

Music streaming platforms and everyday musical lives: Dynamics of community, individualisation and personalisation in China

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Abstract

The editors of this special issue invited its contributors to consider how communities are changing as digital platforms become an increasingly important way in which collectivities are shaped and maintained. They also encouraged us to investigate which novel forms of community might be emerging from digital platforms, and to illuminate how digital platforms might challenge prevailing understandings of what a community is and could be. This paper addresses these issues in the domain of music, using a diary-and-interview study conducted in China on people's everyday musical lives, bringing together both online and offline experiences. In examining the musical lives of people in China over a 3-week period, we analyse what mix of individualised and collective musical experiences we find there. We also ask how the role of digitalisation and platformisation might be understood in relation to that mix, especially given the widespread use of personalised recommendation systems on music platforms. We explore how intertwined dynamics of musical individualisation and community are being reshaped in the era of digital platforms and beyond that, whether there are reasons to think, on the basis of an examination of 22 Chinese musical lives, that digitalisation and platformisation are enhancing musical community or reducing it. We address these research questions by analysing three musical lives in some detail over a 3-week period in 2023, supplemented by discussion of two other, younger diarists.

Keywords

Music streaming platforms, sociology of music, musical community, individualisation, algorithmic personalisation, sociability

Introduction

The editors of this special issue invited its contributors to consider how communities are changing as digital platforms become an increasingly important way in which collectivities are shaped and maintained. They also encouraged us to investigate which novel forms of community might be emerging from digital platforms, and to illuminate how digital platforms might challenge prevailing understandings of what a community is and could be. This paper addresses these issues in the domain of music, using a diary-and-interview study conducted on people's everyday musical lives in China. Although we are concerned with the specificity and distinctiveness of China, the reason for studying China, as well as the well-recognised and even obvious need for more studies beyond the Global North, is simply that it is as important and interesting a place to study as any other. This is not, we hope, a specialised case study

with implications only for China; we intend it to be of interest to anyone considering music and digital platforms.

The topic is timely because new questions about the relationships of music to community are raised by the onset of digital platforms (in Tarleton Gillespie's words, 'sites and services that host, organise, and circulate users' shared content or social exchanges for them, without having produced or commissioned (the majority of) that content', Gillespie, 2018: 18). Compression and file-sharing technologies

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meant that music was the first major cultural form to be digitalised (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2018) and has more recently become the first major cultural form to be 'platformised', that is, digital platforms have become central to its circulation and consumption (Prey, 2020). The main platforms are those operated by Spotify, Apple Music and others in the west, and by Tencent (such as QQ Music and Kugou) in China, plus video, short video and social media platforms (YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Douyin, Kuaishou and others). A key feature of these services is that they host an immense amount of music, based on the same core repertoire, and they compete with each other by providing various automated systems of personalised recommendation to help users navigate this abundance. This raises the possibility that personalisation might diminish music's long-valued role in forging community (Shelemay, 2011). Music's capacity to induce feelings of solidarity, conviviality, publicness and sociability (Hesmondhalgh, 2013) therefore also makes it an intriguing case for reflecting on the changing relationship of culture to community; and our view, explained below, is that music's affordance of sociability is a particularly important way in which it might serve as a basis for enhancing community.

The article offers a number of provocations to internet studies and the rapidly growing world of platform studies served by *Platforms and Society*. One is to forefront the possibility that, in spite of the prevailing focus in internet-oriented music research on virtual community, the platformisation of music might be associated more with dynamics of individualisation (defined below) and even isolation, rather than community. We show that processes of digitalisation and platformisation can be seen as extensions of long-term processes of musical individualisation (though as we show, the forms this takes in China are distinct from, though also resonant with, transformations in the west).

A second provocation follows from this: to challenge the overly extended use of the platform concept. We show that platformisation has by no means displaced other aspects of people's everyday musical lives. In the context of music, platformised musical experiences need to be embedded within the context of people's musical lives as a whole, taking into account online and offline experiences of music. Moreover, there are many other technologies that shape people's experience of music that are not really covered by the platform concept and might indeed be more important, perhaps most notably the smartphone, headphones/earphones, radio and audio devices in automobiles. This also means shifting attention to *devices* and away from platforms.

The overall questions guiding our enquiry are as follows: what evidence does our diary-and-interview study provide regarding dynamics of musical community and individualisation in contemporary China? How might we understand the role of platformisation in these dynamics? We begin by outlining, as essential de-westernising context, historical understandings and experiences of community and

individualisation in China, and changes and continuities in how digitalisation and platformisation shape these dynamics, comparing them briefly with related but importantly different debates in the west. In the following section, we then outline historical developments in musical collectivism and individualisation in the west and China, identifying a scarcity of research on the formation of musical publics in both locations and especially a lack of work in English on these aspects of music in China.

We then outline the methodological thinking behind our diary-and-interview study and reflect on some potential problems and limitations in addressing our above question via diaries and interviews. We also explain our strategy in constructing this paper out of our empirical material: rather than organising our material according to themes, and drawing from across all our 22 Chinese diaries, we focus on five particular diarists to provide full accounts of the musical experiences reported by five diarists. We expand on our reasons for selecting these particular diarists in the methods section. Those diaries are then analysed in terms of what they reveal about community and individualisation in Chinese musical lives in the current conjuncture. Our main claim, based on analysis of our diary-and-interview studies is that, in China, musical digitalisation and platformisation, linked to an ecology of smartphones, headphones and other personal devices, represent an intensification of the long-term individualisation of musical experience. This process is not only technological but also embedded within broader socio-cultural shifts towards individualisation in contemporary Chinese society. Secondary claims are that this intensified individualisation of musical experience is only very partially redressed, or compensated for, by the networking affordances of digital technologies, and that experiences of musical collectivity are often the object of a kind of 'restorative nostalgia' in the Chinese context.

Community, collectivity and individualisation in the age of digital platforms

Almost every treatment of the concept of community notes its vagueness, the elusiveness of precise definitions and that the term rouses suspicion because it 'never seems to be used unfavourably' (Williams, 1983: 76). Some even take the view that '[a]s an analytical concept community has little value' (Shore, 2006: 102). Some of the most widely cited treatments of community in the twenty-first century seek to deconstruct the word (Nancy, 1991/1986) and others focus almost entirely on how it can be mobilised in acts of exclusion (Joseph, 2002).

While some media studies and internet studies have taken a more positive approach, they have been concerned almost entirely with the construction of 'imagined' and 'virtual' community – hence in part the rising popularity of another concept in recent years: 'network' (Rainie and Wellman,

2012). As anthropologist Vered Amit (2002) observes, it is not surprising that ideas of community as ‘imagined’ and ‘virtual’ would seem compelling in a world in which local and immediate experience are perceived as disappearing or receding. And of course such concepts direct our attention to the changing ways in which community is mediated. But Amit points to a different way to approach the minefield of conceptualising the term. For her, community remains such a widely used word because it is a ‘longstanding conceptual medium for interrogations of the interaction between modernity and social solidarity’ (Amit, 2002: 2) – and there are many ways in which social solidarity and collectivity are under threat. By this reading, the concept of community (the concept invoked by the editors of this special issue) is closely associated with crucial dimensions of sociality: solidarity, commonality, publicness, conviviality and importantly for our concerns in this article, *sociability* (see below). Amit and other anthropologists such as Herzfeld (1997) help us to see that the community concept, for all its vagueness and dubious deployment, can point to genuinely positive aspects of life that people might have reason to value. Their work also raises the possibility that there may be reasons to value co-present experience as highly, and in some cases and contexts, more highly than mediated ones without excessively disparaging the latter.

In this article, we use the concept of individualisation as a necessary counterpart to community – not as its binary opposite, but as a distinct and evolving process. We recognise of course that the term ‘individualisation’ has been used in a dizzying variety of ways across many different disciplines (Kaiser et al., 2024): either criticised as causing isolation and loneliness (Franklin, 2022; O’Day and Heimberg, 2021), or celebrated in some strands of social theory as enabling autonomy and self-determination (e.g. Beck). We adopt a more neutral stance, referring to the increasing requirement for individuals to manage their own existences and to live their lives separately from others. In the context of music, it encompasses experiencing music alone rather than with other people and experiences where knowledge or appreciation of music is not shared with other people.

The relationship between community and individualisation needs to be understood not as a binary, but as a distinction that constitutes a continuum. Many aspects of modern life will involve hybridity in relation to community and individualisation: technologies can simultaneously foster communal connection and individual expression; people may experience both a sense of belonging and of alienation; and social formations may be marked by uneasy co-existence between collective norms and personal autonomy. We understand modern life, including musical life, as unfolding within a relational space where community and individualisation are not opposites, but dynamically intertwined.

Questions of community and individualism in China challenge or at least complicate western social theory

models of history, whereby the industrialisation, urbanisation and nation-building characterising one phase of modernisation are superseded by globalisation or post-industrial change of a later phase (driven by deinstitutionalisation, individualisation and marketisation) (Kipnis, 2012; Yan, 2009). According to some (e.g. Yan, 2009), such processes have occurred simultaneously rather than sequentially. While some in China have achieved secure employment, welfare protections, and political rights associated with ‘first modernity’ in the west, others are exposed to new risks associated with autonomy, self-expression and changing intimate relationships – features often attributed to the conditions of second, late or post-modernity (Yan, 2009). Kipnis (2012) provocatively claims that individualisation in China is a ‘myth, structure of feeling, or problematic’ (p. 7), and is actually deeply shaped by socialist legacies, state interventions and socio-cultural particularities. Although many Chinese individuals may experience a greater sense of autonomy or alienation, they are not necessarily becoming atomised social beings. Rather, they are often re-embedded within specific social groups and national ideologies (Yan, 2009), and remain deeply shaped by institutional forces, state projects and evolving social norms.

Seen through this lens, contemporary Chinese society faces a mix of challenges from first- and second-order modernity. Dis-embedding from institutional structures such as party-operated factory collectives has often been followed by re-embedding within family and personal networks, shaped by neo-familism, nationalism and materialism under state-led governance (Yan, 2021: 58). Governance often works ‘from a distance’, with the state prepared to intervene and impose limits on individual expression when necessary (Ong and Zhang, 2008: 1–19; Zhang, 2012). Governance ‘from a distance’ is of course not unique to China; liberal democracies also govern indirectly through self-regulation and surveillance. However, Ong and Zhang highlight a distinct hybrid in post-socialist China, where market reforms co-exist with a resilient authoritarian apparatus; individuals are encouraged to build self-enterprising networks, provided they do not challenge ideological boundaries. Ong and Zhang (2008: 8) refer to such state-governed self-enterprising dynamics as the ‘new social’ of the post-socialist era: a depoliticised space where personal agency is cultivated for entrepreneurship and consumption, but not for political critique. In the context of a distinctive Chinese neoliberalism (economic liberalism without political liberalism, market individuation without political individualism) (Ong and Zhang, 2008: 12), the ethical question of ‘how one should live’ becomes increasingly urgent in the face of ‘fading collectivist values, the compulsion to self-govern, and the heavy hand of authoritarian socialism’ (Ong and Zhang, 2008: 16).

The effects of digitalisation and platformisation in China involve similar entanglements of state power and individual practice. Yang Guobin (Yang, 2021) argues that, while

digital life in China is largely structured by state-sponsored platformisation aligned with party-state priorities, it remains complex and multi-layered. The state has worked to ‘civilise’ the internet by cleansing dissent and promoting ‘positive energy’, and ‘occupied’ the digital sphere with official accounts – thus tempering the once-contentious Chinese cyberspace (Yang, 2021: xix; Yang, 2017). Yet social media platforms still afford spaces for bottom-up public engagement. Repnikova (2017) highlights the fluid boundaries of Chinese media politics, allowing for creative negotiation and improvisation, including civic contestation (Han, 2018), playful appropriation (Dodge, 2017) and even collective protest (Qin et al., 2024). Platforms can offer micro public spheres of experimentation in political discourse and new social identities (Zhou and Lu, 2017). These complexities provide crucial context for the relationships of music to everyday life in the new China.

Musical community, collectivity and personalisation in China and the west

In the west, community has for decades been a key concept in understanding music, both in popular understandings of its value, and in academic analysis (Shelemay, 2011). This is perhaps no surprise, given that music has long and often been linked to experiences of collectivity (bearing in mind our view, explained above using Amit (2002), that community often operates as a synonym for collectivity or solidarity) partly because of its capacity to synchronise action and to heighten emotion and mood (Clarke et al., 2010: 101–115). With its partner cultural form dance, music has historically been a key component of ritual across nearly all societies. It plays a key role in experiences of sociability which are often the basis of community; parties, celebrations and festivities would mostly be unthinkable without it (Malbon, 1999). The relations between sociability and community are complex and case-specific but at the very least sociability can offer the kinds of pleasurable and playful interaction that might foster the potential for meaningful community (Simmel, 1949). This is a potentially significant but often overlooked aspect of the importance of music (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). It also raises the possibility, often seemingly ignored in research on digital platforms and on the internet, and highly relevant to the role of music in the modern world, that mediated interactions, for example those taking place via digital platforms, might be lacking the embodied co-presence that makes sociable interaction valuable for many people’s experiences of community and belonging (Turkle, 2011).

Yet over the last century or so, at least in the west, music has come to be increasingly experienced when people are alone (Volgsten, 2022). Falling family sizes and changes in domestic arrangements (including heating systems) meant that in wealthier nations and places, young people in particular were able to spend more time in their own

bedrooms, where listening to music became a major teenage pastime (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2018). Automobiles became sites of individualised listening for many people of different ages (Bull, 2004). A series of technological developments in the late twentieth century extended personalisation still further, such as portable transistor radios and affordable headphones and earphones from the 1950s onwards, portable cassette players (most famously Sony’s Walkman) in the 1980s (Bull, 2000) and portable digital music players (most famously Apple’s iPod) in the 2000s (Bull, 2007).

Digital technologies of personalisation, based on algorithmic, human and hybrid recommendation, have extended musical individualism further by seeking to direct people to distinctively personalised sets of musical taste (Seaver, 2022). The issues surrounding such claims about the effects of platformisation and digitalisation on musical discovery and identity are complex and contested but there can be little doubt that music has been a testing ground for dynamics of personalisation, a domain of experimentation that has been the basis of recommender systems which have then been applied in other fields (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2023).

In spite of these developments, it would be misleading to think of capitalist modernity’s shaping of music as entirely or even principally one of individualisation and personalisation.

Music’s long-standing and politically ambivalent role in forging collectivities based on ritual, nationalism, sociability and social identity appears to have survived (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). This role includes promoting counter-hegemonic and oppositional forms of solidarity based on gender, sexual orientation, ethnic and political affiliation. A great many cultural studies of music address this aspect of music, including work on the communities formed by youth sub-cultures (Hodkinson and Deicke, 2007) and in music ‘scenes’ (Kruse, 2003). Ethnomusicology and research on music education also offer copious examples of communities still based around shared practice (e.g. Finnegan, 1989; Kenny, 2016).

The digital era has brought further complexity to the relations between community and individualisation in music. Early studies of digital communication in general (i.e. beyond music) tended to focus on digitalisation’s capacity to create new forms of collectivity (Rheingold, 1993). Studies of online music echoed this focus, insisting that online sociality was no less ‘real’ than co-present encounters, and that ‘new possibilities for subjectivity and group identity’ were being opened up (Lysloff, 2003: 236). More nuanced positions eventually emerged, for example arguing that digital systems have entrenched a ‘networked individualism’ that was already forming even before the internet, whereby individuals create their own distinct networks, by contrast with ‘the all-embracing village that is usually held up as the model of community’ (Rainie and Wellman, 2012: 8). Such accounts point to how the creation and maintenance of such networks necessitate considerable work on the part of those individuals, as well as a certain

freedom. Other perspectives examined the way internet culture also enabled what Nancy Baym (2015: 101) called ‘networked collectivism’, whereby ‘groups of people now network through the internet and related mobile media, and in-person communication, creating a shared but distributed group identity’.

Interestingly, Baym gave a musical example to illustrate her notion of ‘networked collectivism’ on the internet: fans of Swedish independent music organising themselves into ‘clusters’ on what at the time were called ‘social networking sites’ and ‘blogs’, but also via ‘regular nights in local music venues’ (Baym, 2015: 101). Other writers likewise discussed fandom as the basis of new musical communities forged online (Duffett, 2014). It is not always clear from these studies, however, how typical or widespread such forms of digital or platformised musical community might be – and we have been unable to locate the kind of survey findings that would answer such questions of typicality or dissemination, whether in the west or China. However, it is likely that active involvement in such digital fan communities is somewhat rare.

A more common and arguably weaker experience of digitalised musical collectivity has been afforded by the incorporation into music streaming platforms (MSPs) of social media features such as ‘following’ friends, acquaintances and public figures. In the most significant study of the relationships between personal and social aspects (or in our terms in this article, individualised vs communal) of music in the digital era, two Norwegian researchers, Hagen and Lüders (2017), based on diaries, online observation and interviews, questioned how social such streaming experiences actually were. While streaming increased the potential importance of ‘weak ties’ and ‘absent ties’ (using Granovetter’s (1973) influential distinction, based on the amount of time, emotional intensity, intimacy and reciprocity constituting the tie), there was considerable variation even among the users studied by Hagen and Lüders, in spite of the fact that these were heavy and committed users of MSPs. Our sample of diarists deliberately covers a wider range of users, from heavy to casual, and including people who make use of platforms and those who do not.

To what extent does the collective potential of music persist in China, amid the rise of individualised and personalised consumption, offline and online? Rapidly urbanising and modernising China has seen the widespread adoption of the same individualising musical technologies as prevail in much of the west – smartphones and earphones/headphones, as well as the increasing use of cars (Liu, 2024). At the same time, China’s ‘pan-entertainment’ music platforms promise interactivity and community via features such as online karaoke, synchronised listening rooms, music livestreaming, integrated short video contents and comment threads (i.e. user-generated comment sections under songs, where users can post, reply to and engage in discussions). It is possible, then, that in the Chinese context,

platforms and networked technologies have intensified both individualised consumption *and* the possibility for individuals and groups to connect with each other via digital means. However, when it comes to research on music and audio platforms in China, there is very little research on the formation of musical publics and collectivities in everyday life – though there are some treatments of new ‘auditory publics’ forming around talk radio (Lei and Sun, 2017) and podcasts (Xu and Morris, 2021: 18).

There is therefore a pressing need to interrogate the tensions between the collective potential of music and the deepening individualised personalisation of music experiences – especially given the recent demise of alternative music platforms in China that once offered a basis for musical community based on aesthetic affiliations (Li and Hesmondhalgh, 2024; Qu and Xu, 2024). Moreover, across both western and Chinese research, there has been little direct address of the thorny question of how musical collectivity (in its different dimensions, as discussed above, including pleasurable co-present sociability or mediated community) might meaningfully contribute to people’s flourishing.

Methods

In this regard, the diaries kept by our Chinese participants offer an intriguing basis for reflection on the entangled relationship between individualised music consumption and collective imaginaries, prompting deeper questions about what it means to be musically connected – both within and outside platform-mediated environments. We recruited our diarists via a market research company, offering small incentives in line with the ethics procedures of the University of Leeds. We asked the company to aim for a varied recruitment sample in terms of gender, age and location – including different ‘tiers’ of cities, that is, not just the major ‘tier-one cities’ such as Beijing and Shanghai, but also smaller cities far from the economic and cultural centre of the nation. Of the 22 participants who completed the diaries, 12 participants identified as male, 10 as female. Ages ranged from 18 to 72 years. In terms of education, 12 participants had no higher education, nine had been educated to undergraduate level and one was still studying. We also succeeded in fulfilling our aim of recruiting a wide range of music users, including casual users who were not committed and frequent listeners, in contrast to the most important recent diary study of users in the context of the digital era, Hagen’s (2015) PhD and the articles published as part of it.

The aim of the diaries was not just to investigate users’ engagement with MSPs but for the diarists to record, and where possible reflect on, *any* encounters with music that they had. This strategy was chosen in large part to avoid assuming a prominent role for MSPs, and instead to situate platform usage within the broader context of people’s musical lives. We undertook briefing interviews, during which participants were given information about the study

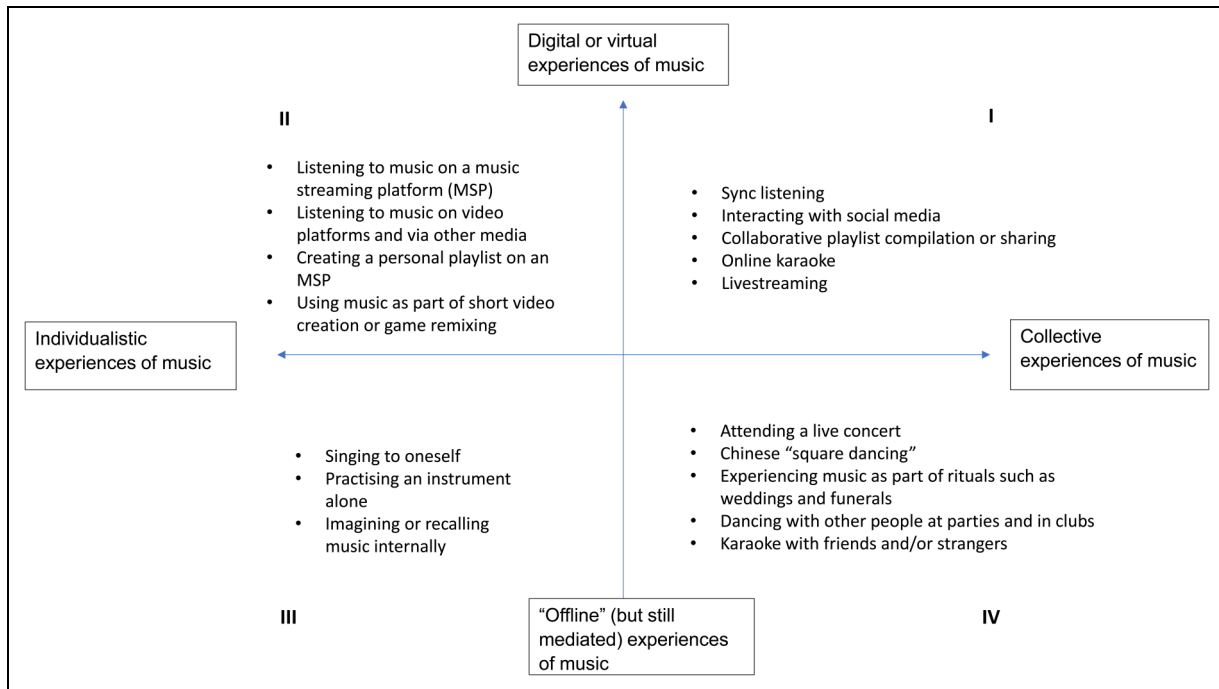


Figure 1. Two dimensions of musical experience (each axis represents a continuum).

and guidance provided based on this overall objective of tracking people's encounters and engagements with music in general. We also asked questions about our participants' music habits and everyday lives. Participants were asked to either write an entry or record a voice note outlining their musical experiences each day, for a total of 21 days. This length was chosen in order to allow for variation in what people were actually doing in their lives, but to avoid the danger of drop-outs that may have occurred if a longer period of diary-keeping had been required. Participants were encouraged to register their thoughts and feelings at any point of the day. Once the diaries were completed, we conducted more detailed completion interviews (50–90 min in length), where we discussed their diary entries, and asked further questions about their musical experiences and values. Consent forms and information sheets were provided, and the project received ethical approval from our funders and from the University of Leeds. We transcribed and translated the interviews and diaries using an artificial intelligence system (Microsoft Co-pilot) approved by the University of Leeds, in accordance with its data management and ethics procedures. We then manually coded the transcripts and discussed them in detail. In writing up our research, we used pseudonyms in order to protect the anonymity of our diarists, and all materials were kept on encrypted and password-protected servers.

The combination of diaries and interviews conforms to what Bartlett and Milligan (2021: 4) refer to as 'the diary–interview method', allowing greater depth, including 'the opportunity to talk about diary entries and the

researcher is able to explore in more depth the entries diarists have made'. Experiences of musical community and individualisation were just one theme (or set of themes) that we discerned and the project was not designed specifically to investigate those issues but rather to reveal multiple dimensions of people's musical lives across two nations and to allow those people to reflect on them. For the purposes of this article, written for a special issue on 'platformed communities', we chose to focus in detail on a small number of Chinese diarists (five from our 22) rather than to select themes and then draw upon most or all of the diaries to unpack them.¹ This is because, as indicated in the literature review above, we were interested in how people's relationships with music are embedded in their broader life experiences. As Bartlett and Milligan (2021: 55) observe, 'some researchers choose to adopt a narrative approach to the analysis, where the researcher attempts to make sense of the storylines or narrative threads that run longitudinally through the diary in order to convey the meaning and contextual detail that is important to understanding and explaining the storylines that run through the diary'.

We selected our five diarists to illustrate two different dimensions or axes of musical experience captured in our diaries and interviews that in our view illuminate our approach to the 'platformed community' concept that the editors of this special issue asked its contributors to consider. Figure 1 summarises these two dimensions. One dimension takes the form of a continuum from, at one end of the horizontal axis, individualistic experiences (listening alone with no direct or mediated interaction with

others) to collective (experiences of intense musically mediated community) at the other. In between are intermediary states and experiences involving tension, conflict, negotiation and hybridity. The other dimension, on the vertical axis, takes the form of a continuum from, at the one end, musical experiences that take place in ‘virtual’ or digitally mediated settings (such as streamed via a platform on a smartphone and/or shared via online group chats) to, at the other, co-present experiences (such as singing together in a choir or dancing together at a party). These too are not strict alternatives: live shows can be streamed online while audiences on-site interact with remote viewers via real-time comments, or an online music discussion may trigger off-line gatherings and activities. The top left of the quadrant in Figure 1 thus represents experiences that are both more individualistic and digitally mediated (though not necessarily fully so – because the continuum allows for different extents), while the bottom right represents musical experiences that are collective and co-present in physical space. The axes, we emphasise, are continua, and the kinds of experiences that lie between the poles will emerge as part of our analysis later in this article.

Among the advantages of diaries in the context of research that seeks to gather a sense of the experiences that people have, and their reflections on those experiences is that they reduce the dependence in interview studies on participants’ memory and allow for reflection on experiences more or less as they happen (Kaun, 2010). Among the disadvantages are an unevenness in the length and content of material produced, because some people are more willing and/or able to provide detailed records of and reflections on their experience; though the same disadvantage of unevenness is arguably also true of interview and focus group studies. The major problem of our method in the context of the present article is the possibility that the individualised nature of diaries may lead to a downplaying of communal aspects of music. However, we made clear to our diarists that, because everyday musical life often unfolds in shared and public contexts – such as concerts, squares, social media interactions or listening and singing with others, we were offering them the chance to document and reflect on these more communal dimensions of what they experienced and witnessed.

To maximise the value of the opportunity to gain from diaries a richly textured sense of someone’s life – in this context, their musical life – over a period, we have chosen to concentrate on three contrasting diaries as case studies, and then to complement these case studies with a fourth section drawing on the diaries of two younger participants.

Diary 1: Li Siqing: Individualism, rejection of platforms, nostalgia for radio collectivity

At the time of our study in 2023, Li Siqing was 32, working as a client manager responsible for project development at a youth organisation in Beijing. He seemed to us to be

struggling with his life and a demanding work schedule. Li uses music to wind down and relax, whether in the car or on the bus, or during breaks from his intensive work. In this situation, music seems to have become a way for Li to cope with his busy life. When he’s upset, he told us in interview, ‘my first thought is to listen to music’ – but he also listens to music when he’s happy. His use is strongly individualistic: ‘Whenever I have free time, the first thing I do is find my phone, and the second thing is to find my headphones’. Platformised features of music consumption feature strongly in his musical life. Most days, he clicks through lists of algorithmically recommended songs, and while sometimes he is frustrated by not liking any of them but occasionally one will hit home, as when a song by the gloriously named Dick Cowboy, ‘Wind Blows Sand’, reminds him of how popular Dick Cowboy was ‘back then’. But there was no mention of his using any of the more ‘social’ features offered by Chinese MSPs of the kind we discussed above.

Writing about the role of devices such as iPods in the sonic culture of early 2000s London, Michael Bull (2007: 26–28) drew on the work of writers such as Simmel, Benjamin and Bauman to observe (or to report that others have observed – Bull’s own view is not entirely clear) how urban experience has undergone a long-term transformation characterised as ‘urban retreat’, whereby the plenitude, sensory richness and ‘polyrhythmic nature’ of urban life is transformed into ‘the interiorised monorhythmic sounds of users’. Use of Apple’s iPod device was for Bull at the time of his writing ‘the most recent and pervasive manifestation’ of what he called ‘auditory solipsism’. Similarly, Hanrahan (2018: 296) has argued that judgements about music increasingly tend to be private or tacit, rather than ‘sociable, deliberate, performative or public’. Li is just one of many of our diarists who conforms to this picture of the contemporary music system in the era where the mobile phone has almost totally replaced the iPod and other similar devices as an individualising technology, still of course crucially combined with headphones, for some the most solipsistic of audio devices (see the debate between the authors in Keil and Feld, 1994: 7).

Bull also observed how in London, iPod users not only turned inwards towards ‘an interiorized and pleasurable world of their own making’ but also shifted nostalgically ‘away from the historical contingency of the world into the certainty of their own past, real or imagined, enclosed safely within their very own auditory soundscape’ (Bull, 2007: 135). For Li too, in the China of 2023, music evokes an easier past. When asked in interview whether he thinks about certain things or scenes when listening to music, he told us that when he hears a song that he knew from school ‘I think about what it was like back then, feeling that time has passed so quickly.... I think about how carefree I was in school and now my work situation is completely different’. Nostalgia is often equated with sentimentality and

thoroughly absorbed into consumer culture (Huyssen, 2003) but Bull saw the music nostalgia of his iPhone users as often exhibiting creativity, appropriating urban space by infusing everyday life with a 'narrative presence' (Bull, 2007: 144). Li too applies his own form of appropriation to the quality of music itself. 'Compared to the fast-food style of current songs', he said he felt 'that old songs are more emotional, with better melodies and lyrics, making it feel like they are telling a story that resonates with me'. He frequently refers to older songs and artists. He finds for example that Angela Chang's 'ethereal voice is still as beautiful as ever', which reminds him of listening to one of her songs on cassette when he was young. He mourns the passing of Coco Lee whose songs were everywhere on TV when he was young ('especially in shampoo commercials'). And he is also nostalgic about his own relationship to music, writing in his diary that he used to listen to music more attentively, sitting at home with one of China's MSPs (NetEase Cloud) open, 'listening to one song after another all day, reading the lyrics to see what story they told, and reading the comments. Now I occasionally do this on weekends, but it is much less frequent because of work'; and a sense of how hard he has to work comes through strongly in his diaries. As was also the case for Bull's iPod users, then, Li's retreat into urban interiority is closely linked to nostalgia but might be seen as a creative form of coping with *pressure* and possibly, on the basis of his diaries and interviews, a certain loneliness as someone who has recently moved city for work.

But to what extent do Li's diaries and interviews also reveal forms of collectivity, including community enabled by the digitalised, platformised world he (partially) inhabits? The answer is not very much at all. There is no sense of any use of the socialised features of Chinese MSPs, with one rather striking exception as follows, where suddenly he seems to stand back from his rather compulsive relationship to listening to music alone:

I find that whether watching videos or listening to the radio, hearing a favourite song by chance feels like winning a prize. It makes me happy when everyone is listening to songs they love, but when I listen alone with headphones, it doesn't feel the same, and I lose interest quickly.

It is intriguing to us that this intensive user of platforms yearns for the collectivity of radio, and finds his own individualised use ultimately unfulfilling. Radio was forged in a moment where globally there were efforts to inculcate publicness, with nationalist motivations, but in ways that went beyond nation-building. One of the leading western academic analysts of radio, Paddy Scannell, saw radio as a medium fundamentally reliant upon the value of sociability built on *talk* (e.g. Scannell, 1996) and for Danish radio analyst Iben Have (2018: 139), the dependence of radio on music adds to this aspect of radio because of the way that 'music and social life go hand in hand'.

Li's past experience with music radio resonates with the sociability created by radio's unique blend of music and talk as a shared public acoustic space. In his words, 'I used to always listen to music radio, and the radio version of "Nocturne" was truly amazing. Just the intro gave me goosebumps'. He reflected on this in interview: 'I used to love listening to the radio at lunchtime. When I was eating with my classmates, I'd bring out a radio so we could listen to story shows and music stations together'. Li's fascination with 'Nocturne' seemed less about the song itself and more about a nostalgia for shared music experience. Li, then, is a highly individualistic listener, who rejects the social features of platforms, and seems to find little musical collectivity in his life but expresses yearning for the collectivity of the declining medium of radio.

Diary 2: Zhang Menglin: Limited community via platforms, yearning for co-present collectivity

Born in rural Hunan, Zhang moved to Guangzhou as a migrant worker in her 20s, building a life alongside her husband and 5-year-old twin daughters. The precarious balance of her daily existence was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the departure of her mother – a key source of support – due to residency restrictions. The subsequent illness of her husband further exacerbated financial and emotional difficulties, leaving Zhang with limited personal time under stressful family economic conditions. She is now a single, 'stay-at-home' mum, who occasionally freelances as an accountant.

Zhang Menglin's engagement with music exemplifies the tension between individual listening and collective resonance, reflecting broader shifts in urban Chinese soundscapes. She finds personal solace in music, using it as a space for introspection and comfort when her children are asleep. But she also recognises its function as a sociable medium of shared memory and social connection, even as public spaces for collective musical experiences have gradually diminished.

Unlike Li Siqing, who engaged with music in a private, nostalgic way, Zhang Menglin was drawn to its communal dimensions. Each evening, she visited a public square where synchronised dance routines unfolded to the sound of portable speakers. Although she did not participate, she observed the dances with great interest, drawn to the sense of shared rhythm and an unspoken camaraderie. 'The dance steps are beautiful – too bad I don't know how to dance! Once the kids are older and don't need me as much, I'd love to join them. Just listening to the songs, feeling the rhythm, letting my mind drift – I imagine it would make me feel free, even if just for a moment'.

On the fourth day of her diary, Zhang reflected on the diminishing presence of music in public spaces. 'There's less and less music in public places these days', she noted.

‘It used to be everywhere. Now, it seems like this square is the only place left where you can hear it at the same time every day. Maybe people just rely on their phones now’. Zhang further explained her views on the decline of communal soundscapes in our closing interview:

Back when we were kids, there were outdoor movie screenings, and during the New Year, there would be firework shows or big karaoke gatherings. My uncle used to run a video hall in our hometown – sometimes it was for watching movies, other times they’d switch it up and turn it into a karaoke spot. But now? It feels like all of that is gone. These kinds of entertainment spaces have pretty much disappeared, and what’s left seems to have turned into things like foot massage parlors or spas. Everything used to be out in the open, but now it’s all becoming more private, more hidden. Even with our phones – it’s all individual now. There are still some group activities, like square dancing,² but if you think about it, a whole neighbourhood might have thousands of residents, yet only a handful actually join in! It’s just not the same anymore – music that truly brings people together is getting rarer and rarer.

Public spaces such as outdoor movie screenings, video halls and karaoke gatherings may require money to access them, but they provide valuable opportunities to encounter neighbours and strangers. However, rapid urbanisation and privatisation in China have led to the commercialisation or privatisation of many public city spaces, leaving only limited areas for meaningful collective encounters (Vermeeren, 2022). Spaces that can ‘truly bring people together’ in Zhang’s words, are diminishing. In such a context, public squares become precious yet precarious spaces for social interaction, functioning, as Wang Qianni (2015) observes, as rare urban spaces where collective practices such as square dancing, tai chi and water calligraphy persist.

Yet, even as Zhang Menglin lamented the vanishing public soundscape and was wary of phone intrusion, she found ways of achieving community, via her phone. She was not a dedicated music streamer; instead, she downloaded her favourite songs such as Teresa Teng’s ‘I Only Care About You’ in its Japanese version, keeping them in her phone’s archive. It is in the visual dimension of music that Zhang seems to find a bridge between solitude and sociability. In earlier years, she had created music-accompanied short videos documenting her everyday life, which she uploaded to the Douyin and WeChat video platforms. Although time constraints had more recently limited how much she had undertaken this practice, a recent trip home had re-ignited her interest. She filmed the passing landscapes from a train window and set them to ‘I Only Care About You’, not merely as an aesthetic choice but as a means of emotional expression. At night, she liked to scroll through WeChat moments, Douyin videos and Toutiao news clips. Upon watching a video shared from a friend from the Qinghai region, she wrote: ‘I wish my siblings

could be as close as the sky and Qinghai Lake. I hope my children, when they grow up, will not drift apart as we have. I hope music binds them and makes the air around them sweet’. For Zhang, however, it seems that platformised sharing and mediated sociability (with siblings and friends) are transient and fragmented, lacking a depth of engagement and social cohesion that might be achieved in physical spaces.

Diary 3: Niu Ke: Isolation and imagined collectivity via platforms

Niu Ke, 38, was a middle-aged human relations (HR) manager at a major company in Shenzhen. Twelve years earlier, he had left his hometown in Hunan province to join a promising startup. As the company grew – eventually being listed on the Growth Enterprise Market with annual revenues peaking over 2 billion yuan – Niu built his life in Shenzhen. He got married, had a child and ‘settled down’. But by the time of our research in 2023, both the company and Niu were experiencing crises. The company had laid off nearly half of its employees due to economic difficulties and the lasting impact of COVID-19. Niu, now divorced, had sent his child to live with his parents in his hometown. More painfully, he had been assigned the difficult task of laying off colleagues – many of whom were long-time friends and fellow veterans of the company.

Niu had once believed that through hard work, good outcomes would follow – a faith rooted in a spirit of self-reliance. Yet, as scholars like Yan (2009) and Zhang and Ong (2008) have pointed out, absolute self-reliance is a prevalent myth in the market economy of contemporary China. Lacking strong state support in areas like childcare, individuals are effectively re-embedded into ‘neo-familism’ networks – emotionally, financially and morally (Yan, 2021). In contrast to classical familism, which emphasised lineage and patriarchal authority, neo-familism has emerged under conditions of market reform and state withdrawal. The Chinese family now functions as both an emotional anchor and the core mechanism of social and economic reproduction in the absence of public welfare. As Niu wrote in his diary: ‘I’ve been drifting for years – where there’s a job, there’s no home; where there’s home, there’s no job. I haven’t made much money, and I’ve had to leave my parents and kid behind. Every time I go back, my kid looks at me with eyes that feel both familiar and distant. It really hurts’. In this neo-familial arrangement, Niu maintained constant phone contact with his parents to check on their health and his child’s well-being. His parents took on childcare responsibilities, and in return, Niu helped them with things like booking hospital visits. Despite the closeness embodied in these practical arrangements, the geographical and emotional distance wore on him, especially after his divorce and under the daily pressure of dismissing colleagues.

In these moments of isolation, Niu confided that, as a middle-aged man, he had no one to talk to about his burdens – work stress, family obligations and even his own health while living alone in a big city. ‘Not only is everyone occupied by busy work and family life’, he said, ‘but also, I thought no one can really understand me. I kept it all inside’. In this context, music provided solace and support via streaming platforms. The COVID-19 lockdowns gave him more time online, deepening his engagement with music as a source of emotional comfort. He even subscribed to premiere services on NetEase Cloud Music and KuGou Music so he could access the songs that brought him timely relief. ‘You keep it all inside. You can’t tell anyone, and maybe you shouldn’t. The only relief I have is music. On sleepless nights, it’s the late-night radio and those calming songs that get me through. KuGou and NetEase Cloud Music are my favorites – they’re the apps where I spend the most time’.

Niu developed two ways of engaging with music for emotional regulation. When he had specific emotional needs, he would search for mood-based playlists. When he was too exhausted to think, he let the algorithm decide – ‘I just clicked whatever the system recommended. Let it all drift, I guess’. What truly helped him, though, were the songs and their comment sections. Whether on a break at the office or alone at home, Niu read the comments beneath the tracks. In moments when he had to make painful decisions, he found clarity in these shared reflections.

Cost-cutting, restructuring, team downsizing... it all feels like a mountain pressing down on me. At times like this, I always go back to two songs by Wong Ka Kui – ‘No More Hesitation’ and ‘Boundless Oceans, Vast Skies’. I’ve played them on repeat more times than I can count during my lowest, most overwhelming moments. Only then – when the music clears my mind – can I truly feel calm, and make the decisions that need to be made.

When asked in interview why he turned to the comment sections, especially during emotional lows, Niu replied that he often encountered others going through similar pain, and occasionally found bits of advice – something that might help him push through. ‘When I read the comments, it feels like someone’s there with me – like someone truly understands. That sense of connection gives me strength. It reminds me that I’m not alone, that there are others in this world who feel the same way I do’. These moments helped Niu find a form of resonance – an imagined, digital intimacy with strangers that made the weight of his solitude a little easier to bear.

Niu Ke’s story was less a personal failure than a symptom of the growing uncertainty of the ethos of self-reliance mentioned above, as well as the fractured familial intimacy and the hollowing of reciprocal social care in his daily life. Music platforms offered some fleeting relief, with comment

sections creating a semblance of community. Yet this interaction was a largely imagined solidarity rather than genuine connection. The collective resonance masked, rather than resolved, the absence of sustained social and communal support.

Diaries 4 and 5: Chen Muyuan’s collective sociability and individualism; Cao Yuan’s individualised intimacy

Is it possible that our selection of the above examples leans towards cases that reinforce our argument that platformised experiences of musical collectivity are relatively rare and relatively thin, neglecting counter examples? In this final empirical section, we draw on two more cases from our diary-and-interview study, but more briefly, in order to address this potential objection with particular regard to the possibility that the relatively low levels of musical community, collectivity and publicness in the first three case studies above might reflect generational, age-related dynamics. After all, many studies have shown that people live more sociable lives when they are younger, with many conflicting views on why this is the case (Wrzus et al., 2013). In modern societies, there has been a long and close association of music with young people, and this has been the subject of a huge amount of research across many disciplines (Frith, 1981; Hargreaves and North, 1999). This relationship is evolving in complex ways in the digital age, in ways that are still under-explored (Gagne, 2024).

It is true that the youngest participant in our study, Chen Muyuan, an 18-year-old university geophysics student, was probably the diarist who revealed the most sociable and collective experiences. Musical sociability and community were apparent across both online and offline dimensions of Chen’s diary, from simply being co-present with friends or fellow students when music was playing to sharing comments on music with strangers online to singing with roommates together in a seemingly joyful manner. On one day, for example, one of his fellow students was playing music from the soundtrack to the 1980 film *Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence* and this ‘felt very leisurely and comfortable, slowing down my own pace’. In a separate incident, one of his roommates was watching a video and Chen recognised a familiar melody from an anime, *Clannad*, and he told his roommate what the song was and found it on an app for him. While he uses Bluetooth in-ear headphones on a daily basis, he expresses a preference for sharing music with friends (one earbud each), which ‘makes listening together more special’, and this also involved discovery: ‘We mostly shared songs I hadn’t shared before or newly discovered good ones’.

These various activities involve digital mediation, but shared within the same space, but the most collective musical experience recorded in Chen’s diary comes at the

end of a day spent conducting geological surveys with his classmates when he spontaneously engages in singing along with his colleagues, a highly embodied form of shared music-making (Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 102–108):

After a tiring day... when we were about to leave, a few of us walked along the road singing the ‘Song of the Geological Exploration Team’: ‘It is the wind in the valley that blows our red flag’. As our university song and a song written for geological workers, it felt powerful to listen to it. It was the first time I truly appreciated the joy of songs born with a purpose in mind.

In Chen’s case, then, collectivity is strongly linked to work – recalling the long history of work songs in many cultures (Korczynski et al., 2013; Wikeley, 2022) and it may be the physical nature of the work that Chen was doing at the time of his diary contributed to the desire on his part and others to sing together. Collectivity here is also tied to the state-party nationalist nexus via the reference to the red flag.

For all these relatively sociable and collective experiences, however, plenty of Chen’s time is spent on musical experiences that are relatively solitary or engaging in fleeting, digitally mediated interactions. Once his geological fieldwork is over, Chen has to work through his notes to write up his report. His first day after fieldwork is very different: ‘Spent the whole day drawing and listening to my playlist in chronological order – newer additions on top and older ones at the bottom’. And recovering after an intense period of work, he returns to the soundtracks of his beloved anime, winding down, going for a run, gaming; back to mainly individualised musical experience.

Moreover, to equate youth with sociability and publicness and ageing participants with isolation and loneliness is reductive. Young people’s relationships to music and to sociality are more complex than this. This is apparent in the case of another relatively young participant, Cao Yuan, aged 22 at the time of our study, and working in the HR department of a large company in a large southern city. She is a heavy streaming user, and her relationship to music is quite personal and intimate rather than social, in spite of her youth. While she participates in a dance class, she writes little about this, and instead her diaries reveal a woman who uses music to calm down, evoke memories and match her often sorrowful mood, in the context of a seemingly troubled relationship with a young man. As she recounted in interview:

Sometimes I have a specific issue on my mind, and I need a specific song to help me work through it. Like recently, I kept listening to ‘Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai’ because I was arguing with my boyfriend. I just kept looping it.

Music for Cao seems oriented towards one of the uses of music identified in DeNora’s classic account of *Music in*

Everyday Life (2000: 127), where music can act as a way of ‘fleshing out feeling, a material against which the aspects of “how I feel” may be elaborated into an object of knowledge’. Chen and Cao’s cases demonstrate, then, that while some young people may be involved in more collective and sociable musical activities, they tend to be online rather than offline, and some young people (such as Cao) evince similar kinds of individualised musical use as older participants.

Discussion

Let us now consider the questions we raised at the beginning of this article. What evidence does our diary-and-interview study provide regarding dynamics of musical collectivity and individualisation in contemporary China? And how might we understand the role of platformisation in these dynamics? (We refer the reader back to Figure 1.)

First, individualised listening dominates. Most participants engage with music alone, digitally and emotionally. Quadrant II in Figure 1 prevails not so much because of active choices made by our diarists, but out of necessity – due to overwork, limited time and shrinking spaces for shared listening. It is striking that our diarists leaned strongly towards the individualised end of the horizontal axis, as exemplified by the diarists selected for discussion above: Li’s retreats into ‘auditory solipsism’ to cope with his difficult and demanding work, Zhang’s use of music for introspection and comfort, Niu’s use of music for solace and support in the face of professional disappointment, Chen’s use of music to wind down during a period of intense study and Cao’s efforts to match her often sorrowful mood as she begins her working life. In all cases, these uses of music are strongly associated with the digital/virtual end of the vertical axis. In other words, these aspects of all five of our selected diarists lean towards the upper left quadrant (II) and the musical practices indicated there. This suggests a very strong association between digitalisation, platformisation and individualisation.

Second, platform sociality is weak. While platforms offer some sociability in quadrant I – via comments, short videos and shared playlists – they are sparsely used by our diaries and seldom foster lasting musical collectivities. Niu for example found a comforting version of sociality in the comment sections beneath beloved songs on streaming platforms, and Chen shared comments on music with fellow fans of anime. But we were surprised by how little evidence we found of actual engagement with the shared, social features of digital platforms across our diarists as a whole – in line with what Hagen and Lüders (2017) claimed in their diary study of Norwegian streamers. There was little evidence of the formation of meaningful platform-based musical communities in our Chinese diaries.

Third, offline musical collectivity is sparse but desired. Our diaries revealed relatively little collective musical

experience even in offline worlds (quadrant IV). There were of course exceptions, such as 18-year-old Chen Muyuan (the fourth case study above), sharing music sociably with his fellow students, and singing together joyfully at the end of a long day of geological fieldwork.

Based on these three findings, we argue that it is not technologies such as algorithmic personalisation that seems to drive individualisation, as some commentators on music streaming seem to fear, but rather broader socio-cultural forces in contemporary society – lack of meaningful shared life, intensity of work, burdens of caring, reduction of public spaces, the fracturing of communities in a rapidly urbanising society. Our Chinese diarists resort to the convenience of accessing music as a way of coping with those burdens, via individualising technologies such as smartphones and headphones. Platforms respond to these conditions by offering cheap and convenient access.

This leads to a fourth finding: nostalgia as ‘solution’. All of our diarists across the three quadrants resorted to nostalgia when coping with the above pressures, and found them only temporarily appeased in individualised or collective music experiences. The case of Zhang Menglin seems indicative. Zhang’s videos serve as nostalgic anchors, evoking memories of past ‘homes’ and moments of collective joy. She *yearned* for the collectivity that seemed to her apparent in the public square dancing she observed, and in the memories of old public spaces she recalled. Her short videos, featuring music she cherishes and scenes from her everyday surroundings, represent a creative form of individualised engagement with music (quadrant I) – serving almost a form of compensation for her yearning for meaningful collectivity, whether lacking in the present or experienced in the past. Similarly, Li Siqing’s memory of radio evoked strong sense of communal shared music life. Chen’s ‘Song of the Geological Exploration Team’ involved nostalgia for a past version of collectivity associated with communism. However, their longing tends to align with what Boym (2001) terms ‘restorative nostalgia’ – a desire to reconstruct a glorified, unified past – rather than ‘reflective nostalgia’, which offers a more critical, self-aware relationship to history. In this sense, the diarists’ restorative nostalgia emerges as a response to perceived absences in the present: a way to compensate for the erosion of meaningful, shared musical experiences in everyday life, and perhaps a sense of isolation and even loneliness in an increasingly fractured society.

The above accounts of our diarists, then, address how mediated and co-present, and individualistic and collective experiences of music, co-exist in daily life, as summarised in Figure 1. This two-axis framing moves beyond binary views of digital music as either connective or isolating, but highlights how mediated and co-present, individual and collective musical experiences co-exist in everyday life, reframing sociability in the platform age. Here we would want to draw attention to the question of sociability

itself in considering questions of community in the platform age. Our focus on musical sociability as a version of collectivity raises the question of whether a limited online connectivity can adequately substitute for co-present experiences of sociability (Turkle, 2011, cf. Van Dijk, 2013), even allowing for the undoubted importance of ‘weak ties’ (Granovetter, 1973; Hagen and Lüders, 2017). A more sociologically attuned and mediation-conscious framework such as ours does not invoke elusive ideals of regular face-to-face contact as the only meaningful form of community, as is risked by accounts such as Turino’s work on ‘participatory performance’ (Turino, 2008). Instead, in the context of music, it would instead ask how this important cultural form facilitates and/or complicates forms of publicness, intimacy and shared life, and the degree to which platformisation and digitalisation offer the kinds of pleasurable sociability that people might have reason to value. By situating practices such as music streaming, short video sharing, comment reading and game video remixing within this matrix, the model addresses a key limitation in many recent accounts of musical collectivity – namely, an insufficient engagement with the mediated nature of contemporary musical life and with the sociological complexity of sociability.

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Data availability statement

Data from the diary study will be made available via the University of Leeds data repository, in line with the University of Leeds' ethics and data management procedures.

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Notes

1. Two articles based on the UK diaries are in press and will appear shortly after the current article is published. They are co-authored by Hesmondhalgh and Raquel Campos Valverde and explore other issues and themes: the first examines aesthetic versus hedonic and functional uses of music, the second how music is used to demarcate space and time in domestic settings.
2. Square dancing is 'a kind of collective dance with gymnastics as the main movement and modern pop music as the melody' (Yang and Qin, 2023: 1150), popular across China, especially among elderly women.

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