"Genrefluid" Spotify Playlists and Mediations of Genre and Identity in Music Streaming

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Abstract

Recent popular discourse has claimed that music and listeners' tastes are becoming increasingly "genrefluid" in popular music culture, and this idea has been linked to the logics of music streaming services. This article analyzes the Spotify-curated playlist *Lorem*, which has been presented by the company as a primary illustration of "genrefluid" music curation and listening, to investigate Spotify's mediations of genre and identity at the intersections of media discourse, genre metadata, and curated sound. I discuss how the idea of genrefluidity links post-genre and post-identity discourses to the technocultural logics of algorithmic recommendation. At the same time, Spotify's mediation of genre remediates earlier hegemonic associations between genre and identity in popular music culture. This article concludes that musical categorization in music streaming does not transcend genre and identity but is characterized by ambivalent mappings of genre and identity mediated by the logics of algorithmic technologies.

KEYWORDS: Popular music, music streaming, algorithmic recommendation, genre, gender, identity

Introduction

Recent popular discourse suggests that popular music and listeners' tastes have become "genrefluid" in the context of music streaming. For example, writer Amanda Petrusich suggests that Spotify playlists typically organize music by "vibe"

rather than genre, which "seems considerably more in tune with how and why people listen to music" (Petrusich 2021). The notion that genre is becoming less important in music streaming has also been associated with ubiquitous access to music and the individualization of recommendation through automated and human curation (Johnson 2018: 102) and it has also been repeatedly articulated by the world's biggest music streaming company Spotify. The 2022 edition of the company's "Culture Next" report of global listening trends argues that "Gen Z is fluid when it comes to factors like gender, politics, and sexuality – and it's no different for music" (*Spotify Advertising* 2022: 9). Targeting potential advertising clients, the report urges companies to "sponsor" Spotify-generated playlists like *Lorem*, "which put quality first and genres last" (ibid.). And as *Lorem*'s main music curator Liz Szabo summarizes in an interview, "The *Lorem* listener is open-minded, fluid, so we are, too" (Dominguez 2020). In these accounts, genrefluidity is not only associated with the logics of music streaming technologies, but also with the idea that genrefluid listening is an articulation of increasingly fluid identity.

This article asks what genrefluidity means in Spotify's mediation of genre and investigates how this idea relates to mediations of identity. To this end, I conducted a case study of the editorial Spotify playlist *Lorem*, which was created in 2019 and had roughly one million followers in April 2023. *Lorem* primarily features newly released music by young artists and the playlist's main music curator Liz Szabo has described the playlist's listeners as predominantly young, female-identifying, and "engaged" (Dominguez 2020). *Lorem* is chosen as a case given its outsized presence in marketing materials by Spotify, including several editions of the company's "Culture Next" report (*Spotify Advertising* 2020, 2021, 2022), and in music industry reporting (Dominguez 2020; Dredge 2020; Moore 2019; Wang 2020). These texts have singled out *Lorem* as a primary example of "genrefluid" music curation and presented it to support the idea that popular music and listeners' tastes are becoming increasingly "genrefluid" in music streaming and contemporary popular music culture. As Spotify has associated *Lorem* predominantly with young, female-identified listeners, I focus on mediations of genre and gender in my analysis.

I initially analyze depictions of *Lorem* in media discourse to discuss how the idea of genrefluid listening resonates with "post-genre" ideas in (white) postmillennial pop music (James 2017) and the presentation of algorithmic (music) recommendation systems as post-demographic technologies (Seaver 2021) that re-envision identity as the sum of outward-directed behavior (Cannon 2021). I subsequently discuss how the categorizations of music and identity articulated through *Lorem*'s metadata and curated music are mediated by the technocultural affordances of Spotify and characterized by variable scales of differentiation. In the final part of my analysis, I examine Lorem's "indie pop" categories more closely, and discuss how Spotify's mediation of genre relates to earlier discursive formations at the intersections of pop and indie genres.

Literature review: Genre, identity, and technological mediation in popular music and music streaming

Scholars in popular music studies have aimed to theorize, create systematic typologies, and study the social practices of genres (Samson 2001). They have proposed theoretical concepts that encompass musical, social, and economic dimensions of genre in popular music (Brackett 2016; Holt 2007; Fabbri 1982) and have drawn on genre theory beyond music to theorize questions of delineation (Frith 1996; Beer 2012; Rockwell 2012), temporality (Krogh 2018; Lena and Peterson 2008) and meaning (Brackett 2016; Fabbri 1982) as core concerns of genre formations in popular music. On the one hand, these studies jointly understand popular music genres as dynamic and permeable; on the other, they acknowledge the "structuring" function of genre in popular music culture, by way of identification and differentiation (Holt 2007: 2).

Studies have further investigated the ways that categorizations of musical difference in popular music culture have been bound up with categorizations of social difference, including along lines of gender, race, class, and age. Scholars have studied the stylistic and social dimensions of individual genre formations (Fonarow 2006; Haddon 2020; Lena 2012; Walser 1993), their relationships to institutional and corporate processes (Brennan 2017; Hesmondhalgh 1999; Negus 1999; Toynbee 2000), and the associations between genre, social identity, difference, and collectivity (Brackett 2005, 2016; Bannister 2006; Dolan 2010; Hesmondhalgh 2005).

Studying African American popular music genres, David Brackett (2016: 20) emphasizes that identifications between categories of music and categories of people may take on various forms, and he draws on Georgina Born's (2011) four-part model of identifications, which ranges from homological to fantasized, including exoticist relationships. For Brackett, the various "imaginary relations" between music and people "emphasize the contingency of musical and identificatory categories" (Brackett 2016: 20). In other words, they imply that "categories of music and people are neither true nor false, but rather ideological, in that they speak to a shared, tacit understanding about which differences are meaningful as well as how these differences are meaningful" (ibid.: 25-26).

The associations between genre and identity are also embodied in the history of indie music, which forms a central context to this study. Emerging in Great Britain in the late 1970s out of punk and post-punk music cultures, the term indie originally described the goal of establishing structures for the production and distribution of music independent from the mainstream music market (Hesmondhalgh 1999). By the mid-1980s, indie referred to a narrower musical style of pop/rock whose construction of authenticity rested on the creation of a "purified" and narrow cannon of white, male 1960s rock bands (Bannister 2006: 86) and a lo-fi recording aesthetic that signified opposition to "mass popular taste". Although early indie music culture of the late 1970s and 1980s was more accepting of female musicians than the rock tradition at large and attempted to disrupt its sexist and masculine norms, indie's narrow musical canon reaffirmed the whiteness and maleness of rock (Hesmondhalgh 1999: 38). By the time indie and alternative music became widely popularized in the US, UK, and Europe by the mid-1990s, it had merged with the

rockist constructions of authenticity and white masculinity that post-punk aesthetics had originally sought to criticize (ibid.: 52). In the context of these changes, indie pop (re-)emerged as a subdivision that embraced indie rock's lo-fi recording aesthetic that stylized low production values, cheapness, and do-it-yourself spirit (Dolan 2010), but increasingly foregrounded melody, song structure, and "jangly" guitars (Kruse 1993) and qualities of childlikeness, sweetness, femininity, and amateurishness (Abebe 2005).

In popular music culture, formations of genre and identity have been additionally technologically mediated, and emergent technologies of production and distribution have informed new formations of genre (Katz 2010). In recent years, digital, online, and algorithmic technologies have been central to these developments (Born and Haworth 2018). Brackett describes the advent of sound recording as a crucial moment in the identifications of music and people, which facilitated the creation of discrete markets for distinct genres and groups of listeners (Brackett 2016: 19). While early 20th popular music media intensified associations between categories of music and categories of listeners, music streaming has been associated with notions of the transcendence of genre, as articulated in the ideas surrounding "genrefluid" music production, curation, and consumption in contemporary popular music culture.

Robin James (2017) identifies a "post-genre" aesthetic in some work and reception of white pop stars in postmillennial pop music, which she understands as an articulation of post-identity politics. She argues that these texts exchange commitments to aesthetic (and racial) "purity" for a "post-genre" aesthetic that resonates with the post-identity idea that identity-based forms of marginalization have been overcome. For James, these ideas correspond to the concept of "omnivorousness", defined by sociologists Richard A. Peterson and Roger Kern (1996) as a mode of consumption that is opposed to snobbishness as it departs from "highbrow" taste and includes some other forms of consumption. As James argues, omnivorousness and post-identity politics both "refer to the overcoming of obsolete investments in purity and the preference for an aesthetically pleasing, respectable mix" (James 2017: 25). However, as she shows in an analysis of media discourse, the perceived ability to transcend genre depends on the perceived ability to transcend identity, as post-genre claims are "credible" only when made by white artists, whereas artists of color remain aesthetically and discursively tied to racialized constructions of genre (ibid.: 27).

In an ethnographic study of algorithmic music recommendation companies, Nick Seaver (2021) finds that engineers claim to have moved beyond demographic categories like race, gender, and age in the segmentation of listeners and tastes. Engineers instead distinguish listeners by scales of "avidity", which describes varying interests in music exploration and is analogous to the concept of omnivorousness. However, while engineers often describe algorithmic recommendation systems as "post-demographic" technologies, Seaver finds that gender-, class-, and age-based discourses of musical taste continuously inform the working theories of listening and listeners among these engineers. Analyzing Spotify's genre metadata, Tom Johnson (2018, 2020) has also discussed how earlier constructions of genre and identity as well as associated forms of (sub-)cultural value are remediated in Spotify's genre practices. He identifies variations in the

scale, scope, and number of Spotify's genre tags across genres, which he understands as rearticulations of uneven constructions of (sub-)cultural value in popular music culture. While previous research about genre in music streaming suggested that Spotify's mood- and activity-based playlists recast genre as context (Krogh 2020) and conceptualized streaming playlists as genres themselves (Siles et al. 2019), Seaver and Johnson show how mediations of genre in music streaming remediate earlier hegemonic associations between genre and identity. With this article, I aim to contribute to this growing body of work through an examination of the notion of genrefluidity in Spotify's playlist curation and its negotiation of genre and identity at the intersections of media discourse, metadata, and curated music.

Material and method

Lorem is an editorial Spotify playlist that was introduced in 2019 following the redesign of an existing editorial playlist called *Left of Center* that had gained some popularity among predominantly young women (Moore 2019). *Lorem* also primarily addresses young, female-identifying listeners, who are described by music curator Liz Szabo as "engaged" listeners, who are "coming back to listen day after day" (Dominguez 2020). The playlist is not explicitly situated in any region, but it mainly features music by US-based artists with lyrics in English. The playlist typically includes roughly 100 to 150 songs and is updated approximately once a week. Curatorial updates primarily introduce newly released songs, and occasionally older songs that have become popular online, to the playlist's top slots. Songs that have been featured on the playlist for some time may be moved downward or removed. Curatorial updates often also entail updates of the playlist's header image, which features an artist with a newly released song that is placed at the top or among the playlist's top songs. The playlist's graphic design also includes a stylized banner of the playlist's title that represents the "o" in *Lorem* by rotund icons like a smiley or a Magic 8 Ball.

   In the context of music streaming, music curation has become "algotorial" (Bonini and Gandini 2019), combining automated algorithmic and human curatorial processes. Thus, while editorial playlists like *Lorem* are primarily created by music curators, they rely on software that monitors demographic information about listeners and individualized streaming metrics including plays and skips of individual songs on playlists (Prey 2020a). Playlist curation has thus become a "data-intense gatekeeping activity" and produces "new regimes of visibility" (Bonini and Gandini 2019), and playlists are a central means for Spotify to exert "platform power" in relation to global music and advertising markets (Prey 2020b). Playlists like *Lorem* are also central sites of mediations of genre and identity in music streaming, where media discourse, genre metadata, curated sound, and multimodal design jointly categorize music and tastes. I use the method of Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) (Brock 2018), which was initially conceptualized as a tool for analyzing text-based online media technologies like X, (formerly Twitter). I aim to develop CTDA as a tool for multimodal technocultural discourse analysis in music streaming research and I conceptualize and analyze curated music and multimodal content of *Lorem*, genre metadata, and marketing

materials by Spotify as a "triad of relations" between "artifact, practice, and belief" (Brock 2018: 1016) in Spotify's mediation of genre and identity.

The material for my analysis of media discussions of *Lorem* includes marketing publications by Spotify, including the annual "Culture Next" global trends report published by Spotify's advertising division (*Spotify Advertising*). The document presents user data and data from focus-group interviews about the listening preferences of Spotify users in ages defined as Gen Z (18-25) and millennials (26-40) (*Spotify Advertising* 2020: 3). The report is directed at potential advertising clients and translates listening data to suggestions for the commodification of this data in third-party advertising. I further analyze interviews with Spotify's music curators published on the *For Artists* page on the company's website (*Spotify for Artists*: 2020) and in the popular music and culture magazines *Musically* (Dredge 2020), *Hits Daily Double* (Dominguez 2020), *Complex* (Moore 2019), and *Nylon* (Wang 2020). Additionally, I draw on the personal website of the playlist's co-creator and graphic designer Cecilia Azcarate (Azcarate, n.d.) for descriptions of *Lorem*.

Spotify organizes songs and artists through various metadata, including information about genre. Spotify's genre metadata is generated through a heterogeneous algorithmic model that includes machine learning, audio analysis, data from online textual analysis and listener activity, as well as direct interventions by data analysts (Johnson 2020). Spotify's genre metadata is not currently visible on the user interface, but it can be accessed through the company's Web API and is also represented on the website Every Noise at Once (ENaO) that was created by Spotify data analyst Glenn McDonald. I used ENaO's "research" function to access the genre metadata of all artists featured on *Lorem* on November 18, 2021. My sample consisted of 154 tracks by 163 artists, who were assigned 341 tags of eighty-eight individual genres. I cross-checked this data with the metadata accessed through Spotify's Web API and found the genre tags to be identical.

Spotify presents genre metadata as "neutral", thereby minimizing the interventions of its data analysts and expressing the assumption that listening patterns "reveal latent musical categories" (Johnson 2020: 181). However, its metadata practices participate in the demarcation of genres, which have throughout the history of popular music intersected with formations of social identity. The association between genre and identity rests on complex and multifaceted processes since, as Brackett emphasizes, the "range of genre-identity relations does not arise as a natural or biological connection" but emerges "through the repetition of social practices in which a generic label brings together categories of people" (Brackett 2016: 20). The representation of social identity categories like gender and race among artists therefore does not indicate a homology between genre and identity but results from and points to repeated structural, discursive, and social practices. I mapped genre metadata with information on artists' gender as stated on Spotify's "About" artist bio pages, artists' linked Instagram profiles, the music information site MusicBrainz, and music reporting on the playlist's ten most common genre categories (assigned to 92% of all featured artists). I coded artists' gender as female, male, and non-binary, adding a fourth category for mixed-gender groups and collaborations. I also drew on information in music reporting about artists' racial identities to indicate intersections between gender and race as

associated with individual genres in my sample. This information is not used to draw general conclusions about Spotify's mediation of genre and race, but to indicate tendencies in a small sample. Finally, I contextualize these analyses with audio analyses of curated music to discuss stylistic characteristics that offer deeper insight into mediations of genre and identity at the intersections of discourse, metadata, and curated sound on Spotify's *Lorem* playlist.

Lorem and constructions of genrefluidity

The idea that popular music and listeners' tastes have become increasingly genrefluid has been repeatedly articulated in Spotify's marketing materials in recent years. For example, in 2020, Spotify's "Culture Next" report presents genrefluidity as the central defining characteristic of contemporary popular music culture. Citing the success of artists like Billie Eilish and Lil Nas X, whose music blends influences from singer-songwriter and electropop traditions on the one hand, and pop, country, and rap on the other, the report argues that "[t]he 2020 Grammys were essentially a celebration of genre subversion" (*Spotify Advertising* 2020: 14). It is claimed further that these changes are informed by the "genrefluid" listening practices of millennial and Gen Z listeners, whose "category-defying approach to taste" has also increased the popularity of "genre-less" playlists like *Lorem* (ibid.). Spotify's report then associates listening habits with listeners' identities, and it suggests that they can be commodified: "Young people are proud of their unique, multidimensional identities, and brands can be a part of that" (ibid.: 15). Similarly, the report's 2021 edition suggests that "Young consumers can't be boxed in – to genre, geography, language or any other passive identifier" (*Spotify Advertising* 2021: 22) and urges brands to "sponsor one of [Spotify's] genreless playlists" (ibid.: 23). And in 2022, the presumed links between genrefluid taste, identity, and possibilities for commodification are phrased almost identically: "Gen Z is fluid when it comes to factors like gender, politics, and sexuality – and it's no different for music. Sponsor playlists like POLLEN and Lorem, which put quality first and genres last" (*Spotify Advertising* 2022: 8). This presentation of user data is strategic for Spotify's positioning toward advertising partners: by claiming to identify, understand or even anticipate changing patterns of cultural consumption associated with millennial and Gen Z listeners, Spotify presents itself as a crucial nodal point in translating user data to individualized and broader "taste profiles" (Prey 2020b), which can be commodified for maximizing consumer targeting for potential advertising clients. Spotify thus articulates its "platform power" in relationship to the advertising market (Prey 2020b).

Spotify's marketing materials illustrate how fluidity has developed from a general metaphor for decentralized logics of power illustrated in software-based systems (Bauman 2001) and a descriptor of a mode of cultural recommendation and consumption illustrated by the image of "streaming" (Morris and Powers 2015) toward a descriptor of modes of listening and types of listeners in algorithmic music recommendation. As Eric Drott (2018: 330) has argued, discourses surrounding recommendation not only shape technologies, but also shape (ideas about) users. Thus, as technologies are construed as "dynamic and adaptive", designed to meet

"users' fluctuating needs", they also "demand users who are no less dynamic and adaptable", who are imagined and imagine themselves "less as individuals having cohesive identities, and more as a diffuse set of fluctuating needs, dispositions, and drives, whose only constant is their inconstancy". Below, I discuss in more detail how Spotify, through the idea of genrefluidity, mediates genre and identity at the intersections of media discourse, metadata, and curated sound. First, I analyze media discourse to discuss the construction of fluidity as futurity and its relationships to "post-demographic" recommendation. Second, I examine genre metadata and curated music to investigate the relationship between constructions of genrefluidity and the "platform effects" of Spotify's system of organizing genre. Third, I analyze *Lorem*'s mediation of genre and identity in relationship to earlier discursive formations at the intersections of pop and indie genres.

Fluidity, post-genre discourse, and post-demographic recommendation

Lorem is shorthand for "Lorem ipsum" and describes the practice of using dummy text in the printing industry, dating back to the development of typesetting in the 16th century. Describing a momentary placeholder, the term signifies newness, flux, and an openness oriented toward the future. As *Lorem*'s co-creator Cecilia Azcarate (Azcarate n.d.) explains, these connotations fitted Spotify's idea for the playlist's design: "The idea and name (…) is that the music is so new it doesn't even have a name yet (…)". For the playlist's main music curator Liz Szabo, "genrefluid" playlists like *Lorem* embody "the next evolution of a Spotify playlist" (Moore 2019). Szabo presents changes toward genrefluid curation as an echo of the "fluid" identities of listeners, whom she defines as young and primarily female-identifying (Dominguez 2020).

The above descriptions articulate two interlaced ideas: They present genrefluidity as the future of music taste and curation, and they associate genrefluid tastes with a new generation of listeners, whose identities are also believed to be "fluid". Fluidity in taste and identity are thus ascribed positive value and depicted as a desirable future. Robin James (2017) has similarly identified a "post-genre" discourse in postmillennial pop music, which she understands as an articulation of post-identity politics. She argues that in the work of white artists like Taylor Swift and producer Diplo, a "post-genre" approach to style replaces earlier commitments to aesthetic (and racial) "purity". For James, "post-genre" pop embodies the post-identity idea that identity-based forms of marginalization are to be, or have already been, overcome. Post-genre pop music is thus presented as an articulation of a "post-identity future" that departs from popular music's genre- and identity-laden past. The above depictions of *Lorem* similarly construct genrefluidity as aspirational and directed toward the future, as they are already identified in the identities and tastes of (some) millennial and Gen Z listeners. The association between "genrefluidity," futurity, and youth also resonates with the songs and artists featured on the playlists: *Lorem* primarily includes newly released songs by artists in their early twenties and at relatively early stages of their careers. The playlist also includes new releases by artists that had initially become popular among young listeners, but have since become more widely known, like Billie Eilish and the

Norwegian singer-songwriter girl in red. It is thus also discursively associated with futurity as it primarily features young artists and addresses young audiences.

For Szabo, future directions in music curation are set by the tastes of "young and fluid" audiences, which are quantifiable through listening data: "I think we can start experimenting with that because we have an audience that's young and fluid and probably open to new things, and we'll be able to see in the data when they're not into something" (Moore 2019). Szabo's assertion that user data will show Spotify's music curators when listeners "are not into something" illustrates how listeners are reimagined as "data doubles" (Couldry and Mejias 2019), which describes the process of re-constructing subjectivity as the sum of user behavior in algorithmic recommendation technologies.

Robert Prey describes this construction of listeners in the context of music streaming as an "epistemologically behaviorist position to understanding music taste" (Prey 2020a: 5) that is based on user behavior rather than self-identification or demographic markers. Nick Seaver (2021: 773) finds that the idea of algorithmic music recommendation systems as "post-demographic" technologies that are believed to transgress "traditional marketing categories of race, gender, and age" is common among engineers of recommendation algorithms. These engineers conceptualize datafied listening behavior as "privileged knowledge" about users' "musical identities", and they claim to categorize listeners based on listening data rather than demographic information or stated musical preferences (ibid.: 785). Seaver finds that engineers segment listeners along scales of what he calls "avidity," which describes listeners' "musical enthusiasm," or interest in exploring different forms of music. However, as he explains, although "abstracted away from details of genre or listener demography", avidity remains "implicitly gendered" masculine (ibid.: 779). The gendered coding of divergent tastes and listening practices is articulated explicitly by one head engineer in Seaver's study, who explains avidity by contrasting the repetitive listening to pop music by teenage girls with the explorative male jazz listener (ibid.). Like the marketing materials discussed above, these engineers ascribe value to "fluid" tastes, while "repetitive" tastes are devalued and continuously associated with subject positions – like teenage girls – whose tastes have been marginalized throughout the history of pop music (McRobbie and Garber 1981).

Studying algorithmic marketing, Camilla Cannon similarly discusses how the datafication of subjectivity articulates a post-identity politics, where identity is disconnected from demographic factors and re-envisioned as the sum of outward-directed (consumer) behavior (Cannon 2021). Cannon explains that ostensibly "post-demographic" marketing increasingly re-envisions binary-gendered consumer profiles toward fractured and individualized "genderfluid" consumer data profiles, which expand possibilities of commodification. Like the depictions of *Lorem*'s "genrefluid" listeners above, these marketing texts depict "genderfluid" consumption as an articulation of a desirable post-identity future (ibid.: 9). However, as identity is rendered into consumer behavior, "genderfluid" consumer profiles are severed from the lived experience of genderfluid and non-binary-identifying people.

Thus, while algorithmic music recommendation systems are presented by engineers as transcending identity in music recommendation, they remediate

earlier associations between genre and identity. In this way, ideas of "post-demographic" recommendation in music streaming resonates with "post-genre" and "post-identity" ideas in popular music more broadly, where the ability to transcend genre depends on the perceived ability to transcend identity. Post-genre claims have been shown to be "credible" only when made by white artists, whereas artists of color remain aesthetically and discursively tied to racialized constructions of genre (James 2017: 27; Johnson 2020). Thus, earlier associations between genre and identity inform tacit understandings among the creators of algorithmic systems about what listener groups and practices are thought to represent popular music culture's "fluid" future. In the next section, I map discursive formations surrounding *Lorem* with genre metadata and curated music to discuss how ideas of genrefluidity are mediated by the technocultural affordances of Spotify's logics of genre categorization.

Constructions of difference and genrefluidity as platform effects

The 163 artists featured on *Lorem* in my sample were assigned 341 genre tags in total. It is common that artists are assigned several tags by Spotify, and the tags referred to eighty-eight different genre categories. At surface level, this data illustrates that Spotify's mediation of genre is characterized by a multiplication and fragmentation of genres. In April 2023, Spotify distinguished between roughly 6000 genres in its genre metadata. Spotify's genre categories remediate earlier genres in popular music culture and industry, and logics of categorizing like the use of umbrella terms and subgenres (like "hiphop" and rap subgenres like "rap", "gangster rap" and "trap"). But Spotify also categorizes music based on temporal (like "retro metal") and regional descriptors (like "rap lyonnais"), moods (like "chillsynth"), activities (like "nightrun"), social identities ("lgbtq+ hiphop") or more obscure factors (like "shiver pop"). For Mads Krogh (2020), Spotify's mediation of genre illustrates how music recommendation is increasingly organized around moods and activities, thereby challenging earlier associations of genres with musical scenes and music-cultural environments. Musical categorization around moods and activities resonates with the fragmented subject position of algorithmic recommendation as described by Drott (2018: 350), where listeners are re-envisioned through dynamic needs and desires rather than a cohesive identity. However, Spotify's remediation of earlier genre categories and the construction of explicitly identity-based categories indicate that Spotify's organization of music also rearticulates and newly foregrounds associations between genre and identity.

While *Lorem*'s eighty-eight genres resonate with Spotify's presentation of "genrefluidity" in media texts, a closer analysis of genre tags shows that ten genre categories dominate in numbers. 92% of artists are assigned at least one of the playlist's ten most common genres, which include "indie pop" (36%), "pop" (21%), "bedroom pop" (18%), "indie r&b" (13%), "modern rock" (9%), "alternative r&b" (7%), "modern indie pop" (5%), "electropop" (5%), "bubblegrunge" (4%) and "chill r&b" (4%). These numbers and titles suggest that the playlist mainly includes music from pop, rock, and R&B genres, and the additional descriptors "indie", "alternative", and "bedroom" imply narrower stylistic and music-social histories. They thus illustrate how the questions of what genrefluidity means, and how genrefluid curation and tastes appear to be, are mediated by the logics of Spotify's

categorization of music. On *Lorem*, Spotify's genre metadata intensifies an effect of "genrefluidity" through fine-grained differentiation. The effects of Spotify's technocultural logics on differentiation and discursive constructions of fluidity are instances of what Jeremy Morris (Morris 2020) calls "platform effects": developing Mark Katz's (2004) concept of "phonograph effects" for the context of music streaming, the term describes the impact of algorithmic technologies on the production, distribution, and consumption of music (Morris 2020: 3).

The genre metadata particularly highlights Spotify's fine-grained differentiation of genre by the distinction between "indie pop", "bedroom pop", and "modern indie pop". These genres overlap in their assigned artists as nearly 80% of artists labelled "bedroom pop" and almost half of the artists tagged "modern indie pop" are also tagged as "indie pop". Music across Spotify's "indie pop", "bedroom pop", and "modern indie pop" tags also widely shares stylistic characteristics to the extent that intra-genre variation appears greater than inter-genre variation. Songs across the three genres address themes of coming of age and mental health including female friendships (Remi Wolf, "Liz"), (queer) love (girl in red, "we fell in love in october"), sexual harassment (Clairo, "Blouse"), depression (boylife, "amphetamime"), and addiction (Remi Wolf, "Liz"). Some songs combine stylistic elements associated with earlier iterations of indie pop, including a lo-fi recording aesthetic (fanclubwallet, "That I Won't Do"), "jangly" 1960s guitars (carpetgarden, "IDC"), subdued and simplistic vocal performance (Sipper, "stay"), and a childlike and amateurish sensibility created by lo-fi synthesizer sounds, ukulele, and claps (Sipper, "stay"). For example, artist Claud combines textural simplicity, minimalist instrumentation, and a naturalized recording aesthetic in their song "Tommy". Using stylistic qualities of earlier indie pop, they employ body shape as a central lens for communicating the specificity of their non-binary experience of unrequited love through its immediately corporeal and affective dimensions. Other songs by artists tagged "indie pop", "bedroom pop", and "modern indie pop" illustrate the broadening of stylistic characteristics of past indie pop. Artists incorporate old-school hip hop drum kits (mxmtoon, "in the darkness"), syncopated drum and bass patterns (mazie, "spinnin"), rap (No Rome, "I Want U"), R&B vocal harmonization (MICHELLE, "Mess U Made") and crisp sonic textures (Clairo, "Amoeba") that depart from the stylized amateurism and lo-fi production values associated with earlier indie pop (Dolan 2010).

Tom Johnson (2020) has argued that Spotify's varying levels of differentiation in genre metadata resonate with uneven constructions of cultural value in popular music culture. He observes that Spotify's metadata tends to be considerably more detailed and fragmented in rock and indie rock genres, while pop and hip hop genres often lack differentiation. Building on Umberto Eco, Johnson understands the variably differentiated grids of metadata as instances of "overcoding" and "undercoding". For Johnson, the lack of conceptual differentiation in undercoded genres inhibits the analysis of stylistic and identity-based differences and presents "reductivist" notions of genre that remediate earlier uneven ascriptions of value to racialized and gendered popular music genres (2020: 183). In contrast, he argues that overcoding ascribes cultural capital to indie and rock music as it enables the analysis of "smaller musical differences" and "finer grained identity distinctions" (ibid.: 184). On *Lorem*, the stylistic qualities across Spotify's "indie pop", "bedroom

pop", and "modern indie pop" genres suggest a broadening style in relationship to the history of indie pop to some extent, but stylistic differentiation does not map onto categorial difference. While recent cultural writing has used the term bedroom pop to describe the proliferation of independent music production and distribution in the context of digital recording and online media (Roos 2020), in Spotify's genre metadata, bedroom pop remains discursively and stylistically tied to indie pop. Further, the genre tag "modern indie pop" remains an elusive category that does not exist in popular discourse or popular music culture beyond Spotify's metadata and does not seem stylistically distinct from Spotify's "indie pop" genre.

On the one hand, Spotify's mediation of genre through metadata constructs *Lorem* as a "genrefluid" playlist, where a highly differentiated map of genre tags suggests the existence of stylistic and identity-based differences and nuances. However, while the genre tags enact a categorial differentiation, the genres largely overlap in assigned artists and stylistic characteristics. Therefore, the ability for these categories to contribute to stylistic and cultural differentiation appears uncertain. The variable degrees of differentiation in genre metadata highlight how Spotify's mediation of genre articulates and enacts tacit understandings of identification and difference. While these understandings remain partially unknown, their "platform effects" include discursive formations like the idea of "genrefluidity" in music streaming and popular music culture. In the final part of this analysis, I examine in more detail how *Lorem*'s mediations of genre and identity relate to earlier associations between genre and identity at the intersections of pop and indie genres.

Mediations of genre and identity at the intersections of pop and indie

Spotify's genre metadata indicates that *Lorem* inhabits narrower stylistic spaces of "indie music" across pop, rock, and R&B than suggested by the constructions of genrefluidity in media discourse. Music curator Szabo has also described the playlist in more precise genre-based terms that negotiate the discursive spaces between indie and mainstream pop, although she continues to emphasize "fluidity":

> It's sort of like bedroom pop gone to the mainstream and a lot of things adjacent going on around that. We don't want to have a sound that's too narrow because we always want Lorem to be fluid (Moore 2019).

Like the media depictions studied by Cannon, Szabo ascribes authenticity to fluidity: "This is not a playlist for anyone that's taking themselves too seriously or pretentious. It's a place where you love music; there's no such thing as a guilty pleasure" (Wang 2020). Elsewhere, she describes the listeners as "kind of indie kids who are kind of into pop, too" (Dominguez 2019). At surface level, the description of *Lorem*'s audience as "inclusive and accepting" listeners who have "no guilty pleasures" resonates with the concept of poptimism, which has revalued pop tastes and pointed out the marginalization of musical practices and tastes of artists and fans beyond rock(ism)'s white, male norm (Sanneh 2004). As *Lorem* is primarily associated, by Spotify, with young and female listeners, its presentation as a trend-setting playlist in Spotify's marketing materials seems to ascribe cultural value to the tastes and practices of young women that have been devalued in the history of

popular music. However, Szabo's depiction of *Lorem*'s listeners as "discover-oriented" (Dredge 2020) also resonates with the "avid" listener identified by Seaver (2021: 779), which is presented as a post-demographic category, but remains implicitly gendered as it remediates earlier ideas of omnivorous tastes and consumer practices that have been coded masculine.

Like the discursive formations surrounding *Lorem*'s listeners, the playlist's representation of artists remediates earlier associations between genre and identity in ambivalent ways. Roughly half of the artists in my sample were identified as male (49%), followed by female-identified artists (39%), mixed-gender groups and collaborations (10%), and non-binary artists (4%). The representation of gender among artists partially confirms the gender inequality in music streaming, where roughly one out of five streamed songs is performed by female-identified artists or mixed gender groups (Epps-Darling et al. 2020). However, the playlist is more quantitatively equal than lists of Spotify's most streamed songs. Analyzing weekly "Top 50" lists from January-August 2019 in four countries, the US, Mexico, Sweden, and the UK, Ann Werner (2022: 95) finds that male artists strongly dominated in all four countries, with 77% in the US; 76% in Mexico, 63% in Sweden and 66% in the UK. Whereas the representation of mixed-gender groups and collaborations on *Lorem* ranges roughly in the average of the "Top 50" lists (7-16%), the number of non-binary artists (4%) is considerably higher than on the lists analysed by Werner (0.2-1%) (ibid.).

While *Lorem* includes more female- and non-binary artists and mixed gender groups than Spotify's top streamed lists, the representation of gender among individual genre categories largely conforms to gendered discourses of genre. For instance, all artists assigned the "modern rock" genre tag are identified as male, and the genre tag is contrasted by the feminized rock label "bubblegrunge", which is exclusively assigned to female-identifying artists. The three indie pop genres are the genres most quantitively balanced in terms of artists' gender, and mixed-gender groups are most commonly tagged as "bedroom pop" (18%), "indie r&b" (13%), and "indie pop" (12%). Besides "alternative r&b" (8%), the remaining genres do not include any songs by mixed-gender groups or mixed-gender collaborations. The representation of non-binary artists is also strongly genre specific: non-binary artists are almost exclusively assigned indie pop categories ("bedroom pop", 15%; "indie pop", 12%, and "modern indie pop", 10%). The representation of non-binary artists in the "pop" tag (3%) is lower than the playlist's average but higher than on the top streamed songs lists studied by Werner (2022: 95), whereas non-binary artists are not represented among the remaining six (all rock and R&B categories as well as "electropop") of the ten most frequent genre categories.

Artists' "About" pages and social media profiles as well as music industry reporting rarely address artists' racial identities, and information on artists' biographies at large is particularly limited for new artists, which are frequently featured on *Lorem*. Nevertheless, the information on artists' racial identities I was able to access indicates that Spotify's categories of music tend to rearticulate earlier associations between genres and racial identities in popular music culture. For example, all artists in the rock category "bubblegrunge" are identified as white,[1] which broadly resonates with the higher visibility of white artists in (indie) rock genres (Hesmondhalgh 1999). In turn, resonating with the historical association of

R&B with Black artists and fans (Brackett 2016), Spotify's R&B categories "alternative r&b" and "chill r&b" include more Black artists and artists of color than all other genre tags.[2] These relationships between genre metadata and artists' gender and race seem to resonate with Johnson's (2020) argument that Spotify's genre metadata, listening data, and media discourse indicate categorizations of artists that enact earlier "hegemonic or racist constructions of musical similarity" (Johnson 2020: 192).

   Lorem's categorizations of audiences and artists at the intersections of discursive formations, genre metadata, and curated sound mediate associations of genre and identity in pop and indie music in complex and ambivalent ways. On the one hand, Spotify ascribes value to the tastes of young and primarily female-identified listeners that transgress pop and indie boundaries in ways that appear to resonate with the discourse of poptimism, which has challenged hegemonic masculine-coded ideals of genre and taste in popular music culture. At the same time, depictions of listeners are also discursively associated with "avid" listening that is presented as a "post-identity" approach to listener categorization but remains implicitly gendered. Similarly, on the side of artists, *Lorem* includes more music by female-identified and non-binary artists as well as mixed gender groups than Spotify's most streamed lists and recommendations at large. However, the representation of artists in individual genres tends to resonate with earlier hegemonic associations between genre and identity in popular music culture.

Conclusions

In this article, I have argued that Spotify's system of mediating genre categorizes music and identity in complex and partly ambivalent ways. On the one hand, Spotify articulates the idea of "genrefluidity", which is ascribed cultural value and presented as the future of music curation, listening, and listeners. These discursive formations link earlier post-genre and post-identity ideas to the logics of algorithmic recommendation systems, which have been presented as post-demographic technologies. For Spotify, identifying and claiming to understand and anticipate "the future" of popular music culture works as a strategic positioning and an articulation of "platform power" (Prey 2020b) in relation to the music industry and advertising markets.

   However, while discursive formations surrounding genrefluidity claim the transcendence of genre and identity, I have identified more complex mediations of genre and identity in music streaming. In some ways, Spotify's categorization of music suggests the broadening of stylistic qualities and the increasing representation of female and non-binary artists in indie pop genres. Simultaneously, it also remediates earlier hegemonic associations between genre and identity. By detailing these mediations at the intersections between discursive formations, genre metadata, and curated sounds, my analysis points to the tensions between "artifact, practice, and belief" (Brock 2018: 1016) in Spotify's organization of genres. These tensions highlight how the technocultural logics of Spotify's mediation of genre negotiate tacit understandings of musical and cultural differences with the affordances of algorithmic recommendation systems. This article thus concludes

that the "platform effects" of Spotify's mediation of genre are not characterized by a general departure from genre and its association with identity, but by complex and ambivalent mappings of genre and identity in the context of technological change.

Endnotes

1 The "bubblegrunge" category in my sample included the US-based musicians Snail Mail, Frankie Cosmos, and girlhouse as well as the Norwegian musician girl in red.

2 Seven out of ten artists and groups in Spotify's "alternative r&b" category are identified as artists of color in artist bios and music reporting. These artists are Peach Tree Rascals, Q, Frank Ocean, Jelani Aryeh, Deb Never, Omar Apollo, and ODIE. Four of these artists and groups are also tagged as "chill r&b": Peach Tree Rascals, Q, Omar Apollo, and ODIE.

Acknowledgements

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