

Spotify Music Groups Session

Exploring the social practice of listening to music in digital virtual spaces

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Introduction

Spotify, a Swedish-based audio streaming and media services provider, has recently launched "Groups Sessions", a new feature in beta release that introduces a virtual collaborative space that allows listeners to listen to music and podcasts together in real time. Everyone invited to the session can control what is played. The purpose of this new feature is to enable users who are close together in the same place or at a distance anywhere in the world to share control, virtually socialize, and listen to music and podcasts with others.

This paper discusses how the traditional practice of listening together to music and podcasts is disrupted when people use the Groups Session tool in the Spotify platform. I first provide a brief overview of relevant concepts in both activity theory and social practice theory and explain how these theories differ from and relate with each other. I then briefly describe the psychological and physiological elements involved in the practice of listening to music. Next, I describe how the two theories mentioned above can be combined to form a new lens that examines how the individual activity of listening to music is transformed when people listen to music with others using the Groups Session feature in Spotify. Finally, I discuss how the social practice of listening to music and podcasts through the Spotify Groups Session feature reveals new perspectives and opportunities to enhance the experience of sharing a virtual channel where people can listen to music together.

Theories at Play

Activity theory is a conceptual framework that originated from Marxist social psychology and developed by Russian psychologist Aleksei Leontiev. It aims to break down the boundaries between thinking and doing, between mind and society. The foundational concept of activity theory is activity, which, in a broad sense, refers to the interaction of an actor (i.e., human being) with the world [4].

Activity theory defines interaction as a process where the subject or actor relates with the world through an object. Actors have their own needs, and they need to perform activities to survive. Actors need to interact with objects (e.g., things) in the world to meet their needs. The unit of analysis in activity theory is the activity itself. Activity is motivated by needs that must be met to reach a goal.

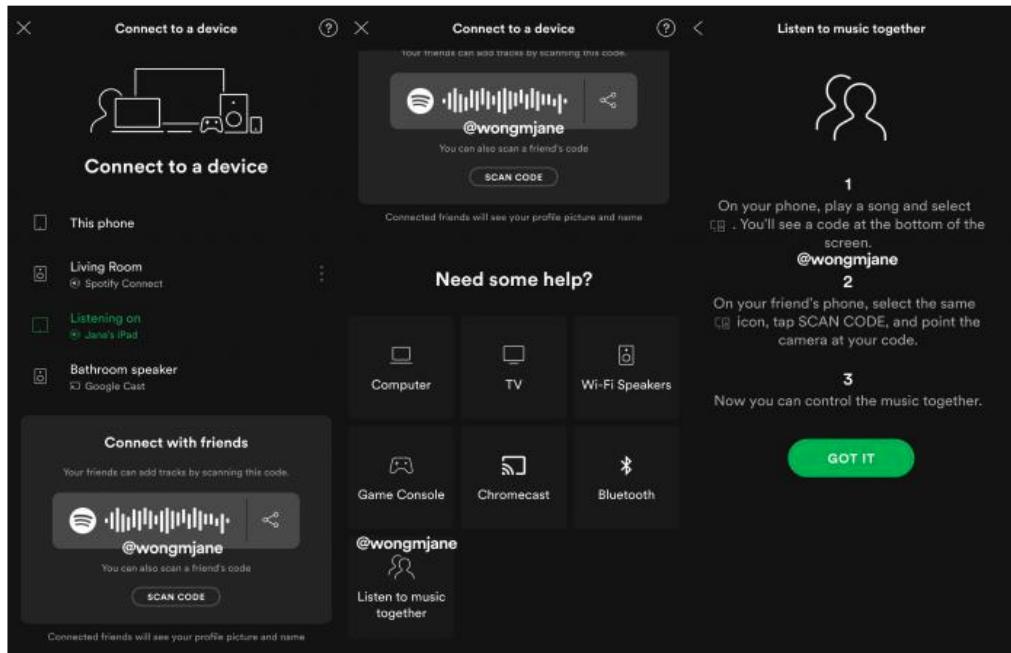
In contrast with activity theory, social practice theory does not focus on the interaction between an actor and an artifact but on encompassing human activities and practices within the context of environment and culture. Social practice theory views situations in life as momentary results of historical evolutions, which are influenced by other factors in the environment, over a period of time. In this theory, social practices are considered the units of analysis. Social factors come together naturally and authentically and can be analyzed for study.

Social practice theory views the world as a network of performances where things are coded in minds, bodies, artifacts or objects, and the environment. These elements are interconnected such that the outcome of performing an activity serves as a resource for another activity. The

existence of practices is dependent on the temporal interconnection of these elements and cannot be reduced to a single element, which is the case in activity theory. Accordingly, people are carriers of social practice.

The practice and activity of listening to music

Spotify is a Swedish-based audio streaming and media services provider that offers digital copyright-restricted recorded music and podcasts. The Spotify Music Group Session is a virtual collaborative space that allows music listeners subscribed to the Spotify platform to stream content simultaneously and listen to music and podcasts with friends and family synchronously even if they are not in the same physical location. Groups session is a tool for social listening where music listeners collaborate in real time to build playlists and control audio streams.



Spotify Groups Session Interface

Examining the Spotify Groups Session using the combined theoretical perspectives of activity theory and social practice theory shows how the individual activity of listening to music is modified to a collective experience within a group of people who are not necessarily present face-to-face.

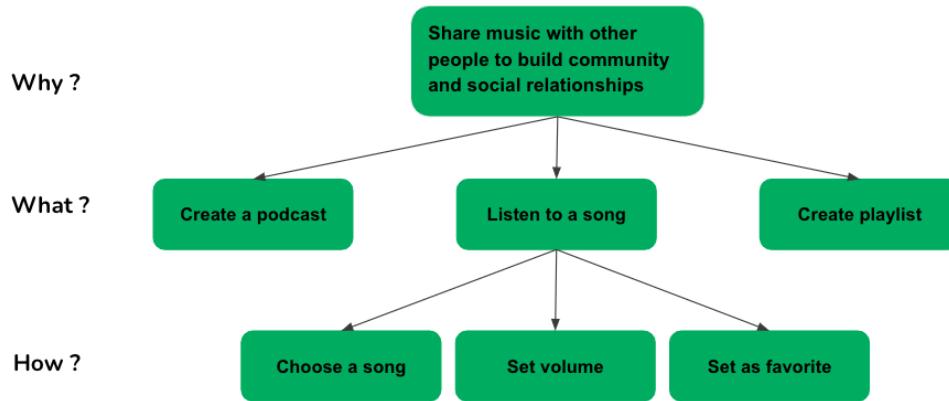
In the Spotify Groups Session feature, any subscribed member can start a virtual session by generating a shareable link, which, in this case, is the “subject.” A Spotify user starts a virtual music session to share and exchange music with other members in the platform, which, in this case, is the “object.” In activity theory, the unit of analysis is the activity of creating a group session to interact with other music listeners. Mobile phones, internet access, and the Spotify platform act as mediators that help accomplish the main objective of exchanging music, creating music podcasts, and sharing control of music streamed in the virtual session.



Spotify Groups Session Activity Interaction

Activities in the Spotify Groups Session are hierarchical. The main motives are to share and listen to music with other people in real time and to build community and social relationships through the virtual session. Everyone in a session can take action, for example, creating a

podcast, listening to songs together, or creating a playlist. Actions involve operations, such as choosing a song, pausing a song, and setting a song as a favorite.



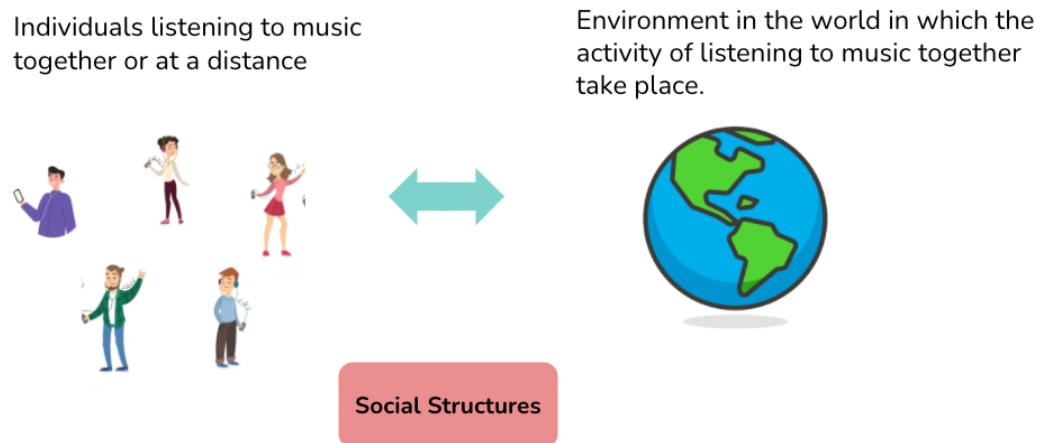
Hierarchy in a Spotify Groups Session Activity

These activity actions (e.g., creating a podcast, starting the playback of a song, marking a song as a favorite, and choosing a song) become a collective effort.

The Groups Session feature changes the traditional way people practice listening to music; people can now listen to music together in the same physical location or at a distance. This feature also gives Spotify subscribers the option to share their listening experience with other people in real time.

Listening to music can be viewed as a social practice, and the Spotify Groups Session feature potentially disrupts the traditional practice of listening to music, either alone or with a group. This change in routine is analyzed using social practice theory to understand broader social meanings and structures. Individual activities (i.e., Spotify users listening to music with others

close together or at a distance) are performed in a social environment as a practice. This practice can reinforce social structures or create refusal to transformative change.



Activity theory does not include the cultural context or the environment where the activity takes place. Meanwhile, in social practice theory, individuals using the Spotify Groups Session are analyzed based on their interaction with their environment and with normative social structures around them. In social practice theory, the practice of listening to music together is the unit of analysis.

Combining these theories helps clarify how the practice of listening to music individually is modified by the Group Session feature in Spotify and how the practice of such activity is used for social structure transformations.

Traditionally, people enjoy listening to music together in the same physical place with a shared audio device. From a physiological perspective, "The rhythm in music helps us to synch up our

brains and coordinate our body movements with others" [2]. Coordinating movement through music increases our sense of community and prosocial behavior. Researchers Chris Loerch and Nathan Arbuckle studied "how musical reactivity – how much one is affected by listening to music – is tied to group processes, such as one's sense of belonging to a social group, positive associations and acceptance with group members" [1].

Loerch and Arbuckle found that "Musical reactivity is causally related to basic social motivations and that reactivity to music is related to markers of successful group living" [1]. In other words, music makes us affiliate with social groups. Conversely, listening to music individually using a personal mobile device and headsets has an isolation effect since the listener does not interact with other people.

Kracauer [3] claimed that listening to music individually using headphones creates distance between people. Instead of fostering social interactions, music becomes a playground for isolation, silence, and lifelessness. People sit side by side, yet their souls wander about far away. Headphone users create a space that separates them from those around them. The communal listening of music is inhibited since headphone users listen to music individually and do not interact with other people to share their music listening experience.

Activity theory and social practice theory complement each other. Combining them helps us understand how different actions and operations of a Groups Session can be distributed among multiple people and how practicing this activity can modify cultural and social rules and norms (i.e., social structures).

Spotify users can use a mobile application and headphones to listen to music and podcasts when they are alone. Accordingly, individual listening using headphones creates distance between

people. This distance enforces certain social and cultural rules and norms (i.e., social structures), such as privacy in personal schedules, respect for others' music taste, and individual control in the streaming of music and podcasts. However, the activity of listening to music and podcasts with other people through Spotify's Group Session transforms these social structures. Activity actions, such as listening to a podcast, choosing a song, creating a playlist, and controlling the content stream, are transformed into a communal effort.

A New Perspective in Listening to Music and Podcasts

The rise of audio streaming platforms discontinued the use of portable cassette and digital media devices, such as the Walkman and iPod. A key technological feature of these devices is that they allow people to listen to music of their choice. Nowadays, audio can be streamed from music platforms, such as Spotify, while on the move. The practice of using headphones continues to create a space that separates listeners from those around them such that music and podcasts become activities for individual listening only. However, the inception of video and audio chat technologies (e.g., WhatsApp) opened new perspectives and opportunities in the way people communicate and share information with each other synchronously or asynchronously. In a synchronous video chat, two or more people can interact and communicate with each other and exchange video and audio messages in real time. Similar to video and chat technologies, the Spotify Groups Session feature transforms the traditional practice of listening individually to music and podcasts using an application and headphones by providing listeners the option to interact with others and share their audio content experience synchronously.

The combination of activity theory and social practice theory forms a new perspective in the practice of listening to audio content in a shared environment. This combined lens acknowledges the advantages of innovating artifacts for Spotify users so that they can listen to audio content in a shared, interactive, synchronous environment, but it also recognizes potential breakdown and crisis in the routine, well-established practices of individuals as well as in the private listening of content. Privacy, individual taste in music, and individual schedules can be affected.

Nevertheless, the practice of listening to music and podcasts with others in a shared virtual space can transform social structures and introduce new forms of interaction between people.

By sharing a virtual channel, for instance, couples at a distance can share and control the same audio stream based on their choice. Actions, such as choosing and listening to a podcast, become communal rather than individual activity actions. Other opportunities for social interactions are the ability to control the playback of a podcast and introduce conversations and personal points of view, which can transform engagement among multiple listeners.

For people who listen to music together in the same physical space, the Spotify Groups Session feature potentially transforms the way they share audio content. The virtual session can encourage users to more freely exchange ideas and music by allowing them to interact with each other and choose songs or create playlists in real time in the Spotify platform. This can, in turn, promote a sense of community and belonging among people listening to music together.

Analyzing an activity that involves the use of technology, both at the individual level and with the surrounding environment, is critical to understanding successes and failures in the system. Analysis can also reveal social deviance that can help us understand the introduction of an artifact can impact a routine.

References

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