‘Press Play for Pride’: The cultural logics of LGBTQ-themed playlists on Spotify

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Introduction

In 2016, the music streaming service Spotify launched more than thirty LGBTQ[1]-themed playlists with the shared label “#PressPlayForPride”. The service, provided by a Swedish company of the same name, was founded in 2006 by Daniel Ek and Marin Lorentzon and launched as a platform in 2008. As at December 31, 2017, it had over 157 million active users across 65 markets, including 71 million paying subscribers, with 35 million songs in its library (Spotify, 2018). Spotify’s LGBTQ-themed series simultaneously commemorated the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida on June 12, 2016 (Mlot, 2016) and celebrated North American Pride month. It was promoted publicly, emphasising the company’s support for diversity and inclusion (Mlot, 2016). The series included a range of Spotify-curated playlists, some of them guest-curated by LGBTQ music artists and allies. Each playlist represented a particular configuration of Western-centric LGBTQ culture, music genres and scenes.

The #PressPlayForPride playlists are an instance of the broader cultural phenomenon of playlist curation, and a considerable number of LGBTQ-themed public playlists had already been created by ordinary users. This widespread cultural practice is a manifestation of broader trends associated with the digital transformation of the recorded music industry, and in particular the shift to streaming as mode of distribution. Beginning with the widespread uptake of digital formats like MP3, the playlist has become a primary means to discover, order and share music.

Significantly for our purposes here, when consumer-curated playlists are shared via platforms and ancillary social media, playlist curation becomes a public, representational, and performative practice. Playlists on streaming services, we argue, do cultural work. It is our task in this article to unpack their cultural logics.

We define cultural logics at two levels: first, as those sets of shared purposes, values, and aesthetics users draw on and reproduce when curating playlists; and second, as being embedded and shaped by digital media's platform logics. At the first of these levels, we understand cultural logics as those "elements of cultural meaning which are commonly carried by some group of individuals, and which are regularly employed in social interpretation among them" (Enfield, 2000: 59). Secondly, we build on the concept of "social media logic" (van Dijck and Poell, 2013) as well as scholarship on the cultural logics of digital media (Jenkins, 2004; Lobato, 2016), to understand how playlist curation articulates to the changing digital media environment more broadly. Therefore, for our purposes here, streaming playlist curation requires and performs shared cultural knowledge and values that inflect and are shaped by the broader logics of algorithmically-influenced, commercial digital media platforms, of which Spotify is but one example.

In terms of the first level, LGBTQ-themed playlists are of interest because they express and amplify the logics of LGBTQ cultures and politics. In terms of the second level, they are also shaped by platform-specific affordances and algorithmic mechanisms for curation – hence, both users and platforms are working to represent and remediate LGTBQ music cultures and histories. These cultures and histories are inevitably diverse, fragmented, and contested across subcultures, demographics, and geopolitical contexts (including those where public LGBTQ culture is relatively acceptable and those where it is not). Identifying and interpreting the cultural logics that underlie the playlists helps us understand the range of ways LGBTQ identities are being reconfigured, amplified or muted in digital culture and its publics. In doing

so, we engage with scholars who reflect on the role of digital curation in the representation of identity (Potter, 2012) and construction of an LGBTQ community (Wargo, 2017).

We also draw on the work of queer theory-informed scholars who have studied LGBTQ-themed music (e.g., Dhaenens, 2016; Taylor, 2010; Whiteley and Rycenga, 2006), including the hegemonic influence of the conservative identity politics associated with hetero- and homonormativity (Duggan, 2003) on the representation of LGBTQ themes and identities in Western popular music culture. At the same time, these scholars highlight the potential and manifestation of queerness in popular music. Although the concept of queer is multivalent and its meanings have co-evolved with cultural history (see Dyer and Cohen, 2002), we use it as a subject position that signifies resistance to what is discursively constructed as the norm in heteronormative societies (Warner, 1991). Accordingly, here we are interested in the presence or absence of queer artists or songs in public Spotify playlists as well as the existence of playlists that are explicitly positioned as politically queer in this way.

In the remainder of the article, we provide an overview of the relevant literature, first exploring the implications of streaming services for how people consume and curate music. The following section provides a conceptual framework for the study of identity-based curation, paying attention to LGBTQ-themed content, and then outlines the methods used in our empirical study of LGBTQ-themed Spotify playlists. In the subsequent analysis, we discuss the four cultural logics that were found to underpin the creation of LGBTQ playlists. We conclude that playlist curation engages with LGBTQ culture in three distinctive ways: first, the curators contribute to a library of libraries by sharing diverse perspectives on what constitutes LGBTQ music culture; second, the platform engages in community-building through enabling the sharing of tastes, pleasures, and personal experiences; and third, the practice brings diverse identity politics to the table, resulting in playlists that are politically queer, homonormative, or ideologically ambiguous.

Streaming services, Spotify, and playlists

Streaming services have changed how music is consumed, experienced, and shared. There are a number of competing business models, but the most commercially successful services employ the two-tier 'freemium' model. Users choose either a free, advertising supported option, or an ad-free and otherwise enhanced 'premium' experience – in exchange for a monthly subscription fee (Thomes, 2013). Following the rise of the MP3 and the increased plentitude of recorded music, Wikström (2009) noted that value for consumers in digital music services lay mainly in the ability to "navigate, manage and manipulate the music in the Cloud and on their digital devices" (2009: 175).

Kjus's research (2016) highlights that music discovery is an essential affordance of streaming services for many users, who understand them as apparently boundless archives that grant access to artists' extensive catalogues or to music that fits their tastes. Yet, his study also found that many of these users find the idea of 'boundless' musical archives overwhelming and that unsatisfying searches often result in fatigue. Nowak (2016) found that users of streaming services often complement them with other music technologies such as vinyl or compact discs. Holding on to physical recordings may be a way to re-create the affective relationships with particular songs or artists that might otherwise be missing when we experience music as an infinite stream, which removes the requirement to choose carefully and then to maintain an attachment to our choices. Building on Hagen and Lüders (2017), we suggest that playlists might play a similar role. Especially when they are user-curated, they may help constrain and order the apparently infinite and undifferentiated universe of available songs, albums, and artists, and allow audiences to get closer to their music. Further, the curation of playlists is a way to guide users through the content library. In constituting and enacting aesthetic, narrative or ideological relations between curated songs or artists, curators can convey particular stories

and histories about (popular) music culture, which are otherwise lost or invisible in the vast archives.

Playlists are a prominent structural feature of the Spotify platform. Upon opening Spotify, users are guided to a wide variety of 'official' playlists that are represented as matching the user's personal tastes and context, based on listening history, location, and so on. Additionally, Spotify offers a range of mood-based, activity-based or event-based playlists. The company began investing in the curation of playlists in approximately 2012, to accommodate those audiences who prefer a continuous, radio-like mode of music listening (Fleisher and Snickars, 2017). The turn to playlists led to the hiring of curators, who now enjoy significant cultural influence. Fleisher and Snickars (2017) highlight how curators were not required to have expertise in particular genres, but had to be able to curate playlists appropriate to various moods, events, genres, or experiences. This cultural knowledge and affective expertise were then paired with the algorithmic recommendation systems Spotify invested in, resulting in the current curation system, which relies on both human and machine inputs.

Both users of the advertising-supported 'free' version and subscription-paying users can also curate an indefinite number of playlists themselves. Algorithmic curation and personalisation play a role in determining the kinds of music users come across, as well as the content of user-curated playlists. As Morris and Powers (2002) note, streaming services may sell the idea of unlimited access to music. However, through the logic of personalisation, they also effectively constrain the range of musical genres and styles that users encounter, by suggesting music based on past listening patterns, daily routines, or moods. Features such as 'Automated Play' – which enables Spotify to start playing similar songs when a song, album or playlist ends – and 'Recommended Songs' – which refers to a set of songs that are suggested to users to include in their playlists – shape which songs and artists are included in a playlist. Through recommending songs that are popular and fit a playlist's emergent logics, Spotify not only co-constructs

individual tastes, but also – given its widespread cultural influence – arguably contributes to the reshaping or invention of musical canons for particular styles and genres.

Of course, the content that is not available on the platform is as culturally influential as the content that is presented to users. Even though Spotify has recently renewed its partnerships with the three major music labels (i.e. Sony Music, Universal Music Group, Warner Music Group; see Deahl, 2017), the licensing deals allow exceptions such as assuring that artists can hold back albums from the free service for a few weeks. Further, there may be artists who have an exclusive deal with a different streaming service, artists refusing to stream their music on free services like Spotify, or artists who do not have a label, aggregator, or specialized company to negotiate these licensing deals with streaming platforms. Further, legal and administrative issues may keep certain artists or record companies from licensing specific albums or songs. Finally, legal constraints prevent the sharing of bootlegged music, unauthorized remixes, and mash-ups, which might otherwise be a rich source for the memorialisation and curation of vernacular creativity and fan culture. In summary, Spotify as a platform and as a digital media business is powerfully influential in selectively remediating, reconfiguring and representing popular cultures and histories.

Curating LGBTQ culture through Spotify playlists

The curation of identity-themed playlists, especially when shared quasi-publicly on Spotify and social media platforms connected to it, is both an act of self-expression and a contribution to public culture. Potter (2012) argues that when ordinary people mindfully produce, collect, assemble, edit, remix and share content online, they are engaging in practices of curation that can work as forms of self-representation. Wargo (2017) similarly underscores the role of curation as a social and participatory practice of storytelling. As curating has been used to highlight markers of identity (Potter and Gilje, 2015), it can be mobilized for online activism.

It can raise awareness about social inequality, bring people with marginalized identities together in online networks, and build equity for neglected, oppressed or minority communities (Wargo, 2017). Wargo (2017) demonstrated how the practices of collecting and curating allowed young people to "create community, maintain queer-kin relations, and create social norms for interactions" (2017: 28).

Hagen (2015) stresses that this identity work, which has always been part of the creation of playlists or mixtapes (Skågeby, 2011), remains important in the production of playlists on streaming services. She argues that "playlists curated by moods, feelings, memories, or biographical/relational representations help the user experience mastery over the self, whether those lists remain private or not" (2015: 18). These practices of self-management and self-representation have been dominant within the digital media sphere (Baym, 2010); but the logic of social convergence has blurred the boundaries between self-representation and public communication. Unsurprisingly, some users curate playlists that might be grounded in and motivated by deeply personal feelings or experiences, and yet are shared publicly as well (Hagen and Lüders, 2017). Usually, explicitly political themes are backgrounded in playlists that feature a person's favorite tracks or in playlists that express one's romantic feelings for another. But personal playlists become more explicitly and visibly political when the assembled songs are articulated to minority or marginalized identities.

Of course, what is understood as LGBTQ music is as diverse as LGBTQ cultures themselves. In writing on gay culture in the 1980s, Dyer and Cohen (2002) demonstrated the myriad ways LGBTQ people engaged with arts and culture, ranging from a camp aesthetic that is associated with, say, opera fandom or pop divas, through to directly representational or activist queer media and art. Yet, in doing so, they and other scholars (DeChaine, 2008; Wasserbauer and Dhoest, 2016) have revealed which cultural productions and genres have been meaningful to LGBTQ people and demonstrated the existence of a vernacular LGBTQ canon. LGBTQ-

themed playlists may implicitly or explicitly draw attention to identity politics and to LGBTQ culture at large. Vivienne and Burgess (2012), for instance, demonstrated how queer digital storytellers producing autobiographical videos engage in forms of 'everyday activism'. In doing so, the storytellers had to negotiate their privacy with the desire to be heard publicly and engender social change. Accordingly, we consider public playlists related to LGBTQ identities as public expressions and negotiations of private and intimate desires that diverge from and challenge heteronormativity. Since little research had been conducted into these issues, our study sought to explore them through an analysis of LGBTQ-themed playlists on Spotify, with the objective of identifying the range of cultural logics underlying them, in relation to both digital media and Western LGBTQ culture.

Methods

We began by creating a sample of LGBTQ-themed playlists using a freely available tool that connects to the Spotify platform.[2] The goal was to be as inclusive as possible of the diversity of LGBTQ-themed playlists available on Spotify, based on a selection of such playlists that were publicly available in March and April 2017.[3] We looked for playlists whose title or description included a reference to LGBTQ culture. The study of LGBTQ-themed playlists on Spotify entails a large volume of content – e.g. a search for 'gay' resulted in more than 1000 playlists containing that keyword. Other, less dominant, keywords (e.g. 'bisexual') yielded very small numbers of results. To allow for a comparative approach between playlists with similar entries, we decided not to include the results from searches that generated ten or fewer results. We further left out pejorative uses of LGBTQ-related terms (e.g. 'gay' meaning 'lame' or 'effeminate'). In the end, we collected playlists found using the following keyword searches: 'LGBT OR LGBTQ', 'gay', 'lesbian', 'queer' and 'Pride'.[4] The top four playlists listed in the results of each search were included. When a playlist was already included, we skipped it and instead selected the following one in the results list. These playlists were complemented by a

selection of thirteen hand-selected playlists that illustrate alternative or other practices that were not present in the first selection, which resulted in a final sample of 37 playlists (see Table 1).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

It was also important to our study to learn something about who curated the playlists. However, the availability of this information is limited. Spotify has not invested in providing its users with the means to create personal profiles specific to the platform (although it connects on the back end to users' Facebook profiles). Apart from a profile picture and the ability to add commentary to each self-created playlist in a 300-character text box, there are few options to identify oneself, either by real name or pseudonym. It would be impossible to 'categorize' users' sexual or gender identities, even if we had been interested in doing so (and we were not). However, we could distinguish four *categories* of curators of public LGBTQ-themed playlists. The biggest group comprises ordinary users who have made their playlists publicly accessible. They are responsible for the majority of LGBTQ-themed playlists. A second, smaller but still prominent group are the curators responsible for the official Spotify playlists. They remain anonymous, because such playlists are officially curated by 'Spotify' and any direct information on who has actually compiled the playlist is omitted. The third category consists of media companies, such as LGBTQ press (e.g. Têtu), record companies' curating brands (e.g. Topsify), or digital distribution services (e.g. ONErpm). Finally, there are the celebrity guest curators who were invited by Spotify or other companies to create playlists, and are usually represented as LGBTQ allies or as LGBTQ celebrities or artists (see Table 1).

Subsequently, we conducted an interpretative textual analysis of the sample (including playlist titles, song lists, and curator information) to explore and identify the underlying cultural logics. Following Larsen (2002) and McKee (2003), who define textual analysis as a method geared to understanding the latent meanings and likely interpretations of cultural texts and practices,

we developed a research design that allowed us to 'read' the identity-based playlists in relation to LGBTQ identity politics and LGBTQ culture. Three basic questions were progressively and iteratively used to inform our analysis: (1) who is curating the playlist?; (2) what is the logic of individual song selection, with respect to LGBTQ culture? and (3) taking each playlist as a whole, what are its implied themes or contexts of use? By analyzing fifteen randomly selected songs from each playlist, and reflecting on the principles that connected them, we identified an emergent set of thematic categories through which LGBTQ culture was being articulated. The following categories were identified: LGBTQ artists, LGBTQ-themed lyrics, LGBTQ-themed music videos and popular culture, LGBTQ-based subcultures, genres or movements, LGBTQ allies, party songs, adoration of divas, appropriation by LGBTQ community, intertextuality, celebration of LGBTQ culture, civil rights-themed songs, soundtracks to everyday life, and personal taste and/or storytelling. Finally, we interpreted these categories with reference to the data on the curators to identify, name and describe each playlist's apparent cultural logics.

This approach enabled us to identify four distinctive but occasionally overlapping cultural logics that structure LGBTQ-themed playlists: 1) mapping and exploring LGBTQ music culture (19 playlists) (code: mapping); 2) engaging with identity politics (6 playlists) (code: identity politics); 3) soundtracks to everyday life (4 playlists) (code: soundtracks); and 4) personal storytelling (8 playlists) (code: personal) (see Table 2).[5]

[Insert Table 2 about here]

The cultural logics of LGBTQ-themed playlists

1. Mapping and exploring LGBTQ music culture

The question of what constitutes as Western LGBTQ music culture has been approached from different angles by both individual and organizational playlist curators. A common practice is selecting songs that have an explicit link to LGBTQ music culture. A song may be included if

the performing artists are openly LGBTQ (like Melissa Etheridge) or sometimes claimed as part of the LGBTQ community regardless of whether they have identified themselves in that way (like Tracy Chapman). The song itself may explicitly tackle LGBTQ themes (as in Lady Gaga's 'Born This Way'); or it might be read as such because of the sexual or gender identity of the performer (e.g. Troye Sivan's 'Wild').

Some curators present historical accounts of LGBTQ music culture. Noteworthy is the user-curated *Queer Black Music History* series of three playlists that recount black music history, throughout three periods (1930-60; 1970-90; 1990-present). The series demonstrates the diversity of (mostly) African-American artists, from out jazz artist Billy Strayhorn, to disco gay icon Sylvester, and contemporary hip hop artist Angel Haze. The series historicises and retroactively redefines what counts as an LGBTQ identity. While many artists included have publicly declared their sexual or gender identities, some have not done so, but are nonetheless important in terms of LGBTQ visibility. Examples include Big Mama Thornton, a rhythm-and-blues performer whose career took off in the early 1950s, and who has long been rumoured to be same-sex attracted. As Mahon (2011) points out, her on-stage performances could best be described as transgressive. She adopted a masculine appearance through traditional masculine clothing that could easily be interpreted as lesbian or, at least, representative of something other than a traditional heterosexual feminine identity.

Whereas the previous curator is more interested in historicizing an identity category throughout the popular music history and across genres, some archive or map musical subcultures, genres, or movements. For instance, the user-curated *QUEERCORE* playlist is accompanied by a short introductory text in which the curator summarizes the genre as "LOOKS LIKE HELL, SOUNDS LIKE SHIT, QUEER AS FUCK." The use of capitals and swearing matches queercore's aesthetics. In comparison to the abundance of mainstream pop songs that populate most of the studied playlists, this playlist sheds light on a genre and movement that resists both

musical and political, homonormative tropes within LGBTQ culture. DeChaine (2008) describes the genre as a mixture of humor, 'vulgar' and direct lyrics, a punk rock sound, and critical and queer content. The playlist represents the genre accurately, including leading bands such as Pansy Division and Hunx and his Punx.

Tracks by LGBTQ allies, icons, and divas are also central to the logic of exploring and mapping LGBTQ culture. For instance, with 79 entries, the inclusion of Lady Gaga is almost mandatory. The adoration of female divas corresponds to what Jennex (2013) found in his study on gay male fandom of Lady Gaga. He argues that Gaga's popularity among gay men can be understood as motivated by her ongoing advocacy for LGBTQ rights, her camp and anti-normative performances that subvert established gender norms, and her ability to create a safe fan community where queerness is celebrated. Even though, as Jennex argues, cross-gender fandom used to function as compensation for a lack of out LGBTQ artists, divas remain important to the process of queer identification and community-building. In fact, the association of LGBTQ culture with contemporary mainstream pop turns out to be a dominant logic in our sample. Looking at a list of the most popular songs in our sample (see Table 3), we note the authorative presence of contemporary female artists who are known for their support to LGBTQ causes and/or have an LGBTQ fanbase.

[insert Table 3 about here]

Table 3 also reveals the importance of LGBTQ anthems – songs that do not explicitly reference LGBTQ culture but which have historically resonated with issues and desires that were experienced by LGBTQ people. Playlists that give a general overview of LGBTQ music culture tend to include such anthems (e.g. Diana Ross's 'I'm Coming Out'). This phenomenon not only illustrates how practices of diva fandom and appropriation remain important for processes of

identification, but also shows the importance of queer nostalgia. Padva (2014) argues that nostalgia – understood as the practice of glorifying and reminiscing past heroes, fights and events– has helped LGBTQ minorities by making traumatic pasts more bearable and/or revealing alternative ways to deal with present-day struggles. The inclusion of disco classics thus creates a communal experience in which LGBTQ people simultaneously share the pleasure of hearing much loved LGBTQ anthems, and recall the earlier collective or individual struggles with homophobia from that period in cultural history.

At the same time, the repetition of mainstream pop songs and LGBTQ anthems does overshadow the diversity that can be found across the platform's playlists. Despite their historical importance, appropriated LGBTQ anthems undoubtedly speak to Western audiences who made sense of their sexuality during a period where little overtly LGBTQ content was publicly available. Yet, whereas these canons of Western LGBTQ music culture are represented in plenty of LGBTQ-themed playlists on Spotify, many LGBTQ people will find themselves and their take on LGBTQ music culture unrepresented on Spotify; (non-Western) LGBTQ audiences, whose local or national LGBTQ icons are considered too uncommercial to become part of the international canon or queer and trans youth of color, who may be fan of a music culture outside of the white mainstream music industry and consists of artists who, for whatever reason, refuse or are unable to stream their music. These examples illustrate how Spotify has the power to make certain artists and songs hegemonic while 'burying' lesser known songs and 'difficult' genres in the back of Spotify's archives – not because of social prohibition, but because of the business logics of the streaming music industry. For example, copyright logics and platform regulation may prevent the inclusion of work by artists producing remixes or mashups for the purposes of political critique, such as Angel Haze's remix of Ryan Lewis & Macklemore's 'Same Love'.

2. Engaging with identity politics

The second cultural logic is an explicit engagement with LGBTQ identity politics. Playlists ordered by this logic feature clear political goals in the titles of the playlists, the accompanying text boxes, or the arrangement of tracks. Spotify's official *Pulse* playlist is a good example. Even though it does not explicitly make a political statement, it condemns terror and hate crimes directed to LGBTQ people by its commemoration of a tragedy that struck the LGBTQ community. The political intent is emphasized through its selection of songs. Besides featuring tracks by LGBTQ artists, it brings songs together that explicitly question the unfair treatment or mourn the unjust deaths of LGBTQ people (e.g. Rod Stewart's 'The Killing of Georgie (Part I and Part II)'). Also, by including tracks by civil rights activists (e.g. Israel Kamakawiwo'ole') and songs from various decades that question warfare (e.g. Marvin Gaye's 'What's Going On'), the playlist represents the fight for LGBTQ rights as an essential part of humanitarian discourses and human rights movements.

Playlists that articulate identity politics do not necessarily share common perspectives on those politics. Whereas Spotify's *Pulse* expresses its politics in a subtle and humanitarian way, the user-curated playlist *lavender linguistics, body politics, black feminism* consists of songs that align with the politics of queercore and second-wave feminism. In the accompanying text box, the curator states that in almost all songs, "the artist renders their body (or the body of the subject) as the site through which political expression of grievances occur." The statement directs the listeners' attention to the lyrics and frames them as engaged with body and identity politics: Perfume Genius's 'Queen' defies heteronormative society and its rigid conceptualization of families by sashaying through the streets; Noname brings a nuanced story about abortion in 'Bye Bye Baby'. We argue that this playlist articulates a form of queer rhetoric: experienced together, these songs offer cultural resistance to the way heteronormative society governs everyone's body and identity and reveal how music can participate in queer identity politics.

However, not all playlists' rhetorical capacity or identity politics are as unambiguous or straightforward as *lavender linguistics, body politics, black feminism*. The politics of the Pride playlists mirror the contested and ambivalent politics of Pride festivals and marches. These playlists feature mostly mainstream artists from a wide variety of pop-friendly genres and are curated to celebrate sexual and gender diversity. Pride marches and months remain hugely popular and some cities invest significantly in the events to boost tourism. Consequently, Johnston (2005) argues that the events turn LGBTQ lives into a form of commodity while promoting and privileging a homonormative way of life. The Prides mainly attract LGBTQ people who can afford traveling and participating while organizing cities tolerate and celebrate sexual and gender diversity as long as it fits within the boundaries of a neoliberal cultural citizenship. Yet, Johnston argues that the paradox of both celebrating and confining sexual and gender diversity enables Pride to subvert homonormativity and the processes of commodification associated with contemporary Pride events. We see a similar paradox emerging in the Pride playlists. A recurring investment and huge popularity of Pride playlists illustrates the ongoing desire for and necessity of an annual celebration and manifestation of LGBTQ identities. Yet, nothing in the intrinsic political motivation of Pride prevents others capitalising on it. Compared to the other LGBTQ-themed playlists, Pride playlists are uniquely situated at the nexus of political commitment and commodification.

Not surprisingly, these are the LGBTQ-themed playlists that the record companies' curating brands have frequently engaged in. For instance, Digster.fm's aptly named *Pride* playlist changes its content regularly to ensure the playlist sounds contemporary enough. It is easy to imagine that some may read into these playlists a reiteration of a cliché of LGBTQ culture as superficial, apolitical, and commercial. However, following Dyer's (1979) defense of disco, while mainstream, commercial popular music has been produced by capitalist logics as a commodity, it can be used to subvert capitalist ideologies. Furthermore, it is rich with

sociocultural meaning. Dyer demonstrated how the appropriation of disco by gay male culture was unintended by the music industry. Yet, it turned out to be a meaningful source of (erotic) pleasure, self-identification, and community-building. Contemporary popular music industries are much more aware of LGBTQ audiences and employ various strategies to tap into their purchasing power. However, their practices do not devalue the sociocultural value of popular music for LGBTQ audiences who find pleasure in singing along to music considered in heteronormative discourse as guilty pleasures, use music to reflect on their own identities and desires, and form LGBTQ-inclusive communities around specific artists.

3. Soundtracks to everyday life

Playlists that are curated according to the third cultural logic feature tracks that can accompany an everyday activity from an LGBTQ perspective. Context-sensitive playlists are common on Spotify and other streaming services (Hagen, 2015). They respond to the demand of audiences to experience music in (public) spaces that nonetheless fits the activity they are engaged in and reflects their personal taste. Such playlists represent important historical continuities: early radio transformed the domestic space, providing a soundtrack to everyday life (Frith, 2002); portable personal stereos (and later, the Sony Walkman and the iPod) allowed users to engage 'privately' with music in public spaces. It resonates with Bull's (2000) observation that listening to music in public spaces during particular activities can aestheticize the environment or activity, energize listeners, or help them stay focused on the activity at hand. But LGBTQ-themed playlists are culturally distinct from this general function of activity-based playlists because they articulate everyday activities explicitly to LGBTQ culture in the title or description of the playlist. The music may be chosen as personal background music for a generic activity like walking, or a workout, but the playlists still curate and perform a representation of LGBTQ culture. The curators queer their activity-oriented playlists by injecting LGBTQ-themed music or songs by allies. For instance, user-curated *GAY GYM PLAYLIST - WORK-*

OUT/FITNESS + CARDIO features songs by various female allies and divas and tracks that become tongue-in-cheek comments in a gym setting (e.g. RuPaul's 'Sissy that Walk'). These activities figure on a more abstract level as common and cherished practices within LGBTQ culture at large. Alvarez (2010) highlights the importance of gay gym culture, experienced by many gay men not just as an everyday activity, but also as a global subculture. The playlist represents the relation of gym culture to club culture, and particularly circuit parties – large dance events for gay men that revolve around dancing and cruising. As Westhaver (2006) argues, most gay men attending these parties use dancing to display a hypermasculine and hypersexual body. As a consequence, the gay gym playlist participates in promoting this normative body ideal, despite including female and LGBTQ artists who actively defy this form of normative masculinity within the gay male community.

4. Personal storytelling

Entire playlists can be built around tracks that represent personal feelings and experiences, producing a form of musical storytelling. For example, the user-curated *Gal Pals* playlist is accompanied by a self-chosen vintage cartoon of two girls in which one girl is watching a boy while the other appears more interested in her friend's breasts. The tag reads: "Lisa discovers boys. Stephanie doesn't." Even though we know little about the curator, the witty coming-of-age cartoon and the personal statement that this playlist is "a growing collection of songs that make me feel mushy and queer", allows us to assume the ordinary user may be making sense of her own sexual identity through songs that evoke personal memories and feelings while nonetheless matching her taste. Wasserbauer and Dhoest's study (2016) affirms this, as it highlights how LGBTQ fans of various genres, ranging from indie over queercore to pop and opera divas, display affective relations with the music and artists they like and underscore how the music and artists' dimensions of gender and sexuality relate to their own personal identity. The playlist testifies to that. It features mainly young female artists who are part of the

alternative mainstream; some are ‘out’ artists (e.g. Peaches), some sing about LGBTQ themes (e.g. Jen Foster’s ‘I Didn't Just Kiss Her’) and some have no explicit link to LGBTQ culture. The latter can become meaningful in a queer sense through their incorporation in this playlist. For example, the lyrics of Chairlift’s ‘I Belong in Your Arms’ articulate a subject position that may be imagined as queer: when lead singer Caroline Polachek declares her love to the genderless ‘you’ and convinces her significant other to forget about the world around them, many LGBTQ people will recognize the feeling of not having to think or worry about the heteronormative and patriarchal worlds around them. But it might well be that Polachek is included because of the pleasure the curator experiences when hearing her voice—as Bonenfant (2010) pointed out, even the timbre of the human voice may trigger same-sex desire. As such, auditory sensations may be considered a motivation to include artists. Yet, whereas it is easier to argue that a track is included because the singer identifies as LGBTQ, we can only guess at the reason why, for instance, Birdy is included in the playlist ‘Lesbian feelings’, as it may be motivated by an affection for the singer, her voice or a personal memory.

It is primarily ordinary users rather than industry actors who produce these personal LGBTQ-themed playlists. Yet, the cultural power of this kind of personalization has not gone unnoticed by the music industry. By trying to capitalize on the appeal of celebrities, labels and distributors have invested in promoting celebrity mixtapes. Drew (2006) points out how Apple’s iTunes encouraged celebrities to post their playlists, together with personal notes to the choice of songs. A similar practice has been employed by Spotify having celebrities act as guest curators for their #PressPlayForPride series. Many of these playlists share a similar structure, mirroring that of a radio show: the first track is a short audio clip in which the curators address the audience and introduce the playlist. What follows is a list with favorite or meaningful tracks, the artists’ own songs, and short audio clips that explain song choices, or recount personal experiences related to their own LGBTQ identity. The final choice of songs and the provided stories do

reveal divergent interpretations of the curatorial practice. Whereas Troye Sivan mainly chose songs he likes and included quite a few of his own hits, Olly Alexander states he deliberately included artists who are part of the LGBTQ community and who deserve more attention. Further, Alexander's opening speech is remarkable as he challenges the dominance of white gay men making mainstream music while not masking the fact that he himself is a white gay man.

These personalized playlists by guest curators, featuring audio clips that not only speak of personal experiences but also encourage others to speak out and become political, prompts us to reconsider Drew's (2006) critique of celebrity-curated personal playlists. He argues that music platforms use the personal appeal of celebrities to lure audiences to music platforms, which results in a commodification of the highly personal and intimate practice of making mixtapes. It is more than likely that Spotify and Troye Sivan profit from one another to gain popularity and attract audiences. With 83.070 followers, Sivan's guest-curated playlist was among the most popular ones in this particular series. At the same time, artists and allies seem to be encouraged to use the platform for more than only personal promotion. In this context, we point out how Spotify's update of its Pride playlists in June 2017 brought along a whole range of new guest-curated playlists, including a series with activists as guest curators. Whereas the artists are less politically and socially engaged and often use the opportunity to promote their own music, the activists use the audio clips to be overtly political. Activist Alex Berg, a bisexual and queer writer, host, and producer is a good example. In one of her playlist's audio clips, she reflects on the lack of representation of LGBTQ women when she was growing up and challenges the introduction of anti-LGBTQ bills in states across the United States. Music is at the heart of her stories: female icons played a key role in her own coming of age and she believes that they will continue to play a role in the lives of many LGBTQ people. Yet, ordinary users who also want to engage in everyday activism may have more limited means to express how

they articulate their personal lives to music and politics. With no options to upload personal audio clips and only a limited amount of characters in the text box, an imbalance remains between the degree of cultural agency enjoyed by Spotify guest curators as compared to its most engaged ordinary users.

Discussion and conclusion

Popular music culture has long been important to the LGBTQ community (Dyer and Cohen, 2002), and the findings of our study suggest that it remains an important resource for LGBTQ people to find and express comfort, pleasure, belonging, and recognition. Even though practices of music consumption have been transformed in the digital age, the social and cultural importance of music has not diminished. Ordinary users and media companies alike have discovered the potential of streaming services to curate playlists that are LGBTQ-themed. We found that the curation of LGBTQ-themed playlists engages with LGBTQ culture and identity politics in three distinctive ways.

First, each curator contributes to the creation of a library of libraries. By creating LGBTQ-themed playlists, curators are recording and sharing their perspectives on what LGBTQ music culture is and what it means. Spotify becomes an archive where each playlist reveals a part of LGBTQ music history. Here, our findings resonate with Halberstam's (2003) discussion on archiving queer subcultures. Halberstam emphasizes that such archives should be understood as more than just collections of queer material and artefacts. Through Spotify's library of libraries, a shared but contested public memory of Western LGBTQ culture is constructed, interwoven with diverse individual and collective queer histories. Curators on Spotify too interpret the songs collected on the platform and create various queer 'histories' or 'libraries' of LGBTQ music culture. We emphasize the notion of plural libraries as each playlist has its own logics and interpretation of what LGBTQ music is, resulting in overlap and contestation.

Consequently, a canon is created and consolidated, while what qualifies as LGBTQ music continues to evolve and expand. It does however depend on the curators and Spotify to make this archive visible; LGBTQ artists or songs may already be on Spotify but they only become part of the playlist if they are 'labeled' as such. Further, Spotify and the music industry assume a considerable role in the management of this archive as they decide which songs and albums will become part of the platform. As a result, certain LGBTQ-related tracks, artists, remixes, acoustic performances or bootlegged covers are, and may remain, missing on Spotify. It may well be fairly impossible for Spotify to become an all-encompassing archive of LGBTQ music culture, nor will ordinary users be able to independently curate how they experience and interpret LGBTQ music culture.

Regardless of its limitations and commercially-driven constraints, for those seeking role models, allies, LGBTQ music to dance to, politically themed songs or personal stories with which to identify, Spotify is becoming a key platform. Consequently, the platform is increasingly involved in various kinds of community-building. By hosting many personal, public LGBTQ-themed playlists and creating diverse playlists themselves, the platform invites audiences to share their taste, pleasures and personal experiences. It also encourages them to reflect on the chosen music in relation to their own gender and sexual identities and desires, and in relation to 'offline' cultures, subcultures and scenes.

Third, the curation of playlists brings a dynamic and messy collision of identity politics to the table. A few ordinary users represent themselves as politically queer and curate their playlists accordingly. They collect music that challenges assimilationist politics and demonstrate that there is more to LGBTQ music than white gay men and heterosexual female pop divas. However, many playlists are rhetorically and ideologically vague and ambiguous. Some include songs that contradict each other politically, some feature artists who have made homophobic remarks in the past and some include artists who critique homonormative discourses supported

by LGBTQ people and allies. Similarly, many playlists work to perpetuate what could be perceived as a stereotypical image of Western LGBTQ music culture, privileging fashion, style and the dancefloor. At the same time, the dancefloor must be understood as political too, in that it has been a site for solidarity, resistance and pleasure.

Our textual approach to studying playlists has not addressed the motivations, experiences, and sense-making practices of the curators themselves nor has it thoroughly addressed the platform's role in shaping such curational practices. Even though these were not the aims of this study, we nonetheless conducted supplementary empirical exercise to reflect on the platform's affordances and interface shape curation. By means of subsequent 'app walkthroughs' (Light, Burgess and Duguay, 2016) of the Spotify platform's playlist feature, using our own accounts and playlists, we paid particular attention to the platform's affordances for song selection (including algorithmic recommendations), playlist description, and social elements such as sharing on external social media services. The combination of this exercise with the above analysis indicates that Spotify's hybrid model of human-algorithmic curation intensifies some of the key tensions inherent in the cultural logics of streaming. It apparently offers curatorial freedom and an endless library, while at the same time returning the user inexorably time and again to – and thereby reinforcing – a canon of Western-centric LGBTQ music culture that revolves around dancefloor fillers, mainstream female popstars and LGBTQ anthems. The question then is how and whether ordinary users are aware of, are bothered by, or change their practices in response to these algorithmic 'co-curation' mechanisms.

Finally, our analysis did not inquire into the identity politics at work in playlists that interpret 'gay' and 'queer' in a negative manner, or that frame certain artists as inferior to dominant ideologies of heterosexuality and traditional masculinity. The ongoing existence of such anti-gay expressions on the Spotify platform illustrates the challenges of platform governance in a culturally laissez-faire commercial environment: while the company is engaged in LGBTQ

rights advocacy and uses its platform to put the spotlight on LGBTQ music and culture, it does not appear to actively prevent the public curation of playlists that articulate homophobic discourses, despite provisions in its user-generated content guidelines to prohibit hate speech and bullying (Spotify, 2017). We hope that digital media, communication, and cultural studies scholars will take up the many intriguing research questions that emerge from the cultural practice of digital content curation.

[1] In this paper, LGBTQ is used as a generic term to refer to those who are identified and/or self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans*, queer as well as anyone whose gender or sexual identity does not conform to the heteronormative ideal. However, we set out to tease different (sub)cultures that may use different identifiers and use the (sometimes historically specific) language originally used by scholars we are citing.

[2] We used http://playlistminer.playlistmachinery.com on 30 March 2017 to calculate the number of playlists.

[3] In June 2017, Spotify updated its Pride playlists and refined the intermediary Pride-themed interface to structure the LGBTQ-themed playlists even more. Even though we finished our research before this update, we stress that this update demonstrates how Spotify aims to further embed and highlight its LGBTQ-curated playlists.

[4] We underscore that we are aware of the Western, Anglo-centric terms we used to research LGBTQ culture on Spotify, which affects the range and type of music, songs and logics we came across. Searches with keywords in Arabic, Chinese and Japanese, for instance, demonstrate a (limited) presence of playlists that articulate same-sex desire to music that does not circulate in Western international pop culture.

[5] We arranged the playlists according to the cultural logic we found to be the most dominant in each case.

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