

## SHAPING THE CANON<sup>1</sup>

Spotify and the Construction of Spain’s *música urbana*

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**ABSTRACT:** In the second half of the 2010s, a new music genre named *música urbana* has emerged in Spain, and a music world –a network of collaborative practices organized around the production, distribution and consumption– has sprouted around it. In this paper, we argue that music streaming services and playlisting practices are becoming a new kind of sociotechnical gatekeeper that influences the shaping of music canons in unprecedented ways. We will focus on Spotify in order to point out methodological challenges and proposals suitable to empirically determine sociotechnical actor’s influence on popular music genre formation.

**Keywords:** music genre, mediatization, playlists, music streaming, Spotify, conventions, music worlds, *música urbana*

### 1 THE MEDIATIZATION OF GENRE FORMATION

During the last years, a new music genre named *música urbana* has taken over Spain (Castro, 2019, pp. 21-28) and a whole music world (Becker, 2008; Bottero & Crossley, 2011; Crossley & Bottero, 2015) –a network of cooperative activities organized around the production, distribution and consumption of that kind of music– has sprouted around it. For this cooperative activities to get routinized, it is required to establish conventions on a number of levels; amongst these, genre conventions are fundamental. I understand genre conventions as a set of traits that work as production guidelines for artists, as market boundaries for record sellers and as frames of expectations and instructions of use for audiences. As Simon Frith suggests in his sociology of music (1998, pp. 75-95), genre mediates the creation, distribution and interpretation of music.

According to the institutional theory of art subscribed by Howard Becker (Becker, 2008, pp. 161-184), in the case of popular music worlds, genre rules are rarely set prior to the production of songs; in fact, the order of things is usually the opposite. Firstly, music pieces are released to the market, and only afterwards a number of

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legitimating discourses and classifying techniques are set in motion in order to find similarities and continuities between those pieces, therefore constructing a corpus of songs whose perceived “family resemblance” (Griffin, 1974) conform the genre’s canon.

Following this cue, it isn’t difficult to infer that during the second half of the twentieth century, the shaping of popular music genres was mainly the product of the complementary activities of music journalists and radio programmers: the former constructed genre rules through their albums and concert reviews in the press, while the latter defined genre canons by selecting certain songs and broadcasting them in genre-oriented radio stations. In other words: while music journalists explained the reasons why bands as disparate as The Beatles, Black Sabbath or Pink Floyd were part of the same “rock and roll” family, it were rock stations which played these bands’ music, therefore grouping and associating them.

Nonetheless, these processes of genre formation have changed radically over the last ten to fifteen years. On one hand, the post-2008 economic depression led to a great crisis in the media sector in which cultural journalism was hit badly. On the other, the distribution and consumption of music in Spain has dramatically shifted from physical albums, MP3 downloads and radio broadcasting to the vast predominance of streaming platforms such as Tidal, Apple Music or Spotify (PROMUSICAE, 2021). I argue that this tendency has far-reaching consequences for the way music is understood, used and appropriated, since it sets new organizing principles that impact the dynamics of music cultures. In this sense, for instance, during the twentieth century there was a transition from the centrality of live music to the predominance of the record. As Sarah Thornton described on her book *Club Cultures* (2003), this shift led to a myriad mutations in the spaces, practices and discourses related to music. In the same way, my hypothesis is that playlists and playlisting as conceived by streaming services are becoming a organizing principle around which today’s music cultures revolve.

Connecting genre theory (Castañares, 1995; Fabbri, 2004, 2006) with recent development in media studies, I suggest that the dynamics of genre formation in popular music are becoming increasingly mediatized (Hepp, 2013, 2020; Krotz & Hepp, 2011). In other words: the ways in which music genres are defined and evolve depend on possibilities and constraints afforded by sociotechnical actors (Gibson,

2014; Latour, 1998, 2001, 2007) such as streaming platforms. In this context, music journalists and radio programmers have no option but to share their role as gatekeepers with algorithmic recommendation systems and curational playlisting teams.

I pose that *música urbana* is a good place to look at in order to understand the ways in which playlisting is changing genre formation dynamics. Unlike other genres such as rock or jazz, whose changes are somehow tied to –and limited by– a collective memory (Lotman, 1998, pp. 108-115) and an established popular tradition, *música urbana* is an uncharted territory on which the influence of playlisting on canon formation might be best observed. In addition, the audiences of Spain’s *música urbana* are mostly youths who only listen to music through streaming platforms. Accordingly, in what follows I will suggest ways in which the influence of playlisting and the editorial policies of streaming services on genre formation might be researched. I will focus on Spotify since it is the most popular music streaming service in Spain as well as worldwide (Babos, 2021; Prieto, 2020). Another reason has to do with the increasing popularity of *música urbana* on this platform: in a very symptomatic 2019 piece published in Spotify’s blog, the company described what *música urbana* was all about, and pointed out this genre as the most-streamed in Spain (Spotify, 2019).

## 2 SPOTIFY’S CURATIONAL TURN

Over its 10 year lifespan, Spotify has changed the way it conceives itself and its users (Eriksson, Fleischer, Johansson, Snickars, & Vonderau, 2019, pp. 138-160). In a first period, the company presented itself as an immense music database. Under this metaphor, Spotify users were thought of as sovereign individuals with solid criteria who chose exactly what they wanted to listen to. The company’s first slogan, “Music whenever you want it, wherever you are”, focused on this on-demand feature. However, as time went by, Spotify realized that users had serious trouble navigating the platform’s catalog, which comprises more than seventy million tracks. In order to make it manageable, the company shifted its identity from an on-demand music database to a music curator able to provide users with individualized recommendations; that is, from a service to an actor. This new strategy implied the development of a complex recommendations system which combined algorithmically-

generated playlists with the work of a human curational team.

Human-curated playlists are then one of the main ways in which Spotify mediate the catalog’s abundance. These playlists are mainly grouped by mood, activity and genre: this latter classifying criterion is relevant for us since a number of curational playlists have been created around *música urbana*. Our argument goes that if songs featured in playlists receive much more exposure than those which are not, Spotify’s genre-oriented playlists focused on *música urbana* might afford some songs to become hits, therefore influencing the formation of the genre’s canon in decisive ways.

In order to tackle the complexity of this issue, we follow Antoine Hennion’s musical approach to actor-network theory (2002, 2003), as well as the musical sociologies of Tia DeNora (2000) and Georgina Born (2005; 2018). Spotify needs to be conceptualized as a sociotechnical assemblage composed by human and non-human actors, whose relationships and inner dynamics must be defined only after an intensive fieldwork phase. We will now proceed to highlight strategic points and methodological approaches from which this complexity might be addressed.

### 3 WHO ARE THE CURATORS? INSIDE THE PLAYLISTING BLACK BOX

In Spotify there are three types of human-curated playlists. The most relevant in terms of visibility and number of streams are those created by the platform’s curators, a group of Spotify employees who are distributed between a central team and regional divisions. The exact magnitude, identity and personal contact information of this editorial staff is unknown to the public –and presumably, to artists and record labels–. All in all, it must be a big team, since they are in charge of more than 3000 playlists (Ross, 2020).

The only official channel of communication between artists and curators is the song pitch form hosted at Spotify for Artists (Spotify), a back-end service for artists and labels. Through this procedure, unreleased songs can be submitted to the consideration of the platform’s playlist editors. As put by one of these anonymous editors in a Spotify for Artists blog entry, “Anyone can pitch music through Spotify for Artists, that’s the place where ALL (sic.) editors go to look for new music—it’s your line to contacting our editors” (Spotify, 2020b). I argue that the effort to make direct contact with curators by unofficial channels virtually impossible is part of a strategy set to

preserve their image as independent professionals, whose taste-making criteria isn't influenced by external factors such as pressures or bribery. In this sense, when asked whether contacting curators improved an artist's odds of being featured on a playlist, Spotify's Head of Music Strategy Jeremy Elrich roundly declared:

No. The playlist submission tool is the only way we review music. People may text me their song, but I tell them they need to submit it in the tool because that's how you get playlisting. Editorial decisions are based purely on the quality of the song and its fit in the playlist. I was just telling a label that everyone emailing me doesn't increase your chances of getting on a playlist at all (Ross, 2020).

In the same Spotify for Artists blog piece referenced above, the anonymous editors claimed accordingly that "it's important to us that people know that getting your song on a playlist is in no way whatsoever influenced by creating relationships with editors. Having a relationship with anyone at Spotify is never a leg up for playlisting" (Spotify, 2020b). In the few journalistic pieces on the subject, when asked about their criteria for choosing and keeping a particular song on a playlist, these curators remain vague by claiming that "it depends on a bunch of things –the update schedule of the playlist, the type of playlist, the playlist's audience, and the performance of the song within the playlist" (Spotify, 2020b). On another interview in Spotify For Artists' blog, R&B curator Khalila Douze declared that

the strategy [used to curate] is based on the playlist itself. Each has its own hypothesis, theme, or audience that we're thinking about. If it's one of the genre-specific playlists, like Are & Be, that's the home for the current, biggest songs in that space" (Spotify, 2020a).

In a rare interview to Rocio Guerrero, Head of Content Programming and Curation for Latin Global on the platform, she explained that "Spotify's real magic is that we receive data from people's reactions to playlists on the spot, so we can quickly react and change the playlist's title, songs or audience hypothesis if it doesn't work" (Navas, 2016). Therefore, it remains an open question whether and to what extent the curators' decisions are mediated by big data inputs on playlist performance, such as time spent on a song or skip ratio (Ross, 2020).

Nonetheless, Spotify's editorial team are not the only actor at play: Sony, Universal and Warner –usually referred to as The Big Three– have also build their playlisting teams and services, whose presence stretch across streaming platforms.

These services –Filtr by Sony, Digster by Universal and Topsify by Warner– only feature music from their respective catalogs, therefore working as a tool to increase revenue from streaming royalties.

Lastly, there are also independent curators whose influence is, in some cases, pretty remarkable. They act as influencers and can be contacted directly; besides, most have webpage forms from which artists can submit songs for consideration. On the edge of this category, some companies are starting to make business by charging artists a fee for featuring songs on playlists. When asked on this subject, Spotify fonts qualify such third-party promotional companies as scams (Ross, 2020). As expressed by anonymous Spotify curators,

If someone or a third party company is offering placement on a playlist in exchange for money, this is a streaming manipulation service that goes against Spotify’s guidelines for music promotion. The following is not permitted for any reason whatsoever: Selling a user account or playlist, or otherwise accepting or offering to accept any compensation, financial or otherwise, to influence the name of an account or playlist or the content included on an account or playlist. Additionally we routinely remove user-generated playlists that claim to offer this, so it won’t benefit you in the long run (Spotify, 2020b).

#### 4 ARTISTS, LABELS AND CURATORS: SOME RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Up to this point, two sets of questions regarding the ways in which Spotify’s mediation influences the shaping of *música urbana*’s canon need to be raised. One possible point of departure would be major and underground record labels’ personnel and artists. Through ethnographic interventions and in-depth interviews, some of the points of enquiry would be:

- Where do these actors mainly pitch their songs: to Spotify’s editorial team, to the Big Three playlisting services or to independent curators?
- In each case, is there a difference in the acceptance rate between *indie*’s and major’s pitched songs? Which is the most effective way to get featured?
- Within the labels, is there a specific professional profile in charge of the pitching process? Is this organizational structure different in major and indie record companies?

These research questions could easily be summed up in two interweaving

hypotheses. First, both big and small record companies related to *música urbana* have changed their structure, abandoning their priorities in record distribution and assuming tasks related to management, booking and online communications. Second, underground and mainstream artists from *música urbana* get a different treatment from curators in genre-oriented playlists.

Playlist curators are another strategic site of research, especially since the criteria they apply on *música urbana*'s playlists presumably has great impact on the demarcation of some songs as representatives of the genre. In-depth interviews on playlist curators specialized on *música urbana* and its generic synonyms –such as *trap*, *latin* or *perreo*– would be useful in order to pose relevant questions such as:

- Which are the “audience profiles” or “model reader” (Eco, 1987) to which these playlists are aimed?
- Which are the professional profiles that companies look for this job? What background do they usually have? Are they related to the scene, do they know it well?
- How and to what extent do big data input mediate the creation and modification of playlists related to *música urbana*?

## 5 METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

As has been shown in recent ethnographic research on streaming platforms and editorial playlisting (Bonini & Gandini, 2020; Eriksson et al., 2019), direct access to this field might become impossible due to the complicit silence towards researchers' questions. As is usual in tech business, streaming platforms exert very close control upon their information releases. This opaqueness might be bridged by relying on informants no longer involved in the field, whose participation will not collide with their professional or personal interests. Although current and past playlist editors are very difficult to reach to through social media or email, it's been surprisingly simple to find them on usually neglected sites such as the professional social network LinkedIn.

According to what has been developed above, chances of conducting ethnographic work within Spotify's facilities are low. Instead of focusing on a single location, the opaque and disseminated nature of the field should be approached

through a multi-sited ethnography. This kind of research has proven to be useful to “examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (Marcus, 1995, p. 79). From this point of view, the field emerges as the result of the work for connection the researcher makes between heterogeneous materials, temporalities and spaces. These disparate elements become commensurable precisely through this work of connecting (Latour, 2008, p. 59; 110). In that way, by collecting data from a wide variety of sources, chances are that knowledge gaps will be filled.

In this sense, mapping stands out as a central technique in the construction of the multi-sited field, since it answers our research questions about influence by making empirical relations emerge. The result would be a bunch of representations that would make sense of the ensemble of entanglements between humans and non-humans that are involved in the mediatization of *música urbana*’s genre formation. We follow suit of actor-network theory’s radical take on the principle of symmetry (Latour, 1998, 2001) and claim that everything that modifies the agency of the ensemble must be considered an actor, be it algorithms, metaphors, people, trade unions, companies, records or money fluxes.

Of course, in a high-complex and fast-changing environment such as today’s digital music industries and cultures, aiming for an all-encompassing picture of the field would only lead to frustration. Instead, our attention should be put on highly specific points of departure that are deemed significant to the enquiry. From those points, we will follow connections guided by our research questions. The result will be a series of partial networks that, when combined, will –at least partially– fill each other’s gaps.

## 6 MUSIC PRESS AND AUDIENCES AS FURTHER SITES OF RESEARCH

Before concluding, I would like to pinpoint the interest of music press and audiences in the understanding of new genre formation dynamics. First of all, if the music press has been forced to share its gatekeeping role with streaming platforms’ editorial policies, the ways and extent to which these two actors influence one another in the establishment of *música urbana*’s canon remains an open question. We then hypothesize the existence of a relationship between specialized *música urbana* media

feedback on artists and the inclusion of songs by that artists on the genre-oriented playlists. Do positive reviews impact on playlisting? Or does it happen the other way round?

In order to search for correlations and causal relations, we propose following both media coverage and playlist changes over a period of time. By engaging in digital methods (Marres, 2017), two datasets will be created and crossed in search for relations. On one hand, news pieces by a selection of *música urbana*'s specialized sources will be periodically fed to a database. Content analysis will be subsequently applied to this growing corpus of texts in search for mentions of artists, songs and albums. We will additionally submit the pieces to sentiment analysis to determine the overall positivity or negativity of each review. On the other hand, we will engage with Spotify's API to create a code device capable of checking *música urbana*'s genre-based playlists and extracting a set of valuable public parameters such as number of streams and its evolution, as well as modifications exerted to the playlist, mainly related to song inclusion, exclusion or change of position within playlists. After a six to twelve months' data scraping phase, we will cross data from both sets and seek for correlations.

Finally, if we are to grasp the modulation Spotify exerts on the understanding of *música urbana*, fans of the genre are a unavoidable site of research. We propose the selection of a sample of fans who will be interviewed to understand how do they make sense of *música urbana* as a genre, which are the discourses and metaphors they use to describe it and their music consumption habits on streaming platforms. Paired with the interviews, we will use Caliandro's proposal of the “user as a device” (2017) by tracking the subjects' activity on the platform. Although media diaries on Spotify use might be useful for this purpose, this tool should not stand alone, since it demands a considerable amount of work from the participants that sometimes leads to inconsistency and disengagement. We therefore suggest to couple media diaries with unobtrusive data collection tools such as Spotistats and Last.fm that will provide us with raw data on number of streams.

## 7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, we have proposed methods and techniques from which the

research of new genre-formation dynamics might be carried out. After a theoretical note on popular music genres, streaming platforms have been pointed out as a new kind of sociotechnical actor that play a central role in the establishment of new genres' music canon. In parallel, it has been posed that playlists and playlisting is becoming a new organizing principle for today's music cultures. This part of the paper has closed with reference to Spotify's curational turn and its implications for our object of enquiry. The second half of the article has focused on highlighting methodological challenges related to the study of music streaming platforms and digital music cultures. Tentative solutions have been drawn from Antoine Hennion's musical take on Actor-Network Theory, as well as Mediation theories and multi-sited ethnography. From that point on, attention has been put on identifying suitable sites -artists, record labels, media coverage and audience habits- from which the work of field construction might depart.

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