
The Meanings of Music Sharing in Tween Life

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Abstract

The effects of digitalization for music sharing have been debated vastly. However, the new practices of making widely available music meaningful for those who share it remain largely uncovered. We set out to study this through exploring how the tweens of early 2010's face this challenge. In a qualitative exploration with Finnish children aged 10-13 years, we identified practices of making digital music meaningful: socially considerate sharing, modification and associations outside music, and consideration for the difficulties of infrastructure. We find that the content gains value in the socio-technical network of sharing practices. This observation challenges the notions of digital music as a "mass" format lacking personal or social value.

Keywords

Tweens; music sharing; cultural studies

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.5 [Sound and Music Computing]: Methodologies and techniques; J.5 [Arts and Humanities]: Music;

General Terms

Human factors

Introduction

In human-computer interaction, digital music is often studied with the aim of finding better solutions for navigating and sharing abundant content (see, e.g. [4], [6],[8],[13]). In these studies, it is acknowledged that the design of music technologies needs to consider the social practices of sharing. We conclude from these studies that one reason for sharing is that it makes abundant digital contents meaningful and valuable personally and socially. To understand comprehensively the value of sharing widely available content, we need to study the practices of making digital music sharing meaningful for those engaging in it. The topic remains largely uncovered, especially in the case of sharing music on mobile devices. We believe that a good way to illustrate the new ways of making "limitless" digital music valuable is to study the meanings of music sharing for a new generation, which engages in mobile and digital music sharing.

The studies of technology use among children and teenagers are often justified by claiming that they are the users of future technologies. Arguably, adolescence is a phase of life that dictates the listening habits of later life [14]. However, tweens are a notable group of music technology users not only tomorrow but also today. For example, studies with Finnish kids (such as [6],[12]) identify the generation of our participants, born in the 1990's, as one of the first groups to use mobile phones as music listening devices. By studying the music sharing of tweens we may explore practices that are blooming today.

Background

Digital formats have been criticized for lacking unique, natural characteristics, such as that of attrition. When

digital formats are compared to physical formats such as vinyl records, digitalization is shown to imply a notion of being limitless, and therefore less valuable (e.g. [1],[3],[7],[15]). Those sharing digital content, including tweens, may acknowledge this discourse around digital music. However, we may as well identify ways of challenging the discourse, in practices of music listening and sharing.

Some scholars, such as Kibby [5] and Skågeby [9], argue for rethinking music collection and sharing in the digital era. Kibby and Skågeby both illustrate new ways of making digital music "material", a limited asset, and hence valuable and meaningful. Kibby [5] shows how exchanging playlists is a new way to tie music sharing to social networks. Similarly, Skågeby demonstrates that the value of new music technologies is not always in increased speed, as might be the case with some other devices. Instead, value that the devices give for social bonding, for example through social navigation of music, makes them meaningful for their users. We assume that these new practices concern not only serious music collectors but, also, music sharing by everyday users. We explore these practices in the case of tweens sharing digital music.

Methods

Our study utilized a mix of qualitative methods. To focus our research material to issues and concepts that our participants themselves bring up when discussing the topic, we conducted 12 interviews with altogether 29 tweens (15 girls) aged 11 to 12 years. The tweens could participate either individually (4 interviews) or in groups (8 interviews) – depending on their wishes, or the practical constraints of a school setting. To back up the discussions, the participants filled out a diary of

their music device use during the previous week. The participants were asked to write or draw about the time, place and the device(s) used. In addition, the participants were provided with visual probes (such as pictures of music devices and smileys), with which they could further illustrate the events. In most of the interviews as well, visual probes and drawings were used to augment linguistic accounts. The participants created a "map" of their music device use practices (see Fig 1 for an example). The diary events were placed on the map, and topics that came up in the interview were added to it. The participants also filled out a questionnaire about their music device use. All participants provided consent for the study signed by their guardians.

Our analysis is grounded in the research material [10], in the sense that we constructed the findings without subordinating them to any theoretical model. However, we were admittedly guided by our interest in the possibilities of making digital music meaningful, identified in previous studies (such as [5],[7],[8]). First, we picked up from the material the expressions we considered crucial for the research problem. The visual material was integrated to the analysis by treating a visual expression and the verbal expression concerning it, as one expression. Through comparing the similarities and differences between the expressions, we constructed themes that illustrate the ways of making digital music sharing meaningful. These themes are presented as subsections in the following section.

Findings: Making "limitless" meaningful

In this section, we illustrate the ways of making "limitless" digital music meaningful. We do this through

elaborating on the themes we identified in our interviews with tweens, the early adopters of mobile music sharing technologies.

Socially considerate sharing

The way of sharing files that our participants mentioned most often was using Bluetooth. In the questionnaire, 22 participants used Bluetooth the last time they shared a music file. In the interviews as well, the participants associated Bluetooth to sharing situations. Transferring music data from one phone to another with Bluetooth requires that both participants agree to share a file. Typically, this sharing occurs face-to-face.

On the other hand, our participants did not bring up the importance of Internet-based peer-to-peer networks in acquiring music. This finding can be reflected to Håkansson's et al.'s [4] finding that music sharing is a practice subordinate to the rules of gift-giving. Music files were shared with close acquaintances rather than just anyone in their network, because then it was easier to deal with the debt of gratitude. We interpret that binding music sharing this way to social networks is also a way to make it meaningful through associating it to meaningful people.

Files and links spread in information networks and gain popularity when they are shared in social networks. In order to keep them as a personal and special thing, their sharing is deliberately limited. One participant illustrates this notion in the case of Bluetooth sharing: *"From one friend, whom nobody (knows) - who lives in another town, I got from him a game or a song. And now everyone has it. Then I don't want to send it anymore, as it isn't any special anymore. I don't send much nowadays"* (boy, 11).

In addition to face-to-face sharing with Bluetooth, our participants preferred instant messengers to share links to music videos on the Internet, most often in YouTube. Some participants shared actual files with an instant messenger as well, even though they commented on the slowness of this method. Instead of Internet-based transfers, they shared the music files by connecting an external drive, usually a flash drive, to each other's computers.



Fig 1 Sharing music to friends through messenger (boy, 11)

Like bringing a flash drive to a friend's home for sharing music, sharing links to music through instant messengers was similarly limited to particular friends, who were added to a private contact list. Tweens did not emphasize the amount of their contacts. On the contrary, they talked about the few friends with whom they shared music. The detail in Figure 1 (a map drawn

by a participant), depicts the two friends of the participant, with whom he shared music through an instant messenger. The participant chose to include only these two persons to the map – though he has 71 contacts altogether. We did not identify the practice of making digital music meaningful through sharing personal playlists as Kibby [5] did, but we interpret that socially considerate sharing is another way to make the abundant digital music valuable.

Modifications and associations outside music

One notable aspect of digital music sharing devices is that they can be used to share content other than music, too. Our participants mentioned games, themes, ring tones, and Internet memes (called "pranks"), which they share through Bluetooth with one mobile to another. At the time when the interviews were conducted, a popular Internet meme was a song that could be translated into "I'm an apple". One interviewee drew a remix version of this song to her map, and associated it with her mobile phone and its Bluetooth feature (Fig 2):



Fig 2 A meme shared through Bluetooth (girl, 11)

Tweens mentioned recording their own content with cell phones, not always in a very flattering light: *"some have some stupid (recordings) where they talk, there's some stupid noise, they yell and everything"* (girl, 11). One interviewee described a game they had invented with her friends around content on their mobile devices: a competition for recognizing a song, connected to a running race for being a "queen of the hill" at the school yard's swings (Fig 3). We interpret the modification of content and associating it to content other than music as a way to make meaning to mobile music device use and sharing of content – new practices that are to some extent comparable to practices with C-cassettes of previous generations.

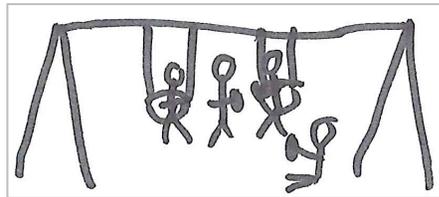


Fig 3 A game invented around music on cell phones (girl, 11)

"Lovely" Difficulties of Infrastructure

A feature comparable to physical attrition is the limited capacity of digital devices. Our participants found the limited capacity annoying especially with cell phones. A distinctive feature with mobile devices is the nuisances associated to the complexity of the infrastructure needed for listening and sharing. This came up especially when discussing the pros and cons of using a cell phone for sharing music, as in this group interview:

Participant 1: *"With a mobile it's easy at least."*

P2: *"It takes much less time."*

P3: *"With a computer it's such a hassle. With a mobile, you can just send it with Bluetooth. It's lot easier."*

Although there usually is an option for Bluetooth sharing on laptops, our participants considered any intervening devices bothersome. However, neither is a cell phone a perfect device for sharing. It demands fitting the devices together as an infrastructure as well: *"But then it's difficult when I've got Samsung and the other has Nokia, then it's a different system. I can't explain it then."* (girl, 11). We interpret these "complaints" about the infrastructure as a new way of making sharing a format meaningful. Emphasizing the difficulties reduces the cognitive dissonance: if I give a lot of effort for something, it must be meaningful for me.

Discussion and Future Directions

We believe that the need to make meaning to one's choices concerning music sharing is not limited to serious collectors. The need to make personal and social meaning to something that is practically limitless applies to everyday practices, too. In case of mobile sharing that allows access regardless of place, the value of sharing is made through new practices: deliberate sharing with social networks, modifications and associations beyond music, and considerations for the difficulties of infrastructure of the devices.

When studying tweens' music sharing practices in other countries (see, e.g. [2]), using mobile phones for this purpose does not come up that clearly. We believe that Finnish kids get their own phones early compared to other countries, although there is no comparable data available yet. The generalizability of the themes we identified in our study is a topic for further studies that

could uncover how digital content other than music, too, is made meaningful.

Future studies will also hopefully show how the practices will change as the capacity of mobile, digital music sharing devices becomes of the order of ten gigabytes rather than few hundred. For instance, will the practices of making abundant content personally and socially meaningful become more important and varied, or will they change altogether? We encourage designers of music sharing technologies to recognize the socially motivated, constrained and enabled practices of making "limitless" digital music meaningful. This would help to better understand the point of sharing content that is already abundant.

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