

Music Sharing Based on the Context of its Unlimited Medial Availability

A Qualitative Study on the Social Use of Spotify

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Introduction: “Sharing music has never been so easy”

“Sharing music has never been so easy” – With this claim the swedish music streaming service Spotify advertises its services. Not long ago it was almost inconceivable that a legal music service would use the word ‘sharing’ for this purpose. Until recently, the term was closely connected to the sphere of illegal music piracy. The act of ‘sharing’ was hold responsible for a great economic loss affecting all media industries (cf. IFPI, 2011a; Gorny 2007). Even the scientific debate on this issue remains mostly limited to one perspective: researchers of different disciplines try to find out, if there is a correlation between music sharing and the development of sales in the music industry – and come to very disparate conclusions (cf. Tschmuck, 2010).

Regardless of whether there is a correlation or not, one essential dimension of music sharing often remains unconsidered: the fact that music sharing is also a *social* action. An action with a long tradition and – due to the one-sided view of the term – maybe some hidden potential.

In this paper I want to analyse the social aspects of music sharing and reveal some of its hidden potential. I want to explore which social, cultural or even economic value is added when people share music with each other.

¹ This paper is an abridged version of my master’s thesis which I wrote from January to June 2012 at the Institute of Journalism and Communication Research, Hanover.

This new, explicit *social* perspective on music sharing is relevant, because the access to music and the way we listen to music has changed dramatically in recent years. It is a fact that every day more and more music becomes available for more and more people. Music streaming services like Spotify provide unlimited access to music at any time and place – legally and sometimes for free.

The development of the internet and digital network media has not only changed the way we access music, but also the role of the music consumer. Connected to digital network media the music consumer can influence the production, allocation, reception and use of music (cf. Winter, 2006a). Through network media he becomes an active part of the music value creation and is less dependent from traditional music business intermediates. Today's possibilities of music sharing are only one example for this development. More and more people can legally share music with one another. The action of sharing could thus become a culturally significant practice. But what exactly characterizes this practice? What are their functions? In which way are these functions significant in cultural and social terms? What kind of value is added?

2. Music in the context of media development

The starting point for my analysis is the development of media in recent years. On the one hand it has changed the accessibility of music, on the other hand the role of the music user. These two central changes lead to new practices and forms of using music that can only take place online. The basis for this development is the fact that the ways people access music have changed dramatically. Tschmuck (2008) shows empirically that sound storage media like CDs more and more lose their relevance for the distribution of music. Instead other forms of music distribution like streaming services have established and reach an increasing number of music users (cf. Baghdassarian & McGuire, 2011). In the light of Rifkins (2002) concept of an "age of access", where the accessibility of goods becomes more important than ownership, it becomes evident that music has to be seen more as a service than as a commodity. Wikström (2011) describes this development with words that remind of Rifkin: "The illusion in the mind of consumers that it is possible to acquire and own their favorite songs is slowly

replaced by a desire to be able to access that song, everywhere, anytime. ‚Experience and access’ replace ‚materiality and ownership” (p. 2).

As a consequence of this development, music users having this new kind of musical access also develop new ways of dealing with music. This is also facilitated by the development of digital network media, which assign users new roles in this context. While, in the old logic of value creation, music users were seen as passive consumers being at the very end of the value chain, today’s digital network media turn the music users into active and important parts of music value creation.

The reason for this is that media communication, which is organised via digital network media, can be understood less and less as a linear sequence of production, allocation, reception and usage, as its users can theoretically be linked with each of these moments and contexts. At the same time they can basically be sender and receiver, producer, distributor, recipient and user of media communication. Doing so, they break the (former) linear process of mass communication. This blurring of boundaries between single moments and contexts as a result of their convergence implies that media communication now rather runs network-like structured (see fig. 1). The concept of the prosumer (cf. Toffler 1980) as a conflation of the words producer and consumer converges the new roles of the active media users also on a linguistic level.

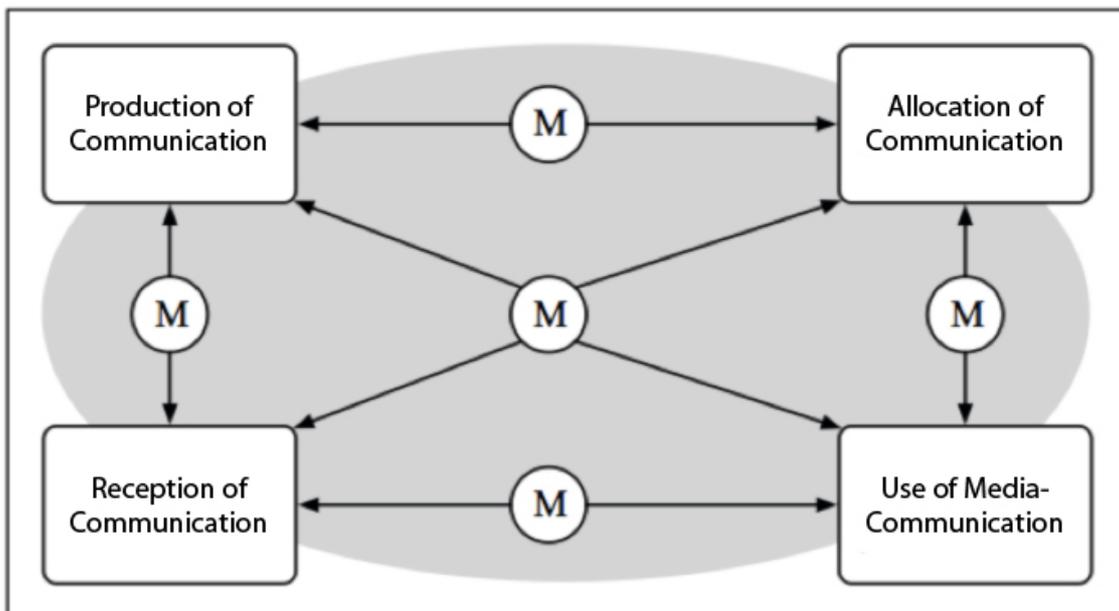


Fig. 1: Media-communication-network model (source: Winter & Dürrenberg, 2011, p. 96)

This results in new forms of dealing with music as Wikström (2011) states:

“For instance, music has been and continues to be an efficient tool for communication. But when recorded music loses its materiality, people who want to have musical conversations with friends and with the world, increasingly depend on real-time information about their musical experiences, rather than on the historical record collections in their living room cabinets.”

At this point it becomes clear that digital network media facilitate new practices, requirements and usage habits in connection with music. Some of the established forms of digital music (e.g. “single-song-download”, “digital album covers”) are being described by Wikström as imitations of practices from the ‘physical’ world. But there are more and more practices that derive from the logics of networks and connectivity and arose originally on the internet. With the possibilities of digital network media, music users do new things with music that have been impossible before. This concerns in particular the act of music sharing.

3. State of research: Existing social perspectives on music sharing

Music sharing is a multifaceted field of study. In this paper I want to focus on its social perspectives and shed some light on (1) the development of music sharing practices, (2) the importance of sharing for interpersonal relationships, (3) music sharing as a relevant act in the context of identity formation, (4) sharing as an orientation tool and (5) sharing as a reference to value creation with music. In general these social aspects of music sharing have not been researched extensively. Below I will present some points of contact to existing research.

(1) Music sharing is not a phenomenon of the network society. In fact the action has a long history: The ‘mixtape culture’ during the 1960s is one example for a popular movement of music enthusiasts sharing and presenting music to their friends (cf. Herlyn & Overdick 2005). Another example: The first ‘Sony Walkman’ even had two built-in headphone jack sockets – it was considered unusual for one person to listen to music alone (cf. du Gay et al. 1997). These examples show that the act of music sharing – within the meaning of giving music to others or listening to the same music – always has included social aspects. With the development of new digital network media, new social functions and practices of sharing evolve as Brown and Sellen (2006) state: “The change in media, as with other recent moves

such as from records to CDs, results in a range of changes to practices involved” (p. 40). The file sharing platform *napster* is one of the earlier examples for new online practices of music sharing. Brown, Sellen and Geelhoed (2001) have compared online music sharing using *napster* with offline practices of music sharing with CDs or mixtapes. They assert that music sharing indeed fulfils several social functions, e.g. in the context of identity formation or to establish relationships. But they also state that *online* music sharing is less important for these social aspects. Other studies show that online music sharing has developed over the years and thus became more and more relevant in social respects (cf. Volda, Grinter & Ducheneaut 2006; Håkansson, Rost & Holmquist 2007).

(2) One social function of music sharing concerns interpersonal relationships. Many researchers have pointed out the importance of music as a “social resource” (Föllmer 2009, p. 256) within relationships or friendships (cf. North & Hargreaves 1999; DeNora 2000). Håkansson et al. (2007) show in their study on the application ‘Push!Music’ that sharing music with a friend can also be understood as an act of gift-giving that implies reciprocity: “In our study of Push!Music, we also became aware of this obligation in the sharing of music, and how participants sometimes became frustrated when they could not reciprocate due to design and technical issues” (p. 327). Considering the fact that interpersonal relationships in times of digital network media more and more become *medial* relationships, online music sharing might be relevant for their quality.

(3) In order to distinguish the big number of more or less close medial relationships in the social web, practices of “identity management” (Schmidt 2011) respectively “impression management” (Goffman 1959) have developed. In this context music is a significant factor as Hargreaves et al. (2002) state: “[...] music can be used increasingly as a means by which we formulate and express our individual identities. We use it [...] to present ourselves to others in the way we prefer.” (p. 1). For Brown and Sellen (2006) the personal record collection “as a tangible presentation of one’s taste in music” (p. 45) is particularly important. Volda et al. (2006) give a first indication on the importance of music sharing in this context with their study on iTunes. They researched how and why users share their music with one another via iTunes. The study revealed that the participants are conscious of

the fact that the publication of their collections leaves an impression. Accordingly, users started to edit their music, deleted or added certain songs until they had created a representative picture that fits their personalities. Another study concludes:

“The music carried around with you can no longer be understood simply in terms of what people want to listen to. Its visibility to others means that it becomes something to be carefully managed in terms of what gets presented to particular people under particular circumstances” (O’Hara & Brown 2006 on Bassoli, Moore & Agamanolis 2006).

(4) One aspect of digital music sharing – its orienting function – did not attract much research interest so far. But when more and more music becomes available for an increasing number of music users, it can be assumed that some of them might be overstrained by the large quantity of music. In this context the act of sharing might possibly be able to reduce the increasing complexity. Håkansson et al. (2007) state in their study on ‘Push!Music’: “[...] we learnt that for some users, getting *credit* was a very important motivation behind the sharing of music. Some users wanted to be able to build up a *reputation* for pushing good music [...]” (p. 328). This reputation could also be important for other music users because it might help them to find out which music is relevant for them and which is not.

(5) The creation of value has changed with the development of digital network media (cf. Zerdick et al. 2001; Winter 2006a). A linear concept of value creation – e.g. Porters (1985) influential ‘value chain’ – is not able to cope with the increasing complexity of a “network economy” (Zerdick et al. 2001) anymore. The user as a central part of medial value adding networks is described by Winter (2006a). Against this background music sharing can be understood as a co-creative act of value creation: music users use the “experience environment” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004) offered by internet platforms and services to develop and experiment with new (social and cultural) forms of value creation with music. I want to shed some light on this ‘company-consumer interaction’ using the example of Spotify. My methodological approach is described in the following section.

4. Research method

In order to irritate and enhance these perspectives on music sharing I conducted an empirical study with users of the music streaming service Spotify. I opted for Spotify as my research subject mainly for two reasons: First, Spotify provides a lot of features and possibilities to share music with other users, including social networking websites like Facebook or Twitter. At the time of research in April 2012 it was the only service offering such a wide range of sharing features. Second, the service does not only provide musical content but also a lot of contexting information (cf. Wikström 2010). Apparently it is not just a simple content provider but can be seen as an “ecosystem for music” (Lumma 2011). For this reason I assumed that Spotify is a good starting point for the development of new social practices around music.

To find out more about these new practices I conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with seven frequent users of the service. Aim of the study was to reconstruct their individual music sharing practices and the significance of the action’s social functions. I have chosen a qualitative approach because it gave me the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the participants’ *individual* motivation, which is to my mind essential to re-evaluate the established perspectives on music sharing. In order to gather as much diverse perspectives on music sharing as possible, I tried to recruit different types of users who have only two things in common: they use Spotify very frequently and music plays an important role in their lives. Apart from that the interviewees had a different level of experience in using Spotify, different music preferences and differ in age and gender. The qualitative data analysis of the interview transcripts revealed some new information on music sharing. I will present these findings in the next chapters.

5. Findings: Extended perspectives on music sharing

I. Music sharing as an everyday practice

One objective of this empirical analysis was a better understanding of the *everyday practices* of music sharing. While conducting the interviews it became apparent that the individual interviewees have different approaches regarding their

way of sharing music. Their statements depict how the act of sharing has changed in the context of digital network media. By reconstructing the interviewees' sharing experiences, it was possible to reflect something like an 'Evolution of Sharing'. The interviews show that the practices of music sharing are strongly connected to technological aspects of music. Most of the participants started their 'sharing career' with copying tapes or burning discs in order to tell their friends about new music or to make a gift. With the rise of mp3 and bigger hard discs, music sharing has reached bigger dimensions, too. Some participants shared their whole collections with their friends. Some were even overstrained with the huge amount of musical information. With the development of streaming services which made music available without the necessity to actually own the files, the act of music sharing took another turn. Music sharing does now not mean to make music available to one another but to *convey*² music to others.

In the context of this development the interviewees mentioned a wide range of approaching music sharing – find an overview in fig. 2 – which reveals basically two findings: On the one hand it shows the fundamental evolution of music sharing in terms of *social sharing* – to convey music to others via digital network media such as Spotify, Facebook or Youtube having unlimited access to musical resources. On the other hand it reveals that the act of music sharing has become a part of their daily routines. One interviewee gets this kind of everyday occurrence right to the point: "I think when you are on facebook... you do not reflect on the actual process of posting a song. [...] it's just normal. [...] You wake up in the morning and eventually you login on facebook and have a look what your friends are doing and what they are listening to" (interviewee, 25, female).

² In the German version of this paper the action shifts from "Teilen" (to share) to "Mitteilen" (here: to convey). Unfortunately there is no appropriate translation for this term, so the expression "to convey music to one another" is unavoidably imprecise.

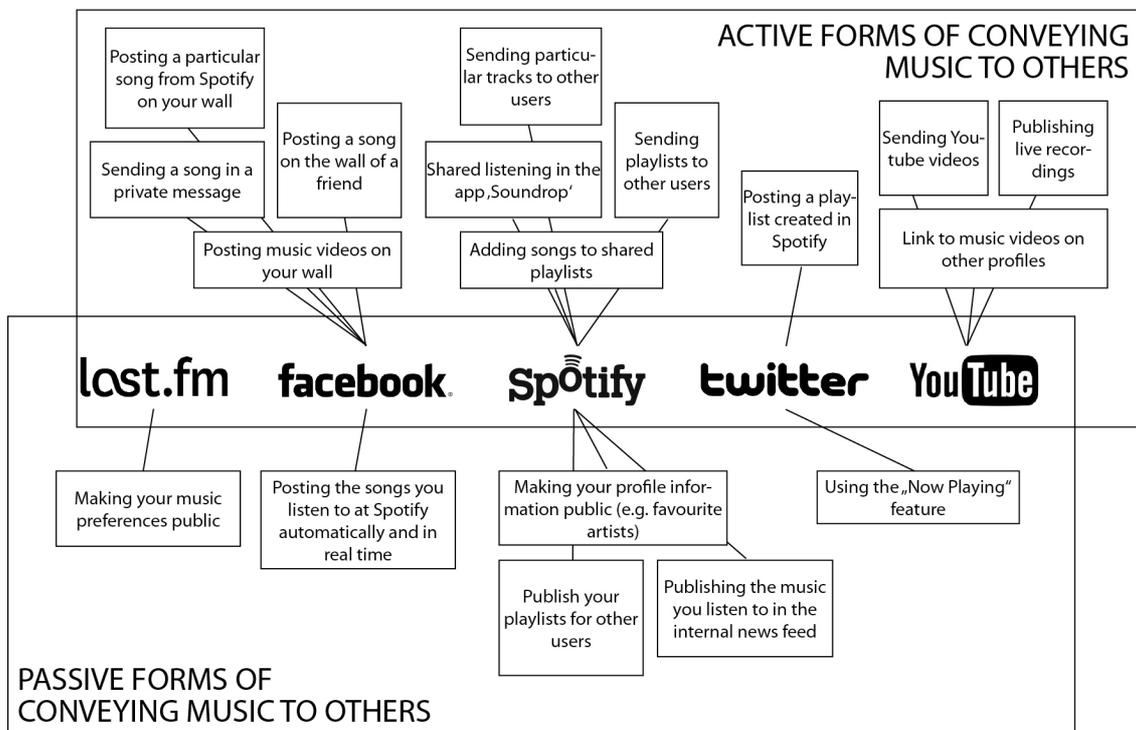


Fig. 2: Practices of social music sharing mentioned by the interviewees (source: own figure)

The aspects stated above are necessarily restricted to the acts of sharing which were identified within the collected data. They could presumably be extended coming up with further interviews or other research approaches. But based on this limited overview, there are basically two different ways of conveying music to others:

- (1.) *active*, deliberate forms of conveying music to particular people or communities (e.g. sending a Spotify playlist to a friend or posting a YouTube video on a friend's Facebook wall),
- (2.) *passive* forms of conveying music to others in terms of making (parts of) your music collection public or publishing your music preferences (e.g. creating a music profile on Last.fm or making your playlists available for everyone on Spotify).

II. Music sharing increases the value of relationships

The interviews reveal a wide range of social functions of music sharing. Its relevance within interpersonal relationships becomes particularly apparent. First of all the action can be understood as a catalyst for building friendships. The participants share their music to establish, foster or add weight to relationships.

One interviewee found new friends accompanying her to a concert just by making her music preferences public. Other participants share music actively to communicate with friends, e.g. in order to prepare common activities like concerts or parties. Furthermore sharing a song is also understood as an act of gift-giving. In this context the act of sharing is used to give someone a treat or to express emotions. E.g. posting a song at a friend's facebook wall is a way to show empathy or just to refer to a common experience or memory.

The statements from the interviews reveal that music sharing via digital network media is related to a variety of social functions increasing the value of interpersonal relationships (see fig. 3). One fundamental basis for this is the fact that all members of digital network media such as Spotify or Youtube have the *same* access to music. This identical access makes it obsolete to transfer large quantities of musical data to one another. During this time of large quantity music file sharing the social functions of sharing seemed to be 'forgotten'. But the original social functions of sharing that have been mentioned in connection with physical forms of music (e.g. mixtapes) apparently have been rediscovered. The interviews show that music sharing is once again (or still) understood as a catalyst for friendship, as a communicative gift, as an expression of emotion and moreover as a reference to common memories.

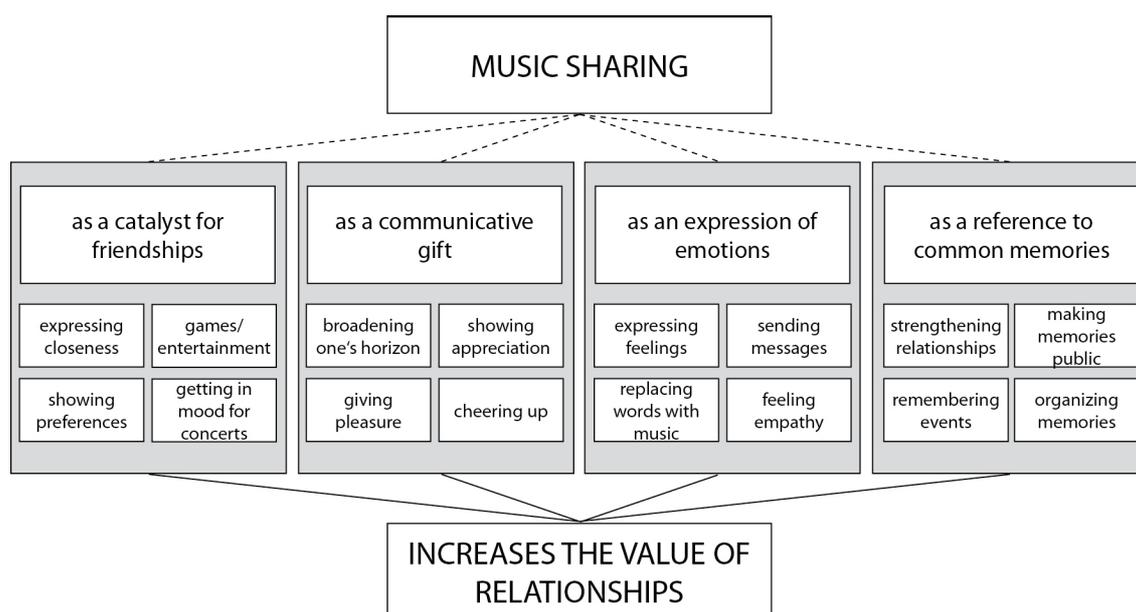


Fig. 3: Social functions of music sharing in the context of digital network media (source: own figure)

III. Music sharing has an impact on social orientation

As stressed in the chapter above, communication using music plays a major role for the quality of interpersonal relationships – in certain situations music serves to maintain or to deepen a relationship. In other situations music sharing can even be the trigger for these relationships. The interviewees often describe the act of sharing as something which reveals common grounds – people share music because they have the same taste in music or because they want to refer to common memories; eventually you share music to show or reinforce these common grounds. Finally it is evidential that the wide range of relationships, which are spread over different digital network media such as facebook, can also be distinguished by the act of music sharing. The own musical taste, which can be expressed in this way, can create social orientation. Music sharing becomes by this means an instrument for cultural classification and distinction. As it became apparent in the interviews, the participants are well aware of these social consequences of music sharing.

Some of the interviewees use active and passive forms of sharing with great care – others with less care. They are aware of the fact that the possibility to share (parts of) musical collections to the public also makes Individual meanings public, which were before (in times of physical music storage) only exceptionally accessible for others. Possible similarities in this way become apparent to others. Music sharing by using digital network media complements the traditional practices of cultural identification and distinction. To make its own musical consumption visible, it becomes "like a style, like a piece of clothing" (interviewee, 33, male) that shows how somebody sees oneself, how a person positions oneself socially and how a person identifies with or distinguishes oneself from others. Shared music thus becomes an instrument to classify oneself socially.

Of particular importance is that a musical collection organized by Spotify and presented on Facebook or Last.fm has a different character than collections on physical records. On the one hand, it obviously allows – as already mentioned – a greater range of publicness. On the other hand, it meets the claim formulated by Wikström (2011) entitled to a "real-time information" (p. 2) of the user's music experience. Music collections and presentations of somebody's own listening habits evolve dynamically – based on the included music as well as in real time.

This shows: the meaning of music for how you present yourself to others and how "impression management" works, depends less and less on what people own or on what they have already collected. Instead, the actual listening habits depend more on what people consider as meaningful at certain times and in certain places and for specific reasons.

IV. Music sharing as a guide in the music landscape

Sharing practices do not only involve opportunities for social orientation, as described in the last chapter. Music sharing is also a source of musical orientation. This function of sharing is particularly important when music becomes more and more available via digital network media. As the interviews reveal, unlimited access to music at any time and place creates a new level of complexity for music users. In comparison to earlier forms of dealing with music – e.g. maintaining a collection of records, CDs or mp3 files – some of the interviewees feel overstrained by the huge amount of music they can find in streaming services like Spotify. On the one hand this 'oversupply' leads to a certain kind of disorientation in relation to music. On the other hand the participants find it increasingly difficult to deal with the same music for a longer period of time. The result is that music users using digital network media seem to listen to *more* music but they are *less* able to build a solid relationship to particular songs, albums or artists. Dealing with music via digital network media becomes more diverse but at the same time more superficial.

In this context the interviews reveal that it is also important *who* shares your music with you. The kind and quality of the relationship to the person sharing his or her music with you determines whether you take a deeper look at the music or not. But not only close friends can be important 'music sources'. Strangers or distant acquaintances who earned 'musical reputation' over the time by sharing good music repeatedly can also become relevant sharing partners.

Fact is: The act of sharing helps the participants to discover new music. In return they share music with their social network to show their latest discoveries and so help their friends to find relevant music. Thus the act of sharing can be understood as a reduction of complexity. For music users facing a huge availability of music it offers orientation – as a kind of guide in the music landscape. Furthermore the act of sharing makes deeper relationships to music more likely.

V. The institutionalization of music sharing adds value

In the previous chapters it has been depicted, how the practices of music sharing within digital network media have developed. Moreover, the functions of sharing for each interviewee have been identified, too. It has been proven that the act of sharing in times of connectivity can provide orientation – both within music services and within social relationships, which partly arise and can be distinguished based on the act of sharing. Of great importance for these functions are services and platforms such as Spotify, in which the sharing of music is institutionalized in new ways.

The participants' statements reflect what Spotify claims for itself: sharing music has never been so easy. In experience environments such as Spotify (or Facebook, Youtube, Last.fm etc.) music sharing is institutionalized in new ways. The act of sharing becomes in this context an everyday practice because music as a resource becomes accessible in an entirely new way. Music users are endowed with possibilities of sharing that they can develop through their own actions and that they can use across platforms. The value which is added in this context, differs individually from user to user, but the creation of value is mainly based on the fact that the act of sharing can provide orientation.

It can be said that social contacts have always been important to find orientation in terms of music. Also music has always played a major role in order to distinguish oneself or to identify with a certain social group. But in dealing with digital network media these functions seem to take on a new meaning: It has never been easier to connect yourself with everything and everyone, with new music and distant acquaintances – enabled through and via digital network media. As depicted in the interviews, however, media users have never been so much involved in the organization and differentiation of their medial relationships. The act of music

sharing in this context is of great importance, as it can help in doing so: The action of sharing can help users to organize their social relations and relations to music as well as to make these relations distinguishable.

Through the institutionalization of sharing in experience environments such as Spotify, the action can unfold its importance, because it can be an initial point of individual value creation at any time and in any place. What has been a major exception in former times, becomes an everyday practice in the context of digital network media utilization.

6. Conclusion: Five theses on music sharing

In this paper I tried to develop a better understanding of the act of music sharing in the context of digital network media. The following theses give a summary of the theoretical and empirical examination:

- (1) Music sharing has become a multifaceted practice in the context of digital network media. Conveying music to others without exchanging files can be seen as a specific practice in this context. In this way music sharing becomes independent from sound carriers and takes place across different platforms and services. There are active and passive forms of communicating music.
- (2) Music sharing is an action of social significance. It helps to create new social relationships or to increase the value of existing ones. Within these relationships shared music can be understood as a communicative gift, as an expression of emotions or as a reference to common memories.
- (3) Music sharing helps to differentiate the multitude of medially constituted relationships and makes them distinguishable. Through practices of sharing via digital network media, music becomes visible in real time as a means of cultural differentiation. In this way digital music complements physical music collections as a means of musical identity.
- (4) Music sharing gives orientation for users facing the huge amount of medially available music. The act of sharing makes relations to music more likely, because it helps users to find music that is also relevant for them.

(5) Music sharing can be seen as a reference to co-creative value creation with music. In experience environments like Spotify the act of music sharing becomes institutionalized in a new way, so music users can become an active part of value creation with music. With their culturally significant actions they create social and medial orientation for themselves and for other users.

These theses illustrate that music sharing has indeed developed since Napster and other file sharing sites became popular: Now, music sharing does not necessarily mean copying music. Quite the contrary the (*online*) practice of conveying music to one another means sharing without copying. But when you see the action only in the context of file sharing, you might possibly ignore some of its social functions – the potential and significance of these social functions might be undervalued. So one of the most important results of this paper is that music industry and artists should understand the term ‘music sharing’ not only as a threat but in consideration of its social functions also as a great opportunity. Music is not only a value in itself – what people *do* with music becomes valuable as well.

The importance of this connection is especially evident when the new functions and forms of sharing are understood as symptoms for significantly new approaches of media users expressing their music related relations: digital network media enable music users and fans to express their relations to and through music in a totally different way than ever before. In their new roles in the context of media development, music users are more than ever able to create value for themselves and for others and to incorporate this newly created value in medially constituted relations.

The changing practices of music sharing are just one of many examples for this “new power of users” (Winter, 2006b, p 199). If we understand these user activities as value creation, the consequence should not be the question of how to prevent these activities most effectively and sustainably. Instead you should ask: How can the value creation activities of users be better understood? How can music companies or artists create new (sustainable) values for and together with their clients, listeners, fans and users? How can the culturally significant activities of music users eventually be converted into economic values?

The changed practices and functions of sharing are strategically challenging not

only for music business representatives but also for the music users themselves, as their new role in the context of digital network media comes along with new responsibilities: users of digital network media are, more than ever, responsible for the quality of their medially constituted relationships. The use of music with the aim of affecting the value of relationships can be a great advantage, but may also be disadvantageous, as the example Spotify shows: The service provides access to its offers exclusively to individuals who are also registered Facebook users. That means if you decide on the benefits of sharing your music via Spotify it also has an impact on the informational self-determination. The act of listening to music becomes inevitably a social experience which always means *more than just listening* to music. Indeed, sharing music has never been so easy. At the same time it has never been more complex.

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