



LUND UNIVERSITY

Play it COOL

Understanding Consumer Identity Performances through Musical Taste

Master Thesis

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Abstract

Sharing music and displaying one's musical preferences have become an inseparable part of the content circulating on social media, dating apps, and the online world as a whole. Accordingly, music-streaming services are providing users with more and more functions to share musical content on other platforms and even introduced summaries of their annual music consumption. How consumers are using these functions to share their musical taste online and how this is helping them present themselves in the digital world is at the center of the present research. In the process of investigating these consumer practices, this study adopts a Consumer Culture Theory perspective to examine the concepts of consumer identities and taste and follows the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Erving Goffman for the analysis of the collected data. From an empirical point of view, this research is based on 23 in-depth semi-structured interviews with young European consumers who use Spotify, the biggest music-streaming service worldwide. The findings highlight three ways in which consumers share their musical taste in the online world as a means to (1) express and validate their personal identities, (2) perform collective or expert identities and thus define their social position, and (3) selectively present socially desirable identities to avoid stigmatization and symbolic violence. The insights of the present study further contribute to consumer cultural conversations in relation to (1) the role of the market, (2) consumers' self-presentation in the digital world, and (3) social belonging. These contributions might be of interest for brands that seek to discover why and how consumers use music sharing functions and for future consumer culture researchers who might want to investigate even further the connection between musical taste and consumer identities. Finally, this research presents how and why these contributions might also be important from a societal perspective.

Keywords

Bourdieu, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), digital selves, digital world, Goffman, identity, fragmented self, judgement, legitimization, musical taste, music consumption, music-streaming services, selective self-presentation, symbolic violence, Spotify, stigma, performances, validation



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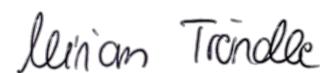
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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Tell me what you listen to, and I’ll tell you who you are”

- Tiffanie DeBartolo -

When getting to know an unknown person, the first conversation often includes the question “*What kind of music do you like to listen to?*”. In combination with other basic information such as name, age, and hobbies, someone’s musical taste seems to represent a significant puzzle piece of an overall picture we immediately seek to compile about our still unknown counterpart. Somehow, as novelist DeBartolo beautifully described, our musical taste appears to say something fundamental about who we are. Thus, in those first encounters, we could now reveal our true preference for “Horror Punk”, or we might “play it safe” by disclosing rather generally popular chart songs. This choice might significantly impact the first impression our conversation partner gets of us. For that reason, we might go for the “safe” option with the intention of hopefully being liked and without running the risk of immediately being labeled as “weird” due to our unusual liking. As our musical preferences seem to reveal a lot about us and play an important role in social interactions, it comes as no surprise that they are an integral part of how we present ourselves to others.

With smartphones, perpetual internet connectivity, and social media becoming a permanent part of our lives, many of those social encounters and the disclosure of our musical preferences have moved to the online sphere. Modern technologies have significantly shaped how we communicate with each other and how we present ourselves in contemporary times. In the online world, we can easily compile private information about other individuals even before getting to know them. This information might include their favorite travel destinations, the type of food they enjoy, but even more often - their taste in music. For instance, even when looking for the love of our life on online dating apps, we are now encouraged to display our musical taste by revealing our Top Five music artists and by choosing a personal ‘anthem’ that best describes us (Hunt, 2022). By doing so, we can help our potential “matches” build a more accurate picture of who we are. Furthermore, social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook have long allowed users to share songs on their



online profiles. This enables users to discover bits and pieces of other people's musical preferences and seemingly also their personalities. Reciprocally, they can disclose their own musical taste with the intention of presenting themselves to others. With that in mind, the present research will investigate how consumers perform identities through musical taste in the online world.

1.1 Background

In this context, music-streaming services in particular play a significant role. These digital platforms have drastically changed music consumption (Nowak, 2016; Prey, 2016) by enabling consumers to listen, share, curate, and personalize their musical content on the go, from any place and at any time (Hamilton, 2019; Hracs, Jakob & Hauge, 2013). For a monthly fee, users gain access to a vast amount of music, turning material CDs into a truly rare species. With over 523 million users globally in 2021 (Porter, 2022), music-streaming services have turned into the dominant means of contemporary music consumption (Webster, 2020). However, as “we are situated in the early phases of a new mode of musical consumption, for which the rules and norms have yet to be determined” (Morris & Powers, 2015, p.117), the opinions about its impact on society are still rather mixed. From one side, in the name of societal progress, some researchers argue that music-streaming services and their algorithms have provided consumers with greater freedom (Hamilton, 2019; Hracs, Jakob & Hauge, 2013), whereas other scholars have condemned the use of users' personal data by those enterprises as a form of control and limitation of their freedom (Morris & Powers, 2015; Prey, 2016). Especially in the era of “surveillance capitalism”, as coined by Zuboff (2015), this topic will continue to gain academic attention as scholars seek to determine if these digital services invade consumers' privacy merely to provide more convenient means for online music consumption.

However, it seems that it is not only the convenience of these platforms that attracts a plethora of users. It appears that the functions enabling consumers to share their own musical preferences on different online platforms and to discover other people's musical taste might be making these music-streaming services even more popular. Arguably, by allowing consumers to interact with each other and share their musical preferences, digital music providers have given new grounds to consumers to present their identities and craft a selective image of themselves based on musical taste (Hagen & Lüders, 2017; Volda, Grinter, Ducheneaut, Edwards & Newman, 2005). Not



surprisingly, Spotify, the world's biggest music-streaming service, introduced a function in 2015 that allows users to present parts of their musical taste on different social media platforms (Spotify, 2021b). This tool called "Spotify Wrapped" (see Appendix A) provides all users with an annual summary and evaluation of the genres, artists, and songs they have listened to during the year and enables them to instantly share selective parts of this sum-up in the form of so-called "Wrapped cards" with others (Spotify, 2021a). Consequently, once a year, badges of honor such as "Congrats, you are among the top 3% of Beyoncé's listeners!" or "Your musical taste is happy and bold!" swamp diverse social media channels (Swant, 2019, n.p.). Since its introduction, Spotify Wrapped has turned into a notable part of popular culture (Hicks, 2021). This showcases that the display of musical taste has turned into an essential part of consumers' self-presentation in the digital world.

With that in mind, the question now remains as to what exactly makes musical taste so crucial for the presentation of who we are in the digital world? If musical preferences truly are the window to our personality, as novelist DeBartolo seems to believe, then how do we choose how much and which parts to disclose to others? These questions will be at the heart of this academic research, which aims to explore the role of musical taste in consumers' online identity performances in the digital world and how music-streaming services enable those.

1.2 Problematization

From a socio-cultural perspective, the impact of digitalization has significantly triggered the interest of consumer culture researchers regarding diverse consumer practices (Kozinets, Patterson & Ashman, 2016; Manovich, 2009; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014; Miles & Ritzer, 2018; Rokka & Canniford, 2016). Scholars within the field of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and in particular the literature stream of consumer identity, investigate consumption as a means to construct, present, and express one's identity by providing consumers with material and symbolic resources (e.g. Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk, 1988). Accordingly, scholars within this research paradigm have started to investigate how the digital era has been transforming consumer identity projects (Belk, 2013; Chen, 2016; Schau & Gilly, 2003) and have found that the digital world provides consumers with extended options for the construction and presentation of their identities. For instance, Chen (2016) investigates how consumers create, maintain, and perform their digital selves on YouTube. The study claims that "participants thoughtfully consider which performances



of their multiple digital selves to disclose” (Chen, 2016, p.250). This study provides a perception of digital platforms as a site for extended identity construction and selective self-presentation for consumers, which is an essential angle for interpretation of the digital realm.

Another relevant stream of literature within CCT engages with the digitalization of *taste* (McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013; Webster, 2020) and provides insights into how digital platforms have enabled novel forms of social distinction. For instance, McQuarrie, Miller and Phillips (2013) explore how public displays of taste or precisely said - “aesthetic judgements” (p.139) made by fashion bloggers on social media have enabled those consumers to gain higher social status and economic rewards. Hence, they investigate how the internet allows consumers to reach mass audiences and use their taste as a tool for social distinction, which in Bourdieu’s sense (1984) refers to the hierarchy of social classes and one’s status in society. Another study by Jack Webster (2020) investigates how music-streaming services might also enable consumers to achieve new forms of social distinction through the possibility to self-generate playlists. Thereby, he explores the relationship between these music platforms and social distinction through the concept of musical taste. These studies are important for this research as they illustrate how taste in the digital world is being used in novel ways for social distinction.

Additionally, we want to point out that there are a few studies exploring the connection between the symbolic consumption of *music* and *consumer identities* within CCT (Hesmondhalgh, 2008; Larsen, Lawson & Todd, 2009; Larsen, Lawson & Todd, 2010). For instance, the framework created by Larsen, Lawson, and Todd (2009; 2010) attempts to explain the processes involved in crafting and presenting one’s identity through the symbolic consumption of music. On the other hand, Hesmondhalgh (2008) emphasizes that although music consumption might connect individuals and even form communities, the power of music in the process of identity creation could be rather limited due to various socio-historical factors. Furthermore, there are some studies outside of CCT that investigate this connection between *music* consumption and *identities* in the digital world (Hagen & Lüders, 2017; Volda et al. 2005). For instance, the media and communication scientists Hagen and Lüders (2017) illustrate how the social functions of these streaming services, such as following others and sharing playlists, cause consumers to negotiate music in terms of “personal” and “social” in relation to their self-presentation and how much of



their identities they want to disclose with others within the service. This supports an observation from a study in the field of human-computer interaction, in which Volda et al. (2005) investigate consumers' sharing practices of their digital playlists. The authors discover that users share music in an attempt to portray a selective image of themselves, which might be interpreted in a similar sense to Erving Goffman's (1959) perception of impression management.

With that in mind, we note that while previous literature on *consumer identities* in the digital realm mostly focuses on consumers' self-presentation and the immaterial possession of symbolic resources (Belk, 2013; Chen, 2016; Schau & Gilly, 2003), existing literature both on *taste* in general (McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013) and in the specific case of *musical taste* (Webster, 2020) in the online sphere mostly highlights how the digital world enables consumers to pursue new forms of social distinction. In that context, it appears that scholars within CCT have largely investigated the influence of digitalization on *consumer identities* and *musical taste* separately, although a few scholars have already illustrated that a strong connection between music and identities exists in the real world (Hesmondhalgh, 2008; Larsen, Lawson & Todd, 2009; Larsen, Lawson & Todd, 2010). However, even those scholars look at the concept of music consumption instead of musical taste. Similarly, even the few relevant studies outside of CCT that acknowledge the need to explore the relationship between *music consumption* and *identities* in the digital era (Hagen & Lüders, 2017; Volda et al. 2005) have not done so in the sense of musical taste. These studies have also overlooked the role of the market for music-streaming as a provider of symbolic resources that enables consumers to perform their identities. Even more, this literature has not yet emphasized consumers' increasing possibilities in the digital era to selectively and consciously present solely fragments of their musical taste, as this option has only recently been introduced through technological updates on music-streaming platforms.

We conclude that previous research that explores the link between music consumption and identities both in the real world (Hesmondhalgh, 2008; Larsen, Lawson & Todd, 2009; Larsen, Lawson & Todd, 2010) and in the digital world (Hagen & Lüders, 2017; Volda et al. 2005) has rather done so by focusing on the consumption of music rather than the notion of musical taste. The combination of identities and musical taste, therefore, has been significantly overlooked. Based on that, this study seeks to explore and answer the following research question:



How consumers perform identities through musical taste in the digital world?

In order to address the theoretical gap and to provide specific insights for answering our research question, we will focus on one particular music-streaming service - Spotify. As mentioned in the background, this company and its Wrapped function have turned into a viral trend in popular culture (Hicks, 2021), enabling consumers to selectively share parts of their musical taste on social media platforms. Due to this, Spotify can provide a descriptive and rich empirical source to develop a theoretical understanding of consumer identity performances in relation to musical taste from a CCT perspective.

1.3 Research Aim and Intended Contributions

This research aims at contributing to the literature streams on *consumer identities* (Belk, 2013; Chen, 2016; Larsen, Lawson & Todd, 2010; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Weinberger & Crockett, 2018) and *taste* (McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014; Puetz, 2015; Webster, 2020) in the field of Consumer Culture Theory. Within the former, we especially aim to expand the current knowledge of consumer identities by exploring in-depth how consumers present themselves in the digital world (Belk, 2013; Chen, 2016; Schau & Gilly, 2003) and how they use tools provided by the market to shape their digital selves. Within the latter, we aim to contribute in particular to the current understanding of the concept of taste by investigating how musical taste in the digital world might lead to the reinforcement of social hierarchies (McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013; Webster, 2020) or the formation of new social groups (Puetz, 2015). This is of great importance since those topics are at the heart of contemporary consumer culture. However, the telos of this study not only lies in contributing in a separate manner to both literature streams, but we rather seek to contribute to academia by exploring the link between consumer identities and taste in the digital world. The field of CCT has substantially overlooked this possible connection as it often studies those concepts separately. And even when music and identities have been researched together, it has not been done from the perspective of musical taste but rather the symbolic consumption of music. Hence, we aim to discover how and why these two concepts might be interlinked. This is of importance for academia as musical taste is becoming more and more an inseparable part of consumers' online culture and thus, the connection of both theoretical



concepts might help to gain a more holistic understanding of consumer practices in the online world.

The generation of this knowledge might further be important from both a market and a societal perspective. The understanding of the underlying reasons for consumers' online identity performances through musical taste might provide valuable knowledge for industries concerned with consumer taste, which seek to comprehend their customers' behavior in order to discover new market potentials. Furthermore, the findings might raise consumers' awareness and critical thinking regarding their symbolic use of resources provided by music-streaming services.

In this way, we seek to contribute to academia and practice by investigating the concepts of consumer identity and taste in the online world together and by presenting practical insights that might be useful to understand for both brands and consumers.

1.4 Outline of the Thesis

The present study is structured as follows. We will first provide an overview of previous literature about consumer identity and taste in order to provide insights into existing knowledge that will act as an academic background for the present study. Subsequently, the theoretical framework will introduce the main scholars whose concepts and theories will be used for the analysis of the empirical data. After describing the methodological approach and research design, we will present empirical findings showcasing how consumers perform their identities through musical taste. Next, in the discussion section, we will contextualize the insights of this study within CCT conversations to present the importance and contribution of these findings. Consequently, we will conclude this research and expound on potential limitations, implications, and directions for future research.



Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will present previous literature related to the subject of this study. As the research aims at investigating how consumers perform identities through musical taste, this section will provide an overview of the existing body of knowledge regarding consumer identity and consumer taste that both form part of the research tradition of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). As music and self-presentation have been investigated within both literature streams of consumer identities and taste from different angles, understanding the ongoing academic discourse in both streams will enable us to identify their intersections. It will further help us to comprehend how those streams could be understood in a rather complementary instead of an exclusive way.

2.1 Consumer Identity

The first part of the literature review will focus on consumer identities. Firstly, it will provide an overview of previous research regarding consumer identity projects in general. Subsequently, it will continue to present studies on how consumer identities have been impacted by the digital world. Finally, it will expound on existing literature that deals with consumer identities in relation to music. All these concepts are essential for the conduct of this study, as they carve out what has already been researched in the field and what might call for further investigation. By exploring the findings and potential contradictions of previous literature, we aim at identifying theoretical concepts that might be complemented, extended, or opposed by the findings of this study.

2.1.1 Consumer Identity and Self-Presentation

The field of Consumer Culture Theory has contributed significantly to the understanding of consumers and their consumption practices. Hereby, one of its main contributions can be witnessed in its elucidation of socio-cultural practices connected to the topic of consumer identity projects. Many famous philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and later even Kant from different angles laid the foundation for the concept of identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2018). Their understandings were later borrowed and extended by many CCT researchers in their quest to explore consumers' identity work.



The literature stream on consumer identity projects illuminates the question of how consumers create and express identities through the symbolic consumption of resources provided by the marketplace (e.g. Belk, 1988; Bock, 1993; Elliott, 1997; McCracken, 1988). According to Arnould and Thompson (2005) who first coined the “disciplinary brand” of CCT, identity projects thereby refer to

“social arrangement[s] in which relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through the markets” (p. 869).

Schau (2018) provides a general overview of the concept of identity within this field. In this way, she defines identity as bearing upon the four different pillars of “personality, self-concept, identity project, and self-presentation” (p.19). Herewith, personality refers to character traits and self-concept describes what people think about themselves. While an identity project refers to “a strategic choice of objects, symbols, scripts, and practices to claim particular identity position”, self-presentation addresses “the performance of an identity project within a social context” (Schau, 2018, p.19). This means that consumers perform their identity projects through self-presentation, a process that is enabled by the marketplace that provides the tools for doing so. The latter two concepts of identity project and self-presentation are of particular significance for this study, as it investigates the role of musical taste for them and thus contributes to this body of knowledge.

Schau (2018) further suggests that one important feature of identity lies in its intentional character, meaning that humans create their identities on purpose. Thereby, she reflects the opinion of a plethora of other scholars in the field who regard humans as consumers who actively pursue and construct their identities through the use of market resources (Gabriel & Lang, 2006; Holt, 2002; Levy, 1981). Gabriel and Lang (2006) describe this active pursuit of identity in a pictorial manner:

The Western consumer readily transfigures into an identity seeker. Whether choosing goods, exploring them, buying them, displaying them, disfiguring them or giving them away, consumers



are, above all, frequently presented as thirsting for identity and using commodities to quench this thirst.” (p. 79)

The significance of consumer goods in the process of identity construction is equally emphasized by a considerable number of consumer culture theorists who have explored the importance of market commodities and possessions for the construction and expression of consumer identity (e.g. Belk, 1988; Hill, 1991; Hill & Stamey, 1990). Belk (1988) for instance, suggests that consumers regularly integrate their possessions including their belongings and ideas, as well as other persons or experiences into what he calls their “extended self”. He argues that individuals oftentimes have a similar emotional connection to certain things as towards themselves and therefore, these things might become part of their identities. Belk (1988) further builds on Sartre (1943) to explain three different means of how to integrate possessions into one’s identity. According to him, the first way for doing so is to control and master items. A basic example from daily life could be learning to ride a bike. Secondly, possessions can also be integrated into one’s extended self through the creation or alteration of an object since part of the self is invested into the object through this process. The last means lies in acquiring deep and intimate knowledge about this object (Belk, 1988). The author demonstrates his theory by pointing out the feeling of grief and sadness that an individual experiences when losing a beloved object. In a similar spirit, Hill (1991) and Hill and Stamey (1990) research the effect of an involuntary disposition of possessions on identity among homeless people in America. The prevailing tenet of those studies builds on the notion that consumers construct their individual identities through marketplace resources and possessions and reciprocally communicate this identity through their consumption.

However, Belk (1988) also contends that consumers do not merely seek personal identities, but also aim to associate themselves with collective identities. In this manner, he states: “We exist not only as individuals, but also as collectivities” (Belk, 1988, p.152). This view is reflected in the research of other scholars in the field who, in similar fashion, accentuate that consumers build their identities not only on a personal level but are heavily impacted by a deep yearning for communal experiences and identity (Arvidsson & Caliendo, 2016; Cova, 1997; Cova, Kozinets & Schankar, 2007; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Kozinets, 2001; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). These collective identities emerge where consumers build relationships and “set[s] of shared meanings around



brands or consumer practices” (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016, p.728). However, those communities are designated and conceptualized diversely by different authors. Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) for instance examine one specific consumption collective which they designate as “brand communities”. According to the authors a brand community refers to “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers or a brand” (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001, p.412). Other scholars conceptualize more ephemeral collectives as “consumer tribes” which arise around similar passions or leisure practices (Cova, Kozinets & Shankar, 2007; Goulding, Shankar, Elliott & Canniford, 2009). Another type of community that is of special importance for this research is what Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) coined as “brand publics”. Brand publics differ from the other concepts of communities by the fact that they emerge on social media and “do not develop a collective identity around the focal brand; rather the brand is valuable as a medium that can offer publicity to a multitude of diverse situations of identity” (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016, p.727). All those authors similarly suggest that people do not exclusively adopt specific conducts and use symbolic or material market resources for constructing a personal sense of self, but also to mark their affiliation to a certain community and to satisfy their desire for belonging.

From a slightly different angle, Weinberger and Crockett (2018) examine social influence on personal identity projects by investigating “social identity” - a term that was first coined by sociologist Erving Goffman (1963). Hereby, the authors refer to how individuals think about themselves and how they are simultaneously perceived by others. In their quest for acting out and enhancing their personal identity projects, people are simultaneously deeply influenced by the profound wish to belong and fit into society (Weinberger & Crockett, 2018). This leads to the fact that they attempt to highlight some features of their identity while hiding others in order to fit in and ‘improve’ their social identity. In a similar spirit, Weinberger (2015) investigates in an empirical study, individuals who live in America and do not celebrate Christmas due to their religion. In doing so, she finds that people often choose to adopt some Christmas rituals and practices, which are contrary to their own identity and religion, to live up to the “dominant identity” and to strengthen social links (Weinberger, 2015). Moreover, other scholars have emphasized that it is the marketplace that plays a vital role in the definition of dominant and non-dominant identities in societies (Cayla & Eckhardt, 2008; Mora, 2014; Velagaleti & Epp, 2016). It has the ability to



change social perceptions of what is normal, legitimate and should be aspired for, however, this power can also reinforce the distinction between dominant and non-dominant identity practices (Weinberger & Crockett, 2018). Additionally, Crockett (2017) claims that individuals possessing dominant identities often seek to practice their taste in forms that reassert their legitimacy. He further argues that consumers with non-dominant identities might actively attempt to change the social perception of their stigmatized attributes. These studies are essential for the present research as they contribute to the understanding of the relationship between the market and society.

All in all, the existing literature about consumer identity lays a fundamental base for the understanding of the topic of interest of this research. Therefore, for this study it is of special importance to understand the intentional character of identities (Schau, 2018), the importance of collective identities (Arvidsson & Caliandro; 2016, Cova, 1997; Cova, Kozinets & Schankar, 2007; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Kozinets, 2001; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001) and the wish to “fit in” society (Weinberger & Crockett, 2018). It is further important to understand that people perform their identity projects through self-presentation by using resources provided by the marketplace (Schau, 2018). In this way, the present research will contribute to this literature stream by investigating how consumers perform their identity projects through the presentation of their musical taste using music-streaming platforms and social media channels as market resources. It will further explore how they are influenced by collective identities. As the present research focuses on digital platforms, it is imperative to further gain an insight into the literature that has researched consumer identities in the online realm. With the world ultimately becoming more and more digitized, multiple consumer researchers have identified significant changes in the ways consumers conduct their identity projects online. Therefore, the next section will elucidate the subject of consumer identity in the digital era.

2.1.2 Consumer Identity in the Digital Era

With the rise of digitalization, several studies have already taken the concept of consumer identity and self-presentation into the digital sphere (Belk, 2013; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Magaudda, 2011; Chen, 2016) and thereby paved the way for this study.



Indeed, 25 years after publishing his famous work *“Possessions and the Extended Self”*, Belk (2013) provides an update for his theory of how consumers integrate possessions into their sense of self in the online realm. Without nullifying the relevance of his general concept, Belk (2013) finds that the means for creating and expressing one’s identity have changed significantly with increasing technological transformations. By this means, he conceptualizes five primary changes that influence the self-extension process of contemporary consumers. These changes are “Dematerialization, Reembodiment, Sharing, Co-construction of Self, and Distributed Memory” (Belk, 2013, p. 477). For the present study especially the first two concepts are of great relevance as they help explain consumers’ online behavior in their pursuit of identity. Therefore, “dematerialization” refers to the development that many previous possessions like for instance CD collections, have now become immaterial, with songs and playlists being stored digitally (Belk, 2013). The author claims that despite their intangible character, digital possessions are still essential for the “extended self” as consumers become similarly attached to their digital possessions as to their material ones. This conceptualization is of special importance for this study as we will investigate digital music consumption which nowadays is largely immaterial. Belk (2013) further explains that also consumers themselves have lost their physical body in the online sphere. Therefore, they start to represent and “reembody” themselves through photos or videos or by creating “idealized” avatars. He further claims that through the modification of those, consumers oftentimes tend to present a desired and possibly somewhat idealized version of themselves. When examining the changes within the realm of “sharing”, Belk (2013) finds that consumers appear to be much more comfortable to share intimate information than prior to the digital era. Hereby, Belk builds on Côte’ (1996) who suggests that social identities are not ascribed anymore by external societal factors like for instance race or gender but are rather actively managed by consumers themselves. Additionally, through sharing those stories, consumers become part of imagined communities (Belk, 2013). The “co-construction of self” refers to the idea that other people play an important role for the sense of self in the online realm (Belk, 2013). According to the author, through digitalization consumers can receive much more immediate affirmation from others but at the same time run a much higher risk of getting immediate negative feedback.



With a similar intention, Schau and Gilly (2003) investigate how consumers use personal web pages to construct and present their identity and to associate themselves with specific brands towards an external audience. The authors suggest a similar conceptual update of Belk's (1988) initial idea of "we are what we have" (p.139) and claim that the digital era consumers have the possibility to construct multiple identities online that do not depend anymore on material possessions. Consumers can rather imagine new and idealized versions of their identity and present themselves in a desired light. In contrast to their real lives, they can freely create associations with specific brands in the online sphere and are not subject to their financial limitations. Schau and Gilly (2003) therefore conclude that the increasing possibilities of online self-presentation lead to a decreasing importance of material possessions and an increasing relevance of a consumer's imagination. However, other scholars within the field have developed a different understanding of the role of dematerialization and its relation to consumers' identity projects. For instance, Magaudda (2011) investigates the importance of materiality regarding digital music consumption. He presents the theory "that the changes in music consumption generated by the process of digitization have not led to the dematerialization of consumption and to the disappearance of material objects but have rather generated forms of "re-materialization" as consumers get more sentimentally attached to physical objects enabling them to listen to music.

From another angle, Chen (2016) contributes to the knowledge of identity and self-presentation within the online realm by investigating the means of how individuals create multiple online selves through YouTube videos. The author suggests that the formation of this digital identity bears upon three different stages namely "digital self-construction, digital self- presentation strategies, and parasocial relationship developments that are managed by digital self-images" (Chen, 2016, p.232). This study further claims that the Youtube platform plays a vital role in this process by providing "cultural values and symbolic meanings" for the creation of those online identities (p.252). In contrast to Schau and Gilly (2003), Chen (2016) finds that the selves created in the online sphere are not inconsistent with a consumer's real identity. Hence, they are not just based on imagination but rather build on an individual's self in real life. Further, the author concludes that consumers carefully choose which information about themselves to reveal in their YouTube videos and which to keep private. By doing so, YouTube video creators aim at achieving a high



interaction with and positive feedback from their audience. This finding goes along with the previously mentioned social identity explained by Weinberger and Crockett (2018).

In conclusion, existing literature on consumer identity in the digital era especially reaches the consensus that digitalization has increased the possibilities for a targeted self-presentation (Belk, 2013; Chen, 2016; Schau & Gilly, 2003). However, while some scholars emphasize the notion that people create rather idealized selves in the digital realm (Belk, 2013; Schau & Gilly, 2003), other authors such as Chen (2016) hold the view that the created identities in the digital realm remain similar to one's identity in the real world. The present research will therefore join this debate and investigate how consumers present themselves in the digital realm.

Moving even one step closer towards the topic of interest of this paper, the last area of consumer identity literature which should be scrutinized, pertains to the relationship between consumer identity and music. Therefore, the following section will expound research that has already investigated the role of music in consumer identity projects.

2.1.3 Consumer Identity and Music

As explained above, in CCT identity is understood as being expressed and constructed through consumption (e.g., Belk, 1988; Bocoock, 1993; Elliott, 1997; McCracken, 1988). Therefore, for the sake of this study, it is important to recognize the role of symbolic music consumption for consumer identity projects. A widely renowned perspective on the impact of music on identity stems from the study *“Music as a technology of the self”* conducted by DeNora (1999). In this study the author presents her notion of music as a resource for identity projects, as it carries symbolic connection to one's past experiences and social environment. According to DeNora (1999) “music can be used as a device for the reflexive process of remembering/constructing who one is, a technology for spinning the apparently ‘continuous’ tale of who one ‘is’” (p.45). In a similar manner, Wanjala and Kebaya (2016) explore what role popular music plays for the identity creation of young people. Those researchers support the argument that music is not mere entertainment but rather is used “in shaping, influencing, and negotiating identity formations among the youth” (p.31) and thus, is being utilized as a tool for distinction amongst their peers. This research plays an essential role for the present study as it forms part of its rationale to focus



on the youth. The multifaceted and long investigated connection between consumers' musical taste and their social distinction will be further presented in the next chapter regarding the concept of taste.

Furthermore, other scholars have continued to explore music's role in shaping the self (Hesmondhalgh, 2008; Larsen, Lawson & Todd, 2009; Larsen, Lawson & Todd, 2010). In fact, Hesmondhalgh (2008) stated:

Music provides a particularly interesting example of modern relations between consumption and self-identity. Many people report that music plays a very important role in their lives. This role does not appear to have diminished with industrialization, commodification and the mass consumption of music: if anything, it has grown (p.329).

This notion of an increasing role of music in the construction of consumers' identities is largely supported by the study "*The consumption of music as self-representation in social interactions*" by Larsen, Lawson and Todd (2009). Their theoretical framework is based on the comparison between the image of one's preferred music and the image of themselves they want to present to others in social interactions. As the authors claim: "individuals can use music to represent themselves in social interaction when the meaning of that music is congruent with the image of themselves that they wish to present" (Larsen, Lawson & Todd, 2009, p.2). Furthermore, they note that the self which an individual chooses to convey to others through the consumption of music is carefully chosen amongst all parts of one's identity and largely depends on the social situation. In their succeeding article "*The symbolic consumption of music*" Larsen, Lawson, and Todd (2010) further argue that "music, like all products, has the ability to carry and communicate cultural or symbolic meaning, which is used by individuals in identity construction" (p.671), and thus not just self-presentation. Furthermore, they shed light on the idea of music as a tool for emotional expression or aesthetic enjoyment. Hence, they articulate music as an "interplay of functions" (Larsen, Lawson & Todd, 2010, p.682) with multiple aspects taking part in everyday practices of consumers. These studies are of special importance for the present research, as they provide novel theoretical understandings of the role of music consumption in relation to consumer identities and put special emphasis on self-presentation.



From a different angle, Hagen and Lüders (2017) investigate how music consumption can be used not solely for identity construction but for fragmented self-presentation. By exploring the music sharing practices and consumer behavior within two music-streaming services, Spotify and Tidal, the researchers find that there is a tension in regard to following friends and sharing one's own playlists with others (Hagen & Lüders, 2017). Arguably, consumers sometimes negotiate their playlists as too intimate or personal to disclose with their friends, as this would portray a self-image, they do not feel comfortable revealing (Hagen & Lüders, 2017). This enables us to comprehend how consumers perceive music as a mirror of their identities. Moreover, as this study illuminates that social awareness is apparently present in users' online music consumption, it elaborates that this social awareness depends on the listening situation and on the relations between consumers on the platform. Therefore, the authors conclude that:

An ongoing, situational negotiation of self and of music as personal or social and a heightened awareness of others in relation to one's own music listening are among the social consequences of the use of music-streaming services (p.657)

This study to a large extent, supports and expands the research by Volda et al. (2005), which explores user behavior on iTunes. Their work introduces the perception that music consumers share their playlists in a conscious and selective manner, as this process largely includes “determining what identity to portray through one's own music library” (Volda et al. 2005, p.194). This selective use of cultural goods, although essential to consumers' identity creation and thus consumption behavior, is still rather understudied, especially in the ever-changing environment of digitalization. These theoretical findings on the topic of music, identity and self-presentation are a significant starting point for the present study, as the “social consequences” as called by Hagen and Lüders (2017) of music-streaming services will be in the center of investigation in our research.

Summarizing it can be said that scholars within the field of Consumer Culture Theory have paid great attention to the literature stream on consumer identity. Many of those researchers have investigated how consumers create and perform their identities through the consumption of market resources (e.g. Belk, 1988; Hill, 1991; Hill & Stamey, 1990; Bock, 1993; Elliott, 1997; McCracken, 1988). Some researchers have already taken the topic of identity projects into the



online sphere and have especially emphasized the increased possibilities for self-presentation through increasing digitalization (Belk, 2013; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Chen, 2016). Finally, a rather small number of scholars within and outside of CCT, have connected the two concepts of identity and music (DeNora, 1999; Hesmondhalgh, 2008; Larsen, Lawson & Todd, 2009; Larsen, Lawson & Todd, 2010; Hagen & Lüders, 2017; Volda et al., 2005) which is of special relevance for the present research. Therefore, all the above explained studies lay the ground for the investigation of this study.

2.2 Consumer Taste

As this research will be exploring musical taste as a tool for identity performance, it is further essential to review previous studies and their findings about the concept of taste. This section will be structured as follows: First, it will provide an overview of research exploring the notion of taste in general, including some of the contradicting positions of researchers on the topic. Subsequently, studies on musical taste will be introduced and revisited. Finally, the last part will include literature related to the specific case of musical taste in the digital era.

2.2.1 Taste

Another important stream of literature in the field of Consumer Culture Theory relates to the concept of taste. Although the exploration of taste historically starts with ancient Greek philosophers like Aristotle himself, it later turns into a cornerstone of sociological research aiming to understand how taste can shape and reinforce social class belonging (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont, 1992). These sociological findings have inspired consumer researchers to start investigating the notion of taste (Holt, 1998; Peterson & Kern, 1996; Üstüner & Holt, 2010) due to its ability to reveal a lot about consumers and the cultures they are a part of. Moreover, taste appears to play a vital role in shaping individuals' consumption preferences and behavior (Arsel & Bean, 2018a; Pomiès, Arsel & Bean, 2021) and therefore has turned into a key object of study in the field of Consumer Culture Theory.

The concept of taste, most simply put, refers to “one’s ability to make judgments about aesthetic objects ... an inseparable component of even the simplest everyday practices” (Arsel & Bean, 2018a, p.276). The study of taste is ever-changing and can refer to a heterogeneous specter of



practices, which has turned it into a research object across multiple industries such as food, music, fashion, design and others (Airoldi, 2021; Arsel & Bean, 2018b; Pomiès, Arsel & Bean, 2021). This ability of individuals to make aesthetic judgements is argued to “shape boundaries, subcultures, and global culture” (Arsel & Bean, 2018b, n.p.) and has therefore turned taste into a core concept in social science provoking scholars’ interest for a long time now.

When speaking of taste, it is only natural that studies attempting to contribute to Consumer Culture Theory, consumer research or sociology must begin by familiarizing with the famous work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu’s opus “*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*” (1984) can be seen as revolutionary, as it introduces the notion of judging cultural goods as a form of distinction between the social classes. According to the sociologist, the taste preferences of the upper classes are shaped by their ownership of more social, economic, and cultural capital - referring to money, knowledge, and education, in contrast to the working classes whose taste preferences are bound by necessity, as they cherish goods that are practical, functional, and versatile (Arsel & Bean, 2018a). Indeed, to distinguish the taste preferences of these social groups, Bourdieu (1984) uses the terms “highbrow” culture to express the taste of upper-classes and “lowbrow” for the working classes. He further elaborates that individuals possessing “high cultural capital” or cultural competence are conditioned to appreciate fine arts, luxury goods and aesthetics. Therefore, their taste becomes a way for expressing qualities such as individuality and cosmopolitanism (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1998). Simply put, Bourdieu (1984) claims that likes and dislikes are shaped and reflected by one’s environment and social upbringing and hence, play a vital role in one’s social class belonging and self-image.

As Bourdieu’s book is the first major work to bring the notion of taste to the sociology of consumption, it should be of no surprise that it has turned into the cornerstone of further exploration of the relationship between taste and consumption. Indeed, some scholars use Bourdieu’s theory of social distinction to explore this phenomenon outside of France (Holt, 1998; Mozgot, 2014; Peterson & Kern, 1996; Üstüner & Holt, 2010; Wanjala & Kebaya, 2016; Zhang, 2020). Whereas others, use it to provide a novel and contradicting understanding of taste and shifting class preferences (Glévarec & Pinet, 2012; Glévarec, Nowak & Mahut, 2020; Hennion, 2004; Peterson & Kern, 1996; Skandalis, Banister & Byrom, 2017; Thompson, Henry & Bardhi,



2018). Finally, Bourdieu's (1984) theory is applied by some scholars in their attempt to explore taste in the digital world (Airoldi, 2021; Derbaix & Derbaix, 2019; McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014). The findings of these studies to a large extent paint the big picture of how taste has been researched so far and why scholars do not always see eye to eye on this topic. Moreover, they illustrate how the theoretical understanding of this concept has evolved over time in the socio-cultural field of research.

On one hand, the scholars who apply Bourdieu's (1984) concept to investigate consumer taste in the setting of their own countries (Holt, 1998; Mozgot, 2014; Peterson & Kern, 1996; Üstüner & Holt, 2010; Wanjala & Kebaya, 2016; Zhang, 2020), do not always agree with the concept's universal applicability. For instance, Üstüner and Holt (2010) discover tangible differences in the consumer tastes and cultural capital of upper- and lower-parts of the middle classes in the less industrialized country of Turkey. This fits well with Bourdieu's (1984) observation of France in the time of his research, but the authors note that Bourdieu's status consumption theory, created in a Western society, fails to fully explain the cultural capital of non-Western contemporary societies (Üstüner & Holt, 2010). Indeed, Zhang (2020) argues that consumers in China deliberately and consciously structure their consumption taste in order to create a desired image of themselves and their social class belonging, which contradicts Bourdieu's (1984) assumption that cultural capital and expression of taste are not learned but unconsciously preconditioned. This novel finding might be interpreted as a shift in consumers' practices who now consciously use the display of taste as a tool for self-presentation and social distinction that do not necessarily match their social upbringing and status. This understanding is of key importance for the research aim of the present study.

On the other hand, the concept that upper classes have a "highbrow" taste and lower classes have a "lowbrow" taste as introduced by Bourdieu (1984) has also faced some criticism. For example, Peterson and Kern (1996) showcase that high-status consumers do not fit the description of "highbrow snobs" but have rather omnivorous and eclectic taste, which means - liking both classical and popular culture. The authors argue that demographic shifts, migration, the mobility of social classes, and the rise of mass media have contributed to the mixing of consumers from different social groups and thus have caused the increasing blending of different tastes. Moreover,



they claim that this social shift “from exclusionist snob to inclusionist omnivore can ... be seen as a part of the historical trend toward greater tolerance of those holding different values.” (Peterson & Kern, 1996, p.905). Hence, the heterogeneity of tastes is seen as evidence for the growing openness of social groups to cultural diversity. Other scholars such as Prieur and Savage (2013) support the idea of the fall of highbrow culture and the need to conceptualize the new and complex cultural tastes but criticize the notion of “omnivore” taste based on tolerance, as studies show that “tolerant taste has its limits, when confronted with particular items from popular culture” (Prieur & Savage, 2013, p.256). These findings showcase a small portion of the complex notion of taste within academia and its ever-changing nature, which from time-to-time lead to contradicting theoretical understandings of the topic.

We must note that most of the above-mentioned literature treats the performance of taste as a tool for social distinction and status presentation (Üstüner & Holt, 2010). However, it can also be perceived as a tool for building social networks (Arsel & Bean, 2013; Holt, 1998; Mozgot, 2014; Puetz, 2015). For instance, a study by Puetz (2015), which investigates the impact of taste on social network formation, elaborates on how people sharing similar tastes in consumer goods are likely to become close. As the author argues “people who feel the same way about a cultural object are likelier to become friends ... if they feel strongly about that object, they are likelier to become close friends” (Puetz, 2015, p. 442). Moreover, the study shows that the more heterogeneous the taste of individuals is, the higher their chances of building heterogeneous personal networks (Puetz, 2015). This somewhat aligns with what Holt (1998) finds out about the American elite and how they use consumption for the creation of taste communities and the discovery of fellow members of one’s social class. This perception provides another angle for the interpretation of taste - as a means for social group belonging, instead of social distinction in the sense of reinforcing social hierarchies.

However, in consumer research these two different perspectives are not being separated mostly because Bourdieu himself presents the concept of taste in a way that encompasses both meanings. As he remarks: “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make” (1984, p.6). To simplify this twofold meaning, McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips (2013) differentiate between the notions of



“distinction-between” and “distinction-over”. The authors explain that the former “draws boundaries, creates groups, and fosters solidarity ... and acts to cluster like-minded individuals” (2013, p.139), whereas the latter “claims status for one above others, and sustains hierarchy ... and can raise select individuals to positions of prominence” (2013, p.139). Therefore, taste can be simultaneously viewed as (1) expressing judgment towards the aesthetic preferences of other social groups with the aim of social distinction and (2) the adaptation of one’s preferences in order to fit into a social circle with the goal of group formation (Derbaix & Derbaix, 2019). Most studies ascribe both interpretations to Bourdieu’s (1984) concept.

From a different angle, there is a stream of literature around the notion of taste that does not treat taste in the sense of Bourdieu (1984) as something culturally preconditioned, given, static, or structured but rather as (1) reflexive and changing (Thompson, Henry & Bardhi, 2018), (2) dependent on spaces and places (Skandalis, Banister & Byrom, 2017; Skandalis, Banister & Byrom, 2020) or sees taste as (3) an activity or performance (Hennion, 2001; Hennion, 2004). Thus, research has started to analyze taste in a more pragmatic way (Arsel & Bean, 2018b). For example, Thompson, Henry, and Bardhi (2018) investigate how women in Australia had to change their consumption practices and accordingly – their taste after divorcing their spouses. The authors discover that consumers who have lost their ideological lifestyles become aware of their inability to match their old, habituated consumption preferences with their new life conditions and thus adapt their taste accordingly (Thompson, Henry & Bardhi, 2018). From a different angle, the studies of Skandalis, Banister and Byrom (2017; 2020) have presented a novel understanding of taste as place dependent. The two studies explore how consumers at festivals and concerts are able to build place-dependent identities and to perform and develop their taste in connection to the remembered experiences from these places. Hence, the authors claim that taste is being transformed through the memory of places and experiences (Skandalis, Banister & Byrom, 2017; Skandalis, Banister & Byrom, 2020). And last but not least, to contradict Bourdieu, Hennion’s (2004) idea of taste as an activity introduces the notion of taste as being produced and tentative rather than a mere reflection of reality and one’s social environment. As Hennion explains:



Tasting does not mean signing one's social identity, labeling oneself as fitting into a particular role, observing a rite, or passively reading the properties "contained" in a product as best one can. It is a performance: it acts, engages, transforms and is felt. (Hennion, 2004, p.3)

These different viewpoints touch upon some of the different approaches and understandings that taste researchers have incorporated in their attempt to discover the broad palette of taste preferences of consumers, their formation, consequences, and application. This relatively limited overview of this broad object of study aims at presenting a sketch of the multiplicity of perceptions on what taste is and what it means for consumers. Furthermore, it showcases how the rather constantly evolving notion of taste has led to a lot of contradicting research findings, historically and geographically. As Pomiès, Arsel and Beans simplify it – “taste is ... shaped by a socio-material world which, in turn, shapes the world” (2021, p.2). Thereupon, understanding the different aspects of taste is essential for the comprehension of consumption and society and of utmost relevance for the present research.

2.2.2 Musical Taste

As this research explicitly investigates how consumers present their musical taste, it is essential to review some of the main literature on musical preferences. We note that some of the key studies on taste in general presented above, have been conducted in the specific field of music (Hennion, 2001; Skandalis, Banister & Byrom, 2020; Peterson & Kern, 1996). For example, Hennion's (2001) perception of taste as an activity is widely based on his argument that listening to music live in concerts or recorded over the radio are two different activities. Thus, those experiences play an essential role in shaping the musical taste of consumers. Even Bourdieu claims that “nothing more clearly affirms one's 'class', nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music” (1984, p.18). He postulates that the upper class is dispositioned to appreciate classical music, whereas popular music is more to the liking of lower classes (1984). Even Peterson's and Kern's (1996) criticism of Bourdieu's “highbrow” culture is based on investigating the musical taste of the American elite and their openness to mixing both classical and popular genres. This is later replicated in France by Glévarec and Pinet (2012) who explore the transformation in the judgment of musical taste, which is no longer based on dislikes as in Bourdieu's time but on openness and tolerance. These later studies (Bourdieu, 1984; Glévarec & Pinet, 2012; Peterson & Kern, 1996)



are mostly focused on understanding how different classes judge music and if their musical taste can be determined by their belonging to a particular social class.

There are, however, other studies on the topic of musical taste that are also worthy of mentioning due to their relevance to the topic of the present research. For instance, Savage's (2006) study on the field of music shows that "musical taste is highly divided and contentious, with large numbers of people intensely disliking certain genres of music" (p.1). He further investigates what factors impact the musical taste of consumers and finds that various elements such as class, education, ethnicity and even gender impact one's disposition to like or dislike different genres of music and different music pieces. The research into what shapes and conditions music preferences is further continued. Later, a study by Mozgot (2014) focuses on young people's musical taste and suggests that belonging to a social group has an impact on one's perception of music. Derbaix and Derbaix (2019) investigate how musical taste is shaped and shared within different generations of the family. They find that different social fragments such as one's peers and marketplace media institutions are the most influential determinants of one's musical taste. Moreover, Glévarec, Nowak and Mahut (2020) explore how consumers' age and the cultural times in which different genres of music emerge seem to be factors significantly impacting the musical taste of individuals. The authors also note that the music genres that are culturally developed are likely to become more popularly distributed and therefore more easily accessible by consumers.

This purposeful overview of some of the relevant literature on musical taste emphasizes that the investigation of musical taste has long been at the heart of the literature exploring consumer taste. Although, scholars (Bourdieu, 1984; Peterson & Kern, 1996) have not reached a consensus how the musical taste of high and low social classes truly differs, others have tried to investigate what other factors apart of one's social class belonging might be shaping consumers' taste (Derbaix & Derbaix 2019; Glévarec, Nowak & Mahut, 2020; Mozgot, 2014; Savage, 2006). The familiarization with these different studies and their findings is essential for the present study, as it provides relevant context and theoretical understanding of the notion of musical taste and the factors which seem to shape it.



2.2.3 Musical Taste in the Digital Era

Digital platforms have significantly impacted most everyday practices and have caused the necessity for research to explore this shift and its impact on consumer practices (Kozinets, Patterson & Ashman, 2016; Manovich, 2009; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014; Rokka & Canniford, 2016). In the particular field of music, streaming services have enabled consumers to access and listen to vast amounts of music with minimal limitations. Moreover, these platforms have made it possible for consumers to craft and share their own playlists, through which they can even communicate (Hagen & Lüders, 2017; Rochow, 2010; Volda et al. 2005; Webster, 2020). This creates an opportunity for consumers to develop and use their musical taste in new ways. To that end, Webster (2020) explores how music-streaming services have enabled consumers to use them as tools for social distinction. The author argues that individuals can acquire social status through displaying their musical taste via public playlist curation. This activity can lead these consumers to gain both online and offline social distinction through unveiling their musical and technical ‘expertise’. This study provides a contemporary understanding of how consumers can deploy their taste to pursue social distinction, especially in relation to music and the rise of audio streaming platforms, which makes it essential to the present research.

From the perspective of big data, Prey (2016) argues that for consumer behavior scientists within digital companies, taste has turned into an algorithm based on quantitative data gathered from the platform. Or as Airoidi (2021) further elaborates “digitized consumer tastes are datafied” (p.100) making them easy to trace and predict. This way consumer practices within online platforms leave large amounts of digital traces of their taste, which according to the author require new methods of investigation from consumer researchers (Airoidi, 2021). Although, this progress has generally been praised as something positive for consumers and intriguing for researchers, some scholars have been less enthusiastic about the potential of the digitalization of music and taste and have shed a light on the rather negative aspects of this transformation (Hamilton, 2019; Morris & Powers, 2015; Prey, 2016). Some of these scholars are Morris and Powers (2015), who argue that this shift has led to “musical consumption in which consumers do not own nor fully control discrete musical collections but instead buy into cloud-based libraries, accessible via constant connection to the Internet” (p.117). Their study further claims that the algorithms for personal recommendations based on the liking, saving, and sharing practices of consumers, have the impact



to influence and condition individuals' musical preferences, hence, their taste. The power and potential of music-streaming services to shape and govern consumers' taste through developing personalized recommendations based on big data, has sparked the interest of various studies (Hamilton, 2019; Hrac, Jakob & Hauge, 2013; Prey, 2016; Webster, 2020). The reason for this academic interest lies in the vital role of those platforms in the ongoing debate on consumers' freedom, privacy, and governmentality. No doubt this discussion is of great importance in the era of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2015), and will continue to gain attention from different academic disciplines.

After reviewing some of the literature on musical taste in the digital world, it is evident that a divide exists between studies trying to determine (1) social factors in the construction of individuals' musical taste and (2) the impact of digitalization and datafication on musical preferences. However, a study by Nowak (2016) attempting to pin down when and how the discovery of music takes place, argued that:

The ways through which individuals access and discover music, coupled with the evolution of their life narratives and identities, emphasize the dynamism in their relationship to music. ... The two paradigms of (1) the social milieu of individuals as determining taste and (2) the technological means to access and discover music tend to overestimate the impact of each variable on individuals' actual everyday interactions with, and access to, music. (p.144)

This dynamic relationship that both social and digital factors have with music consumption and the construction of taste, calls into question the need to explore how consumers use their taste in the era of music-streaming services in both social and digital sense. As Nowak (2016) builds on Hennion, "it is essential more than ever to not reduce taste to 'a category in a table'" (Hennion et al., 2000 cited in Nowak, 2016, p.144) but one should rather attempt to grasp its multi-faceted nature in order to gain deeper insight into consumers' music consumption practices.

The review of previous literature dealing with the topic of taste in all its forms and contexts, provides a multi-faceted notion of this concept. This manifold understanding explores taste as a tool for social distinction (McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013; Webster, 2020) or social network formation (Holt, 1998; Puetz, 2015) but also seeks to uncover diverse variables that influence the



formation of consumer preferences (Derbaix & Derbaix, 2019; Glévarec, Nowak & Mahut, 2020; Savage 2006). Furthermore, it aims at providing a glimpse at how consumer taste has changed due to the increasing digitalization of everyday life (McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013; Nowak, 2016; Prey, 2016; Webster, 2020) and how that requires new methods of investigation (Airoldi, 2021). The extensive familiarization with all these various findings and the scholarly conflicting points about this theoretical concept is essential as it provides relevant context for the present study and lays the ground for the investigation of the notion of musical taste and all its fragments.

2.3 Summary of the Literature Review

All in all, the goal of this chapter is to provide a holistic, though not exhaustive, overview of relevant studies regarding both consumer identity and consumer taste. It can be summarized that the former stream of literature has especially emphasized the role of market resources and possessions in consumer identity work (Belk, 1988; Hill, 1991; Hill & Stamey, 1990) as well as the consumers' yearn for social identities (Weinberger & Crockett, 2018) and communal belonging (e.g. Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016; Cova, Kozinets & Schankar, 2007; Muñoz & O'Guinn, 2001). It has further explored how consumers choose to present themselves to others in the online realm (Chen, 2016; Schau & Gilly, 2003). The stream on taste is substantially researched in relation to social status and one's social class belonging (Bourdieu, 1984) but also social network formation (Puetz, 2015). These topics that are at the center of both literature streams have much in common. They explain from different angles how consumers might behave in order to fit in society, be perceived in a certain light and consume to connect with others. Therefore, it is of utmost relevance for the present study to recognize the connection between the two literature streams in its attempt to discover various ways in which consumers might use musical taste for identity performances.



Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

This chapter will expound the main scholars and theories that will serve as a theoretical lens for the analysis of the empirical material of this research. Thus, it will first define the field of Consumer Culture Theory in which the study is positioned in, and further introduce the sociologists Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu whose views on identity, self-representation, taste, and social distinction set the theoretical basis for this study.

3.1 Consumer Culture Theory

The field of Consumer Culture Theory unites a wide range of literature and theoretical viewpoints dealing with consumer research “that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p.868). Scholars within this field aim at investigating the effects of consumer culture on consumer identities, behavior, and relationships as well as consumer practices within the market (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Hereby, they build on consumer research with theories from diverse academic disciplines such as sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, and political science (Arnould & Thompson, 2018). Arnould and Thompson (2005) further mapped the research in the field under four connected dimensions. These are “(1) consumer identity projects, (2) marketplace cultures, (3) the sociohistoric [sic] patterning of consumption, and (4) mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers’ interpretive strategies” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p.871). As mentioned in the literature review, the first dimension is of special importance for this research as it examines how consumers form and represent their identities and the role that the consumption of symbolic market resources plays in this process. Adopting the lens of the research paradigm of CCT will therefore assist us in our pursuit of exploring how consumers use their musical taste to perform identities in the online world.

3.2 Erving Goffman - Stigma, Identity and Self-Representation

Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman represents the first main author that will frame the analysis of this research. He grounds with his illustrative conceptualizations of identity and self-representation our understanding of these concepts. In his opus “*The Presentation of Everyday*



Life” he demonstrates that in human interaction, individuals attempt to control and influence how they are perceived by others (Goffman, 1959). The author argues that humans actively attempt to present themselves in a certain light by changing and adapting several behaviors or appearances to guide the way they are seen by their interaction partners. The author introduces this theory as “Impression Management” and suggests a connection to the realm of theaters as he draws conspicuous parallels between dramaturgical performances and human daily face-to-face interactions. In this way, he underlines that in both the theater sphere, and everyday situations there is a stage and a backstage. While actors in theaters as well as individuals in everyday life, prepare for a specific role in the background, they tend to spotlight merely the best side of themselves during the actual “performance” on stage in front of an audience (Goffman, 1959). He further suggests that in our everyday lives, those roles and performances can be intentionally acted out with the aim of receiving a specific response by one’s counterpart or in order to mark one’s belonging to a group or social status. Moreover, Goffman (1959) claims that there is no such thing as one true identity, but identities merely consist of multiple performances. In sum, all these performances craft a persona that reflects how we want to be perceived by others. Another important notion introduced by Goffman (1959) lies in his understanding of external validation of identities. He argues that it is not sufficient to merely act out targeted performances, but to sustain them, humans need some form of external validation. Therefore, individuals look for audiences that might have the power and credibility to validate their performances.

Goffman (1959) further reflects about the inevitable cases where a performance might be inconsistent with the persona or identity that an individual is trying to present to others. In this case, people might run the risk of “losing their face” - as firstly coined by Goffman (1955) in his article “*On Face work*”. Thereby, this term refers to a positive social value that an individual attempts to claim and sustain by behaving and performing in a specific way in social encounters. According to the author, a possible discrepancy between one’s desired identity that this person is attempting to convey and his or her actual performed identity, might lead to “losing face”. This again leads to a feeling of strong embarrassment (Goffman, 1959).

In his books “*Stigma - Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*”, Goffman explores humans that are seen as “abnormal” and are therefore stigmatized by society (1963). Hereby, he refers to



individuals who show a specific characteristic which is commonly associated with negative stereotypes and consequently experience a lack of social acceptance, possible marginalization and discrimination or a feeling of being ‘less’ human. Those individuals are generally stigmatized in relation to other people in society who are considered to be “normal” and who do not exhibit those attributes. To that end, Goffman (1963) claims that a stigmatization lies in the relationship between the characteristic and the audience. In other words, following the Goffmanesque thought, stigma does not lie in an attribute itself - such as, for instance, a specific skin color or disability, but rather in how it is seen by a specific audience who might consider this characteristic to be “abnormal”. Thus, it follows that a specific characteristic or identity might be stigmatized in one context, but not in another. Goffman further distinguishes between three types of stigma that a person might experience, namely “character defects”, “abominations of the body” and “tribal stigma” (1963). Hereby, especially “character defects” are important for this study as they describe any characteristic or trait related to someone’s personality that might be different to the “normal” and therefore lead to stigmatization. “Abominations of the body” refers to a kind of stigma that is based on negatively connoted characteristics of the human body such as for instance scars, and finally “tribal stigma” includes factors like belonging to a certain race or religion that might provoke external judgment.

Further, Goffman (1963) states that all humans have the potential to be “discreditable”, which indicates that every human possesses some characteristics that when being uncovered might jeopardize their identity, lead to stigmatization, and might make a person feel less “normal”. Individuals whose identity has already been spoiled through the revelation of one of those attributes are – using again Goffman’s term - “discredited”. As a logical consequence to this threat for identities, individuals attempt to eschew being discredited by intentionally controlling and hiding any information that might disrupt or contradict their currently performed identity (Goffman, 1963). However, if these endeavors prove insufficient and a person becomes discredited, he or she will try to change the attribute that led to the situation (Goffman, 1963).

With the present research we aim to apply Goffman’s theorization of identity, self-presentation and stigma to the virtual sphere and use those constructs in order to investigate how consumers



share their musical taste on social media in order to perform identities and to convey a specific image about themselves.

3.3 Pierre Bourdieu - Taste and Social Distinction

Another relevant term which requires a theoretical frame is the concept of taste. When referring to taste, this research will draw on French anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu as he famously used this concept in his classic book *“Distinction – A social critique of the judgment of taste”* (1984). As already presented in the literature review Bourdieu’ theory on taste has been the cornerstone for most studies on this topic and has set the ground for investigating the complex relationship between social milieu and consumers’ aesthetic judgments.

In contrast to the common connotation of the word, which often refers primarily to gustatory taste, some scholars broaden this term significantly referring to ways of how humans appropriate and judge cultural goods such as fashion, architecture, or music (Bourdieu, 1984; Arsel & Bean, 2018a). For instance, Bourdieu investigates the notion of taste in relation to “social distinction”, including social classes, the so-called “capitals” and the “habitus” they possess. These are some of the factors that, according to the sociologist, shape one’s taste and determine how it is expressed. In his book *“Outline of a Theory of Practice”*, Bourdieu (1977) firstly introduces and coins his famous concept “habitus”. According to the author habitus presents the link of routinized behaviors, which arise from the internalization of social structures through socialization. The external influences of one’s social groups then shape or precondition one’s ability “for action and the ways in which they respond and improvise to the demands of a given social situation” (Henry & Caldwell, 2018, p.161). Put simply, habitus as introduced by Bourdieu (1977) explains how the social world is constructed through a range of probabilities and expectations that make individuals more likely to choose particular actions over others. Therefore, it symbolizes the internalization of structures that organize society. This concept is of importance for the present study as it might provide another way for interpretation of Goffman’s understanding of society as inherently having expectations and preconditions for other people, which could help us understand in-depth why consumers might share or hide their musical taste.



Furthermore, in his contribution chapter to the *“Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education”*, Bourdieu (1986) elaborates that the hierarchy of social classes presents “a multidimensional social space within which social groups are positioned in relation to each other and where the boundaries between groups are defined by the volume and forms of capital they possess” (Henry & Caldwell, 2018, p.158). According to Bourdieu (1986) “capital” refers to the resources different individuals own and could use in their competition for social status. For instance, economic capital represents the financial resources one owns and thus how wealthy this individual is. However, social capital is defined as the capacity of one’s social network to introduce them to new social connections and ‘open doors’ in society. Last but certainly not least, cultural capital according to Bourdieu (1986) is shaped by one’s social surroundings especially in their earlier stages of their life, which includes one’s family, education, friend groups and life experiences. In other words, cultural capital is significantly shaped by one’s habitus. This form of capital is significant for the theoretical framework of this study, as it often represents an individual’s ability to play musical instruments, appreciate arts and their sense of manners, which arguably play a vital role in shaping and performing one’s taste and how they judge other people’s preferences.

It must be noted that these different forms of capital could be used as a ‘trading currency’ (Bourdieu, 1986). For instance, an individual could exchange economic capital to attend universities and gain more cultural capital. In the same manner, it is also possible to use cultural capital to gain social capital. For example, when individuals share their expertise in politics, sports, or arts, they could initiate conversations with new acquaintances, who are part of different social groups and thus build new social connections based on similar interests (Henry & Caldwell, 2018). In this sense, the different forms of capital and the expression of taste play a vital role in shaping one’s social circles and their place in society. Therefore, one’s capital and accordingly their knowledge and taste might contribute to identifying potential peers and building social networks.

More precisely, it is in *“Distinction - A social critique of the judgment of taste”* (Bourdieu, 1984) where Bourdieu extends the idea of social distinction to the notions of taste and lifestyles and how they are influenced by a set of elements including for instance education or our socio-economic origin, hence our habitus. He explains that judgment of taste often reflects the hierarchical



structures in society and that one can identify social classes through observing utterances of taste. Indeed, in this book (1984) Bourdieu differentiates between upper and lower classes of the French society by investigating their preferences for cultural goods. He argues that the elite, which possesses more cultural, economic, and social capital is likely to cherish and understand fine arts and classical music in ways that are incomprehensible for lower classes, who only care for what is practical and functional. Moreover, he suggests that taste emerges from our fundamental urge for prestige and status and how individuals indulge in activities of exclusion or domination. Hence, dominant groups are usually successful in legitimizing their own culture and thus position lower classes in inferior positions “through oppositions such as distinguished/vulgar, aesthetic/practical, and pure/impure” (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p.172).

And as “taste is the product of socialization and regardless of your position in the social hierarchy it is impossible to escape its consequences” (Arsel & Bean, 2018a, p.278), the practice of taste is a means of defining symbolic boundaries that determine who is welcomed to a particular social group and who is not. For instance, some symbolic boundaries such as religious affiliations could be official and included in laws, whereas others such as who is allowed to display tattoos and piercings in the workplace can be unwritten (Arsel & Bean, 2018a). However, in both cases violation of these symbolic rules could be a reason for exclusion or discrimination, as the person could be perceived as lacking taste or manners. When violation takes place dominant groups exercise what Bourdieu coins as “symbolic violence” - imposing one meaning as the “legitimate” one. Bourdieu (1984), thus, tries to describe “taste judgements as social weapons of symbolic violence - that reinforce hierarchies” (Arsel & Bean, 2018a, p.278). Put simply, a negative judgment of one’s taste “becomes a form of violence, as it aims to force that person into a position below oneself, not physically but certainly symbolically” (Ulver, 2017, p.284). Therefore, symbolic violence can be used as a tool for the maintenance of social exclusion and distinction. In a different way, this could be interpreted in a similar manner to Goffman’s (1963) definition of stigma, when individuals are being discriminated against due to an attribute that does not fit the dominant group perception of the “normals”. This in the sense of Bourdieu might simply be a higher social class. Combining these perspectives, allows us to better understand the difference between “legitimate” meanings and cultures or dominant groups as Bourdieu (1984) describes



them and “stigmatized” and “discredited” individuals or groups as Goffman (1963) would refer to them.

However, we must note that “*Distinction*” does not provide a formal definition of the concept of taste. This was interpreted by some scholars as a deliberate and strategic choice by Bourdieu (McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013), as he aimed to present a rather broad understanding of taste and its meanings. Indeed, as touched upon in the literature review, he states in his book that taste can be seen both (1) as a way to create social groups of like-minded people who share similar tastes, and (2) as a tool for reinforcing social hierarchies and placing one individual over another in the social ladder (Bourdieu, 1984). Thereupon, this elusiveness and ambiguity of the term in the sense of Bourdieu might be the reason why his work manages to underpin most research regarding taste. This twofold meaning of the concept will allow us to have larger freedom in our perception of the notion along our research process, but it will nonetheless provide us with enough concrete guidance for understanding the nature and character of taste.

3.4 Summary of the Theoretical Framework

The above presented theories and their founders are essential for the analysis of the empirical data of this research, as we aim to investigate how consumers perform their identities through musical taste in the digital world. Goffman’s concepts of selective self-presentation will enable us to understand how and why consumers might be selective in revealing their musical preferences. Additionally, Bourdieu’s concept of taste, how it is shaped and what it says about an individual, will help us interpret how consumers use their musical taste as part of the identity they aim to disclose with others. Furthermore, Goffman's concept of stigma and Bourdieu’ s concept of symbolic violence will enable us to understand why consumers might be anxious or careful with their identity performances and display of taste. The theories of these two scholars will enable us to answer the research question more in depth as they provide different theoretical understandings of the major concepts under investigation. Even more, combining them will help us to comprehend the relationship between taste and identities in a more nuanced and holistic way. Due to this, the notions provided by these scholars in the context of the present study could be complementary instead of exclusive and thus will be used for the analysis of the empirical data.



Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter will outline the methodological approach which will be applied in order to investigate and answer the research question. In this manner, it will firstly expound on the philosophical considerations that underlie the present research. Hereafter, it will elucidate the research design, the ethical considerations as well as the limitations of the selected methods. Finally, it will present the quality criteria of validity, reliability, and generalizability of this study.

4.1 Philosophical Assumptions

Before deciding on an adequate research design, it is of great importance to ponder the philosophical assumptions that underlie this research. This is necessary in order to specify the role of the researcher within the process of data collection and analysis. It further provides a basis for a coherent choice of research methods (Easterby-Smith, Jaspersen, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021). Hereby, the most fundamental philosophical assumption is its ontology, as it deals with the question of how the essence of reality is understood. Thereupon, this present research takes a relativistic viewpoint from the continuum of ontological positions. Following Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) this implies that the researcher assumes the presence of multiple truths and notions about the world and that the understanding of reality and its phenomena hinges on the perspective of the observer, instead of uncovering independent facts.

Those assumptions about reality can not be separated from questions about how knowledge is acquired and consequently how the research and data collection will be conducted. Therefore, the present study takes the position of a social-constructionist and interpretive epistemology suggesting that the world is seen as a construct of mankind and subject to interpretation (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). As this research investigates consumer practices and in specific how consumers selectively use their musical taste as a means for identity performance in the digital realm, it aims at understanding how consumers behave and how they experience their worlds. As, hereby, the subject's feelings play an important role, it comes naturally that the collected data will be contingent upon interpretations and do not represent objective facts.



In coherence with this interpretivist epistemology and the previously explained relativist ontology, this research will deploy qualitative methods for the gathering of its primary data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This implies that this study aims at gaining a deep understanding of the phenomenon by exploring the meanings consumers attach to their musical taste and the motivations for using it for their identity performances, instead of measuring statistical correlations and causality or quantifying data (Bell & Bryman, 2011). In other words, the primary benefit of and reason for a qualitative research design for this study lies in its ability to understand “meaningful relations” (Kvale, 1996, p.11) in the interviewees’ lived world and therefore to understand how consumers experience the link between their musical taste and identity performance.

4.2 Research Design

With those philosophical assumptions and the objective of the research in mind, this subsection will expound on the structure and course of action of this research. It will firstly examine the chosen research approach, the method of data collection and the empirical context. Subsequently, it will provide a rationale for the chosen sampling method which was used to recruit adequate participants and finally describe the process of data collection and analysis.

4.2.1 Research Approach

First, it is essential to define the reasoning approach of this study (Bell & Bryman, 2011). In accordance with the choice of qualitative methods and the theories that serve as a base for the analysis of the data, this research will follow an abductive reasoning which contains several characteristics from both induction and deduction (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2015). Following the definition of those authors, researchers following an abductive approach, on one hand seek to remain open to new insights and theory arising from the collected data as is the case within inductive approaches. On the other hand, as typical for deductive approaches, scholars are shaped by their preconceptions which are based on existing knowledge, theories, and assumptions. However, Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2015) further hold the position that abduction is not a mere mix of those two approaches, but rather adds its unique characteristics. In this way, abduction contains the element of understanding phenomenon in depth by putting its focus on the discovery



of patterns within the data. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2015) additionally suggest that abductive research is closely related to hermeneutics.

For the present research we aim to discover new patterns and arising theories from the empirical data, but simultaneously use the existing theoretical lens of Goffman (1959; 1963) and Bourdieu (1984) for the analysis of the findings. In this way, the course of action clearly reflects an abductive approach. By adopting this means, we aim at applying the lens of previous theories in novel ways and settings and consider possible modifications and novel theoretical understandings as suggested by Thornberg (2012).

4.2.2 Method of Data Collection

With the purpose of investigating the research question in depth, the primary data was collected through language and text, which according to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) represents one possible means for qualitative data collection. Hereby, we conducted qualitative interviews which are conversations that arise around directed questions asked by the interviewer about the topic of interest (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). According to Bell and Bryman (2011), one strength of qualitative interviews lies in their purpose to pay special attention to the perspective of the interviewees instead of merely reflecting the interviewer's own concern. They further enable the researcher to understand underlying personal constructs and motivations for their actions (Kvale, 1983). Therefore, as answering the research question of this paper requires a deep understanding of how consumers understand and frame their personal identity performances in relation to their musical taste, qualitative interviews are especially appropriate. We specifically chose to conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews using an interview guide with preset questions but leaving space for flexibility and spontaneously for upcoming topics during the interview. We purposely decided to maintain this degree of flexibility as it gives space to what the participants perceive as important and relevant as recommended by Bell and Bryman (2011). Since identity performance is a personal topic that might be perceived and experienced differently by every participant, with the choice of semi-structured interviews we aimed to provide enough flexibility to allow the interviewees to talk about the aspect that they personally consider important. In this way, we sought to get a deep insight into the topic.



4.2.3 Empirical Context

In order to investigate consumer culture in the particular case of identity performance through musical taste we chose the music-streaming service Spotify as specific empirical context for this study. According to its own data, the company has 406 million active monthly users worldwide (Spotify, 2022a), making it the most popular audio-streaming platform with 31% share of the global market for digital music consumption (Porter, 2022). However, Spotify's popularity and global reach is not the only factor that qualifies the brand as an appropriate empirical context for this study. It further represents an adequate choice especially due to its unique function called - Spotify Wrapped which provides consumers with an annual, statistical summary of their music consumption (Pau, 2021). The tool discloses the users' favorite artists, songs and genres of the last year and supplies information about how many minutes they have spent listening to music on the platform during the past year. It further classifies the music taste of the user by assigning attributes such as "happy" or "melancholic" to it (Swant, 2019), which are then assigned to a spectrum of six colors that claim to reflect a user's identity and personality traits (Kundu, 2021). Interestingly, no other music-streaming service has so far introduced a similar function (Hicks, 2021), turning Spotify Wrapped into a unique selling point for the company. Recently, this tool has reached worldwide popularity, not only amongst Spotify users but also non-users, due to an update that allows the direct sharing of selected parts of one's Spotify Wrapped results on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or WhatsApp (Hicks, 2021). Hence, as Spotify Wrapped is a function disclosing a large amount of information about one's own musical taste and allowing consumers to share this information with others on diverse social media channels, it will enable us to understand how consumers use this music-streaming service and its sharing functions in the process of identity performances.

4.2.4 Sampling Technique

Before initiating the actual process of data collection, a suitable sample had to be selected. We decided to employ a Purposive Sampling strategy which forms part of non-probability samplings (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). This specific method was chosen since we had a clear perception of the criteria our participants had to fulfill to be able to provide deep insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Therefore, we first established the criteria for selection and then purposely reached out to possible participants who fulfilled those criteria, as is characteristic of a purposive



sampling (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). The benefit of this chosen sampling strategy is that it ensures that the research participants represent an adequate fit to provide deep insights into the research topic (Dudovskiy, 2022). By applying this sampling method, we aimed at minimizing the possibility of including participants who might not have enough touch points with the topic. Since we used Spotify as an empirical context to fathom how consumers perform their identity through musical taste in the online realm, we targeted possible participants who met the following preset criteria. They should 1) actively listen to music, 2) be users of Spotify, 3) be familiar with Spotify Wrapped and 4) actively use social media. Furthermore, we decided to merely include European consumers into our sample, even though the chosen streaming platform operates on a global scale. With this decision we aimed at giving a more targeted focus to the research and at receiving more precise insights into the phenomenon. Besides that, we further decided to choose this context because Spotify is a Swedish company whose largest share of active users are in Europe. According to the shareholder report of the company from the last quarter in 2021 (Spotify, 2022b), 40% of all monthly premium users are located in Europe and 33% of the total Spotify Wrapped engagement as well takes place in Europe. This decision was further underpinned by the fact that mostly Europeans volunteered for interviewees after our public announcement on diverse social media channels. Time constraints and convenience further contributed to this decision.

Besides targeting European consumers, we additionally chose to focus on young consumers. This decision was based on research that has shown that especially for young people music represents an important element of their personality and that it is vital for their identity construction process (Wanjala & Kebaya, 2016). Indeed, the excessive time young people spend consuming music was also emphasized by other researchers who investigated the impact of music preferences on identity and social group formation among the youth (Mozgot, 2014; North & Hargreaves, 1999). As this age group is arguably significantly impacted by music consumption, those studies underpinned our decision to focus on young people in the present research. We further note that the actual age range of young consumers included in this research is 22 to 28.

As we aimed at reaching a wide spectrum of possible participants, we published an announcement with the above-mentioned criteria on our personal Instagram and Facebook accounts. Thereby, we asked people to inform us if they had acquaintances who would fulfill the criteria and might be



willing to participate. Additionally, we posted this announcement on public Facebook groups that are related to Spotify and Facebook groups including international students at Lund University and in Sweden in general (see Appendix B). The public groups related to Spotify had a total number of 112.543 members and the international groups of students in Sweden included a total of 20.839 members at the time of posting. From our personal accounts, according to the Instagram and Facebook Story Insights, the announcement reached another 2113 viewers. In total, from all sources, 67 volunteers reached out or were recommended to us. From those 67 potential participants, 42 fulfilled all preset criteria. We then further focused on selecting young people from Europe from the 42 volunteers in order to stay within the desired focus of the research. However, within this target group we also sought to include the most diverse backgrounds regarding gender, nationality and country of residence into the sample with the aim to increase the validity of the research. We conducted interviews until reaching a point of data saturation in a manner that only negligible new information could be gained through further interviews (Kvale, 1996; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). This saturation was reached after 23 interviews.

4.2.5 Process of Data Collection

Depending on the geographical location of the participants, one part of the interviews was conducted in person, while some interviews took place through online video calls. However, we aimed at conducting as many interviews as possible in person as this allows for a more personal interaction and truthful observation of non-verbal communication (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). For those interviews we selected a room in the Lund University library to create a neutral atmosphere. In order to gain their trust, we informally started the conversation by disclosing some personal information about ourselves. In this way we sought to encourage the participants to open up about themselves in a similar manner. With the big part of the interviewees located outside of Sweden, we conducted online video interviews through Google Meet as this medium allows easy access for the participants and does not require them to download any application. To overcome the reduced personal in-depth communication of online interviews (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021), we allocated an increased amount of time to ‘ice-breaking’ conversation in the beginning.

Each interview lasted between 30-45 minutes including a short briefing in the beginning and debriefing of the interviewees at the end. Both researchers of this study were present in all



interviews. However, one researcher acted as principal interviewer while the other took a background role observing gestures, mimics, and non-verbal behavior of the interviewees. The presence of two researchers can be seen as a benefit as it might evoke a more relaxed and informal situation and thus, cause more sincere answers (Bell & Bryman, 2011). During all interviews, both researchers took field notes including spontaneous, preliminary interpretations as according to Kvale (1996) an “ideal interview is to a large extent interpreted throughout the interview” (p.145). These field notes were essential for the analysis of the data as they included separate interpretations of both researchers before any mutual discussion of the interviews took place.

As explained above, the interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix C), which included topics to be covered during the interview as well as a sequence of possible questions. When compiling the guideline, we purposely avoided the use of academic terms and technical jargon in order to make the questions easily comprehensible for the interviewees (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). After the previously mentioned trust-building conversation in the beginning, the actual interview was initiated with general questions about the participants’ demographic background to get insights into their age, education, occupation, and family background as well as their social surroundings. This was of special importance as we used this information to contextualize our research participants regarding their cultural and social capital, possible expertise, or special access to the music industry, which was later used in the interpretation of their stories. Subsequently, these were followed by questions about their self-image, aspirations, and musical taste. Furthermore, they were asked about their perceptions of other people’s musical preferences and their music consumption in private as well as in social settings. Finally, the interviewees were questioned in depth about their experiences with Spotify Wrapped, their music sharing behavior on social media as well as their reaction towards other people displaying their Spotify Wrapped results or musical preferences on social media.

During the interviews, the main interviewer applied the rhetorical technique of “laddering up” which seeks to reveal underlying reasons for an interviewee’s statement and “laddering down” which aims at encouraging the interviewees to illustrate their assertions with an example (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). The interviewer further employed “probes” to refine responses that needed clarification (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Those techniques were equally applied to



sharpen answers that slightly touched upon other related topics that might help to deepen the general understanding of the phenomenon. During the entire interview process, special attention was paid to a potential improvement and modification of the interview guide in order to reach the deepest insights possible. During the first interviews we noticed that the participants only started to disclose their honest thoughts and underlying motivations for their behavior after a major part of the interview had already elapsed. Therefore, in subsequent interviews we added some light sub-questions in the beginning to encourage them to share this valuable information already in an earlier phase of the conversation. Furthermore, we adapted the formulation of some questions as we noticed that at the outset, several interviewees struggled to grasp the focus of some questions and topics. Finally, we noticed that some interviewees started to talk about useful related topics which initially had not been considered in the interview guide. Consequently, we incorporated those as well into the guideline. The following table provides an overview of the research participants and their demographic background.

Table 1: Overview of research participants

Overview of Conducted Interviews							
#	Participant (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Nationality	Country of residence	Occupation	Musical Preferences
1	Maria	Female	25	German	Belgium	Junior Specialist Monitoring and Knowledge Management	Diverse
2	Linnéa	Female	26	Swedish	Sweden	Postgraduate Student	Pop Music
3	Anna	Female	25	Polish	Bulgaria	Financial Advisory Associate	Rap & Hip Hop
4	Alexander	Male	28	Bulgarian	Germany	Medical Doctor	Techno & Rap
5	Kaya	Female	25	Bulgarian	Bulgaria	Social Media Manager	Pop Music
6	Wilma	Female	24	Swedish	Sweden	Postgraduate Student	Pop Music
7	Davit	Male	27	Armenian	Sweden	Digital Artist	Diverse
8	Sofia	Female	25	Italian	France	Junior Brand Manager	Indie & Pop
9	Liliya	Female	25	Bulgarian	Netherlands	Junior Sustainability Consultant	Pop Music
10	Gabriela	Female	28	Portuguese	Germany	Trainee in Logistics Company	K-Pop
11	Eloise	Female	22	French	Sweden	Postgraduate Student	Indie, French Rap, Brazilian Music
12	Hendrik	Male	23	Dutch	Sweden	DJ	House Music, Dutch Hip Hop
13	Christina	Female	25	Bulgarian	Switzerland	Chef	Pop Music
14	Katharina	Female	24	German	Sweden	Postgraduate Student	German Rap & Hip Hop
15	Daniel	Male	26	Bulgarian	Austria	Digital Marketing Specialist	Diverse
16	Luca	Male	23	Italian	Sweden	Postgraduate Student	Diverse
17	Thomas	Male	26	German	Sweden	Postgraduate Student	Hip Hop & Rap
18	Inga	Female	27	Icelandic	Sweden	Postgraduate Student	Pop Music
19	Simon	Male	24	Swiss	Switzerland	Junior Product Manager	Latin Music & Indie
20	Paulo	Male	25	Brazilian	Portugal	Freelance Project Manager	Diverse
21	Julia	Female	24	Dutch	Sweden	Postgraduate Student	Indie, Pop, Rap
22	Nia	Female	25	UK-Bulgarian	UK	Strategy Consultant	Diverse
23	Agnese	Female	24	Latvia	Norway	Junior Consultant	Diverse



All interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. The observed behaviors and fieldnotes were equally included in those transcriptions and considered for the subsequent analysis of the crafted data.

4.2.6 Process of Data Analysis

For the process of analyzing the crafted data, we applied the recommendations by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) who suggest a tripartite approach including the steps of *sorting*, *reducing*, and *arguing*.

As a first step, *sorting* deals with structuring the large variety of the collected data (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). According to those authors this first task requires the researcher to get “intimate” with the crafted material by reading through it multiple times. After familiarizing ourselves with the crafted data, we initiated the process of coding to get an overview over the material and to notice first patterns (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Hereby, we made use of the online data analysis tool ‘Atlas.ti’ which assisted us to keep an overview of the material and repeating codes. We first started with “initial coding”, which according to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) requires the researcher to stay close to the actual words and expressions of the interviewees. In a second iteration, we used “focused coding” by assigning more abstract and academic terms to the assertions of the participants. For instance, the statement “... I can relate to that! Maybe we can become friends ...” made by one of our interview participants, was initially coded as ‘recognition of potential peers’. In the subsequent step of focused coding, this initial code was added to the more abstract term “social network formation” that finally became a subcode in the overall theme “social identification”. Furthermore, as suggested by Ryan and Bernard (2003), during the coding process we paid special attention to “indigenous categories” which pertain to noticeable and meaningful expressions used by the interviewees to describe their opinion on the topic. Hence, instead of replacing them with abstract terms, we marked them as specifically interesting. As further recommended by those authors, we additionally took subliminal emotions and behaviors of the interviewees into account, which we had previously included in the transcripts. Hereafter, we evaluated all final codes for repetitions and recurring patterns and grouped them under larger thematic headings.



Subsequently, we initiated the process of *reducing* the data which refers to the selection of the themes that will be presented in the final research paper (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Following those authors, the first step lies in the realization of “categorical reduction”. In doing so, we ensured to not merely choose the most frequently used themes. We rather selected the most novel categories that might be able to provide new and interesting insights into the phenomenon. The second step of the process of reducing lies in the so-called “illustrative reduction” (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Within this process, we selected empirical excerpts out of the chosen categories that particularly well illustrate the chosen themes and theory.

Finally, the last step of *arguing* deals with “the problem of authority” (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.143) as the researcher must decide how to use their findings in relation to previous literature and how to argue for those. No matter if the findings support or criticize previous research and if they provide a ground-breaking discovery or small but relevant extension of a theory, they should be presented in an argumentative manner that turns empirical evidence into theoretical concepts (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Therefore, we followed the suggested structure for building strong arguments that include strong inferences between analytical points and empirical evidence. In this way, as inferred by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), we aimed to “think with data” (p.158) in order to build a strong reasoning for our theoretical findings.

4.3 Reflection on Ethical Considerations

When conducting any kind of research, it should be of highest priority to adhere to basic ethical principles in order to avoid any kind of harm (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Therefore, Bell and Bryman (2007) provide a guideline which includes ten ethical principles aiming at the protection of the people involved in the research and the entire research community. During the entire research process, we paid special attention to comply with those. To protect the interview participants, we applied various measures. As the topic of interest touches upon a rather personal sphere that includes one’s own identity and taste, we made sure to roughly inform the participants in advance that the interview would pertain to personality traits and behaviors. In this way, we pursued the goal that the participants would not feel uncomfortable during the interviews and would have the chance to decide not to participate. Nevertheless, we agreed not to reveal further information about the subject of identity performances prior to the interviews, as we considered



that this information could have led to possible bias in the answers of the participants if they were aware of the underlying topic of interest. Nonetheless, by informing them about the personal character of the interview, we sought to comply with research ethics by protecting their dignity and ensuring an informed consent (see Appendix D) of the participants as suggested by Bell and Bryman (2007). Further following those key principles, we assured full anonymity to the participants. In order to do so, we replaced their real names with pseudonyms and deleted other identifying details. We further asked in advance for their consent to record the interviews and store their data in a protected, offline file for one year after submitting the thesis. Moreover, we assured them that the data would be destroyed after the expiry of this time. After the interviews were completed, we debriefed the participants by informing them in more detail about the purpose of the study and its relation to identity performances. In this way we aimed to ensure honesty and transparency about the aim of the present study to protect the integrity of the research (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Afterwards, we once again ensured that the interviewees were still willing to give their consent for the use of the collected data for the purpose of the present research. Additionally, all data was collected and recorded under the supervision of both researchers with the goal of avoiding errors or misleading reporting. As mentioned above, all these measures were taken to prevent any possible unethical behavior during the conduct of this study both in regard to the interview participants and the integrity of the research itself (Bell & Bryman, 2007).

4.4 Limitations of the Selected Methods

As all research, the present study inevitably suffers from some methodological limitations. A concrete limitation of qualitative interviews, according to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) regards the bias of the researchers when asking questions and interpreting answers, as they might impose their own perceptions onto the interviewees. Therefore, we purposefully used open-ended interview questions and probes and aimed at preventing the use of leading questions that might have impacted the answers of the interview participants. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the possibility that some participants might have replied to certain questions in a biased way due to willingness to hyperbole or depict themselves in a positive light (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Despite the shortcomings of this qualitative method, we argue that it represents the most adequate method for the present research and its goal of understanding the meanings and perceptions consumers attach to their experiences.



Another specific limitation of the present study regards the use of mediated interviews which refer to a form of interviews that are conducted remotely via a medium such as phones or computers (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Hereby, the interviews which were conducted via Google Meet fall into this category. It is noticeable that, despite putting a significant effort in overcoming the issue of personal in-depth communication during the online interviews (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021), this specific method of data collection still might include certain constraints. For instance, mediated conversations might have prevented us from noticing some mimics or movements of the participants or the overall atmosphere, which potentially could have been relevant for the assessment of the interviewee's mood or reactions. However, we are convinced that the advantages of this method that facilitate a more diverse sample through the inclusion of participants who live in other locations by far outweigh the explained disadvantages.

Moreover, we acknowledge that the sample includes mostly European citizens and even though one participant is not born in Europe, he currently lives in Europe as well. Therefore, this study can only make claims about the consumer practices in the field of digital musical consumption of Europeans, which might differ from the consumer behavior on other continents. Furthermore, even though we sought to include participants with diverse educational and familiar backgrounds, we acknowledge that the actual sample predominantly includes participants who are highly educated, thus they possess "high cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1984), and are mainly cosmopolitan as most of them do not live in the countries they were born in. Additionally, another limitation might be witnessed in the merely narrow age spectrum of the participants in the sample ranging from 22-28. Although we deliberately chose young people, as explained above, we acknowledge that a study with participants from different ages or research particularly focusing on another age group, might yield different results. Finally, we must note that the sample includes slightly more female than male participants, which could potentially have an impact on the findings, as the different genders might perform their identities in different manners. In sum, we acknowledge that, as our qualitative study is solely focused on subjective consumers' experiences and perceptions, a different sample including other consumers could potentially lead to significantly divergent conclusions.



All in all, we argue that we sought to reduce the above-mentioned limitations to a minimum. Moreover, we aimed at providing full transparency and reflexivity about those possible shortcomings and took them into consideration during the data collection, the interpretation of the findings and when drawing conclusions.

4.5 Validity, Reliability and Generalizability

Throughout the entire research process, it was of utmost priority to achieve and maintain a high standard of academic quality. This section will therefore scrutinize the main characteristics of quality and credibility of this research which according to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) are reflected by its *validity*, *reliability*, and *generalizability*.

Within social constructionist research, the concept of *validity* primarily refers to the concern whether a study incorporates sufficiently diverse opinions and positions (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Hereby, it is assumed that an observation demonstrates a higher degree of credibility if made from several angles. In this manner, this quality feature aims at avoiding a one-sided and hence biased view of a phenomenon (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). To meet this criterion, we aspired to include a high degree of diversity in our sample. Hence, from the multiple prospects reaching out to us after the publications of the announcement on several social media channels, we proceeded to select the most versatile sample regarding cultural background, gender, age, and occupation (see table 1). In this manner we sought to include as many different perspectives as possible and achieve an utmost diverse and credible observation of the phenomenon.

The second quality feature introduced by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) is *reliability*. As stated by those authors, from a constructionist viewpoint reliability assesses whether another researcher would make congruent observations. Nevertheless, they admit that this is difficult to achieve as in contrast to quantitative research, qualitative findings depend on personal interpretations. Therefore, reliability in social constructionist studies can especially be guaranteed through the provision of full transparency about how the data was crafted, analyzed, and interpreted (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Hence, to conduct reliable research, we paid particular diligence to keep detailed records of the research procedure during the entire process. We further aimed at providing



full transparency about our data collection and analysis in this methodology chapter and presented the interview guide in the appendix.

In this way, we sought to make sure to provide a detailed description of the entire process in order to lay the base for possibly similar observations through other researchers, hence fulfilling the quality criteria of *reliability*. Nevertheless, as mentioned above it is essential to note that the findings depend to a certain extent on personal interpretations of the researchers. Thus, it is necessary to acknowledge that other researchers might interpret the observations in a different way and come to divergent conclusions as they might take a different perspective. However, this fact does not detract from reliability as social constructionist research acknowledges and even enhances the existence of multiple truths and multiple valid perspectives (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021; Kvale, 1994). As long as the researchers do not lapse into biased subjectivity but adopt different kaleidoscopic perspectives, their possibly diverse interpretations might even contribute to a richer understanding of the phenomenon (Kvale, 1994).

The final consideration refers to the *generalizability* of the study. In contrast to positivist research, the generalizability of the present study is not a statistical one, therefore, it does not aim at drawing conclusions from the researched sample to the entire population or larger social groups (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Due to the social-constructionist approach of the present research, its generalizability evaluates whether inferences can be drawn from the observation to other settings outside of the one being investigated (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Hence, this characteristic of the present research regards its potential ability to be transferred to other consumption practices and phenomena. For instance, our theoretical understandings might be applicable to other consumer tendencies within the digital world, such as self-presentation through the sharing of photos, texts, or other forms of content. Moreover, it can be used for the further investigation of the impact of other forms of taste in the online context, such as taste in food, clothing, or others. The findings of this study which are made within a European context might also potentially be applied to other Western contexts. Therefore, although it cannot be claimed that the findings of this research explain the consumer practices of all users of music-streaming services worldwide, it contributes by providing in-depth understanding of the specific case as well as theoretical understandings that can potentially be transferable to other settings.



Chapter 5: Findings

This chapter will outline the main findings that were distilled from the empirical data. It will hereby make use of the theoretical lens presented in the theoretical framework. From the several categories that were identified in the process of data analysis, three main themes were chosen which seem to provide the deepest and most novel insights into the matter. These categories depict three different ways in which consumers perform identities through musical taste in the online world. They are enabled by music-streaming services that provide the necessary functions and hence the required market resources.

The three identified pathways illustrate that 1) consumers use the sharing functions provided by Spotify to express and validate their taste and personal identities, 2) they also use those market resources to perform either collective or expert identities and hence to claim a specific social position and last 3) consumers make targeted use of those functions to perform socially desirable identities in order to avoid stigmatization and symbolic violence. These three answers to the research question are presented in the following.

5.1 Use of Market Resources for Self-Expression & Identity Validation

The first theme that arose from the empirical data regarded the importance participants ascribed to their musical taste, how they display it in the digital world and what role the market plays in this process. First, we found that consumers consider their musical taste to be representative of their identities and thus use market resources to express those in the online sphere. Second and perhaps even more intriguing, we observed that the market role in the case of music-streaming services goes beyond the typical function of merely providing consumers with symbolic resources for their identity performances but has additionally turned into a provider of validation legitimizing those performances.

5.1.2 Let me show you who I am: Self-Expression through Musical Taste

During the interviews, it became evident that most interviewees perceived their musical taste as a reflection of who they are and how they feel. Due to this, they used the online display of their



musical taste as a means of self-expression. This process of showing one's personality and emotions through music took place through Spotify's sharing functions. These functions allowed consumers to directly share their musical preferences with online audiences on social media platforms, which then enabled their online identity performances. This was perhaps most accurately manifested in Linnéa's explanation of why she uses these functions to share music on her social media profiles:

I do share songs on social media a lot! I think your music taste is a second portrayal of who you are because it shows parts of your personality. Like, if you are shy or rebellious or maybe even a feminist, you know. So, I would say the songs present a lot of who I am and who I wanna be, like - strong, independent, stubborn. It's fun [to share].

Linnéa's statement showcases that consumers might use the option to share music online to disclose parts of their personalities. A similar reason for sharing music that was discovered during the interviews, lies in consumers' intention to disclose their musical preferences as a means to express their current moods and feelings. This was manifested in Luca's story:

I checked Anderson Paak's music and I was like "Wow, it's amazing!". And then a song came up [on Spotify] and it was "Celebrate". And it was really, really nice! I like everything to be fair from this [song] - [the] music, the song itself, ... the lyrics. And usually, you can choose the part of the lyrics you want to share [in the Instagram story]. And so I think I picked a specific part and just communicated what I was trying to say. I think it was just happiness and joy.

This wish to express one's moods and emotions through music was even more precisely noticeable in Paulo's answer to the question of why he uses the sharing options of Spotify:

For me, this specific action to decide to share a song on social media, I think, will be more based on the theme of my life or the mood of the day. So, for example, if it has been a tough day or a tough week, I try to share something about overcoming obstacles because it will be connected with my mood and experience of the week. So, I would choose to share this song mainly based on its message. I would say that this kind of consideration that I do before I post, is based on the fact that I'm trying to say a little bit about myself and how I am feeling at this specific time.



All three excerpts showcase that musical taste appears to be closely linked to someone's identity. It seems to have the power of acting as a mirror of the soul, reflecting important parts of one's personality and emotional state. Accordingly, Spotify's sharing functions enable consumers to communicate, express, and perform their taste and thus their identities in the digital world. Therefore, in more CCT terms, it appears that Spotify and hence, the market, provides the required symbolic resources for identity performances and the construct of consumers' digital image.

5.1.2 I told you so: Validation of Identity Performances

The market's role of providing consumers with symbolic resources for their identity performances is not a new understanding in terms of Consumer Culture Theory. However, a rather novel part of our findings showcases that the market has taken an even bigger role in consumer identity projects. We found that Spotify has turned into a provider of an official "validation" in the sense of Goffman (1959) of consumers' taste and identity. This became evident in the testimonies of several participants who used their Spotify Wrapped result as a reliable confirmation of their music consumption and therefore their musical taste. It seemed that some participants enjoyed this 'tangible' confirmation provided by Spotify as it officially legitimized their taste. For instance, Simon shared the following about his reaction when receiving his Spotify Wrapped results:

I really like Spotify Wrapped because it summarizes your whole music year. So, I mean, you kind of already know what you have listened to during the year but I feel that this tool gives you a more detailed picture and kind of confirms in numbers what you already knew. I think it is also cool that they tell you if you are for example among the 3% of the Top listeners of a specific artist. So, I feel that this is just very exciting to see.

According to Simon, his result "confirms in numbers" what he already expected, making his musical consumption habits more tangible and official. In a similar way, Sofia was also excited to receive an official confirmation of her musical taste:

I know that Spotify last year told me that my taste in music is "thoughtful and deep" ... and I remember it because I absolutely agreed with it and I felt like I was lacking the word to describe it or summarize it but Spotify gave it to me and I was feeling like "YEAH, RIGHT?". Like finding out something you were right about all along! It just confirmed my expectations.



It appears that many participants were proud of their results and thus of their taste. This feeling was mostly present when their results matched their own perception of their musical preferences. Moreover, some participants attested a similar positive feeling when their results were congruent with the image their friends had of them. Julia, for instance, shared her feelings when receiving and sharing parts of her Spotify Wrapped results:

I was proud [to share the Spotify Wrapped results] because maybe it finally kind of shows that I have a genre that I can identify myself with and it reassures me that this is my genre, that that's kind of who I am, musically wise ... And also, it was nice to see how my friends reacted. So when I shared, for example, my Top Artist last year, which was Pink Panthers who became famous through Tik Tok, my friends were like “Ah, that’s pretty clear, that’s evident!” Like it was no surprise for them. So, that's funny that their image about me actually was confirmed!

These empirical excerpts demonstrate that apparently, receiving an official brand certificate gives legitimacy to consumers’ musical taste. Hence, many interviewees enjoyed sharing this data-based validation as it enabled them to legitimize the identities they perform through musical taste and the image they want their peers to have of them. Viewed from a Goffmanesque lens (1959), this demonstrates the consumers’ need for “validation” of their identity performances from their audiences. The somewhat novel finding here, however, is that apparently the market is not merely the provider of symbolic market resources, but it has further turned into an official provider of this validation that consumers use as a proof to legitimize their performances.

In contrast, it also appears that a few consumers were not satisfied with the official certificate Spotify provided them with. For them, the music they listened to the most, somehow did not fit their own image of what their musical taste actually was. Due to this, they did not see their personalities accurately reflected in their Spotify Wrapped results. Therefore, they did not use this market validation to perform their identities. This could be witnessed in Christina’s statement when explaining why she did not share her annual Spotify sum-up with others:

Because I mean the songs that I got in my Top Songs are not the songs that I see myself in. I don’t see how they reflect who I am but those were the songs I was listening to the most last year. But



yeah, it wasn't what I was expecting. So, what I mean is that it definitely did not match my own image of my music taste but rather some songs that were stuck in my head and that would definitely remind me of the time that passed. Although they are not songs that I would connect with myself or define my music taste [by] but maybe [they reflect] my experiences last year.

Similar to Christina, Nia noted that she also does not believe that the music she listens to the most, accurately represents her and her musical taste. Therefore, she also chose not to share her results with other people:

I know some people share it, some people don't share it. Sometimes I look at it and I think "You know what? It doesn't represent my actual taste in music". If people saw this, they would get a completely different understanding of what kind of music I actually like and what kind of music I actually listen to. So, for example, I don't share it because I don't know. For example, my number one song was WAP by Cardi B or Nicki Minaj. I don't know ... I was like "Okay, this says that I'm very uncultured for sure". So, you know, sometimes, I don't think it [Spotify Wrapped] is a great representation [of one's musical taste] just because of the quantity.

For Nia, disclosing parts of her taste that might make her look as having "low cultural capital" in Bourdieu's (1984) terms, was unacceptable as it contradicted her own image of herself. As evident from both excerpts, attributes that did not match consumers' perceptions of themselves or their desired identity, were kept hidden. In a similar manner to Christina, many participants further used the term "embarrassing" to describe their feelings when Spotify Wrapped showed them a music preference or habit that they did not believe to have. Some even decided not to believe those results at all. From Goffman's (1959) point of view, this feeling can be interpreted as a human reaction towards a discrepancy between our desired self and our actual role performances in everyday life. In these cases, the official market "validation" provided by Spotify Wrapped turned into a way to "discredit" those people, as it reveals information that might be considered to be "abnormal" by others and therefore jeopardizes their identities. Hence, it seems that the consumers who receive those misaligned results, do not just run the mere risk of being "discreditable" but they feel embarrassed because they have already lived a certain degree of discreditation by the market. The only measures that remain for these consumers is to eschew that others will find out about it. Hence, they decide not to disclose those discrediting results with others.



In sum, from this first theme, we can identify the first way in which consumers perform their identities through musical taste. Most of our research participants see their musical taste as a profound representation of their identities. Due to this, they use Spotify's sharing functions to display musical taste and thus communicate who they are to their online social circles. Furthermore, these consumers have started to use the brand summary of their music consumption as certificates to validate and legitimize their musical taste for themselves and for others. This new role of the market supports consumers in their pursuit of external validation from their audiences regarding their identity performances. However, in the cases when there is a misalignment between the received market validation and one's desired identity, consumers often decide not to share it with others.

5.3 Use of Market Resources to Define Social Positions

The second intriguing theme that emerged during the analysis concerned consumers' social position. It became evident that the display of musical taste enabled by music-streaming services does not only allow consumers to perform and validate their personal identities but also helps them to perform either collective or expert identities. Hence, it allows them to achieve 1) social identification by helping them recognize potential peers or 2) social distinction in the sense of reinforcing hierarchies and social status. Those will be explored in the following subsections.

5.3.1 Where do I belong: Social Identification

According to almost all interviewees, the Spotify functions enabling consumers to display their taste, allowed them to reciprocally identify other people who have similar preferences in music and hence potentially similar personality traits. The participants stated that they used similarity in musical taste as an opportunity to reach out and discuss music with unknown people. Even more, the display of musical taste appears to not solely be used as a conversation starter in the digital world but also as a tool to 'decode' other people's identities. This became noticeable from the answers of some of the interview participants, who explained how they react to other people sharing either songs or their Spotify Wrapped results on social media. For instance, Nia claimed:

It [seeing someone share songs on social media] might start a conversation. I would be like – “Oh my God! They listen to that as well!”. I'll reply to the story and be like – “Oh, by the way, I'm so



obsessed with that. Did you hear they have a concert? We can go together!” or something like it. It really opens the door for conversation with that person, I would say or really makes me like them. I automatically like them more. I appreciate them more if they like the same music.

Nia’s statement showcases that the display of musical preferences can enable consumers to reach out to each other and initiate conversations that could potentially lead to the formation of new social connections. Therefore, we can interpret the online sharing of musical taste as a ‘match-maker’ function for people. This became also evident in the way Inga explained how she reacted to the musical stories of other people on social media:

If it’s a song [that someone shared] that I know and I love myself, I get really impressed and I think “Nice!” and “Cool!”. Maybe it’s a person I don’t really know that well and they’re sharing a song and I’m like “Oh nice, I can relate to that!”. Maybe we can become friends or something.

This statement illustrates that consumers use the display of musical taste as a tool to identify like-minded people that could potentially become their friends. To do that, participants appeared to decode other people’s personalities based on what songs they share. This was perhaps most precisely manifested in Paulo’s story:

I felt more connected with the person [who shared the same songs]. Like, maybe we have similar personality traits. I could see in this person a small personality trait that can fit with my personality. So, if it was not a person too close to me, this gave me a reason to be more open to this person and to try to create more connections with her or with him. So, I felt closer to them.

Those excerpts demonstrate how the display of musical taste in the digital world enables consumers to reach out to new people and form new social connections based on their similar preferences. To some extent this matches Bourdieu’s idea (1984) that taste helps people to identify their social groups. In this sense, the display of cultural capital in regard to music has the potential to initiate conversations and thus, bring like-minded people together in new social circles. In this sense, the presentation of musical taste through online sharing functions turns into an opportunity for consumers to perform collective identities in the digital world by identifying their social belonging.



However, social identification based on musical taste also appears to have its disadvantages. We observed that once consumers have built relationships with like-minded people based on their shared interests, they might run the risk of becoming ‘stuck’ within the identity that connected them in the first place. For instance, some participants shared the experience that after building a friendship based on similar Spotify Wrapped results, it became difficult for them to reveal new musical preferences that would not match this image. Apparently, consumers felt that revealing different or contradicting parts of their musical taste, could potentially ruin the image their new peers have of them. This became clearly manifested in Anna’s story:

I have one colleague that always sends me very niche, drill UK Rap, like, 60,000 views or whatever. And he's the only one. I'm the only other person in the office that listens to this type of music. And when he found out [through Spotify Wrapped], he got super excited and now he's sending me at least three songs every day. And for example, in front of him, I wouldn't, you know, send him a song of The Weeknd that I am listening to. I only sent him the best of what he likes, you know.

In this manner, Simon expressed a similar feeling when explaining why he was hesitant to share his Spotify Wrapped results on social media:

I was not sure if I wanted to share my Spotify Wrapped. I don't know. I've been hanging with my new university friends that I had met that year and we connected over Mac Miller. We are all big Mac Miller fans. And yeah my results included mostly indie music like Bon Iver and The National, which is super different. You know? So, I didn't feel comfortable showing them that.

Those examples showcase how the market resources that enable consumers to share their musical taste with others can help people build social connections, but this display can also put consumers into a position, where they feel uncomfortable revealing preferences outside of the ones that made other people connect with them. Therefore, they hide parts of their taste that do not fit the identity they perform in front of their new peers. This could also be interpreted in a similar way to Goffman’s (1963) concept of “spoiled identity”. Some consumers, in their attempt to not spoil their collective identity that others expect them to perform, end up hiding parts of themselves.



5.3.2 Leading the pack: Social Distinction

While most interviewees shared their musical taste to perform collective identities to discover new peers, others displayed their musical preferences to gain social status by presenting themselves as an expert in the field. This opportunity for consumers to perform an identity of an expert arose as a lot of other consumers started to use people's musical posts and their Spotify Wrapped results as a source for music discoveries. This pursuit for musical inspiration was well reflected in Linnéa's statement regarding the shared Spotify Wrapped results of other people:

Usually, I often screenshot them [others' Spotify Wrapped results]. I love getting new inspiration. I think that goes hand in hand with, like, I want to reinvent myself and expand my music so then I try to see what other people listen to.

Additionally, even Thomas, who was not always fond of the hype around sharing music online, as the quantity of shared musical content sometimes became overwhelming, admitted that he happens to use these occasions to discover new songs or artists. He reflected about sharing songs on Instagram stories as follows:

Yeah, as I said sometimes, I think it's annoying [sharing songs on Instagram stories] but then on the other side, I also found cool songs due to that, because I was clicking on it and I said "Oh, interesting! Let's see who that artist is". And then I actually found an interesting artist, which I like to listen to.

It becomes noticeable from these excerpts that the online display of musical preferences and taste has apparently turned into a popular way to discover music in the digital world. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that other consumers seize the opportunity to take on the role of musical experts and provide others with recommendations. These consumers strive to become known for their explicit knowledge of and taste in music. Performing an identity of an expert accordingly contributes to their social status. This is well reflected in Nia's explanation of why she shares music online and how she chooses what to share:



It has to be something that is not very commercial. Something that is either very new, so it literally came out on the day, and I'm really excited just to let other people know that it's already out there and that I'm really up to date with it. So you really share things because you want people to think certain things of you, right? Not just because you share them for hanging out free goods on the market. I want people to think that I know artists that they don't know, so they can come to me for music, and they can find out new music from me. And so, when I share something, it will be something rare that other people wouldn't know, that is not a huge name. It would say that I am good at finding new music and the song should be something good that would make people think – "Oh my God, this is so good!".

Nia's statement illustrates that some consumers deliberately share music online to perform an expert identity. Arguably, this performance enables them to gain respect from others and craft an image of a specialist amongst their online audiences. This could be regarded as another interpretation of Bourdieu's theory of social distinction (1984). In this sense, the consumers who want to be the experts contribute to the reinforcement of social hierarchies in the digital world as they present their "high cultural capital" through the display of their rich knowledge of music. This, accordingly, elevates them into a position of higher social status.

In conclusion, this theme contributes to the further understanding of the research question by representing the second way in which consumers perform identities through musical taste in the online world. It helps us to comprehend the display of musical taste through the provided market resources as a tool for social identification because it enables consumers to identify potential peers and thus to perform collective identities. Nevertheless, this might also have its downsides, as it seems to lock consumers in a particular identity performance. Seen from another angle, this second theme also allows us to grasp the display of musical knowledge as enabling the performance of an expert identity, which accordingly leads to the reinforcement of social hierarchies. Both of these practices could be understood as different forms of identity performances consumers deploy to determine their position in society.

5.3 Use of Market Resources to Avoid Social Exclusion

The final theme that emerged from the data regarded consumers' cautious use of Spotify's sharing functions to avoid social exclusion based on taste. It became evident that many research



participants used those functions to share only fragments of their musical taste and identities in an attempt to avoid stigmatization and symbolic violence. Moreover, this fear of being stigmatized or unfit for social norms, made some interviewees even adapt their music consumption practices on those platforms. Those two practices will be presented in the following.

5.3.1 Don't judge me: Avoidance of Stigmatization and Symbolic Violence

It became evident that many participants were trying to actively perform an identity that would make them be liked and accepted by their peers. In order to achieve this, they admitted that they were only sharing fragments of their musical taste and their Spotify Wrapped results that would be perceived as “cool” by society. The goal of being perceived as “cool” was persistent in the narratives of most of the interviews. Spotify made this fragmented presentation possible by providing the option to share only parts of those results on social media. However, this urge to be “cool” seemed to be driven by a fear of being judged. Therefore, we observed that a lot of consumer behavior in regard to sharing musical taste was significantly preconditioned by a conscious wish to avoid mocking and discrimination. The fear of being judged or excluded in some form by other people, was present in Katharina's explanation of why she plays different kinds of music when she is alone and when she is with friends:

There is definitely a huge difference because when I'm on my own I mainly listen to K-Pop. I can listen to it every day, all day long! But since I'm a bit ashamed of that, I would never listen to that when I'm around other people, unless I feel like really, really, really close with those people and just when they already know that, I also listen to that kind of music! So, usually that's not the first thing I tell people.

Interviewees like Katharina seemed to be conscious and highly aware of the chance of being judged by others based on their musical taste. This awareness was also manifested in Julia's statement:

I am definitely very conscious of the fact that people will probably judge me based on that [the shared music]. Like every time I post a song on Instagram, not just in relation to Spotify Wrapped, I'm very conscious that I think this song might define me as a person and people might look at me differently based on the song. Like, for example, if I would post a hardcore Grime Rap on my story,



people would be like “What?! What?! Do you listen to Grime?” and maybe it’s surprising to some people and to other people it’s off-putting and they’re like “What? Why is she listening to that and to those lyrics?”. So yeah I’m very, very conscious of that.

Those quotes clearly illustrate that consumers are highly conscious in their thought process of what musical preferences they should share in the digital world and how those could be perceived by others. And due to this, consumers often experience fear and anxiety when revealing parts of their musical taste. Furthermore, other research participants expressed that they would not disclose all parts of their musical taste online, not because they were ashamed of these attributes of their identities but rather because they consciously wanted to avoid being judged based on them. Therefore, they only selectively displayed fragments of their musical taste in an attempt to prevent the possibility of being belittled by their audiences. This is manifested in Sofia’s explanation of why she decided not to share all of her Spotify Wrapped results on social media:

I mean I wasn’t willing to disclose that I am in the Top 1% of Taylor Swift [listeners] not because I was embarrassed but [because] some people actually would have tried to make me feel that way. Or would have judged me if I shared it just because they don’t like her and would assume that people who listen to her are too basic and lame.

Sofia’s assertion showcases that her choice not to reveal particular fragments of her musical preferences that could be perceived as not “cool” is a rather conscious decision aiming to prevent judgment. Seen from Goffman’s (1963) point of view, those unpopular parts of someone’s musical taste could be interpreted as “character defects” that might lead to “stigma” as someone’s musical taste seems to be closely connected to his or her personality. In this way, consumers might fear becoming stigmatized when others discover parts of their musical taste that are not considered to be “cool”. This practice could further be understood as an attempt to avoid “symbolic violence” as Bourdieu (1984) would rather describe it. Avoiding confrontation in the online world and not giving others the ground to make negative judgements about their musical taste, appears to be a deliberate choice some consumers make in their attempt to avoid potential symbolic violence from their online audiences.



To sum up, strikingly almost all interviewees attempted to create a “cool” image of themselves by performing likable identities. Accordingly, they seemed to experience a fear of being judged or stigmatized. Therefore, they selectively and consciously chose which fragments of their musical taste to disclose in order to avoid being mocked. The market’s role in those cautious identity performances was to enable this selective self- presentation.

5.3.2 Can I sit with you?: Adherence to Social Norms

Not only did the participants actively choose which fragments of their musical taste to reveal or to hide, but sometimes the wish to craft a desired image of themselves and their fear of getting judged even went further. The online display of musical taste and Spotify’s validation of it caused consumers to compare their results. Due to this, some consumers felt pressure to conform to unwritten social norms that dictate what kind of musical taste is desirable and what is not. This was particularly well illustrated through the following statement of Simon where he reflected on his reaction towards his Spotify Wrapped results that did not match the image he aimed to portray in front of others:

I remember an awkward situation when the last Spotify Wrapped came out. So, I was in a zoom meeting with some friends when one friend said “Guys, Spotify Wrapped is out”. So, we all checked it out together on Zoom. And then there are those attributes that Spotify assigns to you, something like your music taste is “happy” or “bold” or whatever. All my friends received those, in my opinion, positive attributes, but mine said “melancholic” and “violet” which describe very emotional listeners. So, I was super surprised by it because I did not feel identified at all. And when I heard that all my friends got the attribute “happy”, I said mine was also happy. I don’t know why I did this in this situation but probably I just felt a pressure and wanted to be cool somehow. And I really did not want them to think that I am a sad person, you know.

Simon’s reflection showcases that consumers in some cases might even lie about their Spotify Wrapped results when they feel that the results do not truly reflect who they are and how they want to be perceived by others. Therefore, they decide to perform an identity that might position them in a better light and avoid possible jeopardy of their image or belonging to a certain social group. This is also well-reflected in Anna’s explanation of why she was boycotting commercial music online but secretly enjoying it in private when she was younger:



When I got access to the Internet, I started listening to Rock, Heavy Metal and stuff like that. And I was very into it and I was boycotting commercial music. But truly I was secretly listening to Adele though ... And I was doing it [boycotting commercial music], first of all, because it was cool ... If you remember on Facebook, everyone was hating Rihanna and Justin Bieber and stuff like that. So, I felt like I needed to do that too. Plus, you know, when you are growing up and you choose a certain genre, it kind of defines a big part of your personality and the people you hang out with, let's say, not always, but most of the time.

Both examples reveal that consumers might claim to have a different musical taste than the one they actually have in order to be accepted by their peers and fit the social norms. This deep desire to fit in and craft a desired image of their identity in some cases even went one step further than merely lying about one's taste. Some consumers started to adapt their musical taste. Those consumers admitted that after receiving their results, they changed their music consumption practices on Spotify in order to receive different Wrapped results next year that would match their preferred musical taste and image. These results would then be 'worthy' to share with others, as they would enable them to legitimize a more acceptable identity performance that fits social norms. Linnéa, for instance, expressed:

I noticed that it (Spotify Wrapped) made me think that I want to discover more music because I was seeing that I listen to the same music a lot and it became repetitive. So that made me feel like, okay, next year I'm really gonna try to innovate myself and listen to other artists or other albums ... I mean personally I am quite happy in my bubble listening to the same music and being quite basic I would say, but I think sometimes these days basic is bad and you want to be relevant or different and unique ... I do feel the external pressure because if my songs in the Wrapped are too mainstream, maybe they are all from the same artist, then maybe I feel less likely to share them.

This statement shows that Linnéa's results inspired her to actually change her music consumption practices, even though she herself was happy listening to the same music on repeat. Nevertheless, it was apparently more important for her to stay "relevant" and "unique". In a similar manner, Kaya admitted that she would actively change her music consumption in order to receive different Wrapped results in the upcoming year:



I listened to music a lot more than it actually turned out, so I was kind of surprised to see that. I was actually barely listening to music in comparison to other people of course. So I decided that this year, I'm going to turn it up a little bit. So, my Spotify Wrapped can have a little bit more diversity.

These two excerpts demonstrate that consumers begin to adapt their behaviors and consumption practices to receive an official market validation that would be more socially desirable and would match the image they want to convey to their online audiences. This shows that in some cases consumers try to drop the attribute that puts them in the risk of becoming stigmatized or judged, in this case their musical taste. This behavior adaptation aligns with the Goffmanesque thought (1963) that people usually respond to stigma by changing exactly those factors that had provoked the stigmatization in the first place. Besides that, the behavioral change could further be interpreted as an adaptation to the likings of someone's social group. In this way, the need to adapt one's own consumption practices, could also be interpreted as a performance that is preconditioned by the "tradition of his group or social status" (Goffman, 1959, p.18). To that end, it appears that some consumers deliberately change their consumption practices and their musical taste in order to get a market "validation" in the future, which would conform to social norms, and which would enable them to perform and legitimize the identities they aspire to have.

In sum, this last theme represents the third way how consumers perform their identities through musical taste in the online world. We found that consumers often use the resources provided by the market to solely present those fragments of their taste and identities that seem to be socially desirable. With this, they seek to avoid experiencing stigmatization and symbolic violence. This fear of judgment and the desire to adhere to social norms in some cases even goes so far that consumers would lie about their musical taste or even change their behavior in an attempt to perform a desirable identity.

5.4 Summary of the Findings

We can now conclude that these findings provide a multi-faceted understanding of how consumers perform their identities in the online world through the use of their musical taste. It allows us to understand one's self-expression through musical taste as a complex game that requires multiple



tactics and a lot of considerations from the participants. In this game, consumers can have different strategies when revealing their musical preferences. First, consumers might use the sharing options of music-streaming services to present themselves, their emotions, and experiences and to accordingly legitimize those. Second, these functions might enable consumers to perform a collective or expert identity by pursuing social identification or social distinction in the online world. Finally, consumers make cautious use of these sharing functions to present only fragments of their identities and taste or even change their music consumption practices with the intention to be liked and accepted in society. This is influenced by a conscious wish to avoid symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1984) and stigmatization (Goffman, 1963) and a pressure to conform to social norms.

These findings help us understand the three different strategies behind consumers' intentional display of musical taste in the digital world. How these findings, however, fit conversations in the field of Consumer Culture Theory and how they exactly contribute to the theoretical understanding of consumer identities and taste will be presented in the following part.



Chapter 6: Discussion

After having presented the main themes that arose from the empirical data, this part of the paper seeks to contextualize the findings of this study within previous literature. It will explain how our insights might support, expand, challenge, or bridge theories of existing research. Thus, it will showcase the contribution of the present study to the field of CCT and especially the literature streams on consumer identity and taste. In particular, our results will contribute to three conversations within CCT, starting with the general role of the market, followed by the self-presentation in the digital world, and last but not least finishing by explaining how our insights can expand the theoretical understanding of social belonging. Above all, this chapter will expound on our argument that taste and identities are deeply interlinked and, in some contexts could be better understood when studied together.

6.1 Role of the Market

Some of the essential findings of this paper add on the classical CCT understanding of the market as a provider of resources, which consumers symbolically use for their identity performances. Here, the consumption stories collected in the interviews are largely consistent with the findings of multiple consumer culture researchers who ascribe a predominant role to the market within consumer identity projects (e.g. Belk, 1988; Hill, 1991; Hill & Stamey 1990; Holt, 2002; Levy, 1981; Schau, 2018). For instance, Belk (1988) claims that “we are what we have” (p.139) and we reciprocally use consumption to express our identities. Thus, market goods and services are providing consumers with the tools to communicate who they are (Schau, 2018). This was substantially evident in our empirical data. As expounded in the previous chapter, consumers often regarded their musical taste as representing important parts of their identities. Thus, they use music-streaming services to present their taste and consequently who they are. If we perceive taste as part of consumers’ “extended selves” as Belk (1988) would call it, then the sharing function of music-streaming service turns into the symbolic resource consumers use for self-presentation.

Moreover, as we aim to understand how consumers utilize the functions provided by digital platforms to communicate who they are, this research more precisely adds to Belk’s (2013) update



of the extended self in the digital realm. He claims that in the digital world many possessions have become immaterial, but nonetheless consumers are still attached to them and include them in their extended selves. However, although our findings support this notion, we expand the understanding of Belk's extended self in the digital world (2013) by suggesting that consumers still inherently seek 'tangible' proofs for those online "possessions", such as their playlists, their taste, or their music consumption practices. The narratives collected in the interviews showcase that consumers were attached to their Spotify Wrapped results, as they perceived those results as an official confirmation of their consumption, hence of their taste and their identities. This essential finding has the potential to bridge the somewhat contradicting notions of Belk's (2013) "dematerialization" and Magaudda's (2011) advocacy for "re-materialization" of consumption in the digital world. On one hand, the finding that consumers still consider 'intangible' music in the era of music-streaming services as important and integrate it into their sense of self goes along with Belk's (2013) argumentation for dematerialization. On the other hand, the strive for tangible proof of consumers immaterial music consumption could be interpreted as an enhanced attachment to material possessions as a consequence to the "immaterialization" in the digital world, as argued by Magaudda (2011). However, we note that Magaudda (2011) argues that consumers get attached to material possessions that enable their immaterial practices, which is slightly different from our argument. Nevertheless, we argue that the sum-up of consumers' online practices, although still immaterial, is now 'tangible' and due to this, consumers are deeply attached to it. This might be interpreted as a new form of overcoming the "dematerialization" of goods and practices in the era of digitalization. Therefore, this notion that the market can provide consumers with a somewhat tangible proof of their intangible digital consumption could to some extent bridge the gap between the attachment to immaterial possessions (Belk, 2013) and the need for re-materialization (Magaudda, 2011).

In this sense, we further argue that the present research contributes to the conversation of symbolic consumption of market resources in a somewhat novel way. Put simply, the findings do not merely exhibit the role of the market as a provider of resources for identity performances but show that the market could also turn into a provider of validation for these performances by issuing this tangible proof of consumers' taste. Indeed, our research reveals that consumers symbolically use this proof to legitimize their identity performances in front of their online audiences. According to



Goffman (1959) every human being strives for identity validation from their audiences. In a novel way our findings show that this classical understanding could be extended because the market can now become a first audience that validates consumers' identity performances.

Moreover, this interpretation of how the market can provide validation for consumers' identities can also add to the classical understanding of the market within CCT as having the power to legitimize identity practices. Previous studies demonstrate that brands significantly contribute to the legitimization of different nationalities and cultures (Cayla & Eckhardt, 2008; Mora, 2014) family structures (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013; Velagaleti & Epp, 2016), and other socio-political areas by shifting society's perceptions of what is normal and legitimate. However, the marketplace is also often the one reinforcing the distinction between dominant and non-dominant identity practices by representing certain identities as more legitimate than others (Weinberger & Crockett, 2018). This classical legitimizing role of the market was only in a limited manner evident in our findings because Spotify did not actively promote, position, or represent any identities as dominant through their Wrapped campaign. However, the brand indirectly contributed to the division between dominant and non-dominant identities by providing validation certificates that consumers deployed to claim legitimacy. As Crockett (2017) argues, consumers with dominant identities will actively engage in taste practices reaffirming their legitimacy. Our findings largely support this observation. Consumers who were proud of their results typically had a musical taste that fit the dominant perception of 'good' musical taste, which according to the majority of the participants, referred to broad, diverse, and unique taste in music. Those consumers were also the ones that shared their results or as Crockett (2017) would describe it - engaged in showcasing their taste in order to reaffirm the legitimacy of their identities.

Crockett (2017) also claims that individuals possessing non-dominant identities might actively try to conquer the stigmatized perception of their attributes. This is supported by other studies which similarly showcase that stigmatized consumers might undertake actions toward changing the connotations of the attributes that cause their stigmatization (Adkins & Ozanne, 2005; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2012; Velagaleti & Epp, 2016). In our case, this would mean that consumers with 'basic' musical taste that does not fit the dominant perception of 'good' taste would actively try to change this negative perception. However, our research did not uncover such consumer efforts. As



evident in our data, many of those consumers felt embarrassed and anxious that they might get stigmatized, and their identities might get spoiled - to use Goffman's (1963) term. Therefore, all consumers who experienced this sense of embarrassment regarding their results did not share those with others in order to prevent stigmatization instead of trying to destigmatize their musical preferences (Crockett, 2017). This rather aligns with one of Henry and Caldwell's (2006) findings that stigmatized people might choose a coping mechanism they refer to as "concealment" and simply hide the consumption practices or aspects of their identities that might cause them to experience exclusion or judgment. Consequently, the more consumers with broad and unique musical taste publicized their results, the harder it became for people with other musical taste to feel comfortable sharing it. This reinforced the division between dominant and non-dominant perceptions about what is legitimate, socially acceptable, or simply 'cool' in regard to musical taste. Some stigmatized consumers even adapted their behavior to adhere to this new dominant social norm instead of challenging it. This can be interpreted in a similar way to Weinberger (2015) who found that consumers with non-dominant identities would adopt common behaviors and practices of the dominant identity to fit in and to strengthen social links, even though these practices might be contrary to their own beliefs and principles. In the light of these findings, we want to be critical of this extended market role and add to Weinberger and Crockett's (2018) argument that the marketplace contributes to reinforcing the division between dominant and non-dominant identity practices by showcasing that this can be done even in an indirect manner.

This critical consideration about the role of the market can further lead to the *agency versus structure problem* as presented by Giddens (1984). Since even consumers who were comfortable with their own taste and music consumption adjusted their behavior to conform to societal norms, the question now arises to what degree this consumer decision was governed by their own will and how much of it was governed by external influences. In the case under investigation, we observed that digital platforms can provide a space for social institutions such as one's online audiences to indirectly impose social norms and expectations onto consumer practices. Through the lens of Foucault's (1991) notion of governmentality, these social institutions might be perceived as the ones owning the power to govern consumers through *freedom*. Although consumers perceive their decision to adhere to socially aspired norms as their own free choice, it seems like they are unaware that it might be their online circles that shape their aspiration to adapt. Indeed, our findings



illustrate that this free choice is mainly preconditioned by fear of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1984) and stigmatization (Goffman, 1963) and thus does not seem so free after all. To that end, after presenting these more critical perceptions of the extended role of the market, the question remains of who bears the responsibility for these societal consequences. Is society to blame for reinforcing social norms and hierarchies in the digital world or is the market in the wrong by providing a platform and tools that enable this reinforcement?

The next parts of this discussion will position the findings of this study within two further academic conversations. Our research aims at contributing to the intersection between taste and identities as shown in the figure below, as we argue that those two literature streams often could be complementary to each other instead of exclusive. We have identified that scholars within both streams oftentimes investigate similar aspects of consumer practices simply from different angles. However, the combination of these notions might hide potential for a better and more holistic understanding of consumer practices. This intersection between taste and identities includes, according to our findings, two essential conversations in the field of CCT that are going to be presented below.

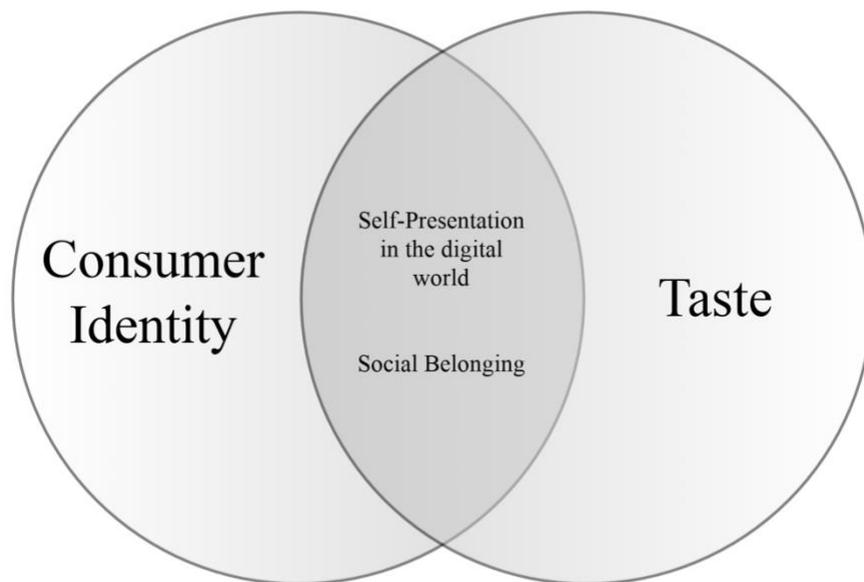


Figure 1: Proposed Intersection of Consumer Identity and Consumer Taste



6.2 Self-Presentation in the Digital World

This study contributes to a conversation within CCT on the topic of self-presentation in the digital world. As mentioned in the introduction of this research, digitalization has impacted the literature streams of both consumer identities and taste. Scholars from both streams have begun to investigate how consumers present their taste and their identities in different ways in the online realm and what factors impact these consumer performances. Therefore, in the following, we will elucidate how our findings can contribute to both literature streams. By doing so, we aim to showcase why those concepts could be more often studied together instead of apart within the field of CCT.

On one hand, the insights from this paper are significantly interlocated in the CCT studies engaging with identity projects and self-presentation in the digital world. One significant finding of our research shows that in the online realm consumers selectively and cautiously choose which parts of their musical taste and identities to disclose to others and which parts to hide. This finding to some extent supports Belk's (2013) argument that consumers create "idealized" avatars of themselves in the online world, as well as Schau and Gilly's (2003) notion that consumers manage to create idealized selves through imagination and thanks to the freedom provided to them in the online world. However, these observations are only somewhat consistent with our findings. We agree that the self that consumers choose to present in the online world through the display of musical taste is, indeed, a deliberate and conscious choice. Similar to the suggestion of those authors, it also became evident in our findings that consumers often attempt to portray merely the positive parts of their musical taste that they consider to be flawless, interesting, and likable by others. Hence, they aim at presenting an 'improved' version of who they are in reality. However, we observed that the identities consumers represented were not "idealized" in the sense of Belk (2013) and Schau and Gilly (2003) who argue that consumers actively create idealized avatars in the online world that do not necessarily reflect their real-life identities. Based on our research we suggest that instead of creating modified and idealized selves, consumers portray rather fragments of their true selves. This largely supports an observation made by Hagen and Lüders (2017) that consumers present fragmented versions of themselves by disclosing only a limited amount of their music playlists online. This reflects the intention to keep particular parts hidden that might not be perceived as socially desired and might, therefore "spoil" their identities in some way (Goffman,



1963). In this way, our findings can be positioned closer to Chen's (2016) observation. The author claims that the digital selves consumers perform online are consistent with their identities in real life. However, they consciously select which part of their identities to disclose to others. This became evident in the narratives of our interviewees, as they deliberately chose which aspects of their real identities they wanted to communicate through the fragmented display of their taste. Although our study supports the understanding of digital self-presentation provided by Chen (2016) it further adds to it by revealing underlying reasons for the consumers' decision of which parts to disclose to others. We find that this decision is largely influenced by a fear of being judged. This fear that appears to cause consumers to hide some 'embarrassing' parts of their identities seems to be the underlying reason for selective self-presentation in the digital realm. Therefore, perhaps one of the biggest contributions of our study to this academic conversation is that a big part of consumer practices in relation to identity performances and taste in the online world might be governed by a conscious attempt to avoid symbolic violence. In this way, this finding allows us to better understand the studies that highlight consumers' profound wish to craft a positive image of themselves (Belk, 2013; Chen, 2016; Schau & Gilly, 2003), as they have not deeply focused on exploring the rationale behind this consumer desire. Therefore, by uncovering that avoidance of judgment and symbolic violence is the driver of much of consumers' identity performances in the digital world, our study enables a deeper understanding of the underlying reasons behind these online consumer practices.

On the other hand, our findings do not merely contribute to the conversation on identity presentation in the digital world but also to the literature on taste presentation. These insights can add to the theoretical understanding of the online display of musical taste as a tool for social distinction in the sense of reinforcing social hierarchies and defining one's social status (McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014; Webster, 2020). For instance, as observed in our findings, some consumers use the deliberate display of musical taste as an opportunity to gain social recognition from their online audiences. This supports what some scholars have investigated in relation to how taste can determine or represent one's social status (McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014; Webster, 2020). The first study by McQuarrie, Miller and Phillips (2013) highlights how ordinary people can turn into influencers on social media through the display of taste, which could earn them more economic and social



“capital” as Bourdieu (1984) would describe it. However, in our study, we identify that consumers pursue social recognition, but not necessarily financial rewards. Even more, our findings largely contradict Bourdieu’s (1984) classical notion that one’s social status depends on their habitus, thus social upbringing. According to our research, the consumers that aimed to gain higher social status due to their expertise were not consumers who had any positions within the music industry or family background that could help them. This higher social status was achieved through the mere display of their taste in music. This largely contradicts Bourdieu (1984) and rather supports the successive study of McQuarrie and Phillips (2014) that claims that the online world has allowed individuals without specific background, social or financial resources to reach a social position of an influencer or leader based only on their cultural capital. The understanding that consumers from different backgrounds could reach higher social status due to the display of taste, contributes to the comprehension that the digital world has provided consumers with new means for social distinction (Eckardt & Bardhi, 2020; McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014; Webster, 2020). However, we argue that social distinction in this case could be perceived as an attempt to perform an *expert identity*. This showcases that the concepts of taste and identities are interwoven, as taste can enable consumers to perform identities.

On that note, we argue that our findings contribute to different studies from the two separate literature streams of consumer identities and taste in the digital world, but also add to studies that already acknowledge the connection between music consumption and identities. For instance, Larsen, Lawson and Todd (2010) argue that the music individuals consume is essential for their identity construction and self-presentation. Our findings largely align with this observation that music and identities are often connected. We observed that consumers mostly perceive their music consumption as representative of their musical taste and accordingly use that taste for self-expression. Similarly, Hagen and Lüders (2017) and Volda et al. (2005) explore how music consumption can be used not solely for identity construction but for a rather fragmented self-presentation. Our findings largely support their suggestion that consumers might use music-streaming services in a conscious and selective manner to craft a positive image of themselves and to not disclose parts of their identities that are too personal or embarrassing. However, we further contribute to those studies by uncovering that this urge for fragmented self-presentation lies in



consumers' wish to fit in society and avoid being stigmatized. This desire underpins the cautious display of taste and the selective identity expression consumers perform through it.

6.3 Social Belonging

The third CCT conversation this study adds to, regards social belonging. Both literature streams of consumer identities and taste have intensively engaged with how social surroundings impact consumers. However, they mostly do so in a separate manner and although our research contributes to studies from both streams, it also argues why these theoretical understandings in relation to social surroundings can be complementary.

From one side, our findings can contribute to the significant academical work done on how consumers' identities are impacted by their wish for communal belonging (Cova, 1997; Cova, Kozinets & Schankar, 2007; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Kozinets, 2001; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Weinberger & Crockett, 2018). Some researchers have explored how consumers build communities around brands, shared practices, or experiences (e.g. Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016; Cova, 1997; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001), which could be supported by our study as it indicated the union of consumers around Spotify Wrapped and its symbolic validation of taste. As shown in our findings this brand function has turned into a tool for igniting conversation and building friendships. Although previous literature shows that communities built in relation to the market could among others be (1) brand communities (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001), (2) ephemeral consumer tribes (Cova, Kozinets & Schankar, 2007; Goulding et al. 2009), or (3) brand publics (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016), our findings show that some online communities evince characteristics of several of them. The shared interest for music and passion for Spotify Wrapped that we identified as the basis for connecting like-minded people, could be interpreted in the sense of consumer tribes (Cova, Kozinets & Schankar, 2007). However, in contrast to consumer tribes, our findings showed that the connections that were rooted in this shared interest were less ephemeral but would oftentimes end up in long-lasting friendships. At the same time, the online communities identified in our research also to some extent resemble brand publics. Similar to Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016), we found that online communities can be built through brands, but not necessarily have the brand as their central linking point. This became evident in our data, which shows that consumers used Spotify Wrapped to both identify and build social



connections, but the brand was not in the center of their new communities. The brand rather acted as a mediator as it is common in brand publics (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). However, we note that in contrast to brand publics, consumers were not publicizing opinions about the brand but were posting the personalized brand content on social media to ignite conversations with each other and actually build social relations. And although our findings indicate some resemblances with brand publics and consumer tribes, they more closely fit Cova's (1997) more general understanding of how individuals use consumption to build social connections. In this sense, Spotify consumers perceived the use of the Wrapped function as a tool for building social links and thus creating new social circles. This aligns with the theoretical understanding that consumers increasingly use market resources to find belonging in a world where consumers are becoming more and more alienated (Cova, 1997). Intriguingly, we discovered that in our case consumers did not merely use the online function provided to them by the market to find potential peers, but they were interested in bringing these new friendships into the real world. With that, once again we can observe a deep connection between the concepts of taste and consumer identities as we found that the online display of taste might become the foundation for building *collective identities*.

From another perspective, our results provide some additions to the literature concerning consumer taste regarding the identification of one's social groups. Our discovery of why some consumers were deeply selective with the music they share online contributes to the research on how taste can be used as a tool for bringing like-minded people together (Holt, 1998; Puetz, 2015). As shown in the findings chapter, consumers often used taste to recognize potential peers. This largely appears to match Holt's (1998) claim that taste could be used as a means to discover people with similar interests. His study was largely aligned with Bourdieu's (1984) claim that taste can enable individuals to recognize their social classes. However, although both Bourdieu (1984) and Holt (1998) created this understanding in relation to social class identification, we argue that in the digital world consumers display taste to discover, not necessarily their social class, but rather other individuals who share their interests and likings even if they have nothing else in common. This more precisely aligns with an argument by Puetz (2015) that people sharing a similar taste are likely to become friends. As evident from our findings, consumers used the sharing functions of their music-streaming service to recognize potential peers and build new social connections.



Therefore, we contribute to the conceptualization of the display of taste as a way to identify one's social groups.

Finally, we want to further emphasize the connection between musical taste and identities that is present also on the level of social belonging. Our findings largely align with Larsen, Lawson, and Todd's (2009) argument that if the image of the music consumers like, matches the part of their identity they want to convey to others, self-representative music consumption takes place. Our data similarly illustrated that consumers display musical preferences to reveal parts of their identities to others. However, we expand this understanding by discovering that most of this self-representative behavior is shaped by a wish to fit in society. As evident in the narratives of consumers, they were willing to disclose only parts of their taste that would be liked and accepted by their online circles. Their intentional concealing of other parts of their taste can be better understood through Weinberger and Crockett's (2018) argument that individuals feel pressure to 'improve' their social identities in a way that would make them fit in society. We argue that this theoretical understanding in regard to the performance of identities can also help explain the selective and cautious display of taste, as taste is often perceived as a reflection of one's identity. Moreover, consumers feared that the reveal of different parts of their taste might spoil their identities and thus lead to their social exclusion, which is also pointed out by Weinberger and Crockett (2018). In the light of this, we argue that theories from the literature stream of consumer identities have the potential to expand the understanding of taste and vice versa.



Chapter 7: Conclusion

This final chapter will conclude this study by presenting a recapitulation of the key findings in relation to the research question as well as their contributions to previous literature. Moreover, it will review the limitations of the study and propose potential implications for market actors and directions for future research.

In summary, the empirical findings illustrate that musical taste plays a significant role in the complex game of identity performances in the online sphere. Moreover, they showcase that these performances are enabled by the market, which has taken on an expanded role in this process. We identified three key ways in which consumers perform their identities through musical taste in the online world.

Firstly, we found that consumers consider their musical taste to be a reflection of their personalities, aspirations, and emotions and therefore share it to present their identities in the online world. In this process, music-streaming services are not just the required market resource enabling consumers to perform their identities but have turned into a provider of an official market “validation” (Goffman, 1959) of those performances. In the cases when consumers do not perceive this market validation as representative of their identities, the market instead of legitimizing their performances rather appears to discredit those. Secondly, consumers further make use of the market resources in order to share their musical taste with others and to perform either collective or expert identities. On one hand, the online display of musical taste might hereby be used for social identification by enabling consumers to recognize like-minded people and thus potential peers. On the other hand, this display of musical taste can also be interpreted as a tool for social distinction as it allows consumers to gain higher social status due to their rich knowledge of music. Thirdly, consumers use the functions provided by music-streaming services to selectively and consciously choose which parts of their musical taste to disclose to others and which parts to hide. By sharing only fragments of their musical taste, consumers strive to perform socially desirable identities that will make them liked and accepted in society. This profound desire to fit in the social norms is preconditioned by a fear of becoming stigmatized or experiencing symbolic violence and sometimes causes consumers to mask or even adapt their actual music consumption practices and



identities. Put simply, consumers put a significant amount of effort and consideration into their attempt to *play it cool* in the online world.

With that in mind, we can conclude that the insights of this research contribute to three CCT conversations engaging with the role of the market, self-presentation in the digital world, and social belonging. Most notably, our findings add to those discussions by illustrating an extended market role, which can now provide validation to identity performances. Through that, however, it appears that new grounds for the legitimization of dominant identity practices and hence the reinforcement of social hierarchies have emerged. Furthermore, we contribute to both literature streams of consumer identities and taste by demonstrating that most consumer practices in the digital world concerning these two notions are underpinned and governed by a fear of symbolic violence and stigmatization. Our research not only contributes to theoretical understandings of online consumer practices and consumer culture but reveals that there is an essential intersection between the two literature streams. Hereby, the display of taste can be used in different ways to perform identities but also taste itself can be adapted to fit a desired identity. On that note, we conclude that in the researched context identity performances and taste are intrinsically interwoven and should more often be perceived as each other's yin and yang.

7.1 Limitations

We must note that our study suffers, as every research, from some limitations. Therefore, we want to highlight four specific limitations that might restrain the contribution or applicability of the insights derived from our study.

First and foremost, as previously touched upon, we note that our empirical data stems only from the narratives of young European consumers, whose practices and reasons might differ from consumers from other nationalities or different age groups. However, this would especially represent a limitation jeopardizing the quality of this research if the telos of this research would have been to generalize those findings. This however is not the case, as we clearly state that we cannot draw conclusions about consumer practices in other cultural contexts. Furthermore, we would like to emphasize that we cannot and do not aim to draw conclusions about the music-



consumption practices of all young Europeans or to develop a universal theory of either all forms of identity performances or uses of musical taste.

Second, we acknowledge that this study explores the topic of identity ‘performances’ by conducting interviews, which are merely based on the narratives consumers shared and thus the meanings they ascribed to their own practices. Doing ethnographic or netnographic research, for instance, might have led to more accurate or novel insights, as it would have allowed us to directly observe those performances instead of investigating the mere narrative description of them. This might have more accurately revealed intentions or patterns of behavior that consumers are not aware of. However, due to time constraints in regard to the conduct of the present study and due to the rather hardly observable topic of sharing Spotify’s annual user consumption summaries that only come out in December, those two methodological approaches would not have been feasible for this study.

Third, another limitation might be witnessed in the fact that the insights presented in this study are largely derived from consumer practices in relation to only one music-streaming service - Spotify. Although Spotify is currently the biggest and most popular digital platform for music consumption worldwide and it provides unique functions such as Spotify Wrapped, users of other music-streaming platforms might have different experiences. Therefore, we acknowledge the possibility that they may have different consumption practices than the ones presented in this study. These two limitations have to be taken into account when interpreting the transferability and potential implications of our research findings.

Last but not least, we would like to point out that English merely constitutes the second language of both researchers as well as of most of the research participants. Even though both researchers are fluent in English and the interviewees felt comfortable expressing themselves in this language, we do not want to exclude the possibility that the inherent connotations of some words and expressions might differ from the expressions in their respective native languages. Therefore, we acknowledge that this might have hampered the lingo and accordingly the understanding of the findings to a certain degree.



7.2 Implications for Market Actors

This last part of the discussion chapter follows the objective of indicating which implications can be drawn from the research results for market actors - including both brands and consumers. We will first elaborate on the potential of our findings for particular market industries by illustrating how our insights might help managers develop the potential of their digital platforms but also pointing out the risks and dangers of such practices. Thereafter, we will present the implications our findings might have on consumers, arguing that such digital platforms and their functions might hide more harm than good for society.

7.2.1 Brands

As expounded previously, we found that brands can gain the power to officially “validate” consumer taste and therefore play an enhanced role in consumers’ identity projects. This became evident in Spotify’s introduction of the Wrapped function as a tool enabling this specific validation of their users’ taste. We observed that a potential reason why this function is as hyped and successful despite its controversy surrounding data privacy might lie in its ability to resolve the consumers’ deep urge for tangible proof of their online practices regarding their taste and identities. This function might even play a role in Spotify’s market leadership, as consumers could potentially be joining this platform because it is so far the only company that provides a summary and evaluation of their taste and music consumption practices. Therefore, a potentially helpful insight for other music-streaming providers lies in the provided explanation of why consumers seem to enjoy this Spotify function and how they use it.

From a transferability point of view, we even go further and suggest that our insights might be applicable to other industries. Be it music, fashion, or food, all industries connected to consumers’ taste might find our findings useful to some extent. We suggest that every form of taste that consumers could integrate into their identity projects might have the potential of gaining market validation. The benefit of providing consumers with tangible proof of their taste and a function to share this official certificate with others might be worthy of exploration from a business perspective. We suggest that certificates that closely align with consumers’ own image of their taste and identities are likely to be used for identity performances.



Moreover, managers of digital platforms might gain inspiration from our findings regarding the consumers' need for fragmented self-presentation. As shown in the findings chapter, consumers deploy multiple tactics when presenting themselves on digital platforms and in front of online audiences. Accordingly, as most of them strive to avoid judgment, they need online platforms to provide them with more functions enabling them to present only the parts of themselves and their taste that they feel comfortable with. Similar to what we observed in our study in relation to music-streaming services, other platforms like Instagram have allowed users to share stories with only "close friends" instead of their full list of followers. The provided understanding of these functions which enable consumers to share only fragments of themselves and to decide whom to share them with might hide significant potential for the further development of social media apps and other digital platforms.

However, we would like to draw some critical attention to the suggestions presented above. First, in order to provide users with a validation of their consumption practices and their taste, digital platforms have to track and collect consumers' data but even more so indirectly disclose this brand practice. Therefore, from a privacy perspective, the potential that the validation of taste hides might be a double-edged sword. Furthermore, especially in regard to surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2015), it is questionable if companies should invade the privacy of consumers in this way just to produce more features and services that might raise the companies' popularity and revenue. Brands should also be aware that although these strategies might be profitable, they might lead to the reinforcement of social hierarchies, social exclusion, stigmatization, and to increased opportunities for the exercise of symbolic violence. These negative and ethically questionable consequences should not be neglected and overlooked by managers of digital platforms who have to make the decision if their companies should engage in such strategies.

7.2.2 Consumers

From a societal perspective, it is important to elaborate on why and how our findings might reveal if music-streaming services and their functions might help or harm consumers.

On one hand, consumers seem to benefit from these sharing functions and consumption summaries provided by the market as they satisfy their urge for tangible proof of their intangible practices,



which allows them to validate and legitimize their identities. Moreover, as our results show, those tools might help consumers in novel ways in their quest for self-expression and social identification. This can help consumers find social belonging and build new friendships in a time when people are more distanced from each other than ever (Cova, 1997).

On the other hand, the downsides of these functions for consumers must be acknowledged. We note that consumers are not always fully aware of their actual consumption practices, and thus they might be disappointed by a real data-based validation of their behavior. As we found, when misalignment between one's own image of their taste and the results provided by brands exist, this might make consumers feel embarrassed. Therefore, such validation might spoil consumers' identities, harm their self-esteem or make them feel external pressure to adapt their practices and behaviors. Such behavior adaptations could be an expression of reduced consumer agency, as external forces such as society and the market hide tremendous risks of governing consumers to behave in accordance to unwritten social norms or ideals. As a consequence, this might lead to the rise of dominant identity practices that can cause further stigmatization of particular consumers and contribute to the reinforcement of social hierarchies. In its own turn, this can have the power to shape consumers' perceptions and thus their behaviors, reducing the acceptability of self-expression of unique qualities, taste or personalities and increasing the homogenization of single socially aspired identities.

Last but definitely not least, although consumers seem to acknowledge that they are consciously adapting their behavior in accordance to what society considers desirable, it appears that they do not want to rebel against these social norms. More concerning is the fact that most consumers rather blindly and obediently follow these unwritten rules without knowing or questioning their origin or legitimacy. By pointing that out, we aim to showcase that consumers might want to understand more in depth the external influences that could be shaping their own behaviors and practices.

7.3 Directions for Future Research

This last part will present how future research might benefit from the findings of the present study and which parts call for more thorough research. We will explain which connections of literature



streams and scholars could be more often researched together and how studies on the topic of identities and taste in the digital world might benefit from a closer examination from the lens of governmentality.

As previously explained, we see great potential in the connection of the concepts of consumer taste and identity. Based on our findings and discussion, we conclude that for a holistic understanding of consumer identity projects and taste in the digital realm, it could be helpful to study both concepts together as they often complement each other. Indeed, we showcase that there is an intersection of topics that both literature streams often analyze merely from different angles. Therefore, we invite future researchers within CCT to produce more research combining these two conceptual lenses.

In a similar manner, we see great potential in the combination of some theories by Pierre Bourdieu and Erving Goffman. We argue that the combination of these scholars' views can be beneficial for future research as they identify similar sociological patterns but present those in different contexts. Those in our opinion, hide the potential to complement each other and contribute to a deeper understanding of consumers' culture and their practices.

Additionally, we found that consumers look for tangible proof for their taste in the online sphere which they could use for their online identity performances. This seems to be a rather novel insight, as we discovered that the market takes the role of providing the required resources for this identity performance and its validation and legitimization. We invite scholars to broaden the understanding of this new market role and its potential in depth. Especially important is to understand more thoroughly how this ability of the market to validate identities and to allow consumers to define what is legitimate, might be causing reinforcement of social hierarchies and the social exclusion of consumers. From another perspective, a further understanding of this market validation might be of importance in the academic debate on data privacy in regard to the online world, as it provides a novel perspective as to why consumers might be willing to have their data collected and used by digital platforms.



Finally, we invite scholars to investigate digital platforms from a more critical lens. We believe that the findings of our paper and its conclusions can be significantly extended and challenged by investigating this phenomenon from a governmentality perspective. It became evident in our empirical data that consumers were willingly changing their own behavior in order to fit social norms. This, however, requires further and more critical research to uncover how these social norms regarding taste and identities arise and what exactly is the role of the companies that provide the platforms and functions for the creation of such social boundaries. Additionally, we invite scholars to shine a critical light on the celebratory approach of new technologies by further investigating how these might shape consumers' agency, identity performances, and taste.

However, as Plato arguably said, "I'm trying to think, don't confuse me with facts". With that, we want to acknowledge that future research could and should part from our insights in completely new directions we have not yet discovered.



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Appendices

Appendix A - Spotify Wrapped Examples

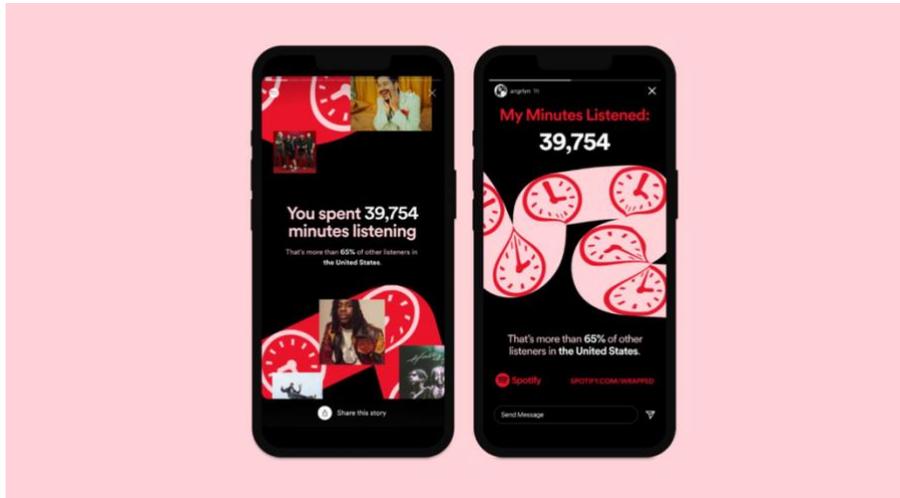


Figure 1: Sum-Up of Listening Time

Spotify (2021) The Wait Is Over. Your Spotify 2021 Wrapped Is Here. Available online: <https://newsroom.spotify.com/2021-12-01/the-wait-is-over-your-spotify-2021-wrapped-is-here/> [Accessed online 17 May 2022]

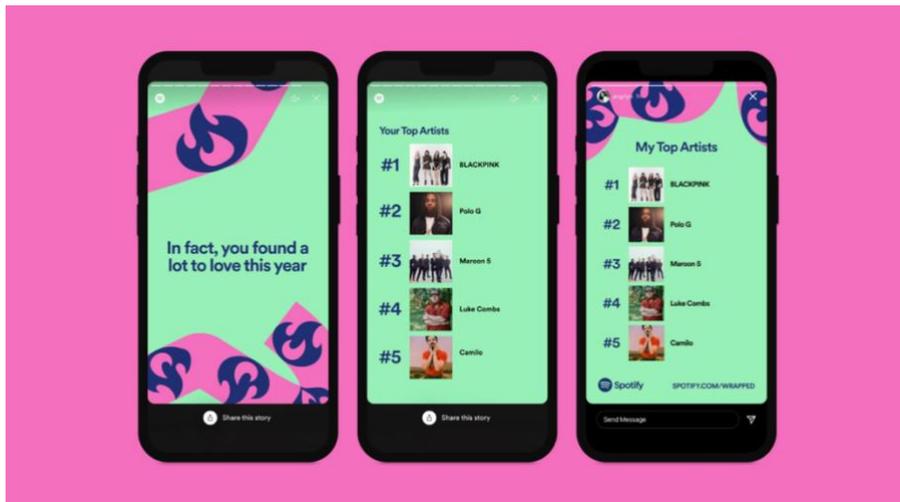


Figure 2: Five Top Artists

Spotify (2021) The Wait Is Over. Your Spotify 2021 Wrapped Is Here. Available online: <https://newsroom.spotify.com/2021-12-01/the-wait-is-over-your-spotify-2021-wrapped-is-here/> [Accessed online 17 May 2022]



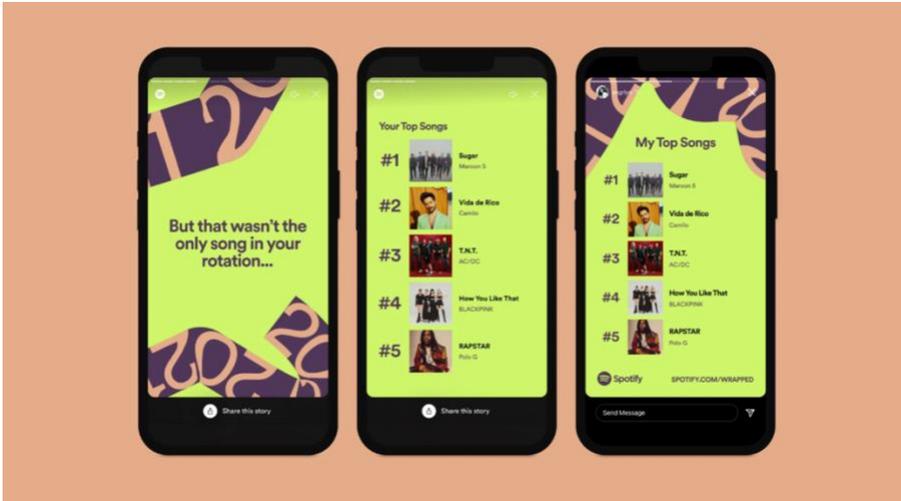


Figure 3: Top Songs

Spotify (2021) The Wait Is Over. Your Spotify 2021 Wrapped Is Here. Available online: <https://newsroom.spotify.com/2021-12-01/the-wait-is-over-your-spotify-2021-wrapped-is-here/> [Accessed online 17 May 2022]

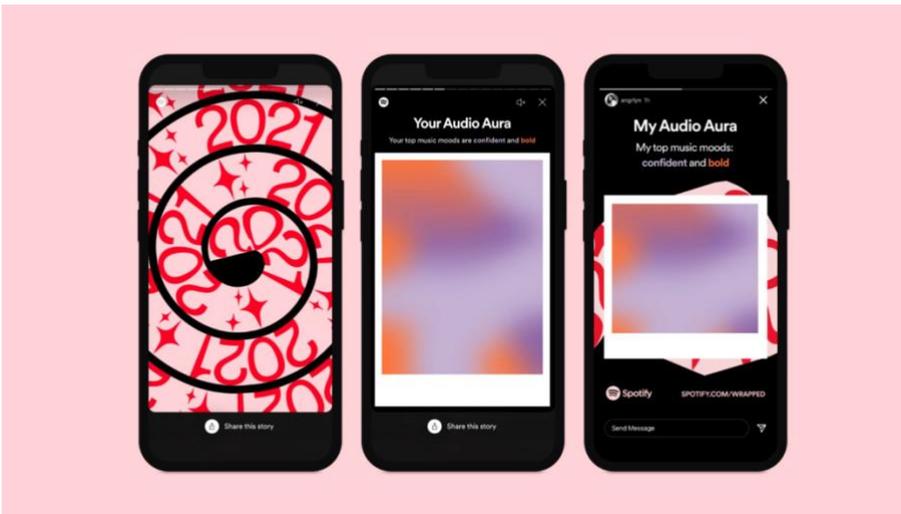


Figure 4: Audio Aura

Spotify (2021) The Wait Is Over. Your Spotify 2021 Wrapped Is Here. Available online: <https://newsroom.spotify.com/2021-12-01/the-wait-is-over-your-spotify-2021-wrapped-is-here/> [Accessed online 17 May 2022]



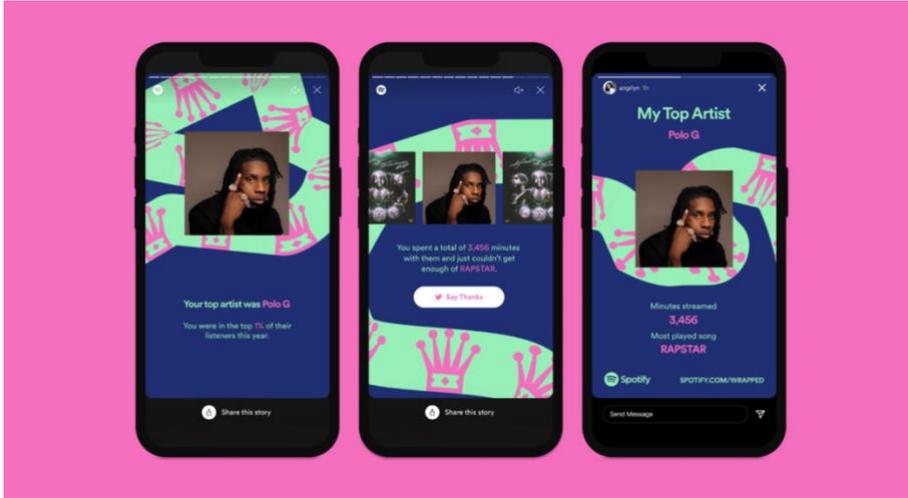


Figure 5: Top Artist

Spotify (2021) The Wait Is Over. Your Spotify 2021 Wrapped Is Here. Available online:<https://newsroom.spotify.com/2021-12-01/the-wait-is-over-your-spotify-2021-wrapped-is-here/> [Accessed online 17 May 2022]



Appendix B - Facebook Groups Used for the Recruitment of Research Participants

- **“Spotify Playlists”** - 23.695 members (Status from 18 April 2022)
Available online: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/533754831333209/>
[Accessed 18 April 2022]
- **“Share Music and Playlists”** - 59.791 members (Status from 19 April 2022)
Available online: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/864850200972879/>
[Accessed 19 April 2022]
- **“Spotify Playlists”** - 29.057 members (Status from 19 April 2022)
Available online: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/578119692870047/>
[Accessed 19 April 2022]
- **“International Master Students in Sweden”** - 14.353 members (Status from 19 April 2022)
Available online: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2621461558072433/>
[Accessed 19 April 2022]
- **“International Students in Lund 2021/2022”** - 6.486 members (Status from 19 April 2022)
Available online: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/320986491706137/>
[Accessed 19 April 2022]

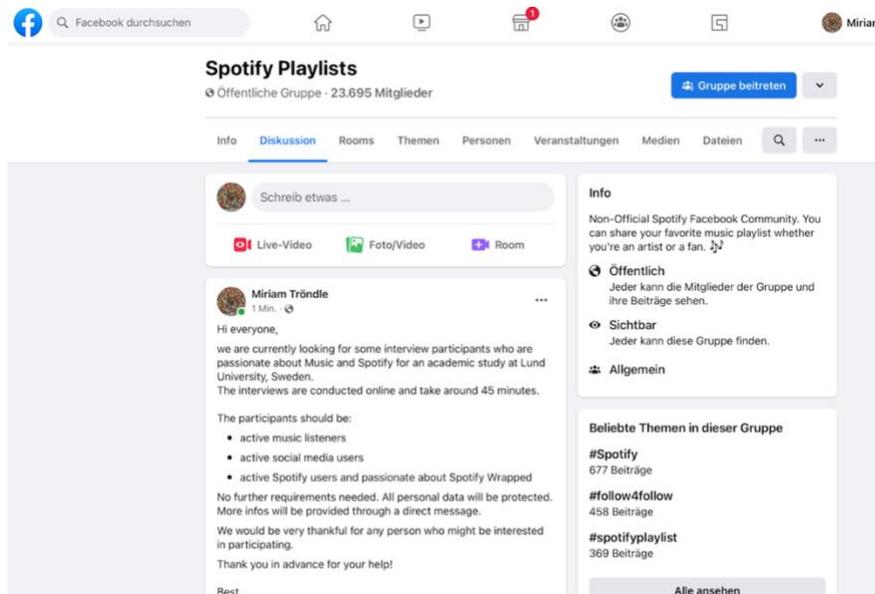


Figure 6: Post to recruit participants

Available online: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/533754831333209/> [Accessed 18 April 2021]



Appendix C - Semi-Structured Interview Guide

As mentioned above, the qualitative interviews followed a semi- structured interview guide. However, it should be noted that the interviews equally involved “Follow-up” questions that arose from the specific content of the respective interviews. The interview guide is presented in the following:

Demographics/ Personal background:

1. What is your name and how old are you?
2. Where are you from and where do you currently live?
3. What do you do/work? What is your education?
4. Can you give us some basic background information about your family/how you grew up?
5. How would you describe yourself with 3 words? How would your friends describe you?
6. What is the type of person that you would like to be? Can you describe your dream life?

Musical taste in general

7. How would you describe your musical taste? / What music do you like to listen to?
 - a. Did it change over time? Why?
8. How do you listen to music when you are alone and with friends? Is there a difference in what you listen to depending on that?
 - a. What do you do and how do you feel if you are the one in charge of putting on the music at a meeting with others?
9. What do you think musical taste says about someone/ What does it say about yourself?
 - a. Do you think musical taste is an important part of someone's personality or not?

Experience with Spotify Wrapped and sharing music with others

10. What is your experience with Spotify Wrapped?
 - a. Do you like it or not? Why?
11. Did your last Spotify Wrapped result match with your own image of your musical taste? Why?



12. Was there something interesting you remember? Maybe something that did not fit your own image of your musical taste or something that made you happy/ proud/ embarrassed/ angry?
13. Can you remember which parts of your Spotify Wrapped results you shared with friends or on social media?
 - a. Why did you decide to share them only with friends? Why did you decide to share them on social media?
 - b. How did you decide which friends to share it with?
 - c. Would you have shared your Spotify Wrapped result with others if it would have said your top artist is *“(using a very different one from the actual one)”*
14. What was the reaction you got from others and how did that make you feel?
15. Have you seen your friends or other people share their Spotify Wrapped on social media?
 - a. How did that make you feel?/ What thoughts did that provoke in you?
16. Do you sometimes share music on social media, for example on Instagram?
 - a. What makes you share a song on social media?
 - b. Is there something you want to say/transmit through posting music?
 - c. What do you think of other people sharing songs on social media?
17. How would you react if someone you don't know that well shares a song that you really like?
18. How would you react if someone you don't know that well shares a song that you don't like?



Appendix D - Informed Consent Form

Consent for personal data processing

I consent to my personal data in the form of audio recordings that include my name, occupation, nationality, country of residences and consumption practices being processed by Lund University for the following purpose: Conduct of a Master thesis investigating consumer behavior in relation to digital music consumption.

Information

The personal data will be processed in the following way: The audio recordings will be transcribed into texts and personal details will be anonymized or deleted and names will be replaced by pseudonyms. Audio recordings will be stored on the personal computers of the researchers and not uploaded to any cloud services. The data will not be disclosed to any external parties outside of Lund University.

The data will be used for the above purpose and in accordance with this form. The legal basis for the processing of your personal data is that you have given your voluntary consent. We do not share your personal data with third parties.

Lund University, Box 117, 221 00 Lund, corporate identity number 202100-3211 is the personal data controller. You can find information about the processing of personal data at Lund University at www.lunduniversity.lu.se.

The consent is valid up to and including 31.05.2023 You have the right to withdraw your consent at any time. You do this by contacting Miriam Tröndle (mi0611tr-s@student.lu.se) or Tsvetelina Rakova (ts2715ra-s@student.lu.se) or registrator@lu.se. We will in this case cease to process personal data that we have collected based on this consent. However, data included in results that have already been obtained will not be affected by the withdrawal of your consent. Certain data may also be archived in accordance with Swedish law.



You have the right of access to information about the personal data we process about you. You also have the right to have incorrect personal data about you corrected. If you have a complaint about our processing of your personal data, you can contact our data protection officer via dataskyddombud@lu.se. You also have the right to submit a complaint to the supervisory authority (Swedish Data Protection Agency) if you think that we process your personal data incorrectly.

I consent to Lund University processing personal data about me in accordance with the above.

Town/ City	Signature
Date	Name in block letters

Consent Form adapted from Lund University's official Consent Form Template

Available online:

<https://www.staff.lu.se/support-and-tools/legal-records-management-and-data-protection/personal-data-and-data-protection-gdpr/general-information-and-support/legal-basis/consent> [Accessed 21 March 2022]

