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# The Socialization Experience at a Silent Disco

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## Abstract

The infusion of digital devices into everyday life influences the way one seeks information, feedback, and connectedness (Deuze, 2012). Media device use enables connectability anytime, anyplace, and anywhere; therefore creating the potential desire for customized experiences among users. The purpose of this research brief is to understand how media transforms leisure activities by focusing on an emerging event, the silent disco. In a silent disco, participants can customize their experience by choosing what, where, and how they experience the music through the use of wireless headphones. Two research questions were investigated: (a) how do people engage in socialization at silent discos, and (b) in relationship to social interaction, how does the silent disco differ from the music festival experience. Through an interpretive phenomenology approach involving interviews with 25 participants at Amsterdam's Pitch Festival, this paper discusses the experience through two themes: control of the experience and the individual, collective experience.

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Within the last decade, a new music experience has emerged on the landscapes of traditional music festivals and electronic dance music (EDM) festivals. The silent disco, a dance music experience using wireless FM headphones to transmit music, has become a popular feature within music festivals and special events. The research on this particular type of event is limited, with many aspects of the event experience unknown. More specifically, how the process of socialization is affected by the mediatization of the music experience is lacking. Mediatization, or the transformation of an activity through the use of media or media devices (Krotz, 2009), is transforming the landscape of music festivals with an engaged, technological audience seeking personalized media experiences. This mediatized leisure activity results in the media-based social solitude experience in which participants are alone together through the use of a mobile media device (Barnett & van Driel, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this research brief is to describe the essence of the silent disco experience among the Millennials attending the Pitch Festival in Amsterdam.

**The Millennial Generation**

Millennials, those born between 1980 and 2000, have grown up in a completely wired world, using all available electronic means for communication (Downing, 2006). Eight "norms" of Millennials include: (a) freedom of choice and variety, (b) customization of experiences and purchases, (c) scrutiny, (d) integrity, (e) collaboration, (f) entertainment, (g) speed of answers, decisions, and action, and (h) innovation (Tapscott, 2009). Millennials use and manipulate media in an intuitive way (e.g., Snapchat). They use technology for everyday activities including work, school and leisure (Nielsen & NM Incite, 2012).

Having grown up with personal computers in households or schools, the sense of connection for this generation is one of always having access to the Internet via landline connections or Wi-Fi (Tapscott, 2009). One method in which connections are frequently made is with the use of mobile smartphones (CTIA Everything Wireless, 2015). Connectivity in the U.S. is important; therefore, wireless companies cover 99% of the population in 4G networks (CTIA Everything Wireless, 2015). The unlimited accessibility to others through mobile device use in turn can create a desire to keep those connections. Turkle (2011) stated:

Our neurochemical response to every ping and ring tone seems to be the one elicited by the 'seeking' drive, a deep motivation of the human psyche. Connectivity becomes a craving; when we receive a text or an email, our nervous system responds by giving us a shot of dopamine. We are stimulated by connectivity itself (p. 227).

This seeking drive may provide the context for the general need for immediacy or urgency to gain information quickly or to respond fast (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). Providing expansive wireless coverage can encourage the emergence of new media that can affect leisure activities. The accessibility, desirability, and mobility of media have provided new opportunities that help build relationships through mediatized leisure activities, such as a silent disco.

**A Mediatized Leisure Activity: The Silent Disco**

Socialization, the act of learning the necessary attributes for membership associated with a group, community, or organization, requires communication (Gardner, 2010). The daily interactions between people can occur from traditional face-to-face to the modern mediatized format. Face-to-face communication has been a basic human practice that relies on facial gestures, body posture, and language to send and receive messages between one another. When media is implemented in communication, three forms can emerge: (a) mediated interpersonal communication (e.g., instant messaging), (b) interactive communication (e.g., Skype), and (c) mass communication (e.g., news broadcast) (Krotz, 2009). According to Krotz (2009), the larger mass media induced forms of social and cultural life is termed mediatization. Mediatization is the continuous "process whereby communication refers to media and uses media so that media in the long run increasingly become relevant for the social construction of everyday life, society, and culture as a whole" (Krotz, 2009, p. 24). Mediatization can influence our individual and collective lives (Hepp & Krotz, 2008; Schulz, 2004).

Direct mediatization is the conversion of a traditionally non-mediated activity to a mediated one, thus the activity interacts through media in order to conduct the activity (Hjarvard, 2008). In the activity of an electronic dance music (EDM) festival, the festival requires an interaction with the environment (e.g., bar, seating, dance areas) and the participants (e.g., dancers, musicians/DJs,

spectators, employees). The EDM festival allows individuals to engage with others in face-to-face communication. In direct mediatization, the traditionally non-mediated EDM festival is transformed through the use of headphones to listen to the music being transmitted via multiple FM channels, becoming a silent disco. Thus, the activity remains the same (listening to music and dancing), but the communication at the festival is mediatized because the disc jockey and silent disco participants are wearing headphones. Since socialization requires communication, mediatization impacts relationships and interaction due to the increase in media use in everyday encounters (Hepp & Krotz, 2008).

Due to ever-evolving media, new forms of traditionally non-mediated activities are being developed. The silent disco is a new experience within the electronic dance music festival landscapes primarily in Great Britain and Europe, specifically countries such as Holland and Germany. It is, however, gaining popularity at large music festivals, universities, and private parties around the world (Silva, n.d.). Although its founder is unknown, silent disco began during the turn of the millennium. Some suggested its origin dating to 2002 when two disc jockeys (DJs) organized the first silent disco by gathering people at a secret location within a larger music festival, De Parade in the Netherlands (433FM.com, 2013). Unbeknownst to other festival participants, the music being transmitted via FM channels was not heard, due to the use of wireless headphones, ultimately avoiding noise ordinances and allowing the party and music to go later into the night and early morning. Others insist the creation was of "headphone discos" in Germany, and the idea was stolen while the creator was looking for investors (Silva, n.d.).

Regardless of who gets credit, the silent disco and the customization of a social experience for each individual even though they may be experiencing the event as a collective, provides the context for the concept of media-based social solitude. Media-based social solitude can be defined as the act of being alone together virtually or physically with others through the use of mobile media devices (Barnett & van Driel, 2016). This definition evolved from Coleman's (2009) concept of social solitude by recognizing the additional influence of mobile media devices in shared, yet individual experiences. Similar to the silent disco experience, social solitude is "a socially-shaped,

structurally-given kind of solitude in company" (Coleman, 2009, p. 765). Silent disco arenas provide a space in which people can interact without the conflict of amplified sound or be alone in their experience.

Since the adoption of the Walkman, people have been creating personal discos while walking the streets, waiting for friends, or in shopping malls. To Bull (2005), individuals have created "accompanied solitude" through the use of digital devices such as mp3 players as they move through an environment (p. 343). Only with the addition of simultaneous transmission of FM radio frequencies to wireless headphones, the previous individual dance party became a group individualized dance party. As one participant at a silent disco in Germany wrote, "dancing to 'no music' looks funny and weird but when you put the silent disco headphones on, the whole world changes. You became the funny one and a weirdo too :-)" (Silva, n.d.). Everyone, regardless of how silly they may look and feel, is in the experience together, and yet the experience is different. In essence, the silent disco alters the level of noise to a low volume so that traditional communication has the potential to occur when headphones are removed. This process may enhance the socialization process even though the headphones create the illusion of multiple experiences occurring together in one location.

To understand how mediatization affects socialization at a silent disco, the following study was conducted and analyzed based on the following research questions.

1.    How do people engage in socialization at silent discos?
2.    In relationship to social interaction, how does the silent disco differ from the music festival experience?

**Methods**

This study was an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) to understanding the social interactions of individuals attending the Pitch Music Festival in Amsterdam, Netherlands, over the course of two evenings. IPA allows the researcher to interact with and observe the lived experience of participants in the natural environment of a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). Through the use of this approach, individual or groups' shared experiences can be

investigated without the use of intrusive methods by focusing on interviews and observations. The Institutional Review Board approved this study.

**Data Collection**

Pitch Festival participants were the target population for the study. An estimated 1,000 participants attended the silent disco events each evening at the Pitch Festival. Participants who exited the silent disco event space were eligible for an interview. A total of 25 respondents agreed to be interviewed, including ten males and fifteen females. The average age of the respondents was 25.1 (SD= 7.56), and the average number of silent discos attended annually was 2.52 (range 0 to 9). Respondents were primarily from the Netherlands (n=21), with a few international respondents from Germany, Great Britain, and Hungary.

The Pitch Festival held at *Westergasfabriek* in Amsterdam promotes new artists in the genres of electronic dance music. The flow of movement within the festival forced participants to pass the tented silent disco arena. Upon entering the tent, participants received a set of FM headphones with two channel options. The headphones were then placed on the participants' heads and turned to the appropriate channel. On both evenings, there was only one disc jockey spinning music, resulting in only one channel option for participants. According to the line-up, there was supposed to be two disc jockeys on the second evening of the event, but due to mechanical failure, only one could be transmitted. Participants danced to the music, sang along, and participated in DJ-led activities, such as "raise your hands in the air" or "now scream." Once the participants were finished listening to the music, they would remove and return the headphones, then depart the tent.

Upon exiting the tent, the researcher approached participants with the request to take part in a brief interview. Each interview started with the same two questions, a) what attracted you to the silent disco this evening; b) please describe your experience socializing in the silent disco arena. Utilizing semi-structured interview questions allowed the researcher to ask specific follow-up questions based on the respondent's responses to the first two questions. A final set of eight event quality questions and socio-demographics were collected at the end of the interview to be used for descriptive purposes.

**Data Analysis**

Respondents' responses were audio-recorded, transcribed, and statements were coded for themes. Strategies were taken to enhance the credibility of this qualitative research. Careful examination was taken to find similarities in responses across respondents in the development of the themes. The themes were then described to capture the essence of the silent disco experience. Utilizing "rich and thick verbatim" from respondents to support the themes are provided in the findings (Noble & Smith, 2015). The socio-demographic questions were analyzed using SPSS 22.0 to gather descriptive statistics (e.g.. gender, age, and satisfaction).

### Findings

Two main themes emerged from the data to explain the silent disco socialization experience: (a) control of the experience and (b) the individual, collective experience. Even though socializing at an electronic dance music festival is not necessarily the primary purpose of attending, it is still a part of the process of creating shared experiences with others. Socializing during a music festival can be difficult due to the volume of the music. Since the silent disco removes the open-air sound from the environment, the opportunity to have relatively easy conversation with others is present. But was the socialization process enhanced through the silent disco experience, considering the insertion of a mobile media device?

**Theme 1: Control of the Experience**

Headphones allowed control over the interaction among respondents, including face-to-face communication. A 27-year-old male indicated the ability to control the level of communication by wearing headphones. Regarding the interaction with others he stated,

> They just take them off and walk up to you and you start talking back...It's really easy like this. Because when you keep it on, it's like no, no attention-- just walk by me, or take it off and let someone in....

Another 29-year-old male confirmed,

… When you are doing a silent disco…you can take your headphones off at any time and have a little conversation....

The majority of the respondents felt that the experience of communicating with others is relatively "normal" in that the same social cues such as hand signals, mouthing words, and the use of eye contact to convey the need to converse were used. The modes of communication between individuals who knew each other for long periods of time were different from those communicating with strangers. Familiarity of social cues among friends provided an ease of communication. However, communicating with strangers was somewhat more complicated and required confidence and the ability to be assertive. A 29-year-old male indicated he physically removes the headphones of another person to talk with them. A 20-year-old female would use eye contact, smile and remove her headset to signal that she wanted to talk to that individual. There were a few respondents who indicated they were not participating in the silent disco to talk to people but to dance, so they would talk after leaving the tent.

### Theme 2:  The Individual, Collective Experience

Media-based social solitude is defined as the act of being alone together, either virtually or physically, through the use of a mobile media device (Barnett & van Driel, 2016). Through the interviews, it was clear that the silent disco experience is one in which there is a paradoxical feeling of being both together with others and alone in the experience. Due to the nature of the single disc jockey silent disco, there was a greater sense of collectiveness among the respondents as they all listened to the same channel. Yet, each of those respondents also made some comment that indicated a feeling of isolation or being alone:

> Everyone's in their own world…It's like being on drugs…everybody's on their own world…but in a local community so everybody's like in a bubble...over lots of bubbles. …So, it's like being on your own but being social. (20-year-old Female)

> I don't like having been isolated [due to the headphones]... it seems like they [the people] are all in the same vibe. (31-year-old Male)

It's really like restricted… if you take them [headphones] off, you will not experience [what] others are [experiencing]. (21-year-old Female)

Because you have the headphones on it makes it less personal, which is nice in a way, because you are more individual this way, which I think it adds to the idea of the silent disco where you can just be yourself and go nuts. (24-year-old Male)

[The silent disco] is a way to experience music and collectiveness, but then you can step out of it and step into it whenever you want to. (21-year-old Female)

Other keywords used to describe the collective experience were "very intimate," "shared," "connectedness," and "collective." Feelings of being alone were described as being in a "little shell," "isolated," "bubbles," "avoid interaction," "less personal," and feelings of being an "outsider." Wanting to have the same experience at the Pitch Festival was apparent as a 21-year old female explained, "…there are so many people who take their headphones off, and when you take them off, then your friends feel obliged to take them off [too], because they want to share your experience…it's all about sharing the same experience…" This may be unique to the silent discos at the Pitch Festival as there was only one disc jockey, but may not be the case at other silent discos where at least two disc jockeys are present. By having more options, there may be less chance to be on the "same level."

Therefore, the essence of a silent disco experience is the ability to control the way in which an individual experiences the event based on the mediatization of the activity by using wireless headphones and the paradoxical experience of an individualistic and collective experience. Over 50% of the respondents were satisfied with the silent disco experience at the Pitch Festival. For most of the individuals, the silent disco experience is considered to be a fun enhancement to the larger music festival experience. As one respondent indicated, "It's a fun thing at the end of the night or something extra," however, this individual would not pay to attend a silent disco on its own. This form of simple entertainment allows individuals to participate in

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media-based social solitude as an added benefit to the non-mediatized music performances the music festivals provide.

The exploratory nature of this interpretive phenomenological study have provided some insight that has associations to previous studies conducted on other alternative music experiences, such as raves. The paradoxical experience of being alone together was a result of findings from an ethnographic study on raves, in which participants were collectively experiencing the rave but only as individuals connecting to the "broader level of collective association" of other ravers during the actual event (Moore, 1995, p. 207). The communication about the experience within group members did not occur until after the event was over, unless the friends took simultaneous breaks during the event (Moore, 1995). Part of the reason for this type of alone together experience is due to the heavy use of drugs, loud music, and sometimes large crowds in a smaller venue (Moore, 1995). According to Moore (1995), the "rave is experienced personally (through one's own body) but in a uniquely and highly social, but non-verbal, environment (among other ravers, many of whom are strangers)" (p. 207). Similarly, the silent disco experience allows individuals to share the experience through non-verbal interaction while wearing the headphones, however they can talk to each other during the event if they so choose to do so by removing the headphones.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of two evenings of silent discos at the Pitch Festival in Amsterdam. The results revealed that the socializing experience at a silent disco is similar to that of main stage events. Headphones offered more control in how and when respondents communicated with others. Having control over the interaction allowed individuals the ability to focus solely on the music or on the socialization with others. For some, this sense of control enhanced the experience of listening to the music without interruption. Overall, respondents expressed the paradoxical feeling of being alone together in an experience, the media-based social solitude. To assess the relevancy of the experiences found at silent discos, more research on mediatized leisure experiences of Millennials and the facilitation of activities involving media-based social solitude is needed. Future

research in this area may provide valuable insight into adapting leisure experiences toward the needs and wants of the second largest generation, the Millennials. Understanding these experiences can also help event planners enhance the service delivery of any music-related event.

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