

## Music and Youth in Brazilian Contemporary Society

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**Abstract:** Based on qualitative and quantitative research with 1,080 youth in the Brazilian cities of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Porto Alegre, this article analyzes the role of music in the constitution of young people's everyday lives. Focusing on how youth obtain, store, and listen to music, as well as on how they describe the presence of music in their lives, we argue that music – facilitated by digital technology – permeates and gives meaning to young people's lives in a way more pervasive than ever before, to the extent that, in their words, it constitutes the 'soundtrack' of each individual life. We propose to understand this puzzling statement through a material culture framework, and to do so we ask: how do youth currently give meaning to music as a key feature of life, and how do music and the objects through which it is experienced constitute life as such?

**Keywords:** *music, youth, materiality, technology, digitality.*

### Introduction

Since at least the mid-1950s, music has played a significant part in the lives of young people, thus also arousing much academic interest. In the 1950s and 1960s, for example, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University, United Kingdom, studied the rebellious spirit of 'rockers' and other youth

subcultures (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979; Hodkinson and Deicke, 2007). In Brazil, groups such as punks (Caiafa, 1989) and 'funkers' (Vianna, 1988) – and the particular music through which they defined themselves – became popular topics of study. More recently, studies in the field of education have looked at the role of musical styles such as rap and funk in the socialization of marginalized

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youth (Dayrell, 2002, 2003). Through their varied approaches and academic traditions, all such studies have linked music to specific cultural phenomena and described it as one key element in the constitution of young identities.

What seems to be at stake in most such studies is how youth identities relate to music, as well as the relationship between being young and enjoying music. In other words, their focus is youth, and music enters the analysis as one way through which youth is constituted. However, music itself – as a practice, in the sense of how exactly it enters and permeates young people's lives – has largely remained absent. What is its concrete presence in young people's lives? How is it materialized through listening practices and the various objects and gadgets necessary to such endeavor? In this article, we engage with the materiality of music, and in so doing we switch focus away from youth subjectivities, redirecting it towards actual practices that young people engage in.

To do so, we discuss three specific dimensions: (1) digital media and their consequence to how young people get to know, obtain, store, and listen to music, as well as the objects through which such actions are materialized, (2) the individualization of listening practices, and (3) ensuing changes in the space occupied by music in young lives. In exploring such questions, we suggest that young people – enabled by digital technology – increasingly create not only their own repertoire, but even 'their own' music in a variety of ways, so that, at the end of the day, each individual youth is able to put together a unique combination of musical taste, style, repertoire that accompanies one

everywhere. Such centrality of music in the shaping of the everyday for young people is a new phenomenon, at least in terms of the extent to which, nowadays, virtually every moment of the day can be, and is, replete with the presence of music, which makes itself felt, and is listened to, while the youth are performing most of their daily chores.

It seems fair to argue that, in former times, specific groups of young people would relate more or less closely to music. Such groups might make music themselves, and thus feel particularly attached to it, while others might be specific fans of specific musical styles of music and thus be more tempted to spend large chunks of their time listening to them. By contrast, we argue that music today is perceived, by our interviewees and respondents, to function much like a movie soundtrack: it is the background through which each 'scene' of life is experienced, but in doing so it materializes, and gives meaning to, lived experience. For virtually all youth, music seems more present than ever before in different activities and different physical environments. At the same time, however, listening to music as an end-activity seems to be losing ground to the participation of music in myriad other everyday activities, and in this sense its centrality is secondary. To convey this point, and that the suggestion of several interviewees, we employ the notion of music as the 'soundtrack' of everyday life.

## The Research

Our research was both quantitative and qualitative. The aim in both stages was first to determine the scope of certain habits, perceptions and ways of relating to music and second, to build an overall picture of the role of music in youth's daily lives. More specifically, we focused on how young people from different backgrounds and social classes relate to, and consume, music. However, we found very few differences in our data that could be traced to class, income, or background: youth of all classes and backgrounds revealed very similar habits and perceptions, and they had access to virtually the same gadgets (which are increasingly becoming more affordable in Brazil). This similarity is what the analysis below is taking into account, for it points to youth as the key category, rather than class or any others.

In the first quantitative stage of data collection, we conducted two different series of questionnaires over the first semester of 2008. In the first, we asked 818 young people aged between 17 and 25 and living in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Porto Alegre to answer more general questions about their broader lives and we linked those to questions about music, musical taste, consumption habits, objects used to facilitate access to, and enjoy, music, and the role of digital media.

In the second, based only in the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro, we worked with 218 young people. Here, we designed a questionnaire focused only on music, and asked them to answer – besides the same questions we used in the first phase – questions directly about their own engagement in

musical practices (as musicians, DJs, and others), their specific consumption habits (who buys CDs, when and why, how often they attend concerts, etc.), their everyday activities and the role of music in them, and the meanings they attach to music. Here, ages ranged between 16 and 29.

To further complement our sample, we designed a qualitative research phase where we conducted focus groups and in-depth interviews in Rio de Janeiro with 44 young people aged between 16 and 28. Questions asked were similar to the ones in the questionnaires, but here we asked them to elaborate on the meanings and cultural contents of their answers, perceptions, and representations. These we then crossed with the statistical data previously obtained. In both stages – quantitative and qualitative – incomes, place of living, socioeconomic backgrounds, family structure, educational characteristics, insertion in the labor market, and so on, varied greatly, thus enabling a truly comprehensive sample.

## The Material and Immaterial Culture of (Digital) Music

A crucial argument here is that the specificities of the material and immaterial culture of music have led to a thorough renewal in the uses and meaning of music for young people. In other words, how youth get to know, obtain, store, and listen to music is determined by certain very specific developments in technology, and those have affected the music industry more generally and the practices of music consumption more specifically. For

example, one need not actually own a specific material object (such as a record, a tape or a CD) as in former times; rather, one can literally ‘get’ one’s music online, choosing from a virtually endless variety of offerings for very little money – or no money at all.

At the same time, the objects used to consume music and transport it also display a seemingly endless variety: one can now ‘get’ music – the ‘native category’ Brazilian youth use to refer to how they obtain music – through computers, radios, mobile phones, iPads, and so on, and these are, in turn, also perennially changing. Further, music can now be stored not only in the more material environment of a computer hard drive or a mobile phone’s memory card, but also in the immaterial world of cyberspace – as in the (very) recent development of the so-called ‘clouds.’ Finally, it is also ever easier to now transport music to, literally, wherever one goes: iPods and other MP3, MP4, and MP5 players of various brands, styles, and storage capacities are one example; iPhones and iPads are another. They are one’s permanent chaperon, so to speak: they accompany one wherever one goes, as one is never far away from at least one or two such devices.

Through such (recent) digital developments, music enters the lives of

youth in multiple ways – and it stays there only until its ‘owner’ decides it is time for a renewal of his or her playlist. Access and portability, but also substitutability and disposability, are thus tremendously facilitated, and thanks to this wide array of available modes of ‘getting,’ storing, substituting, and transporting music, it can now literally be everywhere, all the time. In fact, it so permeates young people’s lives that many of our interviewees found it appropriate to say that they never, ever, leave the house without their music.

### ***The Digital World of Music: The role of computers***

Our respondents described a wide array of platforms, all directly or indirectly related to the digital world, that they use to listen to music. One of the questions in our questionnaires was: ‘how often do you use the following devices to listen to your music?’ We presented them with the options ‘Apple’s iPod,’ ‘other MP3 player,’ ‘computer,’ ‘CD player,’ ‘radio,’ and ‘mobile phone,’ and we gave them the choice between ‘never,’ ‘rarely,’ ‘frequently,’ and ‘always.’ Significantly, their responses were as follows:

To further develop these points, in the qualitative stage of the research we

**Table 1:** *How often do you use the following devices to listen to your music?*

|              | Never | Rarely | Frequently | Always |
|--------------|-------|--------|------------|--------|
| iPod         | 39.4% | 14.7%  | 12.4%      | 33.5%  |
| MP3 (others) | 34.9% | 14.2%  | 22.0%      | 28.9%  |
| Computer     | 3.7%  | 6.4%   | 31.7%      | 58.3%  |
| CD player    | 22.9% | 33.0%  | 25.7%      | 18.3%  |
| Radio        | 14.2% | 19.7%  | 38.5%      | 27.5%  |
| Mobile phone | 38.1% | 17.9%  | 15.1%      | 28.4%  |

encouraged our interviewees to reflect upon their uses of these devices, and it became clear that the choice of the medium depends on where and with whom one is at a particular moment, and what one is doing then. More importantly, devices used function as interconnected platforms, as people can – and do – move from one to another. This depends not only on the particular array of devices owned by each youth – since most in our sample owned most if not all of the suggested items – but, more importantly, on the specific role that music is invited to play at each particular moment in their lives: for example, whether or not it accompanies them during the writing of a term paper and thus offers some much-needed motivation, whether it is serving as a ‘frame’ for the initial moments of a relationship, or whether it is merely acting to fulfill the void sensed, say, when one is riding a bus filled with strangers.

What seems especially salient here is that all options – from the more ‘traditional’ radio to the very ‘high-tech’ iPod – were chosen by more than 40% under the rubrics ‘always’ or ‘frequently’. Even so, there is one item that clearly predominates here, being used ‘always’ or ‘often’ by no less than 90% of young people: the computer. Again, we asked interviewees to elaborate on this point, and they recognized their dependence on the digital world – mainly instantiated by the computer – and its overlapping with other everyday activities:

‘We’re young and young people spend the whole time glued to the computer. We do everything there. It’s really cool.’ (female, 21, member of an NGO)

‘I do not sleep on the computer only because I cannot do it. Actually, everything I want to

do when I’m home I do on the computer.’ (male, 20, university student)

‘It’s part of my arm. I do everything there.’ (female, 21, university student)

‘The first thing I do when I get home is turn on the computer. There I have everything: my music, my friends, my movies. You can even shop. You can do everything.’ (male, 27, works in marketing)

Further, and most importantly, the computer’s predominance in music listening is also obviously a function of the ubiquitous practice of downloading music, which entails that music is accessible and stored on the computer and can be easily distributed from there to other platforms. And this, in turn, is enhanced by the fact that most youth report that they commonly download music free of charge, that is, they use open (usually illegal) file-sharing, P2P sites – which they define as ‘sharing music’ rather than as a legal violation, and which, incidentally, they say is what most attracts them to such computer-based access to music.

Of course, downloading music via the computer stands in opposition to buying CDs. When explaining why they prefer the former over the latter, 70% of our sample point out that CDs are expensive; they are discouraged from spending money on those given that, through the computer, all music is so readily available and, as they put it, ‘for free.’ Another reason, pointed out by 43.6%, is that CDs do not offer the exact mix of music they seek. This is because, usually, not all the music on any one CD is equally enjoyed. Since they often only desire a couple of songs from a particular CD, having to buy the whole product seems, to many, a waste of resources. This combination of a

(perceived) high price and the selective enjoyment of only some tracks in a CD, together with the ease with which music is downloaded ‘for free,’ have certainly been instrumental in popularizing the practice of downloading music:

‘CDs are all ready, nice and tidy. I do not like that. I prefer to look myself, because only I know what I’m looking for.’ (male, 18, university student)

Hence, besides the fact that around 90% say they listen to music on their computers, 79.4% report that the computer is also their main means of accessing, and obtaining, music. This is because, as they explain it:

‘I like to download music because I can find all I need. Sometimes I want a song to remember something cool, and sometimes I want a piece of music to cheer me up or make me forget. There [on the Internet] I’ve got it all.’ (female, 19, university student)

‘When I want something I go there [to the Web] and look for it. It’s like I can just pick everything off the shelves. I don’t feel that I’m taking anything from anyone, because if someone doesn’t want to share, then they don’t share.’ (female, 18, university student)

And the young people know very well why they prefer downloading

music through a computer over any other method of obtaining music. When encouraged to elaborate on this, interviewees mentioned four main points: (1) the variety of music available online, (2) the low cost (since only a very small percentage (8.7%) pay for their downloads), (3) the fact that one is always connected to the Internet, so that one can easily download music while engaging in other activities, and (4) ease of use.

### ***Listening to Music in the Digital Era***

Of course, the computer is not the only medium used to obtain or to listen to music. Rather, it acts as a central distributor, a ‘wholesaler’ that distributes such music to a variety of other – still digital – platforms. Devices used thus include Apple iPods, other MP3, MP4 and MP5 players, cell phones and smartphones. This is illustrated in the table below, constructed according to the answers we received when we asked the youth: ‘how do you obtain music?’

A few interesting points are highlighted by this table: while the computer obviously holds the upper hand (with 79.4% saying they get their music by downloading it for free through the Internet via a computer), a perhaps surprising 67.4% still obtain their music through the radio – not very

**Table 2:** *How do you obtain music?*

|                                                      |       |
|------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Downloading from the Internet (free-of-charge sites) | 79.4% |
| Listening to the radio                               | 67.4% |
| Buying original CDs (record stores)                  | 53.2% |
| Through friends via MSN                              | 50.0% |
| Copying original CDs from friends                    | 48.6% |
| Through friends who download music and pass it along | 28.9% |
| Through friends via Bluetooth                        | 26.1% |
| Buying pirate CDs (street vendors)                   | 20.0% |
| Buying via own mobile phones or friends’ phones      | 10.6% |
| Downloading from the Internet, paying                | 8.7%  |
| Through blogs                                        | 6.4%  |

different from the youth of five decades ago. At the same time, CDs – whether personally bought or copied from friends – are a means used by around half of the youth; also, apparently, not too differently from two decades ago. Only, when we broke down this answer by the frequency with which they engage in each kind of practice, it became clear that even those who still buy CDs do so very infrequently: one, perhaps twice a year, and only in very small quantities. In any case, it is most significant here that all the other options entail the materiality of computers in some way, making this

apparatus into the central object used by youth for their musical practices.

Now, as to the question of where the youth listen to music, the table below shows that, while a great deal of music is still listened to at home, the habit of listening to music has become a very mobile activity:

Of course, it is the digitalization of both obtaining and listening to music that allows people to further diversify the sites where music is listened to. And, although portable radios, walkmans, disc magnets and related devices have long been used to transport music around, the ease of

**Table 3:** *Where do you listen music?*

|                                             |       |
|---------------------------------------------|-------|
| At home                                     | 88.5% |
| In the car                                  | 59.2% |
| In friends' homes                           | 53.2% |
| In the bus/subway                           | 51.4% |
| At school/university                        | 28.0% |
| With boy/girlfriend or husband/wife         | 27.1% |
| In relatives' homes (cousins, uncles, etc.) | 25.7% |
| At work                                     | 22.0% |

portability enabled by digital music has greatly expanded this practice.

Current devices can be carried around by the listener in ways much more varied than before. For example, the diminutive size of a late-model iPod shuffle – less than two inches long – makes it incredibly portable, for it is, indeed, almost invisible to others. Another important aspect, clearly, is that, thanks to the present status of technological innovation – and, again, to the permanent presence of the computer in people's lives – the music heard on these devices can be spread with incredible speed. This is because the allocation, and thus the materialization, of different music in different media – starting with the music stored on the computer at home

– is now a much faster process than, for example, the former slow recordings from cassette tapes.

### ***Portability, Disposability, Substitutability***

What emerges here is a picture of the young listener as someone deeply involved with music, which can be obtained in different ways, stored in different media, heard in different places with different people, and articulated with various activities. Importantly, it is portability, expanded by what we may call 'digitality,' that allows for this wide range of uses and meanings. Easy access and the use of computers for musical purposes, the

variety of media that can be used for conveying and listening to music, and diversified (and even individualized) musical tastes have transformed the practice of listening and the very role of music in the lives of the young. More specifically, music can now be ever more thoroughly imbricated in everyday life, rather than be assigned to specific ‘appropriate’ contexts, times, and spaces.

Portability and customized listening, however, are not the only features of digital music that engender new forms of listening. Other prominent features are the disposability, the substitutability, and the dematerialization of music. With respect of what we are terming ‘disposability’ and ‘substitutability,’ the possibility of downloading and sharing music with others, given the ease of transferring between platforms, has turned the repertoire of available music into something virtually ‘infinite.’ And, at the same speed that new songs are always appearing, automatically other songs can be, and are being, discarded and replaced. Furthermore, anyone can now substitute one song for another literally at the very moment when one begins to ‘tire’ of it:

‘If I get sick of it, I change it.’  
(female, 19, university student)

‘Suddenly you find ‘that song.’ I just go there and add the song I got and forget the others.’ (male, 17, student)

‘MP3 is much better than CDs because I can add and remove what I want. I have this thing of getting sick of music. I hear it three times and get sick of it.’  
(female, 22, student at an NGO)

‘My iPod is 8 GB. It holds a lot, it holds everything I like. As I get to

know more, I get an upgrade and change the iPod. And if I get tired of a song, I get rid of it and put in another. [This] is very good.’  
(male, 19, university student)

Rather than former modes of extreme loyalty to singers and bands, and though some youth obviously still have their favorite artists, for most what prevails today is a permanent substitution of different music to fulfill the same functions: music that is thought to be particularly suitable for motivation or exercise, for example, is different from music seen as suitable for driving a car, or falling asleep, or hanging out with friends. And what matters more is the function such music is asked to fulfill rather than loyalty to one band or singer. Which, again, also helps explain the permanent renewal of everyone’s musical repertoire. Music that is used for motivation, for example, can be any music provided that it is classified as motivating, and the same goes for other possible functions. In this sense, ‘Music’ is permanent in the lives of young people, but ‘music’ – in the sense of specific songs, styles, and singers – is certainly not.

Substitutability is further facilitated because digitalization enables exchanging and discarding free of charge, as explained by these interviewees:

‘I go there and delete everything. If I want it again, it’s all there [online].’ (male, 18, university student)

‘I’ve got all and none of them. When I’m going through one [specific] phase I set up my iPod one way. When I don’t want it any more I just delete it and get

some other [songs].’ (female, 18, university student)

In addition, the dematerialization of music, which is another characteristic of brought about by digitality, allows one to enjoy music without necessarily possessing it in a permanent medium, such as vinyl or CD. As the youth so aptly put it, they have ‘all songs and no songs;’ everything is ‘there,’ online, available to be downloaded at any time. Hence, they do not literally need to ‘own’ it. Listening to whatever kind of music one feels like listening to no longer requires ‘having the music;’ access to it is enough:

‘My relationship is like this: I’ve got all and none at the same time. So why have CDs?’ (male, 21, university student)

‘I do not buy CDs, I’ve given away almost all of them. I only saved a few. They get so covered in dust. Why gather that pile of CDs? When I want some music I just go there [to the Web] and get whatever I want. Everything’s always there.’ (male, 19, university student)

## Music as the Soundtrack of Life

### *Individualization and Music*

It is not, however, that the portability enabled by digital music has made the habit of listening to music a more social activity than ever before: to the contrary, it has favored precisely the increasing individualization of the habit of listening to music. As shown in the table below, over 90% of the young people surveyed listen to music by themselves. It is true that this is not an activity that is engaged in only when they are alone, because about 60% also listen to music with friends, about 30% with their family, and a little less with their partners. However, it is quite significant that the predominant response is ‘alone:’

Such individualization in the practice of listening to music highlights how, in earlier times, one might have the habit of meeting friends in order to listen to music – with everyone listening to the same music, usually from a phonograph or record player – while today this activity is most

**Table 4:** *With whom do you listen to music?*

|                                     |       |
|-------------------------------------|-------|
| Alone                               | 91.9% |
| With friends                        | 60.2% |
| With family                         | 30.2% |
| With boy/girlfriend or husband/wife | 27.6% |
| With work colleagues                | 11.3% |

often performed alone. By extension, and enabled by not only the digital character of current musical practices, but also by the immense material culture surrounding music today, each individual now builds his/her own digital platform and personal repertory.

Some statements illustrate this point well:

‘I don’t have MP3 or iPod, only CD players. But I have two. One I keep in the room and the other I take everywhere with me. And when I cannot take it, I listen to

music straight from the mobile [phone]. I have some music for each hour of the day, and I adapt as I go along. I even listen to music in the bathroom. I take the CD player in there with me.’ (male, 21, student at an NGO)

‘I always want the most powerful cell phone, and it’s got to have MP3. That is how I listen to music. I’ve been robbed three times, but I just go out and buy another [phone]. It’s great because I have everything there, a whole bunch of songs. And it even speaks...’ (male, 27, works in marketing)

Important in explaining this individualization is also that each individual has now ‘his/her’ music stored in their own platforms, which enables anyone to easily build their own individualized music repertoires (the famous ‘playlists’). And these, almost by definition, are never exactly the same as the repertoires of others, since they draw upon not only individual taste, but also each personal history and experience, the particular influences one may have been subjected to, certain childhood memories, one’s current relationship status, or work status, and so on. In this way, the ease with which such personal repertoires can be built allows for a very special relationship between each individual youth and his or her individualized set of songs, which in turn are accessed and materialized by (largely) individual devices. Such relationship, then, is necessarily different for each individual youth.

Furthermore, since music is listened to in tandem with the particular activities one is performing on any given day, interviewees report that they assign

specific kinds of music, or specific songs, to each particular activity they engage in. There is ‘music for working out,’ ‘music for relaxing,’ ‘music for listening to with friends,’ or dating, or riding the bus, car or subway. In short, a picture emerges whereby different songs and musical styles are used for different activities and for each time of day. By logical extension, then, the particular music one is going to listen to will depend, to a large extent, on those other activities one is about to perform at any given moment:

‘Sometimes I know that I’m tidying up the room just because of the music.’ (female, 19, university student)

‘I have a song for everything and I feel different with each type of music. Depending on my mood at a particular moment, I prefer this or that song. I know what I need at the time.’ (male, 19, university student and member of an NGO).

### ***The Role of Music in Daily Activities***

To further develop the previous point – about how music is linked to specific activities – we asked our respondents to explain how exactly music fits into their daily lives. To do so, we offered them the choice of eleven different activities and asked them to determine how frequently they listen to music when engaging in each such activity. The table below is telling:

What these responses allow us to do is understand the relationship between music and other everyday activities, for the table offers a kind of ‘map’ of the activities in which music plays a routine role. If we look at the activities

that young people say they always perform when listening to music, we see that they mention three activities most often (and with high percentages, since all the other options fall in the range of 20% or below): driving a car (56%), using the Internet (46.8%), and sports or exercise (33.9%). If we

add the ‘frequently’ responses to the ‘always’ responses, there is only one significant change, because besides the three previous activities, ‘being with friends’ also plays a central role: more than 50% of the young people say they ‘frequently’ listen to music when hanging out with friends. So, using the

**Table 5:** *How often do you engage in the following activities while listening to music?*

|                       | Always | Frequently | Rarely | Never |
|-----------------------|--------|------------|--------|-------|
| Driving               | 56.0%  | 23.4%      | 6.0%   | 14.7% |
| Surfing the Internet  | 46.8%  | 38.1%      | 9.6%   | 5.5%  |
| Exercising            | 33.9%  | 29.8%      | 22.9%  | 13.3% |
| Being with friends    | 22.0%  | 50.9%      | 17.4%  | 9.6%  |
| Working               | 15.1%  | 17.0%      | 19.7%  | 47.2% |
| Sleeping              | 13.8%  | 22.9%      | 28.0%  | 34.4% |
| Dating                | 12.8%  | 39.4%      | 29.8%  | 17.9% |
| Studying              | 10.6%  | 15.6%      | 28.4%  | 45.0% |
| Eating                | 10.1%  | 19.3%      | 37.6%  | 33.0% |
| Watching television   | 8.3%   | 9.6%       | 22.5   | 58.7% |
| Speaking on the phone | 7.8%   | 16.5%      | 24.3%  | 51.4% |

Internet is the activity that they most often perform while listening to music (84.9% ‘always’ + ‘often’), followed by driving (79.4%), followed by being with friends (72.9%), then (fourth) by sports/exercise (63.7%).

What this suggests, also, is that the space filled by music is complementary to other activities. In other words, music here appears not as an end-activity in itself, but as something that is done while doing other things. In this sense, the presence of music is quite significantly differentiated from two or three decades ago, when young people gathered to listen to music, or from the former imagery of individualized, introverted youth locked up in their bedrooms with their headphones, ‘only’ listening to music. What emerges from the table above is a very different scenario: music

does not appear as the core activity; rather, it fills space and accompanies other activities. On the other hand, it is also crucial to understand that these activities are rarely engaged in without consideration of the appropriate music that is defined as ‘perfect’ to accompany them.

It should be noted, though, that the meanings attributed to music in the four activities mentioned above are different: while driving or being in the car, music fills that idle space/time that can be potentially irritating but can also be a moment for introspection, of thinking about life or upcoming chores. While using the Internet, music is an integral part of the activity because it accompanies some other activity that is being done ‘in it,’ or because the user is actually downloading and/or listening to music. When one is with

friends, music serves as a setting, so to speak, in which sociability takes place. As for playing sports or exercising, music is made to serve as motivation. In other words, one listens to music while performing other activities but, for each such activity, music fulfills a different function.

But if music is part of some activities, this is not true of all activities. Young people listen to music regularly while downloading music, doing more general research on the Internet or chatting with friends online. Several of our interviewees point out, though, – and contrary to the prevailing image, conveyed by the media and some writers, of the young scatterbrain engaged in numerous activities at the same time – that music does not participate while they are studying or working, because it ‘disturbs’ them. There is, then, a specific hierarchy of activities that may or may not be performed together: studying and working cannot be combined with music, but engaging in social activities such as using Facebook or MSN are thought to ‘go perfectly together with music,’ as one interviewee put it. In fact, often new songs are heard or commented on while one is socializing with friend through such social networks. In short, music is present in day-to-day affairs in a variety of ways, but rarely as the main activity; to the contrary, it is almost always materialized jointly with other activities and it is deployed as a means to give meaning to such activities and not vice-versa.

### ***Music: The Soundtrack of Life***

Our data leads us to suggest that music functions today as the ‘soundtrack’ of one’s life – a term proposed by many of our respondents. By this we mean that music – or, rather, the songs one listens to – is increasingly able to assign unique meanings to unique people and the peculiarities of these meanings are known, and understood, by only each particular individual and no one else. Even more interestingly, such particular meanings change according to each moment in time and each situation – hence the idea that such chosen songs serve as a ‘soundtrack.’ Particular – and differentiated – songs and playlists accompany each and every moment of daily life: for each individual there seems to be a specifically appropriate piece of music especially suited for each particular situation, and it is each individual who chooses his or her own ‘soundtrack.’ Of course, it is the digital character of contemporary music that enables the multiple and interchangeable combinations of songs that, eventually, act as the ‘soundtrack’ for each particular situation. In a deep sense, this means that life itself is thought and perceived through music. This is to say that it lends more density to experiences, the effect of the sounds and the meaning of the songs move us emotionally and make certain moments more intense:

‘I think my life through music. For each thing I do, I need the right music, and it has to be that precise one, otherwise it does not seem real.’ (female, 18, university student)

The relationship established with music, through such functions as are assigned to it, is an individualized relationship: each young person chooses his/her own music for the different functions to be fulfilled on a typical day. As one young woman put it:

‘Music serves many different purposes, so I need different kinds of music.’ (female, 17, university student)

Or, in the words of this young man:

‘I have different music for each thing, and I feel different with each kind of music. Depending on my mood on that particular moment, I will choose this or that kind of music. I am the one who knows what I need on that moment.’ (male, 21, university student)

This young woman summarized it especially poignantly:

‘It is my soundtrack. It is the soundtrack of my life and no one else’s.’ (female, 18, university student, emphasis added)

As this last statement makes particularly clear, what these young people are suggesting is that music acts, truly, as the soundtrack of these youth’s lives, in the sense that it not only accompanies, but effectively materializes experience at any given moment. Music thus is not acting as the center activity in most these everyday experiences, but neither is it merely functioning as ‘background noise.’ Rather, it is felt to act much like a movie soundtrack would: different actions or moments in a movie are made more real because specific music brings them to life, for each scene (or group of scenes) there is specific music chosen specifically for it, the music in a

soundtrack helps convey the meanings of each moment in the movie, and it individually tailored – it fits only that scene or group of scenes in that movie designed by that director, based on his or her understanding that that is what that part of his movie ‘needs’ at that moment.

For the youth with whom we worked, this is precisely the role played by music in their lives. It is present in (almost) every moment in quotidian life, fulfilling different functions along one particular day. Hence, it comes to be seen as, literally, the ‘soundtrack’ that accompanies each individual life at every moment, fitting into each moment according to the specificities of both moment and music. Very importantly, this is an individualized soundtrack: for each individual there is a specific soundtrack, and only he or she knows what it is. Equally important, of course, is that it is each individual who sets up their own soundtrack, picking the song or kind of music more adequate for this or that ‘scene’ in their life, ‘getting’ their music online (and, rarely, also buying CDs), carrying it along while all other daily activities are being performed, and storing it in a personal computer so that it can be re-utilized for other moments. And, given that all have access to the digital media necessary to do so, all are able to set up their very own, very unique, soundtrack, also changing it as they see fit – through the logics of substitutability and disposability – depending on moment, function, changes in musical taste, and so on.

Of course, the main reason why music has come to be understood as a soundtrack of individual life is that

today one has, at one's disposal, all the required means for materialized such individualized, substitutable, disposable, and portable soundtrack. Further, it is also because, given the degree of individualism current in present-day societies, these youth learn to imagine their world in an individualized form, and they are able to find, in such equally individualized listening habits, their perfect 'allies' in the construction of the very new, very unique relationship to music that we have been describing. Therefore, while music seems, in fact, every more central in these young people's lives, for each individual youth this happens in an ever more individualized way. Again, this is why the phrase 'soundtrack of life' seems so apt: it highlights precisely this individualized, and highly adaptable, feature of music consumption and music listening.

### **Concluding Thoughts on Music and Materiality**

Each and every technology and each and every object are a combination of material possibilities that are only truly instantiated when they are objectified, in specific social forms, inside a given society and culture. Further, these forms of objectification are not necessarily the same, which points to the multiple cultural logics that can then be brought into being so that one single materiality platform can produce very unique, and differentiated, social configurations and meanings. The example we have described here – the appropriation of digital technology by Brazilian youth and the ways it has provoked a revolution of sorts in how

music is listened to and experienced – suggests further reflection on the status of material culture – or, better, of materiality – in contemporary life.

To trace a very brief genealogy of the role of objects in the human and social sciences, it is useful to remember that, initially, material culture was studied by archaeology: already in the nineteenth century, researchers treated any artifacts or other concrete things as 'rests' left behind by past cultures. Museum curators then tended to place such tokens of material culture on display according to their assumed function in an assumed evolutionist logic – objects were placed alongside to, and in contrast with, others according to a presumed timeline based on a presumed level of technological development. Such assumptions – about artifacts reflecting an evolutionary process – were questioned shortly thereafter by Boas, an anthropologist who argued that such juxtaposition of museum objects according to function and position in the same evolutionary line entirely misunderstood three basic points about objects in culture: that they reflect the cultural circumstances in which they are produced, that their end function or effect can have multiple causes and can have been produced under multiple cultural circumstances, and that to understand the real role and function of objects one must look at the context of their production.

Jumping ahead to the second half of the twentieth century, while some scholars still focused on, for example, the semiotics of objects (Barthes, 1983, Baudrillard, 1998, 2006) or the 'social life of things' as gifts and/or commodities (Appadurai, 1988), other

studies in anthropology and the social sciences were increasingly diverting their gaze away from the objects themselves and towards practices of consumption. Thus, a plethora of studies emerged on the ‘world of goods’ (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996), the processes of ‘distinction’ instantiated and reproduced by consumption (Bourdieu, 1984), or the role of consumption as everyday practice central in the making and unmaking of societies (Weiss, 1996).

We may say that this gradual move from the early idea of material culture in North American anthropology and archaeology, where the ‘remains’ of native societies were treated as easy-to-read texts through which one tried to read concrete forms of life, passing through multifaceted studies on consumption, culminated in current emphases on establishing an actual field of ‘material culture studies’ (eg, Buechli, 2002, Miller 1997, 2009). Such field, as Miller points out (2005:9), has as one of its starting point the notion of ‘objectification’, which should be understood as ‘a process in time by which the very act of creating form creates consciousness or capacity such as skill and thereby transforms both form and the self-consciousness of that which has consciousness’, i.e., humans.

This, then, is what the notion of ‘materiality’, proposed as yet another step in studies of objects and objectification (Miller, 2005:2), is meant to do: to emphasize precisely the foundational role ‘played by materiality in most people’s stance in the world,’ and the fact that it ‘remains the driving force behind humanity’s attempts to transform the world in order to make it

accord with beliefs as to how the world should be.’ And the way to achieve this, Miller goes on, is to transcend the duality between subjects and objects altogether, not solely by claiming the agency of things as Latour (1993) does, but by taking seriously the possibility that objects make people in the same degree of importance that people make things and, moreover, that people engage with the material world in an agentive, active way.

What becomes clear through such an approach – which we have intended here – is the dynamic relationship that humans establish with the material world that surrounds them. Further, this is a relationship conceived as much more active than ever before. Sometimes it provokes us and sets in motion reactions that, in some cases, may restrict us, our thoughts, and our actions, but at other times liberate ourselves in the direction of new meanings, new sensorialities, and new discoveries about ourselves and the world we live in. What we do with such potentialities and how exactly they affect us is a whole new path of study that needs to be taken on.

Digital technology, in how it has been appropriated by the youth we describe here, has changed radically how music is listened to, not only by the youth, but by a whole society, and it has done so in a way that contrasts markedly with modes of music listening typical of previous generations. Listening to music has become a highly individualized activity but, now, as it seems to be reaching the limits of its own process of individuation; new spaces of sharing and socialization are being opened. This is signalled, for example, by new

experiences of sharing ‘my’ soundtrack in specific spaces – such as parties – where such sharing allows the ‘other’ to enter ‘my’ privacy and find out as much about me as I do about him or her – and we do so through our mutual reactions to what ‘I’ listen to and like. What this means, of course, is that through a material potentiality offered by digital music ‘I’ have changed the ways that I relate to music but, at the same time, I return, through different means, to new forms of socializing the listening to music.

To conclude, this has not been the only transformation linked to music. With it, the very idea of ownership – crucial to materiality in earlier times – changes, precisely because, now, one single object – if it is even adequate to refer to all the possibilities entailed in digital music – is simultaneously owned by everyone and by no one in particular. In doing so, formerly ‘sacred’ copyrights are now being strongly tempered with. On the other hand, this dematerialization of consumption is

being transferred to the materialization of so-called ‘access goods’ (Rifkin, 2011). If I no longer own music, nor do I need to materially dispose of it, I still need – and ever more so – the materiality of those objects that grant me access. This process, of course, creates new social configurations that we could never have anticipated. And these are not only fixed onto the realm of music; rather, they can be observed with regards to any other goods that people can somehow access, use, and enjoy without necessarily owning them. In this context, notions of the exhaustion of consumption, the relationships between consumer and producer, and the very cycle of production (up to disposal) are being fundamentally transformed. New responsibilities are being discussed, new relationships are being created, and new actors enter center stage. In a future archaeology of our present, material culture will need to be redefined – once more – to try to make sense of its own de-materialization.

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