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TRANSFORMATIONS IN MUSIC CONSUMPTION IN THE STREAMING ERA: FROM ALBUM LOGIC TO FRAGMENTED LISTENING

TRANSFORMAÇÕES NO CONSUMO MUSICAL NA ERA DO STREAMING: DA LÓGICA DO ÁLBUM À ESCUTA FRAGMENTADA

TRANSFORMACIONES EN EL CONSUMO MUSICAL EN LA ERA DEL STREAMING: DE LA LÓGICA DEL ÁLBUM A LA ESCUCHA FRAGMENTADA

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, the advancement of digital technologies and the consolidation of streaming platforms have significantly transformed the ways music is accessed, circulated, and consumed. Services such as Spotify and Apple Music have expanded access to vast music catalogs, allowing millions of tracks to be available on demand. In this context, a shift can be observed in the cultural practices associated with music listening, characterized by the fragmentation of consumption and the increasing centrality of playlists and algorithmic recommendations. Traditionally, the experience of listening to music was associated with the album as a structuring unit of artistic production, in which songs were organized according to an aesthetic logic defined by the artists. In the digital environment, however, music increasingly circulates as individual tracks, often consumed in isolation or inserted into thematic playlists. This article discusses the transformations in music consumption practices in the streaming era, reflecting on how digital platforms reconfigure listening practices and the relationship between audiences and musical works. Based on a theoretical approach grounded in studies of digital culture and cultural consumption, the analysis examines how elements such as algorithms, random playback, and playlist curation contribute to the fragmentation of the contemporary musical experience, especially among younger audiences.

KEYWORDS

Digital Culture. Music Consumption. Streaming. Digital Platforms. Listening Practices.

RESUMO

Nas últimas décadas, o avanço das tecnologias digitais e a consolidação das plataformas de streaming transformaram significativamente as formas de acesso, circulação e consumo da música. Serviços como Spotify e Apple Music ampliaram o acesso a vastos catálogos musicais, permitindo que milhões de faixas estejam disponíveis sob demanda. Nesse contexto, observa-se uma mudança nas práticas culturais associadas à escuta musical, marcada pela fragmentação do consumo e pela crescente centralidade de playlists e recomendações algorítmicas. Tradicionalmente, a experiência de ouvir música esteve associada ao álbum como unidade estruturante da produção artística, no qual as músicas eram organizadas segundo uma lógica estética definida pelos artistas. No ambiente digital, entretanto, a música passa a circular cada vez mais como faixas individuais, frequentemente consumidas de forma isolada ou inseridas em playlists temáticas. Este artigo discute as transformações nas práticas de consumo musical na era do streaming, refletindo sobre como as plataformas digitais reconfiguram as formas de escuta e a relação dos públicos com as obras musicais. A partir de uma abordagem teórica baseada em estudos sobre cultura digital e consumo cultural, analisa-se de que maneira elementos como algoritmos, reprodução aleatória e curadoria de playlists contribuem para a fragmentação da experiência musical contemporânea, especialmente entre públicos mais jovens.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Cultura Digital. Consumo Musical. Streaming. Plataformas Digitais. Práticas de Escuta.

RESUMEN

En las últimas décadas, el avance de las tecnologías digitales y la consolidación de las plataformas de transmisión digital han transformado significativamente las formas en que se accede, circula y consume la música. Servicios como Spotify y Apple Music han ampliado el acceso a vastos catálogos musicales, permitiendo que millones de canciones estén disponibles bajo demanda. En este contexto, se observa un cambio en las prácticas culturales asociadas con la escucha musical, marcado por la fragmentación del consumo y la creciente centralidad de las listas de reproducción y las recomendaciones algorítmicas. Tradicionalmente, la experiencia de escuchar música se asociaba con el álbum como unidad estructurante de la producción artística, en el que las canciones se organizaban según una lógica estética definida por los artistas. En el entorno digital, sin embargo, la música circula cada vez más como pistas individuales, a menudo consumidas de forma aislada o incluidas en listas de reproducción temáticas. Este artículo analiza las transformaciones en las prácticas de consumo musical en la era del streaming, reflexionando sobre cómo las plataformas digitales reconfiguran los hábitos de escucha

y la relación del público con las obras musicales. A partir de un enfoque teórico basado en estudios sobre cultura digital y consumo cultural, este estudio analiza cómo elementos como los algoritmos, la reproducción aleatoria y la selección de listas de reproducción contribuyen a la fragmentación de la experiencia musical contemporánea, especialmente entre el público más joven.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Cultura digital. Consumo musical. Streaming. Plataformas digitales. Prácticas de escucha.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the ways music is accessed and consumed have undergone profound transformations, particularly as a result of the advancement of digital technologies and the consolidation of streaming platforms. Services such as Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube Music have significantly expanded access to music catalogs, enabling millions of tracks to be instantly available to users; however, such access is conditional upon active subscriptions or subject to limitations in ad-supported free models. This technological shift has altered not only the modes of music distribution but also the cultural practices associated with listening and the relationship between audiences and musical works (Santos; Barth, 2025).

Historically, the experience of listening to music has often been linked to physical media and to specific formats for organizing musical production. Among these formats, the album became established as a relevant cultural unit, structuring artistic production into sets of songs organized according to an aesthetic logic defined by artists and producers. In this context, listening to an album often implied following a sequence of tracks conceived as part of a broader work, in which the order of the songs, sonic transitions, and thematic construction contributed to the listening experience (Kelsch; Rosa; Barth, 2026).

With the popularization of digital platforms, new dynamics of music consumption have emerged. The centrality of the album tends to give way to other forms of organizing listening practices, such as thematic playlists, algorithmic recommendations, and shuffle modes. Within this logic, songs circulate in a more fragmented manner, frequently being consumed as independent units detached from the original context of their albums or even from the artistic trajectory of their performers. This process reflects broader transformations in contemporary cultural practices, marked by an abundance of content, the logic of informational flow, and the growing mediation of algorithmic systems.

Among younger audiences, such practices appear to be particularly evident. Music listening is often combined with other everyday activities, such as the use of social media, urban mobility, or the performance of simultaneous tasks, creating a more fluid and dispersed relationship with musical content. In this scenario, it becomes common for users to become familiar with specific songs without necessarily identifying the album from which they originate or establishing lasting connections

with particular artists, a phenomenon that can be interpreted as a form of music consumption that is more fragmented and less centered on the idea of the work as a whole (Foscarini; Rosa; Barth, 2023).

In light of these transformations, understanding the new forms of relationship between audiences, technology, and musical production becomes a relevant topic for the Humanities and Social Sciences. Music, as a cultural practice and symbolic object, offers a fertile field for analyzing the changes in cultural consumption mediated by digital technologies (Pavão; Barth, 2022).

Thus, this article proposes to discuss the fragmentation of music consumption in the streaming era, seeking to reflect on how digital platforms reconfigure listening practices and the ways individuals relate to music. Based on a literature review and a reflection on contemporary dynamics of cultural consumption, the study aims to understand how elements such as playlists, recommendation algorithms, and shuffle playback contribute to redefining the role of the album and transforming musical listening experiences in digital culture.

2 TECHNOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATIONS AND NEW LISTENING PRACTICES

The history of music consumption has always been directly associated with the reproduction and distribution technologies available in each period (Katz, 2010). From the emergence of vinyl records, through cassette tapes and CDs, to digital formats, each medium not only enabled access to music but also influenced the ways individuals relate to it. In this sense, technology does not act merely as a means of transmitting content, but also as a structuring element of the cultural practices associated with music listening (Williams, 2003).

For much of the twentieth century, the album became established as a central unit for organizing musical production (Frith, 1998). This format allowed different tracks to be grouped within a single work, organized according to aesthetic, narrative, or thematic criteria. In many cases, the sequence of songs was conceived as an integral part of the artistic experience, establishing a listening trajectory that could include variations in rhythm, intensity, and theme throughout the tracks. Thus, listening to an album often implied moving through a relatively cohesive work conceived as a structured whole.

The consolidation of digital technologies and the internet brought significant changes to this model. Initially, the popularization of the MP3 format already indicated a tendency toward the fragmentation of music consumption (Sterne, 2012), as it facilitated the circulation of individual music files. However, it was with the rise of streaming platforms that this process intensified more profoundly.

Services such as Spotify and Apple Music have significantly expanded access to music catalogs, offering millions of tracks available on demand (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). In this context, access to music no longer depends on acquiring a physical medium or even downloading specific files, but rather occurs through a logic of continuous access to large content databases.

This technological transformation has contributed to changes in the dynamics of music listening. Instead of selecting a specific album to listen to from beginning to end, users often choose individual songs selected through recommendations, playlists, or shuffle modes. As a result, the musical expe-

rience becomes characterized by greater flexibility and fluidity, allowing different artists, genres, and styles to coexist within the same playback sequence.

Furthermore, the organization of content on digital platforms tends to privilege structures based on playlists, categories, and algorithmic recommendations. In this model, the user's navigation logic is not necessarily guided by an artist's discography, but by thematic associations, moods, or everyday activities. Playlists titled "for studying," "for relaxing," or "for working out," for example, reorganize music according to contexts of use, shifting the focus from the musical work to the listening experience.

These changes indicate that the fragmentation of music consumption does not result solely from individual user preferences, but also from the technological and organizational structures of digital platforms themselves. The ways in which content is presented, recommended, and reproduced contribute to shaping consumption practices and influence how individuals discover and listen to music.

3 THE LOGIC OF PLAYLISTS AND THE REORGANIZATION OF THE MUSICAL EXPERIENCE

Among the elements that most contribute to the transformation of contemporary listening practices are playlists. On streaming platforms, they have become one of the main forms of organization and circulation of music (Morris, 2015). Unlike the album, which is conceived as a work produced by a specific artist or group, the playlist brings together tracks from different origins, artists, and periods, organized according to thematic or contextual criteria.

This shift implies a significant reorganization of the musical experience. While the traditional album reflected an aesthetic proposal defined by its creators, playlists often operate according to broader logics of curation that may be defined by platform editors, users themselves, or automated recommendation systems.

In the case of algorithmic playlists, platforms use user behavior data to suggest personalized sequences of songs. Information such as listening history, favorite artists, and listening patterns is analyzed in order to identify preferences and suggest similar content. This automated recommendation process reinforces the logic of fragmentation, since songs begin to be consumed as independent units within continuous playback flows.

In this context, the discovery of new music tends to occur less through the deliberate exploration of albums or discographies and more through automated recommendations or thematic lists. Users may become familiar with certain songs without necessarily associating them with a specific album or even with a broader context of production.

This dynamic also contributes to modifying listeners' relationships with artists. Instead of following the complete trajectory of a musician or band, many users encounter only a few isolated tracks that circulate through playlists or recommendations. As a result, the construction of long-term connections with specific artists may become less frequent, being replaced by a more episodic and fragmented relationship with songs.

Moreover, the logic of playlists aligns with contemporary cultural consumption practices, which are often characterized by multitasking and the constant circulation between different types of con-

tent. Music is frequently consumed simultaneously with other activities, such as browsing social media, studying, or performing everyday tasks (Bull, 2007). In such cases, listening tends to assume the role of ambient sound, functioning as a background element for other experiences.

4 DIGITAL CULTURE, ALGORITHMS, AND THE MEDIATION OF MUSIC CONSUMPTION

The fragmentation of music consumption in the streaming era can also be understood through the growing mediation exercised by algorithms on digital platforms (Van Dijck, 2013). Unlike earlier periods, when discovering music depended primarily on traditional channels of dissemination such as radio, television, or personal recommendations, much of the contact with new content today occurs through automated recommendation systems.

These algorithms operate through the analysis of large volumes of data generated by user interactions on platforms (Striphas, 2015). Information such as songs played, listening time, playlists created, and followed artists is used to identify behavioral patterns and predict preferences. Based on these analyses, systems suggest new songs that present characteristics similar to those already consumed by the user.

Although this process significantly expands the possibilities for discovering music, it also contributes to reorganizing the ways in which songs circulate. Instead of depending exclusively on traditional promotional strategies or the recognition of an artist, many tracks gain visibility through their inclusion in popular playlists or automated recommendations.

In this scenario, the logic of consumption tends to favor individual songs that have the potential to circulate in different listening contexts. In some cases, certain tracks achieve great popularity even without being associated with a widely recognized album. This reinforces the idea that music, in the digital environment, increasingly circulates as an autonomous unit of consumption.

Additionally, the constant presence of recommendations and suggestions in platform interfaces stimulates forms of listening based on continuity and flow. After a song ends, new tracks are automatically played, keeping the user within a continuous cycle of consumption. This dynamic reduces the need for deliberate choices by the listener while simultaneously increasing exposure to different musical contents.

From the perspective of cultural practices, this model reinforces a more fluid and dynamic relationship with music. Listeners can quickly move between artists, styles, and periods without necessarily establishing a structured sequence of listening. Music thus becomes part of a broader flow of digital content circulating continuously in users' daily lives.

5 YOUTH AND NEW FORMS OF RELATIONSHIP WITH MUSIC

Transformations in listening practices become particularly visible among younger audiences, who have grown up in a context marked by the constant presence of digital technologies. For these users, access to music through streaming platforms often constitutes the main form of contact with musical content.

In this scenario, the relationship with music tends to develop within the logics of digital platforms themselves, where navigation through playlists, recommendations, and suggested content plays a central role. The discovery of new music frequently occurs incidentally, through suggestions presented by platforms or through content shared on social networks.

This process contributes to many young listeners establishing relationships with specific songs without necessarily following the complete production of particular artists. Listening may focus on isolated tracks that become popular in certain cultural contexts or digital platforms.

Another relevant aspect concerns the integration of music with other digital experiences. In environments marked by the intense circulation of audiovisual content, music often appears associated with videos, memes, and cultural trends circulating across networks. In this context, certain songs gain visibility not only due to their musical characteristics but also because of their insertion within dynamics of sharing and viralization.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that the fragmentation of music consumption does not necessarily imply a decline in interest in music. On the contrary, many young listeners demonstrate strong engagement with specific artists, genres, or musical scenes. What is observed is a change in the ways this interest is accessed and organized, now occurring within a digital environment characterized by an abundance of content and multiple paths for discovery.

Thus, the fragmentation of music consumption may be understood less as a sign of disinterest and more as a reflection of structural transformations in the contemporary media ecosystem. Digital technologies expand the possibilities for accessing and circulating music while simultaneously redefining the ways individuals relate to it.

6 CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF MUSICAL FRAGMENTATION

The transformations observed in music consumption practices also raise relevant questions about the cultural role of music in contemporary society. Whereas in earlier periods the album often functioned as the central unit of musical production and enjoyment, in the streaming era this role appears to be gradually replaced by more flexible and fragmented forms of organizing listening.

This change may impact both listeners' experiences and the strategies of production and distribution adopted by artists and the music industry. In an environment where individual songs circulate more easily than complete works, the release of singles or isolated tracks seeking visibility on digital platforms has become increasingly common.

At the same time, some artists continue to invest in the production of albums conceived as structured works, preserving the traditional narrative logic of this format. This scenario highlights the coexistence of different models of musical production and consumption, which interact in various ways within the digital ecosystem.

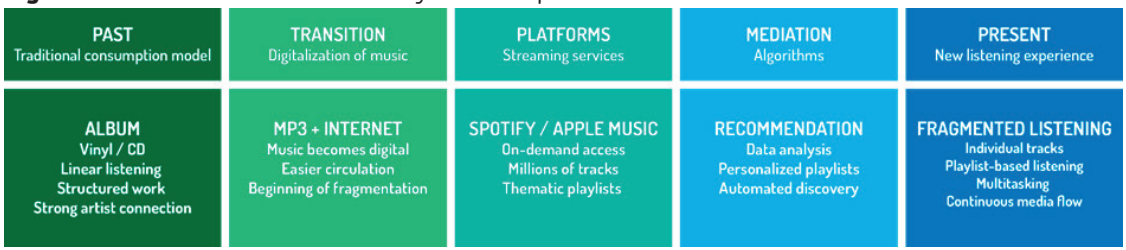
From the perspective of the Humanities and Social Sciences, analyzing these transformations allows for a better understanding of how digital technologies reconfigure established cultural practices (Jen-

kins, 2006). Music, as an artistic expression and symbolic object, offers a privileged field for observing changes in the forms of cultural production, circulation, and consumption in contemporary society.

Thus, the fragmentation of music consumption in the streaming era does not merely represent a change in individual listening preferences but reflects broader transformations in the technological, economic, and cultural structures that organize access to music. Understanding these dynamics contributes to expanding the debate about the relationships between technology, culture, and social practices within the context of digital culture.

Finally, in order to visually represent the analysis developed in this study, Figure 1 is presented below as a visual summary of the discussions addressed throughout this work.

Figure 1 – Visual abstract of the analysis developed



Source: Prepared by the authors (2026).

7 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The technological transformations that have occurred in recent decades have brought significant changes to the ways music is produced, circulated, and consumed. The consolidation of digital streaming platforms has profoundly altered how individuals access musical content, expanding the reach of available catalogs and offering new ways of organizing the listening experience. In this context, relevant changes can be observed in the cultural practices associated with music consumption, particularly with regard to the fragmentation of listening and the relative loss of the album's centrality as the structuring unit of the musical experience.

Throughout this article, the aim was to discuss how the expansion of digital platforms and the growing presence of algorithmic recommendation systems contribute to the reconfiguration of contemporary listening practices. The analysis indicates that music increasingly circulates as an autonomous unit of consumption, often inserted into playlists, personalized recommendations, and continuous playback flows. Within this model, the experience of listening to music tends to shift from the logic of the structured work to a logic of fragmented circulation of individual tracks.

This process is directly related to the characteristics of the contemporary digital environment, marked by an abundance of content, the logic of informational flow, and the central role of digital platforms as mediators of access to culture. The interfaces of these platforms, organized through thematic

playlists, automated suggestions, and continuous playback, encourage forms of listening that are more fluid and less dependent on the original structure of albums. In this sense, the fragmentation of music consumption should not be understood merely as the result of individual user preferences, but also as a consequence of the technological and organizational dynamics that structure digital environments.

Another relevant aspect concerns the changes in the forms of relationship between audiences and artists. In the context of digital platforms, contact with music often occurs through recommendations or playlist insertions, which may lead listeners to become familiar with certain tracks without necessarily establishing longer-lasting connections with an artist's complete body of work. This dynamic reinforces the circulation of individual songs and contributes to a listening experience characterized by diversity and the constant alternation between different artists and styles.

Among younger audiences, these practices appear to be particularly evident, since much of their musical experience occurs within the ecosystem of digital platforms. Listening frequently intersects with other everyday activities, such as the use of social media, urban mobility, or the performance of simultaneous tasks. In this scenario, music may assume different functions, ranging from an object of aesthetic enjoyment to an element of ambient sound accompanying users' daily practices.

However, it is important to emphasize that the fragmentation of music consumption does not necessarily imply the disappearance of the album as a cultural format. Although digital platforms encourage listening practices based on playlists and recommendations, many artists continue to invest in the production of albums conceived as structured works. In this sense, there is a coexistence of different models of musical production and consumption that reflect both the traditions of the phonographic industry and the new dynamics introduced by digital technologies.

From the perspective of the Humanities and Social Sciences, the analysis of transformations in music consumption offers a valuable opportunity to understand broader changes in contemporary cultural practices. Music constitutes a privileged field for observing how digital technologies, platforms, and algorithms influence forms of access to culture, redefining the relationships between works, artists, and audiences.

Thus, understanding the fragmentation of music consumption in the streaming era contributes to expanding the debate on the cultural dynamics of contemporary society. In this sense, this article argues that the fragmentation of music consumption should be understood not merely as a change in listening habits, but as a structural transformation in the cultural logic of music, in which platforms, algorithms, and interfaces actively reshape how music is experienced and valued. Digital platforms not only facilitate access to music but also reconfigure the ways in which listening is discovered, organized, and experienced. These transformations reveal how cultural practices adapt to new technological infrastructures, highlighting the need to continue investigating the impacts of digital platforms on the forms of cultural production and consumption.

Finally, it should be emphasized that this article sought to offer an initial reflection on this phenomenon from a theoretical and interpretative perspective. Future studies may deepen this discussion through empirical research investigating, for example, the listening habits of different generational groups, the strategies of musical curation on digital platforms, or users' own perceptions of their music consumption

practices. Such investigations may contribute to a more detailed understanding of the multiple cultural, social, and technological dimensions involved in contemporary transformations of music consumption.

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