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# Experts, dads and technology Gendered talk about online music

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## Abstract

With the internet and digital media technology increasingly central to practices around music, this shift is often seen as contributing to a networked music use characterized by individualism. Drawing on a focus group study with young adults in Stockholm and Moscow, this article argues, however, that digital music use today is shaped by discourses of difference, with gender a significant factor both in constructions of the ideal music and technology user, and in terms of musical influence and guidance. Taking into account contemporary research on new media technology, as well as feminist studies of technology and music, the article questions ideas of a neutral user of new music technologies, showing how the gendering of music and media technology can be seen as simultaneously context-bound and cutting across geographies.

## Keywords

gender, the internet, media, music, technology

Listening to music has always been an integral part of everyday life (DeNora, 2000), with popular music often considered particularly meaningful for young people's cultural consumption and production (Bennett, 2000; Ross and Rose, 1994). Cultural studies has for

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decades been interested in the cultural, social and political significance of practices around music, co-created by media technologies such as Walkmans, record players, microphones and recording studios (Du Gay, 1997; Frith, 1986). Today, music listening, marketing and producing are increasingly dependent on the internet and digital media technology, with music practices evolving rapidly. The latest major technological development for personal music use is streaming technology, accessing music as cultural data stored online (Beer and Burrows, 2013: 52). Streaming services such as Spotify and Wimp merge the previous formats of radio, peer-2-peer networks and iTunes, providing convenient platforms for music use at home and on the move through mobile devices. These shifts have raised questions about the impact of digital media on artists and the music industry (Anderson, 2014; Ayers, 2006), as well as regarding what the technological development means for the role of music in everyday life. From the standpoint of the technological affordances, music listening among young adults today appears part of a connected and flexible media use, characterized by an abundance of choice and centred on individual networks and taste preferences. At the same time, technology is always incorporated in specific contexts. In this article, we investigate young people's music consumption practices in terms of articulations of gender, to draw attention to some of the ways in which meanings around music and new technology are constructed. Technology and ideas about technology have been rendered relevant to gendered relationships by previous research (McNeil, 1987), as have patterns of music production and consumption (Bayton, 1998). Recent feminist research within cultural studies, further, has highlighted technology and music as closely interconnected, for example in DJ cultures (Gavanas and Reitsamer, 2013).

The analysis is based on focus groups with university students in Stockholm and Moscow, two contrasting environments in terms of music and media landscapes as well as political mediated discourses around gender (Voronova, 2011). Building on the idea that media technologies gain meaning in specific locations, we consider material from two cities helpful for underlining social relations (Sreberny, 2004: 83), and for understanding ideas of music and new technology through a comparative lens. The participants, who all used music streaming services, were interviewed about their music habits, tastes and everyday experiences of the internet for music purposes.<sup>1</sup> In detailing their discussions, we pay particular attention to how the user and expert become constructs among the participants, as well as to how music and technology emerge as gendered in talk about contemporary online music use. Taking our theoretical starting point in media studies of connectivity, mobility and individualism, as well as in feminist studies of technology and music, we thus aim to understand how music use on the internet today is shaped by gender in two different geographical and cultural contexts. Here we will first highlight how discourses around music, media, technology and gender *overlap* between our two contexts of study, and in the final analytical section complement the discussion with reflections on differences.

## **Online connectivity and individualism in contemporary music use**

As the internet has become a central hub for music listening and related activities, practices around music, especially for young people, have evolved rapidly in a relatively short period of time. Changes include the shift from offline to online music listening,

from album listening to single-song listening, and the development of file-sharing and communicative activities around music within social media. More recently, streaming music – allowing assembly of individual playlists online, for instance, as well as widespread access to music anywhere and at any time – has further contributed to music listening as firmly placed within contemporary digital cultures. Music listening today can thus be seen as integrated into what Van Dijck (2013) has described as a ‘culture of connectivity’, where mediated communication between individuals through social media, and the norm of sharing information within wide online networks, are predominant. This sharing on social media can be used for musical content, videos and songs, as well as opinions and information about music events.

As music listeners have moved from the distinct environment of the CD to the giant archives of discrete MP3 files in peer-to-peer networks, as well as to commercial streaming services such as Spotify and YouTube, it is possible to see this as a move towards music as a ‘resource available “on tap”’ (Andersson, 2010: 62), placed within fluid and individualized consumption practices. Likewise, such patterns in music consumption appear to mirror how the rise of online communication overall can be considered part of increasingly mobile and flexible ways of organizing social contacts and cultural consumption. Wellman (2002, 2004), for instance, has argued that communication on the internet in general has contributed to forms of ‘networked individualism’, with individual activities and taste preferences at the centre, and traditional social structures and communities more peripheral (see also Castells, 2000 [1996]; Wittel, 2001).

Correspondingly, there is a tendency in research about music and the internet to highlight how the online environment has contributed to reduce the impact of previous social hierarchies and gatekeepers when it comes to music listening. Gaffney and Rafferty (2009), for instance, argue that social networking sites and the technologies of Web 2.0 have opened up the discovery of new music, both through providing the framework for new kinds of gatekeepers, whom they term ‘savants’ – people who take pride in discovering music and sharing their discoveries through social media – and through providing ‘the average fan with the ability to embrace their inner savant’ (2009: 379; see also Tham, 2010). Similarly, in a study of how digital technologies contribute to shape contemporary musical tastes, Avdeeff (2012) highlights how the internet, digital downloading and listening through iPods and MP3-players overall may stimulate musical eclecticism and the personalization of musical tastes. Such an approach is in line with previous studies into uses of digital music technologies, notably Bull’s (2007) analysis of the impact of the iPod on city life, which emphasizes how MP3-players contribute to mobile and personalized listening.

Yet, while online music listening can be discussed in terms of opportunities for widened taste spectra, individualized listening preferences and the sharing of musical experiences, the emphasis on the internet as an, in some senses, liberating tool for personal musical exploration, may draw attention away from the social contexts in which the technology is used and made meaningful. In order to understand contemporary practices around music from a gender perspective, therefore, perspectives on connectivity and individualism in relation to online music use are fruitfully complemented by feminist studies of technology and music – not least in order to problematize the assumed neutral ‘user’ in arguments concerning individualism.

## **Feminist studies of technology and music**

Cultural practices involving media technology are not understood as neutral, or as homogeneous, in feminist studies (Gregg, 2011). Technology and media are co-creators of subject positions, power relations and differentiation (Haraway, 1997; Hayles, 1999) and as such must be analysed as part of differentiated cultural practices. That is to say, while media and technological advances do change the social and cultural context, it is not changed in the same way for everyone. Critical understandings of power differences in terms of, for example, gender, class, race/ethnicity and sexuality can be applied in studies of discourse, taste patterns and material practices alike (Adkins and Skeggs, 2004).

In studies of technological discourse in general, or in specific areas like computer use, feminist scholars have concluded that technology is often aligned with ideas about men and masculinity – and this comes about through associations with masculinity to qualities like control and skills in their use of technology (Cockburn and Ormrod, 1993; Wajcman, 2004). The idea of the technological masculine has also been shown to not be neutral in terms of class or race/ethnicity (Leung, 2008). Leung (2008: 8) argues that imagined class, race/ethnicity of technology users is multi-layered in her study of South Asian women's internet use, fitting into neither the stereotype of white male expert or tech savvy Asian nerd. Arguably, associations around technology are shifting.

Armstrong (2011) has conducted research on how technology is negotiated in music culture, music education culture in particular. She argues that regarding technology as neutral makes us blind to the social aspects (Armstrong, 2011: 129) – the masculinization of music and technology for example. Ideas of men as technologically savvy result in an advantage for young men in the realm of music. These ideas are in Armstrong's (2011: 130) study articulated for example by male teachers and pupils engaging in technological talk, and constructing the technological expert as male. In a Swedish study, Björck (2011) has shown that technology in Swedish music education is embedded in a masculine discourse while at the same time technology is used to claim space for young female music students, in strategic practices. The masculinization of music and media technologies, thus, must not be understood as fixed.

Music taste patterns and genre divisions have also been seen as constructing differences in the field of music. Scholars like Bayton (1998), Whiteley (2005) and, more recently, Gavanas and Reitsamer (2013) have discussed how different music genres are seen as connected to gendered subject positions and valued differently. The alignment of technology and masculinity is at play in genre divisions, too, for instance when electric guitars are associated to rock or DJ equipment to electronic dance music. Both sorts of technologies are seen as requiring masculine skills. Femininity is defined as the opposite – singing, acoustic singer songwriter music and 'simple' music technologies like pre-produced pop. Music produced in genres associated with masculinity and technology is also to a higher degree associated with authenticity and quality (Leonard, 2007).

Listening to music has traditionally not been understood as an activity in need of technological skills, but music listening and fan cultures have been studied as gendered cultural practices (Baker, 2004; McRobbie and Garber, 2006 [1977]). Here we seek to combine critical feminist analysis of technology with a study of music users' experiences of music and online media technology. By acknowledging that technology is not neutral

but always become meaningful, and used, through cultural and social contexts and power imbalances, we aim to show that feminist research is still important in studies of technology and music, aligning with critical feminist analysis of media landscapes today (see Gill, 2011; Thornham and Weissmann, 2013). In the changing area of media technology for music use, we want to contribute through a critical feminist analysis of discourses among the users.

## **A study of music, media technology and gender**

The present study was set in Stockholm and Moscow, two cities with prominent media and music landscapes developed in different cultural, political and economic contexts – which can be seen as representative of urban environments in Western and Eastern Europe. When it comes to the respective music industries, Swedish popular music has historically been well-integrated in the international music industry, as a significant cultural export product and with a large proportion of English-language music production overall (Baym and Burnett, 2009: 4; Hallencreutz et al., 2007: 91). Russian popular music has focused on the domestic market and a limited number of Russian-speaking clusters abroad, even though the scale of potential listeners in Russian-speaking populations makes it internationally noticeable (Goldenzwaig, 2005; Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 74, 129). Apart from their different music and media landscapes, these locations are interesting for our focus due to differences in dominant conceptualizations of gender, as expressed in legislation and political and mediated discourse. In Sweden, material conditions, as well as cultural representations of gender relationships, are coloured by ideas of Swedish exceptionalism and state-led equality policies (Borchorst and Siim, 2008), while Russian gendered discourses more bluntly emphasize gender differences (Voronova, 2011).

For the empirical study, 17 semi-structured focus groups in Stockholm and Moscow were conducted during the autumn of 2012 and spring 2013, preceded by a pilot study in early 2012, with 80 undergraduate students at Moscow State University in Moscow and Södertörn University in Stockholm.<sup>2</sup> While focus groups are often made up of people who do not know one another, pre-existing groups, with 4–6 participants in each, were considered likely to facilitate relevant insights (see Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999: 8) as online music use was understood as involving notable social dimensions (in tagging, spreading and commenting on social network sites, etc.). Following common practice in focus group research, the groups were designed to facilitate general themes among relatively homogeneous groups of participants, here in terms of age (18–24), occupation (university students), study area and level (undergraduate media/journalism, and location (Moscow/Stockholm)).<sup>3</sup> Within these basic prerequisites (also, naturally, that participants used the internet for music), the groups were divided into female, male and mixed groups.<sup>4</sup>

When analysing the transcripts of the focus groups, we became interested in the way our participants discussed music and technology as embedded in gendered relationships, implicitly and explicitly, and what ideas about gender, music and media technology they articulated. In order to understand how discourses on gender, music and media technology was constructed in their discussions, we analysed subject positions (Fairclough, 1995) that were constructed as desired in order to understand who the ideal music user is.<sup>5</sup> A subject position is understood as a cluster of ideas about how a subject is expected to act, speak and perform

constructed within discourse by institutional norms (Fairclough, 1995: 53). Furthermore, some of the ideas about music and technology repeatedly presented in the groups, such as 'good' music, are seen as discursive nodal points: signs that take on excessive meaning and order other signs around them (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 26) within a discourse. Nodal points are analysed as particularly meaningful ideas for the interviewees.

A second focus was put on nation. We were interested in understanding similarities and differences in subject positions and nodal points between the two cultural contexts and, in order to do so, we identified differences in *how* words and metaphors, music, gender and technology were addressed in the focus groups. Taking into account that these were conducted in different contexts, discourses on gender are seen as shaped in intersections with, for example, class, ethnicity and nation. These intersections, however, proved to be more difficult to identify in our material, which is addressed in the latter part of the analysis.

## Technology and music talk

Before detailing how our participants talked about media technology, music and gender, it could be instructive to provide a general picture of the focus groups. Looking at the groups overall, it is clear, first, that while other media were also used, the internet was central to music habits in the samples in both Stockholm and Moscow, as a meta-music platform for finding out about, searching for and accessing music. There were of course differences between the two contexts, not least in terms of favoured music platforms, where the Swedish participants primarily used the streaming service Spotify to subscribe to and stream music, whereas the Russian participants favoured the Russian social network site VKontakte to access, listen to and download music. But, overall, the discussions in both cities highlighted mobility and connectivity as characteristic of music habits, with music described as omnipresent and integrated into social media.

Second, there was a strong sense among the participants that their increased reliance on the internet for music use had facilitated an individualist listening approach. They emphasized, for example, music listening as a partly solitary activity, the enhanced possibility of constructing individual taste preferences and playlists due to the almost unlimited range of music so easily available, and themselves as highly selective music listeners. At the same time, their practices, tastes and classification of music formed a pattern from which few individuals really stood out in their uses and tastes. However, some talked more elaborately about technology and music than others.

*Johan:* If somebody changes in the middle [of a song/playlist], that's it, like, everything's ruined kind of. Then it's like no respect. That makes me as a, what shall we call it: an active listener mad. [...] I know that Neil Young of all people, him and an old producer, T-Bone Burnett, I think his name is, they are developing a new player, a new format, because the formats available, like the MP3, are not made for listening, they're made to be sent between [users], they are compressed.<sup>6</sup>

In all groups the participants were asked what technology they favoured for listening to music, how they used it, what type of uses they did not like and what they liked/disliked about the media technology. They were also asked about musical preferences. All groups

discussed these issues in one way or another and patterns of preferred uses were articulated. In the quote, Johan describes one type of music use that he does not approve of: when a person changes songs before the first one has finished. He explains how he, as an active listener, gets upset by this type of behaviour, indicating that some listeners are passive and not upset. Being active was, for Johan, a good thing, since earlier in the discussion he described the active pursuit of music in positive terms. Being passive, and not respecting the music, was in this discussion understood as negative. Similarly, in many of the focus groups participants described themselves in terms of *active* or *lazy* users, talking about how new media technology could both make music use very easy and comfortable, and promote activity. The topic of activity was approached in several ways, but most often an active user was described in positive terms, while laziness was considered a less desirable trait, and sometimes being lazy was seen as a consequence of new technology that ‘gave’ music to the user too easily. The active user is, by this reasoning, an *even more* desirable position than before music use on the internet, since the technology encourages laziness.

Noticeably, the participants who talked about themselves as active were often young men, but not all young men talked this way. Activity in music use connoted control over and knowledge of the music and the technological devices. Control over technology is discursively masculinized, not only here but in discourse on gender and technology in general (Armstrong, 2011; Cockburn and Ormrod, 1993; Wajcman, 2004). Active choices were understood as based in knowledge about music as well as technology, and also often coincided with lengthy talk about technology, quality of sound and music among (mainly) young men. Being in control of one’s musical choices and having the skills to discuss and use media technology were thus articulated as desirable, with control of music associated with control of technology. Gavanas and Reitsamer (2013: 73) have shown that female DJs recognize that technological skills are associated with masculinity and value in their profession, and still claim technological skills for themselves to obtain that value (more or less successfully) by, for example, describing themselves as ‘nerds’. Young men in our study referred to themselves, each other and male artists or friends when talking about technology and music, positioning ‘active’ as masculine. There were, however, female participants who at times claimed activity too, and male participants who did not. Participants who called themselves lazy or admitted to listening to music put together by others followed such statements with laughter, not with pride. Some participants also ascribed the laziness to others, while they themselves did not want to be associated with that quality:

*Alex:* I have a very long playlist on the social network (VKontakte), which my friends use just as much, those who are too lazy to look for music, they always come and pick from my page.

While the internet as a medium for music was seen as a good thing by participants, both the active and the lazy, when it came to sound quality many of them were concerned. Smartphone headphones, computer speakers and compressed MP3-formats did not provide good sound quality, according to the participants. This viewpoint was sometimes challenged, but many discussions ended in nostalgia for high fidelity home technology, vinyl and CD formats. The most popular format is not always the format with the best quality (Taylor, 2001: 23), but the participants were not necessarily correct when

ascribing good sound to 'old' technology, as some digital formats can also be said to have quality advantages (Taylor, 2001: 17). Either way, talking about sound quality was initiated by male participants, while female participants took part and agreed. Some of the young men spoke at length about sound quality, and also identified themselves as producers and active listeners with a craving for good sound. Good sound, according to these participants, required better technological solutions. Once again it was male participants who developed arguments about how to improve devices for listening and how to choose which formats to listen to, reinforcing ideas about technology as masculinized. Such ideas could be expressed as in the following examples:

*Andrej:* Well, in general, about the quality. I have an extra application that allows me to download free music from Vkontakte. But it also helps me to define the type of file extension, and I can determine, well, with the help of an additional window, how much it weighs, the file, and how many fractions of a second there are. And based on that, I determine what music I will download, what I will listen to.

*Stefan:* Because, say, a number of sites have files of, so to speak, not so good quality, and even with viruses.

Being active as a music lover as well as a user of media technology, and caring about sound quality were not the only subject positions regarded as good and desirable. Having the right taste in music and being able to keep up in discussions about good music was also appreciated. Ideas about good taste interacted with ideas about active/lazy users. Everybody participating in the focus groups liked music, and listened to music, they all talked about their taste in some way. But the participants who described themselves as active listeners and who, almost always, were young men, did have particular specialist tastes. Their tastes in music could be displayed as a wide knowledge of genres and artists, a disdain for pop and chart music, and a manner of talking about artists that they were particularly familiar with on a first-name basis, as if they were friends. They typically mentioned many artists by first name, and while their less assertive peers could say that they liked singer songwriters or 'romantic music', the participants with specialist taste tended to explain the genres in terms of time, place and the relations between similar artists. The gendering of pop and mainstream as feminine and authentic rock music as masculine, of higher value, has been noted in previous research (Frith and McRobbie, 1978; Railton 2001). One very clear exception was a female participant, who, working part-time as a music journalist, mastered the specialist talk about music genres even better than the male participants in her group: she carved out a space for herself in the masculinized name-dropping.

## **Dads and 'music nerds': the role of experts**

While the articulations of specialist tastes and 'active' music listeners appear to mirror previous insights from feminist research into music consumption, highlighted by new media technology, it is also revealing to examine expertise as a more general discourse in these discussions. As explained, those who were closest to describing *themselves* as music 'experts' in the groups were often male, with definitions of themselves as for example 'music lover' or 'super-music-interested' – even if many of the female

participants also proclaimed a strong interest in music. 'Nerd' occurred in some of the groups, particularly in Stockholm, as shorthand for someone with an extensive knowledge of music. 'Nerd' or 'nerdiness' are of course ambiguous terms, which for instance could refer to both a socially undesirable individual and someone with an all-consuming interest in a specific area, but they also have connotations of a male subject (see e.g. Thornham, 2008; Thornham and McFarlane, 2013). In music culture Straw (1997: 8) has observed the connotations of 'nerd' as often referring to white males, for example in ideas about record collectors. In the present study, such connotations were notable when participants made references to a male 'nerd', for example in passing comments such as 'my boyfriend, he's a real music nerd'.

As this 'nerdy' form of music expertise appeared as a somewhat masculinized personal trait, expertise was also touched upon when discussing the online music landscape more specifically. The interview guide included questions about how to get to know new music, and how participants found their way through what some of them described as a 'baffling' choice of music on the internet. Here, online experts, in the shape of bloggers, music journalists and people on social network sites were mentioned as valuable for finding out about new music. Individuals with advanced knowledge of music were experienced as having an important day-to-day function for musical guidance on social network sites such as Facebook and VKontakte, through sharing playlists, status updates and tips on gigs and new music, for example.<sup>7</sup>

As exemplified in the following quote, some female participants argued that the emergence of the internet as a music platform had amplified the need for personal music guidance:

*Carina:* I was thinking, that nowadays, with the internet, there's so much music, and you don't really have the time to get 'deep' into something. And in a way it means that the music nerds are becoming even more important. You really look up to people who know *everything* [about music].

*Interviewer:* How do you mean?

*Carina:* Well, for me, I have less and less of an idea if something is old and new, and where it comes from. I don't have the time and there is so much to choose from. Whereas those who really do take their time, and find out all sorts of things and get into certain genres or whatever, they can really get a lot out of the internet, and pass it on to people ...

*Susanna:* Yeah, and some people ... my boyfriend is very much like this, that he gets really into a band, and then he listens to them over and over and finds out everything there is about them. And then he moves on to the next and learns all there is to know about them. He gets obsessive and knows everything.

*Interviewer:* And that's what you mean with a 'music nerd', or ...?

*Carina:* Yeah. And it's like those people are more important now.

This reflection on the potential of the internet to stimulate and provide new meanings of music expertise was not overtly concerned with gender, but it illustrates how such ideas can interlink with male subject positions such as ‘boyfriends’ and form masculine agency in engagement with music, online as well as offline.

Although the music expert could be conceptualized as a (male) ‘nerd’ on the internet and in other contexts, expertise, as the above example likewise shows, was also brought up in relation to more private influences shaping musical tastes. Friends, partners and family members were considered sources of inspiration. As in this quote, female participants could refer to boyfriends as an influence, whereas references to female (or other) partners were absent from the young men’s discussions. Boyfriends, likewise, were mentioned by women as having contributed to listening practices. A female participant explained, for example, how her boyfriend had created the basic playlists for their joint Spotify account, which she would then simply add to as she went about using the service. A little unexpectedly, given the age of the participants and the focus on the internet as a ‘new’ music platform, there were also in almost every focus group – in both cities – spontaneous references to fathers as expert figures:

*Anya:* Now [with the internet] I have the freedom to choose the music that I like, that I would like to listen to. And earlier, for example, it was only my dad’s CDs. Well, and this has, in fact, influenced my taste in music, because my dad listens to Nirvana, Queen, AC/DC and stuff like that. So it somehow influenced me.

*Frank:* ... my dad had a very particular music style, 70s sort of. When I was younger I didn’t want to listen to that. But today I think it’s great, and I more and more take after my dad’s style.

*Alma:* It’s funny that you say that, because my dad ... it’s definitely from my dad that I have my interest in music.

As illustrated in these quotes, the ‘dad’ was emphasized both for having provided inspiration for initial interest and for later taste formations. In some discussions, likewise, the dads were referred to as belonging to a generation of more ‘genuine’ music users, uncontaminated by digital technologies and therefore with a somehow more substantiated understanding of music. A participant in Stockholm, for example, explained how her father would ‘play air guitar, and really get into the music’ as he was listening, whereas a topic in one of the Moscow groups concerned how the participants’ dads had had to put more ‘effort’ into finding out about and keeping up with artists when they were young, in a way that their own generation did not have to do. The fathers, then, appeared to represent an idealized music listener – active, knowledgeable and with good taste – illustrative of the continuing gendering of cultural practices within families, across geographies.

The hierarchy of expertise in the family was destabilized in some of the descriptions of the younger generations as experts of the new music technology. For instance, when female participants in two focus groups explained how they had helped their puzzled

fathers to open a Spotify account, they positioned themselves as the ones in possession of technological savvy, with their dads lagging behind:

*Sandra:* I would be happy to teach mum how to use Spotify, but it's only dad who's shown an interest, so I taught him how to create playlists and stuff.

*Christine:* Yeah, I showed my dad what you could search for and what you could get [on Spotify], and he was, like, 'Oh my God!'

Underlining the image of the father as the parent with the active music interest, the first quote is notable as it both corroborates a 'habitual "feminine" position of [technological?] incompetence' (Walkerdine, 2006: 526, quoted in Thornham and McFarlane, 2013: 196), in the description of the two parents, but also counteracts this in presenting the young woman as an emerging technological expert, and as someone with a music interest on a par with the father. It serves as a reminder that understandings of gender and expertise within the contemporary music landscape can be analysed as multi-layered, with subject positions in this study shifting depending on the kind of expertise in question, and with ambiguities involving for example age and generation. Nevertheless, it is clear that the discourse around the music expert, overall, appeared rooted in existing social and cultural patterns of gender difference.

## Location-bound discussions of gender

It is evident that, despite the two different geographical locations that the study incorporated, there are, as we have discussed, many apparent similarities in the understandings of music, technology and gender between participants in both cities. In terms of age, class and ethnicity these participants constituted a fairly homogeneous group; middle-class young university students with ethnic majority backgrounds, which may account for some of the overlaps and which also means that the analysis performed in this article cannot be extended to take, for example, class-related differences into account; we are analysing ideas belonging to mainly middle-class youth. Yet the similarities between discussions in the two cities here are in themselves interesting, as they point to overriding conceptualizations of gender in relation to music, expertise and technology that appear to cut across national and cultural boundaries.

Nevertheless, for further analysis of how the geo-cultural dimensions are manifested in everyday experience it is worth exploring some differences between the discussions in the two locations. The contrasting environments and the resulting differences in lived experience were traceable from time to time. The researchers for instance noticed how, within the mixed groups, the female participants in Moscow appeared uncomfortable and were allocated less space in the discussions than their male counterparts, whereas these flowed more freely and evenly in the single-sex groups. This pattern, which was not noticeable in the Swedish groups, is understood as related to the different gendered discourses noted above.

Likewise, while participants in both cities constructed activity and knowledge as desirable and masculinized in talk about skills, taste and music/technology the jargon

differed at times. Girls and guys were more explicitly named as such in the Moscow groups when expectations of taste and knowledge were discussed. Appropriate feminine taste in music was, for example, addressed in the Moscow groups, as in the following example about what music and styles were seen as fit ‘for girls’:

*Milena:* And just there, I don’t know.... And you look at the person, like, it happens to me, and I think, ‘God, this is a girl, this style of music [techno] just doesn’t fit her, appearance wise.’

*Tanya:* I guess, my interests are somewhat like girls’ interests. Everything depends on the mood really, on the condition and generally, I don’t care at all what genre to listen to.

To feminize mainstream music or generic taste and to display opinions of what behaviour suits girls is nothing new in talk about music (Baker, 2004; Bayton, 1998; Whiteley, 2005). It is, however, missing from the Stockholm interviews, where the participants did not explicitly call themselves girls or guys in relation to their music tastes. This is not an argument for the Swedish participants as less gendered, but rather gendered in a silent way, displaying a local gender-blind discourse.

The specificity of the contexts and their intersections with gender also became notable in discussions of music and technology as particularly tied to nation and space. While Swedish participants listened to Swedish music and Russian participants listened to Russian music there seemed to be different value judgments of local popular music traditions. While the Swedish participants listened to Swedish music and liked it, Russian participants often scorned Russian music. Their scorning made interesting distinctions about class and gender, calling popular Russian artists classless and backward, un-modern men, and tasteless in terms of their artistic identity.

Spatial aspects of the locations, the surrounding city, likewise, were mentioned for instance in talk about mobile music use. Devices such as MP3-players and mobile phones were described as a common feature of day-to-day life in both cities, with explanations of how listening ‘on the go’ had become a way to create a personal soundtrack to daily life, as well as to shut out unwanted disturbances from the city (see Bull, 2007). In the Moscow groups, this attempt to keep out the city was talked about by some of the female participants in conjunction to feeling threatened by aspects of city life. One young woman for instance described mobile music listening as ‘stress management’, whereas another saw listening to music as ‘protection’ while commuting:

*Sveta:* In the subway I like to listen to energetic music, because it somehow *protects* me, yeah. You move with the flow of people, you go in a more energetic manner. With people this is important. Well, it just makes it fast, all the escalators, underpasses.

The quote shows uses of technology and media integrated into daily experience, and that this is shaped by social and spatial settings. In the Stockholm interviews participants did not express thoughts about risk, in the Moscow groups some women did. This could possibly be seen as indication that the Swedish discourse is shaped by ideas of safety and

gender equality – yet the analysis in the previous sections shows that gender and power/value is co-constructing music and technology use in both cities.

## Questioning individualism

In the final section we want to return to the idea of the individual, the connected user in contemporary new media studies. In line with current feminist research (Thornham and McFarlane, 2013), an overall objective here is to contribute to questioning notions of a neutral ‘user’ of new technology, while adding to existing research on gender, music and technology. Although the idea of an individual user is present in our study, with participants who emphasized individualism at the centre of contemporary music use, this does not tell the whole story. At the same time as they discuss individual uses, the participants articulate ideas about gender, technology and music that are shaped by patterns of power and difference. The dilemma in their understandings of music and technology as individually shaped by users is obvious. We argue that the increased need for advanced technology in order to listen to the latest music has rendered the user even more affected by gendered ideas about technological expertise and musical experts. Technological skills and mastery are needed not only to control music production but also, increasingly, consumption. On the one hand, new music technologies can be seen to facilitate new patterns of music listening, which places a greater focus on the individual, since an endless choice of personal music is so easily accessible, with vast music libraries and individual playlists available at the touch of a button. On the other hand, uses of technology continue to be firmly situated in discourse and social contexts. Our study exemplifies how discursive ideas about activity, value, expertise and technology – as well as influences from family – are structured by gender, and how the closest relations continue to play a role in musical guidance. It can serve as a reminder, further, of the continuing importance of the offline context for shaping music use.

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## Notes

1. The material is part of a wider study of music use online, involving researchers from Sweden and Russia and aiming to understand the role of the internet in music use among young adults. Experiences of, and different practices around, online music are studied as an example of how technology is reshaping cultural practices today.
2. The pilot study consisted of two focus groups in Stockholm and Moscow, whereas the material analysed for this article consisted of eight groups in Stockholm and nine in Moscow.
3. University students have previously been shown to be a group particularly active in the consumption of music online, regarding music downloading and attitudes towards file-sharing, for example (Jones and Lenhart, 2004). In Russia, where internet access differs widely between social groups and geographical regions (Von Feilitzen and Petrov, 2011: 58), students are also a group likely to have access to the internet on a regular basis. Notably, the use of university student participants has implications for class analysis, as middle- and upper-class youth are over-represented in universities in both Russia and Sweden.

4. The focus groups were led by one female and one male discussant, with a list of potential music listening format used as stimulants. Questions asked included 'What kind of music do you listen to?' as well as where and how, thus focusing on taste as well as media/internet use, asking general as well as specific questions. The participants were recruited through advertisements on course websites and other information channels.
5. Analysis was conducted by use of search words (technology, expert, good, etc.) as well as several readings of all the material for an overview of recurring themes. The most prominent themes surrounding gender are expanded on in this article.
6. All names of participants have been changed and the interviews have been translated from Russian and Swedish. The Russian interviews have been translated by the Russian moderators, with whom we have worked closely. The Russian transcripts have been overseen by the Russian moderators, with whom we have worked closely. The Swedish translations are by the authors.
7. In our samples even those male participants who described themselves in terms of experts, were cautious about indiscreet sharing, preferring instead to direct guidance to selected friends.

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