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Article

Living with music in the digital age: Entanglements of the functional and the aesthetic

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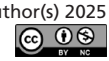

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Abstract

Critics of recent developments in music culture have often claimed, or accepted, that 'functional' or utilitarian experiences of music (using music to achieve goals such as exercise, relaxation, sleep or work concentration) have become more prevalent as a result of the widespread use of music streaming platforms, and these experiences are often contrasted with more aesthetically-oriented ones. Relatedly, such critics often also claim that streaming is leading to a greater prevalence of distracted, inattentive musical experience. After situating our research in a discussion of research on the sociology and psychology of music in everyday life, and of research on music consumption in the digital era, we draw on a diary and interview study conducted in England to show that people's musical lives are more complex and varied than such accounts suggest. We explore musical consumption in the digital age by discussing material from these diaries and interviews related to two of the different 'functions' or 'uses' of music that have appeared prominently in recent critiques of music streaming – one based on providing 'energy' and 'focus', the other on recovery and restoration, in the form of 'relaxing', 'chilling' and so on. We show that while individuals may indeed engage in such functional and distracted music experiences, they also engage in aesthetically oriented, emotionally charged and attentive ones. We consider the implications of our findings, challenging on one hand views of musical consumption as a resource transparently available for well-being (apparent in sociological and psychological research on music in everyday life), and on the other as a 'tactic' for resisting power (apparent in some cultural studies of consumption). Instead, we advocate a sympathetic but critical understanding of music as a way of coping with the challenges of everyday life, shaped by powerful systemic forces.

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Introduction: functionalism, distraction and other purported effects of music streaming

Theo works in a clothes shop, but is working from home, and he finds his mind is drifting away from the job in hand. So he puts on some music, because it 'helps me focus and feel energized with a task', counteracting 'ADD [attention deficit disorder] tendencies when I want to get stuff done'. A couple of days later, he uses Spotify to play the music of a Canadian pop punk-metal band, Sum 41, to accompany his work. This music, Theo finds, generates 'feelings of excitement, motivation and a sense of power'. This 'can be essential in helping me keep a positive attitude and mostly staying focused on my work'.

Theo uses music for many other things too, including modifying his mood. For example, while playing with digital art one day, he plays video game soundtracks. They not only provide 'a pleasant background noise . . . it also made me feel more warm, comforted and motivated while tackling my work'. Sometimes he uses music simply to 'fill the silence' and stop his mind wandering – for example, when he drives to the cinema one evening and puts on the Rodriguez album *Cold Fact*. And music helps him sleep. Struggling with an active mind one night, he puts on a video by a YouTuber called Nemo's Dreamscapes, who 'takes old Disney songs and edits the levels so it sounds like it [sic] being played in a room next door'. Theo finds 'soothing and sentimental remembering all the Disney songs from my childhood while slowly drifting off to a soft lofi sound'.

These musical experiences were recorded in diaries that Theo kept as part of a research project on the impact of streaming on music in everyday life, that we conducted in England in 2023. Those experiences might be characterised as *functional* or *utilitarian* in that they involved *using* music to achieve particular states. Social scientists have studied such functional relationships to music in some detail. To give just one example (but see also Clarke et al., 2010: 79–100; DeNora, 2000), Lamont et al. (2015), in their research on 'self-chosen' music listening experiences, identify four recurring functions of 'music use':

- Distraction: 'a way of engaging unallocated attention and reducing boredom';
- Entrainment: 'task movements are timed to coincide with the rhythmic pulses of the music';
- Meaning enhancement: 'where the music draws out and adds to the significance of the task or activity in some way';
- Energising: 'a means of maintaining arousal and task attention'.

They then summarise research according to a set of 'functional niches' to which music is supposedly linked: travel, 'brain work' such as study and reading, 'body work'

(washing, cleaning, cooking, exercise), 'emotional work' ('mood management' reminiscence, etc.) and live music attendance.

In commentary on music streaming and its effects on musical consumption and production, such functional experiences of music have been a matter of concern. Ignacio Siles et al. (2019: 1) see the creation of playlists by users of streaming services as 'a means to cultivate affect', capturing and exploring moods and emotions in ways that help turn the platform into 'an obligatory intermediary in the establishment of a utilitarian relationship between users and music' (1) so that 'a functional relationship with music ends up infusing self-performance dynamics' (9). Functional, mood-oriented experiences are implicitly and sometimes explicitly contrasted with other experiences of music that are deemed to be under threat from digitalisation and streaming. For example, in the first major critical academic monograph on streaming, Eriksson et al. (2019: 123) claimed that streaming played a major role in fostering 'a utilitarian approach to music, whereby music consumption is increasingly understood as situational and functional for certain activities (rather than, for instance, a matter of identity work or an aesthetic experience)'. Eric Drott (2019: 167) puts the problem in the following way:

> The organization of music in terms of activity and use – a hallmark of streaming platforms and other forms of digital music distribution – does more than simply adapt to the existing practices of listeners; instead, this way of framing music actively encourages individuals to adopt an instrumentalized relation to music, one in which music is conceived less as a source of autotelic aesthetic enjoyment, and more as a resource for self-care, self-regulation, and/or self-improvement.

A tide of popular and academic commentary has expressed similar concerns about how streaming encourages this kind of functional or utilitarian experience, often using the metaphor of 'muzak' to suggest that such functionalism, often centred on the creation of 'mood', might be a new means of social control or discipline and/or a threat to aesthetic experiences of music (e.g. Anderson, 2015; Chodos, 2019; Rekret, 2019 and for fuller discussion of these concerns, see Hesmondhalgh, 2022, and Campos Valverde and Hesmondhalgh, forthcoming).

What is meant by the 'aesthetic experience' of music that is putatively being displaced by musical functionalism and utilitarianism? The dictionary definition of 'aesthetic' is '[o]f or pertaining to the appreciation or criticism of the beautiful or of art' (Brown, 1993: 34). More broadly, aesthetic experiences of music tend to be thought of as those marked by a sense of excitement, beauty, challenge and other qualities. Such experiences tend to involve judgements about the value of the work, in terms of the skill or talent of performers, and in terms of the intensity and complexity of the emotions produced and the ideas articulated. So when the most prominent journalistic critic of streaming, Liz Pelly (2018) writes that streaming 'playlists have spawned a new type of music listener, one who thinks less about the artist or album they are seeking out, and instead connects with emotions, moods and activities', she seems to be troubled by a shift away from listener attention to the aesthetic qualities of the artist or album, in favour of achieving moods or emotional states such as relaxation or 'chill', which support activities such as work or exercise.

Why might this displacement of aesthetic experience be a concern for Pelly and other critics of the new music system that has emerged, centred on streaming? As Ian Cross (2023: 2388) points out, 'concepts of aesthetic value have become key' to how music is understood over the past 200 years, and while this idea is by no means confined to the West, Euro-American traditions are based on arguments that 'music has value that is irreducible and that inheres in the unique quality of the experiences that it affords'. A powerful element in this framing of music is the idea that aesthetic experience somehow transcends people's personal interests and mere functionality.

Importantly, for such critics of music streaming, this kind of *musical functionalism* also produces a further deficient mode of musical experience, characterised by distraction, by a *lack of attention* (Pedersen, 2020). For example, Rasmus Rex Pedersen (2020: 85) sees Spotify's reliance on the datafication of listening (the collection and analysis of data concerning user behaviour) for music recommendation and strategic design decisions as leading to 'the substitution of qualitative understandings of aesthetic value and musical culture with quantitative measures of engagement and context', which in turn 'leads to a situation where the bias shifts towards quantitative criteria, thereby potentially creating a bias towards inattentive (background) listening'. Again, expressions of concern about such developments are very widespread in commentary on the new musical system dominated by streaming, often approached via concepts such as 'lean-back listener'. This is Pelly's (2018) term, borrowed from industry discourse, for the new type of music listener she posits above (see also Pelly, 2025). Another widely used metaphor is a very old one – that music problematically serves as 'wallpaper', a mere decorative background (Pelly, 2025: 87; and see Hesmondhalgh, 2022).

These sentiments echo concerns about how digital media, perhaps especially social media, inculcate a culture of distraction and short attention spans (Pettman, 2016) and have a long history in critical theory (Pedersen et al., 2021; Hesmondhalgh, 2022). However, debates about the value of attention and attentiveness take on particular importance in relation to music, because of long-standing discourses which place a high premium on close listening, with music serving as an exemplar of the civilisational benefits of the cultivation of good listening skills (Sterne, 2003). There is a close connection between the high value placed on close listening historically in understandings of music culture, and the high value placed on aesthetic experience (Friedmann, 2018: chapter 2).

Whether or not a distinction between aesthetic and functional or indeed non-aesthetic experiences of music is valid (the subject of a huge body of work in philosophical aesthetics, e.g. Nanay, 2024), it has been a very common distinction since the Romantic period and one that is explicitly and implicitly evoked in a great deal of recent commentary. Our main objective in this article is not to intervene in debates about the validity of the distinction, or the value or otherwise of attentive and aesthetically-oriented musical experiences versus distracted and utilitarian ones – though we return to these value issues towards the end of the article. Rather it is to investigate, using the diaries of and our interviews with participants, the extent to which our diarists were engaging in the latter kind of activity, at the expense of the former, and how they interpreted their experiences.

In the second section, we situate our goals and approach in the context of two relevant bodies of research: work in the sociology and psychology of music in everyday life,

which has tended to place a higher value on functional orientations to music, and to recent research on music consumption in the digital era, which has tended to focus on the ways in which heavy listeners of music respond to novel technological developments such as 'algorithms' or automated recommendation. We then outline our methods in the third section, reflecting on the benefits that diaries bring to an understanding of contemporary musical experience. In the fourth and fifth sections, the main empirical part of our article, we explore musical consumption in the digital age by discussing material from our diaries and interviews related to two of the different 'functions' or 'uses' of music that have appeared so prominently in recent critiques of music streaming – one based on providing energy and focus (i.e. concentration), the other on recovery and restoration, in the form of 'relaxing', 'chilling' and so on. In the final section, we consider the implications of our findings, challenging on one hand views of music as a resource transparently available for well-being and on the other musical consumption as a 'tactic' for resisting power. Instead, we emphasise a more ordinary and sympathetic understanding of music as a way of coping with the challenges of daily existence in capitalist societies, but with a more critical understanding of those challenges than in the sociology and psychology of music in everyday life.

Music and digital media in everyday life

A formidable body of research, often ignored or skimmed in recent critiques of streaming such as those cited above, provides resources for greater understanding of the complexity of people's musical lives in the digital era. In this section, we situate our article in relation to two bodies of research.

First, there is research in the sociology and psychology of music in everyday life (Clarke et al., 2010; DeNora, 2000; Frith, 2002 Herbert, 2011; Lamont et al., 2015). Also relevant in the context of this article are perspectives within these traditions on music's relations to well-being and flourishing (Clarke et al., 2015; DeNora, 2013). These important contributions mainly precede the streaming era and so do not directly address how everyday musical practices of users are being transformed (or not) in the era of music streaming and social media platforms. Yet, such research is directly germane to the concerns about functionalism just discussed. Rather than see such music functionalism as a cultural–political problem, sociologists and psychologists of music in everyday life have tended mostly to take either a more neutral stance, concerning themselves with identifying functions (as in Lamont et al.'s, 2015 contribution, discussed above), or even a rather positive one, seeing music as a resource for constituting the self, as for example when Tia DeNora, in her classic sociological work on music in everyday life, discusses the way that music is used as a way of *restoring oneself* or reducing 'arousal': soothing, calming, relaxing (DeNora, 2000: 40–50). Our own work is more influenced by cultural studies and critical sociology, so as we explained above, we do not wish to put aside normative and historical issues to the same degree. But such research on music in everyday life can be helpful in analysing the value that people might gain from pursuing different kinds of functions and in registering the positive dimensions of what critics would see negatively as 'utilitarian' or functionalist musical experiences. Work in music psychology also challenges assumptions about a

decline in the degree of attention paid to music by demonstrating the complexity of attention itself (e.g. Herbert, 2011: 187–205).

A second, more recent, body of work has emerged from media and cultural studies and sociology of culture: research on music consumption in the digital era. The most thorough studies cast light on the variability and complexity of streaming practices, providing ammunition against reductionist accounts. For example, important research conducted in Norway by Anja Nylund Hagen (2015) identified a continuum among users between relatively active user-motivated activity, such as the compilation of 'archives' in the form of playlists, versus relatively passive 'service-facilitated' activity; delineated some of the rich metaphors that users mobilise to make sense of their streaming activities; and, in collaboration with another groundbreaking researcher of streaming, Marika Lüders, explored various practices of sharing music via streaming (Hagen and Lüders, 2017; Lüders, 2019). However, even rigorous studies such as those by Hagen and Lüders have tended to focus on people who engage heavily with music and with music technology (see also Raffa, 2024) at the expense of lighter, more casual music listeners/users. Arguably, the latter may have somewhat more distant relationships to digital and streaming technologies. That is an issue we sought to address in our study, by actively recruiting people who engaged more lightly and more casually with music, in order to understand a more diverse range of everyday musical experiences (see section on 'Methods').

From our perspective, though, there is a still more significant problem with this recent body of research on music consumption in the digital era: many such studies, accomplished though they are, have tended to concentrate on issues concerning user responses to novel technological developments, such as users' experiences of automated recommendation (Freeman et al., 2022; Cole, 2024; Siles, 2023) – and this is also true of a neighbouring field of research that valuably examines the role of the Internet and digital media in everyday life (Burgess et al., 2022; Kant, 2020; Ytre-Arne, 2023). For our purposes, a problem with such a focus on recent technological developments in the present context is that it can lead to the neglect of older, long-standing debates about the value of aesthetic musical experience and attentive listening, and the kinds of experiences that critics claim that streaming is marginalising or diminishing. For example, aesthetic experience and close listening hardly figure in Michael Walsh's useful study of musical consumption in the streaming era (Walsh, 2024).[1]

Surprisingly, sociological and psychological approaches to music in everyday life (as delineated above) as a whole have also paid rather little attention to aesthetic experiences and aesthetic discourse, and their relationship to attentive or close listening. There is certainly work in psychology of music more generally on aesthetic experience (such as Thompson et al., 2023 on the psychology of 'music appreciation' or Hodges, 2014 on the neurology of aesthetic response), but in psychological work on the place of music in everyday life, that is our concern here, there are only passing mentions. The same is true of the sociological work on music and everyday life outlined above. Even thoughtful syntheses that devote attention to the question of aesthetics tend to remain silent about aesthetic experience when they turn to 'everyday musical listening practices' (Nowak and Bennett, 2022: 87–106). This is by contrast with sociologically- or anthropologically-oriented research influenced by critical theory, where musical aesthetics and aesthetic experience have been much more central, notably and problematically in the work

of Adorno (see Adorno, 2002) but also in fine writing by Nancy Weiss Hanrahan (2019). Hanrahan takes aesthetic experience in contemporary music consumption seriously, and seeks to analyse empirical instances of it, and in those respects we seek to follow her here, even if she comes to more pessimistic conclusions than we do. (Also inspiring is Frith's (1996) positive sociological account of how popular music can afford enriching aesthetic experience.)

Again, as noted above, our main objective in this article is not to intervene in debates about the validity of distinctions between aesthetic and functional musical experience and attentive versus distracted audition, or to defend the value of one side or the other of these distinctions. Instead, we examine the mix of these experiences in the everyday lives of our diarists. In a certain respect, our diarists affirm the view of critics that functional uses of music play an important role in people's musical lives in the streaming era. For this reason, drawing on Lamont et al. (2015), we focus on two contrasting emotional or mood states that our diarists reported using music to achieve: 'energizing' and a related category of 'focusing', on one hand, and relaxing and recovering on the other (in the fifth section). But we show how our diarists also pursue the more aesthetically-oriented experiences that critics, and the bodies of research discussed above, tend to overlook.

Methods: diaries as an approach to everyday media and music consumption

The findings outlined in this article are based on a diary and interview study of 22 people in England in 2023. This is not a quantitative study seeking generalisations about how many people have access to various musical experiences. Nevertheless, we have sought to cover a range of backgrounds and experiences. The objective of the study was to capture people's daily experiences of music in everyday life, including their interactions with streaming platforms and recommender systems, but contextualised within the wider ensemble of their daily routines of musical media and personal choices of music. The inspiring diary-based research of Hagen (2015) was based on a set of respondents who were mainly heavy, committed users. As explained above, we wanted to explore a fuller range of practices across a wider range of musical inclinations and values, including those whose relationship to music is lighter, more casual and infrequent (cf. Sloboda et al., 2001).

Once participants had been given information about the nature of the study and had agreed to participate, a briefing interview lasting between 20 and 45 minutes was arranged to introduce ourselves to participants, provide complete information about the project and instructions on how to complete the study. We also asked some basic questions about our participants' music habits and everyday lives. We asked participants to either write an entry or record a voice note outlining their musical experiences each day, for a total of 21 days. We considered this length enough to allow for variation and the appearance of unexpected musical encounters and practices, while being mindful of the risk of participant dropouts if the period was deemed too long or demanding. In contrast with the main previous diary study of music consumption in relation to streaming (Hagen, 2015), we did not pre-establish specific 'listening sessions' or times of the day.

Participants were free to register their thoughts and feelings at any point of the day, and submit them to us via an online form daily or in sets after several days. Once the 3-week period had elapsed, we contacted participants again to arrange a longer completion interview (40–90 minutes), where we discussed the content of their diary entries, asked further questions about their musical experiences and reflected on the diary-making process. They provided further insights into participants' personal lives, as well as allowing for more detail and context to be provided for specific diary entries.

Except for two people who kept diaries in the pilot phase, all participants were recruited via a private market research company based in the United Kingdom. We instructed this company to aim for a varied recruitment sample in terms of gender, age and ethnic background. Of our 22 participants, 11 participants identified as male, 9 as female, 1 as non-binary and 1 person was of unknown gender. Ages ranged from 20 to 69 years. In terms of ethnic background, most participants (15) declared themselves as 'British, English, Northern Irish, Scottish or Welsh' while the remaining seven professed belonging to a minority, including Indian, Pakistani, 'Asian and White', Caribbean, African and 'White and South African'. In terms of education, 11 participants had no higher education, 10 had been educated to undergraduate level, and 2 more had postgraduate degrees.

Although our initial idea was to expand and continue Hagen's (2015) pioneering work on diaries of music streaming and everyday life, the final design of the study combined elements from multiple diary studies in sociology (Moretti, 2021), computer science (Sohn et al., 2008), media studies (Kaun, 2010), psychology (Bolger et al., 2003) and health sciences (Bartlett and Milligan, 2015; Milligan and Bartlett 2019). We acknowledge that asking people to reflect on their practices may make them self-conscious and distort their responses in the direction of social desirability. Nevertheless, the diaries method provided us with asynchronous and remote access to a fairly substantial group of participants distributed around England, allowing us to collect rich data akin to ethnographic journaling, but with multiple advantages. First, it did not require the time and resource-intensive engagement necessary for ethnographic journalling work. Second, it allowed each participant to create their own journal and data at their own pace, and to document their experiences directly from their point of view. This effectively meant that we set up the conditions for data to reach us, rather than directly collect it, with the intention of understanding how people interact with the technologies, rather than taking technology as the object of study in itself (Titon, 2008). In addition, the use of interviews before and after the diary data collection allowed us to collect 'thicker' data about each of the participants' personal and social lives, as well as to understand better the intention and perspectives in their submitted media texts.

Modes of background musical functionality: energising and focusing

As explained in the second section, we begin with modes of musical functionality emerging from our diaries and interviews that emphasised 'energising' and 'focusing' (cf. Lamont et al., 2015) and preparing for work or leisure activities. Take, first of all, Josh,

working as a data analyst at the time of our study, in his mid-30s. Driving to the gym, he is playing an R&B-themed playlist on his car's audio system and the aim is to make him feel 'pumped' for the gym session ahead. Later the same week, facing a challenging working day before a long weekend, he is looking 'for music that would get me in the mood for such productivity' (by enabling him to 'focus' or concentrate) and so he starts the day with Seal's track 'Kiss from a Rose' playing on Amazon Music, followed by a playlist throughout the day that consists of 'rappers such as Headie One, Tion Wayne and Bugzy Malone'. For Josh, this is the type of music that gets him 'in the mood to complete the data spreadsheets that I do for work'.[2]

We asked Josh about his regular visits to the gym and the role of music in energising and motivating him. His response was:

> I like to make myself really kind of energised to do it because you have to have a bit of willpower and a bit of the blood flowing for you to have that session. 'Cause it, it's almost like you need to keep building towards it. It's like a building towards during the week.

This sounds like pure musical functionalism of the kind streaming critics have questioned. But the 'music itself' was not necessarily subordinated to this functional use. When we asked Josh why the hip hop and Afrobeats he prefers helped to provide the energy he sought, he revealed engagement with the sonic dimensions of music:

> I think it's the integration of bass. It's very basic, very bass-y, very in your speakers, very boom [emphasised]. You're hearing that. And then you're hearing the echo from that.

Crucially, these functional uses of music were not detached from aesthetic judgement. During one of his gym visits, a playlist was coming through the speakers, 'most likely from [a] Spotify account. . . Afrobeats such as Wizkid and Burnaboy along with pop music artists such as Lady Gaga, Ed Sheeran and Taylor Swift'. This shows Josh's considerable knowledge of artists, but he also remarked in his diary that he 'didn't feel as pumped or excited as I usually would as it didn't have that higher energy or tempo that I would expect from music that I would listen to at the gym typically'. And on one of his rest days from working out, Josh's main exposure to music was while shopping at a shopping centre (mall) near his home, and he found himself quite 'perturbed by the music' – pop music by Justin Bieber and Taylor Swift. 'This was in the afternoon so I still had energy so I was looking for something more upbeat and rhythmic'. 'Perturbed' here seems striking – the music he was exposed to in the retail environment was so aesthetically lacking that he felt actively unsettled.

How should we interpret such aesthetic judgement? It is not necessarily positive in itself – and we do not intend a view of the functional–aesthetic continuum that would see the aesthetic as a positive pole, opposed to a problematic functionalism. Such judgement could be dismissive of popular music, for example. But it would be mistaken to rush to a view that this response was produced by Josh's snobbery or disdain for pop. For elsewhere in his diary, Josh reports using extremely popular and often dismissed artists such as pop rapper Drake and pop singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran (as mentioned above) to try to achieve desired bodily and emotional states. But whatever the basis for his judgement,

what seems clear is how engaged Josh is with the *quality* of his musical environment. He is *aesthetically* motivated, and in a critical way, even as he pursues energisation and even as he is exposed to commercially-driven background music.

An emphasis on energy and energisation is also apparent in reports by another diarist, Rita, of her musical life, often expressed through the term 'uplifting'. She walks past a fun fair and finds the music being played 'really adds to the uplifting atmosphere'. She enjoys her son sending her what she describes as a TikTok style video of himself making his evening meal to Beyoncé's 'Cuff It'. He dances while his friends shout 'embarrassing!' in the background and she finds this 'funny and uplifting'. Like many of our diarists, Rita made only very limited use of terms that could capture musical style, but she expressed appreciation of the music in the Toby Carvery restaurant (a UK chain specialising in mid-price meals with an emphasis on meat) where she eats one night, and even the music played as she waits to speak to an operator about a problem with her mobile phone. The term she uses for her appreciation is consistently that such music is 'uptempo'. Expressing enjoyment of the 'uptempo' music of an advert for P&O Cruises, she explains that it 'puts you in the mood for a great time away with your friend'.

These fragments of musical life could easily be taken as evidence not only of the reduction of music to 'background' and functional purposes, and the deterioration of musical life in the contemporary media environment. So too could her enjoyment of the music being played as she waits to speak to someone in a remote call centre – often invoked as a prime example of how music serves as a kind of commercial pollution in everyday life (discourses discussed by Frith, 2002). But Rita's diaries and interview conversations challenge such conclusions. For one thing, the 'uplift' she stresses as a source of pleasure in music (see above) seems strongly linked to her Christian faith. She accompanies her housework with a gospel radio station, which she finds 'an uplifting and encouraging way to start her day'. She listens to a song that 'has a real powerful true life story' of a young boy who became critically ill but at the church that he attended, the 'worship leader wrote this song when he heard about the boys illness' and this played a key role in the recovery of the boy. Regardless of one's views about religion, such stories can surely not be dismissed as a kind of shallow functionalism. Rita is 'using' music to achieve a state that is connected to empathy for the suffering of others, and a belief in the healing power of community.

Rita links energisation to focus and this is not disconnected from an appreciation of musical artistry: she reports having her favourite gospel singer Fred Hammond 'sort of like in the forefront this morning' and how his music 'sets the scene, it captures your thoughts, it helps you to centre and to focus on entering into, what we say, God's presence'. On another day, she reports watching a Beyoncé concert which was 'Uplifting as she did a tribute to Stevie Wonder'. Even the P&O cruise advert mentioned earlier indicates a connection to meaningful experience. A first-person voiceover recounts the experience of a cruise visit to a non-English location, possibly Spain, by two Black female friends. Accompanied by the early '80s disco classic, 'Love Come Down', by Evelyn 'Champagne' King, the advert ends with them dancing together – a 30-second depiction of pleasurable Black sisterhood, the impact of which depends on its musical setting. Although we did not ask Rita specifically about the musical setting, it may be that it evokes memories of her own childhood (as a Black teenage girl in the 1980s).

Such complexities are also apparent in the case of Theo, with whom we began this article. As well as using music in the ways discussed there, he also engages in aesthetic debate with friends, such as a conversation about what constitutes 'a perfect album': is it a mix of well-known and less well-known tracks, or something well-ordered and well-planned to take the listener on a 'journey from start to finish'? His diaries indicate someone who is fascinated by the history of music, and who finds that digital media provide accessible resources for exploring this history – praising for example a YouTube documentary about the creation and success of a 1970s disco classic, Lipps Inc.'s 'Funkytown'. In the same 3-week period, he spends the evenings with friends watching Eurovision (he enjoys their company but is bored by the music); plays guitar with his drummer friend Ryan and finds that their hard work pays off and 'they could play the song perfectly, without mistakes'; listens to vinyl versions of Beatles albums he knows with another friend; and tries out albums he hasn't heard before such as Brian Eno's *Music for Airports* and Johnny Cash's *American Recordings*. On this reading, Theo comes closer to being the kind of music user that critics of streaming might welcome: attentive and passionately engaged with music and its histories. And if such uses are absent from the very many pessimistic accounts of streaming in recent academic and public commentary, they are also hard to find in the sociological and psychological research on music in everyday life that we discussed earlier.

The above vignettes indicate how use of music for energisation and focusing are intertwined with more aesthetically-oriented experiences, cutting back against critiques that streaming has brought about an excessive musical functionalism at the expense of aesthetically-oriented experience. But they also affirm that energisation is indeed a common way in which music is mobilised, in line with Lamont et al.'s (2015) highlighting of this function.

Relaxing and recovering

As indicated above, there is another, somewhat contrasting way in which our diarists wrote and spoke about their functional experiences of music: rather than energising, music is used to *reduce* 'arousal' and stimulation (and potentially anxiety) in the interests of calming, soothing, relaxing, recovering and other goals.

Here is another diarist, Ashley:

> I was feeling tired as I'd had a long day, and still had to continue cycling home. I hadn't listened to any music so far today so when I began my journey I searched what albums I had downloaded on my Spotify mobile app as I hadn't thought about what I wanted to listen to in advance, so just had to pick from this small selection. I picked an album called 'Ali & Toumani' by Ali Farka Touré and Toumani Diabaté, which I had previously listened to over and over again when I first discovered it, but hadn't listened to in a while. I picked it because I needed something soft and calming, and it made me feel more relaxed and less anxious. I was listening on headphones.

As we write in 2025, Spotify has a personalised playlist called 'Soft and Slow' ('sweet gems to help you slow down and savor your day') and another called 'Gentle Relaxing Soft Mix' ('Gentle relaxing music picked just for you') but instead of seeking

or downloading such playlists, Ashley goes for a specific named album that they had previously 'listened to over and over again', indicating some kind of aesthetic pleasure. They go on:

> I paused my music because I was in a market area where one of the market stall holders was playing loud music through a really big speaker, and I wanted to hear it. It was instrumental reggae music that filled up the small space and felt really joyful and gave the area a warm and community-oriented vibe as a lot of the stall holders are Caribbean, and felt especially good in combination with the sun shining. I really enjoyed it and it made me want to listen to more reggae. I didn't put my music back on afterwards as I went to a library to do some work.

Ashley's reaching out for music that is soft and calming, then, does not mean they lack interest in more upbeat music with a collective feel. Nevertheless, after finishing work in the library they put the album back on for their journey home – and it fulfils the function that led them to it: 'It helped to reset and relax me after having to concentrate hard in the library which had been a slightly noisy and harsh environment for me.'

The next evening, Ashley reports putting on music to fall asleep. The context is a visit they make to a friend for an intimate evening. They go to bed together and Ashley brings the speaker to the bedroom and puts on their April Spotify playlist 'but because it was such a mix of genres (indie and pop, but also classical and Indian 'filmi' music), some of the songs were too jarring so I turned it off'. As their friend recalls the track 'Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots' by Flaming Lips, they put the album on but the music proves too 'dramatic and dynamic' for falling asleep. Instead, they alight on an album by Sufjan Stevens, 'as it's very gentle and calming and I've used it to fall asleep before'.

Some, in line with the critiques explained above, might see this as an example of crude streaming-led functionalism, whereby Stevens' meditations on his stepfather and recently deceased mother, and their relationship, become reduced to the sonic equivalent of a sleeping pill. But that would surely be to deny the aesthetic pleasure and initial listening that might be involved before attention slips away into sleep. And it contradicts Ashley's sense of their own musical agency, apparent in one of our interviews, when they told us that in looking at Spotify playlists, they find that there might be 'a certain artist that Spotify wants to promote and that's why they're on the playlist rather than . . . like often I just won't be that interested in them. I think in general I find them a bit bland'. And in discussing a track they enjoyed, 'Music for 18 Hairdressers' by Ben LaMar Gay, they observe their liking for originality:

> I really like, I dunno, just really like weird things, like things that surprise me, things that I would describe as not bland. I think they stand out in particular because, most of like music they play on the radio is like the opposite of that. And so, yeah, I also just love music that makes me wanna sing along to it and or dance.

Another of our diarists, Mia, who kept an audio diary (hence the rather different voice in the extract below) also used music to 'wind down' and 'relax' on her way home from work (in a housing office). But here too it would be wrong to see her experience as passive and non-aesthetic:

> There's this really good artist called Yebba [. . .], her voice and her songs are so kind of emotionally charged and I was just singing my heart out to those basically, which, I would say put me in a good mood, but it's kind of between a good mood and, I dunno how to explain it more of a, I dunno, just relaxed, probably just relaxed.

Mia is 'winding down' but *also* actively engaging with the music, singing along to it and feeling emotions on the basis of her response. In the end, faced with the paradox of enjoying sadness, she settles on the language of 'relaxation', that the music simply makes her feel more relaxed. But she gets there via what can surely not be conceived of as anything other than an aesthetically and emotionally charged experience.

How to assess entanglements of the functional and the aesthetic?

Our main empirical claim in this article, based on our empirical research, is that while music listeners may indeed engage in the kinds of functional, distracted and background music experiences that have concerned critics of music in the streaming era, they *also* engage in aesthetically oriented, emotionally charged and attentive ones. To put it another way, the functional and the distracted are *entangled* in contemporary musical lives.[3] The significance of this claim is that it challenges the assertion or assumption in recent critiques that functional and distracted uses are typical or dominant in the streaming era and that this is detrimental to people's musical lives.

But our approach here also offers a second significant contribution to understanding people's musical lives in the digital age, which is to push back against what we consider to be excessive attention paid to technological mediation in some recent strands of research (on music, and on digital and social media more generally) and a relative neglect of the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of mediated musical experience.

Is there a danger that this approach involves an abandonment of critique in favour of a more forgiving, conciliatory or even celebratory understanding of how music is mediated in the digital era? We do not believe so. We absolutely accept that music has become extensively platformised and that the power of IT corporations to shape musical experience is potentially damaging and limiting, and we have ourselves sought to critique this power in recent publications. The global spread of music streaming, for example, incorporates music into a system of abundance and convenience that is ultimately harmful for people and the planet, and which at times reproduces cultural inequalities grounded in international hegemony and hierarchy (Hesmondhalgh, 2025, Campos Valverde, 2025).

But such critique is likely to be more effective if it does not make assumptions about the musical lives that people are actually living, but instead seeks to investigate the complexity of those lives sympathetically, looking to understand why people do what they do, and what values they attach to their practices – an aim that we consider to be in line with valuable traditions of cultural studies of music, as well as the best work in the sociology and psychology of music in everyday life.

What are the implications of our analysis for critical analysis of everyday life in the digital age, and more specifically the evolving role of music in ordinary lives?

One is that critics may be *simplifying* and even *reducing* the everyday lives of users. A long-standing impulse in cultural studies has been to challenge such reductive understandings of people's lives, for example, in cultural studies research on television audiences, in response to fears and anxieties about television articulated in the 'mass culture criticism' of the late 20th century, including projections onto the experiences of women (Ang, 1985). As indicated earlier, a number of recent contributions have similarly pushed back against what they consider to be simplistic or reductive accounts of everyday digital interactions with digital life as a whole (Burgess et al. 2022, Siles, 2023). The work of Hagen and Lüders (2017) in Norway demonstrates similar complexity in people's uses of music streaming. In showing that people's cultural musical lives might be more complex than the critics assume, we are following a similar path as these researchers.

But how should we understand the entanglements of functional and aesthetic (and inattentive and attentive) here, beyond the fact that critics understate them? What are the normative or evaluative implications of all this? We are definitely not claiming that our diaries and interviews provide evidence that the new musical system centred on streaming, retaining older forms of engagement with music (such as radio, live music and karaoke), allows for an expanded terrain of choice, such that individual users can maximise, using the language of both mainstream economics and a great deal of computer science, their *satisfactions*. We reject the notion of choice ingrained in such framings of people's everyday lives, and the shallow notion of subjectivity implied by conceptions of preference satisfaction. But to use a central concept in cultural studies, might people's bricolages of different musical experience be understood as a form of coping with everyday life, that might be understood as a set of *tactics*? We invoke here the famous defence of cultural consumption (against certain forms of mid-20th century cultural critique) made by French cultural theorist Michel de Certeau (1984 [1980]: 37), which sought to redeem consumption on the basis that it represented a 'guileful ruse' on the part of the powerless that resists the 'strategy' of the powerful. As Ben Highmore (2002: 159) has pointed out, however, the military metaphors used by de Certeau risk vastly overstating the 'degree of purposeful opposition' apparent in his rather banal everyday examples ('talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.').

What if we adopt an approach, in line with Tia DeNora's classic work on music in everyday life, which would see music as a resource for achieving well-being? Music, DeNora (2000: 53) argued, is 'an accomplice' in attaining, enhancing and maintaining the desired states of feeling and bodily energy, and is 'a vehicle' for moving out of non-preferred states such as stress or fatigue, examples of 'aesthetic agency', carried out on the basis of 'self-conscious articulation work', including the kind of 'de-stressing' or 'winding down' we recount here. But such an account downplays the broader constraints in which people live their lives: unequal access to resources, alienating and sometimes exhausting routines, duties and obligations of work, caring and the maintenance of life. Of course we are not claiming that DeNora fails to see such constraints; but somehow music's agency seems to exist separately from them in her account.

Perhaps a humbler notion of *coping* (recently discussed by Kant (2020) in the context of coping with recommendation algorithms on various platforms), untied from de Certeau's implications of resistance, but nevertheless indicating the constraints faced by users, might come closer to capturing what people do with music in the digital era? For

the term suggests the possibility of connecting everyday musical lifeworlds to social, cultural and technological constraints, without reducing everyday practices to passive reproductions of power, as some critics may be in danger of doing in their critiques of 'lean-back listening' (Pelly, 2025).

By offering empirical evidence regarding the way in which people engage with music in their everyday lives in the streaming era, and complicating some of the critiques of musical functionalism and distraction we discussed above, we wish to draw attention to the richness and variability of people's musical practices, in line with some aspects of sociological and psychological research on everyday life. But drawing upon the cultural studies tradition that has shaped some recent research on digital media in everyday life, we also wish to consider how users' behaviours and attitudes respond to the constraints of contemporary life in capitalist societies, and of digital media themselves. Future research on digital media, and musical lives in the digital era, might benefit from a more sympathetic attitude towards people's efforts to live their musical lives, while maintaining a critique of the power of the technologies and institutions that shape those lives.

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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.

Notes

1. Nowak (2016) differentiates utilitarian and aesthetic orientations to music, but in terms of technology, rather than music itself, seeing a multiplicity of modes or orientations as characteristic of digitalisation.
2. Quotations from diarists are from their written diary texts or from transcriptions of their audio recordings and we have retained their spelling and grammar.
3. We employ the term 'entanglement' in a different way from its use in Actor Network Theory, where it seeks to capture that approach's particular questioning of distinctions between humans and things, in terms of autonomy and agency. In our approach here, entanglement is just a metaphor for how different experiences are combined by users; no particular theoretical claim is attached to it.

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