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FROM “MESSAGE FOR LOCATION” to “NO PHONE ON THE DANCE FLOOR”: PLAYING WITH VISIBILITY IN UNDERGROUND ELECTRONIC/DANCE MUSIC

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The mediation of mobile and social media technologies has reshaped how people imagine, understand, and, in turn, negotiate the visibility of their self-expression, information sharing, and relationship-building (Humphreys, 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2014). The adoption of mobile and social media technologies introduced new possibilities of visibility and new possibilities of managing visibility by affording individuals' agency in regulating their own monitoring and enacting the monitoring of others (Marwick, 2012; Trottier, 2012).

Much of visibility management entails the calibration “between hyper-visibility and under-visibility to avoid over-exposure in some areas and redirect audience interest to others” (Abidin, 2021, p. 1). As engagement with social media increasingly turned mobile, the spatial and temporal dimensions of mobile and social media use afford new possibilities of visibility management. Past work largely looked at the spatial and temporal dimensions in a separate fashion. To consolidate these perspectives of visibility management, I examined how participants in underground electronic/dance music culture (EDMC) managed their visibility on and through mobile and social media to maintain the boundaries of the underground and their culture of secrecy.

Throughout the history of underground EDMC, participants in underground EDMC have developed collective norms for “locating, sharing, and hiding information” (Lingel & boyd, 2013, p. 981) of their gatherings. Such practices reflect a form of visibility management that creates social bonds by distinguishing between insider and outsider groups. Such information practices reflect “a group commitment to protecting shared practices and activities” (Lingel, 2017, p. 115).

Method

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To examine visibility management in underground electronic/dance music scenes, I conducted 20 nights of field observations at live music events and 27 semi-structured interviews with promoters and attendees between April 2021 and November 2022. I adopted a multi-site approach by targeting four underground dance music scenes in distinct socio-political contexts — Bushwick, New York City; Ithaca, New York; Taipei, Taiwan; Berlin, Germany. Taking a “field site as network” approach (Burrell, 2009; Lingel, 2017), I selected the four music scenes as “entry points” to gain access to underground EDMC.

Findings

My analysis highlighted two scenarios in which promoters and attendees leverage the spatial and temporal affordances of mobile and social media to maintain the boundaries of the underground – (1) last-minute, indirect location sharing, and (2) the dialectical shaping of venue policies and phone etiquette.

First, the promoters leveraged the delayed and indirect sharing of event locations to bar outsiders from entering while also affording the insiders to authenticate themselves by navigating to the gatherings. The exchanges and gatekeeping of event information was crucial to maintaining the boundaries of the underground, as such information was attendees’ entry point to the culture. By accelerating the temporality of and augmenting the mobility of sharing, identifying, and hiding event locations, mobile and social media afforded two new ways through which scene participants maintained the secrecy for their gatherings - last-minute announcement and indirect location sharing. In the case of the latter, the indirect sharing of locative information through (1) direct messages (DM), (2) instructions, and (3) GPS coordinates have shaped three distinct modes of location-seeking practices among the attendees – (1) locating through inquiries, (2) locating via instructions, and (3) locating by navigating.

Second, the dialectical shaping between promoters’ venue policies and attendees’ folk theories of phone etiquette maintained a state of reduced mobile media use at such gatherings. My data highlighted a specific set of policies regarding phone and social media use at the venues. Such policies range from banning flash use, warning against phone use, taping the back camera of each attendee’s phone upon entering, to collecting each attendee’s phone. Meanwhile, attendees also developed their own folk theories regarding what is socially acceptable in terms of their phone and social media use at these venues. Taken together, these policies and folk theories shaped the way attendees presented themselves through their in-situ use (and non-use) of mobile and social media. In particular, attendees embraced three sets of spatial-temporal practices attendees to calibrate their visibility. First, they would forfeit or reduce their phone use on the dance floor. Second, they would leverage insider cues such as sharing a snapshot at the bathroom entrance to signal their participation without sharing technical details of the events. They would use ephemeral media such as Instagram Stories that archives shared content after a short period of time to render their content untraceable in retrospect.

Discussion

These two scenarios in underground EDMC pointed to how the spatial-temporal affordances of mobile and social media use are constitutive of contemporary practices of visibility management. The visibility management practices I identified span across a wide array of spatial-temporal scenarios, from the delayed and indirect announcement of event locations in the neighborhood, the process of navigating to out-of-the-way venues, the non-use of phones on the dance floor, to the in-situ content sharing while vibing at the venue. These practices illustrate how participants of underground EDMC conceptualized their visibility as a continuous presence – spatially, across networked publics and physical territories, and temporally, across synchronous situations and asynchronous situations.

On the spatial end, one's visibility is concurrently marked by physical actions and online content circulation. On the temporal end, one's visibility is simultaneously mediated by in-the-moment physical actions, broadcasting of live actions, ephemeral evidence of past actions, and permanent presence of profiles. Underlies this understanding of visibility is the new condition of surveillance imaginaries where people constantly think about the lateral gaze from both in-person and online observers as well as from both synchronous and asynchronous observers – regardless of what they are doing, where they are physically located, and whether they are on their mobile devices.

This new condition of visibility has brought forth new possibilities for people to not only manage – but play with visibility. In particular, this case study on underground EDMC calls attention to how the playful engagement with partial visibility can in itself become a proxy of sociality. As it becomes faster and easier to locate information, it is through the purposeful act of waiting, navigating, and obfuscating that people distinguish between insiders and outsiders and bond with one another.

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