

Thesis as part of the Research Master program in Musicology
Utrecht University, Department of Media and Culture Studies

**Slow Listening:
Streaming Services, the Attention Economy,
and Conscious Music Consumption**

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Abstract

In the contemporary capitalist society, speed is a driving force for many production and consumption processes. Take for instance technological developments in factories that often have as their aim to be more time efficient, or fast-food restaurants for a time efficient consumption of an (often unhealthy) meal. This inclination to constantly speed up everyday life is criticized by slow movements such as slow food, slow travel, and slow media. These movements have as their aim to slow down daily life by making conscious choices in terms of consuming in moderation to maintain your own health as well as taking environmental issues into consideration. But what about music consumption? Music streaming services such as Spotify offer an enormous library of songs that can be accessed in an instant, which can make it overwhelming for listeners to make choices. Spotify offers listeners guidance in this, by recommending music and automatically generated playlists. However, this results in situations where listeners are unaware of the music that they are listening to and consuming music without paying attention.

In this thesis, I take the concerns of slow movements as my starting point and examine how users of streaming services can listen to music consciously – that is, to what extent listeners can make healthy and mindful choices in music consumption. The attention economy is an important factor in this, as this causes the necessity for artists and streaming services to develop themselves in order to keep the attention of listeners and to stand out. Through an examination of these changes and the way that users of streaming services listen to music, I ultimately argue that slow listening to music on streaming services is a multifaceted mode of listening that depends on the deliberate choices that the user makes and the context in which the music is consumed.

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1. Introduction: Slow Movements¹

1.1 A disrupted bike ride

As an avid Spotify user, music frequently accompanies my daily activities. When, a little over a year ago, I opened the smartphone app to pick a Beatles song as an accompaniment to my bike ride, the interface changed to a looping video of a rotating tape, filling my entire smartphone screen. This was the first time that I saw such a video appear, and I was immediately wondering whether other songs had similar videos or if this was an exclusive feature. Anyway – there was no time to figure that out. I had an appointment to get to, so I quickly locked my phone and jumped on my bike. However, that entire trip I kept thinking about this new Spotify function. The amazement paused my day for a minute, and it suddenly made me aware of the late 1960s recording conditions that this song was made in. The seeming immateriality of a digital music streaming service like Spotify makes it quite easy to forget about such technological aspects of music. Or about music in general, as it is so easy to continue listening automatically, without being aware of either the artist or the music itself. A material playback device such as a vinyl record would require me to flip it after the first side finishes. Contrastingly, with only one button, Spotify could give me an infinitely long playlist, for which I would not have to make any conscious decisions myself for the rest of my life.

This experience that I had shows that daily life, time, and consciousness are entangled in a tense relationship. The way in which I used Spotify to accompany my daily life did not align with the time that was required for an exploration of the video loops. This lack of time is certainly not limited to music consumption, as the generally used aphorism “time is money” indicates. While I often hear this phrase in contexts where it contains a sense of sarcasm, there is some truth to this. In the current capitalist climate, time is scarce and feeling rushed is a common state of mind in all kinds of situations. Many innovations in technology have had a large impact on the sense of speed. Take for instance the introduction of the steam powered train, which caused the need for a fixed central time because people could travel longer distances in shorter time spans. Moreover, technological developments in production have nearly always been speed-driven: when a new technology is able to perform certain processes faster, it means innovation and *better* performance. Industrialization resulted in countless factories that were built to fabricate cars in a more efficient manner, produce more dresses in a

¹ This thesis is an expansion of the contents of and ideas that I expressed in a paper that I wrote for the course Digital Media Cultures in 2019; Marjolein Wellink, “The Immaterial Record Sleeve? Engaging the Listener with Spotify’s ‘Canvas’ Video Loop,” Paper Digital Music Cultures, Utrecht University, 2019.

shorter amount of time, and so on. This longing for speed is not only a matter of interest for production processes, but for consumption as well. After all, consumers are necessary for producers to increase revenue and “succeed” in capitalism.

As a response to the current speed-driven society, several so-called “slow movements” came into existence. These started with slow food in Italy as an antithesis to the emergence of Rome’s first McDonald’s fast-food restaurant, which was seen as a threat to the traditional Italian cuisine, hence the adjective slow.² Fast-food restaurants promise consumers meals that are produced and consumed at a fast pace, often cheaper than “normal” restaurants. Their food is often unhealthy and produced in an unethical way, which were the main concerns for the slow food movement. It was important for them to protect the better restaurants in Italy, and to stand up against the capitalist motives underlying the emergence of fast-food chains. By promoting healthier food and local produce, they encourage people to be mindful of their food consumption, and they ask companies to carefully consider their food production processes.

Many different kinds of movements followed, such as slow travel (that gives preference to more sustainable means of transportation), slow reading (a practice that focuses on a better comprehension of texts) and slow media. This last movement is the most significant when it comes to music. Nowadays, most music that is produced and consumed comes into contact with some form of media – be it through production, promotion, or consumption. Although the slow food movement became a structured organization that created communities around the world, slow media is by far not as big, well-known, and organized. Journalism scholar Jennifer Rauch is perhaps the most outspoken in an academic context, and pointed out that ideas of slow media emerged in the early 2000s, but that these were not labeled the “slow media movement” until 2009, when it was picked up by several radio broadcasters.³ The slow media movement does not only focus on sustainability in terms of the environment, but also in terms of a sustainable relationship with media: mental health and mindful consumption are important, because media are ubiquitous.⁴ The speed with which communications happens nowadays and “always being available” can both be overwhelming, and slow media attempts to make users aware that slower consumption and going offline is sometimes better.

² Michael Clancy, “Introduction: The Rise of Slow in a Fast World,” in *Slow Tourism, Food and Cities: Pace and the Search for the 'Good Life'*, ed. Michael Clancy (London: Routledge, 2017), 1.

³ Jennifer Rauch, “The Origin of Slow Media: Early Diffusion of a Cultural Innovation through Popular Press Discourse, 2002-2010,” *Transformations* 20 (2011): 4.

⁴ Jennifer Rauch, *Slow Media: Why “Slow” is Satisfying, Sustainable, and Smart* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 79.

In this thesis, I will focus on streaming services and listening to music through a similar lens as slow movements, in particular slow media. In the situation that I described in the first paragraph, the music that I was streaming asked something of me that did not fit the rush that I was in. However, it did make me aware of all kinds of aspects of the music that I was not aware of before seeing the complimentary video on Spotify. Streaming services are a part of everyday life, and it is easy to not pay attention to them. Would a theory and mode of slow listening be an answer to the sometimes-uncomfortable rushed contemporary life? On the following pages, I will get into more detail about the slow media movement and its relationship to music, after which I will formulate the research questions and explain the methodology and structure of this thesis.

1.2 Slow media and music

While speed seems to be the main driving force for these movements, it is not their only focus. Slow movements incorporate certain production and consumption processes that are “solutions” for several negative consequences that emerged in the always-faster society. This means, among other things, advocating sustainability, both in terms of human as well as environmental resources. Fair practices in which all the contributors get a fair price for their work, decreasing the environmental footprint of production, and being more conscious about this in consumption are the most common thoughts of these movements. However, above all other things, producing and consuming *consciously* is important. Being aware of what one produces and consumes, where and when, instead of doing this in a subconscious manner, which often means: spending more time on it. It is thus fair to say that – in terms of speed – the consumption and production practices of many different fields are in an interplay between the corporate, capitalistic tendency of speeding up and attempts to slow them down out of dissatisfaction about the negative consequences it has.

But what exactly are these ideas of slow media? In 2010, a group of three German media scholars wrote the “Slow Media Manifesto,” in which they argue that, after years of innovation and developments in online culture and networks, the central theme of the 2010s was going to be a proper way of using and developing media: deliberately and consciously, or in other words, slow.⁵ Their manifesto contains a list of what they argue should be characteristics of these slow media, such as sustainability, prosumerism and palpable quality. Throughout this manifesto,

⁵ Benedikt Köhler, Sabria David and Jörg Blumtritt, “The Slow Media Manifesto,” January 2, 2010, <http://en.slow-media.net/manifesto>.

their understanding of what such media are is not always clear and sometimes it seems contradictory. They speak about content, products, consumption and production, and argue for instance that “Slow Media are timeless,” that is, media that can last for a long time and do not require this continuous innovation, and “the medium belongs to just that moment of the user’s life.”⁶ However, the list in this manifesto does point to some general beliefs of slow media that are shared with others: slow media are sustainable, focus on quality, respectful towards their users, and require active users that contribute to the medium.

In her book on *Slow Media*, Rauch also quotes this manifesto, however, she proposes a more specific description of the possible forms that such media can have.⁷ Starting from a personal experiment she did, in which she decided to cut down her media usage and avoid technologies that became available after 1989, Rauch mainly speaks about media that are used for communication (e-mail, telephone, newspaper). Rauch argues that it is important to cut back on digital media, because they have become so integrated in people’s lives that there is no joy in using them anymore.⁸ Similar to the arguments in the manifesto, a promotion of sustainability, mindfulness and monotasking recurs throughout Rauch’s book. The main themes for the slow media movement would thus be attention, mindfulness, monotasking, and sustainability.

Music specifically has come up throughout discussions of slow media, and there have been a few attempts towards a more conscious consumption of music. There currently is no active “slow listening movement” such as the other slow movements, but there has been an attempt to create one. In December 2008, a slow listening movement was initiated in a blog by American music journalist Michelangelo Matos. In the first post on his blog, he argued that a large part of the music that he receives to review remains not listened to, disappearing in the large library of songs on his iPod.⁹ He was “sick of feeling trapped by [his] own clutter,” both the physical forms of music on his shelves and the loss of awareness of what music was on his iPod.¹⁰ Therefore, Matos conducted a personal, 11-month experiment, in which he was not allowed to download or obtain any new MP3 or CD before he listened to the previous one: one album or song at a time. His aim was to create a community of people doing a similar experiment, and Rauch mentions one of its members: rock critic Simon Reynolds, who decided

⁶ Köhler, David and Blumtritt, “Slow Media Manifesto,” 10-11.

⁷ Rauch, *Slow Media*.

⁸ Rauch, *Slow Media*, xvi.

⁹ M, “So Here’s the Deal,” Slow Listening Movement, last modified December 24, 2008,

<http://slowlisteningmovement.blogspot.com/2008/12/so-heres-deal.html>.

¹⁰ M, “So Here’s the Deal.”

to participate because of similar problems as Matos. He “felt simultaneously overwhelmed by the quantity of digital content available and underwhelmed by its quality, as many cultural connoisseurs do.”¹¹ His motivation thus has not only to do with a more conscious consumption of music, but also criticizes the quality of production – similar to the quality claim of the “Slow Media Manifesto.” Unfortunately, Matos stopped posting updates in 2010, and there are not many traces of the movement still being active.

The “Slow Media Manifesto” also uses music as an example for illustrating the active position of users in slow media, and the encouragement to engage in discussion. First of all, they mention the idea of discussing records as a form of prosumerism that is encouraged by slow media.¹² Moreover, they write that discussing a late musician’s work is also part of slow media, because “slow media are social media.”¹³ However, these observations show that their manifesto is unclear in its interpretation of slow media. Would this mean that any album that is discussed is a slow medium? Or is a platform that encourages users to be prosumerists and social a slow medium? While these unclarities seem a flaw in their manifesto, it also points toward the fact that there is no clear-cut definition of what a slow medium is. Rather, slow media is a way of looking at consumption and production values, and Rauch even argues that it is “not only a personal lifestyle choice but also as a political, ecological, and ethical commitment.”¹⁴ As a consumer, a slow lifestyle is about making conscious decisions.

The ideas expressed in all of these slow movements and practices are claimed to be useful in creating a healthier relationship with the things that we produce and consume. However, there is some criticism on these slow movements that is important to consider before I formulate my research questions. First of all, a common critique on slow movements is the fact that they imply a certain socioeconomic status of producers and consumers. It is not always possible to spend more time on traveling or writing letters by hand instead of e-mails. Time has value, and not every individual or company can afford a slower media usage in their communication processes. Moreover, the means by which people can incorporate a slower lifestyle are oftentimes more expensive than the common practices. In other words, the factor of value and time are an important one to keep in mind when envisioning such improvements. Not everyone has the means to navigate through capitalism in a slow manner, and I would argue that the focus should lie more on dealing with popular means of consumption in a

¹¹ Rauch, *Slow Media*, 20.

¹² Köhler, David and Blumtritt, “Slow Media Manifesto,” 5.

¹³ Köhler, David and Blumtritt, “Slow Media Manifesto,” 7.

¹⁴ Rauch, *Slow Media*, 14.

conscious manner than on completely going against the common practice – as this is not feasible. The second critique that I have on the slow media movement is the fact that Rauch does not once mention ideas surrounding the attention economy. Many scholars have argued that we live in an attention economy, which means that the attention of consumers is sold.¹⁵ The limited attention span cannot keep up with the abundance of information, which is perhaps one of the most important reasons for consumers to feel overwhelmed.

1.3 Research questions and methodology

The slow media movement deals with many aspects: production, consumption, sustainability and mindfulness. Because there is a lot to be said about all these aspects and because the scope of this thesis is only limited, my main focus is on the consumption of music, and how music can be consumed in a conscious manner – that is, in terms of taking care of the mental self and being mindful in the amount of information that you process. As I wrote in the previous paragraph, the attention economy is an important notion that needs to be taken into consideration when it comes to music consumption. Moreover, because it is not always feasible for consumers to completely change their current consumption practices and integrate new media hardware in their lives, I want to focus on one of the most popular ways to listen to music today: music streaming services. Streaming platforms had by far the largest market share for music consumption in 2019, with for example nearly 80% of music revenues in the Netherlands coming from such services.¹⁶ Thus, the main question that I will answer is the following: how can consumers of music on streaming services consciously deal with all the music that is offered in this attention economy, and what could *slow listening* be? Before I can answer this question, there are smaller issues that need to be addressed, because to what extent does the attention economy have an impact on how listeners encounter music? And how do users listen to music via streaming services? These are the questions that I will address in the two main chapters of this thesis.

In order to delineate my object of study more and to use concrete examples to discuss the issues in my research questions, I will focus on one streaming service in particular: Spotify. After its launch in 2008, it quickly became one of the most popular streaming services all over

¹⁵ Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck, “The Attention Economy,” *Ubiquity* (May 2001), <http://doi.org/10.1145/376625.376626>.

¹⁶ “Sterkste omzetgroei Nederlandse muziekindustrie sinds vijf jaar,” NVPI Audio, February 27, 2020, <https://nvpi.nl/nvpi-audio/2020/02/27/sterkste-omzetgroei-nederlandse-muziekindustrie-sinds-vijf-jaar/>.

the world, with as of today over 320 million users and 144 million subscribers.¹⁷ Spotify offers music and podcasts (but the former is their main product) and is well-known for their use of data and artificial intelligence to generate playlists with music that users might like, based on their listening history. This possibility for Spotify users to not pay attention to what kind of music they want to listen to, gives, as will become clear in the following chapters, valuable insights about attention and listening.

Thus, Spotify serves as the main case study throughout this thesis. To understand what kind of features the platform includes, I will observe and refer to several aspects of the platform itself. Moreover, I examine these features of Spotify through the lens of affordances. James J. Gibson described affordances as possible actions that are offered to individuals because of their relationship with the environment.¹⁸ Affordance theory acknowledges the fact that it are not only the characteristics in that environment that afford individuals to act in a certain way, but that it also depends on the individual itself.¹⁹ This makes it a useful theory for this thesis, as individuals can interact with technology in an endless array of ways, also when it comes to streaming music. By combining the observations that I make of the platform and its features with the possibilities for types of listening and other interactions for Spotify users, I can still draw some conclusions regardless of the individuality of streaming.

Still, listening is a highly individual experience, which makes it difficult to make more general comments on how people really listen. Therefore, although this thesis does not contain any original ethnographic research of my own, many of the comments that I make about listening are supported by ethnographic research done by other scholars. Nevertheless, this is not always possible, which means that I make some observations that are more anecdotal and based on my own experiences. At most points where this is the case, this is mostly done to clarify ideas and arguments, but these are *not* used as some kind of “proof.” Anecdotal evidence is not the kind of evidence that I could build my whole argument on, and I am aware of that. Then again, this also underlines the personal nature of listening, a recurring topic in the next chapters.

There are some words that I use throughout this thesis whose meaning needs some clarification. There is the distinction between *paying attention/attentiveness* and *not paying attention/inattentiveness*, which I use in the sense of focusing or not focusing on something.

¹⁷ Spotify, “Company Info,” For the Record, accessed January 21, 2020, <https://newsroom.spotify.com/company-info/>.

¹⁸ James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Psychology Press, 1986), 127.

¹⁹ Gibson, *Ecological Approach*, 127-8.

However, as I will address in the first chapter, this is not a question of either/or. There are degrees of paying attention, as people can also pay attention but not fully. Another word that is often used is *conscious*, which does not necessarily mean paying attention, but being aware of something. *Sub-conscious*, on the other hand, is not immediately being aware of something, but something that does happen to someone consciousness. In the case of music, listening can happen sub-consciously when it is there and it affects you, but you are not focusing on it (although you can if you want to). I use *unconscious* as the opposite of conscious, for not being aware of certain processes, and not being able to focus on them either. The last term that returns and is connected to the previous words is *mindful*, that I use in the sense of mindfulness. This means that it is not merely a synonym for conscious, but for being conscious of the present moment that a person finds themselves in.

1.4 Chapter outline

In the first chapter of this thesis, I focus on the question of how the attention economy influences the music that is offered to listeners on Spotify. As I will show, the attention economy is one of the main reasons that the online music environment can be overwhelming for listeners. Musicians as well as streaming services battle for the attention of online music consumers, which results in several changes that are being made both in the music that artists release and in Spotify itself, to attract listeners and make them pay attention to them instead of other musicians of streaming services. One of the ways that Spotify does this is through the use of exclusive content, oftentimes in the form of visuals. Moreover, Spotify creates a “special” relationship with its users by offering many playlists for all kinds of moods. These playlists complicate the situation for artists, users do not always pay attention to the music that they are listening to in such playlists.

The second chapter continues with the results and issues that I raise in the first chapter, but I shift my focus to the listener. By discussing several scholars, I start with the question if there is a “right” way to listen and what has been said about this in several contexts and music genres. Then, I continue with listening behavior and return to my arguments about the attention economy and the observations that I made in the first chapter, in order to examine the possible interactions and experiences that listeners can have through streaming services. Moreover, I dive deeper into the phenomenon of mindfulness that is important in Rauch’s slow media movement. I show that playlists that are used to enhance focus are a tricky phenomenon for

slow listening, because users are meant to *not* pay attention to the music, but they do help listeners to fully pay attention to something else.

The distinction between production and listening in my first and second chapter is merely done in an attempt to order my observations and thoughts, but in the first chapter it quickly becomes clear that production and consumption cannot be seen as two distinct processes. Changes in production or distribution are made based on how something is consumed and the other way around. Moreover, because chapter 2 is a continuation of chapter 1, the second chapter contains many cross-references, which I have indicated by the section number that contains the information that I continue with.

In the conclusion I tie everything together in order to answer the main question of how listeners can consciously consume music on streaming services in the attention economy, and what “slow listening” could be. Ultimately, this thesis does not have as its aim to tell listeners to act in a certain way. Rather, it is written out of care and a realization that the online world – both in and outside of music streaming services – can be overwhelming because of the abundance of information in this attention economy that we live in. Especially now, in the year 2020-2021, in times when we need to stay home as much as possible, and everyday life for many people has become synonymous for digital life.

2. The Attention Economy and Streaming Platforms

2.1 Introduction

Let us assume that I want to find a video that contains information about pandemics. The first thing that many people do in this case is to go online to the most popular website for video content: YouTube. However, even before I can fill in my search terms, YouTube's homepage confronts me with a list of personal recommendations based on my viewing history and channel subscriptions. My attention is grabbed by a restored video of my favorite artist that was released earlier that day. After viewing that video, I click on the next recommendation. Before I know it, I have spent an hour watching random music videos from the 1960s, without remembering my quest for information about pandemics.

Such an online journey might sound familiar because many social media websites are built using techniques to keep consumers present on that specific platform for as long as possible. It is nearly impossible to go online and avoid an abundance of information that demands the attention of users. YouTube and video creators sometimes even battle for attention within its own environment: vloggers might refer to previous videos or tell the viewers to answer a question in the comment section – which can be read simultaneously while watching the video and which makes it easy to get distracted from the video itself. Users need to decide what they pay attention to and sometimes this can be a conscious choice, but social media's techniques to grab the user's attention often address the more unconscious decision making (hence my sudden one-hour music video detour).

Artists are competitors in the fight for gaining consumers' attention online. For instance, through personal pages on social media, their own websites and online advertising, artists try to gain a larger fanbase. In the example above, it is the music that grabs my attention to focus on a video. In this case, I am aware of both the artist and the song, but this does not always have to be the case when consuming music online. An example of this are the playlists that for moods that are available on Spotify, a streaming platform that focuses more on (the sound of) music than visuals. It is easy for users of these playlists to forget what exactly they are listening to, which means that the artist is not getting the originally intended attention. Moreover, it is easy for users to even forget that they are listening to music *at all*, when the music becomes a mere background filler. In that case, not much conscious attention is paid to the music.

The fact that organizations and artists need to attract attention in a world that is overflowing in terms of information, is caused by what is called the "attention economy." Like

social media platforms, streaming platforms also need to attract the attention of the user, which has an impact on the way that people listen to music. In this first chapter, I discuss the question to what extent music consumption through streaming services is influenced by the workings of the attention economy: how do artists navigate online to generate bigger audiences, and how do platforms present the music to their consumers? The attention economy is often discussed in relation to innovations in media, where users are seen as the product being sold to online advertisers. In order for online platforms to create a bigger revenue through advertising, such platforms need their users to be exposed to as many ads as possible. This means that the users need to be engaged with, for instance, their smartphone screen for a long time. Therefore, in order to understand the impact that the attention economy has on the consumption of music on streaming services, I also need to map ideas surrounding time and the experience of digital media. Then, this chapter dives into the effects of the attention economy on encounters with music and attentiveness to music itself. By taking developments on Spotify as an example, I argue that listening to music through streaming services is heavily influenced by the workings of the attention economy.

2.2 The attention economy

In digital culture, the workings of the attention economy form one of the most poignant ways in which a fast instead of slow pace in time is clearly commodified. Many people face a problem in navigating through (online) life today: they do “not [have] enough attention to meet the information demands of business and society.”²⁰ One of the first scholars who mentioned the importance of attention for economic processes in relation to an information overload is Herbert A. Simon, who argued already in 1971 that

in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.²¹

It is thus not an information economy that we live in, because information is not scarce. The generated information needs to be processed by people in order to make sense, it requires

²⁰ Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck, “The Attention Economy,” *Ubiquity* (May 2001), <http://doi.org/10.1145/376625.376626>.

²¹ Herbert A. Simon, “Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World,” in *Computers, Communication, and the Public Interest*, ed. M. Greenberger (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1971), 40-41.

human attention.²² Therefore – because it is not information but the human attention that is scarce – the economy is an attention economy. Michael H. Goldhaber specifically focuses on online communication and the attention economy, and similarly explicitly argues against the existence of the “information economy” because, “[b]y definition, economics is the study of how a society uses its scarce resources. And information is not scarce - especially on the Net, where it is not only abundant, but overflowing.”²³ He follows Simon’s thoughts, because it is not information, but attention that is scarce and that forms “the natural economy of cyberspace.”²⁴ Goldhaber argues that for users cyberspace works well, because it is not only a place for individuals to pay attention to information: human beings also need to *get* at least a minimum amount of attention, of recognition. Cyberspace is an ideal place to find attention from others, and thus individuals also contribute to the abundance of information themselves, fueling the attention economy.

Thomas Davenport and John Beck discuss the underlying economic structure of the attention economy from a business perspective. The authors argue that “understanding and managing attention is now the single most important determination of business success,” because companies do not only want the attention of customers for their products to increase sales and revenue, but companies also need to decide as an organization where to direct their own attention to concerning their management.²⁵ Davenport and Beck compare the current abundance of information to the limited supply of books and newspapers before capitalism. However, their approach of what that information can be is broader than text only, because “every new product or business offering is a form of information that requires attention to be comprehended and consumed.”²⁶ Take, for instance, the grocery store, where an enormous variety of options for one and the same product is offered. All of these products demand your attention, through advertising and packaging. Ultimately, Davenport and Beck argue, companies invest and use their money to buy the attention of the consumer.

Davenport and Beck dive deeper into the reasons that make attention suitable as an economy. First, like Simon and Goldhaber, they point to the scarcity of attention, and that consumers of any kind of information only have a limited amount of attention to pay and

²² In cases that include artificial intelligence it is also the computer that processes information and that learns through that information. This is a common practice on Spotify as a streaming service, where information about listening habits is collected and processed by computers. However, here I point to the fact that people share information online with the intent to share it with people.

²³ Michael H. Goldhaber, “Attention Shoppers!,” *Wired Magazine*, January 1, 1997, <https://www.wired.com/1997/12/es-attention/>.

²⁴ Goldhaber, “Attention Shoppers!”

²⁵ Davenport and Beck “The Attention Economy.”

²⁶ Davenport and Beck, “The Attention Economy.”

multitasking is only possible to a certain extent. Second, there are “markets [where attention] is bought and sold.”²⁷ A few classic examples are how social media platforms promote pages for money, or advertisers being first in line for a time slot during the Super Bowl commercial break. The third and last reason for Davenport and Beck to see attention as an economy, is the fact that the market for attention, like every economy, knows both “organizational and individual participants.”²⁸ Organizations need to decide what parts of their work they pay most attention to, while simultaneously wanting the attention of consumers for their products or services. Likewise, individuals do not only possess attention to spend every day: they also produce information that requires the attention of others.

Thus, according to Simon, Goldhaber and Davenport and Beck, the attention economy points to the fact that is it economically beneficial for organizations to attract attention, that attention is scarce and sold, and that this is not only the case for individuals, but businesses as well. Moreover, this attention economy does not only apply to communication, but every bit of information that people need to process, which can be either conscious or unconscious. Especially the latter element is something to keep in mind in the remainder of this chapter because the aim of slow movement practices for consumers is to have an awareness, or a consciousness, of production and consumption processes. Especially techniques of online platforms to lure consumers into paying attention to something is often a process that consumers are unconscious of.

While enlightening in terms of what the attention economy entails and why attention works as an economy, Simon, Goldhaber, and Davenport and Beck’s works were all published well before the first social media platforms, streaming services, and smartphones were commonly used. These technologies have made the attention economy even more important. Its users are connected at any place and any time, ready to be disrupted from their offline activities by a new message or notification from the online world. Even more so, the online and offline world are interwoven. In this light, a problem with their work to be aware of is the deliberateness of paying attention. Patrick Crogan and Samuel Kinsley point out that paying attention is, by the scholars above, seen as a conscious act, as “the rational choice of the economic subject, [that] maintains a semblance of freedom.”²⁹ Furthermore, seeing attention as a commodity “invites the assumption that attention has no degree: that one either pays

²⁷ Davenport and Beck “The Attention Economy.”

²⁸ Davenport and Beck “The Attention Economy.”

²⁹ Patrick Crogan and Samuel Kinsley, “Paying Attention: Towards a Critique of the Attention Economy,” *Culture Machine* 13 (2012): 7.

attention or does not,” and this is something to be aware of.³⁰ Goldhaber, for instance, writes that “the attention economy is a zero-sum game. What one person gets, someone else is denied.”³¹ This on-off mode of paying attention is in practice not always the case. To get back to the example of listening to music while riding a bike, in this situation the music does something with the listener, but the listener does not *fully* pay attention because it is also important to keep an eye on the road.

This more cognitive question of levels of consciousness and attention is addressed by N. Katherine Hayles, who distinguishes two main modes, or levels of paying attention. “Deep attention” is a state of attention in which a consumer is “concentrating on a single object for long periods ..., ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged, preferring a single information stream, and having a high tolerance for long focus times.”³² This would probably be the mode of attention when someone is sitting in the chair at home, listening to music with their eyes closed, only focusing on the music, a kind of slow and conscious listening.³³ “Hyper attention,” on the other side, “is characterized by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom.”³⁴ This sounds like multitasking that Rauch wants to get rid of in her slow media movement. Listening to music in a mode of hyper attention occurs when music is for instance used as a background filler while studying, or for other activities such as riding a bike. These two types of attention are not distinguished by attentive or inattentive consumption, but hyper attention means that there are more impulses that one pays attention to.

According to Hayles, there is a shift taking place in society from a preference, or having the skill for paying deep attention, towards a society that demands hyper attention – a shift caused by the overwhelming abundance of information and media.³⁵ She argues that this preponderance of hyper attention especially causes problems in education, resulting in the inability of students at every level of education to focus and concentrate for longer periods of time. Hayles does not pick a side in the question whether this consequence has a positive or negative impact, but sees it as a dilemma for the way that education is organized: either students need to be changed and trained better in the usage of the mode of deep attention because that

³⁰ Crogan and Kinsley, “Paying Attention,” 4.

³¹ Goldhaber, “Attention Shoppers!”

³² N. Katherine Hayles, “Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes,” *Profession* 13 (2007): 187.

³³ It is possible to distinguish multiple information streams in music (sound, timbre, lyrics, harmonic progression etc.), but I discuss music here as an art form that, with all those elements combined, forms one information stream for the average listener.

³⁴ Hayles, “Hyper and Deep Attention,” 187.

³⁵ Hayles, “Hyper and Deep Attention,” 189.

is what current education systems demand, or the education system has to be changed in order to play into the mode of hyper attention that is currently predominant.

This consequence brings me to other implications that scholars have identified and which are supposedly caused by the attention economy. As Patrick Crogan and Samuel Kinsley have pointed out, there is far from any consensus about what the consequences of the attention economy are and if its workings have a predominantly positive or a more negative effect on human wellbeing.³⁶ First of all, many early scholars that focus on the attention economy do not stress enough that this type of economy (already) has implications. Davenport and Beck, for instance, only briefly mention the risk of being “overwhelmed by the imbalance of information over our available attention,” but do not go into more detail.³⁷ Goldhaber, writing in 1997, does come up with three more specific problems that the attention economy might cause, but poses these as possibilities for the future:

1. The danger of huge inequality between stars and fans; 2. The possibility that increasing demand for our limited attention will keep us from reflecting, or thinking deeply (let alone enjoying leisure); 3. The possibility that we will be so engrossed by efforts to capture our attention that we will shortchange those around us, especially children.³⁸

The first two problems are especially important in for this discussion slow listening and the attention economy, and these are not so much possible implications for the future anymore, but already present. The large following that some artists have (literally, in terms of number of followers on their social media accounts) only becomes larger, because they get all the attention of for instance the press when they make announcements or release new music. The internet is often considered a democratic place where everyone can get famous from their own bedroom, but algorithms put forth those who are already famous and popular. Giving popular artists a platform and attention means that those companies that do this are more likely to gain a larger audience as well. I will get back to this later in this chapter when I discuss streaming platforms as gatekeepers for the music industry.

The second implication that Goldhaber discusses, that the “increasing demand for our limited attention will keep us from reflecting, or thinking deeply,” is backed up by many researchers.³⁹ The distinction that Hayles makes between hyper and deep attention that I

³⁶ Crogan and Kinsley, “Paying Attention,” 14.

³⁷ Davenport and Beck, “The Attention Economy.”

³⁸ Goldhaber, “Attention Shoppers! .”

³⁹ Goldhaber, “Attention Shoppers! .”; Crogan and Kinsley, “Paying Attention,” 14-15.

discussed above touches on this, as people are less inclined to deeply engage with information and, or rather *because*, they need to process more. Ideas of “the brain [that is] rewired by the internet” are widespread, for instance in Nicholas Carr’s popular book *The Shallows*.⁴⁰ The internet with its abundance of information demands a different way of thinking for the user. Similarly, as I will show throughout this and the following chapter, the abundance of music on streaming services – made possible by the internet – changes the way people listen. It is easier to have music playing in the background, without fully paying attention to it.

2.3 Technology, the internet, and the sense of time

One of the other implications of digital technology that is important to discuss in this chapter, is the relationship between technology, and the sense of space and time. As the classic steam-powered train example in the introduction showed, technological innovations can make it possible to go a longer way in a shorter amount of time, and consequently change the expectations and relation between space and lived time. A characteristic of the capitalist society is that people often get paid for their time working, instead of the actual work that they (need to) do. “Time is money” is a saying that indicates that time has a certain value attached to it. The verb of “paying attention” already indicates that attention has a certain value, and that it *costs* people something to focus on information. That “something” is difficult to indicate because of attention’s ungraspable nature which differs for every individual or organization. For an individual, paying attention means putting the energy in focusing on something. However, the value of attention for businesses and on the market in the attention economy where the consumers’ attention is sold, is, next to numbers of people, often determined through the amount of *time* that they are exposed to information. The concept of time is vague, and it is impossible to grasp its meanings in this thesis. This is by no means my aim, but it is necessary to define an understanding of this concept to be used throughout this thesis, and to clarify some of the values attached to time and the role of digital media into more detail. The measurement for the attention market depends on the more practical definition of time in seconds, minutes and hours on the clock, but the sense of time is a relative and highly personal experience. “Time goes fast when you are having fun,” or “time goes fast when you are getting older,” but when people are for instance impatiently waiting, “time goes by so slowly.” The perception of time depends on the individual, their state of mind and the context they find themselves in.

⁴⁰ Crogan and Kinsley, “Paying Attention,” 14.

The constant innovation in digital media specifically, plays an important role in people's sense of space and time, as is addressed by Paul Virilio. He coined the concept of "dromology" as a lens through which he examines "the political economy of speed" and "the impact that fast transportation, faster information transmission, and superfast cybernetic means of telecommunication have had" on different levels of society.⁴¹ While Virilio's work is at times dystopian and mainly focuses on broader implications for politics and war, his alarming words underlying his theories resonate with the thoughts carried out by slow movement enthusiasts and should therefore be taken into consideration. However, slow movements at their foundation are a reaction to capitalism and the sense of the high speed that this causes, while Virilio argues that this effect works the other way around. According to him, the basic driving force for Western society is speed, which "has been central to the organization of civilizations and politics."⁴² In other words, capitalism is caused by the urge to continuously innovate in speed, and thus the urge to speed up production processes. As Bob Hanke shows, for Virilio, "the industrial revolution, which resulted from faster machines, is to be understood as a dromological revolution and as a war against time itself."⁴³

Moreover, Rob Bartram writes that "according to Virilio, the speeding up of society is far from emancipatory. On the contrary, the acceleration of speed has had largely detrimental consequences with the decline of the public sphere, the erosion of the democratic process and the increased power of the military complex."⁴⁴ Virilio argues that the increased speed of communication and connection has led to a sense of "delocalization," and the abundance of information and technologies then causes a situation in which "WHERE loses its priority to WHEN and HOW."⁴⁵ In other words, being in a certain place is not as important as the speed and nature of such technologies. With technological developments, anything can happen anytime, people can for instance be controlled from a distance. This works in a larger context, where local communities become less important, but also on an individual level where people live their lives through digital media and lose a sense of being in a certain physical space. Consumers of digital media suffer from a "loss of orientation," because they are connected in a real-time digital environment that has replaced local time.⁴⁶ Moreover, Virilio sees the

⁴¹ Bob Hanke, "McLuhan, Virilio, and Speed," in *Transforming McLuhan: Cultural, Critical, and Postmodern Perspectives*, ed. Grosswiler (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 216.

⁴² Rob Bartram, "Visuality, Dromology and Time Compression: Paul Virilio's New Ocularcentrism," *Time & Society* 13, no. 2/3 (2004): 289.

⁴³ Hanke, "McLuhan, Virilio," 216.

⁴⁴ Bartram, "Visuality, Dromology," 289.

⁴⁵ Virilio, *Art of the Motor*, 155.

⁴⁶ Paul Virilio, "Speed and Information: Cyberspace Alarm!" *Ctheory* (1995), www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=72.

controlling abilities of consumers fade, as “real-time media interactivity enhances technocapitalism's control of the pace and the tempo of human activities.”⁴⁷

A direct connection to streaming music can be made here, with the popularity of mobile music devices that already started to appear in the 1920s with portable record players.⁴⁸ Sumanth Gopinath and Jason Stanyek have argued that the phrase “anywhere, anytime” is “a key advertising trope for the mobile music industry.”⁴⁹ Having music in portable forms means that it is not fixed to a certain place or time: “work time need not be bound up with work spaces, and any space can, at any moment’s notice, be transformed in to a leisure space.”⁵⁰ The iPod was influential in this respect, because of the space that it had for thousands of songs, but I would say that especially having access to music through the internet means that it is possible to listen to almost *anything*, anywhere, anytime. Even without owning physical or digital copies of the music, because having an internet connection means that most songs are directly accessible. While space and time constrictions were always challenged by mobile music, even in the 1920s, they seem to be no challenge at all anymore with a smartphone, the internet and streaming services at hand.

Visual technologies are also an important element in Virilio’s work, which is discussed by Rob Bartram in his article about “Visuality, Dromology and Time Compression.”⁵¹ Bartram writes that “for Virilio, reality is constituted through an epoch, a science or a technique and that each transition in reality has a profound consequence for social life. So, it is not that the new visual technologies distort or destroy our sense of the world, they ‘replace’ it.”⁵² Virilio argues that “fragmented, discontinuous and autonomous visual experience instigates a form of widespread ‘mental concussion,’ ” which contributes to this loss of being in a certain time and place which in turn is caused by technologies.⁵³ Similar to what Davenport and Beck argued in their understanding of the attention economy, Virilio also argues that it is not only an increased speed in sharing and accessing knowledge or textual information that has its implications. There is a “new ocularcentrism [that] is characterized by an endless tele-horizon brought about by the nodal, ‘tele-local’ reorganization of telecommunications.”⁵⁴ The internet and

⁴⁷ Hanke, “McLuhan, Virilio, and Speed,” 219.

⁴⁸ Sumanth Gopinath and Jason Stanyek, “Anytime, Anywhere? An Introduction to the Devices, Markets, and Theories of Mobile Music,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mobile Music Studies*, eds. Sumanth Gopinath and Jason Stanyek (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7.

⁴⁹ Gopinath and Stanyek, “Anytime, Anywhere?,” 15.

⁵⁰ Gopinath and Stanyek, “Anytime, Anywhere?,” 24.

⁵¹ Bartram, “Visuality, Dromology.”

⁵² Bartram, “Visuality, Dromology,” 292.

⁵³ Virilio, “Speed and Information.”; Bartram, “Visuality, Dromology,” 292.

⁵⁴ Bartram, “Visuality, Dromology,” 292-3.

possibilities of smartphones have made it easy to share images from all over the world, and the 2020 pandemic made clear that people from anywhere can be together in a virtual place, without being together physically.

This mobility made possible by mobile music and streaming services shows that, although the relationship between capitalism and sense of speed is reversed for slow movements as they see fastness as a result of capitalism, the consequence of losing a sense of space is an important factor to take into account. Nevertheless, the underlying processes that Virilio discusses and his technologically deterministic stance are criticized by multiple authors. Rebecca Coleman, for instance, discusses what the concept of “real-time” means in digital culture, and approaches it as an “interplay between human and non-human entities through which ‘the now’ is created and lived out.”⁵⁵ She argues that many scholars have approached the relationship between time and technology by combining notions of the present, past and future, which results in “the present as a temporal quality, condition or state [being] somewhat overlooked.”⁵⁶ Instead, Coleman focuses on “the Now” and how this is understood by professionals that use digital media and who are therefore constantly confronted with its temporal qualities. This is important because, as Coleman points out, the sense for users of what “now” means depends on how platforms carry out their understanding of “nows.”⁵⁷ She quotes Robert Hassan who sees “real-time” as a “misnomer” and proposes the concept of “network-time,” that better suits the fact that “the real-time of ICT networks is not simultaneous with the real-time of events, but instead is *compressed* according to the capacities of the network.”⁵⁸ It is not connected to actual present living time. While real-time is still the preferred concept for media platforms and discussions of digital media, it is necessary to keep in mind that platforms compress time and make this real-time appear as if it aligns with present, living time. This is also the point that Coleman makes: the meaning of “now” is constructed through platforms. This seems to align with Virilio’s thoughts on speeds and real-time, but he does not take into consideration that these communication platforms are also regulated by people. It differs per platform what instantaneous information is. Virilio has a more technological deterministic stance on people’s experience on speed, and while technologies and platforms influence the sense of real-time, these decisions are made by the people behind it.

⁵⁵ Rebecca Coleman, “Making, Managing and Experiencing ‘the Now’: Digital Media and the Compression and Pacing of ‘Real-Time’,” *New Media & Society* 22, no. 9 (2020): 1682.

⁵⁶ Coleman, “Experiencing ‘the Now,’” 1683.

⁵⁷ Coleman, “Experiencing ‘the Now,’” 1685.

⁵⁸ Robert Hassan, “Network Time and the New Knowledge Epoch,” *Time and Society* 12 nos. 2-3: 233; Coleman, “Experiencing ‘the Now,’” 1683.

Thus, it is not only the abundance of information that is overwhelming, or the fact that innovation in speed of communications has made the production of information easier. It is also the speed with which this information is presented to people that can be overwhelming and that has an impact on the sense of living in a certain space and time. Listening to a specific piece of music is easier nowadays, compared to a time where people required specific physical albums containing that piece of music in order to be able to listen to them, or a time when it was even required for a concert with that specific piece on the program to take place near them. This instantaneity also results in a different expectation pattern – it can be extremely frustrating when something cannot be found online.

Many platforms use artificial intelligence that decides what people get to see, which is for instance the main concern in *The Social Dilemma* (2020). In this documentary, professionals from the tech industry warn users of social media that the information streams they encounter online are suited towards their preferences, that they end up in a personalized filter bubble. This works similarly for the music that listeners encounter online: the music videos that YouTube recommends to its users is based on the other music videos that those users have watched, and the playlists that Spotify creates and puts forward are filled with music that users seem to like.⁵⁹ It is, however, important to keep in mind that it is not only technology that controls this system of recommendations. Most of the information is produced by people, similar to the people that control the platforms decide how those platforms generate what “real-time” is. Moreover, producers of music and their listeners can make specific choices that suit this attention economy and the way that these platforms function. These processes of how decisions for platform interfaces and decisions of music labels can navigate through the attention economy will be addressed in the remainder of this chapter, together with the use of music itself as a means through which the attention of users can be attracted.

2.4 Music and attracting attention

There are several ways in which the attention economy and music are connected to each other, of which I will examine two. First, there are specific techniques for the music industry and their aim to reach as many online listeners as they can. This is especially connected to visual aspects, such as standing out on social media with a certain visual appearance. The second approach to

⁵⁹ Every user has personal playlists based on listening history in a special “Made For You” section, such as “Discover Weekly” which contains songs that Spotify thinks you might like, “Daily Mixes” for songs in different genres, “Release Radar” with songs that were released and that you might find interesting, and “Time Capsule,” with songs that you listened to a lot, “to take you back in time.”

examining music and attention that I discuss below are phenomena in which it is music itself that is demanding attention. This has common ground with for instance the way that music is used in television, where sound takes back the attention of viewers – who can be distracted by other things in the living room – to what is happening on television: the traditional idea of the television is that it is part of a living room and that it competes with what Rick Altman calls the “household flow.”⁶⁰ Moreover, music that attracts attention can be seen as having an almost opposite effect than *ubiquitous music*, which is described by Anahid Kassabian as music that surrounds people in everyday life, but to which often little conscious attention is paid.⁶¹ These two connections between music and the attention economy are important to examine in this work towards a theory and understanding of what slow listening can be, because the first one has to do with creating awareness of what (or which artist) someone is listening to, and the second one focuses on the awareness of the presence of music or other media forms that music accompanies. This chapter discusses techniques from platforms and the music industry to attract attention, while the second chapter of this thesis dives deeper into the meaning and modes of listening itself. In order to connect the theories on attention and streaming music presented below to recent practices in online music distribution and consumption, I will return to the phenomenon that I discussed in the introduction of this thesis: the Canvas videos that Spotify has added to their streaming platform.

Before I continue to discuss attention and online music consumption, however, a quick but important general note on forms of online music consumption and how these differ from offline music consumption is necessary. Online music consumption is inherently different from the most popular means of offline music consumption, such as CD’s or vinyl records, because of their different materiality. Instead of “product-based consumption,” which means buying music on physical sound carriers that can be owned, (such as a CD complete with its artwork and booklet containing background information) online music consumption is nowadays often “access-based,” through subscriptions for online music libraries and/or streaming services.⁶² As Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward argue concerning the popularity of vinyl records, the physical aspects of such a record causes a ritual of listening, a certain relationship with the music as product:

⁶⁰ Rick Altman, “Television/Sound,” in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington [etc.]: Indiana University Press, 1986), 40.

⁶¹ Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention and Distributed Subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), xii.

⁶² Fleura Bardhi and Giana M. Eckhardt, “Access-Based Consumption: The Case of Car Sharing,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 39, no. 4 (2012): 881.

the rituals of preparing for vinyl listening, physical characteristics of the record, and the act of playing the vinyl itself, make one more conscious of the medium's presence and the specific aesthetics of sound reproduction, not only in terms of audible properties of music, but also visual impressions of the medium and the equipment that 'reads' it.⁶³

Users of vinyl take care of the records that they use, and the durability of the records – they could, for instance, be in a personal music collection for a lifetime, and passed over to family members – helps in creating rituals around them.⁶⁴ Listening to music on streaming services results in a completely different relationship with the product, because the music cannot be “owned” and taken care of in the same way that Bartmanski and Woodward describe concerning vinyl. Streaming services can cause a transition from consuming music based on “sign value” – owning things and building a relationship with them – toward “use value,” which then means that listening to music on streaming platforms is mainly done as a practicality.⁶⁵ With regard to Spotify, there is the danger of creating primarily a relationship between the *streaming platform and the listener*, instead of the *artist and the listener*.

Because of this increase in access-based consumption of music, Patrik Wikström raises the question whether the end of music stardom is near.⁶⁶ Consumers do not have to pay much attention anymore to carefully select what records they want to buy and which ones not: if listeners do not like the music, they can skip the song, and playlists are algorithmically created to suit their taste. Wikström argues that this makes listeners less emotionally invested in choosing music that they like, as opposed to product-based consumption, where it takes a bigger, physical effort to obtain music. Wikström certainly has a valid point, because of the different type of relationship consumers might have with music on streaming platforms as opposed to physical music. However, I would rather argue that what Wikström calls “music stardom” is not disappearing, but it changes: take for instance the popularity of artists on social media, which shows that there are definitely still certain artists that are more popular and looked up to. Moreover, the danger of a decrease in sign value can be overcome, like what happens with some car sharing platform through which entire communities are formed.⁶⁷ Users do not have a relationship with a car that they own but they do have a meaningful relationship with

⁶³ Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward, “The Vinyl: The Analogue Medium in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 15, no. 1 (2015): 19.

⁶⁴ Bartmanski and Woodward, “The Vinyl,” 20.

⁶⁵ Bardhi and Eckhardt, “Access-Based Consumption,” 890.

⁶⁶ Patrik Wikström, “Will Algorithmic Playlist Curation Be the End of Music Stardom?” *Journal of Business Anthropology* 4, no. 2 (2015): 281.

⁶⁷ Bardhi and Eckhardt, “Access-Based Consumption,” 893.

the community, which prevents car sharing from becoming a mere practicality. Streaming platforms can similarly increase the sign value, for instance through the system where you can follow artists or friends and see what they are listening to. Also, as what happens on Spotify and what I will discuss later, exclusive visuals generate a unique listening experience for Spotify users, with unique content that artists release only on Spotify. This also profits the artists and their willingness to still release their music through streaming platforms such as Spotify. The abundance of information online does also result in an abundance of music online. This means that, in order for artists to engage an audience that cares about them and also wants to attend concerts, they need to stand out among the abundance of other artists. They need to attract the attention of listeners, as well as stand out in such a way that the listener becomes aware of who they are and returns to listen to them. Similar to record sleeves in a record store, this requires visual and textual components as well.

2.4.1 The music industry and the attention economy

Because of the popularity of consuming and sharing music online and the differences in how listeners encounter music, several scholars have argued that the internet has caused a “new music industry” to emerge.⁶⁸ They have argued that artists do not *need* to present themselves to gatekeepers who can launch them into the music industry and public eye. Aspiring musicians first need to find an audience online that appreciates them, after which they can get exposure through larger channels or gatekeepers (circular model). Guy Morrow argues that, because the globalization of the music industry online it has become expensive to take risks, and that therefore “artist managers and other intermediaries have become more reactive to hard evidence that an artist’s work is receiving audience attention, instead of investing time and money in what they assume ... will receive attention from audiences.”⁶⁹ In terms of managing artists, the pressure of the attention economy results in an industry that “is characterized by the slow monitoring of customer feedback and each iteration of the developing product is designed to obtain and test such feedback,” in other words, it “reduces the risk” of not knowing what consumers want, because it is tailored to what they *do* want.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Diane Hughes, Mark Evans, Guy Morrow and Sarah Keith, *The New Music Industries: Disruption and Discovery* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), viii.

⁶⁹ Guy Morrow, “Distributed Agility: Artist Co-management in the Music Attention Economy,” *International Journal of Arts Management* 20, no. 3 (Spring 2018): 38.

⁷⁰ Morrow, “Distributed Agility,” 41.

However, this does not mean that there are no gatekeepers, companies that have the power to influence and even regulate what the larger audience gets to see and consume, at all. In her article about internet user agency, José van Dijck argues that the power of individual users online is only limited, and that the companies that own the platforms still have a large influence in steering its users.⁷¹ The online world seems to be more democratic, because “what is different in the digital era is that users have better access to networked media, enabling them to ‘talk back’ in the same multimodal language that frames cultural products formerly made exclusively in studios.”⁷² This does not mean that all users are active as “content providers,” but they *do* all participate as “data providers.”⁷³ Moreover, “platform owners play the role of mediator between aspiring professionals and potential audiences,” with help of this data that users provide.⁷⁴

These are all important points that are still valid and relevant today. However, it does become clear how fast the entertainment industry and role of broadcast media has changed when Van Dijck, writing in 2009, argues that “YouTube fame only counts as fame after it is picked up by traditional mass media.”⁷⁵ I would argue that this is not the case anymore, as television has decreased in popularity with younger generations and online videos can reach audiences that are just as large.⁷⁶ Online platforms, such as YouTube, have caught up being just as important gatekeepers as traditional broadcasting companies. As a popular streaming service for music, Spotify also functions as a gatekeeper for the music industry. Their platform presents many playlists to their users, often suited to certain moods, time of the day, or other themes. Many of these playlists are curated by Spotify itself, most of which are most easily accessible to users, increasing their consumption of such Spotify-curated playlists. When musicians are successful and have an audience and management, artist managers thus must be active in presenting those artists to streaming-platform gatekeepers such as Spotify to make sure the artist is often added to popular playlists. Managers need to have a good relationship with Spotify, similar to the relationship with radio or television companies in order to make sure that songs are being heard by as many people as possible. Record labels even have

⁷¹ José van Dijck, “Users Like You? Theorizing Agency in User-Generated Content,” *Media, Culture & Society* 31, no. 1 (2009): 42.

⁷² Van Dijck, “Users Like You?,” 43.

⁷³ Van Dijck, “Users Like You?,” 47.

⁷⁴ Van Dijck, “Users Like You?,” 52.

⁷⁵ Van Dijck, “Users Like You?,” 53.

⁷⁶ There are many studies showing that younger people spend less time watching traditional television, and broadcasting companies are aware of this. See for instance: Wilko van Iperen, “YouTube versus tv: een serieuze zaak,” BM, accessed on January 13, 2021, <https://www.broadcastmagazine.nl/radio-televisie/televisie/youtube-versus-tv-een-serieuze-zaak/>.

“streaming managers” whose job it is to maintain this relation with Spotify, and to plug artists and songs. This reinforces the idea that streaming platforms such as Spotify and YouTube have taken over the role of gatekeeping in the music and entertainment industries.

Although the details about specific branding strategies for artists in the attention economy exceeds the scope of this thesis, I would like to point out one example that provides some useful insights into the role of gatekeepers and the framing of artists. In Charles Fairchild’s 2007 article about the television contest *Australian Idol*, he discusses the role of the television as a gatekeeper, as well as several promotional strategies used by this medium, specifically in relation to the attention economy. *Australian Idol* exemplifies these promotional strategies for artists, because ultimately the aim of the television program is to make money by making talented musicians known to a wide audience. “These processes rest most centrally in shaping audience perceptions of the contestants themselves as performers deserving of praise, success, and celebrity,” as the program needs to turn “normal” people into idols for viewers.⁷⁷ Fairchild connects the promotional strategies of “Idol” to the implications of the attention economy and argues that the program tries to satisfy the public by giving them many ways to participate – that is, through different media and also through live tours that the artists make. The overload of information can be chaotic to the viewer, so eventually, Fairchild argues, “it is the structured narrative of the contest that ties its disparate expressions together.”⁷⁸ This is a narrative of authenticity, a crafted “public personality” of the artists, because viewers can follow them through different media: the live shows, but also backstage footage that shows the background story of participants and how they “deserve to be there.”⁷⁹ “It is this narrative of aesthetic order, in the face of a perceived industrial chaos, that is intended to draw us into the spectacle,” in other words, there is so much information on different media platforms that viewers need to invest time and attention in order to understand it and the artists, but the broadcaster also helps the viewer in framing the participants in a certain way.⁸⁰

The media landscape and the attention economy have changed a lot ever since because streaming services were not as important for music revenue at the time. However, Fairchild’s notion of an authentic narrative of artists for generating a better relationship with their audience is still extremely relevant, as this seems to be magnified with artist’s social media accounts. But why is this important for slow listening? On the one hand, extensive branding of artists

⁷⁷ Charles Fairchild, “Building the Authentic Celebrity: The ‘Idol’ Phenomenon in the Attention Economy,” *Popular Music and Society* 30, no. 3 (2007): 357.

⁷⁸ Fairchild, “Building the Authentic Celebrity,” 360.

⁷⁹ Fairchild, “Building the Authentic Celebrity,” 365.

⁸⁰ Fairchild, “Building the Authentic Celebrity,” 360.

adds up to the abundance of information that music consumers receive, but on the other hand, it also adds to the knowledge that listeners have of the artists that they are listening to. The music on playlists that Spotify creates for its listeners can be very “anonymous,” that is, listeners can consume music without knowing who created it. The many playlists and the platform’s ability to keep on playing music affiliated to what you listened to before makes that it is not necessary to view your screen in order to listen to a variety of music. This unawareness and unconscious consumption are exactly what slow movements are against. In the final part of this chapter, I will return to this issue after a discussion of several features, such as videos and ties to social media platforms, which seem to be aimed at increasing the amount of attention attracted from the listener’s senses – other than hearing – towards the music.

Before I dive into the video and social media features on Spotify, first an author that discusses the influence of the attention economy on music production needs to be highlighted here. Hubert Léveillé Gauvin specifically focuses on music on streaming services and argues that “the fact that almost all of the artists do offer their music through some online streaming platform confirms Goldhaber’s thoughts: in an economic system treating attention as the preeminent currency, online streaming services offer tremendous possibilities.”⁸¹ Listeners that use streaming services can easily skip songs if they do not like them, which happens mostly during the first 20 seconds of a song, which, on Spotify, would mean that the artists do not get paid.⁸² Therefore, he examines what kind of processes have occurred in songs in order to keep the listener’s attention for longer than those 20 seconds.

The study departs from five hypotheses about different musical parameters, to suit listening and not skipping songs in the attention economy.⁸³ First, shorter song titles, because “shorter titles should be more memorable.” Second, faster tempo, which “increase(s) the listener’s arousal, and thus increases attention and memorability.” Third, earlier entry of the voice in songs, because the voice attracts attention. Fourth, earlier mention of the title or “hook”, because that often indicates the chorus and grabs attention. And the last parameter is “more self-focused” lyrics, because such “content will draw self-focused attention from the listeners.” Léveillé Gauvin thus does not focus on the impact of technologies on the listener, but how the developments related to the attention economy have an effect on the musicians and their practice of creating music. His results are the following:

⁸¹ Hubert Léveillé Gauvin, “Drawing Listener Attention in Popular Music: Testing Five Musical Features Arising from the Theory of Attention Economy,” *Musicae Scientiae* 22, no. 3 (2018): 292.

⁸² Léveillé Gauvin, “Drawing Listener Attention,” 293.

⁸³ Léveillé Gauvin, “Drawing Listener Attention,” 294-5.

Today's online streaming platforms create a highly saturated ecosystem that encourages a high level of competition for the listener's attention. The present research highlighted four main parameters that have changed in the last three decades in a way that is consistent with the proposed theory of attention economy: the number of words in song titles has decreased, the average tempo has increased, the time elapsed before the initial entry of the voice has shortened, and similarly the time before the title of a song is heard has also shortened.⁸⁴

Importantly, L veill  Gauvin ultimately implies that listeners in the attention economy and the composition process are mutually influential: musicians make music based on how people listen, and listeners behave according to how the music is composed. On Spotify, it is important that artists keep the attention of listeners, not only because they only get paid when listeners listen for a certain amount of time, but also in order to have advantages in terms of the data that is generated.⁸⁵ While Spotify as a company is extremely closed about the details, artists and streaming managers (the people that are mediators between the label and Spotify) speak of so-called "skip rates" and "completion rates." When songs have a low skip rate and high completion rate, artists have a chance at being included in popular playlists that are created by Spotify, but when these rates are the other way around, the chances are high for the songs to be kicked out of those playlists. The exact details are only accessible for Spotify itself, but artists do have the ability to see data about individual songs on their personal page, with information about, for instance, how the song performs in different locations, demographic information about listeners, and the playlists that the song is in.⁸⁶ This information helps the artists and label to make changes where necessary to the music and branding.⁸⁷ Thus, the music needs to keep the attention of the listener to be successful on a streaming service such as Spotify, and the Spotify data is an important guideline in this.

⁸⁴ L veill  Gauvin, "Drawing Listener Attention," 302.

⁸⁵ Because Spotify is very closed about this, there are only the experiences of artists and streaming managers that I can follow in this regard. An example is an article and video created by the Dutch news site NOS, where two Dutch artists (Bizzey and a singer from the band WIES) and a streaming manager explain why streams are important and how the skip and completion rates work: "Kan een artiest leven van jouw Spotify-streams?," NOS, last modified December 23, 2020, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2361802-kan-een-artiest-leven-van-jouw-spotify-streams.html>.

⁸⁶ "How to Read Your Spotify for Artists Data," Spotify for Artists, last modified February 24, 2020, <https://artists.spotify.com/blog/how-to-read-your-spotify-for-artists-data>.

⁸⁷ NOS, "Kan een artiest leven van jouw Spotify-streams?."

2.4.2 Spotify's visuals

In the previous part of this chapter, we saw that the attention economy certainly has its influence on how artists are presented and how music is created. This is important for a theorization of slow listening, because the way that musicians act towards listeners impacts the way that listeners experience this music. One of the possibilities of releasing music on streaming services which is important for the listening experience, that I will discuss in the next chapter in detail, is the ability to add visuals in the form of videos. Fabian Holt asks the question whether, through all of the online possibilities for managements to promote artists, music is indeed “becoming more visual” and argues that a “video turn” has taken place.⁸⁸ According to him, “music has made the transition into the next major stage – namely, audiovisual convergence, with the penetration of video in music industry practices of production, communication and distribution.”⁸⁹ In academic research, Holt notes, not a lot of attention is given to the impact that online videos have had on the music industry.⁹⁰ While music is difficult to always interpret since it is difficult to control associations, “video creates a narrative and imaginary around sound,” and therefore Holt claims that the possibility to share videos makes music distribution more visual.⁹¹ While Spotify is mainly meant as a streaming service to *listen* to music without looking, they have gradually increased the appearance of visuals in their smartphone application. We could say that Spotify has also become more visual, with the addition of the so-called “Canvases,” “Stories” and “Enhanced Albums.”

The first addition that Spotify made was the “Canvas” feature, which is a 3-8 second video loop that accompanies songs. Listeners can see these videos in the smartphone app when they have their phone unlocked, opened the app, selected the song, and are in the “now playing” view. Normally, listeners see the album cover in this place, but Canvas serves as a substitute for that. These videos are always uploaded by artists or labels themselves, so they have full control of which songs have video loops and what listeners get to see. This can be anything, as long as it fits the rectangular screen of a smartphone. Some artists create unique visuals, while others add their album cover with a moving element or a few shots from the music video. Take

⁸⁸ Fabian Holt, “Is Music Becoming More Visual? Online Video Content in the Music Industry,” *Visual Studies* 26 (2011): 50.

⁸⁹ Holt, “More Visual?,” 50.

⁹⁰ Holt, “More Visual?,” 51.

⁹¹ Holt, “More Visual?,” 52.



Image 2.1: a shot from the Canvas loop for “Shallow,” that shows the face of the artist, in this case Lady Gaga.



Image 2.2: the “Christmas Hits” playlist, with the button to view the Story function appearing at the top.



Image 2.3: one of the sequences in the Story for “Christmas Hits.” Jennifer Lopez and Stevie Mackey personally introduce the user to their version of “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year.”

for instance the Canvas of Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper’s “Shallow,” that consists of shots from the film *A Star Is Born* (2018) for which this song was written (see image 2.1).⁹² Canvas first appeared in 2017, and many popular songs now contain them. Moreover, these videos can be edited at all times, so when listeners come back to songs, they might find a new video.

Another feature that Spotify launched recently is “Stories” which can be added by the artist to a playlist. This looks very similar to stories on, for instance, Instagram and the feature gained wide public attention with the launch of the personal “Spotify Wrapped 2020” function. In Spotify Wrapped, users get to see an overview of what they listened to in the past year, of which songs, artists and genres they streamed most. Wrapped itself is not new, but the way it was presented in December 2020 was as follows: a visual sequence of shorter videos, each dedicated to one topic (e.g. songs, playlists, artists), sequences between which the user could switch, similar to many story functions on social media platforms. This feature was then also added to the “Christmas Hits” playlists (generated by Spotify) during the holidays, which

⁹² Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper, “Shallow,” Spotify, track 12 on *A Star is Born Soundtrack*, Interscope Records, 2018.

contained videos of artists talking about their songs in the playlist (see images 2.2 and 2.3).⁹³ The similarity between the layout of “Spotify Wrapped 2020” and the format of “Stories” to other social media platforms such as Instagram made the separate “video tiles,” that users could take screen captions of, highly shareable. This increased the (visual) presence of Spotify’s (curated) music on other social networks.

The last notable visual feature on Spotify is the “Enhanced Album,” which is essentially a playlist with one or more videos where artists welcome the listener/viewer, sometimes also including a story. These videos contain more information about the production process in short, documentary like videos. An example is Khruangbin’s album *Mordechai* (2020), of which each song has its own unique Canvas video loop, and two songs are accompanied by a short interview with the band members (see image 2.4 and 2.5).⁹⁴ Similar to the Canvas and Stories videos, the videos in enhanced albums have a portrait format and are made to fit the smartphone screen. However, the extra videos on enhanced albums can also be watched through the desktop version of Spotify or even when streaming to a television screen. They do still have the portrait format and are mainly made for the smartphone user.

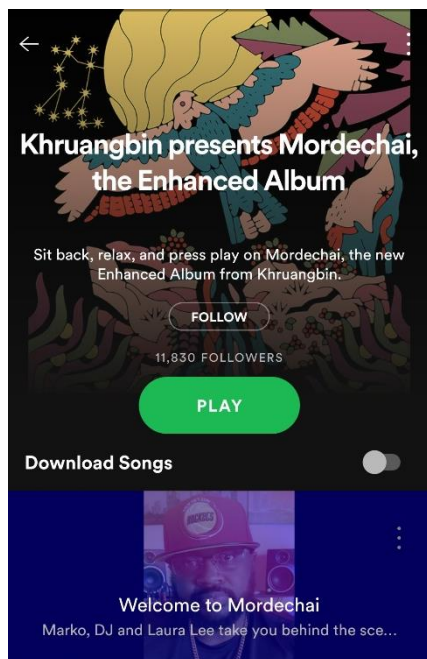


Image 2.4: the playlists that is the Enhanced Album version of Khruangbin’s *Mordechai*.



Image 2.5: one of the videos in the Enhanced Album *Mordechai*: “*Making of First Class*.”

⁹³ Spotify, “Christmas Hits,” playlist, Spotify, accessed January 13, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZF1DX0Yxoavh5qJV?si=juD2QBAURI-P3s7RYdCbsw>.

⁹⁴ Spotify, “Khruangbin Presents Mordechai, the Enhanced Album,” playlist, Spotify, accessed January 13, 2021, https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZF1DXakoXtFKnQYm?si=vxRqIF_4QjCPZksddcWaxg.

The Stories and Enhanced Album features are fairly new, and Spotify has not shared details or information about how this exactly works for artists and what the benefits are. Canvas, however, is a more integrated function that has already generated some data that Spotify has shared. On the webpage where they introduce Canvas to artists, the streaming service highlights aspects that should interest artists to use the video loop feature: “Get noticed. Share it wide. Change it up.”⁹⁵ First, Spotify argues that Canvas increases the attention that artists get from listeners, because “they are more likely to keep streaming (5% on average) . . . , share the track (+145%), add to their playlists (+20%), save the track (+1.4%), and visit [the artist’s] profile page (+9%).”⁹⁶ Second, the loops can be shared through Instagram Stories including a link to Spotify, generating a larger audience. Third, according to Spotify, the fact that Canvas can be changed serves as a motivation for listeners to return to the songs and see if there is anything new in terms of these visuals.

According to Spotify’s Canvas metrics, this video loop feature has both an opposite and a similar effect compared to what Paula Harper calls the genre of online “unmute this” videos.⁹⁷ This genre, as Harper shows, was a response to online videos – especially on Facebook – that start playing automatically, but without the sound. Videos that are accompanied by “unmute this” directions are audio-visual *par excellence*, because these videos do not make sense without the sound. Only when users view them *and* listen to them, they can get the point and joke.⁹⁸ In this sense, Canvas is not similar at all. The music does make sense without the visuals that are added through the video loop. But according to Spotify, the fact and idea that these videos exist is bringing listeners back to artists to see if anything has changed. Moreover, Spotify writes that this increases the clicks of listeners on the artists’ profile page. In other words, Spotify indirectly argues that the existence of Canvas tells listeners “look at this”.

On the other hand, the way that Spotify Canvas functions when it is shared through Instagram is very similar to Harper’s “unmute this” videos. For users of both Instagram and Spotify, it is easy to share a song with the Instagram stories function, after clicking on the “share” button in Spotify itself. Then, Instagram users that watch the story see the video loop if this is available. However, this always excludes the music. The visuals itself do not really make sense, and in this way, viewers of the story are encouraged to go to Spotify itself in order

⁹⁵ “Canvas,” Spotify for Artists, accessed December 1, 2020, <https://canvas.spotify.com/en-us>.

⁹⁶ “Canvas.”

⁹⁷ Paula Harper, “‘Unmute This’: Captioning an (Audio)visual Microgenre,” *The Soundtrack* 9, nos. 1/2 (2016): 7-23.

⁹⁸ Harper, “‘Unmute This,’ ” 16.

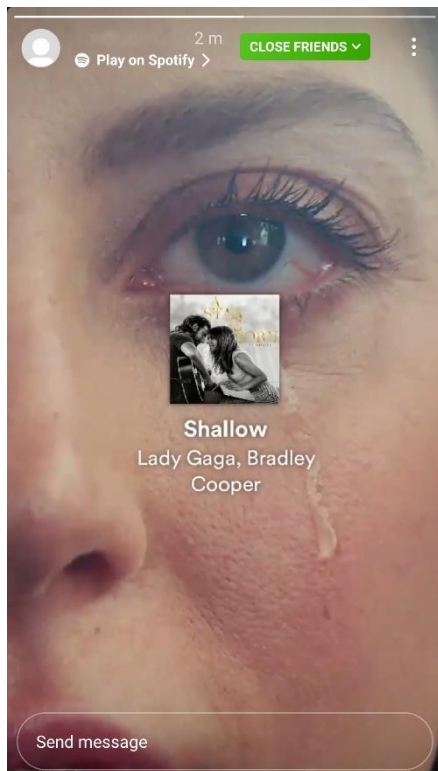


Image 2.6: a screenshot of “Shallow” shared in an Instagram story. The “Play on Spotify” button automatically opens the song on the Spotify app.



Image 2.7: Paul McCartney talking about his album *McCartney III* in the Story that is attached to the Enhanced Album.

to hear what the music sounds like. This step is easy, because of the integrated “Play on Spotify” button on the top of the Instagram story (see image 2.6). Instagram does have a function to add music to stories, but when users share a song from Spotify it is impossible to add this feature.

The shareability of these videos suits the circular music industry that I discussed above, because sharing the videos on social media can attract other potential listeners, while the consumer is “doing the work.” In another article, Harper shows with the 2013 visual album *BEYONCÉ* as an example, “how an assemblage of social media platforms, circulating musical objects, and techniques – of listening, viewing, comprehending, and participating in viral phenomena – came together to generate [the album’s] commercial success.”⁹⁹ Harper mentions the attention economy, and how sharing videos on social media can generate a “parasocial relationship” for listeners towards their idols.¹⁰⁰ She mainly speaks about videos on artists’ social media accounts, but such a relationship is fostered through Spotify’s stories as well. Paul McCartney in the story of his Enhanced Album *McCartney III*, for instance, stresses the fact that this is “available to the fans exclusively on Spotify.” He is looking into the camera from,

⁹⁹ Paula Harper, “*BEYONCÉ*: Viral Techniques and the Visual Album,” *Popular Music and Society* 42, no. 1 (2019): 62.

¹⁰⁰ Harper, “*BEYONCÉ*,” 64.

presumably, his own house and telling the story to the individual watching it on their smartphone (see image 2.7).¹⁰¹ This adds a personal feeling to it and attracts attention. Moreover, the form of a story confirms my points about the applicability of Fairchild's *Australian Idol* analysis: a narrative is created around the music through visuals, to support the listener into making sense of them.

Another aspect that Spotify highlights in their data about Canvas is that listeners keep streaming.¹⁰² It can lower the skip rate, which thus adds a new layer to the findings of Léveillé Gauvin, who argued that the composition of music changes in order to keep the attention of the listener. If such a study was done again after the addition of the visuals, it might generate new results. The visuals that Spotify has added – Canvas, Stories, and Enhanced Albums – not only generate awareness about the artists and the production or composition process of the music that people are listening to, but it makes it also possible for artists to take hold of the listeners' attention for a longer period of time. Visibility seems to be key in an online world where attention has become a commodity.

2.5 Music avoiding attention

So far, we have seen how the offer of music on streaming services and beyond is influenced by the attention economy. The visuals on Spotify attract the attention, and the Enhanced Albums are generated for listeners to consciously pay attention to production processes. However, music and attention are also deeply connected in another way: it can attract attention to other media forms, or it can enhance focus on other activities, in which the music itself is an important aspect, but it does not require attention. The second chapter focuses on listening, mindfulness and focus, which are very important for slow movements. Therefore, I want to end this chapter with a brief discussion of the contrast between music that attracts attention versus the offer of music on streaming services that does *not* attract attention.

Perhaps the clearest media form in which music has always played an important role to attract the attention of viewers, is television. According to Rick Altman, the main role of the television soundtrack is to be a mediator between the “household flow” and “television flow.”¹⁰³ The television flow is understood as the internal workings of television and the way in which the different sequences (such as programs and commercial breaks) are tied together,

¹⁰¹ Spotify, “Paul McCartney Presents McCartney III, the Enhanced Album,” playlist, Spotify, accessed January 13, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZF1DX0XZlqI087Y7?si=Zra1FpErQQCZ5aSiRZS5yg>.

¹⁰² “Canvas.”

¹⁰³ Rick Altman, “Television/Sound,” in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington [etc.]: Indiana University Press, 1986), 40.

in order to generate a smoother viewing experience for consumers.¹⁰⁴ However, television sets are situated in household that are full of distractions and other activities at hand for viewers: the household flow.¹⁰⁵ Sound on television is a mediator between these two forms of flow, because it can call back the consumers to the screen and tell them to pay attention to the television set because something important is happening. According to Altman, this is done by effects such as internal audiences, distinctive sounds that need a visual identification, and voice-overs.¹⁰⁶ In other words, elements in the sound that pique the interest of the “viewer” to really *see* what is happening. However, content-wise it is also well-known music that can attract the attention of viewers to the screen. Advertisements are a good example of this, where “music serves to engage listeners’ attention and render the advertisement less of an unwanted intrusion.”¹⁰⁷ Especially popular music that is entertaining works in this regard, see for instance the Pepsi ads with Michael Jackson. As David Allan showed, it is especially music that contains voices which engages the attention of the viewer.¹⁰⁸

Thus, the authors above argue that music or sound on television attracts the attention when it is well-known, the soundtrack contains voices, or when sounds need to be complemented by a visual element before viewers can make sense of it. In other words, music that does *not* require the attention of the listener, or rather, tries to avoid the attention of the listener, needs to avoid such elements. The phenomenon that Anahid Kassabian describes as “ubiquitous music” is enlightening in the discussion between music that is meant to pay attention to and music that works well in the attention economy, but that does not require *conscious* attention. Music is everywhere, it has become a part of everyday life, often in the background without paying attention.¹⁰⁹ Kassabian traces this phenomenon back to the role of radio and the Muzak corporation: “the kind of music that we listen to as part of our environment.”¹¹⁰ Kassabian argues throughout her book that ubiquitous music also comes with a kind of “ubiquitous listening,” to which I will return in the second chapter of this thesis. While ubiquitous music is not always consciously paid attention to, its presence does affect human behavior and mood, similar to the aim of the Muzak corporation in working places.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁴ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken, 1974), 86.

¹⁰⁵ Altman, “Television/Sound,” 43.

¹⁰⁶ Altman, “Television/Sound,” 44-50.

¹⁰⁷ David Huron, “Music in Advertising: An Analytic Paradigm,” *The Musical Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (1989): 560.

¹⁰⁸ David Allan, “Effects of Popular Music in Advertising on Attention and Memory,” *Journal of Advertising Research* 46, no. 4 (2006): 441.

¹⁰⁹ Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening*, xii.

¹¹⁰ Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening*, 4.

¹¹¹ Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening*, 5.

As I discussed before, Spotify needs to maintain a good relationship with the listener to add sign value, instead of a merely practical use value. One of the ways that Spotify does this is through the many playlists that they create, with music for all kinds of activities or moods.¹¹² Paul Allen Anderson has discussed such playlists and argues that this is “the age of neo-Muzak...: subjects live and weave among an array of streaming platforms for algorithmic or curated musical moodscapes and affective atmospheres.”¹¹³ While Muzak was made for large groups of workers, the playlists on streaming services such as Spotify take a step further in managing moods, as their playlists are tailored to the needs of the listener based on personal (listening) data. As Anderson points out, “mood management is the quintessence of affective labor in the ever-expanding service economy.”¹¹⁴ Moreover, the way that such playlists are presented to users has strong ties to the attention economy: they “reduce or prevent anxiety amidst an atmosphere of overstimulation.”¹¹⁵ They have automatic recommendations, and the user does not have to choose music themselves.

Again, the receiving end of such playlists will be discussed in more detail the second chapter, but it is important to note that Spotify participates in this “business of mood.”¹¹⁶ The streaming service has countless playlists for every mood or activity. Such mood playlists are not always demanding attention: Spotify also contains many playlists that are meant to *not* pay attention to in the form of playlists for, for instance, studying, working, or meditation. Such playlists can calm the listener, and help them to concentrate in the overwhelming attention economy. And, as I will show and argue in the next chapter, this can also be considered as a form of slow listening.

Playlists for focus at home such as “Calm & Focused,” “Maximum Concentration,” or “Instrumental Study” are all aimed to *not* attract attention. These playlists contain only instrumental pieces, mostly with a solo piano, that are highly repetitive. They do not attract the attention like the sound on television. There are no voices or loud melodies, or hooks that penetrate the mind and distract the listener from the work that they need to do. Another very popular genre of music to listen to while studying or working are “Lo-Fi” beats. These playlists do contain music played by other instruments than merely the piano, but also do not attract attention as the sound is more laidback, slightly distorted and filled with “unwanted” sounds

¹¹² For more about use value and playlists see: Jörgen, Skågeby, “Slow and Fast Music Media: Comparing Values of Cassettes and Playlists,” *Transformations* 20 (2011).

¹¹³ Paul Allen Anderson, “Neo-Muzak and the Business of Mood,” *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 4 (2015): 811.

¹¹⁴ Anderson, “Neo-Muzak,” 815-6.

¹¹⁵ Anderson, “Neo-Muzak,” 832.

¹¹⁶ Anderson, “Neo-Muzak,” 817.

such as electronic and background noises.¹¹⁷ The striking problem with the popularity of lo-fi playlists, especially on YouTube, but also on Spotify, is that, according to Cherie Hu, “the average listener treats a lo-fi hip-hop playlist as background fodder for other activities (like relaxing, sleeping or focusing), [so] actual recognition of, let alone engagement with, individual artists is rare.”¹¹⁸ In other words, lo-fi playlists are popular for listeners to focus on their work, but the problem pointed out by Hu highlights, once again, the tension that the attention economy causes between the abundance of information, the music industry, and the listener. This tension complicates a theorization of slow listening, of which it is my aim to solve in the next chapter.

2.6 Concluding remarks

The next chapter continues with and builds on many of the ideas presented in this chapter, but from the listener’s perspective. In this chapter, however, I have discussed the attention economy and its implications for the music industry, as well as how the music industry – artists and streaming services – responds to this, and what this means for how listeners encounter music through streaming services. We have seen that attention works as an economy because it is a scarcity in high demand, especially in the information abundant capitalist society of today. This attention economy and the importance of the internet result in a situation where musicians need to participate in the online ‘fight’ for the attention of consumers. Visuals play an important role in this, and Spotify as a platform contributes to this. Their visual features are designed to attract the attention of the listener and add information about the music, which can create awareness for listeners about what they are listening to. However, it also adds up to the amount of information that consumers have to process. Moreover, as Virilio argued, the speed of online communication and visual information contributes to a losing sense of time and physical space.

Slow movements seem to prefer a state of “deep attention,” where consumers are aware of what they consume and take their time to do so. With online music through streaming services, it is easy to get lost in the easy access to large libraries of songs, and to try out and skip many songs. But does this also mean that using streaming services excludes the possibility of *slow listening*? Spotify generates a sign value and relationship with their listeners by

¹¹⁷ Adam Harper, “Lo-Fi Aesthetics in Popular Music Discourse” (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2014), 19-23, <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:cc84039c-3d30-484e-84b4-8535ba4a54f8>.

¹¹⁸ Cherie Hu, “The Economics of 24/7 Lo-Fi Hip-Hop YouTube Livestreams,” HotPod, January 28, 2020, <https://hotpodnews.com/the-economics-of-24-7-lo-fi-hip-hop-youtube-livestreams/>.

generating all kinds of playlists. Among these playlists are the mood and activity playlists, which are often meant to *not* pay attention to. This complicates the notion of “awareness” in terms of what kind of music and which artists users of such playlists are listening to – Spotify sorts this out for them. However, the music in these cases does generate a state where listeners can work or study attentively, making it a tool for the listener to focus their attention on something of their choice without being distracted. In the following chapter, I will dive deeper into the modes of listening that are suited to navigate through this attention economy where music is “anywhere, anytime,” and connect this to techniques to deal with this that were put forth by the slow media movement.

3. Streaming Services and (Modes of) Listening

3.1 Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in the first months of 2020, daily life and its rituals changed for most people. Instead of waking up, getting ready, and travelling to work, school, or university, it became the standard to work from home if possible. This change in working environment caused problems for many: the home can be full of distractions, and without co-workers or fellow students around, productivity issues were common – as for me. I encountered many initiatives online that tried to make the working from home-situation a little bit better, many of which were through sound. The Sound of Colleagues allows people to recreate the soundscape of their office, and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra added “focus” to their “mood selector” – a website that recommends music for moods which was originally created to introduce people to the world of classical music.¹¹⁹ On Spotify, The Beatles released “new” EPs with “Study Songs” (instrumental Beatles songs) and Cineville created the “Hyperfocus thuiswerk-scores” playlist (containing movie soundtracks).¹²⁰ And these are just a few examples of the many possibilities that were offered online.

The many initiatives show that the practice of listening to music in order to enhance focus has never been more popular than during this pandemic. One of the questions that I raised in the first chapter is whether music that serves to concentrate can be called slow listening, because listeners do not pay attention to the music. This second chapter is a continuation of this and other issues concerning listening discussed in the first chapter. In the first chapter, I addressed ways that the attention economy influences the way that music is offered to people. We saw that listening to music on streaming services is practical, but the popularity of automatically generated playlists carries the ‘danger’ of not being aware of what music is playing. Listening to playlists means that the user does not have to make decisions themselves. Moreover, the mood and activity playlists for work or concentration mentioned above have music that is meant to *not* pay attention to. There are millions of songs available on Spotify, of which individual artists are only a small part, so they need to stand out. Visuals play an

¹¹⁹ The Sound of Colleagues, accessed January 15, 2021, <https://soundofcolleagues.com/>; “Mood Selector,” Concertgebouwworkest, accessed January 16, 2021, <https://waarluisterjijnaar.concertgebouwworkest.nl/moodselector>.

¹²⁰ The Beatles. *The Beatles – Study Songs Vol. 1*. EP, Spotify. UMG Recordings, 2020; Cineville, “Hyperfocus thuiswerk-scores,” playlist, Spotify, accessed January 15, 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4VjVGNS6Czxg5ECzhswHGL?si=F2w8Du7lR22bAExPCzO5IA>.

increasingly important role in adding more meaning and making artists more visible. The main question that still needs answering is the following: how to deal with this as a listener? How to deal with the enormous offer of music, and find a way through this, without getting lost? The slow media movement has as its aim to create a more conscious media use, but what are practices that align with a more conscious way of listening to music? And to what extent is this even desirable or possible in contemporary societies? Should listeners be aware of *ubiquitous music*, for instance? This chapter addresses these questions, by looking at listening habits, and what scholars argue that should be the main “modes of listening.” The material aspects of music, or, in the case of streaming services, the immateriality of the music, plays a large role in how people listen. A comparison with practices of listening to vinyl and cassettes exemplifies what makes listening to digital music via streaming services different. Moreover, the most important way to deal with consumption of media and information in a conscious manner for Rauch in her slow media movement is through the ideas of mindfulness, a practice that can be enhanced through playlists. The techniques that artists and Spotify use to attract attention that I discussed in the first chapter, playlists and visuals, serve as the basis for my discussion of these aspects.

3.2 Modes of listening

3.2.1 “Adequate” listening

This thesis is not written out of a dissatisfaction with how people listen, neither with the aim of arguing that consumers *should* listen in a *certain way*. Listening to music is a personal experience, and there are enormous cultural as well as personal differences in what the significance of music is. However, some scholars have written from such a “listening prescription” perspective and argued that music has to be listened to in a particular way. Perhaps most famously Theodor W. Adorno, who distinguished several types of listeners and who, even though he claimed not to view these types in a hierarchy where one kind of listening is better than the other, clearly gave preference to some.

About his typology of listeners, Adorno writes that “what the types want, ... is to stake out realms of their own, realms that range from fully adequate listening, ... to a total lack of understanding and complete indifference to the material.”¹²¹ He criticizes empirical experiments that deal with how listeners experience music, because it is impossible to measure

¹²¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 3.

or express in words what the aesthetic experience of listening to music is, which is the reason for Adorno to focus on the understanding of the work itself.¹²² Adorno determines “the adequacy or inadequacy of the act of listening” by the knowledge that the listener has about the music that they are listening to.¹²³ He calls this mode “structural hearing” and describes this adequate, “expert listener” as someone “whose ear thinks along with that he hears, [because] its several elements are promptly present as technical, and it is in technical categories that the context of meaning is essentially revealed.”¹²⁴ Adequate listening means an understanding of the technical details of composition; an understanding of the structures and inner workings of the work that are necessary to understand the meaning. This type of hearing does require an enormous knowledge of music, as some compositional processes are extremely complicated, and Adorno acknowledges that there are not many people that possess this. Therefore, he also distinguishes a “good listener” that “makes connections spontaneously and judges for good reasons, ... but [is] not, or not fully, aware of the technical and structural implications.”¹²⁵ The types of listeners that Adorno consequently mentions, decline in adequacy for him. There is for instance the “culture consumer, ... a copious, sometimes a voracious listener, well-informed, a collector of records,” but who mostly focuses on the performer instead of the music.¹²⁶ After some more types of listeners, Adorno ends up with the listener for whom “music is *entertainment and no more*,” who has “the need for music as a comfortable distraction.”¹²⁷ According to Adorno, this is the ideal type that the culture industry is made for. He sees this listener and type of listening as an addiction, and even compares it to drinking and smoking: “we define it more by our displeasure in turning the radio off than by the pleasure we feel, however modestly, while it is playing.”¹²⁸ This is a passive listener, that is not attempting “to make the effort which a work of art demands,” and for instance listens to music while working.¹²⁹

¹²² Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 4.

¹²³ Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 3. The word “adequate” on the first pages of this chapter already indicates that listening in a different way is “inadequate”, as Adorno also writes himself. This wording clearly instigates the hierarchy that Adorno waives throughout this chapter. This is also not merely an issue of translation, as the original German wording that Adorno used for “fully adequate listening” has the same meaning and undertone: “*gänzlich adäquates Hören*.” Moreover, on pages 18-19 Adorno speaks of “a fault [that] arises from the nethermost sociological layers” and “musically correct modes of conduct” as opposed to incorrect, inadequate modes of listening.

¹²⁴ Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 5.

¹²⁵ Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 5.

¹²⁶ Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 6-7.

¹²⁷ Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 14-15. Other types of listeners that Adorno distinguishes are “emotional listeners,” “jazz listeners” and “resentment listeners,” which are all described as passive.

¹²⁸ Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 15.

¹²⁹ Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 16.

Adorno's work is perhaps outdated and has been met with a lot of critique – which I will get back to in the next section. However, even though Adorno focuses on works instead of ways that listeners encounter music, and even though I do not follow the hierarchy that is present in his work, the distinction that he makes between various types of listeners is closely related to what slow listening versus not-slow listening could be. The types of the expert listener, good listener, and culture consumer all imply a listener that is aware of what they are listening to, a listener that pays attention to the music being present *and* that is conscious of the background and cultural significance that the music has. This is similar to what Helena Grehan argues in her article on “Slow Listening,” which does not deal with music but theatre.¹³⁰ She writes that slow listening “is a kind of listening that is resistant to dominant modes, in that it is not concerned with surface absorption but instead with a desire to be fully attuned to both what it is that is being said and the way that saying is performed, before making any move to respond.”¹³¹ This definition makes the act of slow listening political, as it “cuts across the flow of communication that confronts us every day.”¹³² Paying attention is key in this, to not be distracted by anything else and focus on the quality of what you hear on multiple levels: content and performance. In other words, combining Adorno and Grehan here, the ideal form of slow listening is not only structural hearing, but also knowledge of who one is listening to. Slow listening is being an active listener, reflecting on the content in the act of listening, with knowledge of techniques of composing and performance. However, these ideas are situated in a very specific situation, or understanding of what music is. Is it fair to compare the ideas of Adorno and Grehan, in a twentieth century book that only focuses on “works” of music and an article about listening in theatre, to twenty-first century music streaming? And is it even possible to listen in this attentive way while reflecting on the content, when the context of listening varies for every individual due to the mobility that listening through streaming services offers?

3.2.2 Actual listening

As I argued in the previous chapter, the workings of the attention economy, the popularity of online music consumption and therefore the importance of visuals, all result in “new” ways of listening to music, and these do not exactly fit the situation on which the authors above base

¹³⁰ Helena Grehan, “Slow Listening: The Ethics and Politics of Paying Attention, or Shut Up and Listen,” *Performance Research* 24, no. 8 (2019): 53-58.

¹³¹ Grehan, “Slow Listening,” 53.

¹³² Grehan, “Slow Listening,” 53.

their argument. There is also a lot of critique on Adorno's types of listeners, for instance by Peter Szendy, who sees Adorno's active and passive listening as synonymous for a distinction between attentive and inattentive listening. Szendy discusses how attentive listening was imposed on visitors of concert halls as a *politics of listening* and underpins this argument by highlighting several composers and the kind of listening that they and/or their music imposed on the listener.¹³³

Szendy also criticizes Adorno's hierarchy and that "despite some negations of Adorno's, the types that follow [the expert type] seem to be a *degraded* version or a progressive *degradation* of the first type."¹³⁴ According to Szendy, Adorno's distinction between attentive and inattentive listening is too strict, it is "either to understand/hear *everything* ..., or to understand/hear *nothing*."¹³⁵ This is similar to the understanding of the attention economy that I discussed in the first chapter, where I showed that scholars approach consumers of information in the attention economy as either paying attention, or not paying attention, without taking into account the option of not *fully* paying attention (see section 2.2). The problem with Adorno is that he approaches music from a particular understanding of "the work," which indeed has an "ideal" for how listeners should act, but this ideal of how people should listen is entirely constructed. Szendy shows that in the time of Berlioz the *politics of listening* were especially strong in concert halls, "where the members of the public observe each other. ... Where we go to see people listening, or even to listen to people listening."¹³⁶ Groups of people were instructed to clap at certain points and got paid for doing this, and because the concert hall is a place where listeners are influenced by other listeners, these instructions were taken over (perhaps unconsciously for the unknowing audience members). A specific kind of listening and behaving was imposed on other audience members. This politics of listening had as its result that ideas of listening to music in "silence, [and paying] attention" are "characteristics – of *great music* and its *great listening* – [that] were imported to Vienna at the end of the eighteenth century," a "type of listening [that] supposes ... an attitude of fidelity to the work [*Werktreue*], as much in the listener as in the interpreter."¹³⁷ Composers such as Wagner and Schoenberg even recomposed works by Beethoven and Brahms in order to highlight important melodic lines and all of the individual notes respectively, in order to fit

¹³³ Peter Szendy, *Listen: A History of our Ears* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

¹³⁴ Szendy, *Listen*, 103.

¹³⁵ Szendy, *Listen*, 104.

¹³⁶ Szendy, *Listen*, 113-114.

¹³⁷ Szendy, *Listen*, 119.

with the idea that listeners should be able to understand the important aspects of the music: they “*recomposed listening*.”¹³⁸

There are many differences between the topic of this thesis and the listening in concert halls that Szendy discusses, but his chapter shows how particular modes of listening are imposed on the listener, not only by composers, but also by people in power. The importance of seeing as a concertgoer how other listeners listen is important for the *politics of listening*, which is different in the case of listening to online music in one’s own environment. The apps for smartphones, computers, tablets, televisions, etc., make it possible to listen to music in, theoretically, every situation. Listeners can, for instance, listen to music when they are home on their own, or they can use Spotify and stream music to loudspeakers during a party with other people. The first situation, the individualistic kind of listening that Spotify affords using headphones and creating your own bubble, means that it is often not the case that listeners see other people listening. In theory, this would mean that a politics of listening connected to a specific kind of music is not as strong. However, already since its inception, Spotify allows users to follow their friends, and through the desktop version of Spotify users get to see what those friends are listening to – in real-time. I need to take this into consideration, which I will do in the next section.

And what about the kind of listening that Adorno so despises: listening while doing other activities, something for which an app by a streaming service is so convenient? Szendy points to this problem that deals with the question of attentive versus inattentive listening: “To listen without any wandering, without ever letting oneself be distracted by the ‘noises of life,’ is that still listening? Shouldn’t listening welcome some *wavering* into its heart? Shouldn’t a *responsible* listening ... always be *wavering*?”¹³⁹ Szendy writes that “*distraction, lacunary* listening might also be a means, an attitude, to make *sense of the work*, ... a valid and fertile connection in *auditory interpretation at work*.”¹⁴⁰ Thus, Szendy argues that listening to a work takes place within a certain context, and that the sound – or silence – apart from the music itself also contributes to a particular understanding of that work.

This is addressed by Ulf Holbrook in his discussion of ambient music, as he argues “that the background is the context which supports our listening, and that this contextual presence is

¹³⁸ Szendy, *Listen*, 125-127.

¹³⁹ Szendy, *Listen*, 122.

¹⁴⁰ Szendy, *Listen* 104.

integral to our understanding of the music we are listening to.”¹⁴¹ Importantly, ambient music is certainly not the music that either Adorno or Szendy is talking about, so it would not be fair to compare their ideas directly, but the nature of ambient music does show that there is more than only “the work.” In terms of attentiveness, ambient music is composed with the possibility to zoom in or out, that is, to be both focused on and ignored. Holbrook writes that “being ignorable can be seen both as an insistence on being left to one’s own devices as well as an insistence on aspects of timelessness.”¹⁴² Ambient music is often repetitive, and as a listener it can feel as if this is never ending, so listeners can easily ignore the music for a while and return to it, without missing much of a development in the music. Because of this characteristic of ambient music, the sounds from the environment that one is listening in that complement the music are just as important.

Holbrook also writes that, because of this characteristic, “unlike other genres or modes of communication, ambient music can freely move in a perceived spaceless and timeless fashion.”¹⁴³ This is where I would disagree. Not with the fact that ambient music can be perceived in that way, but the suggestion that this is a unique characteristic for this genre. As we saw in chapter 1, Virilio argued that the speed of digital communication *itself*, regardless of the content, causes a loss of the sense of space and time. Moreover, in certain situations, music of all genres can be perceived to move freely. This connects to a mode of listening described by Anahid Kassabian: ubiquitous listening.¹⁴⁴ This mode of listening is “dissociated from specific generic characteristics of the music,” a mode in which “we listen ‘alongside,’ or simultaneous with, other activities.”¹⁴⁵ Because of technological developments in recorded music, music is everywhere and not connected to a certain space. Kassabian argues that, because of this ubiquity, people tend to forget that they are listening to something.¹⁴⁶ In other words, this would mean that, independent of the genre of musical characteristics, music can be perceived spaceless and timeless.

Returning to the question of how to listen, Ola Stockfelt argues that, because music is everywhere, there are different listening modes that are suitable for the different contexts in

¹⁴¹ Ulf Holbrook, “A Question of Backgrounds: Sites of Listening,” in *Music Beyond Airports: Appraising Ambient Music*, eds. Monty Adkins and Simon Cummings (Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield Press, 2019), 51-52.

¹⁴² Holbrook, “Question of Backgrounds,” 58.

¹⁴³ Holbrook, “Question of Backgrounds,” 58.

¹⁴⁴ Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

¹⁴⁵ Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening*, 9.

¹⁴⁶ Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening*, 8.

which music is being played.¹⁴⁷ However, it also depends on what kind of music it is, what a listener's strategy is (what strategies they know for listening, such as paying attention to the more technical aspects of the piece of music itself or the performer), and what their knowledge of the repertoire is.¹⁴⁸ These possible modes of listening are thus different for every listener, and all of these aspects influence each other. The context in which music is heard has an enormous influence on the listening strategy that a listener uses, as "it can be impossible, for example, to choose to listen in an autonomously reflexive mode if too many other things are competing for attention."¹⁴⁹ Take for instance every time that I enter my favorite local cinema, where famous classical pieces sound through the speakers until the film starts. Even though this might be Wagner's recomposed version of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony that Szendy wrote about, with the melodic lines played by the flute so the listener can distinguish them, my mode of listening is completely different than in the concert hall. It merely creates an ambiance, and my friends and I just talk to each other while barely paying attention to the music. However, I know this symphony and it does attract my attention for a few seconds upon entering the room. It is thus not only the situation, but also my own knowledge that influences the mode of listening, a mode that might be different from someone who enters the same place but does not know the music and does not pay attention to it.

For every individual, the mode of listening is thus different. I argued above that in the case of Spotify, the mobility and options that listeners have stimulate this kind of individual listening context. But Stockfelt shows that while the context is important, it also depends in the individual's knowledge of and experience with music. In terms of what is "adequate" listening, Stockfelt does not necessarily contradict Adorno's argument, because Adorno based his argument on a particular kind of music. However, the contextual situation is completely different in the example of the cinema than in the concert hall. Stockfelt calls ideal situations for listening to genres "genre-normative listening situations," which forms "the ideal relation between music and listener that were presumed in the formation of the musical style."¹⁵⁰ Adequate listening is thus connected to a specific context for which the music is made, and "according to the predominant sociocultural conventions of the subculture to which the music belongs."¹⁵¹ This means that the notion of "adequate listening is ... always in the broadest sense

¹⁴⁷ Ola Stockfelt, "Adequate Modes of Listening," trans. Anahid Kassabian and Leo G. Svendsen, in *Keeping Score: Music, Disciplinary, Culture*, eds. David Schwarz, Anahid Kassabian and Lawrence Siegel. (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 132-133.

¹⁴⁸ Stockfelt, "Adequate Modes," 134.

¹⁴⁹ Stockfelt, "Adequate Modes," 134.

¹⁵⁰ Stockfelt, "Adequate Modes," 136.

¹⁵¹ Stockfelt, "Adequate Modes," 137.

ideological: it relates to a set of opinions belonging to a social group about ideal relations between individuals, between individuals and cultural expression, and between the cultural expressions and the construction of society.”¹⁵² Based on all these issues, Stockfelt argues that “analysis of music in everyday listening situations must be based on listening adequate to the given situation,” even if the music was originally written with another type of listening in mind.¹⁵³

In other words, and based on the authors above, I believe that it is impossible to decide what “adequate” listening would be. I started section 3.2.1 with underlining the fact that I do not aim to tell listeners that they should listen in a certain way, and after discussing all of the issues that are caused by so many aspects – a listener’s knowledge, context, ideologies – it is clear that describing slow listening as an adequate mode of listening is unproductive. Especially in the case of streaming services. Stockfelt certainly also criticizes the notion of a single adequate mode of listening and takes into account a lot more aspects that matter concerning the listener and listening situation, but something that he does not stress enough is the question where music in those situations comes from: is it live, is it recorded, are speakers the source, or is it a personal device? A personal device would mean that the listener is in full control of what kind of music is playing, and thus can choose themselves what suits the situation. This means that individual listeners can decide the music based on the context and what fits for themselves at that point in time. The music can adapt to what the listener wants, and I would argue that any kind of listening in this situation is adequate, as it suits the personal needs of the listener.

3.3 Spotify in everyday life

The logical question that follows the issues that I raised in the previous section is as follows: but how do people listen in everyday life? Many scholars have discussed possible answers to this, most notably Tia DeNora in her book *Music in Everyday Life*, that deals with how music in all kinds of everyday situations affects listeners – both music on personal devices and in the public sphere.¹⁵⁴ One of the arguments she makes is that it can regulate feelings, to which I will return in section 3.5 in this chapter that deals with mindfulness and focus playlists. The question of how people listen in everyday life through streaming services specifically is addressed by Anja Nylund Hagen In her chapter, Nylund Hagen discusses her ethnographic

¹⁵² Stockfelt, “Adequate Modes,” 138.

¹⁵³ Stockfelt, “Adequate Modes,” 139.

¹⁵⁴ Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

study of the role that streaming services and the music that they offer have in everyday life of listeners.¹⁵⁵ Instead of the authors above, who mostly focused on specific works or qualities of the music itself such as genre, Nylund Hagen looks at qualities of the streaming service itself. She quotes Jonathan Sterne and argues that “like LPs, cassettes, CDs and MP3 files, a music streaming service also ‘denotes a whole range of decisions that affect the look, feel, experience, and workings of a medium. It also names a set of rules according to which a technology can operate.’”¹⁵⁶ By looking through the lens of *affordances*, possibilities for action, Nylund Hagen identifies several “condition[s] of music streaming services” that influence how listeners experience their music, or use the streaming service, which I need to take into consideration in this thesis about slow listening.¹⁵⁷

First of all, there is the condition of “music abundance,” because the music libraries have an endless offer of music. This ties in with the attention economy and the problem of an abundance of information, and the possibility that it becomes overwhelming for listeners: if the possibilities are endless, what should they choose? Another condition is “intangibility,” the music is not tangible in the sense that it is in the case of vinyl or a CD, which makes it mobile, but also more ephemeral. Moreover, there are certain “platform principles,” the more practical functionalities of the streaming service. As we have already seen, Spotify has the possibility to create your own playlists, but also to listen to AI generated playlists.

I discussed some of these platform principles and how their creation is a result of the attention economy in the previous chapter, but Nylund Hagen connects this to listening in everyday life and shows what kind of effect they have on the listening experience of her research participants. Interestingly, Nylund Hagen argues that music streaming is so easy and ubiquitous that it is part of everyday rituals, and that “just as deprivation of nicotine and caffeine makes addicts stressed, this is also the consequence of missing ... morning music” to one of her participants.¹⁵⁸ Is this not the same situation as the one described by Adorno, when he argued that music is an addiction to some inadequate listener? It sure sounds like it, but the real question then is whether this is really the same type of listening as the way that Adorno’s passive, inattentive “music for entertainment” listener presumably listens. Unfortunately this is a question that I cannot really answer here. This person that has morning music as an

¹⁵⁵ Anja Nylund Hagen, “Music Streaming in the Everyday Life,” In *Networked Music Cultures: Contemporary Approaches, Emerging Issues*, eds. Raphaël Nowak and Andrew Whelan, 227-245. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

¹⁵⁶ Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 7.; cited in Nylund Hagen, “Music Streaming,” 229.

¹⁵⁷ Nylund Hagen, “Music Streaming,” 230.

¹⁵⁸ Nylund Hagen, “Music Streaming,” 235.

“addiction” can also be listening attentively to the music every morning. Being addicted to music does not mean that the music merely serves as a background filler. Nylund Hagen does, however, point out that “through daily use the integrated relationship developed between the users and the technology affords a particular kind of taken-for-granted ‘mode of access’ to music, which affects how the music is experienced.”¹⁵⁹ Music that is taken for granted does imply an unawareness of the music being present, exactly the problem that I aim to tackle with an understanding of possible techniques for slow listening.

About this affected experience of music Nylund Hagen writes that “the experiences of an individual’s temporal being in the world are affected when music streams blend into the rhythms of everyday life.”¹⁶⁰ This is important, as we saw that this was one of the things that Virilio also observed when it comes to technologies and the sense of space and time. The taken-for-granted music in everyday life, made possible through (digital) technology, is fostered by the immediate access to this enormous online song library. It was also possible with for instance a Walkman or an iPod to listen to music in everyday life, but the neo-Muzak (see 2.5 in this thesis) that Spotify offers, music suited for every single situation and tailored to the users need, make it easier to adapt the music to those “rhythms of everyday life” that Nylund Hagen speaks about.

Nylund Hagen ends her article with two important conclusions that I need to stress here as well. First, she concludes that “music streaming services do not afford single, fixed actions, but rather a range of *modes of action* that accommodate both careful planning and serendipitous encounters, as well as technology facilitated practices and user-motivated ones.”¹⁶¹ This only confirms the issue that I raised before, that it is the individual user that decides what and when they listen to music. However, Nylund Hagen’s study also shows that the affordances of Spotify create endless possibilities for interaction with the streaming service itself. The second concluding remark of Nylund Hagen is that “the cloud conditions of abundance and intangibility also allow for more prodigious listening. ... This corresponds with music streaming as a secondary or background activity, perceived with fleeting or fragmented attention. Nevertheless, these various listening experiences, shallow or profound, maintain strong music-listener relationships, because listening has increasingly come to represent the *lived experience* of users’ everyday life.”¹⁶² Thus, it does not really matter how much conscious

¹⁵⁹ Nylund Hagen, “Music Streaming,” 240.

¹⁶⁰ Nylund Hagen, “Music Streaming,” 241.

¹⁶¹ Nylund Hagen, “Music Streaming,” 242.

¹⁶² Nylund Hagen, “Music Streaming,” 242.

attention listeners pay to the music itself, because in any case streamed music is an integral part of how people experience and value everyday life.

3.4 Value and meaning

The article by Nylund Hagen pointed to the importance of the material aspects, or aspects of the platform, the conditions of the streaming service, and that the technologies that people use to listen to their music all have an effect on how the music is experienced. Raphaël Nowak similarly argues that “music technologies delineate the enactment of music consumption modes, and their materiality takes an inherent part in differentiating practices and in anchoring them with everyday contexts.”¹⁶³ Moreover, music technologies “induc[e] particular modes of consumption through their affordances.”¹⁶⁴ The technology influences what how people listen and what they listen to: the degree of freedom is higher with streaming services than radio, for which you cannot directly decide what music will be played – unless you request a song.

In terms of attention and awareness of the music that people listen to and technologies, a comparison between listeners to vinyl records and listeners that use streaming services is useful. Hayes argues that vinyl is still a popular means of music consumption, as listeners do this “to resist industry-regulated contemporary modes of music consumption,” and it is about “a preoccupation with nostalgia and a perceived loss of personal agency.”¹⁶⁵ This personal agency also comes up in Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward’s discussion of the role of vinyl in the current age. They specifically mention slow movements and argue that “vinyl is the slow food equivalent of music listening practices. Precisely because vinyl does not lend itself to portability but invites special attention, it can function as a more demanding, ‘organic’ and thus sophisticated and reflective medium.”¹⁶⁶ Moreover, the physical presence of vinyl “may also mean a more immersive experience, whereby one can feel closer to the music.”¹⁶⁷ Brian J. Hraacs and Johan Jansson’s work about vinyl shops underlines the special attention that vinyl requires, but then in terms of effort to buy. Going to physical records stores can be

¹⁶³ Raphaël Nowak, *Consuming Music in the Digital Age: Technologies, Roles and Everyday Life* (Houndmills [etc.]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 48.

¹⁶⁴ Nowak, *Consuming Music*, 49.

¹⁶⁵ David Hayes, “‘Take Those Old Records off the Shelf’: Youth and Music Consumption in the Postmodern Age,” *Popular Music and Society* 29, no. 1 (2006): 51.

¹⁶⁶ Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward, “The Vinyl: The Analogue Medium in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 15, no. 1 (2015): 21.

¹⁶⁷ Bartmanski and Woodward, “The Vinyl,” 21.

considered by consumers as “more expensive and time-consuming than shopping online” or not shopping at all but just using a streaming service.¹⁶⁸

In this comparison between vinyl and streaming services, value is an important aspect for vinyl listeners that distinguishes it from digital music. Brian J. Hrac and Johan Jansson argue that vinyl stores still exist because they can create a certain value that digital music companies cannot, and that stores have two strategies to create a higher value: “cultivating in-store consumer experiences, [and] creating value through curation.”¹⁶⁹ Indeed, in the previous chapter I already discussed the risk for streaming services that to have merely use value (it is practical for listeners because they can easily access music) at the cost of the sign value (having a meaningful relationship with the music, or, in the case of Hrac and Jansson, vinyl record stores). As I argued, Spotify attempts to recreate sign value by creating a meaningful relationship as a streaming service with the listener. Similar to the value that record stores create, Spotify tries to create experiences for the listener that they can only have on Spotify through exclusive video content, and Spotify curates many personal playlists. Moreover, the possibility on Spotify to create your own playlists (participation) and to follow friends also adds to sign value, as these playlists can be made for and shared with friends, for instance.

3.4.1 Creating playlists

A discussion of the practice of creating playlists is relevant in this thesis, as this means that listeners are actively engaging with music. Even though it heightens sign value on Spotify, playlists on streaming services are not really a new phenomenon. On the contrary: cassette mixtapes and compiled CDs are examples of a personally curated music collection that existed long before streaming services, and digital playlists are merely a digital continuation of this. In 2011, the 20th issue of *Transformations* was devoted to themes of slow media, with Rauch as guest-editor. An article by Jörgen Skågeby in this issue deals with the value of cassette tapes and digital playlists.¹⁷⁰ He argues that the value for non-digital means of listening to music is higher, and that the “speed-focused technical development” has a large impact on the *value* that is attached to music.¹⁷¹ Skågeby writes that “residing analogue media (e.g. the cassette) provides a way to slow cycles of both production and consumption down and emphasize the

¹⁶⁸ Brian J. Hrac and Johan Jansson, “Death by Streaming or Vinyl Revival? Exploring the Spatial Dynamics and Value-Creating Strategies of Independent Record Shops in Stockholm,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* (2017): 2.

¹⁶⁹ Hrac and Jansson, “Death by Streaming,” 2.

¹⁷⁰ Jörgen, Skågeby, “Slow and Fast Music Media: Comparing Values of Cassettes and Playlists,” *Transformations* 20 (2011).

¹⁷¹ Skågeby, “Slow and Fast,” 1.

aesthetics and social bonding value.”¹⁷² Mixtapes have social bonding value because of their personal nature, because it takes time and effort to create one and it is made with music that the creator has in their physical music library. Skågeby proposes to return to these “slow” analogue media, because digital playlists merely have use value. I have two points against this proposition. First, and I discussed this critique in the introduction of this thesis, it is not always possible in socioeconomic terms to go against the tide of what is common and convenient. This is also the reason for this thesis’ focus on whether slow listening through streaming services is possible. The second “problem” with Skågeby’s argument is the recent developments on Spotify that I discussed in the first chapter: the ways that they engage audiences in a new way by adding visuals. This means that it is not merely use value, but that there is also some sign value.

Skågeby has a point, however, concerning the social bonding value that seems to be lower or even missing with digital playlists. Kieran Fenby-Hulse also compares mixtapes to digital playlists, but instead of the focus on value and counter-cultural propositions that Skågeby has, Fenby-Hulse focuses on “Mixtapes, Nostalgia and Emotionally Durable Design.”¹⁷³ He argues that, while contemporary media such as streaming services often refer to the mixtapes, the listening experience is different. About Spotify, Fenby-Hulse writes that the listening experience “seems to revolve more around activity-based listening or functional music than enabling a shared listening and social experience.”¹⁷⁴ Playlists on Spotify are often created for activities and can be hours longer than traditional mixtapes, which results in a selection of music that is a lot broader than mixtapes because there is no limit.¹⁷⁵ Similar to Bartmanski and Woodward’s arguments about vinyl records, “emotional attachment is heightened by the fact that the mixtape brings together an aural experience with a haptic and visual one.”¹⁷⁶ Fenby-Hulse writes that Spotify playlists cannot be personalized because “it is not possible to give descriptions, write blurbs, or upload album art.”¹⁷⁷ This lack of a personal feeling to it is what Skågeby sees as the main reason for a low social bonding value. However, some of the observations that they both do about Spotify have changed. Nowadays it is possible for creators of playlists to add album art and descriptions in order to add this personal note. Still, I think

¹⁷² Skågeby, “Slow and Fast,” 8.

¹⁷³ Kieran Fenby-Hulse, “Rethinking the Digital Playlist: Mixtapes, Nostalgia and Emotionally Durable Design,” in *Networked Music Cultures: Contemporary Approaches, Emerging Issues*, eds. Raphaël Nowak and Andrew Whelan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 171-188.

¹⁷⁴ Fenby-Hulse, “Rethinking the Digital Playlist,” 180.

¹⁷⁵ Fenby-Hulse, “Rethinking the Digital Playlist,” 180.

¹⁷⁶ Fenby Hulse, “Rethinking the Digital Playlist,” 182.

¹⁷⁷ Fenby-Hulse, “Rethinking the Digital Playlist,” 180.

that this is not “enough” compared to the unique and personal nature of mixtapes. In other words, it is not in the platform’s nature to induce a mode of slow listening in terms of personally created playlists. In terms of these playlists, it is the action and mode of listening of individual listeners to be more personal and conscious about these creation processes.

3.4.2 Visuals

Another element of Spotify that I discussed in the previous chapter is that of visuals. Spotify has added Canvases, Stories, and enhanced albums, that are exclusively visible for Spotify users (see section 2.4.2). This not only adds value, but also affects the listening experience as these visuals can add meaning for the listener. Canvas is a substitute for the album cover, which makes a comparison with such album covers in order to understand how Canvases work useful here.

In terms of album covers and their functionality, a few main purposes and effects on the listening experience can be distinguished. Steve Jones and Martin Sorger describe cover art for physical music as “a visual mnemonic to the music enclosed and a marketing tool.”¹⁷⁸ Jones and Sorger’s observation can be divided in two different, smaller functions. First, visuals can contain meaning and add musical meaning, by indicating what kind of genre the music belongs, for instance.¹⁷⁹ Nicholas Cook has described sleeves as an “aesthetic interaction between sight and sound,” because album covers and physical albums belong together and are often consumed at the same time.¹⁸⁰ The visuals can influence the understanding of the music.

The second function that album covers have is that of marketing or branding. When product-based consumption was the standard, the first thing that consumers saw in the record store was the album cover. Therefore, the artwork of an album needs to attract the listener more than the album next to it in the shelves.¹⁸¹ Cook writes that the album cover is especially important in “classical” music albums, because these often contain works by the same composer, but performed by different artists.¹⁸² The art on the cover can not only help customers differentiate between albums, but also give the work an identity.

¹⁷⁸ Steve Jones and Martin Sorger, “Covering Music: A Brief History and Analysis of Album Cover Design,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 11-12 no. 1 (1999): 83.

¹⁷⁹ Jones and Sorger, “Covering Music,” 84.

¹⁸⁰ Nicholas Cook, “The Domestic *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or Record Sleeves and Reception,” in *Composition – Performance – Reception: Studies in the Creative Process in Music*, ed. Wyndham Thomas (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1998), 110.

¹⁸¹ Jones and Sorger, “Covering Music,” 84.

¹⁸² Cook, “Domestic *Gesamtkunstwerk*,” 108.

These two functions were distinguished based on the static artwork in record stores, but what about Canvas as a dynamic substitute for that artwork. And how do the Enhanced Albums and Stories relate to this? In terms of adding meaning and the combination of the visual and aural elements, Canvases are very similar to album covers. Perhaps they even have more options, because of the possibility to show 3-8 second videos instead of only one frame. The Canvases can be shots from music videos, but there is an important difference here: the relation between the visuals of Canvas and music is not fixed. Pausing the music does not pause the video loop, and this means that every single time that someone listens to the same song, the points of synchronization can be different – something so important for music videos.

Let me return to the example that I mentioned in the first chapter. I discussed the Canvas of Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper’s “Shallow,” that showed the faces of the artists and can make the listener aware of who the artists are.¹⁸³ However, this Canvas also strengthens the meaning of the song. The video loop consists of five shots, that show the following scenes:

1. Cooper driving a motorbike, Gaga on the back of the motor with her arms wide open;
2. A close-up of Gaga’s face turned 90 degrees to the right, looking right into the camera;
3. Cooper, smiling while performing on his guitar;
4. A close-up of Gaga’s face with a tear rolling down her eye;
5. A close-up of Gaga and Cooper hugging, smiling and with their heads touching each other.

Musically speaking, “Shallow” starts slowly with a picked rhythm in the guitar, and it builds up to a whole band accompanying high and loud notes of Gaga. Both Cooper and Gaga add a lot of emotion in this build up, also through the lyrics, which deals with varying emotions. They speak of “all the good times,” “all the bad times,” happiness and sadness. The images in the video loop all express different emotions, and the shots all rapidly follow one another. The video loop strengthens the different emotions already present in the music, and with the rapid succession of the shots it adds the meaning and evokes the feeling of an emotional rollercoaster.

The Stories and Enhanced Albums on Spotify can also add meaning to the song, but not necessarily in terms of visuals. Some visuals do show a certain aesthetic, such as the videos in Khruangbin’s Enhanced Album version of *Mordechai*, that have a VCR-like filter on them,

¹⁸³ Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper, “Shallow,” Spotify, track 12 on *A Star is Born Soundtrack*, Interscope Records, 2018.

complete with a distorted effect.¹⁸⁴ It does, however, like the Stories, add meaning in terms of background information. In the video “Making Of: First Class,” musicians that play on *Mordechai* briefly speak about the chord changes and layers of the song, and how the artists themselves did not exactly know what kind of chords they were playing. This is information that listeners can bring with them when they start listening to the song itself, thus affecting the way that listeners start to listen.

There are some differences between the consumption of physical music and that of music on streaming services. Most importantly, the moment when listeners encounter the visual element. The physical album cover is often the first thing that a customer sees in record stores and it helps to attract attention to the record in order for it to be sold. This is the case for Stories and the videos accompanying Enhanced Albums, but in the case of Canvases the visuals can only be seen on Spotify once the music is *already* playing. Moreover, the music does not have to be sold to the listener for money: if they can use Spotify, then they can stream the song. Nevertheless, I do think that Canvases as well as Enhanced Albums and Stories have a marketing purpose. As I discussed in the previous chapter, artists only get paid if listeners listen long enough, and if they complete the song instead of skipping it, the chances are higher for those songs to be included in Spotify’s curated playlists. Encountering a Canvas and perhaps also the Enhanced Albums and Stories, makes the listener more aware of the music and the artist. Spotify’s Canvas data confirms this, that listeners complete songs and share them with others.¹⁸⁵

There is, however, one big issue here concerning listening experience and the addition of Spotify visuals: listeners already need to pay attention to the smartphone screen to see those visuals. It would be unrealistic to argue that the effects of meaning and marketing that I described above always work that way for listeners, because the visuals are merely an addition to a streaming service that is mainly meant for *listening without looking*. Rather it is a *possibility* that is given to listeners, the possibility to engage more with the music that they are listening to, especially with the Enhanced Albums and Stories functions. And the ultimate form of slow listening, I believe, is about using such possibilities. To be a listener that is conscious about the music that they are listening to, and to a mode of deep attention instead of hyper attention.

¹⁸⁴ Spotify, “Khruangbin Presents Mordechai, the Enhanced Album,” playlist, Spotify, accessed January 13, 2021, https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZF1DXakoXtFKnQYm?si=vxRqIF_4QjCPZksddcWaxg.

¹⁸⁵ Spotify for Artists. “Canvas.” Accessed December 1, 2020. <https://canvas.spotify.com/en-us>.

3.5 Mindfulness and focus

I started this chapter with the large role of focus playlists nowadays, which shows an interesting paradox in a practice of music and a possible slow listening. In these playlists, the music is meant to *not* pay attention to, but they are used in order to focus on other work. In this last section, I will discuss these playlists and what this means for my understanding of slow listening. Jennifer Rauch argues that, for slow media consumption, mindfulness is an important practice, because “mindfulness is a basic human capacity for regulating attention that everyone can improve.”¹⁸⁶ Regulating attention is exactly what Spotify’s focus-playlists help the listener to do, but at the same time, no attention is paid to the music itself. An understanding of mindfulness and its relationship to music is necessary here, to create a better idea of how listening to these playlists fits, or does not fit, in the category of slow listening.

As the first chapter showed, losing the sense of space and time is a central problem for consumers that occurs when digital media are constantly begging for their attention. This is where the concept and practice of mindfulness comes in, as one of its aims is to be aware of being in a certain place and of one’s surroundings and be in present time. Mindfulness is a state in which people are more aware of their surroundings, and of their position in relation to the space surrounding them. Practicing mindfulness, or mindfulness exercises, are meant to create such a state and are seen as having a positive impact on mental health in a society that is filled with impulses that all demand attention.¹⁸⁷ Through mindfulness, people should be able to focus their attention on the things that they *want* to focus their attention on, instead of being distracted by all of these other impulses. An example of a well-known exercise is eating a raisin and being fully aware of eating that raisin: the taste, the texture, how taste and texture change, and swallowing it.¹⁸⁸ This seemingly simple exercise challenges the mind to only focus on one thing that you are doing, and keeps you from being distracted by other thoughts that might usually come to mind when eating that same raisin.

Several books by molecular biologist Jon Kabat-Zinn are a major source for mindfulness practices in healthcare and for understanding its benefits. In *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, Kabat-Zinn maps out how mindfulness can be incorporated in people’s daily life, and he discusses several everyday situations that might occur.¹⁸⁹ Concerning time, he argues that one

¹⁸⁶ Jennifer Rauch, *Slow Media: Why “Slow” is Satisfying, Sustainable, and Smart* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 82.

¹⁸⁷ Rauch, *Slow Media*, 82.

¹⁸⁸ Rebecca Coleman, “The Presents of the Present: Mindfulness, Time, and Structures of Feeling,” *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* (2020): 10.

¹⁸⁹ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1994).

of the reasons that people feel rushed nowadays is that there seems to be an unlimited source of light.¹⁹⁰ Kabat-Zinn compares this to pre-technological times, when the light of the sun regulated daily life: there was simply not enough light at night to work. This created a moment to sit by the light in stillness and contemplate life. Nowadays, however, for many people such moments are not automatically created. There are no clear boundaries for when to stop because electric light gives people the opportunity to continue to work endlessly. Kabat-Zinn continues that, even when people stop working once the sun sets, common forms of recreation and relaxation do not open up the possibility for stillness and contemplation. Referring to television, he writes that “we submit ourselves to constant bombardment by sounds and images that come from minds other than our own, that fill our heads with information and trivia, other people’s adventures and excitement and desires.”¹⁹¹ Rauch follows Kabat-Zinn in this and writes that “technology can work 24/7 at top speed, but human bodies, minds and spirits cannot keep such a pace.”¹⁹² I see a similarity here with Virilio, who argued that the speed with which communication nowadays happens and the possibility to be anywhere through for instance images (caused by technologies) creates this loss of sense of time and place (see section 2.3 in this thesis).

The practice of mindfulness has been popularized and commodified by different media. This results in media that aim to support consumers in their mindfulness practices. In other words, the above is not to say that media are inherently *bad* for users, as there are applications that can help to create a mindful consumption ethic. Rauch acknowledges this, and this phenomenon also underlines the point that slow media is not a definition of what a medium *is*, but a lifestyle, a way to *use* media. Therefore, she promotes using media in the sense of monotasking instead of multitasking, also stressed by the authors of the “Slow Media Manifesto.”¹⁹³ Monotasking is seen as a mode of attention in which someone focuses on only one task, instead of switching between multiple tasks at the same time, without finishing anything. While multitasking feels like being productive, as one focuses on several tasks that have to be done, Rauch writes that “it actually stimulates mindlessness, makes you less efficient, and ruins your focus.”¹⁹⁴ It can be good to take a break from monotasking, and briefly stop working, but “there’s a difference between allowing your mind to be diverted by its own

¹⁹⁰ Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go*, 173.

¹⁹¹ Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go*, 174.

¹⁹² Rauch, *Slow Media*, 83.

¹⁹³ Rauch, *Slow Media*, 86; Benedikt Köhler, Sabria David and Jörg Blumtritt, “The Slow Media Manifesto,” January 2, 2010, <http://en.slow-media.net/manifesto>.

¹⁹⁴ Rauch, *Slow Media*, 86.

thoughts and letting it be hijacked by external stimuli.”¹⁹⁵ Monotasking versus multitasking can be compared to Hayles’ distinction between “deep attention” and “hyper attention,” in which deep attention means to focus on one thing only, while hyper attention means shifting focus between several tasks.¹⁹⁶ Here, we see the importance of including ideas of the attention economy again as I did in the previous chapter, because it is essentially the attention economy that contributes to the predominant mode of hyper attention.

3.5.1 Playlists and focus

Music, and especially the focus playlists on Spotify, seem to have a double identity in practicing mindfulness and entering a mode of deep attention. This is also exemplified by Kabat-Zinn himself who, in another chapter of his book, describes a situation in which he cleans his kitchen stove while listening to Bobby McFerrin.¹⁹⁷ While he does get things done, he does not feel like the result is his *own* work: “mindfully speaking, I can't get away with claiming that ‘I’ cleaned the stove. It's more like the stove cleaned itself, with the help of Bobby McFerrin, the scrubber, the baking soda, and the sponge, with guest appearances by hot water and a string of present moments.”¹⁹⁸ This example shows that, on the one hand, the music helps him to be more into the moment and focused on the work he is doing, but on the other hand his focus on the cleaning process seemed to appear out of nowhere, as if his body automatically responded to the rhythm and melodies. Kabat-Zinn shows here that music can help to create a desirable surrounding, to focus attention on something specific. But, as I indicated before, the music itself is not consumed mindfully: it often serves as an accompaniment that does not demand the attention from the listener, the listener is not paying attention to the music itself. This brings us back to an aspect that is so important for listening, but which does not seem an issue throughout the slow media movement: the importance of the context in which music consumption takes place. Listening to music does not necessarily require the user to *look* at something, therefore it is easy to have music accompany daily tasks. An environment can be formed to a place in which it is easy to focus. In other words, sound seems to be perfect to create an ideal situation to generate a mode of deep attention.

The use of playlists to create a state of focus is not new, and Tia DeNora shows this in *Music in the Everyday Life*. In this ethnographic study of how music functions to “regulate the

¹⁹⁵ Rauch, *Slow Media*, 86.

¹⁹⁶ See also section 2.2. of this thesis. N. Katherine Hayles, “Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes,” *Profession* 13 (2007): 187.

¹⁹⁷ Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go*, 204.

¹⁹⁸ Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go*, 205.

self,” one of the recurring themes in the daily music consumption of her respondents was using music to focus.¹⁹⁹ She discusses the type of music that works for her respondents, and writes that:

For the respondents who hailed ‘classical music’ as a ‘focuser’, this was usually because such was least likely to be associated with aspects of their lives outside the realm of work or study – that is, music not strongly associated with specific aspects of their social or emotional lives or memories. (Indeed, they often did not know the actual composers or works they used for this purpose but rather made use of compilation CDs, such as baroque highlights and so forth.)²⁰⁰

Specific musical characteristics are not important here, but the relationship between the music and the listener is. As DeNora writes, the listeners choose albums containing music that they do not know. This means that the listener is not conscious of aspects of the music itself. In the previous chapter, I argued that being noticed is very important for artists nowadays. The abundance of information and music results in the danger of not being noticed, which complicates their success as an artist (see section 2.4). Techniques have been generated to attract the attention of the listener, such as the visuals that can be seen on Spotify. Based on this, on the one hand I would argue that listeners of music to enhance focus are succeeding in applying some kind of slow listening, ignoring extra stimuli such as these visuals. Moreover, these listeners use music to create a situation that is highly promoted by the slow media movement, that of being mindful, being aware, and paying attention to the fullest. On the other hand, however, the music *itself* is not paid attention to. The music is consumed “passively,” without any conscious engagement. The first point goes against all of the practices that were described by many of the authors that I discussed, who specifically included slow movements. Rauch described slow listening as “play a favorite record and absorb every note, tone, and pause,”²⁰¹ Bartmanski and Woodward argued that vinyl is slow listening because vinyl requires care and attention (see section 3.4), Skågeby similarly argued that the time and effort put into creating a mixtape is a slow music medium (see section 3.4.1), and Matos only added a song to his digital library once he had listened to it and was aware of its existence (see section 1.2).

Perhaps listeners of focus playlists do not pay attention to the music, but these playlists are consciously selected. Users of Spotify deliberately choose a certain playlist, and they are conscious of the fact that music is playing. Thus, the use of playlists to generate a state of

¹⁹⁹ DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 59.

²⁰⁰ DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 59.

²⁰¹ Rauch, *Slow Media*, 95.

mindfulness or focus shows that the question of slow listening is complicated, but also that music has a unique position in terms of paying attention and slow movements.

3.6 Concluding remarks

Before I continue with the conclusion of this thesis, I want to summarize some of the main points that I addressed in this chapter. I started from the question whether listeners *should* listen in a certain way, as Adorno and Grehan argued. Adorno's "adequate" mode of listening were based on a certain ideology of what a "right" understanding of the music is and does not take into account specific listening situations. I argued that identifying a mode of listening that is adequate for streaming services is impossible: there are endless possibilities in terms of situations where music is being played, and listeners have different strategies and degrees of knowledge when it comes to musical aspects. More importantly, listeners can decide for themselves what kind of music they want to listen to and what is adequate for them in that situation. We also saw that aspects of the platform create a listening experience that is sometimes taken for granted, as streaming services can fit seamlessly in everyday life. Moreover, the listening experience for streaming services is different because of the different values that it has. Some scholars argued that vinyl or cassettes are a form of slow listening, as listeners need to pay attention to them in order to keep them going.

Spotify has tried to increase sign value by incorporating the possibility to create playlists and exclusive visuals. Creating playlists is not the same as with mixtapes, but the visuals do take album covers a step further and can help to generate meaning. I ended with a discussion of mindfulness and playlists for focus, and whether listening to such playlists can be seen as slow listening. It shows the paradox between the abundance of music and not being aware of what they are listening to, but also ignoring this abundance and creating an environment that is suited for a state of mindfulness.

Conclusion

“Good morning.” Spotify kindly greets me every single day when I get up. I start my days with making coffee and listening to music. At least, that is what I try to do. There is not a specific playlist or album that suits my morning, but I will just go with something that pops up in my mind and that suits the mood that I am in or the mood that I want to be in, is what I think. However, once I open the Spotify app, my mind often goes blank. Spotify’s homepage is filled with suggestions of playlists that the streaming service recommends to me, and all of them are trying to attract my attention with their covers. I scroll a bit and look at the suggestions, after which I either click on a random playlist or put my phone away and make my coffee in silence. The interface of Spotify overwhelms me every morning, but I still try to find a good accompaniment for waking up, over and over again. When I do select a random playlist, I often put my phone on the table and not really pay attention to the music that is playing. In that case it is merely the sound that creates a nice environment for me and activates my senses to start the day.

The “struggles” that my mind deals with every morning is an example of the choices that listeners on streaming services are confronted with. In the first chapter, I discussed the attention economy and how this impacts the way that music is offered to listeners on streaming services. The attention economy is fueled by the abundance of information, especially online, and the scarcity of attention. As an individual, it is impossible to process all of the information that is out there. Companies need to attract the attention of consumers in order to sell their products, and this works similarly for artists and streaming services that offer music. We saw that visuals are a key component in attracting attention, and that Spotify nowadays makes extensive use of the possibility to add such visuals. The Canvases, Stories and Enhanced Albums, benefit Spotify as a platform because they can give listeners something special. Instead of merely having a practical “use value,” Spotify’s exclusive content generates “sign value.” Moreover, these visuals on Spotify are beneficial for artists as well. Through Stories, for instance, artists can tell a personal story about their music to the listener. It generates an awareness for the listener: this is the artist that I am listening to, and this is the story behind it. Canvases, Stories and Enhanced Albums can make the listener pay conscious attention.

However, Spotify not only creates a good relationship with the listener by adding exclusive visuals (or giving me my first “good morning” of the day), but the streaming service also creates personal playlists for users based on their listening history. As beautiful as the added visuals might sound for artists and gaining attention, these playlists carry the danger for

the artist to be unnoticed. Just like me and my morning coffee and the random playlist in the background, listeners might not have a clue of who they are listening to. While being added to popular playlists can result in more plays for an artist's songs, this cannot be guaranteed.

Automatically generated playlists and my morning routine are thus an example of how "slow listening" should not be done. In the second chapter, continued with the observations that I made in the first chapter, but shifted my focus to the listener and listening experience. I argued that there is not a single, adequate mode of listening. The contexts in which music can be listened to and the knowledge and the background of individual listeners is too diverse, and the possibilities are endless. More importantly, however, I argued that listeners that use streaming services can make their own choice, and that everyone thus has adequate modes of listening that they find to suit their situation, choice of music, and context.

But if there is not one adequate mode of listening, what *is* slow listening? Some scholars have suggested a non-digital means of listening, but, as I already wrote at the beginning of this thesis, listeners do not always have the possibility to do this. Still, a comparison with aspects of vinyl showed that the new features on Spotify are similar to what one might encounter when listening to a physical album. Although the materiality is different and a digital file does not need the same care as a vinyl record, the visuals can create a unique listening experience where visuals add meaning to the music, similar to album covers. I want to argue here that being conscious about this, paying attention to the visuals – albeit Canvases, Stories, or Enhanced Albums – all are a form of slow listening. The listener is aware of the fact that they are listening to music.

I ended the second chapter with the relationship between mindfulness, or focus, and music. There is a tension here that needs revisiting in order to make my point about slow listening clear. In the first chapter, we saw Virilio's concerns that the speed of online communication causes consumers to lose their sense of space and time. Mindfulness can be used to solve such issues: it is a practice in which the practitioner becomes fully aware of their surroundings and present time. The slow media movement promotes the practice of mindfulness, because it can make the consumer aware of their media use. However, music has a special position in this. Listeners can "mindfully listen" to music by focusing only on the music as part of a space in the present, or they can *use* music to practice mindfulness. In this last case, music is only functional, and the music is meant to *not* pay attention to. However, I argue that this is also a form of slow listening, because it enhances focus. The listener has deliberately put on music and is therefore conscious of the fact that music is present, and it is used to get into a state of deep attention. This shows that slow listening is multifaceted, it is

not a question of understanding the technical details of music, how the music is composed or what kind of structure it has. It is about being *conscious* of the fact that music is playing.

Let me explain my last point by pointing to another playlist and type of listening that is *not* slow listening: the “Discover Weekly” playlist. Every Monday, Spotify gives users a new playlist with music that the algorithm thinks they will like. “Discover Weekly” is thus different for everyone, every week. If a listener puts on this playlist without consciously paying attention to the music, this is not slow listening. In the case of focus playlists, I wrote that the conscious decision to select the playlist adds up to the degree of slow listening, but it also depends on the activity that the listener finds themselves in. Similar to my random morning coffee playlist, playing “Discover Weekly” while doing other, non-mindful activities cannot be called slow listening. Again, it is thus not about paying attention to the music itself here, but about being conscious, aware of it. Music that is used to enhance focus has as its functionality to pay attention on something else, which is why I call this slow listening. In other words, slow listening depends on the listener, the context in which the listener finds themselves, the degree of attention that they pay to the music and/or the function that the music has.

In the introduction, I explained my decision to especially focus on the role of the attention economy. Moreover, I focused on what this means for the way that music is produced and distributed, and how listeners on specifically streaming services can listen consciously. Thus, instead of attempting to examine the possibility for a whole slow music movement, this thesis still needed to address a *lot* of different aspects of both music production and consumption. Therefore, this thesis turned out to be more of a descriptive work, in which I have pointed out many of the aspects that are important to take into consideration, but at some points more depth was lacking. These points can individually be examined into further detail, such as the content of Spotify’s visuals. I briefly discussed this in section 3.4, but there are many possibilities for artists to use these features. Perhaps the most important next step that can be taken is ethnographic research on the relationship between streaming services and consciousness of listeners about what they are listening to.

While Spotify is the most popular streaming service and therefore made a good research object, other streaming services or platforms might take different approaches to engage the attention of listeners. YouTube premium could be an interesting example, as this platform makes it possible for users to listen to YouTube videos without looking at these videos. In this way, YouTube tries to imitate the function that Spotify has – the ability to listen without looking. YouTube “videos” can then be listened to while doing other activities, which adds yet

another layer to the issues of slow listening: can “watching” a video by only engaging with the sound be slow listening or fast watching?

A last important point for future research has to do with the choices that I made in delineating the topic of this thesis. I decided to only focus on one of the aspects that the slow media movement is concerned with – that of conscious, mindful listening, in a mentally sustainable way. However, there is the other, perhaps more important kind of sustainability. Slow listening in this thesis did not include any issues about sustainability, but if this mode of listening would be developed further, this is definitely necessary. This is also a point where the notion of slow listening can be turned into slow music, because consuming music in an environmentally friendly manner would mean that the consumer pays conscious attention to the production as well.

Throughout this thesis, I discussed the topic of regulating your own attention when it comes to consuming music. It is important to stress one last time that this thesis is not meant as a description for listeners how they *should* listen. My aim has been to examine how listeners listen to streaming services, how streaming services offer music in the attention economy, and how listeners can deal with this healthily. For every individual, music has a different value, music has a different purpose, and music is listened to in a different context. It is certainly not a sin to play music merely as a background filler and not be aware of it, but music is a kind of information that your brain processes through your ears. Therefore, it can add up to all of the impulses and streams of (digital) information, and it can be enlightening and even refreshing to be aware of this sometimes, and to appreciate music for what it is. Still, music can be a great background filler, and I will do a new attempt tomorrow to find some great morning coffee music, even if this is a random playlist to color my environment.

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