

The Sex Playlist: How Race and Ethnicity Mediate Musically “Composed” Sexual Self-Formation¹

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Abstract

Music can function as a powerful technology of the sexual self. Especially with the advent of music streaming platforms such as Spotify, musical playlists are used in instrumental ways to regulate the self and the social in intimate situations. However, something puzzling is going on with these sex playlists, as they are typically aligned with black performers, whereas “love” playlists in Spotify tend to be dominated by white artists. In this chapter, we look at ways to understand this curious alignment of ethno-racial categories with playlists on sex and love, and we argue that these are tied with music genres and relatively stable ideas about racialized bodies, which bear consequences for how the sexual self is musically “composed.”

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Introduction

Around Valentine’s Day each year, popular music streaming service Spotify releases themed playlists for those who want to make the most out of the romance on offer. Spotify offers these in “sex” and “love” packages, but there is also a playlist to accompany those without a Valentine, with the “Top Global Heartache Songs” (Lynch 2018). Consider the picks for 2018 (Table 7.1) Does anything strike as odd?

Table 7.1. Spotify’s “sex,” “love,” and “heartache” playlists.

Top Global Sex Songs	Top Global Love Songs	Top Global Heartache Songs
1. The Weeknd - Earned It	1. Ed Sheeran - Perfect	1. Sam Smith - Too Good At Goodbyes
2. Jeremih - Birthday Sex	2. James Arthur - Say You Won't Let Go	2. Adele - Someone Like You
3. The Weeknd - Often	3. Ed Sheeran - Photograph	3. Passenger - Let Her Go
4. Jeremih - All The Time	4. John Legend - All of Me	4. A Great Big World - Say Something
5. Ginuwine - Pony	5. Ed Sheeran - Thinking Out Loud	5. Gnash - i hate u, i love u (feat. Olivia O'brien)
6. SoMo – Ride	6. Bazzi - Mine	6. Birdy - Skinny Love
7. Rihanna - Sex With Me	7. Christina Perri - A Thousand Years	7. Post Malone - I Fall Apart
8. Trey Songz - Slow Motion	8. Sam Smith - Stay With Me	8. Ed Sheeran - Happier
9. Ty Dolla \$ign - Or Nah	9. Kendrick Lamar - LOVE.	9. Christina Perri - Jar of Hearts
10. The Weeknd - The Hills	10. G-Eazy - Him & I (with Halsey)	10. Sam Smith - Stay With Me

A first thing one may note is the rather low ratio of female to male performers: In the “sex” and “love” lists, only one in ten are female artists and—while slightly higher (three in ten)—the “heartache” list displays a similar pattern. While unsurprising, on the one hand, as women are historically underrepresented in (popular) music production (e.g., Leonard 2007; Lieb 2013), topics such as love and romance, on the other hand, have both implicitly

and explicitly been connected to notions of femininity rather than masculinity (Berkers and Eeckelaer 2014; Schippers 2002), making these skewed ratios rather puzzling. Possibly even more puzzling, however, and the focus of this chapter, is the ratio of black to white artists, which, as one may notice, conspicuously divides the lists from left to right: The top ten “sex” songs on Spotify are all by black performers, while the “love” list is dominated by white artists, with a ratio of eight to two. Strikingly, the “heartache” list is completely white. How should we understand this rather puzzling alignment of ethno-racial categories with playlists on sex, love and heartbreak?

When considering these numbers, it is important to note that Spotify compiles these playlists (at least partly) based on an algorithmic selection from other “sex,” “love,” and “heartache” playlists that circulate on its platform. The core content of these playlists is thus based on streamers’ everyday encounters with sex and love, and the dissolution thereof. The compilation of playlists is, moreover, based on “power by numbers,” so the more popular certain songs are, the more likely that they will become part of a playlist. Songs that are played the most end up on playlists, through which they are then played even more. As such, the algorithmic compilation of playlists has become a new kind of cultural gatekeeper (O’Dair and Fry 2019), which has an effect on how tastes are shaped—including those based on notions of sex and love.

In this chapter, we demonstrate how playlists are used instrumentally as a technology of the sexual self that aids in how people, especially young people, foster sexual affect, sexual encounters, and sexual self-formation. Our conceptualization of this comes from both Foucault (1988) and DeNora (1997, 2000, 2003), with the first defining technologies of the self as technologies “which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts,

conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality” (Foucault 1988, 18).

This is explained in light of Tia DeNora’s (2000) well-known work on music as a technology of the self, and increasing evidence that most people “use” music as a complementary activity to what they are doing rather than a focused activity (Marshall 2019). Especially now that we have entered the era of streaming, people more than ever before are in the position to take control over their musical self-formation through playlists: having millions of songs to build their “desire” on and the opportunity to have them played when they “desire,” wherever they “desire” (Bergh et al. 2014; Bull 2005; Torrens and Hertzog 2004). Playlists provide a highly customizable or tailored backdrop to sexual activities, and as such they offer possibilities for the experience of erotic agency (cf. DeNora 1997; Evans et al. 2010). Yet, looking at the content of sex versus love playlists, we argue that this agency is limited for the way ethno-racial categories are tied with music genres and relatively stable ideas about racialized bodies, which bear consequences for how the sexual self is musically “composed” (DeNora 1997).

Music as Technology of the Sexual Self

Importantly, the pressing nature of the puzzling alignment of “sex” with “black” and (the dissolution of) “love” with “white” lies within the pressing nature of music as a device for cultural and physical transformation. Music is notorious for its ability to connect the inside world of private—physiological and mental—processes with the outside world of public culture, structures, and experiences (Bull 2005; DeNora 2000; Frith 1996, 2003). As such, it continuously permeates the already pervious membrane between the self and the social, aligning body

with culture, with music forming and transforming the body, bringing bodies into action, connecting certain bodies, while—often simultaneously—separating others (Bull 2007; Negus and Velázquez 2002; Prior 2014; Schaap 2019). As music anthropologist Ruth Finnegan once argued:

Whether in deeply intense fashion or more light-touch action, music provides a human resource through which people can enact their lives with inextricably entwined feeling, thought and imagination. (Finnegan 2003, 188)

And in that context, music is “a well-practised device for the production of desire,” Tia DeNora adds, quoting musicologist Richard Leppert (1993, quoted in DeNora 1997, 61). According to DeNora (1997, 2000, 2003), music is both *representative* and *constitutive* of the self and the social, and as such is also representative and constitutive of intimacy. Music has the power to communicate already formed ideas of intimacy that are either publicly or physically experienced, but it also has the power to shape these experiences through embodied practice, which in its turn has the power to (re)shape cultural representation.

Music has the power to “compose” sexual agency (DeNora 1997). It functions as a powerful technology of the sexual self (Van Bohemen et al. 2018; Van Bohemen and Roeling 2019), allowing listeners to move through sexual situations, to discover what types of intimacy they like and dislike, to articulate otherwise inarticulate feelings, to change their moods, heighten sensation, shape interaction, and thus aid in the formation of pleasure. The popularity of this regulatory usage of music is evidenced by streaming services’ increasing reliance on “moods” or “needs” (e.g., “sleep,” “focus,” “diner”) rather than genre, to guide listeners to the music on offer. Clearly, music helps to regulate

the self and the social in intimate interactions (see Juslin and Sloboda 2010; Sloboda 2005). For sex in particular, music has the power to drown out other sound, to reinvigorate memories of previous encounters and experiences, to help people concentrate on the tasks and movements at hand, to set certain physiological events into motion, etc.

Recently, research by Van Bohemen et al. (2018) has shown that young people also use these opportunities in instrumental ways to change the self and physical interactions during actual sexual encounters. They report how their preferred sex music gives them “energy,” “stimulates” them, makes them “feel hot,” gives them “butterflies” or brings out their sexy “alter egos,” and so forth. This often happens in an automatic or semi-conscious way, which is comparable to Gabrielson’s (2011) descriptions of strong emotional experiences through music. Music often also functions as a way for them to find out whether they are on the same sexual “level” with another sexual party or as a means to create a situation in which they definitely feel “in sync.” It also has the power to reinvigorate memories of past sexual experiences. A power that is sometimes used strategically by young people to make a particular sexual experience more special, but that just as well requires careful selection and also a sequencing of songs that are not already tainted with “other” life experiences.

Some do this by purposefully compiling playlists in which music is synchronized to different phases of sexual activity. To understand this, Van Bohemen et al. (2018) draw on DeNora’s (1997) conceptualization of music establishing noncognitive forms of “bio-feedback” that structure the situation and the bodies involved and has the power to heighten sensation. In this context, they particularly name a twenty-year-old Dutch-Surinamese boy, who states that he has multiple sex playlists which he compiles in segments, with music for foreplay, music for sex, and music for relaxation after sex. “You go along with

the *vibe* of the music, so to say. And well, if you have a good playlist that stimulates that in a good way, then I think that because of that, in the end, you also just have better sex,” the boy they named Sunnery explains (Van Bohemen et al. 2018, 24). “And that’s also what I base my music on, more slowly in the beginning, more relaxed. Then actually bang-music, just bang-bang-bang and then slowly cool down like.”

This quote alludes to some of the things we know from research about music and dance as well as sports, which shows that music affects motivation, physical performance levels, perceptions of exertion, and the overall pleasure of movement. Music’s rhythm, or its speed, is considered of the utmost importance here, with faster paced sounds producing the highest levels of arousal and performance (Anshel and Marisi 2013; Edworthy and Haring 2006; Karageorghis et al. 1999). These studies show that the properties of the music, such as its rhythm, tonality, voice, and valence, also have a role in bringing about musical affect, which works through the idea of affordances (DeNora 2000). This means that some music can simply be appropriated more easily for the formation of a certain type of feeling or selfhood, just like some music can be appropriated more easily for “bang-bang-bang” sex than it can be appropriated for slow and soft sex.

Yet, it would be a mistake to read music’s influence on the formation of sexual agency as the music simply “working upon” people, with musical properties mechanically changing sexual selfhood and sexual situations. What we see is an interaction where people try to “work” with the music in order to achieve a good sexual experience. Keeping with our example of twenty-year-old Sunnery, we can see that he also does not mind when the movements do not correspond with the music at all times. However, he does mention one song “where if you haven’t come yet as a guy, you should put some force behind it” (Van Bohemen

et al. 2018, 24), indicating that you would need to work with the music to get the optimal result; in this case, he needs to be finished “in time” before the cooling down songs start to play.

Table 7.2 Sunnery’s sequenced sex playlist.

Sunnery’s sequenced sex playlist	Type of activity
Woodkid – I Love You (acoustic version)	Foreplay
Lorde – Buzzcut Season	Foreplay
Gorillaz – Hillbilly Man	Foreplay
Flume & Chet Faker – ‘Drop The Game’	Foreplay
The Black Keys – Next Girl	Sex
ScHoolboy Q Ft. A\$AP Rocky – Hands On The Weel	Sex
The Submarines – 1940 (Amplive Remix)	Sex
MNM & Tourist Le MC & Fit – Adieu	Sex
Kanye West – Real Friends	Sex
The XX – VCR	Relaxation after
The Weeknd – Angel	Relaxation after
Explosions in the Sky – Your Hand In Mine	Relaxation after
<i>Source</i> Van Bohemen et al. 2018	

Ethno-Racial Mediations of Sex Playlists

Looking at Sunnery’s sequenced sex playlist, we again uncover a similar pattern of white artists predominantly catering to the romantic side of sex (the foreplay and relaxation after), while black artists provide the “bang-music” for the sex itself. (Although Sunnery has also included the music of a very white indie band for this purpose, showing that the juxtaposition of “sex and black” and “romance and white” is not completely fixed, variations are possible and sometimes seized upon.) The overall patterns of Sunnery’s sex playlist suggest ethnic stereotyping and racialization in certain music genres. Why are black and white artists patterned in such a way that the music produced by them is associated with

different types of sexual affect, different types of sexual encounters and different types of sexual self-formation? A discussion of these ethno-racial mediations of sex playlists is largely missing from the literature on music as a technology for the sexual self.

Part of the answer lies in the fact that popular music is a key platform for social identification (Fiske 1998), particularly along lines of gender, sexuality, or race and ethnicity. Ethno-racial categories such as “blackness” or “whiteness” shape people’s understanding of music genres and, as a consequence, are reflected in which groups dominate certain genres (Roy and Dowd 2010). For example, while genres such as rock and country music have been dominated by whites (Hamilton 2016; Mahon 2004; Schaap and Berkers 2019), genres such as soul, hip-hop, and funk tend to be dominated by non-whites (Clay 2003; Neal 2013; Rose 1994). This does not only bear consequences for who listens to certain genres, but also the associations and classifications that people use to appreciate (or dislike) songs. Naturally, this warrants us to question to what extent understandings of different ethno-racial difference may mediate the formation and usage of playlists for the sexual self.

The racialization of bodies has a long history of sexualization and fetishization (Hall 1997). This may be most visible in the racial logic that is (still) applied in the categorization of pornographic material, where it is strictly normal to categorize based on terms such as “Black,” “Asian,” or “Hispanic” (Nash 2014). This demonstrates that, at least in pornography, ethno-racial categorizations have become an important determinant to classify sexual tastes. While certainly not in the same realm as pornography, the more loosely carried ethno-racial associations regarding popular music that are used for sex seem to follow a similar logic. Although the sonic “display” of sex is certainly possible in music,

it is the music video which affords the possibility to signify to listeners what is intended with a song by artists. Here, the ethno-racial background of artists matters: For example, studies have shown that videos made by African-American artists are significantly more likely to display sexual acts than those made by white artists (Turner 2011). This comes as no surprise, since white artists are more often—especially since the “intellectual turn” of rock music since Bob Dylan—perceived to make music “for the mind,” whereas non-white music is perceived as more “bodily.” Such widely carried perceptions can also be found in the idea that whiteness is essentially “cultureless” (Hughey 2012) and that white bodies lack “natural talent and rhythm” (Hancock 2008). These ideas are formative of how the sexual self (and other) is perceived as well and “reinscribe the racial essentialism and traditional pejorative status of the natural qualities of the African American body” (ibid., 792).

Van Bohemen et al. (2018) demonstrate that young adolescents include various genres into their sex playlists, ranging from acoustic music to R&B and dance music. But at the same time they had to admit that not all music genres were represented in these “sex lists”: Some genres such as heavy metal, Dutch *levenslied* folk music, and rap music were considered by young people as inappropriate for sex. Interestingly, especially these genres are strongly tied to ethno-racial categories, as heavy metal and Dutch folk music are associated with whiteness (Schaap 2015; Spracklen 2013), and rap music—especially “gangsta” variations—are associated with blackness. In other words: Songs that are deemed “*too black*” are not selected and songs that are “*too white*” are also not selected for these playlists. Notably, however, playlists tailored for sexual activities —particularly sexual activities that are considered more “rough” than romantic — are dominated by black artists, while playlists tailored for romantic “soft” sex are more open toward songs by white artists.

As we have seen in the introduction, the playlists offered by Spotify display a similar pattern, where music that is considered strongly sexual is dominated by black artists, while the playlists about romance and—most notably—heartache are dominated by whites. For example, a recent study by De Laat (2019) demonstrated that “the presence of poetic allusions to sex by white performing artists, along with the absence of disavowals of infidelity also suggests that white women exact racial privilege through continued assumptions of their sexual propriety and purity” (11). These distinct patterns in how music is associated with *certain kinds* of the sexual self demonstrate how associations based on ethno-racial categorizations mediate the formation of a sexual self. Whereas blackness seems to bear associations of bodily pleasure, whiteness represents romance—or reflective encounters with the loss of it. This association between whiteness and romance is, however, highly classed, as *lebenslied* and metal have strong associations with working-class culture (Bryson 1996) and with being “too white,” which is why they are also perceived as “disruptive” rather than conducive to “good” sex.

Conclusions

Where does this leave us, with regard to music’s role as technology of the sexual self? Our discussion so far ties into one of the major points of criticism that has been voiced against DeNora’s work on music as technology of the self, and the emancipatory potential that some see in streaming platforms. David Hesmondhalgh (2008, 2013), among others, argues that this presents a too optimistic view of agency, with everyone being able to use music according to personal needs. There are always larger social contexts of power and inequality that need to be considered, he argues, as well as the fact that music may be used for creating experiences of solidarity and attachment, while also creating distance and detachment (for a discussion see Bull 2007; Negus and Velázquez 2002; Prior 2014).

Music not only has the power to “turn on” and to move a certain sexual situation further in a positive direction, it equally has the power to “turn off” and to create distance between bodies. Music can be a way to sexual agency, but it can also be experienced as impeding on that agency (Van Bohemen et al. 2018). Whereas some young people confided that they consider the presence of “the right” background music crucial to the construction of a pleasurable sexual experience, others experienced the presence of music as disrupting.

In all fairness, DeNora also never denied this, as she argues (1997, 55) that “as with all forms of culture” music’s “link with agency (and to the interpretations it inspires) is contingent upon local circumstances of use. Particular music may conspire with or against particular bodies, they may constrain and/or enable particular desires and forms of conduct.” Music is not an empty signifier, but has certain properties—tonality, voice, lyrics, rhythm, and video images—that afford or prevent certain types of use. Musical affect is thereby accomplished through an interactive process between these properties and the way in which social actors make sense of them. People in that case work with the music, they bring in their own cultural associations, which, depending on other circumstances of use, may help accomplish pleasure as well as other cognitive, emotional, and physiological experiences from music (Gomart and Hennion 1999; Hennion 2003). Similarly, DeNora (2003) shows how music operates on this “interactive plane” with larger social developments, so that it is not only used as a tool for self-determination, but can also serve as a tool for the control over others and over specific situations (see also Bull 2007); a tool, moreover, that is itself situated within a larger cultural context of conventions, modes of being and doing, discourses, habits, and inequalities. Where music functions as a mediator for sexual agency, these situational factors mediate the mediations of music (see DeNora 2003; Hennion 2015).

Cultural associations with race and ethnicity will thus always mediate music's mediations of the sexual self. But does that mean that there is no hope for change? Does music only help bring about the same patterns of inequality in its formation of the sexual self? Technically, the answer to this is “negative,” cultures are never fully formed and contain a host of different discourses that people may select from (Foucault 1988). And while these still limit the options for change, some of these discourses may actually challenge the types of inequalities we have discussed (Butler 1993), such as the “black-body-sex” and “white-mind-love” associations (cf. Evans et al. 2010). Similarly, a shift is notable in the way in which, particularly young people, select music, which seems much less based on the hegemony of genre and much more on regulating moods and needs, something which streaming services increasingly cater to.

At the same time, however, looking at the sex playlists and comparing them to playlists people construct for love and heartache, the alignments of “sex with black” and “white with love” do not seem very hopeful, and they may suggest that these associations run deeper than merely functioning as categorical tools. Ethno-racial categories have become latched to musical categories in cognition through socialization processes (Schaap 2019), making them difficult to reflect on in everyday life—let alone adjust them. As such, it is essential to unearth how these categories continue to help shape and mediate the formation of (sexual) selves, and how streaming technologies (albeit unintentionally) cater to these processes.

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