITY

To start with, it is important to mention that VK should be regarded as a product of the new media environment (Hesmondhalgh, 2013 ) and it combines functions of both social networking site and a music platform (P. Åker, 2017), (Dijck, 2013). This could become possible only due to the digitalization and evolution of the Internet environment (Hesmondhalgh, 2013 , p. 8). In this context, many new aspects of music consumption emerged and modified the perception of music as commodity. Accessibility of audio tracks influenced the understanding of music material value and how a producer of an intellectual property can be rewarded for her or his creation.

It is important to explore such issues as new digital music formats (Morris, 2015), (Sterne, 2009) and their influence on music consumption, the role of musical tracks in communication process between individuals (Jones, 2010), transformation of perception towards musical tracks in digital environment comparing to the one was in the era dominated by the conventional carriers (Hagen, 2015) as well as

commodification of music in contrast with to the growing freedom of access to information (Hesmondhalgh, 2013 ). All these trends are defining in the process of understanding the phenomenon of music consumption in VK.

The above-mentioned aspects will be discussed in the following chapter with a view to the further exploration of how the social, technological, geo-cultural and historical factors influence the process of music listening by young adults in Post-Soviet countries as well as the process of their interaction in VK both as SNS and online music platform.

### Digital Music Formats

The importance of a medium and its form was admitted long ago by Marshall McLuhan with his iconic phrase "medium is a message". McLuhan established an important approach to the understanding of media theory – medium and its format determines further interaction between the message and the recipient. In our case we can connect this rule to the relation between music formats and the end consumer of music products (McLuhan, 2011). This principle should be remembered – format and channel matter. Keeping the above mentioned in mind, we need to understand role of digital audio format, especially, in the geo-cultural context of post-Soviet region. One should understand that consumer behavior is indissolubly connected to the platform or medium, through which he or she is accessing music.

Adrian North mentions: "While the technology of the late 20th century grouped individual pieces of music on CDs, vinyl records or tapes containing approximately an hour of music that was played sequentially, digitization allows users to select individual pieces based on any number of attributes" (North, 2016, p. 139). The author confirms drastic influence of new formats on the perception of music in digital age. He adds: "Moreover, in addition to selecting individual pieces of music or music by an artist, digital technology allows users to define 'playlists' to be played automatically, or to use 'shuffle' options through which a device will randomly select a series of pieces from a user's collection" (North, 2016, p. 139).

Jonathan Sterne in his book *"Sound Souvenirs"* discusses the evolution of technologies for mobile music listening as well as the way it changed the perception of music and its role in everyday life of listeners (Sterne, 2009). Sterne claims that: "…many of the changes and impacts of the digital transition were first visible on the example of music" (Sterne, 2009, p. 198). According to Sterne: "…the music

commodity then was one of the first to undergo changes, in its position in relation to the previous state of value" (Sterne, 2009, p. 198). Stern explains it by the fact that in 90s, when these changes started to occur in major scale, music files due to their new format and relatively small size were easier to distribute comparing to, for example, video files. In addition, before smartphone boom, one could consume music only in special circumstances. There was no possibility to stream music in the underground or to listen to enormous number of tracks from a smartphone. Listening was limited by a carrier and a format. As a result, music production and distribution became much more dynamically influenced by the new "rules of the game" and by the emergence of new formats.

New formats brought more flexibility to the life of users: "digital formats like CDs and, later, MP3 files have made the disruption of artists' "album" presentations easier by enabling the listener to select and reorder at whim" (Hagen, 2015, p. 627). This became truly power over music and thus music became not just a leisure supplement but also obtained capacity to influence the structure of daily routines. With digital formats capacities, a user can listen to music not only from a stationary source, but also via portable digital devices such as MP3 players (iPod) or mobile phones. This allowed continuity in the listening process and as a result digital music reorganized the structure of daily habits of users.

A good example of a new player in such circumstances was Napster - an American MP3 file exchange network, which initially functioned in peer-to-peer format (Morris, 2015, p. 97). Napster took the advantage of new formats and their flexibility and was one of the first platforms, which later will inspire VK creators.

Anja Nylund Hagen in her article "The Playlist Experience: Personal Playlists in Music Streaming Services" mentions the concept of format's storage capacity introduced by media theorist Friedrich Kittler (Hagen, 2015, p. 627). The feature of the bigger storage capacity of new formats such as MP3, transformed the perception towards music. Nylund Hagen claims, that bigger storage capacity means more extensive possibilities for the quality of music and brings with it a distinctive protocol for listening (Hagen, 2015, p. 627). In the same article, Nylund Hagen also considers formats to be the key elements of the material culture of music (Hagen, 2015, p. 627).

It is important to keep in mind the role of storage capacity of digital formats in daily routines of users. But to grasp the whole meaning of the change in perception

towards music consumption it is important to understand that last twenty or even thirty years saw unprecedently intense and dynamic changes and rapid evolution of the whole music industry (Hesmondhalgh, 2013 ).

The availability of bigger storage capacity brought freedom to choose among big music variety and created continuity in music flow (Castells, 1999). The notion of "flow" was initially introduced by Manuel Castells in 80s and referred to in his later work "Space of Flows, Space of Places: Materials for a Theory of Urbanism in the information Age" (Castells, 2005). However, according to Castells such term as "flow" relates mostly to the television or news continuity enabled by the new technologies. This concept can though also be applied to the evolution of music distribution. Escaping physical embodiment, music became endless and varied. Modern listener has a luxury of music streaming without thoughts about which song he or she should keep, and which delete. This freedom of unstoppable consumption would be the "flow" of music in the context of the present research.

But format is just one component in the whole picture. We always should keep in mind the network technological affordances. One should remember that in post-Soviet countries technological evolution started later and, as a result, Internet development and such indicator as network speed for a long time was not catching up with the western countries (Tulgan, 2008). For example, frames relay average speed of the channel for fixed broadband in 2007, approximate time of VK introduction, was quite limited. Digital subscriber link of 2mbites/s was available only for big corporations, while final user received much lower speed. Dial up technology still was broadly used in 2007 with average speed of 56 kbites/s, which is extremely low for streaming (Starodubtsev, 2011, p. 57). According to the data provided in the research conducted by Evgeniy Starodubtsev and Boris Dudin, by the end of 2008 the broadband penetration in Russia was much lower than in the countries with developed economies, and equaled 19.4%, while the target level to be reached by 2012 was 60%. According to the research: "…by the end of 2008 the actual nationwide broadband penetration was 7%, which was about three times lower than in the developed economies" (Starodubtsev, 2011, p. 57). In addition, broadband connection was too expensive for such a quality (Starodubtsev, 2011, p. 59).

On the other hand, ISDN technology was also popular and allowed base channel and E1 with approximately 2-1,5 mbites/s with 64 kbites/s for a single user. According to the report provided by the prominent Russian telecommunication

company MTS (currently Vodafone Russia), for mobile users 3G was firstly introduced in Russia in 2008 with all the regions' coverage only in 2010. In Ukraine, full 3G coverage was finished only in 2015. HSDPA back then was only 2mbites/s which is a small speed comparing to the current average 63 mbites/s (Tulgan, 2008). Therefore, it identifies challenges, which influenced routines of VK users and affected the development of SNS in general.

For example, for VK at the time of its rise, it was an important not only to provide the possibility of streaming songs on PC but also an opportunity for downloading. It was required for users in Post-Soviet countries, because back in 2007 the technological capability of the then smartphones didn't allow streaming songs as easy as it is possible nowadays (Goldenzwaig, 2013, p. 41). Also, users had tendencies to collect music rather than stream it.

Digital formats lunched new tendencies where users had ability to easily switch tracks, choose own sequence of songs and enable shuffle function, which allows user to customize listening experience. All these functions were included in VK's affordances and brought revolutionary changes in everyday lives of users. This approach to the understanding of digital format's role in the development of music habits and digital algorithms is proved by the research of Anja Nylund Hagen. According to Nylund Hagen: "Participants also associated the shuffle with a particular mode of listening. In contrast to manually edited playlists or the prearranged "album mode," the shuffle almost insists upon somewhat distracted or casual listening, because the user cedes control to the software" (Hagen, 2015, p. 634). Before the introduction of digital music formats software and algorithms did not facilitate the process of music consumption neither they influenced it.

Nylund Hagen also indicates that comparing music-streaming practices with earlier mechanisms of music consumption such as music collecting, one immediately encounters the dilemma that digital formats and streaming services make it impossible to "collect" music as such, because, in her opinion the format offers music through subscription rather than ownership (Hagen, 2015, p. 627). But in the case of VK due to the fact the it allowed downloading through the special extension for the browser, we can see that the phenomenon of owning music is still present in the post-Soviet discourse, while for the Western science it is slowly moving to the past (P. Åker, 2017).

Nylund Hagen also claims that nowadays symbolic substitutes for physical collections must then arise through software interfaces designed to enable or restrict access to music and other cultural objects encoded in digital formats (Hagen, 2015, p. 627). As an example of such interfaces we can mention digital playlists offered by various platforms, and VK is one of them. As a result, the format matters in connection to the organizational structure of a platform and, as a result, music consumption.

VK as phenomenon proves the statement of Nylund Hagen, where the author indicates with reference to Jonathan Stern: "Digitized music via streaming services and MP3 files, after all, is "designed for massive exchange, casual listening and massive accumulation" (Sterne 838). These qualities have liberated recorded music from the traditional economy of exchange value, within which ownership status is central" (Hagen, 2015, p. 628).

Departing from this statement, we can conclude that with the introduction of new digital formats music industry experienced prominent changes in many directions. Firstly, users received freedom of choice and flexibility in the variety of songs. Secondly, it is important to underline the trend of music collecting practices replacement with streaming practices. In this context, the difference in the evolution of this trend between the post-Soviet countries, where collecting practices are still broadly present and the Western societies should be underlined. And finally, the evolution of music formats greatly affected the perception of ownership in the music industry. Therefore, in the next section we will discuss this in detail.

**Ownership and Value of Music in Digital Environment**

As it was mentioned before Nylund Hagen indicates that new digital music formats changed perception towards the ownership in music industry. Since with the introduction of MP3 circulation and dissemination of musical content became much more facilitated, now consumers started to take it for granted.

In the article by Gerard J. Lewis, Gary Graham and Glenn Hardaker the authors discuss concept of ownership and refer to is as to the important attribute, which should be protected by relevant rules and regulations in order to ensure that a creator of a music piece is rewarded: "Copyright secures ownership of an original work of music to the author (e.g. composer and lyricist). It is important to ensure the talents of successful artists and songwriters are rewarded" (Lewis, 2005, p. 349).

Lewis, Graham and Hardaker also underline the role of digitalization and rapid evolution of new formats in the process of modification of the concept of ownership in digital environment: "This is a major break from the pre-web model because it is now a much more complex and difficult issue of the ability of the major record company's attempts to successfully enforce protection rather than purely having ownership, which is going to be major determinant of their future business success" (Lewis, 2005, p. 355).

In relation to this one should remember, that ownership always relates to the notions of reward and commodity. Commodity in terms of Marx is "in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another" (Marx, 1887, p. 27). Referring to Hesmondhalgh, commodification is a more encompassing process than industrialization and does not necessarily entail the use of industrial production techniques (Hesmondhalgh, 2013 , p. 69).  Therefore, it is possible to consider music as an object of commodity since it has always had significant value for humanity working as both an instrument for socialization, identity construction, source of pleasure and entertainment as well as a powerful medium.

On the other hand, music in general has also sacred and spiritual meaning being always recognized as one of the fundamental brunches of art. However, with the development of mass music production the artistic value of musical tracks was put into question while the process of commodification confirmed. As it was mentioned in the introduction to the present paper, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their book *"Dialectics of Enlightenment"* discuss the controversies of capitalistic system and the disturbing trends emerging together with the development of cultural industries. The authors stand on the position that mass production neglects the uniqueness of cultural objects and creates societies of consumers instead of aware art connoisseurs. Adorno and Horkheimer claim that the artistic quality of cultural goods including music pieces was converted into purchasing power (Adorno, 2002, p. 105). Walter Benjamin holds to similar standpoint and indicates that the whole notion of art has been changed with the rise of mass production (Benjamin, 1969, p. 1). Music in this context becomes a commodified piece of cultural mass media industry, which however still is of great value for consumers.

Although Adorno, Horkheimer and Benjamin discuss the phenomenon of mass culture under the critical angle, still, on the other hand, the mentioned trends are accompanied by the development of the necessary legal grounds. Therefore, in

Western societies there is a parallel process namely the development of copyright law aimed at protecting not only material goods, but also those of intellectual nature. This sphere of legislation is especially important in the dynamic environment of Internet, where the omnipresent access to information is quite often normalized, which creates an impression that a user should have free access to various information including media files such as musical tracks. In its turn, copyright law protects artistic works.

According to Mathias Klang, copyright creates a strong, and sometimes profitable, exclusive right of a creator over his or her work. This also relates to the works of art irrespective of the form: material or digital (Klang, 2010, pp. 9-10). That is why the paradox between the accessibility and value exists and is specially intensified in online environment.

First aspect that has changed with the introduction of online platforms for music consumption is that music stopped to be feasible and acquired the form of invisible "cloud" (Marshall, 2014). Previously in the XX century, music was distributed on physical carriers and the consumer had an impression of buying music in the form of material goods.

Goldenzwaig in his turn made similar observations during the interviews with focus groups of Russian young adults. The participants were holding to the opinion that online music "should be free". They were motivating that firstly by the difficulties of conducting payments in online systems as far as in Russia the system of cash free payments is not developed enough. On the other hand, the participants suggested that there is a difference between paying for material goods such as CD or vinyl and indicated that immaterial right to consume music is rather ambivalent to pay for (Goldenzwaig, 2013, p. 55) In such circumstances the notion of ownership becomes blurry and is hard to define and, as a result, to protect.

Patrick Brukart indicates similar trend: "In the audio-visual enclosures created by intellectual property law, contract law, and computer software, music collectors face a loss of property, control and usability, legal rights of first sale, consumer product protections, and other customary rights and privileges" (Burkart, 2008, p. 250). According to Brukart, where he refers to another scholar Jonathan Sterne: "Working at the social systems level, Sterne (2006) takes a less intimate view of digital music collecting. Sterne finds sharing and hoarding practices to be encoded into the very design of the MP3 format, which he considers a "cultural artifact" with a

set of inscriptions left from its historical place and time in late capitalism" (Burkart, 2008, p. 248).

Jones in his research proves this point and mentions that network technologies permit less commercial control and thus it is more difficult to trace the illegal flow of music content: "insofar they permit (for now, at least) digitized music to freely circulate without restriction or compensation, to the chagrin of copyright enthusiasts" (Jones, 2002, p. 220). The author also underlines that third parties are interested in using musical content as a marketing instrument to attract more visitors to their platforms and websites: "The rapid changes in computing and Internetworking […] have changed the connections between record labels, musicians and consumers" (Jones, 2002, p. 220). Therefore, VK is a bright example of such optimization of music content and its use for marketing purposes.

On the other hand, music for a certain period went out of the clear legislative system of protection entering grey zone since consumption in the Internet has not yet been regulated. In such circumstances recording companies appeared to be under the threat of losing profit at all if shadowed by the illegal free music databases. It means that music industry for the sake of self-protection started transformations to keep up with the changes that have been happening during the recent decades. Jones indicates: "the new media in some way are unlike the old, if only in terms of economics" (Jones, 2000, p. 219). This means that new media influence not only the way music is consumed, but also its economic value. The author also points out that it is important to approach music industry with the convergence of all the media branches in mind (Jones, 2000, p. 221). He underlines the fact that "the music industry must shed its insular methods and actively work with other industries or risk losing its market share and power base to competing interests" (Jones, 2000, p. 221).

Another scholar Andy Bennett, underlying the commodified nature of music products indicates that music is like such valuable industries as fashion, clothing and magazines. The author points out that all the above-mentioned commodities became the "signature tune" of the time and should bring reward to the creators (Bennett, 2001, p. 10). The author also underlines the role of technological agenda in the facilitation of mass production and distribution of music among the masses of youngsters.

Burkart continues this logic referring to the process of digital music distribution and introducing connections between it and the question of copyright and intellectual

property. He refers to music as to "enclosure" and discusses the role of terms and conditions suggested on online platforms for music distribution: "The enclosure is tightened in communications online. Digital distribution through most online services is handled by legal transactions based on contract law, for services. Music players also require users to agree to the terms of shrink wrap or click wrap contracts. Providing these services is unregulated, such that public interest regulations related to communications do not apply. Distributing music online as a service, rather than as products, improves intellectual property rights owners' control over newly licensed copies, but also can prevent music fans from becoming music collectors" (Burkart, 2008, p. 248). In such a case it is difficult to trace the real owner of a music piece and to put responsibility for the potential violation of copyright regulations on someone, since the responsibilities of a platform are limited by the terms and conditions.

This idea of conflict between responsibilities of users and a platform is developed by the author further: "Users, who are "authenticated", are subjected to continual online surveillance and relinquish any rights to anything of value that they generate in the enclosure. Surveillance can become internalized emotionally, so that users willingly perform the "work of being watched" and contribute to the value of their own user profiles as cyber commodities" (Burkart, 2008, p. 249).

Another aspect that influences position of music industry within media market and its level of commodification is the historical and cultural custom in a country. Contrary to the Western democracies, post-Soviet countries experienced different stages on the way to digitalization of music industry. Thus, such countries appeared to have weaker legal framework for ensuring copyright protection. For example, according to Elena Sherstoboeva and Ilya Kiriya: "The current legal antipiracy measures are not likely to contribute materially to the fight against piracy because piracy is a cultural phenomenon rather than an economic or legal problem in Russia" (Sherstoboeva, 2015, p. 840). The authors suggest that media piracy in Russia and other former USSR countries is not simply the attempt to own music without paying for it, but also the result of advanced identity formation process connected both to the oppositional music consumption and the perception that the cultural products should be available free of charge (Sherstoboeva, 2015, p. 840).

Music and understanding of its commodified value is different in the abovementioned region. The authors explain this with the help of historical overview. Due to the existence of the main communist ideology in Soviet Union, there were

seventy years of quite a particular approach to the art production as such. The authors indicate: "In the Soviet cultural economy, the problem of risk was secondary because culture was state owned and vertically financed" (Sherstoboeva, 2015, p. 843).

Concluding this section, it is important to underline that the notion of commodity and ownership transformed dramatically with the development of new digital media. That is why initial creators faced the difficulties of receiving the revenue for their work. Especially this trend is visible in the context of post-Soviet countries. Due to that in the next section more attention is paid to the analysis of geo-cultural circumstances in the region, where VK is dominating.

**Digital Music in Post-Soviet Countries**

As it was mentioned before, music industry in post-Soviet countries is characterized by specific circumstances of historical development. While entering digital age, music in post-Soviet countries boomed with illegal distribution in the Internet. This process was one of the trends creating a new digital phenomenon as Runet.

Although, there is no clear definition for what Runet is, there are some specific features which need to be mentioned. Generally speaking, Runet or Russian Internet is considered to be a special Internet environment, which unites all the Russian speaking audience and is defined by loose regulations in relation to copyright laws, presence of political censorship and of specific content, appealing solely to Russian speaking audience. In addition, it should be taken into consideration that the proportion of those, who can speak English in post-Soviet countries, is rather low. As a result, in such a context any Russian speaking services would be more popular there than their alternatives in English. This happened to VK, when it entered the market as a Russian adaptation of Facebook. In addition, VK was more attractive to users due to its free music database included in the standard functions of the site. However, the question of why VK emerged as a phenomenon of music consumption for several generations of users and how it hit the target of the mostly popular social network can be answered with the help of geo-cultural and historical overview.

Here it should be mentioned that Goldenzwaig underlines that the main reason for VK being one of the biggest music distribution platforms in post-Soviet countries is "crucial nationally determined media consumption pattern" inherited and successfully

used in commercial purposes by VK (Goldenzwaig, 2013, p. 52). It means that the habit of "cultural content as a free public resource" that exists outside of restrictive copyright practices was established in post-Soviet countries long ago and thus "every user can enjoy the gigantic array of music uploaded onto VK for free" (Goldenzwaig, 2013, p. 52).

Sherstoboeva and Kiriya confirm this point and analyze the background for such state of things in their article "Russian media piracy in the context of censoring practices" (Sherstoboeva, 2015). The authors indicate that pirate music distribution in post-Soviet countries in general and in Russia in particular is strongly related to the cultural aspect and as a result is not limited only to the extent or legal regulations: "The current legal antipiracy measures are not likely to contribute materially to the fight against piracy because piracy is a cultural phenomenon rather than an economic or legal problem in Russia" (Sherstoboeva, 2015, p. 840). The authors suggest that media piracy in Russia and other countries of the former USSR is not simply the attempt to own music without paying for it, but also the result of a sustainable process stimulated by the perception dominating in post-Soviet countries that the cultural products should be available free of charge (Sherstoboeva, 2015, p. 840). These habitual practices have been elaborated throughout generations and created relevant environment for the emergence of such platform as VK: "This practice shaped certain social habits of media consumption along with the attitude that the access to the cultural goods should be free or at least affordable for the masses" (Sherstoboeva, 2015, p. 842).

This process was probably lunched in Soviet times, when all the spheres of social and cultural life in the Republics were under the total control of the state. Art and cultural industries could not develop separately and often didn't bring much revenue to the initial creator. In such circumstances, musicians, artists, writers and other workers of art industry were members of professional unions called to regulate the process of art creation: "Such organizations wielded huge economic power, as they allocated financial resources, including grants for young members, apartments, and other privileges. Moreover, they completely controlled cultural production, because it was almost impossible to be published without being a member of such an organization" (Sherstoboeva, 2015, p. 483).

However, often the products of culture produced by the "authorized" institutions were not appealing to consumer. Such style as social realism was

dominant in all the brunches of cultural production including music. This means that there were certain themes allowed to dedicate art to. Any piece of cultural production was meant to celebrate the live of working class Soviet citizens or the communist party. As a result, there was not enough variety provided by the official art organizations. In such circumstances, listeners were aiming to find access to the Western music which varied in genres, styles and lyrics.

However, since "Western capitalist music" was forbidden and listening to such music could be considered as state treason, the alternative music consumption was not just a bare piracy, but rather certain oppositional movement. Sherstoboeva and Kiriya confirm this idea and indicate that such actions as "underground" music distribution in Soviet Union were ways to express opposition to the Soviet ideology, which was strongly imposed by the government through art, including music. Therefore, it was possible even to speak about quasi-cultural industries within the state. Due to the circumstances described above, shadow media industry emerged: "The restrictive policies related to both production and consumption gave rise to prohibited, or unauthorized, content" (Sherstoboeva, 2015, p. 483). This phenomenon of alternative unofficial goods circulation was called samizdat, tamizdat and magnitizdat and it was an exchange of musical records and books (Sherstoboeva, 2015, p. 483). The authors indicate that within such an environment, consumers were also producers of the content (Sherstoboeva, 2015, p. 483).

Great example of these limitations is so called phenomenon of "music on bones". In 50s jazz, boogie-woogie and other musical styles started to gain popularity around the world. However, predictably, the Soviet government considered this music to be the product of "vicious capitalists" and, as a result, it was banned. Still it continued to appear in the country being copied from vinyl in the form of bootleg pressings on discarded x-rays (Paphides, 2015). These activities became more than just a search of the necessary cultural goods. It rather became an adventure for a few generations of the Soviet people. In addition, although there were sixteen republics of different cultural and ethnical background all of them were united by such a daily routine. The peoples of the USSR felt pleasure not only of being a part of social exchange (Skågeby, 2011), but also a pleasure of gaining the content free of charge. They felt that music was earned but not due to the material value – money; it was gained due to their abilities to find alternative methods and channels of receiving the object of their desire.

As a result, these circumstances shaped social values, according to which consumers presumed that the access to the cultural goods should be free or at least affordable for the masses (Sherstoboeva, 2015, p. 482). Therefore, it is possible to speak about the double standards being grounded: on one side art, strictly controlled by the propagandistic state, which is barely interesting consumers; on the other hand – "forbidden fruit" in the form of alternative media market mostly flooded with prosumer-generated content. These practices became habitual and have developed throughout generations into the customary environment fertile enough for the emergence of such platform as VK: "This practice shaped certain social habits of media consumption along with the attitude that the access to the cultural goods should be free or at least affordable for the masses" (Sherstoboeva, 2015, p. 842).

These trends continued after the USSR collapse, but under slightly different "souse". This time boom of pirate musical records flooded liberated market after the Perestroika: "After the opening of the Russian media market to international communication, Western media content became popular. In this period, there was no distinction between legal and pirated markets for entertainment content" (Sherstoboeva, 2015, p. 843).

Therefore, new ideology was born and the shift towards the mass media consumption brought new freedoms, which an average user would not like to abandon: "The new digital culture gives Russian users the opportunity to justify their pirating activity (based simply on the principle of access)" (Sherstoboeva, 2015, p. 845).

Another trend in post-Soviet countries is connected to the status acquired by a listener depending on which type of music he or she is listening to. There is a misbalance in the production of cultural goods and consumption of them. According to Eugenia Makarenko, most of information flows including music is created in the countries of so-called western civilization (Anglo-Saxon world). Music export is mostly inherent to Western Europe and North America while eastern European countries, namely those of post-Soviet background, produce music for internal use while still consuming western products (Macarenko, 2004, p. 188). Goldenzwaig also reflects this in the research when the informants of the project were speaking respect with towards the foreign performers and gave kind of a shameful feedback about the Russian music.

In 2013 there were a number or law suits against VK due to the illegal circulation of musical tracks there (Dredge, 2013). And most of the lawsuits were issued by the American companies It was when prosumer generated content proved its usefulness. During that period, there appeared such a phenomenon as renaming of tracks. Since due to lawsuits some of the American singers were deleted from VK's database due to copyright regulations, the users found a way out of it. They started to upload the tracks, naming them incorrectly. Mostly important was the fact that all the users could define and find the necessary audio. For example, Lana Del Ray songs were exempt from the database, but in a short time, they were added back, with different titles. It was possible to identify Lana Del Ray with "Lamp for X-Ray" and the information about how to find the new titles was spread by a great number of communities and individual users in the network. The same applied to other content.

This action of renaming songs was conducted by users unanimously and was an expression of unity in the environment of social network. People united to battle the change in regulations of music accessibility and to preserve their comfort zone in terms of music listening habits. This change was considered by users as offence towards their rights for music consumption and accessibility. In addition, in VK music has additional social meaning for the members of the network. That is why its accessibility is crucial for the users. To explore additional meaning, which music obtains in the environment of social network, the question of sociability of digital music will be discussed further.

**THE SOCIABILITY OF DIGITAL MUSIC**

As it was discovered in the previous chapters, digital music has specific peculiarities in comparison to the previous formats of music. Digitalization and Internet influenced a lot of aspects of music consumption. But one of the most prominent issues to be discussed is additional meaning acquired by music in the environment of social media.

This chapter will discuss social aspects of communication with the help of music and which additional meaning digital music acquires in the context of social networking site environment. Textuality of music will be discussed as one of the prominent feature determining role of music in the process of interaction between

members of a social network. The process of finding "self" through music consumption and its role in self representation in the social network will be analyzed.

**Music and Textuality**

It is implied that music has a meaning and can be used not only as a tool for entertainment, but also as a tool for interaction. Many scholars investigated music and its textuality. For example, Martina Viljoen in her article "Ideology and textuality: speculating on the boundaries of music" refers to music as an important element in cultural interchange and explores its value as intertextual unit, which can be used for communication between individuals (Viljoen, 2004, p. 69).

Textuality of digital music acquires crucial importance in VK. Since VK is an SNS, communication between users is the most important task of the platform. Therefore, music in such a context has value of a message and of an additional tool of expression. Moreover, VK has a set of functions, which plays a significant role in users' daily routines. This creates certain habits, rituals and algorithms in the everyday life of a user and affects not only music consumption on the platform, but also general perception of cultural goods among the users. However, in the first instance it is important to clarify role of music in daily routines of people in the era of digitalization.

Simon Firth indicates that due to technological development, the value of music transferred from the state of art object and became an inevitable part of daily routines. Now music sounds everywhere: in the libraries, shops, restaurants cars and in the headphones of an average pedestrian. The author gives an example that nowadays we are constantly surrounded by noises that is why it became a socially accepted norm to incorporate music in the daily life: "Thanks to the radio, the record player, and the tape machine, music is now the soundtrack of everyday life and no law is going to change that" (Frith, 2002, p. 36). This omnipresent condition adds extra value to music and creates additional demand for the services providing music non-stop.

On the other hand, except from the entertainment feature provided by music there is such an additional characteristic as space demarcation. Due to the fact, that we tend to consume music in certain places, it might also serve as invisible wall mark, identifying borders for physical spaces. Firth states that music like a wall marks

territory in everyday life and often brings strong additional meaning to the physical space: "Sonorous or vocal components are very important: a wall of sound, or at least a wall with some sonic bricks in it. A child hums to summon his strength for the schoolwork she must hand in. A homemaker sings to herself, or listens to the radio, as she marshals the anti-chaos forces of her work" (Frith, 2002, p. 40). Sarah Pink in her article "Saturated and situated: expanding the meaning of media in the routines of everyday life" gives an example of how music can affect structure of the space and daily habits of a listener (Pink, 2013, p. 10). For example, the participants of the research were indicating how they were listening to music in relation to particular places and in respective situations such as morning routines or the after-work relaxation. In these circumstances music helped to demarcate space and establish regular habitual rituals for the participants (Pink, 2013, p. 18). The same tendencies can be noticed with VK users since their attachment to the platform usually is determined by the situations and places, where they have access to the network which in its turn affects their usage of music.

Thus, use of music allows people to map and demarcate their environment according to current mood, circumstances and type of activity. Firth continues to prove this point: "we can better understand the domestic relations of intimacy and distance, power and affection, by mapping patterns of musical use" (Frith, 2002, p. 40). Following this idea, it is equally important to note that people nowadays routinely use music to manage their moods and organize their activities for themselves (Frith, 2002, p. 42). The author adds, that everyday practices of listening to music serve as technology of self and as a method of emotional self-regulation (Frith, 2002, p. 43). A person having an unlimited access to music can use it as constant control mechanism for optimization the sense of wellbeing. Firth claims that music has become the technology of social discipline rather than delight; however, this notion conflicts with the main purpose of VK. In the context of social network music is rather a tool for communication and delight playing both social role and the role of entertainment. Eric Clarke, Nicola Dibben and Stephanie Pitts in their article "Music and mind in everyday life" indicate that music is called to facilitate interaction and create social connections between individuals: "The authors claim that music creates both an aural domain, which imposes seclusion, and an instrument, which creates social bond and cooperation (Eric Clarke, 2009, p. 66).

There are practices when a user sends a musical track in order to replace actual words with textuality of the song. One can arrange a date by sending a song of Blink 182 "First date" or confess love by sending James Blunt's "You are beautiful". In this context music receives paralinguistic features of communication tools in social media described by Rebecca A. Hayes, Caleb T. Carr and Donghee Wohn in their article "One Click, Many Meanings". Even though the authors are discussing ordinary for SNS environment actions, connecting them to so called paralinguistic digital affordances, without referring to music as a communication tool, we still can relate to their argumentation and claim that music in the context of SNS receives additional features of PDA, which usually is not attributed to it (Rebecca A. Hayes, 2016, p. 172). According to the authors: "Both the technical and social infrastructures of various media may afford different cues, interactions, relational contexts, and perceived values to its users" (Rebecca A. Hayes, 2016). Since the function of exchanging music is included in the process of messaging and communication in VK, it is entitled to transform communication process there and add more value to music and its textuality.

Therefore, we can see that music has always been more than just a piece of entertainment and had additional meaning. Often music can even replace text end express the necessary information form one participant to another. In digital environment these additional features are becoming even more noticeable and important. That is why in the next chapter the process of music distribution in algorithmic environment will be discussed.

**Digital Music Exchange Practices**

Digital music exchange practices are affected by many factors and are represented in several sets of actions. In VK, a user has possibility to share music tracks with friends both in private messages and by posting them on a friend's or own timeline. This opportunity creates possibility for a person to use a musical track as a medium for the establishment of ties and communication with another member of the SNS. Similarly, as one can order a "musical postcard" on the radio to congratulate a friend on his/her birthday, a user can do the same in VK. In this case, music reflects personal emotions of the communicator and is reviled to another person or even to the public.

That is why it is important to understand the correlation between music and practices performed with it and how it affects a user of a social networking site. For example, Bennett proves the importance of role of music in the process of friendships formation (Bennett, 2001). Since VK as social networking site is developed around the concept of "friendship" the process of "friendly" music sharing might create pleasant atmosphere of unity. Similar effect can be reached with a peer-to-peer file sharing among "friends". Since concept of friendship has special value among other social relations and word "friend" means more than just an acquaintance, this brings special meaning to all the actions performed in SNS. A user gets an impression that another member is not just formally connected but also has entered his or her personal space. And music only strengthens this feeling. As a result, friendly music sharing without any obstacles and free of charge music listening create an impression of sincere nature of such a communication, and for a user music becomes a source of positive emotions rather than a commodity. This might be one more reason for users to feel comfortable in VK.

Bennet also mentions that music creates personal ties between people enhancing intimate relations. Sharing such, practices as music listening can establish additional context for the relations of people, atmosphere, and emotional attachment to the moment of sharing which provides the feeling of unity (Bennett, 2001, p. 10).

De Nora also indicates that technological development and the facilitation of access to information affect music as valuable cultural material. She mentions that intimate music practices, in the form of private or one-to-one human-music interaction "offers an ideal vantage point for observing music in the construction of the self as an aesthetic agent" (Goldenzwaig, 2013, p. 40). Goldenzwaig in his turn adds community binding feature of music in the context of VK. The author sees music consumption in the network "utilitarian practice, with a sense of nostalgia for value and social meaning" (Goldenzwaig, 2013, p. 56). The author indicates, that although VK was never designed as a hub for music, it took on this role due to the national peculiarities of the music/media landscape, and due to loopholes in copyright legislation (Goldenzwaig, 2013, p. 52).

In addition, proving the point of Goldenzwaig, we need to refer to the idea that musical function of the platform should not be considered as a separate phenomenon. VK is a bright example of so called media cultural connectivity. As it is indicated by José van Dijck in the book "The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical

History of Social Media" social media platforms are not existing independently and separately. They are integrated in the bigger system and therefore should be considered as a special form of cultural connectivity (Dijck, 2013).

Here one should mention an important concept, emerging on the verge of communication theory and the technological affordances of a social networking site. In the context of digital communication, users often tend to conduct some subconscious actions to maintain connection with other members of the network. Often these actions incorporate simple likes under the posts of a friend. It is described by Vincent Miller as "phatic culture" and "phatic communication". Miller provides the following definition for this phenomenon: "With the enlargement of social networks, and the technical means available to communicate with them, this encourages communication that retains a general sociability without the exchange of real information." (Miller, 2008, p. 395). Author refers as well to the technologies, that provide means for this kind of interaction, and suggests them to be "technologies which build relationships and sustain social interaction through pervasive (but non-informational) contact and intimacy" (Miller, 2008, p. 395). Given the above-mentioned, we can assume that in VK users often exchange music not only in the context of textuality, but also without any special purpose and without informational supplement to it. The process of music exchange can also be a habitual practice aimed at maintaining connections between participants. In the previous sections we discussed the other type of music interaction with textuality and meaning. Therefore, we can conclude that there both types of interaction present in the social network VK and both should be considered equally important for the context of the present research.

Form the technological standpoint we should pay attention to indirect music exchange practices in VK as well. If direct exchange practices mean direct communication with the help of music, then indirect include self-representation though publishing own playlists. In connection to this, we need to refer to Norwegian scientist Anja Nylund Hagen and her article called "The Playlist Experience: Personal Playlists in Music Streaming Services". In this article the author introduces such term as curatorial practices in relation to the playlist construction: "Curatorial practices also might reflect a digital renter's perspective upon the meaning of owning a collection, recalling Benjamin (67): the practices of creating playlists and then keeping them encompass experiences of exclusivity and subjectivity that bring about, in turn, a felt

ownership of the music, or even notions of self-identity reflected through the playlist" (Hagen, 2015, p. 641). With reference to McCourt, Nylund Hagen adds: "In cyberspace, that is, people collect lists rather than objects, and those lists serve as a form of personal expression that derives from but also supersedes the record collection (Hagen, 2015, p. 628)". As a result, a user communicates to the other network members her or his music preferences and shapes digital personality. This management stands for indirect communication with friends in SNS environment and should be counted as a separate activity with digital music in VK.

Hereby it is possible to conclude that digital music in the environment of VK is used for multiple amounts of communicational purposes. Users can both engage in the active communicational process by means of exchanging music tracks and at the same time have passive communication with other users by managing their public playlists. Users can also conduct phatic actions while exchanging music without any important meaning, but rather just for the sake of maintaining contact. Later in the research section there will be examples of all the mentioned types of music exchange received from the interviews with the participants. In the following theoretical chapter, the process of self-identification will be discussed. It has crucial importance for the present research because VK is a social networking site and it combines several functions of social engagement in digital environment. In this case music plays an important role in representing the self in the network for other users.

**Identifying Self**

There is no doubt, that music plays important role in self-identification both as for an individuum and as a part of a group. Especially this feature is developed in the context of a social networking site, where music can be used as a tool for construction of a digital identity of a member. It proves that by means of music one can represent himself or herself for the other members of a network, which might affect his placement within social groups and interaction within the network.

In the previous sections, it was mentioned that VK as SNS site combines features of various media platforms. It was also stated before that music as medium acquires certain textuality and thus can be used in the process of communication between individuals.

Music is involved in the process of interaction on various levels. Often music plays reflecting role, which means that the process of interaction with a medium,

music in this case, reflects upon the preferences, mood, lifestyle and other aspects of self-identification and representation in the process of interaction with another person. Therefore, a person has an opportunity to come to self-perception through the experience of certain musical piece.

VK has several instruments for the interaction with digital music, which shapes relation between practices of music consumption and user self-representation. Since VK is a social networking site, the process of music consumption is greatly influenced by the way the platform is organized. Due to certain set of functions available for a user, there is a possibility to specify which aspects of the "self" are involved in activities performed on the platform. Personal representation is affected by intimate music listening, interaction with suggested playlists, and other daily activities of a user described in the previous section. A user performs these activities on a regular basis; therefore, by doing this, a user constructs his or her habits and routines.

The "self" of a user can be strongly affected by memories and reflection upon the history of his or her preferences. This process can be called memory formation through music consumption. Van Dijck mentions it as an example to illustrate the experience by of a participant in the research presented in the book "Sound Souvenirs Audio Technologies, Memory and Cultural Practices". A user saw his music collection as a certain book of his life. This means that he could trace the development of his personality and self-identification and representation referring to his music history: "Jerome has a music collection of over five thousand CDs and LPs. At the time of the interview, he had downloaded 9,800 tunes onto his iPod, divided into twenty-five different genres and multiple playlists. Jerome uses music "as a kind of diary," and considers his iPod as a "time machine"" (Dijck, 2009, p. 87). This correlates with VK, where users often have more than a thousand of tracks saved in their database and, as a result, while scrolling it down they can see the evolution of their personality through time.

The second aspect of music connectivity with memory reflections is that one can keep listening to a song which might not be in trend with his or her usual taste, but is valuable for a user due to special associations connected to it: "One of the first things respondents used music for was to remember key people in their lives, for example loved family members who had died. 'There's a piece of music that my grandad used to like very much" (Denora, 2007, p. 63). This brings additional value to music databases and to VK music section, since there always was a possibility to find

some rare tracks, which are often related to some special events from the life of a user. It adds emotional meaning to the database and creates strong ties between digital representation of a person through the music collection and actual personality. Jones also proves that point and states that: "…memory and identity are ineffably bound to us and to the music, we hear" (Jones, 2010, p. 227).

Self-representation is often correlated with general attitude towards both music and a technology through which the music is consumed (North, 2016, p. 2). Adrian North in his article "Music listening in everyday life: Devices, selection methods, and digital technology" continues the above-mentioned statement and indicates that the process of music selection and the actual choice is intertwined with self-identification and can affect the socialization of a person (North, 2016, p. 140). The author also underlines the role of device through which music is accessed: "The present findings suggest that, beyond musicians and musical styles, it may also be appropriate to define one's musical identity in terms of the device by which one consumes music" (North, 2016, p. 139). This aspect was already discussed in the previous chapters and should be mentioned here too as an important factor of self-placement in the social circles. It is important because VK as musical platform really determines user's possibilities for self-representation depending on from which device he or she accesses music form: PC, IOS or Android device. This theoretical assumption will be depicted in the research section more in detail. North adds: "However, while music is displaced in the environment of social media, where the access to music is facilitated by relevant interface there is a possibility of different perception. Assertion that musical engagement is technologically dependent extends to music identity as well" (North, 2016, p. 139). He develops his idea further by indicating that users may incorporate the technology through which they consume music into their identity: "…we must consider identity not only in terms of technology adoption, but also in terms of the features of those who use technology" (North, 2016, p. 141).The author assumes that the present findings indicate that musical identity may be less of a social and artistic phenomenon than it was historically, but is perhaps nowadays more rooted in technology. Furthermore, there is possibility, that such a conclusion is dependent on the age cohort of individuals concerned: "The link between technology and music identity could conceivably be stronger among younger than older users, although it would become more commonplace over time as currently young users age". (North, 2016, p. 139). If to take this assumption as a ground for the present

research, we can regard VK as a technological determination for a big market of consumers, which might intensify dissonance between the western identity and habits of music consumption and the post-Soviet countries.

On the other hand, departing form the technological ideas as a core issue of self-representation through music in VK, we can move further to the role of music daily routines and its meaning. In this context one of the mostly important research projects was introduced by Tia Denora in her book "Music in Everyday Life". In the book the author reviews multiple aspects of music and its influence on socialization of an individuum. The author calms: "In all of these examples, music is in dynamic relation with social life, helping to invoke, stabilize and change the parameters of agency, collective and individual." (Denora, 2007, p. 20). Denora also calls music "a tool for creating a portrayed identity" (Denora, 2007, p. 44). It confirms the fact that music is an important factor, which creates an impression about a person. She also calls that phenomenon as reflexive identity through music consumption (Denora, 2007, p. 46). Goldenzwaig develops the idea of importance of music in his research project and gives an example of interviewee discussing how one can lose romantic interest towards a potential partner due to the music preferences and self-representation in VK: "My friend once refused to go to the cinema with a guy who listened to Selena Gomez… she saw it on VKontakte" (Goldenzwaig, 2013, p. 53). This demonstrates that music in the context of social networking site plays a crucial role in the perception towards an individuum form the other members of the network. It is important to remember for the analysis of the data received during the interviews for the research part of the present thesis.

Here we can draw the conclusion that we have reviewed the mostly prominent topics related to the music and its role in digital environment in relation to a consumer. We have analyzed theoretical concepts in relation to VK as a social networking site. Therefore, now we can move to the description of the method applied in the present thesis.

# METHODS OF THE RESEARCH

As it was already mentioned in the introduction, there is a limited scope of previous research about music consumption in VK. Referring to the platform as a constructive and defining element in the process of music consumption, we state that VK as SNS with its structure has great impact on the socio-cultural landscape in the region of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. In addition, the recent shift in the copyright policy might have affected user behavior and attitude of users towards the network. As a result, it is important to investigate on the example of the present shift, the changes which took place in VK and how they affected the daily consumer routines of its users. Since VK and Mail.ru are of the most powerful players on Russian and partially Eastern European media market, this case represents an important example of current transformation in Runet and custom of media consumption (Kisilevich & Mansmann, 2010 , p. 46). The paradigm of VK is influential and demonstrative for the region as well as important for the depiction of consumer behavior in the countries of Eastern Europe. It is also important to keep in mind that VK is a social networking site and not just a file sharing platform. Due to this unprecedented and unique hybrid nature of the site, attention should be paid to individual experiences of users reflecting on the practical side of being a member of VK and listening to music on the platform.

## INTRODUCTION AND JUSTIFICATION

The process of music consumption in digital environment is complex and influenced by many socio-cultural, geographical, technological, customary and legal factors. It is difficult to review this process neglecting one of those factors as well as it is hard to investigate music consumption in VK while studying too broad spectrum of aspects including all factors. As it was mentioned before, VK and its audio database are strongly connected to the user-generated content. That is why, to understand the current trends of the network development it is necessary to investigate users' experiences of music consumption in VK.

For the present research, it was decided to use a method, which would facilitate exploratory study of the subject and provide a general overview of music consumption in VK within the mapped research questions. The qualitative method of

in-depth interviews was applied to approach the topic from the behavioral perspective and study individual music consumption.

To start with, it is important to identify what the in-depth interviews method is. According to the "Guide for Designing and Conducting In-Depth Interviews for Evaluation Input" by Carolyn Boyce and Palena Neale, in-depth interviewing is "…a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea" (Carolyn Boyce, 2006, p. 3). Its application is useful when the findings must be connected to the "detailed information about a person's thoughts and behaviors" with deep explorational focus (Carolyn Boyce, 2006, p. 3) According to the authors, it provides additional context to other data, offering a more complete picture of the problem under study (Carolyn Boyce, 2006, p. 3). In order to prove the effectiveness of the method, we need to review its advantages. But to make sure that the results will be reliable, one must keep in mind also the limitations of the method. Those will be discussed in the next sub-section.

**ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS**

Speaking about the advantages and limitations of the in-depth interviews method, Boyce and Neale indicate: "The primary advantage of in-depth interviews is that they provide much more detailed information than what is available through other data collection methods, such as surveys. They also may provide a more relaxed atmosphere in which to collect information" (Carolyn Boyce, 2006, p. 4). This means that the participants might feel more comfortable having a conversation with a researcher and would provide valuable insights on the subject of the research. In this particular case, the interviewees were talking on their behavior and daily practices in VK, which can be considered as really intimate information. In addition, many actions are connected to the illegal or semi-legal music sharing and consumption, which is why participants would not be as comfortable sharing those details without relevant context and atmosphere created by the researcher. These details are not possible to receive in a questioner or in any other way except from a live conversation. As a result, in our particular case, in depth interviews are effective in relation to disclosing personal experiences of music consumption which help to investigate the life-like narrative of a consumer's life. This helps to imagine the detailed picture of a listener's logic while consuming music in a certain way and to collect reflections on VK as a

platform. That is why for the purpose of the research in-depth interviews method is suitable.

However, there are still a few limitations for such method, so Boyce and Neale indicate a number of those. To start with, the authors mention "proclivity to bias" (Carolyn Boyce, 2006, p. 4). It means that the researcher might face a challenge in keeping unprejudiced analytical line. Structure of interviews, design of questions and further analysis might be influenced by the opinion of a researcher. As a result, conclusions might be also biased. It is important to keep this limitation in mind, while working on the research project. The second limitation of the present method is "time-intensity" (Carolyn Boyce, 2006, p. 4). This limitation results from extensive time requirements for such a method. Interviews will take a lot of time as well as the analysis of data. These stages should be well-planned and organized to avoid incomplete results in the research. Another limitation is more subjective and is connected to the general experience of a researcher (Carolyn Boyce, 2006, p. 4). Conduction of in-depth interviews requires good communication skills, preparation and background knowledge of the interviewer. The researcher must be able to create relevant atmosphere of trust and establish connection with a participant. Otherwise, the answers will not be sufficient, and the results will not be relevant to the expectations. And the last one of the major limitations is "non-generalizability". This limitation is related to the fact that the number of participants is usually too small to be able to make a verified generalized conclusion (Carolyn Boyce, 2006, p. 4). In-depth interviews provide valuable personalized and detailed information about the participants and their habits, but they are hard to prove to be mass trends. According to the authors: "When in-depth interviews are conducted, generalizations about the results are usually not able to be made because small samples are chosen, and random sampling methods are not used. In-depth interviews, however, provide valuable information for programs, particularly, when supplementing other methods of data collection" (Carolyn Boyce, 2006, p. 4). This imitation is connected not only to the actual number of the participants but also to their social position and status. It means that for different social groups the value of music might vary as well as their daily practices might differ. As a result, the research will not be representative for other social.  Since the social group and age of participants is rather restricted, this will not allow receiving complete and general picture of the consumer behavior on the platform. However, on the other hand such a limitation allows detailed investigation of

a specific group of users' interactions with the platform. With these aspects in mind, we can proceed to the next sub-section dedicated to the design of the questions and interview structures.

### DESIGN OF QUESTIONS AND INTERVIEW STRUCTURE

According to Boyce and Neale, while developing an interview guide the researcher has to think about the questions and formulations with special attention. They give the important suggestions. To start with, one should pay attention that the questions are "open-ended rather than closed-ended" (Carolyn Boyce, 2006, p. 5). As a result, in the present research the effort was done to make sure that it was difficult to answer "yes" or "no" to the questions in the interview and make participants include as much information in their answers as it was possible. Another point relates to the need in asking factual questions before opinion questions. For example, the authors suggest first to ask about the phenomenon and after that to ask about the opinion on it (Carolyn Boyce, 2006, p. 5). It was also important to keep in mind that the interview guide can always be altered depending on a particular interviewee for the sake of more effective data acquisition. In connection to this one should be ready to ask additional question in order to get full answer to the stated questions. The interview guide with the questions designed in accordance to the abovementioned criteria will be attached in the Annex A.

### INTERVIEWEES SELECTION

For the present research, it was decided to invite twelve people to participate in the in-depth interviews. Since the aim of the research is to investigate music consumption behavior of VK users and study the distinctive features of VK as a platform for music distribution, there was a need in the participants with large experience of VK use. In such case they would be able to provide qualitative description of the interaction process between a user and the site. This interaction process includes daily actions such as search for music, playlist construction, uploading of tracks, exchange of music within the network, publishing and sharing tracks etc.

The participants had to confirm that they use VK currently or they did in the past. It means that only so called "heavy users" were considered as potential participants. Being a "heavy user" meant that a participant should have being using

VK for music consumption at least every second day. Another requirement for the participants was completed higher education – BA or MA degree. This was made to make sure, that the participants were able to provide critical reflections on their actions.

As a result, the focus of the research was concentrated on young adults in the age between 23 and 30, who can be identified as the first generation of VK users, because they started to use VK from the first years of its existence and could follow the evolution of the platform though own experience. They also were supposed to have relatively similar lifestyle. They did not have children, were in the beginning of their professional career and their incomes were relatively similar. These similarities endured that the participants represented the same social group, which would make research relevant. The common characteristic of the participants was that they were highly educated which signified their awareness of the current global trends as well as understanding of such phenomena as consumption, commodification, copyright protection and media market.

The participants had either Russian or Ukrainian background because the present research was focused not only on general consumer behavior, but also on other factors influencing music consumption in VK. However, any questions connected to political aspects of VK were excluded from the interview plan on purpose to preserve focus on music consumption and not on political aspects.

Therefore, the first group of participants consisted of Russian students since VK is mostly popular in Russia. Secondly, there was a group of Ukrainian users. Especially, in this case, it was to explore if there were any difference in perception towards VK between Russian and Ukrainian participants. There was an assumption that such difference could have occurred due to political tension between the two countries.

The third group was the group of expats, who lived abroad and had access to other music platforms as well as experienced other socio-cultural approach to music consumption within their "foreign" environment. Therefore, these participants were valuable for the research since they had an opportunity to reflect on the usage of VK from a different cultural perspective, which was fruitful for the analysis.

The selection of the participants was conducted within personal network of the researcher. Along with the interviews, the audio databases of the participants were monitored to receive, clearer picture regarding the number of tracks saved, their

genres and country of origin. This information was valuable in the context of the research, giving broader understanding of the data received through the interviews. For example, the number of tracks saved could verify the information given by interviewees regarding the intensity of music consumption habits and the amount of interaction with the social network. The genres might have depicted personal preferences of the participants. The country of origin of the tracks helped to evaluate the balance between the "western" and "local" music in social network profiles of the participants. The selection of the participants also was influenced by the intension to keep the interview results balanced in terms of gender and nationality. That is why there were six female and six male participants involved.

Another requirement was ability to participate in interviews in English. It also was supposed to limit time spent on the transcribing process.  As a result, most of the interviews were conducted in English. This helped to avoid misinterpretation of the results while translating. However, sometimes, to receive more detailed replies with slang and jokes participants could use their mother tong (Ukrainian or Russian). These nuances would be impossible to grasp if the all the interviews were conducted in English. That is why the knowledge of Russian and Ukrainian was useful during the research.

All the participants we informed about the fact that the interviews were recorded, their rights to stop interview or ask to omit some of the answers. The participants were also informed about the anonymity of their personalities. All the interviews were collected in equal circumstances through video conference and were recorded both in written and audio format.

All the interviews were collected within three months of July - September 2017 after the introduction of new policies. Therefore, the process of interviewing was consistent, and the results are obtained within relevant time slot.

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Having in mind qualitative method of in-depth interviews described in the previous section, we are finally moving to the section dedicated to the analysis of the results received from the interviews.

All the interviews after transcription were analyzed separately and the results were compared and summarized in relation to each other. Therefore, in the present chapter the summarized results will be presented according to the prominent topics discussed during the interviews. These topics were dedicated to the daily music listening practices in VK, technological affordances of the network itself and the devices, which the participants used to access music. We also paid attention to the ways in which users managed and structured their music in VK as well as their attitudes to the music preferences of other users. During the interviews we discussed phenomenon of free content in the VK database and how do users reflect upon it. Last but not least – the question of digital music sociability in VK was discussed having in mind role, which it plaid in the communication between the interviewees and other members of the social networking site under analysis.

While discovering controversies or differences in the data obtained from the interviews, it was necessary to reflect in the analysis too. It was done since every qualitative interview has independent value and cannot be generalized according to the limitations of the present research. Therefore, exceptional opinions on the topic under research expressed by the participants had the same values as the similarities and could not be omitted.

**STRUCTURING MUSIC**

As it was mentioned before in the theoretical chapter, user experience is strongly dependent on the technological affordances of a social networking site. Music consumption experiences are also influenced by the structure offered in the SNS initially. And this issue was discussed during the interview process. That is why technological factor represents great interest for the present research. It was interesting to discover which devices and why the participants were using for their music consumption and how those devices influenced daily habits of the interviewees.

**Devices, Memory and Space**

Most of the participants were using VK from the beginning of its creation in 2007. Only few of them started using the SNS later, in 2008. Therefore, the majority of the participants started to engage in music listening in VK before 2010. It is important to indicate that there were several factors mentioned by the participants, which influenced the way they consumed music.

Before VK got the broad popularity, most participants were downloading their mp3 music files form other resources such as Torrent, Zaytsev.net etc. Back then Internet connection was slow, and memory of an average phone was rather limited approximately to 16 GB, according to one of the participants.

That is why the majority of the participants claimed to listen to VK music from their PC as a background at home. Here we can again refer to the idea presented by Sarah Pink in her article "Saturated and Situated" while referring to the fact that music is used to mark the space and creates perception of a place for a user (Pink, 2013, p. 53).

The fact that the participants had to use their PC for music listening was determined by several factors. To start with, as it was already mentioned in the theoretical chapter, at that time the speed of the internet was relatively low, so it was hard to stream form mobile or portable devices. On the other hand, cash function was not performing stable in VK mobile apps both on IOS and Android devices and from time to time it was blocked. That is why, PC was mostly popular and reliable device for music listening. According to participant 1: "In order to be able to listen to new songs, I had to delete old music in cash memory. It was really hard for me because I love keeping things in my possession (laughs). It was a big decision to make.

Anyway, I also downloaded music through Torrent, so I had music files both on my phone and on computer". In this example we can see that the participant was mixing ways of music listening and she also was downloading music a lot. This demonstrates strong role of stationary devices in the daily routines of a participant and clear chain in her music consumption habits: first PC – then mobile device. She continues: "I listed to cashed VK music only on the way to school or university. While studying at the University, I lived in a shared room and couldn't have privacy. That is why at home, I had to listen to VK music from my PC and only with headphones, which I didn't really like". Participant 1 also reflects on the way she was listening to songs. The participant tells, that due to the limited space on mobile device she had to choose, which song to listen to. This affected her music consumption habits and, as a result, she was listening to the limited amount of songs and rotated them after certain period: "I had stages when I like particular songs. That is why I listened to them repeatedly. It was convenient with cashed VK music. After a while I downloaded or cashed new bunch of songs and listened to them". Similar habits were discovered with other participants. For example, participant 3 indicated: "I like to listen to one song the whole day. Depending on my mood, I like to download one track from VK and listen to it until I hate it".

In general, participants agreed, that the music function on VK was one of the most important. Participant 5 underlines: "…listening to music was the second important option after communication". She adds: "It was really important because otherwise you have to download music from other pirate websites and in VK it's really easy. You just have to enter the name of the song and if you had a special extension – VK saver – you could even download it to your PC and later send to mobile through Bluetooth".

As to the moments of music consumption, it should be noted that participants had certain rituals connected to VK. Apart from direct music consumption, the participants were accompanying messaging and feed scrolling with music listening. For example, according to participant 5 she was "responding to messages and listening to music at the same time". These routines were usually performed by the participants in the evening time at home as a leisure activity.

Many participants were underlying bad performance of the mobile VK application. This strongly affected their constant necessity in backing up songs for offline listing in cash or even for downloading. In other words, users didn't feel safe

and relaxed about their music consumption in the mobile app. Participant 7 proves this point by saying: Sometimes I had negative experience in VK. It doesn't work smoothly with mobile, and it often interrupts. I think it is not a good user experience".

Participant 12 also was mentioning plugin for Google Chrome called VK Saver. He mentioned that he was using and still uses it for downloading songs: "Not always you would have Internet and I prefer to download some favorite tracks. It's convenient. I just use VK Saver".

Another aspect of music circulation in VK was influenced by the quality of tracks. Historically since "music on bones" phenomenon, listeners in post-Soviet countries were used to compromising the quality of media content for the possibility to get it for free. This forms an interesting consumption pattern in VK. Since VK is a user generated music database, often there might be the same track uploaded by different members of the network. That is why quality of records might vary. So users would assume that in order to find the necessary track in a good quality they might spend extra time. This adds separate pattern to a user routine and adds value to the song since a user contributes additional energy and time to select the right track.  In addition, for some of the users such an experience was kind of adventure. Participant 4 proves the above-mentioned point by saying: "Back then I was young and stupid everything was great. Sometimes music was bad quality, but it's a matter of your search skills. You always can excavate better quality songs (laughs)". The participant refers to those actions in past tense because currently the music consumption patterns are changing and the majority of the participants are now paying more and more attention to the quality of the sound.

### Up and Up[1]

Occasionally every participant of the research project uploaded at least one or two songs to VK database. Some of the interviewees were reasoning it by their intention to complete the database with missing tracks, some mentioned that they wanted to have all the songs in one place and, since VK music database was their main platform to listen to music, they felt that they need to upload songs there. Participant 1 says: "I only uploaded two songs to VK. One song was not on VK, so I wanted to have it on my personal list to have a copy of it online and to be able

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[1] Referring to the song by Coldplay - Up&Up

access fast. It was a really old radio recording from 60s, a jazzy gospel parody, which I heard once and had obsession on having it in my playlist. The second song was my record where I played guitar and I wanted to share it with only few friends". Participant 5 also mentioned similar situation: "My friend used to play guitar so sometimes we recorded our songs and uploaded it to VK. It was useful thing because phone didn't have much space back then and it was convenient to have all the records in VK".

Another popular activity in VK was singing karaoke. It is known and was mentioned before, that songs in VK database have also lyrics extension. It means that one can click on a song in the list and the lyrics might appear. Participant 6 confirmed this fact: "We searched for songs, and we were singing karaoke. It was a cool option for a party or even just simply to kill time at home".

The majority of the participants also underline the role of communities in their music consumptions. They mentioned that communities were convenient to use them for searching new music or look for some music, which was structured according to genres etc. Participant 7 was saying: "I followed a lot of communities because I wanted to listen to music of particular genres. They had convenient playlists, reliable discography and rare tracks. Admins of those communities did a great job and it was a blessing for me".

Since VK has user generated database, and as it was mentioned before by Goldenzwaig, songs are named by users and this creates special pattern for the consumption process. Surely, during the interview process participants were referring to it a lot. Some of the participants were considering it a benefit, while others – a drawback. Participant 1 refers to VK as to "just a jumble of songs, which you can rename". She indicates: "This is nice, but it is not efficient and not trustworthy. You can give a song any name. In Spotify you can be sure about the artist, album and year the song was released".

However, other participants were indicating that even though this system was not perfect it was still rather convenient: "It's a matter of your search skills. There were sometimes problems with titles of music and it could mislead you. Sometimes you had to check few times that it was the original song". Another problem, according to participant 8, was that a user could not see the whole spectrum of songs of one artist and, as a result, sometimes it was hard to distinguish between original songs and covers.

The majority of the participants remember the time when VK removed the songs from the network. For example, participant 2 was mentioning that he experiences need in owning music. He treated music content as his ownership: "When they removed some of the tracks from database I felt offended. I felt that someone stole my music, which I carefully saved and arranged". And all the participants were talking about the phenomenon of renaming tracks as of a moment of unity. Participant 9 also shared memories about that period: "I remember when they started to delete music everyone responded by renaming tracks ridiculously and hiding them. It was the moment when this loose naming system finally paid off". Participant 3 added: "When it first started in 2012 or 2013, quite a while ago, I remember how people started to rename songs. For example, One Republic became Odna Respublika etc."

Summing up this part of the research project, we can see that users depict VK as a user-dependent system similar to other user generated networks. Giving this nature of the music database in VK we can see why users did not feel secure in terms of technological aspect of it. We can conclude that the interviewees had constant experience of rotating tracks on devices and constant need in having a plan B to be able to save their favorite tacks. They also had to go through the chain of numerous actions in order to ensure music not only on their PC but also on their mobile devices. Therefore it is interesting, how such routines affected their attitude to owning music in VK.

**CONTENT IN VK**

In this section we will pay attention to the influence of technological organization of VK on the perception of music. We will also pay attention, which content except from music users could have access to in VK and what was their attitude to it. It is assumed that in modern digital environment users tend to stream more than own, but VK gives bright example of different pattern in post-Soviet countries (P. Åker, 2017).

**Sharing and Owing**

Even taking in the consideration information from the previous section regarding the routines of users we could notice that users could not limit their activities with music only to one action. Mostly they were combining streaming, cashing and downloading together in order to achieve the necessary coverage of their music needs. That is why it was important to ask them about their reflections on the attitude to music and what place it takes in their mentality. "I was downloading songs from pirate websites and uploading them in VK to complete the database. I could name them as I wished, and I felt that is was literally my music. I didn't feel that someone recorded it in a studio for big money (laughs). I felt that it was my achievement to upload them" – mentions participant 2.

 The participant has strong connection with his music collection and feels that his music database has narrative meaning to him. Similarly to photo album, he can go through the database and experience memory flash-backs: "If we open my playlist now, every song means something to me and it was listened to more than once. I was dreaming, growing and fighting with difficulties in my life all while listening to these songs".

Other users also prove the narrative feature of music database. So the "time-machine" effect of the music database, discussed by Van Dijck in the book "Sound Souvenirs" (Dijck, 2009, p. 87), and mentioned in the theoretical part of the present thesis, proves its relevance in the interviews as well. Participant 3 tells: "I have my collection of music from the very beginning. It's nice to observe music through the time I like listening to old music because I recognize it". Participant 4 calls it "evolution of my music taste".

The participants were mentioning a lot such phrases as "my music", "my collection". And the majority of the participants downloaded their favorite songs.

Participant 7 says: "I even liked to back up some of the best songs to my computer so I would not lose them. I did not think about copyright or anything else. I just needed my music to be in order and in place".

Moreover, participants were mentioning sharing of music a lot. "I love sharing my favorite songs on the wall and in current status update. I think it is cool when you can share music with someone, unless it is cheesy" – says participant 4.

### More than Music

All the participants were indicating that special feature of VK music database was connected to the fact that there was not only music content but also other types of content. It is possible to find there audiobooks, lectures, records of pod-casts etc. Participant 3 indicates: "Also, there is such great thing as audiobooks, language lessons etc. You can find also lectures of famous journalists, which was really useful for me when I studied. Everyone uploads everything".

The participants were also indicating that they were able to find rare tracks not present in other music databases. For example, one of the participants mentioned that he managed to find music from his favorite commercials, which would not have an original title of the song, but would be named simply "a song from Lipton commercial". Participant 5 mentioned that she is a big fan of a famous Russian singer Boris Grebenshikov and his radio programs which she was listening to in VK.

Participant 9 underlined that she was often subscribed to communities with rare underground music. There she could find some special tracks of unknown bands, which used VK as a tool for promotion. The participant underlined that those bands were not represented in Spotify or Apple Music, which, in her opinion, added value to VK. The participant also mentioned that this music is possible to find only in VK, that is why she says: "I usually download such music from VK just in case it disappears. Because I love underground music and I don't remember names of songs so if something happens I will not find it back". The participant also gave example of the possibility to find a rare track from the iconic Russian movie "Brat 2" ("Brother 2"), which is called "Vodochku prinesi, my domoy letim" (Bring some vodka, we are flying home). This phrase is iconic for the Russian culture and is kind of a meme. It is not a song, but still can be found in VK. The participant says: "I could send this audio to a friend and communicate this message. This phrase strongly affected our teenage time". The participant also underlines the universal application

of VK due to its user generated nature and indicates: "If you need something, you always can find it. For some time I used VK as google maybe even more then Google. It has everything from audio tutorials to the newest top-hits. It's like a mix between Facebook, a forum and Spotify".

VK was also a platform for virus audio creation and distribution. Participant 9 mentioned the time when in VK it was popular to share so-called "audio drugs". These were audio tracks containing unmelodic noises, which were claimed to create effect of some drugs. The participant continues: "there were also tracks called to cause orgasm in 15 minutes, or the noise with similar effect to ecstasy. And the funniest thing was that people in comments were writing that they experienced best orgasm and felt ecstasy effect (laughs)".

To conclude this part of the research, we can indicate that the participants were tending to treat music as their ownership and they felt really protective about their content. In addition, they underlined that VK was valuable not only due to the popular music in canonical meaning, but also because a user could find any audio file starting from lectures and finishing with quotations form movies. These aspects bring us to the next section, where we will see the discussion about music as a communicational tool in VK.

**RELATIONSHIPS AND INTERACTION**

As it was mentioned before, SNS in its nature provides tools for interaction between users. It can be both direct interaction and indirect interaction. That is why it was important to understand to which extent music was involved on practice in the process of communication (Goldenzwaig, 2013, p. 53). In the present section we will see the replies of the participants about their attitude to music in the context of communication process.

**Hints and Love**

All the participants reflected in their answers upon the role of VK music in their personal relationship. In this context we can refer to music and it textuality, which we discussed in the theoretical part of the thesis. For example, participant 1 indicates: "VK is a social network so it's convenient to use music and video to strengthen your message. It was also easier for me to break the ice if I asked a new friend to check out a cool song. You know, music brings people together and in VK you can directly send a song instead of googling it".

For some of the participants, music sharing experiences turned to play a really important role in building their romantic relationships. According to participant 2, music sharing in VK became fundamental for the development of his relationship with his girlfriend: "I was sending songs to my girlfriend and that is how our love grew into serious relationship. I felt that if she shares my music taste she shares my felling also and can understand me. I always tried to share the best music with her. And I am speaking not about some "cheesy" love songs, but really good music. And it worked – we got married (laughs)".

Apart from the textuality aspect, when music could replace the message sent to another user, participants also underlined the importance of similar music tastes for them as VK members. Participant 7 proves this by saying: "I would never date a girl if she listens to some strange chanson or rap. Music can affect my intensions (laughs)". Participant 8 even confirmed that different music tastes could be the reason for not continuing correspondence with potential partner. Participant 10 indicates that before writing to someone she checked his or her audio database: "I'm a musician. For me it is important to know person's taste for music. Especially if I wanted to impress the guy, first I was checking his playlists and then could send in private message something similar to shock him (laughs)".

As to the habitual actions in VK, the participants confirmed that they used music in all the possible ways for the daily communication with friends in the network. For example, participant 6 said: "I shared music on my wall, when it was some particular composition, which I liked. Most likely it was song with a comment or a picture. It could be simply a song". Participants were also referring to sharing music as "sharing mood".

### Under Pressure[2]

All the participants without any exception were unanimous as to the fact that music page in VK was an important factor in communication and a reason for judgments. For example, participant 1 indicated that she was "deliberately adding only cool songs". The participant says: "I didn't add music that I liked because other people could see songs and make judgements. This in fact influenced my choice of music too. I liked folk music, but I thought it was not cool, so I did not add it. Instead, I added old rock songs. I didn't add "mainstream music" either. I didn't want to look at mainstream, even if I liked those songs". When the participant was asked why she would not just hide her music she replied: "If a person does not have any music in VK is suspicious. I didn't want people to think that I was a weirdo (laughs)".

While being protective about own database participant 1 underlines, that while getting to know a new person in VK she necessarily checked his or her music profile: "I meant that other people would be looking at music tracks when trying to know more about you or before adding you to friends. Personally, I would look through music page when adding a new person. It tells you a lot about another person without telling you directly". Similar pattern can be noticed with other interviewees as well. Participant 2 indicated that music profile is "kind of person's ID".

Participant 3 continues this by sharing experience of knowing a person, who was harassed because of her music tastes: "One of my friends was kind of harassed because of her music. She had some silly songs in her playlists and someone was laughing at her in offensive way, so it was a good that VK introduced function, which allowed hiding your music".

Participant 4 gives an example of hiding her music playlist due to particular songs: "I really like playlist from "Twilight" but I knew that is was a bit shameful to

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[2] Referring to the song by David Bowie and Queen – Under Pressure

watch this movie. That is why I hided one of my playlists and added there a lot of songs from "Twilight", for example, Muse song from the baseball scene (laughs). I felt awkward about "Twilight"".

The majority of the participants did not hide their music from other users. On the other hand, they were managing their music databases while keeping in mind that they might be judged by their music. In such a context music plays role of personal representation in the social network and signifies passive representation in social circles of a user. Participant 2 was mentioning that he was hiding his music database from those people, who he did not really like. In such a way he was "punishing" those users depriving them of the opportunity to access his playlist: "Sometimes I was hiding my music database from some people. If I don't like a person I don't want him or her to listen to my music". In this context a person sees music not only as a way for his representation but also as a way of self-expression through the music collection, which has special value and meaning to him and not everyone is "entitled" to get advantage of it.

Further in the interviews participants were using such notions as "judging on personality" and "personal space". On the other hand, interviewees were acknowledging the fact that they were doing the same towards other users in VK. For example, participant 12 made a remark: "For me music in VK was really important. Personally I would not talk to people who have less than 1000 audios (laughs)".

To sum up this section, we can indicate that the users were paying great attention to music as a tool of communication in VK as SNS. They were aware of the judgments towards them and were judging other members of the network by their music.

**MORALITY AND LOYALTY**

Since music consumption in VK is touching such categories as intellectual property and copyright regulations it was important to see the attitude of the participants towards the music content in their daily routines. It was also important to ask if they have experienced any differences in connection to new copyright restrictions. Participants from Ukraine were also asked about their attitude towards the band of VK in Ukraine.

**Free or Freedom**

Most of the interviewees mentioned that free music in VK is one of the most important factors for its popularity. This phenomenon was also discussed previously in the theoretical chapter on the example of article by Sherstoboeva and Kiriya "Russian media piracy in the context of censoring practices" (Sherstoboeva, 2015). That is why this factor is influential for them when it comes to choosing VK as the main music platform.

One of the participants mentioned that now everyone is so used to VK being free of charge that even if they try to change this policy people will try to find ways to get music without paying for it. This is what Sherstoboeva and Kiriya were referring to in their article dedicated to the institutional piracy in post-Soviet countries (Sherstoboeva, 2015).

In connection to this, we can mention opinion, presented by participant 1, when discussing the fact that VK has become difficult to use due to copyright restrictions and as a result she started to give her preferences to Spotify as an alternative. However, when the participant was asked if she would consider paying for Spotify Premium she gave negative answer: "I never considered paying for Spotify. Because even if free version stops working, I still will have other options so I don't think it's worth it. Yes it might be easier to use Premium and listen to music like a VIP, but I am greedy".

Participant 2 continued these logics and added some reasons for such an attitude towards music services: "For us there is a really tiny margin between free content and its alternative for money. We don't see why we should pay for something which we can get for free if we just put a bit more efforts in it. It's a mentality thing. I guess. Also, we are used that average income in our countries, unfortunately, is lower than in EU or USA, so content is not something that people would pay for in the

first place. I am almost sure that we also use illegal music in shopping malls, theatrical plays, cafes and so on and so forth".

Participant 12 in his turn, was speaking about this phenomenon with a bit of a pride: "Even though the level of social and economy is low, you have opportunity to develop your creativity and get content for free. In the "West" you have to pay for everything. Maybe we just have more developed youth (laughs) so we can find ways to receive what we want in a different way. It's a part of the culture here in Russia to listen to music for free". The participant added his reflections on the fact that the copyright regulations don't work effectively as follows: "I guess they [the government] look through fingers on this issue. If they would want - the control would be present, because it all is decided above. I don't know why they don't block those resources yet".

Initially, before conducting the interviews there was an assumption that the political factor will be really strong in connection to the discussion of VK in Ukraine. It was expected that political discussions with participants would take a fair amount of time. However, in the course of the interviews most of Ukrainian participants did not pay too much attention to this aspect.

In any case the topic of VK ban came up, but mostly as a background for the fact that the participants were missing their music collections in VK: "I miss my music database which was more than 2500 songs. Now I still can access VK even from the territory of Ukraine through VPN, but it is rather hard. I feel that I don't have enough music content in Ukraine after ban of VK" – said participant 6.

Some of the participants, which were considering themselves to be rather patriotic in terms of political tensions between Russia and Ukraine still had negative attitude toward the ban of VK. For example, participant 11 indicated: "As a human rights defender I don't feel good about this. I understand that we need to protect the integrity of the country and of our citizens but banning social media; even if it is Russian social media is not good. Social media equals to mass media. You know what I mean. It is not a good trend".

So in general, Ukrainian users were rather negative about the ban of VK, since they considered it to be the violation of their right for information. Even though they recognized that it was not completely fair to consume music illegally in the SNS.

### Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes[3]

There was a clear connection in the replies of the participants between the time, when VK started to prepare for the introduction of new copyright policies, while removing some of the songs from the database and the decline in the interest of the participants. And this happened even before the ban of VK in Ukraine. Interviewee 1 indicates: "Starting from 2016, I started to listen to music in VK much less. Many songs started to disappear and I also moved to Scotland, where I created a Spotify account. With all the playlists and suggestions, it has more options to organize music and to sort it. I have a free account there. Basically, I was listening to VK because I didn't know about Spotify". As it was mentioned before, participant 1 did not consider paying for premium Spotify account. The participant adds: "In Spotify you can be sure about the origin of a song and you can structure your music. There are more functions than in Vk, but for the same price. I mean for free (laughs)".

Participant 2 also has noted changes in his consumption patterns. One of the factors, which influenced his habits, was also connected to the experience of living abroad: "After two years of life in Sweden I changed my opinion about music. So now I would pay for music if necessary. I even created the Apple Music account and now often listen to music there since Spotify does not work in Ukraine".

A bit different attitude was for participant 3. She lives in Russia, so she still has the access to VK. That is what she has commented on her current music consumption habits: "Even though I'm using Apple Music now, because it is more convenient and the quality of sound is much better, I still listen to some songs in VK. VK gives great opportunity to listen to crazy music. I listen to PewDiePie there and his crazy songs. On apple music it simply doesn't even exist". Participant 3 also mentioned general development of her user experience in VK: "I don't like that they introduced advertising in between songs. I just want to listen to my music and then come "bla-bla-bla buy a car". I also stopped following communities with music. Ten years ago, it was so cool but now don't have time anymore. Moreover, I kind of got overloaded with this music flow form the communities". The participant also shared her opinion on how, the younger generation uses VK: "I have a cousin she uses VK for commenting and social activities. But they don't post music that much or at least it seems to me. I think they listen to music privately". The participant also does not like

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[3] Referring to the song by David Bowie – Changes

the new changes in VK: "They [VK] are trying to be modern and they even have VK stories like in Instagram or Snapchat. But who needs it in VK? It's pathetic".

Participant 4 was experiencing more sharp changes and even deleted her account from VK: "I had several reasons to delete my VK account. The first one was a security reason, Russian security services have access to private information of users, which I don't really feel good about. I also got bored with VK. It got too simple for me; I was dissatisfied with search engine and the whole design. They have changed too much recently. And I realized that if I want more in terms of music – I need to pay". The participant moved to Sweden and it became the last drop in her decision: "Now I pay for my account in Spotify and I think it is fair and a proper way of listening to music". In general, the participant was supporting the recent changes in VK policy towards music consumption: "It's a good and needed reform of VK. Intellectual property rights must be regulated on fare terms and conditions and you cannot use music without legal and financial framework. But I will not return to VK even though they have this nice evolution. It's in the past for me".

Participant 5 while mentioning, current experience in VK underlined: "I can't now listen to as music as I did before because now tracks are restricted". For this participant Spotify also solved a problem of music content: "I am lucky to have access to Spotify. Even with advertising I like how it works".

Participant 9 also changed the music consumption habits due to VK policy restrictions: "I have been using VK for a long time, since 2007. And now I noticed that I use it less and less. I don't listen to music in VK because it's banned now and everything that I have been listening to was removed or blocked. It's frustrating to see that 80% of your music collection which you were choosing carefully has disappeared now". But answering the question if the participant considered paying for the subscription in VK in order to receive the access back the reply was negative: "I can pay for something interesting but not for a chaotic set of tracks. Songs can also have incorrect names. No, VK is not worth it".

Participant 7 tried to pay for VK after it lunched the application: "I decided to give it a try and paid. It was not big money, but the funny this was that it didn't work anyway (laughs). Of course, maybe it was so because they just lunched the service and didn't have time to adjust it. But I will not try anymore (laughs).

In her turn, participant 10 was rather frustrated with the VK ban in Ukraine at first, but now she said that she got used to it and found other ways to consume

music: "First I was angry but now its fine. I tried to reach VK though Wi-Fi open spots, but then I realized that it was just a part of normal process of abandoning my profile. I must say that VK is still more convenient then Facebook for me. And it was good for Ukrainian bands, which used it as marketing tool or promotion. But now we can do the same. We just need several platforms instead for one. For example I started to use YouTube more. Still YouTube is not the best option for be because of its algorithms. I prefer listening to new Ukrainian bands and sometimes YouTube does not "suggest" them to me due to the relatively small amount of likes under their songs".

The only participant, which still was devoted VK user appeared to be participant 12. He mentioned that due to the fact that he listens to really rare music, those songs are in VK still and no one removed them: "In VK I can look for music still. I don't need any additional service".

Therefore, we see that the participants were distracted from VK before the final ban in Ukraine and before the complete introduction of new copyright regulations. It seems that the participants did not like the overall changes, introduced during the recent years, including new interface and VK stories. The removal of the majority of the songs was taken as the last step in such contexts.

# CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, we can indicate that some of the results obtained during interviewing differ from the results of the previous research projects conducted by Goldenzwaig and Åker.

The interviewees now have different attitude towards VK comparing to what Goldenzwaig observed in his research. Currently, the majority of the interviewees refers to VK as to a nostalgic memory and confesses that just during recent year their consumption of music though the network declined. They mostly motivate it by the fact, that now there are plenty of better alternatives to VK, especially taking into consideration new policies of the platform regarding music distribution. VK has started to lose its attractiveness as a music platform and it affected the overall attitude to the SNS. This trend was noticed not only with participants from Ukraine, but also with those of Russian origin. It means that political factor did not play great role in such tendency. It just facilitated general trend of VK losing its place in the lives of young adults.

Only one interviewee out of 12 still used VK on the daily basis and had some kind of "national" pride relating to the fact the VK is a Russian social networking site. Other participants, especially those from Russia felt more reluctant to VK and tended to speak about its role in the past tense. They still use theirs profiles and often listen to music in their music libraries but they feel much less of emotional attachment towards the music library. They don't deny the value of it but currently it is more of nostalgic feeling rather than a current emotional connection.

As to the results, which confirm the previous research, we need to mention the fact that the interviewees underlined technological imperfection of the social networking site's music function. In the research conducted by Goldenzwaig young Russian student were also mentioning rather noticeable drawbacks of VK music service such as incorrect naming of the tracks, the presence of recordings with noticeably insufficient sound quality, not enough developed mechanism of structuring music. Similarly, the interviewees in the present research underline the same factors. Although VK currently enhanced the possibilities for structuring a user's music database, according to the interviewees, these changes are still insufficient and

inferior in comparison to similar algorithms of such music platforms as Apple Music and Spotify.

Another aspect is connected to music consumption practices and the attitude towards the "shameful" music and the "cool" music. Similarly, to the previous research, while speaking abo the privacy settings in VK the participants mentioned that they don't want people to see that they listen to a shameful pop music or explained them indicting that they listen only to cool music.

We can conclude that current reflections of the interviewees towards music in VK are more critical comparing to the ones which were reflected in the previous research. It should be mentioned that such a critical attitude is more present among the interviews that had an experience of leaving abroad and using alternative way of music consumption. As to the Ukrainian interviewees who don't have access to VK anymore, such a change firstly was crucial and had string impact on their habits, but still they don't feel like missing this way of listening to music anymore.

Most interviewees however tend to continue consuming music for free often are combining several platforms, one of which in majority of cases is VK. They also indicate that paying for VK music in their opinion is not reasonable since the database still has many drawbacks in comparison to other alternatives.

One of the important observations demonstrates that VK is different in different countries. Thus, for example, in some songs, which were banned in Spain participants could access in Sweden and vice versa. In addition, one of the participants had interface in English and he didn't experience any changes in new copyright policy at all, although he was using the SNS from the territory of Russia, where such updates were initially introduced.

It is important to underline that these results are relevant to the present group of interviewees and due to the described before limitations of the research, might vary for different social an age groups. It is also important to keep on mind that the results of the present research can be a basis for the further investigation of the sphere of digital music consumption.

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## ANNEX 1: INTERVIEW GUIDE

I want to thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. My name is Iuliia Kyryllova; I am a student of Master's program at Södertörns University, department of Media and Communication. I would like to interview you for my final thesis "Music consumption environment and the formation of user identity in VKontakte" about your experiences of listening to music in Russian social network VKontakte. Specifically, this interview will be used for the analysis of music consumption practices in the environment of VKontakte.

The interview should take less than an hour. I will be taping the session because I do not want to miss any of your comments. Although I will be taking some notes during the session, I cannot possibly write fast enough to get it all down. Because we are on tape, please be sure to speak up so that we do not miss your comments.

All responses will be kept confidential. This means that your interview responses will only be shared with research team members and I will ensure that any information that I include in the master thesis report does not identify you as the respondent. Remember, you do not have to talk about anything you do not want to and you may end the interview at any time.

Are there any questions about what I have just explained?

Are you willing to participate in this interview?

Interviewee _____          Date _____

**QUESTIONS**

*Music, Habits and Everyday Life*

The first section of the questions explores the attitude of the interviewees towards music in VK. Which role VK music plays in the everyday life of the participants, what it means for them, how often they listen to music etc.?

- How long have you used VK?
- What does music in VK mean to you, in general?
- Can you describe a regular day for you and how VK music is incorporated in your daily routine?
- What do you usually do with music in VK: upload, share, and send to friends etc.?
- May you let me know how do you usually listen to music: PC or mobile phone; by streaming, downloading or cashing? Why these ways are more convenient for you than others are?
- What do you feel when you do any of the actions you just told me about?

*VK: Listening to Music*

The second section of the questions explores the attitude of the interviewees towards VK as a platform. The participants are expected also to share personal experiences with music in VK and to reflect on their actions in the network.

- May you let me know what do you like about listening to music in VK, what is convenient and what are the drawbacks?
- What do you think about the privacy policy concerning your playlist in VK (the fact that music is open to your friends)?
- What do you think about the music communities in VK? What do you usually do in such communities, what do you like about them and what do not?

### *Comparative Experience*

The final section of the questions will encourage the participants to share their thoughts concerning the future VK music and their attitudes to it. The interviewees will also share their views about other music platforms. This is done to explore the motivation for VK usage even with availability of different alternatives.

- In which ways do you think music consumption in VK has changed for you during the past ten years or so?
- How did recent changes of the policies affect your music consumption habits?
- What do you think about paying for access to online music? What do you think about new features in VK?
- What do you think about other online platforms and music databases? Why do you still prefer VK?