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Published in:

Poetics. Journal of Empirical Research on Culture, the Media and the Arts

Publication status and date:

Published: 01/04/2024

DOI (link to publisher):

[10.1016/j.poetic.2023.101782](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2023.101782)

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Citation for the published version (APA):

Vandenberg, F., & Berghman, M. (2024). The show must go on (line). Livestreamed concerts and the hyper-ritualisation of genre conventions. *Poetics. Journal of Empirical Research on Culture, the Media and the Arts*, 103, Article 101782. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2023.101782>

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Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Poetics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/poetic

The show must go on(line): Livestreamed concerts and the hyper-ritualisation of genre conventions

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Livestreams
Large-scale interaction rituals
Context collapse
Hyper ritual
Genre conventions
COVID-19

ABSTRACT

This paper examines audience engagement at livestreamed concerts, a form of mediatised cultural consumption that saw an immense growth in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Concerts, as events that draw large groups of people with similar intentions, are the perfect location for the establishment of large-scale interaction rituals – moments of group behaviour characterised by a highly intense collective emotion. Furthermore, as social occasions, concerts are organised around a set of routine interactions that construct and define the collective experience. We argue that in moving online, the definition of the (concert) situation is highly impaired due to a context collapse. In comparing two distinct audiences (classical and Dutch popular music), the first aim of this research is to explore how these differing audiences adapt their cultural behaviour to the virtual sphere. Secondly, by adopting a microsociological perspective, we aim to broaden the theoretical understanding of virtual large-scale interaction rituals, an area becoming increasingly important due to the growth in online communication. This paper uses discourse analysis of the synchronised comments, left on livestreamed concerts on Facebook Live ($n = 2,075$), to examine the interaction between audience members. We find that both classical and Dutch popular music audiences use a form of hyper-ritualised interaction. In an attempt to combat the plurality of meanings online, they explicitly refer back to the central conventions of the face-to-face concert. This emphasises not only the significance of genre conventions, but also presents a form of virtual interaction distinct from interpersonal interaction.

1. Introduction

The past few decades have seen music consumption become progressively more digitally-mediated, with streaming platforms such as Spotify, SoundCloud, Deezer and YouTube rapidly becoming the most popular ways of listening to recorded music (Airoldi et al., 2016; Hesmondhalgh, 2020). However, when it comes to live music, digital platforms long remained supplementary to the place-based concert scene (Bennett & Peterson, 2004; Schaap & Berkers, 2014). This largely changed with the COVID-19 measures that spanned across Europe from mid-March 2020. Concerts of all shapes and sizes – like all other large gatherings of people – were put on hold for the foreseeable future. As a consequence, the transition of live music to the virtual sphere saw an immense acceleration (Hansen et al., 2021), with livestreams proving a popular means for artists to continue performing for their fans.

What sets music concerts apart from recorded music is that they are social events. Taking place in public space, they allow for

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2023.101782>

Received 15 February 2022; Received in revised form 4 March 2023; Accepted 19 April 2023

Available online 11 May 2023

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interaction between the participants (Kjus & Danielsen, 2014) – both on a small-scale (interpersonal communication) and large-scale (crowd behaviour). Online, however, the spatial and temporal dimensions characteristic of large-scale forms of interaction change drastically. Taking into account two important lines of the micro-sociological tradition, in this study we aim to add to the theoretical understanding of mediated live music consumption, an understudied yet increasingly important area of cultural engagement.

On the one hand, Goffmanian dramaturgical sociology proposes that interaction is governed by rituals – mutually understood rules of behaviour (Goffman, 1967). In concerts, these are based on certain genre conventions, guiding participants in how they behave and engage with the event (Frith, 1996; Koren, 2022). Conventions thus work as a means to define and maintain the (concert) situation (Becker, 1982; Hughes, 2000).

However, according to a Durkheimian approach – another important sub-branch of micro-sociological thinking (Turner & Stets, 2006) – conventions have an additional function for interaction. Collectively participating in common actions can also attune the behaviour of participants, resulting in an intense collective emotion (Durkheim, 1995, [1912]). The ritual activities deriving from genre conventions (such as a customary dance or applauding on cue, to name a few) allow the audience to become *rhythmically entrained*, emotionally and cognitively synchronising (Collins, 2004). It is in these moments that the audience can experience a group based *collective effervescence* – an intensely felt shared excitement (Collins, 2004; Horsfall, 2013; Liebst, 2019; Vandenberg et al., 2021). Thus, while small-scale interaction – between new or old acquaintances – is no doubt an important part of any music event, it is the large-scale collective engagement that makes concerts so attractive.

Both micro-sociological approaches were coined originally in relation to face-to-face (F2F) encounters, presenting interaction rituals as “essentially a bodily process” (Collins, 2004, p. 53). Interaction, from the dramaturgical perspective, relies on situationally dependent impression management (Goffman, 1959), but online the space of interaction is generally a chat feed characterised by ‘context collapse’ as ‘people, information, and norms from one context seep into the bounds of another’ (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014, p. 477). While this can then cater for sociability, it poses a challenge to maintain a distinct social context that feeds particular expectations of behaviour (boyd, 2007; Gil-Lopez et al., 2018). In turn, collective rhythmic entrainment presumes that ritualised actions become synchronised (Collins, 2004, 2020). However, in a chat feed this is challenged by the sequential order of comments, resulting in a ‘time collapse’ (Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018, p. 7).

The evident discrepancies between live and livestreamed concerts, has led to a recent increase in studies concerning livestreamed music. Both cross-sectional (Swarbrick et al., 2021) and experimental research (Onderdijk et al., 2021) has documented the experience of concert livestreams and its impact on feelings of social connectedness amongst audience members, making clear that livestreams add something in this respect when compared to recorded music. However, these studies have relied primarily on self-reported feelings of their respondents, with little attention to the interactional nature of livestream participation. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to our understanding of virtual large-scale interaction rituals through directly analysing the interaction seen amongst audiences of livestreamed concerts.

As live chat features provide the predominant means of sociability at livestreamed concerts, this paper uses a qualitative discourse analysis ($n = 2075$) to examine the content and organisation of synchronous comments on livestreamed concerts. We compare the behaviour of two audiences with vastly differing cultural expectations and genre conventions, namely ‘levenslied’ (a popular Dutch music genre, sang in the native language), and classical music. In doing so, this paper does not contrast the offline and online musical experience (which we acknowledge to be very different) but aims to find patterns in how different cultural audiences adapt to the virtual sphere.

When analysing the audience interaction on these livestreamed concerts we find an explicitation of conventions. Rituals common to the F2F concert become hyper-ritualised (Goffman, 1979). Similar to mass media messaging, participants of large-scale interaction rituals compensate for the plurality of reading by symbolically representing the most ideal typical behaviour. They utilise their knowledge of physical concerts in an active effort to manage context collapse. Central genre conventions are confirmed in this way, but as the conventional behaviour is symbolised rather than performed, it hardly results in collective ritual interactions.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Interaction rituals

Scholars have long noted the importance of rituals as fundamental components to human interaction (see, for example, Collins, 2004; Durkheim, 1995, [1912]; Goffman, 1967; Wuthnow, 1989). In this paper we adopt two theoretical lenses in understanding the dynamics of human interaction, one deriving from a Durkheimian and the other a more Goffmanian approach – both influential figures for micro-sociological thinking and the sociology of emotions (Turner & Stets, 2006).

Goffman, perhaps the most notable thinker of interaction, broadened the conceptual scope of the sacred character of rituals to encompass also everyday secular activities. For Goffman, rituals are the routine aspects of behaviour that people adopt during an encounter (Goffman, 1967). These interaction rituals provide the norms befitting the situation. Encounters require a level of ordinance, where participants must signal the correct understanding of and involvement in the situation. “A fundamental interactional goal is to sustain a collectively shared definition of the situation enabling participants to decode normative expectations and to adjust behaviour accordingly” (Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2015, p. 70). It is thus through these ritual interactions that a social encounter is defined and maintained. Each interaction ritual requires a different performance from the participants, with individuals acting in accordance with the social setting (Goffman, 1959). Participants hold skills in knowing which aspect of themselves to present, depending on the situation in which they find themselves. This *impression management* is accomplished verbally, but also through body language, facial expressions, as well as material ‘props’ (Turner & Stets, 2006).

Although the performative aspect of social encounters is helpful to understand the organisation of large-scale gatherings, it does not make clear the appeal of these events. To do so we must include thinking from the Durkheimian tradition. In this line of conceptualisation, Collins (2004) reverts back to Durkheim's original thinking in emphasising that a key motivation for social exchange is the emotional energy it brings to participants. The appeal of engaging in a large event, such as concerts but also football games and religious ceremonies, is the experience of collective effervescence. He names a number of ingredients that are needed for a successful and emotionally intense interaction, the most important being bodily copresence and rhythmic entrainment – a coordination of behaviour between participants that leads to cognitive and emotional synchronisation (Collins, 2004). More recently, the physicality of “copresence”, has been questioned, with Campos-Castillo and Hitlin (2013 p. 169) stating that “copresence is the perception of mutual entrainment between actors, where entrainment is the mutual synchronisation of three components: attention, emotion, and behaviour”. In this conception, copresence is seen not as sharing the same physical space, but as reaching a state of rhythmic entrainment and is thus dependent on the successful signalling of emotional and behavioural cues, without the requirement of physical togetherness necessarily.

While Collins makes little distinction between the “large-scale Durkheimian rituals and the smaller-scale Goffmanian interaction rituals” (Ling, 2008), it is presumed that for either to be successful, rhythmic entrainment is needed. For small-scale interaction (interpersonal communication), turn taking and small acknowledgements, whether verbally or through gestures, attune interlocutors to one another. For large-scale encounters the audience synchronises predominantly through the visual sights and sounds of an excited crowd sharing an emotional state. During concerts, the music plays an important role in establishing rhythmic entrainment by synchronising actions – such as dancing, clapping, and singing. It is this effect that makes music a “hotline to collective consciousness” (Horsfall, 2013), being used in countless large-scale interaction rituals – protests, rallies, religious ceremonies, and sports games – as a tool to foster intersubjectivity.

2.2. Music and behavioural conventions

Music plays an important role in the formation of social life. It can act as a framing device, helping to establish not only personal but also social meaning. DeNora (2000, p. 123) writes that “music is [...] part of the cultural material through which ‘scenes’ are constructed, scenes that afford different kinds of agency, different sorts of pleasure and ways of being”. The materiality of the music played at a given moment helps to make sense of the occasion, directly affecting one's actions. For example, changing the soundtrack of a dinner party from a smooth trip-hop playlist to '80s sing-along classics can drastically change guests' behaviour, with the music altering not only their bodily movements (from sitting to standing), but also their attitudes and general mood. According to Small (1999), any engagement with music is fundamentally social, leading to his suggestion that rather than focusing on music (as an outcome), the emphasis should be on the activity of ‘musicking’.

The relevance of this is hard to deny when looking at live music events in particular. In line with Small's (1999) ideas on ‘musicking’, the music's materiality is not the only factor that shapes the behaviour of the people present. Although music serves as a point of focus for the gathered crowd, as social occasions, concerts are the scene of a multitude of interactions where participants put on a performance appropriately attuned to the situation. Becker (1982) furthers this point by emphasising the importance of genre conventions in the construction of meaning. These stereotypical characteristics of a cultural form are used by an audience as a reference to make sense of the cultural product and, subsequently, as guidelines of how to perform. Every music event will thus have its own social and cultural context, with corresponding rules and practices (about how to behave, how to dress and which substances to consume), largely depending on the genre of the music (Frith, 1996). Tying seamlessly to Goffmanian thinking, the definition of the (concert) situation is not an individual act of either artist or organiser but is dependent on the cooperation of all individuals involved. Through impression management and the staging of ritualised activities, the participants demonstrate a collective meaning and understanding, leading to the formation of a distinctive cultural form (Hughes, 2000). In sum, music concerts are distinct not just for the music's material composition, but for everything that they encompass; the manner of audience engagement, its affordances, and reasons for appreciation. Conventions constitute interaction rituals and in turn, the enactment of interaction rituals also reproduces conventions. Although this means that genres are redefined constantly and may change more noticeably over time (as can be seen in the evolution of jazz, for instance [Peterson, 1972]), interaction rituals also stabilise genres in terms of engagement and expectations, leading to characteristics that are recognisable for participants and external observers alike.

Even though differences in audience engagement between genres are manifold and the scale and social morphology of an event is likely to bear on audience behaviour (Swartjes & Vandenberg, 2022), a clear distinction can be seen between concerts that cater for active audience engagement (in the form of dancing, singing along, or clapping) and those for audiences that primarily engage in listening (often also seated). For example, Benzecry and Collins (2014) notice that opera fanatics are in fact somewhat reluctant towards overly manifest outbursts of emotion during a concert. Opera audiences prioritise live performance over recorded music, but they opt for an introspective experience and deliberately distance themselves from displays of uncontrolled emotion. The “hush of attention before the orchestra starts, the collective focus on the musicians, [form] the subjective feelings of the ritual experience” (Collins, 2004: 59–60), however, the social emotion obtained is expressed in an individualised manner. By contrast, events with standing audiences are much more aimed at a collective release of emotional energy, where individual audience members get swept up in the moment through the synchronised actions of an excited crowd (Vandenberg et al., 2021). To be sure, rather than belonging to either one category or the other, individual concerts are arguably likely to be situated on a spectrum, but in general terms, classical concerts (including chamber music, symphonic orchestras, opera and some jazz performances) will imply different patterns of ritual interaction compared to pop concerts or electronic dance events.

This distinction corresponds to common categorisations that sets the engagement with ‘highbrow’ apart from that of popular

culture (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1997; Peterson & Kern, 1996). While popular culture is argued to cater for immediate gratification, when participating in highbrow culture, a level of restraint is expected and the resulting pleasure is one of more inward contemplation. This also maps onto different audience motivations. Schulze (1992) in this respect distinguishes between cultural schemes. Here the highbrow scheme is characterised by a desire for intellectual stimulation. What is often considered popular culture, in Schulze's typology, is sub-divided into the pop scheme (aimed at entertainment and exciting experiences) and the folk scheme (using tradition to uphold sociability). Although the more fine-grained distinction between folk and pop is interesting, for our purposes it is primarily important to notice the contrast between the inward orientation at highbrow events (of which opera and classical music are the most prominent instances) and the more outgoing and social orientation of both pop and folk.

It should be noted that participation in any of these schemes is not necessarily exclusive. In contrast to how Bourdieu (1984) has generally been received, and as also asserted by the tradition of the cultural omnivore (Peterson & Kern, 1996; Van Eijck & Lievens, 2008; Van Eijck & Knulst, 2005), people may very well participate in a range of events. However, as genre conventions differ, audiences will have different motivations and engage in different interaction rituals depending on the setting.

2.3. Moving concerts to the virtual sphere

While Collins has conducted little empirical research into online communication, he is manifestly sceptical about the possible success of interaction rituals online. Collins (2004, 2014, 2020) heavily questioned the virtual world's ability to convey nuanced emotional communication. He states that due to the lack of bodily copresence "interaction mediated by telephone, internet, or other distant media, are weak in producing emotional amplification and micro-rhythmic entrainment, and thus generate less solidarity and emotional energy" (Collins, 2014, p. 309). So, while interaction rituals are to some extent possible online, he suggests that the intensity of "outcomes" – of solidarity and emotional energy – are diluted in comparison to what is possible in F2F encounters.

A further issue presents itself when considering that interaction on social media causes "context collapse", as social situations that are commonly separated merge into the same virtual space (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). In livestreamed concerts, the context collapse is largely due to an invisible audience. Mediated through a computer, laptop or phone screen, the interaction is no longer amongst participants, but between the individual participant and an abstracted representation of a person or group (Hogan, 2010). This directly affects impression management as individuals only have a name and small profile picture to work with. However, the anonymity online can also lead to new social dynamics with the weakening of social and symbolic boundaries (such as ticket price, but also gender, age, race and ethnicity). As traditional boundaries diminish, new audiences may be attracted, possibly challenging the usual conventions (Mueser & Vlachos, 2018; Schaap & Berkers, 2014).

Obtaining a clear definition of the situation is challenged further when considering the collapse of situational context (Haimson & Tang, 2017). When moved online, the concert's characteristics are concealed. The unique sensory features of a concert (such as the sound quality, the visual effects of lighting, the feel of the bass or the smell of stale beer) are reduced to the generic two-dimensional virtual space of the social networking service (SNS). The location, which would usually help in defining the situation for participants, loses its distinctiveness. In turn, this is likely to contribute to what Boyd (2008) named social convergence, where the public and private sphere collapse into one. While F2F concerts are set in clearly defined public spaces such as a festival ground or a concert hall, livestream participation tends to take place from a private space (a couch, a bed, a kitchen table, ...). This leads to the collision of two realities, usually kept distinct, with an individual's "backstage" merging with that of their "frontstage" (Goffman, 1959). This calls for engagement with multiple situations and multiple audiences at once, presenting more room for distraction and loss of focus (Radbourne et al., 2016).

The transition online complicates not only the establishment of context, but also impacts the form that interaction takes. Online, interaction must be accomplished almost exclusively through verbal (textual) communication. And while there is no doubt that the lack of non-verbal cues affects interpersonal conversations, an overall understanding can be reached through textual exchange (Meredith, 2019). However, the collective interaction (predominantly non-verbal – dancing, clapping, singing, and shouting together), characteristic of large-scale interaction rituals is also forced to be communicated through text. Even though livestream comments happen in 'real-time' (Skjuve & Brandtzaeg, 2019) – and are thus exchanged faster than Collins (2004) assumed in his initial writing on email correspondence – communicating ritual actions synchronously seems challenging when having to type out responses. In other words, apart from a change in the spatial dimension, livestreams also affect audience interaction along the temporal dimension. Through comparing the interaction between music audiences, with differing behaviour and interactional expectations, we aim to understand how participants navigate this context collapse and adapt their behaviour to the online setting.

Although Collins (2004) and Goffman (1967) both developed the concept of interaction rituals for F2F encounters, there has been a growing interest in virtual rituals, with scholars applying ritual theory to communication in games (Burroughs, 2014; Simpson et al., 2018), online dating (Nexo & Strandell, 2020), SNS (Bartholomew & Mason, 2020; Boyns & Loprieno, 2013), online forums (Dimaggio et al., 2018), and gaming livestreams (Jodén & Strandell, 2022; Wang & Li, 2020). In these papers, the online arena is presented as a social space where interaction rituals can unfold through a virtual copresence. These studies, however, focus on small-scale interaction – interpersonal communication between a few people online. Less is known about the virtual interaction of individuals participating in large-scale events, such as concerts.

3. Method

In this study, we analyse the social interaction seen on the chat section of livestreamed concerts on Facebook Live. Developed in 2016, Facebook Live is the livestreaming function of the online social networking service Facebook (Skjuve & Brandtzaeg, 2019). Any

registered Facebook user can stream and broadcast live footage from their personal profile. The user's followers can watch the stream, with the option of leaving comments in real-time in the chat function on the side. After the stream is complete, the video and its comments can be saved on the user's profile, where people can view it asynchronously afterwards. Facebook Live was chosen for this research as in 2020 (when the data was collected) it was an established livestreaming platform, used by a large and varied public (Sheffield, 2018).

The use of social media platforms as a source of data for qualitative research has been growing (Ditchfield & Meredith, 2018), with the data gathered there seen as a "novel tool to observe behaviour in a naturalistic setting" (Wilson et al., 2012, p. 203). Although this method of data collection does not give direct access to participants' motivations, our aim was to unobtrusively capture an uncontrived representation of an (online) situation (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014; Silverman, 2011), as Collins (2004, 2020) states that observation is the most appropriate manner for examining the dynamics of social interaction.

To study how virtual audiences adapt to the online concert setting, we compare livestreams from classical music and Dutch *levenslied*, two genres that had a limited online presence prior to the pandemic (compared to, for example, EDM or Anglo-American pop music). Moreover, these genres may be considered opposing in their behavioural and interactional expectations. While classical music is situated clearly in the highbrow scheme, *levenslied* combines elements of both the popular and folk scheme. It is a popular Dutch music genre, not dissimilar to German *schlager*, that took inspiration from traditional folk music (having roots in Dutch cabaret from the early 20th century), but nowadays borrows heavily from pop music and often uses electronic backing tracks. The songs are characterised by simple lyrics sung in the Dutch language, performed as sentimental ballads with a simple, catchy melody or upbeat tune.² Whether taking place in a small-scale setting (at private parties or bars) or at a large venue or festival, *levenslied* concerts are characterised by a large amount of audience engagement and a festive atmosphere, with audiences singing along, waving their hands, or doing the 'polonaise', a particular type of conga line (Vandenberg et al., 2021).

Given the focus on written communication, we chose to concentrate on Dutch based events only. In this way we could somewhat limit the international composition of the audience, thereby avoiding language barriers in communication. Moreover, as interaction rituals are to some extent region-specific, it restricted the possibility that audience members would have largely different expectations. Still, we would argue that the validity of our claims is not restricted to the Netherlands as such, as the types of events under consideration will have a counterpart in many countries.

In gathering the data for this research, the following sampling procedure was applied. After an extensive search of Facebook Live videos, posted after the initial lockdown (which started in the Netherlands on March 12th, 2020), we chose to focus our research on Facebook profiles run by professional Dutch music industry organisations such as established music venues, concert halls and radio stations. The reason for this is that these are public pages that play various artists and have a large public following. Second, the Facebook profile had to be dedicated solely to either classical music or *levenslied*. We focused on Facebook profiles that started posting livestreamed concerts of over 30 min regularly (at least weekly) after the initial lockdown. Finally, we restricted our search to profiles that received over 100 synchronous comments per video, so as to have a sufficient basis for analysing online interaction. This means that our analysis may not be extrapolated to livestreams that do not cater for online interaction. However, our purpose was to study the interactions taking place, rather than accounting for the factors conducive to interaction.

Fitting within these criteria, for our analysis we selected livestreams from the Facebook profiles of, i) an established classical music concert hall, and ii) a radio station specialising in *levenslied*. These organisations had in common that they only started providing concert livestreams (with audio and video registration) after the lockdown had started.³ Consent was not requested as these Facebook profiles are not restricted by privacy settings and participants are aware of the public nature (boyd, 2008; Ditchfield & Meredith, 2018; Skjuve & Brandtzaeg, 2019), but for the privacy of the viewers, the names of the profiles are kept anonymous.

To achieve a comparable sample of comments per genre, only the first five videos posted after the initial lockdown are used, spanning a period from 20 March until 17 April 2020. During this period, containment measures issued by the Dutch government remained largely unchanged. Concerts (and other large scale social events) were forbidden, restaurants and bars were only allowed to provide take-out services and remote education was installed for students from primary schools up to universities. People were urged to keep a distance of 1.5 m to others.

The final sample contained 2075 comments (classical music $n = 885$, *levenslied* $n = 1190$) (see Table 1 and Table 2). Comments left by viewers in Dutch were translated by the first author. When presented in the results, the original comments can be found in footnotes.

Inspired by Goffman's later work on the use of language in social interaction, discourse analysis is used to see how the participants use language to construct and frame their virtual concert experience (Tannen, 2009). We adopted an inductive approach, starting out with a thorough reading of the synchronous comments to become familiarised with the data. The comments are seen as social practices and thus we analysed both their content (what participants talk about) and organisation (how participants communicate) (Gill, 2000). An initial phase of coding was carried out, based on both the variability and consistency between the discourses used by the (classical and *levenslied*) audiences. This method allowed us to develop themes and patterns within the data, resulting in 24 code groupings.⁴ These groupings were then revised reflecting on the content and organisation of the comments. As regards the organisation of interaction, we paid attention specifically to the length of an interaction, distinguishing between *short interaction* (lasting only two

² Some of the big names in the past have included Johnny Jordaan and André Hazes. Today some well-known names include Frans Bauer, Jan Smit, Jannes, John West and Django Wagner.

³ Livestreamed performances kept a somewhat natural setup. For example, all performing artists were in the same physical space, but without a live audience.

⁴ The codebook used for this research can be found on Mendeley Data.

Table 1

Outline of analysed levenslied livestreams: comments, uploaded date, duration, and views (n = 1190).

Levenslied				
	Comments	Uploaded Date	Duration	views
	200	20 March	40:30	16,000
	350	21 March	1:01:54	27,000
	107	3 April	29:45	14,000
	290	10 April	49:36	25,000
	243	17 April	39:28	47,000
Mean	238			25,800
Total	1190			129,000

Table 2

Outline of analysed classical music livestreams: comments, uploaded date, duration, and views (n = 885).

Classical				
	Comments	Uploaded Date	Duration	views
	250	3 April	1:30:02	2300
	161	4 April	56:30	3100
	134	5 April	1:29:08	1100
	137	6 April	1:03:19	5200
	203	7 April	1:10:14	7200
Mean	177			3780
Total	885			18,900

comments) and *prolonged interaction* (lasting longer than two comments), while also taking into account how many individual audience members were involved. This resulted in three overarching themes that fall under content: i) ritual activities, ii) shared symbols, iii) expressed satisfaction/dissatisfaction of event, and three overarching themes that fall under organisation: i) interaction, ii) rhythmic entrainment, and iii) social/individual engagement. These themes are discussed in the results below.

4. Results

4.1. Content of comments

4.1.1. Expressions of ritual success

When looking at the content of the comments left on the livestreams, one might expect that the predominant topic of discussion would be the musical performance itself. Interestingly, however, it is only in the chat feed of the classical music livestreams that the performance and music's materiality is readily addressed, with 34%⁵ of all analysed comments acknowledging the music. For this audience, the aesthetic qualities of the livestreamed concert are a central focus of the chat feed, seen for example in comments such as:

"Fabulous play and dance, lovely music, great registration; thanks to each and every one of you all"

"I find the key changes so natural and smooth. Beautiful. I am enjoying [this] immensely"

"Beautifully layered. Beautiful balance between the fascinating music and the wonderful evening light through the windows"⁶

These comments not only display an enthusiasm for the livestreamed event, but also a broad command of language, expressing appreciation through refined and well considered vocabulary. Even when the comments are short – "layered beautifully", "brilliant composition!", "very colourful" and "beautiful physicality" – it is apparent that viewers are notably articulate in verbalising their appreciation, and discursively demonstrate an *aesthetic disposition* (Bourdieu, 1984). By contrast, the viewers of the levenslied livestreams rarely discuss the musical properties, with only 3% of comments acknowledging the specific performance. Although clear enjoyment of the livestreamed concert is seen (expressed through the written imitation of excited sounds, such as "OHJAAAA", "whoeeoeeoeeoee", and "tudududu"), little recognition is given to technical skill. This is further illustrated in the comments below:


"Fun in these sombre corona times"

"Better than watching the news"

⁵ Although the use of numbers in qualitative research is controversial, we use numeric representation throughout the results to "give precision to statements about the frequency, amount, or typicality" of important findings (Maxwell, 2010).

⁶ "Ik vind de stemmingswisselingen zo natuurlijk en soepel verlopen. Prachtig. Ik geniet enorm", "Prachtig gelaagd. Prachtige balans tussen de fascinerende muziek en het wonderschone avondlicht door de ramen"

“Music is always good for young and old. Together we are strong”

“This is doing good for us all in these times ⁷”

Rather than focusing on aspects of the performance, the levenslied livestreams are often discussed more as an event in itself; a break, distraction or release. Additionally, these chat feeds stand out in the extent to which conscious consideration is given to COVID-19, with 51 comments addressing the importance of these events in the given circumstances. At a time when the pandemic was in its initial phase, and a hot topic in public discussion, it is perhaps even more striking that this was rarely acknowledged in the classical music chat feeds (9 comments).

The positive and congenial tone of the comments left on the levenslied livestreams, however, cannot conceal the emphasis on lament for F2F concerts:

“I miss concerts, hope we can go again very soon”

“Go away corona, then we can have music parties again”


“Hopefully this beautiful time will be possible again really soon. Back to the old normal, like it should be”

“I look forward to the real thing, sick of doing nothing”⁸

The recurring nostalgic sentiments expressed by the viewers of the levenslied livestream reveal that these livestreamed concerts take a secondary position; a temporary substitute falling short of a true replacement. Interestingly, this lament for F2F concerts is largely absent amongst the comments of the classical music audience (4 comments in comparison to 41 comments expressing lament in the levenslied chat). It is unclear whether this is because they are satisfied with the virtual experience or that it is not in their conventions to express dissatisfaction.

4.1.2. Rituals and symbols

In the chat feeds, both audiences pay tribute to activities associated with the corresponding place-based concerts. For example, considerable portions of the comment sections (9%) of the levenslied livestreams verbally re-enact behaviour commonly seen at the F2F concerts.

“Cheers everyone ”



“Everyone jump!”



“SOON, the whole room will go from left to right”






“I’m singing along already. Can you hear me?”




“I’ll grab your shoulders”^{9,10}

In maintaining these conventions (albeit textually), the viewers mark them as central aspects of the F2F event. From a dramaturgical perspective, we can see that although the physical audience and setting is absent, the context seems to be reimagined by the virtual audience, structuring their social action (Scott, 2018). Cues embedded in the stream evoke past scripts, with knowledge of the physical concert conventions acting as a cultural tool for textual communication (DiMaggio, 1997; Swidler, 1986;). Similarly, the viewers of classical music livestreams routinely invoke recognisable rituals, and interestingly also considerably more than the levenslied audience, with 24% of the comments. Reference to the F2F concert is seen to be primarily reserved for the end of the piece, in streams of comments such as:

Classical music viewer 1: Braavo  . Thank you so much

Classical music viewer 2: BRAVO A TOUS  

Classical music viewer 3:     

Classical music viewer 4:   

The placing of the Clapping Hands and Bouquet emojis, along with the vocabulary used at the end of a set, present very conventional expressions of enthusiasm for live classical music performances, displaying an obvious nod to the customary proceedings. Particularly popular is the phrase “bravo”, which is commonly cried out at the end of a performance (traditionally opera) to show

⁷ “Gezelligheid in deze sombere corona tijd”, “Beter dan het nare nieuws kijken”, “Muziek is altijd goed voor jong en oud. Samen zijn we sterk”, “Doet zo goed in deze tijd voor ons allen”

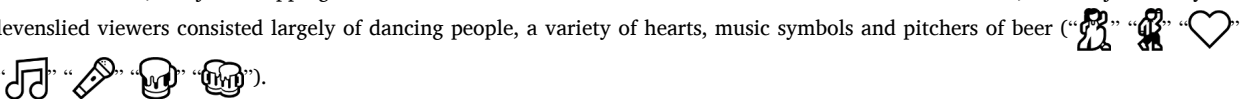
⁸ “Ik mis concerten, hopelijk snel weer”, “Weg met corona, daarna weer muzikfeest”, “Hopelijk komt deze mooie tijd snel weer terug. Naar het oude normaal, zoals het hoort”, “Ik kijk uit naar het echte, veel beeter dan niks doen”

⁹ Holding other audience members’ shoulders is part of the polonaise.

¹⁰ “Proost iedereen”, “Iedereen springen”, “DADELIJK gaat hier heel de fundament van links naar rechts”, “Ik zing al mee. Kan je me horen?”, “Ik pak bij je schoudersss”.

satisfaction with the performance. Used in this online setting it mimics this custom and displays an understanding of the tradition of the music genre (when performed live) by the individual participant that uses it. The use of French may similarly be considered to be inspired by the association between this language and culture that is assumed to be refined and classical.¹¹

It is worth noting that while the classical music viewers refer to previously established rituals (such as the throwing of bouquets and clapping on queue), they omit comments relating to direct social interaction seen at F2F concerts (such as finding your seat with your partner or drinking a glass of wine during intermission). This too can be linked back to conventional behaviour – where audience members remain seated and silent during a concert, with the main focus being the aesthetic experience of the music. We see here a clear indication towards the differing orientations of these two audiences. Reiterating past findings, the classical music viewers display an individualised form of engagement, while the levenslied viewers refer more to the social component of the concert experience (Bourdieu, 1984; Schulze, 1992).

The use of emojis to represent common rituals (as seen above) is adopted by both audiences, adding a visual element to the text-based communication. However, a clear distinction is again seen in the emojis used. For example, while applause is a common action in all music events, emojis of clapping hands were much more common in the classical music chat feed. Instead, the emojis used by the levenslied viewers consisted largely of dancing people, a variety of hearts, music symbols and pitchers of beer ().


The addition of symbols of beer is an interesting example of the difference in customary behaviour between these two audiences, as the Clinking Beer Mug emoji (seen on 31 accounts) in the levenslied chat is swapped for the Wine emoji (seen on 4 accounts) in the classical music livestream. The addition of alcohol is in a sense not surprising, as the ingestion of substances is an important aspect of many social events. Alcohol, food, or drugs are ritualised substances, the consumption of which is part of “coparticipation” (Collins, 2004, p. 62). This applies very manifestly to many live popular music events where substances are central to social interactions (such as going to the bar, toasting, or taking drugs together). However, without being able to physically accomplish these ritualised activities, online they take on a symbolic position, memorialised in emojis (Scott, 2018). From a Durkheimian understanding, using these symbols can generate positive emotions, serving as a reminder of past physical assemblies, charged with emotional energy and re/marking membership (Campos-Castillo & Hitlin, 2013; Collins, 2004).

Emojis have been found to play an important role in computer mediated interaction, specifically because they assist in the expression of non-verbal forms of communication (Nexo & Strandell, 2020). Emojis (and comments of ritualised activities) act as a tool, establishing a shared understanding of a situation that is stripped of context, with participants attempting to redefine the situation. In this the most stereotypical features of the concert become “hyper-ritualised” (Goffman, 1979), as a means to manage misinterpretations, and synchronise users’ expectations (Al Rashdi, 2018). Hyper-ritualization was coined originally by Goffman (1979) to describe the gendered behaviour seen in mass media. To prevent plurality of reading, advertisers take the existing conventions of social interaction and present an exaggerated and simplified version – the rituals without any of the “dull footage” (p.84). Goffman (1979, p. 84) states: “if anything, advertisers conventionalise our conventions, stylise what is already a stylisation, make frivolous use of what is already something considerably cut off from contextual controls. Their hype is hyper ritualisation”. Interestingly, although a very different type of communication, the interaction on livestream chat columns presents a similar pattern.


4.2. Organisation of interaction

In the classical music chat feeds, interaction between participants is minimal, with only 6 accounts of *short interaction*, and 1 account of *prolonged interaction*. The majority of comments aim to directly praise or provide a statement about the performed music (as illustrated in the previous sections). Direct interaction between participants is primarily reserved for inquiries about the music performed:

Classical music viewer 5: Beautiful! What are they playing?
 Classical music viewer 6: Trout!
 Classical music viewer 7: Schubert’s Trout Quintet
 Classical music viewer 8: Hi there! What is this piece? Beautiful
 Classical music viewer 9: Piece written for Dudok by Joey Roukens

17 comments in the classical music chat are phrased as a question, directed not only at the other viewers but also occasionally at the performing artist. One viewer writes “questions for Anna: Did your grandmother like Rachmaninoff as you do? And do you prefer him or Scriabin?”. Similarly, the audience was seen directly addressing the artist, “play Chopin, please...” or responding to something that the artist was saying, “thanks for the explanation, it makes the ‘out of tune’ parts understandable. ”.¹² Unsurprisingly, these questions and reactions to the artist hardly receive any reply, but also inquiries about the music directed to fellow audience members

¹¹ It cannot be ruled out that the people using French in the chat are native speakers (although somewhat, unlikely, given the limited fame of the concert venue outside of the Netherlands), but then still it would be, striking that French is only seen for these particular words.

¹² “De uitleg maakte de ‘out of tune’ parts begrijpelijker ”

rarely result in a dialogue of more than two comments. These enthusiastic, but essentially informational exchanges are indicative of the extent of conversation on the chat feeds, where interaction amongst this audience remains very limited. This again feeds the impression that the audience focuses on the music, rendering frequent exchange during the concert unnecessary, or perhaps inappropriate.

Amongst the levenslied audience direct audience conversation is slightly more present, but still only makes up a small section of the chat, with 11 accounts of short interaction and 13 accounts of prolonged interaction. Questions occur somewhat less commonly (8 comments) and direct dialogue between two viewers is also rare. Rather, the audience is more often addressed as a whole. For example:

Levenslied viewer 1: Yes yes yes, everyone take their shirt off
 Levenslied viewer 2: Party team back!!!
 Levenslied viewer 1: Hahaha
 Levenslied viewer 3: Hoppa
 Levenslied viewer 4: Take your shirt off and wave it
 Levenslied viewer 5: Party
 Levenslied viewer 1: We should come together some time, for a beer
 Levenslied viewer 2: This is a good plan
 Levenslied viewer 1: Which bus should I take?¹³

This sequence of comments was part of the third livestream. What is interesting is that a group of regular viewers started to emerge, seen in the above quote by “party team back together!!!”. With this quote, the viewer acknowledges that a section of the virtual audience has attended an earlier livestream on this Facebook profile. Later in the sequence of comments, another viewer reiterates the emerging relationship by asking to meet in person. The recurrent participation of viewers leads us to believe that aspects of these virtual interaction rituals must be successful. However, the occasional mention of ambitions to meet face-to-face (7 comments, in comparison to no such comments on the classical music chats) suggest that interacting via the livestream is not the end goal and does not fully replace physical interaction.

Furthermore, interaction between participants of the levenslied livestreams is ongoing throughout the entire concert, with a continuous stream of boomeranging comments (which, as mentioned, gives little consideration to events in the livestreamed content). This is a small but exemplary fragment, taken from one of the chat feeds:

Levenslied viewer 6: Do keep 1.5
 Levenslied viewer 7: Fun right?
 Levenslied viewer 6: [Name of viewer 7]
 Levenslied viewer 8: 1.5 m distance
 Levenslied viewer 9: I just wanted to dance the polonaise with you [name of viewer 8]
 Levenslied viewer 6: Lol
 Levenslied viewer 9: From the left tudududud
 Levenslied viewer 10: To the right¹⁴

While these comments are short and seem somewhat random, they are clearly conversational reactions to one another. By directly commenting another viewer’s name, reciprocating previously used themes, and even completing another’s sentence, these viewers engage in a far more engaged manner of interaction than occurs amongst classical music viewers. The style of commenting also comes across as more impulsive, contrasting the articulate manner of communication seen from the classical music audiences. Instead of functional exchanges of information, these conversations are aimed at keeping the interaction going.

This fast-flowing stream of reciprocating comments shows a coordination of behaviour. This is perhaps not surprising as recent research has found that matching discourse and emojis (see also in [Section 4.1.2](#)) is an important part of mediated communication ([Al Rashdi, 2018](#); [Nexø & Strandell, 2020](#)). Similar to F2F interactions, mimicry works to show understanding, indicating that the interaction (and the event more broadly) is being perceived in a similar manner ([Campos-Castillo & Hitlin, 2013](#)). Online, however, this becomes even more important, as discrepancies in meaning can arise due to the limitations of textual exchange. Here mimicry serves to indicate a shared cultural capital (showing other users that you are in the know by adopting appropriate rituals), but also a shared focus and mood (making clear that you are in sync – [Nexø & Strandell, 2020](#)).


The difference in how interaction is organised by these two audiences makes their diverging ambitions evident. For the classical music audience, the performance in the livestream seems to remain the centre of the experience, seen also in the lack of interaction during the performance. This clearly mimics the proceedings of the place-based counterpart, reflecting also [Bourdieu’s \(1984\)](#) qualification of highbrow cultural engagement. By contrast, in the chat of the levenslied livestreams, no consideration is given to the beginning or end of a song (in contrast to 45 accounts in the classical music chat), suggesting that interaction is organised less around the music. For this group the social aspect seems to be central to the experience, using the livestream as a reason to come together. The

¹³ “Jajaaa iedereen de shirt uit”, “Feest teamm is trueg!!!!”, “Shirt uit en zwaai”, “Feestje”, “Zullen we een keer een biertje samen drinken?”, “Goed plan”, “Welke bus moet ik nemen?”.


¹⁴ “Wel 1.5 houden”, “Gezellig toch”, “1.5 mtr afstand houden”, “Wou net de polonaise met je doen”, “Naar links tududududu”, “Naar rechts”.

spontaneous and excited form of interaction mimics the engagement of a place-based popular music audience (Benzecry & Collins, 2014; Bourdieu, 1984), where embodied collective rituals (such as dancing and singing together) play a large part in constructing heightened collective energy.

While in F2F interaction these are important ingredients to the establishment of rhythmic entrainment, it is hard to determine the degree of intensity and success of the online interaction rituals due to the nature of the data.¹⁵ Still, we do find some indications suggesting that these interactions are unsuccessful in generating rhythmic entrainment. For instance, this is seen in the expressions of lament for F2F concerts that intercept the enthusiastic sequences:

Levenslied viewer 11: 

Levenslied viewer 12: Fun dancing and singing together....

Levenslied viewer 13: Back when we still could ¹⁶

Similarly, text-based exchange seems not entirely satisfactory to the expected cultural experience for the viewers. When the build-up of comments results in viewers suggesting meeting in person, it becomes clear that F2F interaction ultimately remains the objective for this audience:

Levenslied viewer 14: That's it!

Levenslied viewer 15: Just warming up...

Levenslied viewer 16: Corona party anywhere?¹⁷

While coordinating behaviour is also possible through online interaction and can allow for feelings of collective participation, we can speculate that reaching a state of rhythmic entrainment is unlikely, due to the inherent delay of turn taking, brevity of the interactions (making the feedback process and subsequent mutual build-up unlikely), and the lack of confirmed shared emotion. This point is specifically important for large-scale interaction, where communication is not based on verbal exchange, but solely on the awareness of a shared emotional state. While comments and emojis may communicate a collective enjoyment, this remains purely symbolic, with the underlying emotions – expressed in uncontrolled facial and bodily movement – hidden behind the screen of the electronic device. To borrow from Goffman, synchronising emotions is challenged when only presented with “expressions given” and not those “given off” (Goffman 1959, p. 2).

5. Conclusion and discussion

This chapter explored the manner in which music audiences adapt their behaviour when interacting during live music performances online. Comparing comments left on livestreamed concerts that represent contrasting cultural orientations (classical music and levenslied) during the initial months of the COVID-19 imposed lockdown, the analysis reveals distinct patterns of interaction used by each audience. Despite the rapid move online and the inherent complications with mediated interaction – on both the spatial and temporal dimension – these audiences maintain clear differences in the content and organisation of interaction. For example, there is a noticeable distinction in the level of sociability pursued. The collective engagement that is assumed to guide the consumption of popular and folk culture (Benzecry & Collins, 2014; Bourdieu, 1984) is clearly recognisable in levenslied participants' interactions and their expressions of solidarity (also recognised by Schulze, 1992) around topics such as the ongoing pandemic. By contrast, the classical music audience displays a more individualised approach to consumption, with the focus remaining on the performance, displaying characteristics of an “aesthetic disposition” (Bourdieu, 1984).

Livestream audiences thus seem to approach these virtual concerts with the same intentions as they would approach their place-based counterparts, attempting to textually construct an engagement similar to that at a F2F concert. However, this results in differing levels of success (as expressed textually). For the popular music fans, the comments of bereavement for the “real thing” exemplify the absence of something in the experience (Scott, 2018). While livestreamed concerts provide an element of solidarity during times of social isolation, they are not deemed sufficient in replacing the F2F concert experience. Interestingly, a similar lament for place-based concerts is not recorded amongst the classical music audience. In a sense, the transition online appears more successful. Viewers primarily praise the musical quality, with little acknowledgement of the importance of copresence. Whether this indicates that it is not in this audience's conventions to express disappointment or that the online concert does not violate the essential conventions of live classical music, it is clear that for this audiences the collective experience is less central (Benzecry & Collins, 2014).

While differences in discourse and form of commenting are evident between the two audiences, one similarity persists; the direct reference to actions related to F2F concerts. The extensive number of comments discursively marking common social activities seen at concerts (collective drinking, dancing, and singing), along with emojis that mimic the core ritualised practices (pitchers of beer, dancing figures, glasses of wine, bouquets, roses and clapping hands), construct a recognisable situation for participants (Al Rashdi,

¹⁵ Without interviewing the participants, it is difficult to empirically evaluate the experience of interaction and level of intensity.

¹⁶ “Wat leuke samen dansen en zingen...”, “Vroeger toen dat nog kon”

¹⁷ “Zo is da!”, “Ff warm lopen...”, “Corona feestje ergens?”

2018). In an attempt to combat context collapse, these actions essentially become “hyper-ritualised”. In dealing with the plurality of meaning – caused by an invisible audience (Hogan, 2010), social convergence (boyd, 2008), and a collapse of situational context (Haimson & Tang, 2017) – the participants revert to commenting the central features of the F2F event. Although hyper-rituals were originally identified for one-way communication of advertisers in mass media, and here we see more reciprocal exchange, they are similarly used to establish a clear definition of the situation.

It would seem from the hyper-ritualisation of interaction that genre conventions serve as a repertoire to viewers, which they mobilise in an effort to restore context. Although we cannot know the demographics of the audience and conclusions in this respect are therefore tentative, this connects to the debate about the place of culture (Vaisey, 2019) and the emergence of meaning (Rawlings & Childress, 2019). Hyper-ritualisation and the use of conventions as a repertoire seem to rest on the “situation” as it presents itself. However, there are also indications that broader cultural orientations and perhaps the audience’s socioeconomic position play a role in interaction. This is, for example, seen in the contrasting language used by the audiences, where classical music audiences present a refined and articulate language, suggesting high levels of cultural capital. By contrast, the more informal language, ongoing interaction, and lack of consideration for the music of the levenslied audience suggest that the concert serves as an opportunity for sociability. In that sense, the music is less central, with the cultural engagement fulfilling a certain “function” (Bourdieu, 1984). This is reiterated in the dismay when this function cannot be fulfilled in its entirety. Following Vaisey (2019) we would argue that exhibiting these cultural orientations does not exclude the use of culture as a repertoire, but rather suggests that these two perspectives can and will work side by side in practice.

These findings lead to some tentative conclusions about online interaction. While the loss of context online promotes a plurality of meanings in all interaction, this seems more problematic for the establishment of large-scale interaction rituals. The reason arguably is that mentioning a ritual is quite different from being collectively engaged in one. At F2F events, ritual activities (whether types of customary dance, dress, or the conventional expressions of appreciation) work to foster rhythmic entrainment – through engaging in these actions, the audience members become attuned to one another. Online, however, without the physical copresence, these ritual activities become totemised. The customary activities themselves become symbols and much of the interaction is geared at acknowledging them. In that sense, rather than collective interaction (needed for a successful large-scale interaction ritual), a significant section of the online activity can be considered a form of *totem-defining interaction*; concerned with establishing a common ground and marking membership. Here we find a fundamental difference compared to small-scale interaction rituals that take place online. Active turn-taking (Meredith, 2019) and mutual recognition are to a large extent still possible through direct messaging, leading to satisfactory levels of emotional energy. This accounts for previous findings on the success of interaction rituals online in an interpersonal scenario (as seen in: DiMaggio et al., 2018; Nexø & Strandell, 2020). However, for a build-up of collective effervescence in the Durkheimian sense, the preconditions are simply not met. Although experiencing the music together can possibly have a similar effect on individual members of the audience, they lack the means to express the shared feeling as a group. In a F2F concert the audience do not take turns one by one. Expressions of excitement need to be collective or they lose their intensity. Arguably, when reactions are translated to a textual format, the absence of confirmation of visceral effects is part of the problem, but even when displaying them more directly (as would be the case by, for example, including the option for audience members to share webcam footage), individual turn taking stands in the way of true synchronisation.

Furthermore, while there is little evidence of audience members policing incorrect behaviour, the very fact that long-standing conventions are so centrally placed suggests strong symbolic boundaries, in contrast to previous ideas on the democratic nature of the internet (Mueser & Vlachos, 2018; Schaap & Berkers, 2014). We speculate that for uninitiated newcomers, boundaries to participate in the social aspect of the event (the chat feed) reflect those at a F2F concert, as viewers must have an adequate understanding of the conventions to display appropriate sociable behaviour. This results in a chat feed likely used primarily – and possibly even governed – by seasoned audience members who take the lead in defining the nature of the situation.

Given the naturalistic data on online behaviour used in this study, our work is characterised by some limitations. Providing more empirical insight into the aforementioned tentative conclusions would require complementing this type of research with other types of data. Firstly, to distinguish between situational and dispositional drivers of online behaviour, we should gain more insight on the socio-cultural characteristics of various online audiences. We would therefore suggest that digital consumption practices become a more prominent aspect of general surveys on cultural participation, especially as we are progressively moving more of our interactions and cultural engagement into the digital realm. Similarly, our data is limited in its ability to disclose the experienced intensity of interaction from the participants. To understand this fully would require also observing backstage behaviour of participants while they are engaging online. Finally, we suggest in this paper that online large-scale interaction rituals are unsuccessful in generating collective rhythmic entrainment, but we recognise that online communication (and people’s ease with it) is rapidly developing. Chat features arguably present merely a basic form of interaction and it would seem like virtual reality (VR) could extend possibilities in this respect. However, on this subject, it is worth noting that Onderdijk et al. (2021) have found that audiences in VR feel more connected to the performing artist, than the rest of the audience. On the basis of our findings, we suggest that the success of VR will depend on the ability of these platforms to establish feelings of copresence amongst the entire audience. Whether online interaction will eventually be able to convey the expressions and allow for the level of synchronising needed for large-scale rhythmic entrainment remains an interesting empirical question. Until then, online, small-scale interaction will remain the most meaningful.

Funding

This project was funded by the Erasmus Initiative ‘Vital Cities and Citizens’. The authors are very grateful for this support.

Declaration of Competing Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and insightful comments of our manuscript. Furthermore, the Rotterdam Popular Music Studies (RPMS) team should be thanked for helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this paper.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2023.101782](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2023.101782).

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