"Music Is Just Right There on Social Media!": Discovering, Exploring, and Incorporating Songs Across Platforms

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This article examines the role of social media in music consumption, extending its scope beyond the circulation of visual content. Based on interviews with and follow-up reports from 25 Costa Ricans, we investigate 3 specific ways of relating to music across platforms: the discovery of affectively resonant songs on social media, the exploration of these songs through interconnections across platforms, and the continuous integration of this music into the temporal and spatial flows of everyday life. The article analyzes the relationship between social media platforms and music streaming services, offering a nuanced discussion of their intricate but underexamined interplay. We argue that music discovery, exploration, and incorporation reveal 3 dynamics at the core of people's interactions with platforms: the reflexive relationship with algorithms as an integral aspect of people's lives, the alignment of affordances with established cultural consumption patterns, and the intricate interconnections across diverse apps and devices.

Keywords: affordances, algorithms, discovery, Latin America, music, social media, streaming, TikTok

Because of its pivotal role in personal expression, identity shaping, social connection, and memory formation, the discovery of new music stands as a crucial cultural practice (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). As Nowak puts it, "discovering music is an essential engine to the renewal of culture" (2016b, p. 138). In light of this

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cultural importance, music discovery and recommendation have emerged as crucial battlegrounds among streaming services (Eriksson, Fleischer, Johansson, Snickars, & Vonderau, 2019).

Studies examining music consumption via platforms such as Apple Music, Spotify, and YouTube, among others, have grown considerably over the past years (Beuscart, Coavoux, & Garrocq, 2023; Glevarec, 2021; Siles, Segura-Castillo, Sancho, & Solís-Quesada, 2019). Yet, a noteworthy segment of present-day music consumption extends beyond these services. Specifically, social media platforms have turned into key sites for fans to listen to music. Music has become a constitutive component of stories, shorts, reels, videos, pins, photos, and ordinary posts. For example, TikTok's collaboration with Billboard to establish a "Top 50" chart in September 2023 evidenced not only the app's pivotal role in music consumption but also the increasing significance of music in the design of social media.

Despite the growing importance of social media in shaping music consumption, researchers have tended to focus primarily on the visual aspects of content circulation on these platforms. According to Tintiangko, Fung, and Leo-Liu (2023), "There has been a lack of attention toward the impact of [social media] . . . [in] the music industry; let alone in the context of the Global South" (p. 1601). This article aims to fill this knowledge gap by examining the practices that characterize music consumption across platforms such as social media and streaming services. To this end, we adopt an ecological perspective that invites examining the use of music streaming platforms not as independent from but rather deeply connected with social media and other apps and devices. Drawing on interviews with and follow-up reports from 25 Costa Ricans, we discuss three specific ways of relating to music across various platforms: *discovering* resonant songs on social media, *exploring* them through connections across different platforms, and *incorporating* them into the temporal and spatial flows of everyday life.

Studies of everyday life have demonstrated that "the most mundane and the banally ordinary practices, emotions, social relationships and interactions also reflect convergences with and manifestations of wider social factors, forces, structures and divisions" (Neal & Murji, 2015, p. 813). In line with this analysis, we argue that music discovery, exploration, and incorporation showcase broader forms of relating to platforms in daily life. These practices unveil how people experience and manage their interactions with platforms by cultivating reflexive relationships with algorithms, aligning the affordances of these platforms with established cultural consumption trajectories, and weaving intricate connections among multiple apps and devices. We discuss these implications and their broader analytical significance in the conclusion.

Theorizing Music Consumption Practices

We draw on an interdisciplinary framework to theorize the processes involved in music discovery, exploration, and incorporation. To begin with and following Nowak (2016b), we define *discovery* as "an affective response to music that associates it with a set of mediations" (p. 137). In short, "a discovery has to be memorable" (Nowak, 2016b, p. 142). For Nowak (2016b), music discoveries manifest in moments of "epiphany" (situations that "leave an affective mark that makes individuals remember the conditions of discovery over time"; p. 143) and "rediscovery" (the reinterpretation of music that people already knew).

McKelvey and Hunt (2019) use the notion of "discoverability" to emphasize that discovery is not a happenstance event but rather a coordinated process that expresses power dynamics concerning digital platforms. They posit three concepts to understand how discoverability unfolds within digital media contexts: surrounds ("the ways that platforms arrange choices on or between screens [and devices]"), vectors ("the interactive pathways we take through data, guided by software"), and experiences ("how users find and consume pieces of content"; McKelvey & Hunt, 2019, p. 2).

We also analyze *exploration*, defined as a thorough examination and in-depth research into music, aimed at acquiring comprehensive insights and understanding of songs. As Riom (2020) suggests, exploration entails actions conducted to ensure that a discovery endures over time, probing whether affective responses to specific songs can evolve into more lasting memories and emotions beyond their initial discovery.

Internet-related activities and technologies have consistently played a significant role in shaping music consumption (Tepper & Hargittai, 2009). With the rise of music streaming platforms, both discovery and exploration have partially been delegated to algorithms (Eriksson et al., 2019). Going back to McKelvey and Hunt's (2019) framework, algorithms are crucial vectors in contemporary music circulation.

The affordances framework has offered a lens for theorizing the dynamic relationship between people, music, and technologies. Researchers have underscored the importance of transcending a conception of affordances as universal properties of technologies and instead advancing toward their comprehension as situational and context-dependent (Davis, 2020). Costa (2018) coined the term "affordances-in-practice" precisely to conceptualize the situated "enactment of platform properties by specific users within social and cultural contexts" (p. 3651). This notion thus emphasizes how music consumption takes place through the interplay of technologies and culturally embedded practices.

While research focusing on platforms and social media has emphasized the significance of affordances, communication studies scholarship has explored the role of symbolic processes in discovering and exploring cultural products. Gray (2010) investigated the significance of "paratexts" in shaping the interpretation of media texts. These are parallel communication elements that "establish frames and filters through which we look at, listen to, and interpret the [media] texts that they hype" (Gray, 2010, p. 2). For Gray, specific communication elements (including music) can perform a paratextual role by helping frame other media texts.

Finally, *incorporation* goes beyond the discovery and exploration of songs by underscoring how people make them a more permanent part of their everyday lives. Incorporation refers to the process through which a relatively more permanent relationship with music is built. Our use of this notion is similar to how researchers have theorized the role of personal "archives" (Lüders, 2021a) or "collections" (Cunningham, Bainbridge, & Bainbridge, 2017). As Woodward and Greasley (2017) note, collections are not necessarily sets of special items but rather assemblages of interrelated ordinary things. In this perspective, collecting items involves primarily integrating them into a "range of diverse temporalities, materialities and practices" rather than isolating them from their use (Woodward & Greasley, 2017, p. 660).

Scholars have examined issues of incorporation primarily by focusing on playlists. These studies have theorized playlist creation and maintenance as a cultural practice of music incorporation through which people perform identity politics, cultivate moods and emotions, establish a sense of community, and articulate meaning for their personal lives (Glevarec, 2021; Siles et al., 2019).

Research Design

We investigated the practices of 25 individuals based in Costa Rica since this country provides an ideal backdrop for exploring the themes discussed in this article. Ninety percent of the population regularly use social media in the country, which also leads the Latin American region in the usage of popular platforms like Facebook (85%) and WhatsApp (98%), with substantial engagement on Instagram (48%) and TikTok (45%) as well (Brenes Peralta, Siles, & Tristán Jiménez, 2024; Latinobarómetro, 2018). YouTube (80%) and Spotify (25%) are the most favored platforms to listen to music in the country (Brenes Peralta et al., 2024).

This case also offers an opportunity to further understand worldwide patterns of music circulation enabled by these platforms. Because of the small nature of the country's cultural markets, Costa Ricans exhibit a greater tendency to listen to foreign artists than local ones (Siles, Ross Arguedas, Sancho, & Solís-Quesada, 2022). As Muñoz-González (2023) puts it, the US influence on cultural consumption in Costa Rica is "palpable in terms of offer and consumption" (p. 2). This inclination creates a favorable environment for listening to music with English lyrics and attention to viral trends that feature music from English-speaking contexts.

To assemble our group of participants, we launched a call for participation that circulated across the Facebook and Instagram profiles of the university where our research was conducted. We specifically sought individuals who had prior experience discovering music through social media (regardless of the platform) and were willing to share their experiences. Those interested completed an online questionnaire covering their background information and social media usage. From these respondents, we selected a total of 25 participants aged 19–42 years old. The average age among them was 26 years old. Among the participants, nine identified as male, 15 as female, and one as nonbinary.

Previous research has indicated that education significantly influences individuals' understanding of digital platforms (Espinoza-Rojas, Siles, & Castelain, 2023; Gran, Booth, & Bucher, 2021). With this in mind, we employed a criterion sampling strategy to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. However, most of our participants were formally educated, with many being college students from urban settings.

All participants provided informed consent, guaranteeing the safeguarding of their privacy and confidentiality. Additionally, our research protocols received approval from the Institutional Review Board of the university where the study was conducted. On average, the interviews lasted 45 minutes. Conversations were conducted in Spanish (translations are our own) and later transcribed in their entirety. To protect the anonymity of our interviewees, we have used pseudonyms throughout this article.

In our interviews, conducted between July and September 2023, we focused on two primary issues: everyday practices related to music listening and experiences with music discovery on social media. During the interviews, we focused on identifying the moments when everyday interactions with platforms enabled music discovery, exploration, and incorporation. Accordingly, we considered the interviews as occasions to recognize *when* a specific action possibility or constraint became an affordance *for* certain individuals to engage with music, irrespective of the platform type (i.e., social media or streaming platforms; Davis, 2020).

In the days following the interviews, participants supplemented our data collection by sending reports via messaging apps. These reports included screenshots showcasing their music discoveries, as well as audio notes and written descriptions detailing their experiences. Through this triangulation of data sources, we aimed to enhance the reliability of our findings and mitigate biases, including the inclination to amplify certain practices that participants perceived to be relevant for our study (Denzin, 2009). The submission of these reports sparked further reflection among our interlocutors and allowed us to delve deeper into specific aspects of music consumption that may have been addressed in a more generalized or abstract manner during the interviews.

We employed an abductive approach to examine the data in the context of existing research (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). The initial round of coding aimed at identifying patterns and trajectories in ways of relating to music encountered on social media. This coding round was carried out individually to foster the identification of the maximum number of categories within the data. After agreeing on coding criteria, we conducted a second round of collective coding to identify both similarities and differences in the data by comparing our preliminary findings to those of previous studies. It was during this phase that we focused on issues of discovery, exploration, and incorporation within our participants' narratives. We further refined these categories during a third round of collective coding, which focused on the specific characteristics of each of these three practices.

The Discovery, Exploration, and Incorporation of Music Across Platforms

To provide context for the interviewees' practices, we initially explored their preferred platforms and music styles. When queried about the social media platforms they typically use for music discovery, nearly all interviewees cited Instagram and TikTok, occasionally mentioning Facebook as well. In terms of music streaming platforms, every person claimed to use YouTube and Spotify without exception.

Although most interviewees said they enjoy "all types" of music, further investigation revealed more specific patterns. Pop was the most frequently mentioned style among individuals identifying as women. Viviana, a 19-year-old university student, succinctly captured this trend: "Pop remains the constant, even as other genres fluctuate." Latin American urban music, such as *reggaeton*, emerged as another popular choice, particularly among people under 25 years old. Conversely, those identifying as men tended to mention rock (both classic and contemporary) more frequently. Other commonly mentioned styles included reggae, hip hop, and jazz (notably by men), as well as movie soundtracks.

An interesting observation is that while all interviewees referenced English-language music, only some included Spanish-language music among their top preferences. When they did, it typically encompassed traditional Latin American styles such as *boleros*, *salsa,* or regional Mexican music, alongside *reggaeton*.

Two significant features were common across the music consumption practices of our interviewees. First, these practices were highly diverse, with each individual developing relatively unique sequences of actions for their music listening. Second, these practices were multifarious in that they involved the interconnected use of numerous platforms and various surrounds in McKelvey and Hunt's (2019) sense. Drawing on our abductive data analysis, we developed three main categories to account for this diversity and multifariousness of practices: music discovery, exploration, and incorporation.

Although these practices are inextricably linked (and sometimes carried out simultaneously), we discuss them separately to further demonstrate the analytical singularity of dynamics that have tended to be conflated in previous scholarly literature. Our analysis delves into the journeys of two archetypal participants: a graphic designer (Valentina) and a college student (Leo), whose stories we detail below. We provide more details about these cases because of how they illustrate the experiences of interviewees, but we also incorporate in our discussion additional insights from other interlocutors to best capture various dimensions of music consumption practices.

Discovery

Most of our interviewees said they welcomed discovering new music, a process that typically involved cultural sources such as movies, television shows, and recommendations from people whose opinions they value. A minority of our interlocutors claimed they devoted specific time to discovering new music, for which they turned to Spotify's "Discover Weekly" and "Radio" features, YouTube's recommendations, and other platforms such as SoundCloud. For most, music discovery on social media was an incidental phenomenon. In other words, interviewees felt they simply encountered music without having to specifically look for it. Although none of them said that finding music was the primary goal of using social media, they all considered it a valuable benefit. As Mariela, a 21-year-old college student who has grown fond of *reggaeton*, half-jokingly put it, "It is collateral damage!"

Two "affordances-in-practice" (Costa, 2018, p. 3641) stood out to our interlocutors because of the way they enabled music discoveries: virality and repetition. Our interlocutors valued the possibility to easily identify what songs and sounds were trending on Instagram and TikTok. They interpreted virality as a popularity rating, which signaled an opportunity for them to be a part of trends in cultural consumption. Accordingly, many paid attention to the features implemented by platforms to indicate that songs were trending.

Furthermore, interviewees valued signs of popularity such as the repetitive use of certain songs on videos. The case of Valentina is useful to illustrate how these affordances matter in people's practices. Valentina is a 27-year-old graphic designer who had started to work in the field of user experience design by the time we met her. Although her professional background undoubtedly made her sensitive to certain

details in platform design, her case is revealing in that it reflects common ways of discovering music based on specific cultural trajectories. Valentina turns to Spotify daily to provide a soundtrack for two kinds of activities in her life: work-related tasks (for which she likes to play instrumental music) and relaxing or doing chores while at home (for which she prefers "romantic" pop songs). For both personal and professional reasons, she likes to know what songs are trending, something that Instagram and TikTok help her achieve

During the interview, Valentina explained the significance of repetition in her discovery of Stromae's (2010) song "Alors on Danse" some time ago in a way that neatly captures the experiences of many others:

> I was scrolling down content on TikTok. And then the song came out. And then it came out again. And then it came out again! This made me say: "What's up with this song?" Because you do so many things at once while scrolling down automatically, you don't really pay attention to things until they come out again. Then, you realize that you've heard it before. Things click and you become more aware of the song.

This song was not immediately memorable for Valentina. Her habitual tendency to absentmindedly scroll down content limited this possibility (Lupinacci, 2021). In her account, repetition made her aware not only of the existence of the song but also of the sense that it was trending and, therefore, important for her to notice. In this way, algorithms create musical "intrigues" (as Mariela put it) and "cravings" for songs (in the words of Viviana). Music begins to *become* memorable through algorithmic repetition, which operates as a vector that enables discoverability (McKelvey & Hunt, 2019; Nowak, 2016b).

Nevertheless, the notion of incidental encounters with new music can be misleading as it naturalizes the power dynamics involved in enabling discovery. Instead, as the notion of discoverability emphasizes, things need to be done for discovery to happen. First, users' discovery of music on social media relies on a reflexive relationship with music recommendation algorithms, that is, a relationship based on the awareness of the consequences of their reciprocal actions (Siles & Meléndez-Moran, 2021; Siles, Valerio-Alfaro, & Meléndez-Moran, 2022). In this context, reflexivity means a capacity to systematically reflect on how their actions and those of recommendation algorithms are intertwined, which leads to constant adjustments in their behaviors.

Scholars have demonstrated that this form of reflexivity doesn't hinge on factual knowledge of algorithmic operations (Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020). Instead, research has emphasized the importance of the theories and ideas that people develop about algorithms, considering them equally consequential (Cotter, 2022). Valentina's experiences serve as a valuable illustration of this point. One week after our interview, she sent us several screenshots and an audio note on WhatsApp describing an example of a song that she had discovered on TikTok (Figure 1):
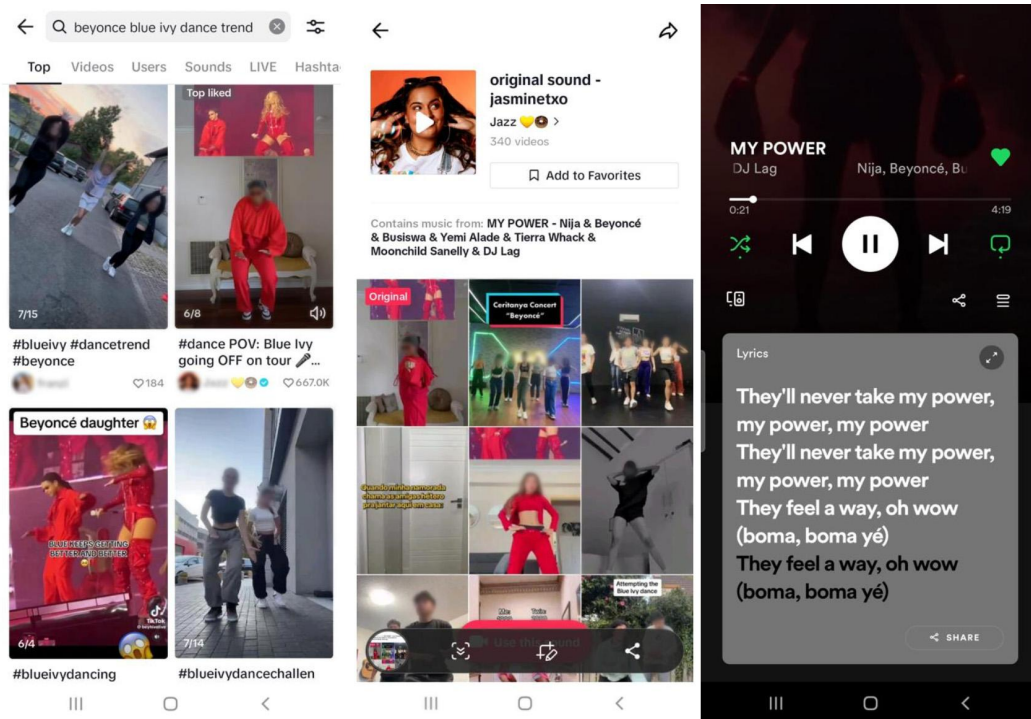
Figure 1. Screenshots sent by Valentina to illustrate her music discovery sequence.

TikTok was filled with a bunch of videos from Beyoncé's new tour because she took [her daughter] for the first time and danced [Figure 1 left and center]. Obviously, if one gives "like" to one [video], one will get many others. The song is very "sticky" [*pegajosa*], you can't shake it away. Thus, I went to Spotify to listen to it in its entirety and I saved it there [Figure 1 right].

Beyoncé's song began to leave what Nowak (2016b) would call an "affective mark" on Valentina: She felt she could not get rid of it (which is why many interviewees used the term "sticky"). For Valentina, turning this song into a discovery required a response to the algorithms that had made her aware of it in the first place (Lüders, 2021b; Siles & Meléndez-Moran, 2021; Siles, Valerio-Alfaro, et al., 2022). Valentina interpreted the repetition of a trending song as an invitation to show interest. After the "intrigue" or "craving" for music created by these algorithms, it was her turn to respond: "You decide whether you hate it [the song] or want to know more," she added. In this case, she let algorithms know her preference by "liking" one video, which she was convinced would be enough to guarantee that the app would "obviously" keep recommending her similar videos.

Similarly, when Lía, a 23-year-old recent college graduate, comes across a song that piques her interest, her typical approach involves saving videos on TikTok. This action is intended to prompt the platform's recommendation algorithms to display more videos featuring the same song.

The risk of algorithmic repetition is that songs that have failed to produce an emotional effect can start to annoy users. People's response to this situation also involves letting music recommendation algorithms "know." For example, many interviewees said they marked videos as "Not Interested" on TikTok. Likewise, when it became clear to Valentina that Miley Cyrus's (2023) song "Flowers" was not appealing to her despite its popularity on TikTok, she sought to explicitly "change the algorithm" (in her words) by "liking" other songs that would "obviously" fill her "For You" page.

In addition to living with algorithms in reflexive relationships (Siles, 2023), other things need to be done to make discovery happen. Some interviewees mentioned they used apps such as Shazam to identify certain songs, searched on TikTok's "Explore" feature, or looked at other videos that used the same song to pick out music that could make an affective impression on them. Valentina considered TikTok's search functions as the most "precise" when it came to helping identify trending sounds.

Experiencing an affective mark through a newly discovered song also requires users to become "ready" for discoverability by using apps in certain ways, as revealed by Mariela's words:

> How I use the apps affects [discovery]. TikTok is an app that I use with audio, with the phone's volume on. Whether I use headphones or not, it doesn't matter. But I don't do that with the rest of the apps I use. I watch Instagram with the phone muted.

The notion of affordances-in-practice is useful to emphasize that the features of technology that enable music discovery only come together in the context of situated listening contexts, practices, and habits. While many interviewees praised TikTok's features for allowing them to discover new music, others preferred different platforms (such as YouTube and Facebook) mostly because these connected better with their personal history of music listening and everyday life activities (Beuscart et al., 2023). That was the case of Eugenio, a 28-year-old advertising professional who says his favorite music style is "whatever has a strong beat." The center of his music listening ecology is YouTube, a platform he has used since he was 12 years old. Eugenio welcomed music discoveries in all the platforms he uses, from TikTok to Instagram to Spotify's "Discover Weekly." But when it came to consolidating these discoveries, he always turned to YouTube:

> I am aware of the algorithm. I look for things so that the algorithm recommends what I want to listen to. If I discover [music] on a reel or TikTok, I go and look it up on YouTube to listen to it in full. [Unlike TikTok] I know YouTube is going to give me at least one or two similar recommendations, which I could explore further. It helps me discover things. I feel like it's because of the trajectory I've had with the platform. I've been making my music playlists there since I was in high school. (Eugenio)

Eugenio's discovery practices are also built on a reflexive relationship with the algorithms of an entire ecology of platforms (Espinoza-Rojas et al., 2023). Seen exclusively as a matter of affordances, his practices might seem counterintuitive or inconvenient in that they increase the diversity and multifariousness of actions and platforms required to listen to a song (Lüders, 2021b). Yet, his practices make sense when affordances are envisioned—as Eugenio does—as subordinate or subject to the history he

has built with a specific platform for over a decade. As with Eugenio, the preferences of interviewees for certain platforms are explained by how they have aligned affordances with life "trajectories" (using his own words) in ways that naturalize the links between specific platforms and certain practices as their preferred way to listen to music.

Exploration

Leo's discovery of the song "Bigmouth Strikes Again" by The Smiths (1986) serves as an illustration of music exploration (Figure 2). Leo is a 20-year-old journalism student who defines himself as a music omnivore. Although Leo said he doesn't use social media specifically to discover music, he certainly appreciates the possibility of encountering new songs, regardless of when these songs were originally released. On social media platforms, Leo claims, "Music is just right there! No matter what I do, songs will always come out [in his feed]."
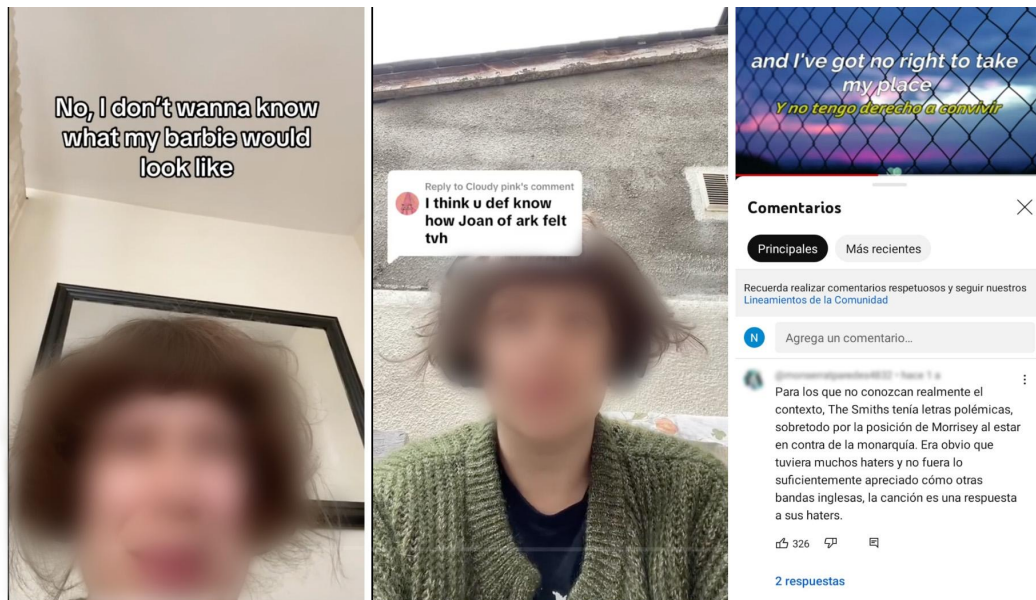
Figure 2. Screenshots sent by Leo to illustrate his music exploration sequence.

The hype that surrounded the release of *Barbie* (Heyman, Robbie, Ackerley, Brenner, & Gerwig, 2023) in mid-2023 made Leo interested in a paratextual video commenting on the movie that was recommended to him on his TikTok "For You" page (Figure 2 left). Leo found this video "quite funny" but felt "more context" was needed to properly understand it. He began reading the comments of this video on TikTok and noticed that its creator had responded to a person by making another video (Figure 2 center), in which Leo discovered The Smiths' song. Leo explained this moment thusly: "Although the video was ironic, the song caught my attention. I clicked the sound [feature on TikTok] to see other videos that had used that song, and I saw several with which I identified."

The repetitive recommendation of Barbie-related videos created fertile conditions for the song to start becoming memorable. To decide whether he wanted to keep listening to this newly discovered song, Leo engaged in "research" activities (as he called them, invoking his skills as a journalism student), typical of exploration endeavors. He realized that the song had elicited feelings of self-identification. In a WhatsApp report that he sent us the day after our interview, Leo elaborated on why he related to the song:

> I went to YouTube to look for the song. I looked for a video that included the lyrics and there I saw a comment about the origin of the song [Figure 2 right]. First, I loved the guy [Morrissey, the band's singer] who was against the monarchy, of course, but I also identified with this "bigmouth" concept who says political things, and then hate falls upon him (🙄).

As Leo's words reveal, exploration implies a change in the attention given to music: it is no longer used to accompany other activities (including scrolling social media content) but rather becomes the primary object of people's consideration.

Through exploration, interviewees found out what kind of emotions discovered songs elicited. Mariela, the college student whom we cited previously, explained: "I might think that I like [a song], but it may be that I'm used to hearing it." To explore the song means clarifying this difference. To this end, the first thing that both Leo, Mariela, and most interviewees did was to listen to songs beyond the extract featured in the video which led to their discovery on social media, considering that most platforms often provide only fragments or alternative versions of original songs.

Once interviewees discovered a song on social media, most shifted to other platforms (notably Spotify and YouTube) to further explore it. Some indicated using Spotify to search for other songs by the same artists, typically using the number of times these had been streamed as an indicator of popularity and therefore as the best examples to familiarize themselves with the artist's work.

The notion of paratexts allows for a deeper understanding of exploration dynamics. On the one hand, many individuals like Leo stated that they often turn to paratexts in their most traditional sense (e.g., explanatory videos and their comments) to add meaning to music. On the other hand, it is also common for people to place texts and paratexts in a more liminal relationship than has been noted in the literature. As revealed by the previously discussed examples of Valentina and Leo, users typically turn songs into the primary criterion for looking for other videos (by employing TikTok's sound feature) to further explore songs (Figure 1 center). By so doing, videos are turned into parallel communication elements that add meaning to the music rather than the other way around.

Our interviewees variously evaluated how different kinds of videos (challenges, choreographies, duets, etc.) or formats (stories, reels, etc.) added valuable meaning to the songs they were exploring. In other words, not all videos were judged equal in adding paratextual meaning. A key rule of thumb was the degree to which videos seemed to authentically fit with the song. Valentina claimed she enjoyed looking for videos that used music she had discovered on TikTok, as she felt it added various perspectives to further "test" songs. However, she noted that certain rules applied: "On TikTok, you can tell when people are using

a song just because it is viral or if the song really matches the video. [The video] has to make sense. Otherwise, it's shocking" (Valentina). Virality and repetition thus had limitations for our interviewees. While useful as vectors for enabling discoverability, they seemed less appropriate for exploration endeavors.

Through exploration, users "tested" not only the discovered song but also themselves in relation to the song (Hennion, 2017). Exploration translates into an evaluation of songs and their place within the broader context of people's lives, identities, and relations. Returning to Leo's case, the song by The Smiths gained emotional significance when it became evident that it mirrored a characteristic that he believed to be inherently defining of himself ("the bigmouth concept"). Thus, for Leo, exploration was not *only* about examining the lyrical and musical characteristics of the song but also about how these fit within broader processes of self-understanding enabled by music. Interlocutors mobilized different aspects of their media ecologies to engage in this "mutual testing" exercise. Leo's explanation of his typical "research" sequence is worth quoting at some length:

> I look for the song [on TikTok]. Then I usually go on YouTube and watch it. Perhaps out of habit [it was the first app Leo used to listen to music when he was 13 years old] but also because it has more information than Spotify. There are videos, and videos with the lyrics, and videos explaining the meanings of the songs, or interviews. But I don't stay there [YouTube] because I don't listen to the music there. So, if I like it, I go to Spotify to save it and listen to it later. Then I see one or two songs by the same artist. If I like them, I keep investigating, I go to Google to find out more about the person. If not, I leave it there.

As Leo's words suggest, music exploration is a multifarious process spread across an ecology of platforms and surrounds, each playing a specific role. That role is shaped by the alignment of both specific affordances (the possibility of accessing paratextual information, reading lyrics, watching videos, finding out more about an artist) *and* established music listening practices in a person's life (the traditional importance of YouTube for a 20-year-old person, the most recently acquired centrality of Spotify for "liking" songs and building playlists).

Interviewees explored songs not only through patterned action sequences (as illustrated by Leo's quotes) but also in various degrees of intensity and depth. Whereas some felt that listening to a song on a few occasions was sufficient to "test" it (and themselves), others needed more context and further "research." This variety in intensity, we argue, is tied to how interviewees thought the song would fit within the flows of their everyday lives, a process we discuss next.

Incorporation

Two weeks after our interview, Valentina sent us a new message that illustrated another practice in people's relationship with music encountered on social media that builds on discovery and exploration (Figure 3).
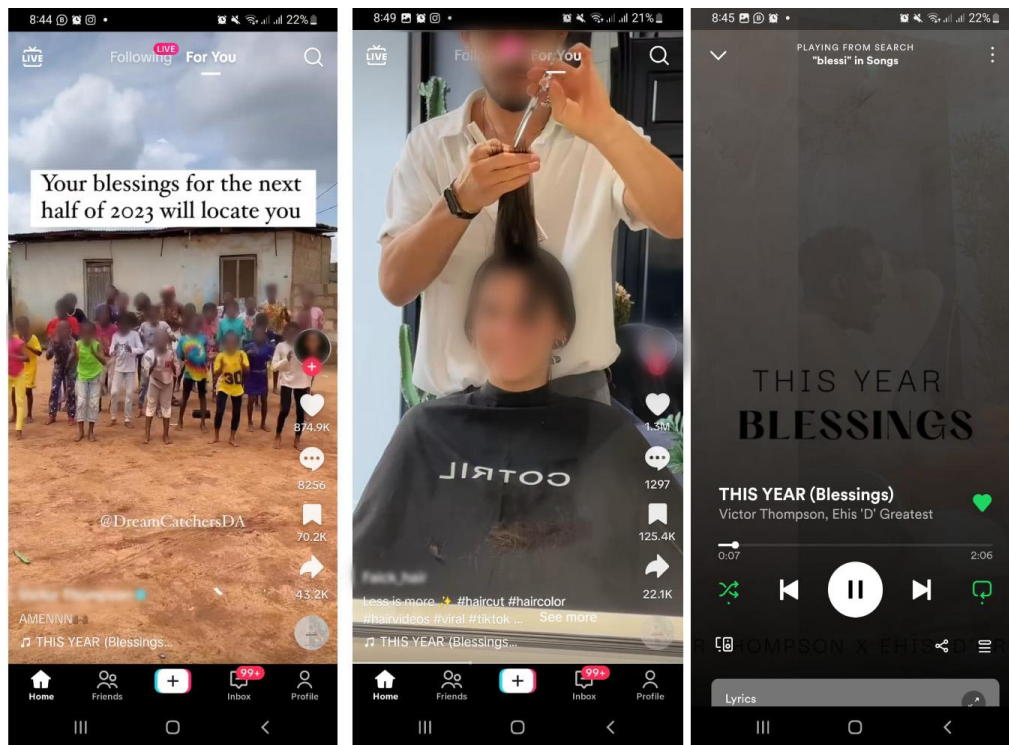
Figure 3. Screenshots sent by Valentina to illustrate her music incorporation sequence.

In her WhatsApp message, Valentina included several screenshots of videos that featured a song she discovered on TikTok ["THIS YEAR (Blessings)"], along with an audio note where she explained them:

> People began to use this song to decree good things in life [Figure 3 left]. And then they started adopting it either to do a choreography or for a random video, like a girl getting a haircut [Figure 3 center]. It was like saying: "I got a haircut! It's a new beginning!" [The song] is super "sticky"! Sometimes, I play it [on Spotify] when I feel bad at work or when I say "I can't do this" [laughs] [Figure 3 right]. It's a mantra-like song to get remotivated.

Valentina's account reveals how she made this newly discovered song part of her life. After diligently exploring it by paratextualizing the videos to better contextualize and "test" it, she made the song part of the selected group of musical "mantras" she plays to motivate herself at work.

Exploring music does not necessarily lead to incorporation into everyday life. As users put it, incorporation is relatively "rare." This highlights a significant distinction that individuals make between songs that experience temporary virality and music that they wish to engage with on a more enduring basis. For Mariela, a song must "pass some tests" to be incorporated into her life. Similarly, Leo explained the key condition that accounted for the instances where he incorporated songs: he "really [had to] like a song," which would guarantee a safe place in his main playlist. By incorporating it into the temporal and spatial

flows of everyday music listening, interviewees thus formalized a more personal and permanent relationship with these songs.

Incorporation has three related dimensions: utilitarian, proprietary, and identity driven. First, songs incorporated into everyday life played a utilitarian role for our interlocutors in that they could be "used" subsequently for different purposes (Nowak, 2016a). Valentina eloquently expressed this idea when she defined "likes" given to certain songs on Spotify [such as "THIS YEAR (Blessings)]" as "clues to my future self." As Spotify allows users to aggregate "liked" songs into a single playlist automatically assembled as part of their personal "library," Valentina used this feature strategically to establish a personal relationship with songs she wanted to have easily available for the next occasion for which she planned to use the platform.

Interviewees also "liked" songs on Spotify to enhance music discoverability. This practice is founded on a cyclical perspective of the relationships facilitated by algorithmic vectors across various platforms and surrounds: songs that had become memorable through algorithmic incidental discoveries on social media were employed on streaming platforms to signal to music recommendation algorithms the types of other songs that could be incidentally recommended. Incorporating songs, therefore, enabled the continuation of this process over time.

Other users considered that a "like" was insufficient to express the kind of relationship they wanted to establish with certain songs. A more explicit act was necessary: adding them to playlists. Many interviewees turned to Spotify because of the number of features it offers to this end (although some also used YouTube for this purpose.) For example, Leo concluded his account of how his discovery of The Smiths' song ended (Figure 2) by stating: "I opened Spotify to save it. I saved it in the 'general' playlist." During the interview, Leo told us he greatly valued playlists as these allowed him to organize songs he regularly wanted to listen to. However, rather than segregating them into specific sets of songs, he preferred to include them all in one single playlist (called the "general playlist"), which was the place where he regularly started to listen to music.

Through this utilitarian form of incorporation, playlists become the place where "future selves" begin their musical journey. Many interviewees valued playlists because of how they helped them organize the abundance of music surrounding them. By segregating songs into playlists, users said it was easier for them to play them on ideal occasions. Adding songs to playlists allowed interviewees to regulate the spatial and temporal flows of their everyday lives. For example, many mentioned that they incorporated songs to have them available during a commute. Mariela turned to yet another device in her media ecology for a similar purpose: Amazon's Alexa. Mariela explained:

> If I can't shake away the song, if I keep singing it, I ask Alexa to play it. I can play any
> playlist. I have an Alexa in my bedroom. When I'm getting ready, I can ask Alexa to play
> a song I discovered on TikTok, without losing much time.

In this example, the notion of surround (McKelvey & Hunt, 2019) becomes useful to reveal how Mariela works to integrate multiple devices to feel she is in control of her everyday routines in both efficient

and organized ways through the music she has discovered. The purpose of this integration was not to engage in entirely novel ways of listening to music but rather to include social media, streaming services, and voice assistant technologies into the "old" practice of listening to music in her own temporal (while "getting ready") and spatial ("my bedroom") terms.

Incorporation also takes the form of proprietary relationships. Contrary to the assumption that people only care about access to the music available in streaming services, some of our interlocutors expressed a clear desire to show that they "owned" new songs discovered on social media (Cunningham, 2019). Cunningham and colleagues (2017) speak of "degrees of 'mineness'" (p. 303) that shape people's relation to music on streaming platforms. Similarly, by incorporating newly discovered songs, our interlocutors sought to demonstrate that these somehow "belong" to them.

Theorized as a form of possession, incorporation resembles the process of building a collection (Cunningham, 2019; Woodward & Greasley, 2017). Several interviewees employed the term "my library" to refer to either playlist on Spotify or collections of songs they listen to on YouTube and with which they feel connected, thus making explicit the symbolic links between traditional book and music collections. Because the term "library" has been integrated into the lexicon used to describe features in digital media for decades, its utilization by platform users is not entirely unprecedented. However, the specific ways in which individuals employed it underscore the connections between the term and the significance of incorporation as a mode of music ownership. Eugenio, the advertising professional, captured this notion with precision: "I feel it's like an accumulation. This is my playlist that I have built since I was 12 years old. It's where I'm going to put all the music I like."

In addition to "liking" and adding songs to playlists, our interlocutors also incorporated music by downloading songs to personal computers and even discontinued portable media players (like iPods). The proprietary dimension of incorporation is perhaps nowhere clearer than in the practice of purchasing songs that were discovered on social media. Javier, a 42-year-old high school teacher who enjoys listening to jazz and occasionally to pop, was among those interviewees who continued to buy music in various formats. Referring primarily to the music he discovered on YouTube, he explained:

> For me, the important thing is to keep it, buy it, or pirate it [*piratearla*]. Just to make sure that I have access to that song whenever and however I want. That's what I like. And let me tell you: there are songs that I have listened to more than 300 times.

Javier's words reveal how incorporation also expresses an attempt to regain control of repetition from music recommendation algorithms. As with Javier, our interlocutors incorporated songs because they planned to continue listening to them repeatedly. In this way, they expected to control the frequency and timing of this repetition to make them fit within the specific conditions and activities in their everyday lives in ways they thought that algorithms could not.

Scholars who have studied collections have also noticed that it is common for collectors to keep items that they know they will practically never use again (Woodward & Greasley, 2017). Similarly, our

interviewees said they incorporated songs that were placed in a kind of musical purgatory where they remained available to them even if they didn't intend to listen to these songs.

Finally, users also incorporated new music into playlists and collections to indicate that they had established an identity relationship with it (Glevarec, 2021). Newly discovered music was incorporated into the personality of users, so to speak, and then turned into a reflection of the person. Eugenio expressed the centrality of this dimension while linking it to the utilitarian and proprietary aspects of incorporation. Referring to the songs he assembled on YouTube since he was 12 years old, he explained:

> If I don't save one of those [discovered] songs, I feel like I've made a mistake, like I didn't do something right. Because I need to listen to them again. It's my library. It represents my taste, my knowledge of music. To be honest, I'm not going to go listen to those 900 playlists I have. But they reflect who I am. It is a very personal space. I would be a little embarrassed if people saw my playlists.

It was relatively common for interviewees to mention instances of incorporating not only discovered songs but also music they "didn't know existed as a genre," as Lía put it. During the interview, Leo recalled incidentally discovering a video on TikTok with music from an artist named Dorian Electra. Leo explored the song as he became interested in this video. As with the song from The Smiths, he read the lyrics of Electra's songs and felt interpellated: "I liked the messages of the songs more than their sound," Leo explained. Through his "research," he found out that this music was considered an instance of a style named hyperpop. Leo kept researching the lyrics of similar songs and listening to this music more often. In his words: "It was weird because I don't really like electronic music. But the genre and its history appealed to me a lot. It ended up being part of the music I listen to." Leo thus incorporated not only Dorian Electra's song but hyperpop into the styles of music he likes and now uses to define himself.

Concluding Remarks

Discovering music on social media has received widespread attention in public culture, in large part because of industry discourses that emphasize notions of breakthrough and innovation (Venkat, 2022). This study provided empirical grounds to make sense of what have largely remained assumptions about what users do with the music they encounter on social media. Our analysis revealed the coexistence of both old and new practices. The widespread incorporation of features to add music to posts across platforms has increased the possibilities of encountering songs, regardless of when these songs were originally released or how they were produced. In short, music discovery and exploration have become constitutive components of the platform ecology. These new features certainly afford relatively novel practices, such as crafting increasingly diverse and multifarious music listening sequences or paratextualizing videos to further explore sounds.

However, as Tepper and Hargittai (2009) have noted, the adoption of digital media has typically reinforced traditional social patterns in how people encounter new music rather than revolutionize these patterns. Our interlocutors ultimately carried out novel ways of discovering, exploring, and incorporating music to perform the "old" practices of soundtracking everyday life activities and "owning" songs in some way, even if the music was always "just right there."

The practices we have examined in this article showcase three broader forms of relating to platforms in everyday life. First, the contemporary appropriation of platforms is based on reflexive relationships with music recommendation algorithms (Siles, 2023; Siles & Meléndez-Moran, 2021; Siles, Valerio-Alfaro, et al., 2022). In contrast to previous studies about users who didn't reflect on how the algorithms of music streaming services work (Lüders, 2021a), it was common for our interlocutors to constantly analyze their relationships with algorithms as a natural and integral aspect of their lives. In their accounts, living in ecologies of platforms *demanded* an awareness of two interrelated processes: on the one hand, constant attention to algorithmic actions and, on the other, active engagement in responding to algorithms. These evolving reflexive relationships do not emerge in a vacuum: they are a means to achieve wider cultural goals. In other words, interviewees cared about these relationships with music recommendation algorithms because they allowed them to listen to songs in certain ways. They envisioned relationships with algorithms as a resource to discover new songs, which they then incorporated into their lives to cyclically feed the process.

This perspective introduces valuable nuance to the examination of people's roles in algorithmic discoverability processes. While McKelvey and Hunt (2019) acknowledge that "[vectors] encourage users to become part of the process of content discovery," they predominantly characterize people's relationship with algorithms as "passive" (p. 4). In contrast, our study underscores the active process required for individuals to engage with algorithms to enable discoverability. In short, enhancing discoverability necessitated being variously active: from constantly engaging with algorithms to becoming "ready" by using apps in specific ways.

Second, previous research has emphasized the importance of affordances in the use of streaming media services, both in the fields of music and audiovisuals (Lüders, 2021a; Nowak, 2016a). Our research contributed to this body of work by showing how people's relationship to platforms relied on the alignment of affordances with specific practices, histories, and trajectories in cultural consumption. We demonstrated that affordances were constantly subordinated or subjected to these trajectories in ways that might seem counterintuitive or inconvenient. Scholarship that conceives of affordances as situational and context-dependent was instrumental in operationalizing an analytical approach for which the possibilities and constraints of platforms to listen to music only make sense in specific situations (Costa, 2018; Davis, 2020).

Third, our interlocutors conceived of their practices in terms of temporal and spatial flows wherein certain connections between different platforms and devices made sense, rather than being a matter of segregated apps with distinct purposes. Accordingly, we implemented an approach that triangulated methods to understand how links between these platforms were established and how certain affordances emerged for people in certain cultural circumstances. This contrasts with the tendency in the scholarly literature to separate people's relationships with platforms based on a view of affordances and technological logics as universally and permanently available (as if it were mandatory, for example, to differentiate the analysis of social media and streaming media services). The case of music consumption thus stands as an invitation to avoid imposing analytical categories that might seem arbitrary to ordinary people and to empirically examine through various methods (rather than assume) what these categories mean in the flows of people's everyday practices. Whereas it might make sense to independently study how people relate to specific platforms or devices in certain cases, on other occasions, an ecological perspective that focuses on

the interconnections across them is essential for comprehending cultural practices in a manner that coherently acknowledges their significance to people.

Discovery, exploration, and incorporation do not exhaust the spectrum of music consumption practices across various platforms. For example, sharing is a fundamental part of people's relationship with music (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). Future research could further analyze how the discovery of music on social media is tied to sharing practices, and what role is imagined for both people and algorithms in this process. Novel studies could also reveal the similarities and differences between the practices of users situated in different contexts and, therefore, who could potentially enact affordances-in-practice in distinct ways.

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