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ASPIRATIONAL SELF-LABOUR AND LISTENING PRACTICES IN BRAZIL

Vanessa Amália Dalpizol Valiati
Feevale University

Robert Prey
University of Oxford

Introduction

Music has long been understood as performing a dual role: an active *agent* (De Nora, 1999) capable of eliciting physiological and psychological transformations and, simultaneously, a *resource* that can be used to signal distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) but can also be harnessed for educational, therapeutic, and social benefits (Miendlarzewska & Trost, 2014; De Witte et al., 2022). This paper asks: *How do contemporary users of social media and streaming platforms employ music and the affordances of music platforms to transform themselves?*

To answer this question, we introduce the concept of aspirational self-labour to examine how contemporary music listeners engage with online music platforms as part of their self-transformation efforts. Drawing from an interdisciplinary body of literature, we explore how users navigate the dual nature of music as both agent and resource in their everyday lives. Our study specifically investigates how young Brazilian music listeners employ music streaming services to refine their taste and construct aspirational identities that align with their desired self-perceptions and social contexts.

By integrating concepts from social reproduction theory (Drott, 2023), self-expansion models (Aron & Aron, 1986), and aspirational labour (Duffy, 2016), we propose a nuanced framework for understanding the labour involved in curating, discovering, and sharing music in digital environments. Through semi-structured walk-through interviews

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with music listeners in Porto Alegre, Brazil, we analyse how these individuals strategically engage with music as a tool for motivation, self-improvement, and social positioning.

Music specifically produced for such uses and engaged in through this listening mode is typically dismissed as 'functional'. We argue that scholars need to move beyond this simplistic portrayal of what is, in fact, a complex dual (agent-resource) mode of using music. Instead, we propose a richer conceptual vocabulary to understand one approach to listening through online platforms, which emerged organically through our interviews. This approach uses music as an agent and resource for self-transformation.

Methods

This paper draws on research conducted with young music listeners in southern Brazil. Semi-structured walk-through interviews sought to understand how these users of online music platforms were employing music in the labour of self-transformation, both as an *agent* to support modes of aspirational labour and as a *resource* to develop aspirational taste profiles. In an initial exploratory phase, we conducted online interviews via Microsoft Teams with 25 participants (ages 18-34), recruited from 217 responses to a social media call for participation (primarily on Instagram and WhatsApp). Most interviewees have formal higher education and live in Porto Alegre and its metropolitan area. The first round of interviews explored everyday music consumption, discovery, and streaming practices. After thematic analysis, we initiated a second round, a more focused phase to refine key themes. At the time of this submission, this phase was still ongoing. These interviews have allowed us to inductively generate the preliminary results described in the next section.

Conceptual Framework

This paper's theoretical framework is based on three concepts: '(self) reproduction', the 'aspirational self', and 'aspirational labour', as described below:

Drott (2023, p.202) argues that music is not simply a technology of the self (De Nora, 1999) but is also a technology of social reproduction. In our paper, we focus on how music is used by listeners to replenish themselves - to fuel motivation regularly, to engage more productively in work, or to enter more deeply into play. We argue that the concept of 'social reproduction' offers a helpful framework through which to examine how music is utilised as a (cheap) resource to sustain and reproduce the self.

Secondly, the "aspirational self" is a general term encompassing various psychological and sociological research dimensions. Most relevant for our study is the 'self-expansion model' (Aron & Aron, 1986), which proposes that individuals are motivated to enhance their efficacy by acquiring resources, perspectives, and identities, often through others. This drive for self-expansion reflects the aspirational self's desire to grow and improve. The discovery of music and the desire to be viewed as having an eclectic taste in music was a critical resource through which our participants sought 'self-expansion'.

Finally, 'aspirational labour' (Duffy, 2016) is a concept that describes unpaid or underpaid work driven by personal passion, future hopes, and the promise of success rather than immediate financial reward. We can also productively reinterpret this

concept by turning it inwards on the self. We do this by focusing on the labour of listening, sharing, searching, and discovering music in ways that help one constitute one's aspirational (musical) self. By - for example - curating and then sharing their annual 'Spotify Wrapped', listeners strive to develop taste profiles they are proud of. Like aspirational labour, this is unpaid work predicated on the promise of future benefit.

By merging these perspectives, we propose that the interplay between social reproduction, self-expansion, and aspirational labour is key to understanding the role of music in contemporary identity formation.

Preliminary Findings and Next Steps

Our early findings reflect previous theorisations of the above concepts, which can be brought into conversation with each other through our concept of aspirational self labour. By interpreting our interview data through this conceptual lens, we provide new insight into 'functional' listening modes. We start to observe some movements that indicate how young listeners engage in *aspirational self-labour*, using music as an agent and resource for self-transformation, revealing its deeper role in identity construction and motivation.

Most of our interviewees reflected on how music makes them better people. B. (22), a student, describes how K-pop, particularly 'Red Velvet', plays a transformative role in his creative aspirations: "They bring fun, emotional, and creative music. This is linked to what I want to be, always doing different things; it makes me improve as a person." In this case, 'aspirational self-labour' is evident when he talks about professional life: "Music helps me focus on what is important (...) I am working on video post-production, which involves some tedious technical parts; music helps me to disregard these processes (...). Music helps me move forward and become a better person".

Inspiration from artists is also a dominant theme in our interviews. K. (20) is studying for her university entrance exam to be a doctor and is inspired by lyrics and music (for example, Shawn Mendes for anxiety and Taylor Swift for encouragement). She takes lyrics that speak for her to the therapist because she cannot express all her feelings. For E. (25), who aspires to be a musician, artists like Bowie provide more than just aesthetic inspiration. In E's words; "We create bonds with an artist (...) who becomes *our* artist." This, in turn, encourages him to share his favourite artists with others because he regards his taste in music as "a portrait".

While music is primarily recognised as an aesthetic art form, its role as an active *agent* and a *resource* (Bourdieu, 1984; De Nora, 1999) has not been overlooked. However, 'functional' modes of listening have often been derided (Allen Anderson, 2015). Our paper brings together an interdisciplinary body of literature and concepts whose connections have thus far only been alluded to. In doing so, we recast functional listening by demonstrating how our interview participants utilise music in the labour of self-transformation. Music platforms, we argue, both further extend *and* subtly shape the possibilities and potentials of 'aspirational self-labour'. This raises a potentially fruitful avenue for future research into music consumption through digital platforms. While Marxist and feminist scholars have long investigated the labour of social reproduction to

examine how the worker is produced, our research raises another intriguing question: 'How is the (aspirational) listener produced?'

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