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Listening at Home and Beyond: Music Polymedia and Everyday Life

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ABSTRACT

This article applies polymedia theory to music and everyday life, with particular attention to musical engagement within families and the home, and to commuting and workspace environments. We focus on three issues: the role of music polymedia in managing multiscreen, intergenerational households, including their use as remote offices; listening practices while traveling and commuting as extensions of the home, and the influence of work schedules on musical experience; and the adoption of streaming in workspaces and the blurring of boundaries between home and work, and between professional and personal engagements with music.

Introduction

John feels that reaching his mid-30s has not really changed his musical taste that much. He still listens to punk most days, and continues to go to concerts when possible. He and his partner like adjacent genres of punk and DIY music, and music taste helped them create bonds when they met. He also thinks that the ethos and political stance of punk are even more valuable when one leads a work-dependent or family-oriented life, which at times may feel like an exemplary instance of reproducing capitalism through both waged and emotional labor. Whenever friends express the view that music was better in the past, he strongly disagrees, and thinks that discovering new artists is an important way to avoid being stuck in such misguided nostalgia. However, he admits that managing work and parenting responsibilities may have changed the way he listens to music. In May 2023, there were entire days when the only music he listened to was the *Rainbow Rangers* theme tune, played over and over on the TV while he was at home with his children. So, when emo-punk band Hot Mulligan released their new album *Why Would I Watch*, he knew that to listen to it attentively he needed to find private spaces between home and work. These spaces turned out to be his car while commuting to work or an evening walk after putting the kids to bed, when he would listen via earphones connected to his smartphone. Sometimes John plays punk music when he is with his partner and children at home or in the car, but he also knows that his children are too young to fully

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get into it. He is also conscious that they might not grow to appreciate it in the same way that he and his partner do, so finding these private spaces is important to him. Commercial radio and pop music often provide suitable background music for family drives, where he learns what his eldest might find interesting in terms of music. For John, having access to varied media and devices to stream music throughout the day helps him build the kind of communication and relationship with family that he looks for. Media choice also allows him to stay true to his musical taste and to his ideas about children's education, enabling him to listen to what he likes and providing choices for his children to find their own musical preferences.

In this article, we draw from life stories such as John's to analyze how "polymedia engagements" (Madianou) are fundamental to contemporary uses of music in everyday life. Originally developed to address the communicative practices of transnational migrant families via social media, polymedia theory argues that in situations where there is a wealth of screen devices available and media and internet access are taken for granted, people turn to different platforms and ways of communicating to maintain their family and work relationships, according to the affordances and common use of those platforms (Madianou and Miller). The theory also emphasizes how choices of platform or medium often reflect moral understandings of sociality and the appropriateness of certain media to sustain them, for example when a messaging app is reserved for close ties like family and friends whereas video platforms might be considered public and impersonal.

Here we extend this idea of "polymedia life" (Madianou) to music media, whereby choices regarding media engagement articulate how people negotiate soundscapes in shared spaces and, by extension, navigate everyday social dynamics such as household management, children's education, collective emotion, and productivity. In other words, we aim to illustrate the entanglement of music and media technologies in the everyday social lives of families and households, for example how choosing to turn on the radio, stream a playlist, or select an album are intertwined with the social relationship or activity that music sustains in each social situation. In line with Madianou's work, we show how music polymedia constitute both the environment where these social interactions unfold and the technological repertoires and skill sets—akin to commanding multiple languages to communicate—used to articulate human relationships. Moreover, we extend this theory by arguing that polymedia engagements structure relationships in the family and the household, but also in domesticized spaces such as cars and offices, which either extend family social practices or comprise quotidian practices of social life such as listening to music with others, talking about everyday matters, or sharing a meal. The empirical material below highlights how polymedia practices shape a continuum of engagements with music media that range from what we call *intensifying practices*—understood as those which foster sociality and connectedness—to *spatializing practices*, which strengthen the boundary-making capacity of music and screen technologies in terms of time and space, highlighting their disruptive capacity.

Polymedia theory places emphasis on human agency in daily life, in and with media. By comparison with neighboring concepts such as convergence culture (Jenkins), polymedia places much greater emphasis on forms of spatialization and the management of ordinary social life, rather than media overlap and creative practices of remixing and repurposing media texts. In addition, polymedia theory does not understand choice in

a liberal or functionalist way, and takes a more neutral stance than some celebratory accounts of convergence, which may be accused of "digital voluntarism"—i.e. an excessive attribution of agency to users of digital technologies. The concept of polymedia understands the use of digital tools as a social practice, illustrating how people go on with their social lives or seek to sustain them in the existing mediascape, but does not celebrate or overemphasize individual choice. We understand the sociality-driven choices in the empirical material below as existing within a larger technological system, which constrains the social possibilities of digital tools, and we consider such constraints more fully elsewhere (Campos Valverde; Hesmondhalgh et al.; Hesmondhalgh, "Global"). There might be more similarities between the concepts of polymedia and "technological eclecticism" (Nowak and Bennett) in their account for the variations and nuance of individuals' technological engagement. However, polymedia theory places a greater emphasis on the moral value given by users to digital technologies as tools capable of sustaining or matching the same kind of moral value given to certain social relationships (for instance, if a certain medium is more likely to create privacy or publicness).

Previous theories about media practice have approached new technologies and the home through the concept of domestication (Hartmann). In particular, some studies of digital media in internet studies rely on Baym's use of that concept (44–49), understood as a third stage of technology adoption, whereby earlier phases of euphoria and moral panic have given way to a situation where the technology is taken for granted and accepted in society (as is now arguably the case with music streaming). In this sense, domestication constitutes a kind of normalization, potentially including the integration of technology into home environments. Studies drawing on the concept have also pointed to the "mutually domesticating" relationship between technology and human agency (Silverstone and Hirsch; Siles). While such scholarship often takes a nuanced approach, some of it seems to come from a place of concern about the influence of technology on people (see Andersen and Vistisen on "fear of missing out" and individualization). When domestication is dealt with in music studies (Parsons; Solomos) these anxieties manifest as fears that both the qualities of musicians and even their very existence might be lost (see Campos Valverde and Kaye; Hesmondhalgh, "Streaming's" on such fears). Our focus on music in everyday life steps away from domestication theories and instead concurs with previous studies of media adoption in intergenerational families (Erstad et al.; Grønning; Livingstone). We emphasize that relational dynamics are transformed through a combination of "embrac[ing], balanc[ing] and resist[ing]" (Livingstone) new platformed practices together with old media in ways that intensify connectedness, rather than interrupt it or lead to intra-familial individualism. In doing so, we challenge an implicit assumption in a great deal of research: the supposed centrality of music streaming platforms in everyday musical life, and their presumed individualizing and life-diminishing power (Hesmondhalgh, "Streaming's").

The continuum that we outline above between intensification and spatialization has often been approached by scholars through the analysis of the boundary-making capacity of music and screen technologies in terms of the fragmentation of time and space. This kind of fragmentation also appears in recent theorizations of domestication theory via the notion of "ritual domestication" (Siles), whereby daily habits get inscribed in everyday life routines via uses of music that contribute to the compartmentalization of work and leisure time, and work and home spaces. Our empirical

material highlights that the loss of agency expressed in some accounts is sometimes a feature of the former. More specifically focused on time fragmentation are theories of the "multiscreen home" and the kinds of new intra-domestic temporal synchronicities and moral economies afforded by "polymediated" dwellings (Chambers). We agree with Chambers that access to media does not necessarily lead to more individualism and "me time." On the contrary, we show how more access to music media can create shared spaces and experiences at home and in domesticized spaces like the car (Bull, "Soundscapes") or the office. We also concur with Chambers in highlighting the role of remote office work in dynamics of spatialization inside the home, within the context of other types of screen and music time. Although the empirical material below does indeed show practices of temporal fragmentation and spatialization, it also confirms Madianou's and Chambers's perspective on spatialization as enabling intensification of relationships, rather than supporting an idea of disintegration of the family. We also complicate these approaches to spatialization by analyzing the blurring and remaking of boundaries between public and private, in spaces such as the car and the office, afforded by polymedia environments and music practices with/in them.

Approaching contemporary music media practices via polymedia theory (Madianou) and its foregrounding of everyday life with/in technology, this article argues for approaching musical experience as a means for articulating social relations. Concurrently, we also understand music in everyday life as well as a device of social ordering (DeNora) between individual and collective that is inherently integrated with technological practices. However, we depart from some of DeNora's analysis in that our vision of social ordering is focused as much on sustaining relationships as it is on coping with everyday life. In doing so, we also differ from critical research on the functional role of music streaming under capitalism (Thompson and Drott). In other words, we understand polymediated musical life as something closer to Livingstone's balancing act, taking place within the possible spectrum of intensifying and spatializing practices, and in ways that sustain social life rather than merely reproducing capitalist structures of labor. Rather than focusing on a specific device or media format (Bull, *Sound*; Bonini and Monclús), this article expands the illuminating but scarce research on digital platforms and everyday life after the music streaming boom (Hagen; Johansson et al.; Nowak; Prior; Tofalvy and Barna; Campos Valverde). In doing so, it also strays from streaming-centric research that dealt with musical experiences inside the home during the emergency phase of the pandemic, mostly oriented to understanding the relatively new experience of lockdowns and the normalization of online interaction (Brunt; Taylor, Raine, and Hamilton), and online music performance (Agamennone, Palma, and Sarno; Kaye). Instead, it applies the framework of "polymedia life" to account for the continuum between intensifying and spatializing practices, which include domestic life, working from home, and returning on-site.

The next section outlines the methodology used to collect the empirical material that forms the basis of this article. The subsequent three sections provide empirical evidence supporting this conceptualization of polymedia for musical experience in contemporary everyday life. First, we focus on the management of multiscreen, intergenerational households, including when these are used as remote offices. Second, we focus on listening practices while traveling and commuting as extensions of the home, and the

influence of work schedules on musical experiences. Third, we turn our attention to the adoption of streaming in workspaces and the blurring of boundaries between home and work, and between professional and personal engagements with music. We conclude by highlighting some limitations of approaches that see everyday musical experience primarily as a means by which capitalism is socially reproduced.

Methods

The findings outlined in this article are based on a diary-and-interview study of twenty-two people in England (21) and Scotland (1) in 2023 (see the Appendix for information about the twelve participants cited or quoted in the remainder of this study). The objective of the study was to capture people's experiences of music in everyday life, including their interactions with streaming platforms that are the focus of our research project, but contextualized within the wider ensemble of their daily routines of musical media and personal choices of music. We also aimed to obtain data about participants' private lives in a way that was noninvasive. Although our initial idea was to expand and continue previous work on diaries of music streaming and everyday life (Hagen), the final design of the study combined elements from multiple diary studies in sociology (Moretti), computer science (Sohn et al.; Carter and Mankoff), media studies (Kaun), psychology (Bolger, Davis, and Rafaeli), and health sciences (Bartlett and Milligan, *Diary*; Bartlett and Milligan, *What Is*). We also departed from Hagen's study in our approach to the sample. While Hagen based her study on a set of respondents who were mainly heavy, committed users, we wanted to explore a fuller range of practices, including those whose relationship to music is much more casual and infrequent. This was crucial to observe the continuity between more free-flowing and location-specific modes of listening and engagement that we analyze below.

The study was divided into four phases. First, we used a private market research company based in the UK to recruit and contact participants. Once participants had been given information about 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 furnish instructions on how to complete the study. At this stage, we would also request a confirmation of consent via a signed form. The briefing interview also allowed us to ask some basic questions about music habits and everyday life and to begin our data collection.

For the diary section of the study, we asked participants to either write or record a voice note outlining their musical experiences each day, for a total of twenty-one days. We decided the study length to allow for variation and the appearance of unexpected musical encounters and practices, while being mindful of the risk of participant dropouts if the study was deemed too long or demanding. In contrast with Hagen, 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. Yet, we recommended using evenings to recall their daily activities and to submit a diary entry per day, a suggestion that most participants adhered to.

Once the three-week period had lapsed, we contacted participants again to arrange a completion interview, where we discussed the content of their diary entries, asked

further questions about their musical experiences, and reflected on the diary-making process. A first phase of analysis based on the transcripts from interviews, and on media and text submissions, to identify relevant questions took place before the completion interviews. These completion interviews were semi-structured and lengthier than the briefing interviews, lasting between 40 and 90 minutes. They provided further insights into participants' personal lives, as well as allowing for more detail and context to be provided for specific diary entries.

Once we had collected all the data, we also transcribed the completion interviews and manually analyzed all texts to identify themes. We also conducted a third phase of manual analysis of this material to add more detail to this thematic analysis and draw broader conclusions. The results presented in this paper are thus the result of interpretation and inference of the theoretical insights from the data.

The diary method (Hagen; Bartlett and Milligan, *What Is*) provided us with asynchronous and remote access to a fairly substantial group of participants distributed around the UK, allowing us to collect rich qualitative data. The joint method (diaries and interviewing) had several advantages. First, it did not require the time- and resource-intensive engagement necessary for ethnographic 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 collecting it. In addition, the use of interviews before and after the diary data collection allowed us to collect thicker data about each one of the participants' personal and social lives, as well as to understand better the intention and perspective that they were conveying in their submitted media texts.

In further contrast with Hagen, we did not use experience sampling methods and provided more freedom to participants to write and record what they believed to be relevant, as a kind of solicited diary more commonly used in health sciences (Bartlett and Milligan, *What Is*). In addition, we set up the diary study entirely online, where all diary entries were submitted via an online form hosted in university servers. This allowed us to reach a more varied set of participants both geographically across the country and in terms of socioeconomic background than would have been possible if we had been collecting paper diaries or conducting interviews in person. Lastly, the participants' relative freedom to write or record the diary without following a set of pre-established questions allowed both more introspective reflection and emotional experiences, and the documenting of specific songs, sounds, functionality, and anecdotes. This was also important in achieving the holistic vision of everyday life that gave rise to the discussion that follows.

Polymediated Homes, Spatialization, and Intergenerational Families

The balancing act of polymedia practices of intensification and spatialization is especially apparent in multiscreen, intergenerational homes. The participants of our diary study lived in multiscreen homes for the most part. Every diarist's household had a minimum of a smart TV and a smartphone, and most also owned a laptop or desktop computer and a second smartphone. In intergenerational dwellings, teenage and young adult children

would also have an additional smartphone per person and often another laptop or desktop computer. In addition, many diarists also owned analogue and digital radios, and one or more smart speakers connected to their Spotify, Google, or Amazon accounts. For diarists such as Peter or Phil who worked both at home and on-site and had partners and children living at home, a typical weekday involved at least switching between the car radio, a smart TV, a smartphone, and a laptop, which in turn may be streaming either via speakers or earphones, and connecting to three or more subscription accounts.

These living arrangements and technological cultures in the household create dynamics of daily family life that benefit from the musical spatialization of different areas, meaning that different dwellers create their own personal spaces within the shared household by selecting between different technologies and forms of engagement with music according to specific functions. At the same time, spatialization is necessary while living in polymedia environments, but it is also an after-effect,produced by living a polymedia life. For instance, Peter recalls how he might be working from home and might have some music on in the background, but his children may be listening to something else in their bedrooms until the family comes together for dinner in the evening, where one single music stream may be selected for everyone, not always without debate. These are prime examples of the "intra-domestic polymediated timescapes" that Chambers highlights (1188), which allow for both spatialization and more togetherness in family time. This is even more the case during weekends or special at-home occasions. Phil recalled a birthday party in his home that included family members aged from one to ninety-two years old, and the difficulty of selecting music suitable for everyone. He chose to play a Spotify playlist that included a mix of indie, commercial hip-hop, and R&B tracks. Although he knew that not all tunes would suit everyone during the entire event, he expected that, being in the background, they would not create much family conflict. In other words, "polymedia repertoires" (Madianou) may be necessary skills to be able to build family relationships through media -akin to languages in a multi-generational household. Yet, when spatialization is not possible, flexibility and tolerance are required to maintain family time. In each case, polymedia is a key part of the environment in which family relationships develop, and of the language used to communicate between family members.

Diarist Ashley recalled a similar dynamic of soundscape negotiation when at home with their mum. At times, they would choose to spatialize by streaming music from their Spotify account via their smartphone and connect it to headphones while cooking dinner. On other evenings, they would play radio at a low volume, but this would sometimes create overlaps—and a cacophony of languages—with the TV, where the mother would be watching a show in Hindi or Punjabi that included musical content. In other instances, Ashley would choose not to spatialize or create separate private spaces in the household, and instead would try to listen attentively to the TV in an effort to catch words or sentences in the languages their mother speaks. Here the understanding of polymedia repertoires is even closer to an idea of media languages and skills, as choices of music media collide with the choices of language. Similarly, as in the previous example, negotiation and compromise are also involved when spatialization is not fully possible, and a polymedia life is a socially oriented practice and language used.

These kinds of polymediated compromises within a spectrum of integrating and spatializing practices are most salient during weekends and in households with young

children. Diarist John, who appears in the opening vignette above, shared multiple instances of activities at home with children that required either spatialization or negotiation of soundscape. Despite the wide choices provided by his polymediated home—including a smart TV, two smartphones, a smart speaker, and a PlayStation—and the potential of choosing between thousands of music tracks to stream, his musical experiences were notably narrower and not streaming-based when he was taking care of his children. However, he experienced this as a necessary compromise to fulfill his parenting role and highlighted how choosing to avoid spatialization allowed him to start discussing simple musical concepts with his eldest child, reflecting on what kind of music education that child might be inclined to take in the future. As above, a form of intergenerational musicking and family time is prioritized over issues of personal taste when at home, where the choice of media is also a choice about the kind of relationship being built. In addition, polymedia practices help John to build a relationship with his children that combines elements of in-person and through-media interaction. In cases such as this, multiscreen homes emerge less as spaces of separation and individualization and more as environments where polymedia is managed in order to ensure connection. These examples from Peter, Phil, Ashley, and John show that navigating polymedia and balancing different forms of spatialization for different times, uses, and space enables new forms of family time, and a continued flow of music in everyday life.

For couples, this combined in-person and through-streaming musical interaction has a more specifically communicative dimension in Madianou's sense. For instance, diarist Elena explained that the "AI-generated" Spotify playlists that combine her and her boyfriend's preferences are quite accurate. However, when she tries to listen to those playlists on her own, she ends up skipping many songs because her boyfriend's preferences do not make sense for her without him. For Elena, listening to mixes only makes sense when they are co-present at home and can have a discussion about the songs being played. In a similar way to other digital traces on social media discussed by Madianou, shared music products in streaming platforms become an asynchronous representation of the absent person themselves. In the case of Elena, the communicative practice cannot sustain itself only through the digital trace, and only the combination of in-person and through-streaming communication creates a fully formed interaction. Here, polymedia practices are both the environment in which, and the communication skills through which, such domestic interaction happens, again enabling forms of separation and intensification of home relationships.

A more acute form of spatialization takes place in single-person households when the dwelling is also used for remote work. Job schedules are important in structuring daily life even inside of the home, and so have great relevance in the organization of everyday musical experience. For instance, two of our diarists, student Kevin and public servant Talia, coincided in making choices to stream certain music genres or in using specific devices depending on the kind of tasks they needed to complete at a particular time. Through their choices of musical genre in the morning, the afternoon, or the evening, their work and study patterns were made distinct in the absence of physical boundaries. Kevin and Talia also used similar terms to self-describe as people who were not that much into listening to music, yet in both cases their entire days are heavily influenced by the constant flow of music coming out from their multiple smart devices. For them, being at home working or resting does not interrupt their music listening practices. Rather, it

changes the qualities or characteristics of those musical experiences. In other words, spatialization to separate work from leisure, or office from home, was very much a polymedia-enabled intellectual separation of different cognitive experiences. Spatialization in these cases is again something required by the context of using the home as a remote office as it was for Peter and Phil, but also something that is achieved through different uses of music. In these examples, spatialization contributes to creating borders between work and leisure when remote working has blurred the boundaries. These boundary-making processes are more akin to the "ritual domestication" that Siles (19) discusses, whereby daily routines and rituals are inscribed in specific times of the day. Through the cognitive music and media separation that Kevin and Talia undertake, daily schedules are integrated in everyday life. Here, the balancing act of navigating polymedia is what enables spatialization within the home.

Commuting, Privacy, and Spatialization

The family dynamics and polymedia practices of intensification and spatialization outlined above also appear in other spaces, out of the home but acting as extensions of the home, such as the family car. Negotiating a soundscape between members of the family and having family time in the car appeared in participants' diaries when describing time spent traveling together. For instance, John recalled how listening to music with his partner and children in the car is a kind of family time similar to listening to music at home, revealing different parenting styles in managing children's music diet, or ways of giving children choices, which need to be proposed and discussed. Similarly, an intergenerational shared space such as the car, which in the case of John included at the time a two-year-old child, is indeed a polymediated space, including streaming accounts on Spotify and Apple Music, in addition to the car radio. These polymedia practices allow for flexible patterns according to times of the day and children's sleeping patterns, as well as ensuring that children can explore their musical preferences overseen by their parents, and that parents have ways to learn more about their children's emotional reactions to certain sounds. For John, this approach to children's education and wellbeing takes priority over considerations of personal taste. Polymedia practices are here again the space where family relationships are sustained and the communication skills that John and his partner mobilize to handle children's education, where child-friendly soundscapes and family time are prioritized over aesthetic enjoyment and personal spatialization.

Another example of these polymediated family negotiations of driving soundscapes and of how diarists were ready to make compromises in favor of family time comes from participant Terence. While the vast majority of Terence's music listening and consumption happens through streaming services, mostly dedicated to learning and practicing duets to sing in the Smule app 1 and preparing songs for choir rehearsals and performance, his media practices while driving do not focus on this musical prep work at all. He prefers to play public and commercial radio when sharing the car ride with his wife, finding music that would suit both their tastes. This still constitutes an important kind of musical family time, considering that they no longer play piano or play records at home. However, asked about this apparent disparity between heavy consumption of streaming at home and no use of digital platforms at all while driving, he highlighted that effortless

access to back catalog that they both like (for instance via Smooth radio) and force of habit may be the reason why he and his wife continue to use the radio in the car. Once again, the social aspects of driving together and family time take priority, to the extent that they may constitute two quite different kinds of music consumption for any one user. By contrast with John's story, Terence's example stresses how polymedia choices in the car context contribute to both intensifying and spatializing practices. Moreover, radio listening is a key sustaining media practice for Terence and his wife's life together, and also a language of care that involves a combination of in-person and through-media communication skills in Madianou's sense.

Although post-pandemic work-from-home patterns have somewhat reduced time spent commuting, the return to on-site work has reinforced the importance of in-person work schedules in structuring daily life and therefore in the organization of everyday musical experience. The most salient aspects of these new work and commuting patterns highlighted by participants are related to ideas of spatialization and private space. In intergenerational family homes where work, personal, and social activities are often intertwined or occurring simultaneously, elements of work and public life have penetrated the home, in some cases reducing the private spaces available for music listening. Multiple participants also provided evidence of the re-carving and revival of those private spaces, which paradoxically can take place while commuting in public transport. For example, Theo explained that listening to music on the train fulfills multiple functions. It cancels the noise and chaos of the train environment; it can induce either a positive, energetic mood at the start of the day or a meditative, relaxing one at the end; it can double as educational time to learn through video content that analyzes specific artists or albums. But, more importantly, Theo sees the commute as a personal and private space where he engages with self-regulating his emotions before and after dealing with the commitments and pressures of daily life following his return to on-site work. Theo also pointed out that these functional and aesthetic goals (Hesmondhalgh and Campos Valverde) are achieved through combining music genres and spoken word from Spotify, and public and commercial radio, but in ways that sometimes use sound as white noise, in a manner not dissimilar to that of John above, where individual or collective harmony while traveling takes priority over aesthetic enjoyment. In this case, however, polymedia practices of spatialization may perhaps lean more on functional practices, allowing Theo to navigate his emotional needs in a given environment.

Tamsin also shared similar stories about her commuting time, listening to commercial radio while driving and streaming music from her Apple Music account via her phone and headphones while riding the train to work. She stressed that her rather long commuting time became more burdensome after the post-pandemic return to on-site work, adding that she would have preferred to continue working remotely. However, her commuting time is the only moment of the day when she can listen to music attentively and with focus on how the music makes her feel. Using similar language to that of Theo, Tamsin compared her use of music to her use of food in dealing with emotions, particularly in trying to keep a positive mood while going to work and returning home from it. Tamsin also combined radio and streaming in a way that sought or targeted specific emotional states such as joy and nostalgia, recalling her heavy engagement with music in her teen years. Once more, polymedia is an important part of the environment and a key medium through which Tamsin deals with the emotional needs of returning to

on-site work. It is also through polymedia practices that Tamsin re-inscribes the daily routines of traveling to and from work in Siles' sense, and reinforces these patterns of time distribution that had previously been spatialized within the home.

Another interesting example of this carving out of private space in the return to work outside of home comes from Ashley and their use of music to structure the day around an otherwise unstructured work-and-leisure pattern. Ashley's return to work in the post-emergency phase of the pandemic did not involve a return to an office environment. Rather, they continued to work as freelance for multiple employers, without specific weekly or even daily patterns, and for which they traveled to libraries or cafés to connect remotely. This kind of unstructured workday was instead spatialized through the introduction of listening sessions, which took place in the personal times and spaces found within the day. Ashley listened to music, mostly via Spotify, while cycling from one location to another, while cooking dinner or lunch, while preparing for choir rehearsal, and while exercising at the gym. Evoking Theo's use of music above, Ashley's "me time" is clearly marked by listening to music, but in a way that is created outside the working time whenever possible, and without following a typical 9-to-5 pattern. In contrast, they rarely used radio—except the shipping forecast as white noise—because the perceived "blandness" of it clashed with this intention of making listening sessions a kind of personal time. In other words, Ashley's polymedia practices engage with the all-too-familiar yearning for a life not totally consumed by work. Theo's, Tamsin's, and Ashley's examples uncover an even richer complexity of polymedia practices, where polymedia spatialization is the environment and medium in which to work on the self and on individual notions of care. These diarists' insights also highlight two further points. First, spatialization can be the necessary counterpart to group-oriented social obligations such as office work. Second, post-pandemic work schedules have returned to heavily influence and often determine engagement with music, although sometimes redefining boundaries between work and leisure, and not always in the same way that they did before the pandemic.

In contrast to these examples of spatialization from Theo, Tamsin, and Ashley, music polymedia practices can sometimes complicate the boundaries between private and public music experiences. Tamsin explained that driving her car to work gives her an additional semi-private space where she can sing her heart out to commercial radio as an emotional release. Once she is inside the car she does not care if other people can see or hear what she is singing about, or the state she is in, because she is just joining in with the radio programming and does not feel judged. The publicness of radio contributes to the privacy of the car. 2 In contrast to this, Kelly, another diarist, explained that since she uses her Spotify account to stream her personal playlists while driving, and therefore to convert the car into a home space, she does care very much about whether others can see or hear what she is listening to or singing along to. For her, the car is the only private space left between the office and her family home where she can stream and sing to her favorite music in peace, but slow traffic makes this space public again. Here, the privacy of personalized playlists suppresses the privacy of the car. In Tamsin's and Kelly's insights, we might see a clearer dynamic of mutual domestication (Siles) than in the examples of the previous sections, where the domestication of music media indeed appears as a mutually influencing process between user and technology. Polymedia

practices of intensification and spatialization inscribe music in personal daily routines and social places shared with others, but at the same time recalibrate the idea of what a shared space is.

Polymedia and Workspaces: Personal Boundaries and New Shared Socialities

Considering this blurring of boundaries between private and public, it is worth focusing in this final section on instances of polymedia practice that contribute to social intensification and shared time, rather than spatialization. Even in public collective environments such as workspaces, attention to personalized digital media helps to cast light on how polymedia practices and understandings of privacy, are articulated beyond domestic settings.

Diarist Jim provided an example of how pairing a streaming account with a car radio can influence understandings of privacy when out-of-hours traveling is not made in a private vehicle, such as a taxi. Jim often uses ride-hailing apps when traveling to events, mostly to avoid driving after consuming alcohol. However, he also appreciates the energizing role of music before a night out or a family event, a kind of functionality of music that he does not want to lose while riding a cab; the pre-party feeling on the way to a venue is to him part of the night out. Jim explained that he avoids this loss of pre-party vibe simply by asking the driver to connect their smartphone to the car's Bluetooth system to stream Jim's personal playlists on the way to the venue. However, this form of music sharing does not seek to socialize with the cab driver. Instead, it creates a form of placemaking or home-making within the cab, which temporarily becomes the customer's own by mirroring the musical experience Jim would have had in his own car.

It does not escape us that although establishing a relationship with the driver may not be Jim's foremost objective, a kind of forced sociality may still be happening. An analysis focused on labor (Bonini and Treré) would foreground how hail-riding apps may pressure drivers to accept this kind of sonic intrusion or personalization for fear of bad reviews, as an exemplary case of mutual domestication. However, here we highlight how the fleeting customer–worker relationship created during the taxi ride again enables music polymedia to provide the tools and communication language that facilitate this relationship, so that those involved are interacting interpersonally and through media at the same time. Yet, this temporary placemaking does not lead to boundary-making. On the contrary, it fosters a kind of social intensification and togetherness, albeit potentially forced in nature. Moreover, this relatively short listening session redefines the boundaries of public and private space between the individuals involved, and makes the public vehicle a temporary domestic space for the customer. Therefore, we argue that polymedia practices in the continuum between spatialization and intensification not only happen in the home or in personal extensions of the home such as the private car. Polymedia practices and "networked mobile personalization" (Hesmondhalgh and Meier) contribute to these modes of placemaking or home-making even in temporary locations.

Polymedia practices also contribute to social intensification and home-making in workspaces via collaborative playlisting, due to the ever-increasing adoption of music platforms in professional settings and decline of radio and Muzak in the post-pandemic return to on-site work. For instance, Theo and Elena explained that at their respective

offices employees are encouraged to add songs they like to the shared playlist that streams throughout the working day. Elena pointed out that this collaborative playlisting provides opportunities for work acquaintances to bond over shared tastes or discuss memories attached to specific songs, in ways that create new shared experiences and therefore foster team cohesion. Elena also expressed a certain sense of belonging and pride when her music taste was recognized or praised by her teammates. These collaborative playlisting practices are sometimes extensions of other office management strategies such as "casual Fridays" and "workplace family." The former allows playing music that inspires a happier or lighter mood as a workplace reward, and in anticipation of free time on the weekend. But both co-opt music, clothing, and other personal preferences of employees to artificially spur the home-making feeling. Indeed, social intensification and mood handling via polymedia choices can happen in vertical, manager-led ways. For example, Peter shared similar stories from his work managing construction sites. He uses his personal playlists to set the mood for the crew, and considers that staying attuned to his team's preferences and mood at work is one of his responsibilities as a manager, in terms of maintaining productivity. These uses of music streaming in offices and other shared workplaces further extend the aforementioned practices where personalization contributes to home-making and social intensification rather than spatialization, but in ways that reinforce workplace cultures such as productivity and team building. We reiterate these as examples of polymedia environment that create new ways for in-person and through-media social interaction, particularly when other choices such as radio or Muzak are available. But we especially highlight them as examples of polymedia as communicational repertoires, used to articulate work-related notions such as corporate culture, teamwork, productivity, and etiquette.

Asked about the potential of sharing personal music tastes to create conflict or shame in the workplace, some participants pointed out the subtle self-management practices that are required to walk such thin social lines when adoption of streaming in the workplace further contributes to blurring of boundaries between private and public. Elena, for instance, admitted that she shares some of her music preferences to show her colleagues that despite "looking like a Taylor Swift fan" she prefers quite different music genres. However, she does not add too many metal or hard rock songs to the office playlist, aiming for workplace harmony at the expense of the more authentic self-presentation that she would have if the office was really "home." She also explained that certain music genres such as 1990s U.S. rap shared by her and other female colleagues in the office are better regarded by the team than the cheesy "Swiftie" pop shared by another male colleague, but in ways that avoid bullying or ostracism. Upon being teased about his music taste, the male colleague simply admitted being musically influenced by his female partner, which Elena signaled as the moment when he became the "office clown," but in a way that the other colleagues find endearing.

Overall, the polymedia environment that combines these playlisting practices with previously existing musicking habits—such as using digital or analogue radio, Muzak, and creating private working spaces via headphones—creates new levels of scalable workplace sociality (cf. Madianou and Miller). Playlisting in the examples above is more personal and engaged than radio listening, but less spatializing and private than listening with headphones. At the same time, this kind of playlisting practice personalizes the workplace as a second "home," yet in ways that make employees more prone to

workplace cultures such as sharing personal information and self-management of team productivity. In short, in the example of Jim's taxi ride and in the example from Elena's workplace playlist, polymedia practices contribute to home-making and connectedness in work environments in ways that redefine boundaries between private and public. Our last section questions the suitability of theories of media choice at a time of high penetration of corporate digital platforms.

Conclusion: Music Polymedia Practices in Everyday Life

In this paper, we have highlighted the relevance of polymedia theory (Madianou and Miller; Madianou) to better understand contemporary musical experiences in everyday life, by providing evidence of practices in the home, at work, and in transport between them. The empirical material presented above also shows how polymedia practices are key elements, social spaces, and skill sets required for both intensification and spatialization of everyday life. In many of the examples analyzed, we have highlighted how the objectives of sustaining specific kinds of relationships (parent-child, life partners, friendships, coworkers, and so on) set the social and moral bars that different choices of media and music aspire to attain. This further emphasizes the suitability of polymedia theory to explain and interpret the music and media practices of people in everyday life, and how a focus on human agency and social interaction provides illuminating insights that more techno-centric approaches (Jenkins; Bull, "Soundscapes"; Parsons; Solomos) do not achieve. In other words, if we had designed this study around the use of a specific platform or consumption format, we might have missed how one kind of listening fits in the overall social life of participants, or how one format can be both context and tool for a given interaction. Instead, we dethrone streaming in favor of a more holistic understanding of musical practices in people's lives as a whole, stressing the importance of the social goals of people over ideas of competing soundscapes or media collage. At the same time, we have also demonstrated that not all personalized polymedia practices are conducive to spatialization, and that some often contribute to intensifying social connectedness. In some of the examples above, spatialization and intensification are two products of the same media choice, complicating notions of mutual domestication (Silverstone and Hirsch; Siles). Polymedia practices can also further the blurring of boundaries between home and work, and between private and public spaces. Moreover, polymedia theory helps us here to articulate how ideas of privacy and publicness are not just after-the-fact consequences of media practices. Rather, aiming for a particular level of privacy or publicness in a given situation is a crucial element of media choice in the first place. In workspaces, personalized music engagements can sometimes contribute to workplace culture and productivity, via polymedia practices that feel home-like.

We are aware of how the adoption of streaming in everyday life across the home office, commuting, and workplaces can be a sign of the intertwining of musical experiences and labor structures under capitalism. We understand how using theories of media choice within highly constrained environments such as work and labor relationships under capitalism may seem to ignore Marxist critiques of how music can serve to reproduce capitalism (Thompson and Drott). It is not our intention to downplay the power of digital corporations to create music-streaming products that contribute to capitalist reproduction, and we deal with the constraining power of streaming platforms in other research outputs

(Campos Valverde; Hesmondhalgh et al.; Hesmondhalgh, "Global"). In the work-related examples that we show here, music streaming could be understood as a disciplining tool, capable of domesticating people for work culture or completion of tasks. However, it would be presumptuous to assume that all practical and emotional impacts of music are conducive to capitalist reproduction, assuming that integration of music streaming in daily life inevitably leads us to being domesticated *by* it. Our emphasis on instances of mutual domestication indicates our departure from such assumptions. Nor do we lean on a liberal functionalist perspective, whereby music streaming consumers are completely free to choose different media according to specific daily functions or tasks to complete. The examples shown here highlight the entanglement of functional and aesthetic experiences of music, an argument we also develop elsewhere (Hesmondhalgh and Campos Valverde). Here we would highlight the sociological tradition of media studies that focuses on the integration of media in everyday life—polymedia life *in* media and *with* media (Madianou). This allows for a richer and broader understanding of what streaming technologies do for people, beyond productivity-enhancing and functional structuring of daily life. Although we understand that algorithmic technologies are indeed not neutral and that their cataloguing and ranking power heavily influences what music our participants stream, when discussing people's polymedia practices of music streaming we have chosen to focus on the experiences, emotions, and functionalities that our diarists highlighted. At the same time, we have consciously avoided a celebratory approach to media use that might be understood as uncritical in its analysis of music platforms, power imbalance, and potential conflict.

Notes

1. Smule (formerly Sing!) is a karaoke and duetting app with licensed songs from popular artists and studio vocal effect features.
2. The most important research on the use of sound and music in automobiles in recent years has been carried out by Michael Bull (e.g. Sound Moves 87–107). Bull emphasizes the way users "negate public spaces" (107), mobilizing sound (music) to privatize their environments. But he does not address the way in which the publicness of radio may persist in some uses of music in cars.

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Notes on Contributors

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David Hesmondhalgh is Professor of Media, Music and Culture in the School of Media and Communication at the University of Leeds (England). His authored books include *The Cultural Industries* (5th edition, 2026), *Why Music Matters* (2013), and *Creative Labour* (2010, with Sarah Baker), and his edited collections include *Music Streaming Around the World* (2025) and *Media and Society* (6th edition, 2019, with James Curran). From 2021 to 2026, he holds a European Research Council Advanced Research Grant on *Music Culture in the Age of Streaming*.

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Appendix: *Participants Cited or Quoted This Article*

Participant	Age	Location	Household	Occupation
Ashley	35	Greater London	Mother	Freelance administrator
Elena	23	Edinburgh	Partner	Consultant
Jim	34	Greater London	Not declared	Electrician
John	36	Greater Manchester	Partner and children	Commercial manager
Kelly	25	East England	Parents	Council employee
Kevin	20	South West England	Not declared	Undergraduate student
Peter	45	Greater London	Partner and children	Construction business owner
Phil	54	Kent	Partner and children	Construction project manager
Talia	33	Sheffield	Partner and daughter	Industrial project manager
Tamsin	49	Birmingham	Single household	PA to Director
Terence	65	Greater Manchester	Partner	Retired
Theo	30	Birmingham	Single household	Civil servant