



Music as a resource for the sexual self: An exploration of how young people in the Netherlands use music for good sex



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ABSTRACT

Much has been written about young people, music and sexuality, often in the context of the sexualisation debate. However, little research has been conducted about the intricate ways in which young people actually use music in their everyday sexual practices. By drawing upon sociological approaches to music and everyday life, with special attention for the work by Tia DeNora (2000, 2003), the current study aims to analyse what young people consider good music for good sex. We introduce a methodological approach that we call ‘music voice’ as it is partly inspired by photo-voice methods. We asked young people to construct a playlist of what they consider good music for good sex, after which we discussed their choices in an in-depth qualitative interview. We found support for the theory that music has transformative power in the constitution and regulation of a sexual self. There were moments in which our young respondents talked about the sound and lyrics of the music and how they resonated with their conceptions of good sex, but most of the time the discussion hinged on the way they felt when the music played and how they actually used the music to move from one emotional, cognitive and physical state into another. Using music for good sex was not always about turning the music on during sexual activities, however. While for some of our respondents music helped to turn their ideas of good sex into reality, others felt music did not contribute to their experience of good sex.

1. Introduction

Consider these two reactions to pop-icon Beyoncé and her 2013 hit-single *Partition*:

The explicit video that accompanies Mrs. Carter’s new single would not look out of place on a porn channel, yet there it is, on YouTube, available for all to see. Admittedly, the word “explicit” is branded across it, but that’s like a red rag to a teenager.

Partition I think is... well yes probably one of the first times I had sex on music. (...) Beyoncé’s voice is already horny to me and *Partition* is just (...) it’s not tender-loving sex, but I really just find this a horny song.

The first reaction is from Sarah Crompton, former Arts Editor-in-Chief for the British newspaper *The Telegraph* (8 March 2014), and it is a prime example of the uneasiness and anxiety in Western societies about the sexualisation of young people. Much that has been written about young people, music and sexuality has been in the context of this sexualisation discourse. Empirical research in this area is mostly socio-psychological and is based on experimental- and survey designs that aim to measure the ‘effects’ that certain explicit songs and videos have on the sexual morality and psychological wellbeing of young people, mainly girls (for example see Hall, West, & Hill, 2012; Martino et al., 2006; Primack, Gold, Schwarz, & Dalton, 2008; Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005). The

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second reaction to Beyoncé and *Partition* comes from Halleh, a twenty-four year old English Major of Dutch-Afghan decent, whom we interviewed for the current article. She represents the other side of the sexualisation discourse, which often comes from more ethnographically oriented research and suggests that young people have a much more reflexive role in how they engage with sexual content in the media (Attwood, 2006; Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Duits & Van Zoonen, 2011).

The latter research argues that young people actively give meaning to the music and other media they consume, that they are often aware of the larger social implications and discourses of sexual inequality that are expressed by the media, that they tend to reflect on the influence of media, but that (sexually explicit) media are nevertheless also an important site of pleasure for them. In the current study we want to build on this approach and examine young people's everyday experiences with music and sexuality. Halleh says in the above quote that one of the reasons why she likes *Partition* is because the record played during one of the first times she had sex on music. This signals that the meaning of music is entwined with circumstances of use and with actual sexual activities, which – we may assume – will be aimed at reaching a pleasurable experience (Spronk, 2014; Van Oorschot, 2011). That is why this study looks at *what young people consider to be good music for good sex* and *how they make sense of their musical choices in relationship to their own sexual practices*. To study this we introduce a new and innovative methodological approach, which we call 'music voice' as it is partly inspired by photo-voice methods.

In what follows we start with a discussion of theory and research about young people, sexuality and music. This literature situates the current, seemingly antagonistic discourses of 'sexualisation' on the one hand and 'sexual pleasure' on the other, within a larger transformation of everyday life in the West, in which identity has become part of a so-called 'choice biography'. After this discussion, we will present our music voice approach and method. In the broadest sense the results of our study support the idea that music functions as a resource for the constitution and regulation of a sexual self, but that does not mean that its presence is always experienced as conducive to good sex.

2. Music and everyday life

Several prominent sociologists have published extensive descriptions of what they considered to be a transformation of intimacy towards a so-called 'choice biography' (Bauman, 2003; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992). Young people are no longer regulated by a prohibition morality, but engage in a situational ethics of sexuality (Ravesloot et al., 1999); an unprecedented freedom, which nevertheless has come with its own obligations, strains and ambiguities, as attachments have lost much of their former stability (Bauman, 2003).

It is within this social context of high flexibility, fluidity and demandingness, Tia DeNora argues, that music has become an important 'technology of the self' (1999; 2000; 2003), a device of remembering and constructing an image of 'who one is' and of presenting this image of 'self' to oneself and others. Scholars like sociologist Frith (1996, 2003) and anthropologist Ruth Finnegan have argued similarly:

"Whether in deeply intense fashion or more light-touch action, music provides a human resource through which people can enact their lives with inextricably entwined feeling, thought and imagination." (Finnegan, 2003; 188)

Building in part upon the work of music psychologist John Sloboda (Juslin & Sloboda, 2010; Sloboda, 2005), DeNora argues furthermore that music is part of embodied experience and is used to transform psychological, physiological and emotional states of being; shifting moods, energy levels, self-perception and movements. She draws a parallel with the concept of 'emotional work' developed by Hochschild (1983), which also refers to doing specific activities to get oneself out of one emotional state and into another. Such 'work' also occurs in intimate situations, where music helps to define the setting of the interaction, serving as an aid to relaxation and a pre-text for further action, disciplining conduct and (enhancing) bodily sensation (DeNora, 1997, 2000). Criticism of this approach comes from Hesmondhalgh (2008, 2013), among others, who argues that it presents an overly optimistic view of personal agency with everyone being capable of using music according to personal needs. There is always larger social contexts of power and inequality that need to be considered, he argues, as well as the fact that music may be used for creating experiences of solidarity and attachment as well as creating distance and detachment (for a discussion see Bull, 2007; Negus & Velázquez, 2002; Prior, 2014).

Similarly, in *After Adorno* (2003) DeNora herself adds to her previous work a more exhaustive discussion of how music operates on an 'interactive plane' where it is not only used as a tool for self-determination, but also as a tool for the control over others and over specific situations (see also Bull, 2007); a tool, moreover, that is itself situated within a larger cultural context of conventions, modes of being and doing, discourses, habits and inequalities. Where music functions as a mediator for sexual agency, these situational factors mediate the mediations of music (see DeNora, 2003; Hennion, 2015). The properties of the music itself are also important in these processes, as music is not an empty signifier but has certain properties that afford or prevent certain types of use. Musical affect is thus accomplished by means of active sense-making by social actors who work with the music, bringing in their own personal and cultural associations which, depending on other circumstance of use, may help accomplish pleasure as well as other cognitive, emotional and physiological experiences from music (Gomart & Hennion, 1999; Hennion, 2003).

Such attention for the socio-political context of music and everyday sexuality, inevitably brings in the literature about the sexualisation of young people in and through music and music videos. While there is considerable attention for various psychological repercussions of sexualised music, the discussion also pays attention to the overall social and sexual inequalities in which music production and consumption take place (see for example Paardekoper & Van Rijsbergen, 2008; Papadopoulos, 2010). It is within this larger context that young people's consumption of music takes place. Such claims, however, tend to forget that young people themselves may be aware of these contexts as well. Research on music amateurs, conducted by Gomart and Hennion (1999), has

already shown that they are often distinctly aware of the social implications of their tastes and preferences. [Duits and Van Zoonen \(2011\)](#), similarly, demonstrate that girls as young as twelve are able to talk about music videos as sexist and problematic (a similar aesthetic reflexivity by young teens is found by [Bergh et al., 2014](#)). We must therefore study empirically how these discourses of sexual inequality and sexualisation – as well as other cultural repertoires – are mobilised in young people’s everyday and situated associations and practices around music and sex. By doing this we offer an exploration of the ways in which music actually mediates (enables and constrains) sexual agency, power and control.

3. The study

3.1. Music voice as method and approach

The music voice approach that we have developed for this research considers that young people are active and creative in the ways that they use music to give meaning to their self and social contexts. Our music voice approach is in part an adaptation of photo-voice, the method in which research participants are asked to capture their life-experiences in pictures which are then discussed in a focus-group or in-depth interview. Our music voice approach shares some of the theoretical and epistemological foundations of photo-voice, as well as aspects of its practical implementation.

Photo-voice was originally developed as a community-based participatory method with three main goals ([Wang & Burris, 1997: 370](#)): 1) “to enable people to record and reflect their community’s strengths and concerns,” 2) “to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small group discussion of photographs,” and 3) “to reach policy-makers.” It was inspired by feminist standpoint theory and Paulo Freire’s empowerment education, which argue that different marginalised social groups (who are often powerless when it comes to the study of their experiences) have epistemic privilege and should be given an active role as research participants offering a window into their lives from an entitled insider’s perspective ([Catalini & Minkler, 2010](#); [Desyllas, 2014](#); [Hergenrather, Rhodes, Cowan, Bardhoshi, & Pula, 2009](#); [Burris, 1994, 1997](#)). The photo-voice method does this by providing these people with cameras, asking them to take pictures of relevant aspects of their everyday social and political realities. After that, participants select photographs they deem important, which are used in individual and/or group discussions, in which it are crucially again the participants who are enabled to contextualise the photographs, telling stories about what they mean ([Catalini & Minkler, 2010](#); [Wang & Burris, 1997](#)).

Our music voice approach diverges from photo-voice in three ways: 1) it takes the individual rather than the community as its subject, 2) it is not as action-based as early photo-voice studies, and 3) the exact procedure of gathering the data is different. It uses music, not photographs, as an aid for people to give voice to their experiences. In practice this has meant that, instead of providing a camera, we provided young people with a link to a *YouTube* channel and asked them to select songs for us that they felt fitted with ‘good sex’. This selection of songs that each participant made for us, formed personal playlists which were subsequently discussed in individual open-ended qualitative interviews.

The important commonality with photo-voice is the active construction of a cultural product by participants for research purposes. This is also how our music voice approach differs from recent other studies about playlists (particularly [Hagen, 2015](#)), as they study already existing playlists with the aim to unravel the contexts of their usage. Even though some of our participants already had a playlist created for sex, most of them created playlists specifically for this research. The way in which we envisioned music voice, it is the active selection of songs and the construction of playlists which helps young people to reflect and think critically about their experiences of good sex.

3.2. Data collection

The data for this study were collected in the Netherlands, which comparative studies have shown has a sexual climate that revolves around self-expression, pleasure and gender equality ([Lottes & Alkula, 2011](#)); values that are also articulated in relation to young people ([Schalet, 2011](#)). At the same time public discussion in this country focusses on the presumed deviation from these values by some ethnic minority groups, like those with ties to Islam who are considered too conservative, and ‘black’ minority groups which are often considered to be too licentious ([Mepschen et al., 2010](#)). That is why, although our study is explorative and based only on a small sample, we have attempted to reach as diverse a group of young people as possible in terms of relevant identity-characteristics, like ethnicity, gender, orientation, residence (urban and rural) and level of education (a list of identity-characteristics per participant can be found in [Appendix A](#)). Fifteen young people, between eighteen and twenty-five, participated in the research. The data were gathered by the second author, who recruited participants by asking close friends, family members and colleagues and then proceeded with a snowballing technique. She asked them to create and share their personal playlists through *YouTube*. Most of our participants created their playlists by browsing through their other playlists on *Spotify* or similar apps. They selected songs that they felt fitted with good sex, or that exemplified what they wanted to discuss in relation to ‘good sex’.

The shortest playlist consisted of eight songs, while the longest included sixty. Together the playlists comprised 302 records, some of which were included in multiple playlists. Yet 254 of these records were only used once. This already shows the extent of variety in the playlists, which also included a mix of genres ranging from R&B (144 songs), to pop (56), indie (10), dancehall (10), reggae(ton) (18), electronic (5), acoustic (2) and dance (23).¹ All of the individual playlists combined two or more of these genres, and they also

¹ Many songs were a mix between these styles.

included songs with different degrees of explicitness (more information about the playlists is summarised in [Appendix B](#)).

When music was added to our *YouTube* platform, this was immediately visible to the researcher, who used this information to prepare for the in-depth interviews. Participants could only see their own playlists on the platform. Each individual playlist was studied before each interview and brought on a laptop. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way, whereby general questions about the playlist and good sex guided the interview, but sufficient space was provided for participants to add their own topics. The questions we asked concerned how the participants went about creating their playlists, what criteria of selection they applied, what their histories were with the records they had chosen and, of course, how this all was connected to good sex. Each of the interviews started with the question ‘Could you tell me how you went about in creating this playlist?’ and then proceeded toward ‘Are there any records that you want to discuss in particular?’. The researcher then played the particular records chosen by the participant, which formed the basis for a more in-depth discussion of why he or she associated these with good sex. She also brought with her two popular sex- and love playlists that were published by *Spotify* and *YouTube* in the months before the start of our study ([Flanagan, 2015](#); [Zolfagharifard, 2017](#)). Some of the records of these lists were played at the end of the interview and participants were asked why these records ultimately would or would not work for them (a strategy that is comparable to the ‘productive’ method employed by [McDonnell, 2014](#)). The interview data were transcribed and the *YouTube* playlists were also converted and saved in a Word-file. We anonymized participants’ names for this article.

3.3. Data analysis

Our music voice method generated two sources of data – a playlist and an in-depth interview – that needed to be analysed in relation to each other. While the properties of the music (lyrics, beat, artist, music video, etc.) are important here, because they interact with larger social discourses of inequality and misogyny (as for instance reflected in the lyrics to the most repeated song in the playlists ‘Or Nah’), it cannot be known beforehand how they structure young people’s use of this music in relation to good sex. We know from the literature that not all people necessarily value similar musical properties (for some lyrics may be important, while others only listen to beat or even a more abstract feel of the music). That is why we have chosen not to analyse the content of the music, but to follow the photo-voice method by focussing our analysis on the ways in which our participants give meaning to the music they selected.

The analysis roughly consisted of two phases, during which the authors of this article convened several times to discuss some of the main codes, concepts and themes that came out of their readings of the data. Consistent with the principles of grounded theory (see [Bryant & Charmaz, 2007](#); [Charmaz, 2014](#); [Corbin & Strauss, 2008](#)) the first phase of the analysis consisted of a bottom-up comparative approach. In this phase we read through the interviews multiple times, each time consulting the playlists in order to contextualise everything that was said. We compared fragments looking for recurring themes, concepts and categories, but also at variations and exceptions, all of which were coded into a data-matrix. In the second phase we connected these themes, concepts, categories, variations and exceptions to the established literature on young people, sexuality and music. Then we re-read the data with new theoretical insights in mind, employing a top-down approach to establish saturation of discourse.

4. Results

Our analysis revealed the following general tendencies in how our young participants talked about their playlists. These playlists were quite diverse, but largely excluded genres like rap, heavy metal and Dutch folk music, which our participants unanimously agreed could not be associated with good sex. These genres were considered too loud, aggressive, a-romantic and disrupting. In these and other qualifications that our participants attributed to ‘good music’, they repeated certain specific characteristics of ‘good sex’ as something that you develop and do together. Returning ideas were, that good sex is about: feeling comfortable, taking the time for it, getting completely wrapped up in the moment and making sure that it is equally pleasurable for the other person. Good sex for these young people is broadly stated an intrinsically rewarding and focussed activity that entails a loss of evaluative consciousness. While sex may be part of everyday life, good sex entails a momentary freedom from everyday drudgery and constraint, they argued. Importantly, our young participants discuss that this is an experience that requires, and is shared with, another person.

Further conversations about the playlists, support the theory that music has transformative power in the constitution and regulation of a sexual self and a sexual situation, whose presence can serve as an aid in bringing good sex about, but that can also hamper the experience. There were moments in which participants discussed the sound and lyrics of the music and how this resonated with their conceptions of good sex, but most of the time the discussion hinged on the way they felt when the music played and how they actually used the music to move from one emotional, cognitive and physical state into another. The choice for turning the music on or off sometimes had its base in living conditions, as some of our participants still lived with parents or roommates and used the music to mask sexual activity. This choice was thus informed – at least partly – by the specific context in which the music is played, with one of the main functions of music being that it drowns out other sound (see [DeNora, 2000](#)). However, more often this choice was informed by our participants’ notions of what constitutes good sex and their abilities to work with the music to turn these notions into reality.

4.1. Music as a resource for constructing varieties of good sex

Earlier, we presented Halleh’s talking about Beyoncé’s *Partition* explaining that she associates this record with good sex because, among other things, it played during one of the first times she had sex on music. In all interviews it became clear that music holds an important place in memory. Often these were about previous relations and times in which our participants had sex with a particular

song playing in the background. At other moments our participants recalled how they danced or kissed with previous partners to a specific record or artist, or how their musical repertoires were formed and explored with these former partners.

For Magda, a twenty-three year old girl of Angolan-Portuguese descent almost all of the music in her playlist is connected to memories about her ex-boyfriend. “These are all records that I discovered together with or through Dan [her ex-boyfriend], or to which we had sex, or which are connected to good memories we have,” she says. She explains that she also talked to Dan before the interview, in which he also discussed a song that made him think about good sex.

Magda: That’s a classic song by Chopin and I can’t remember that, but my [former] boyfriend said (...) like “Yes, don’t you remember that we really had sex to this?” (...) I said “Well, no I don’t remember.” He said “Yes, that was really good sex.”

There are many examples we can give from our other participants, both the young women and the young men, who all say that some of the songs have been ‘successful’ for them in terms of past sexual experiences. Another example comes from Lilly, a twenty-four year old Dutch-Surinamese (Hindu) girl, who explains why she has *All Inside* by Bondax, an electronic club song, in her playlist.

Lilly: This is thus a song that I know Maurits, my ex, really thought was *chill*² or he really liked it, so he also played this quite often, what I also really enjoyed. And well, to which we also really had sex one time. And I just remember that moment really well.

One of the main functions of music is thus that it reinvigorates memories of previous sexual experiences. Phi-Jay, a twenty year old Dutch-Surinamese (partly Chinese) boy considers constructing his playlists in this way, so that the girl he has sex with will remember him in the future or when she hears the music in another context.

Phi-Jay: If I would make a *playlist*, I would definitely not use a lot of records that many people already know. So I would rather (...) make a *playlist* that would also make her think of me, so to say. If she would hear that record playing that she would immediately think of me instead of it being such a casual song.

Many of our participants indicated that, like Phi-Jay, they selected songs for their playlist that they do not regularly listen to and that are not leading the music charts. This allows them to make the experience of sex more special and thus more memorable, with music that is not already tainted with ‘other’ life experiences. Such accounts of our participants coincide with DeNora’s findings (2000), and show that music has a prime function in sparking memories that can be garnered and used in new configurations of the self and the social. What we see here is that our young research participants use music as a device for remembering and constructing a sense of what good sex is.

Like most of the other youth we interviewed, Magda indicates that for her good sex is not univocal; there are different ways of having sex that can be equally pleasurable under the right circumstances. She explains that she does not experience sex “as only one emotion” and that this is also reflected in her playlist, which according to her contains both sweet and romantic songs for ‘intimate’ sex and more explicit songs for ‘dirty’ sex. “So I also have a couple of songs (...) that are somewhat faster, more explicit and intense, because of course you also just have different types of sexual experiences.” Such different types of sexual experiences also came up in our other interviews and the diversity of the playlists in which explicit and non-sexual songs are often combined, which suggests, likewise, that this is a common phenomenon. Our interviews thus show that music is an important resource for constructing different varieties of good sex, with the properties of the music being important as they more easily afford the construction of one variety over the other.

4.2. Music as a resource for regulating the sexual self in interaction

Our conversations also delivered that such varieties do not only exist between sexual encounters, but also within. Many of the stories our participants tell are about music literally changing them in actual sexual encounters; taking them from one emotional state into another, changing the way they feel, energizing them, altering their mood and self-perceptions. Magda again gives examples of these processes when she says that at times the music makes her feel more comfortable during sex.

Magda: I almost think that I’m almost more capable of concentrating on the sex than when there’s no music on, because [without music] then I’m always a bit... I’m a bit of an *awkward* little bird of course (...) I don’t know how to explain it, I’m just *awkward* when there’s no music on.

Veronica, a twenty-two year old Dutch law student, has a similar experience not so much in the bedroom, but on the dance floor. As she explains she has some songs in her playlist that she associates with dancing in a sexy way, where the music “brings out a kind of *alter ego*” in her. “I’m not always like that, but with these songs playing I think, well ‘I really like to dance to this.’” She also explains that doing this with a boy allows for a situation in which they both can explore her body.

Veronica: Yes and you feel sexy and think ‘I’m making a bit of these sexy movements’, and well, he also feels what your body’s like and when you already have this bit of tension with this person, it can be really intense. And I actually quite like that.

Next to setting the mood for sex, music is thus also an aid in temporarily changing self-perception and a pretext for further action. Action and awareness become merged when Veronica dances to this music (she discusses two dancehall records *Pull up to mi bumper* and *Whine and kotch* by J Capri and various colleagues), which allows her to sense herself and her physical reality in a different way.

² Italics are used within quotes to indicate that the original phrasing was in English.

Music is thus mobilised to generate erotic agency. Both Magda and Veronica explain that they experience themselves differently when the ‘right’ music is on, but the latter adds that the music can also help in exploring and moving a sexual interaction further. As Phi-Jay also explains:

Phi-Jay: You know, that mood you create with a certain type of records. Then you can see what’s there. Look, if you don’t have any music and you would be lying in bed with someone and you’re kissing or something, then a song indicates the mood so to say. (...) Then it’s easier to try things so to say.

Luna: Because you then feel that there’s space for it? Or that mood...

Phi-Jay: Or when you caress someone’s butt with your hand or *whatever* (...) then you go along with the song, or something like that. So, in principle, you know a song does help to work in the direction of such a situation.

What we see here, in what both Phi-Jay and Veronica say, is that music is not only used to regulate the self during sexual practices, but also to communicate and thereby regulate the situation. The music helps to give direction to and convey an – otherwise unuttered – idea of what the situation entails and what it can move into. We may also conceptualise this in DeNora’s (1997) terms of the music establishing non-cognitive forms of ‘bio-feedback’ that, in this case, structure the situation and the bodies involved, which may also heighten sensation.

When we look at this regulation of the self and the situation, our participants also talk about tonality, voice, lyrics and rhythm as important in creating the circumstances that take them from one emotional, sensory or behavioural state into another. Rhythm is by far the most important musical property serving as such a resource. While some of our participants also valued lyrical aspects, others indicated not to listen to the lyrics at all. Sunnery, a twenty year old Dutch-Surinamese boy who works as a waiter explains how the internal properties of the music – the ‘vibe’ as he calls it – stimulate a transformation in feeling and action during sexual practices.

Sunnery: Because I also notice (...) when you’re for instance doing it with someone, and you’re kissing and then suddenly there’s a wilder record, then you also notice that you become wilder together. You go along with the *vibe* of the music, so to say. And well, if you have a good *playlist* that stimulates that in a good way, then I think that because of that, in the end, you also just have better sex.

Like some of our other participants, Sunnery compiles his playlist so that the music is synchronised to the different phases of having sex. He says that he always makes his playlists in three segments, with foreplay, sex and relaxation after.

Sunnery: And that’s also what I base my music on, more slowly in the beginning, more relaxed. Then actually bang-music, just bang-bang-bang and then slowly cool down like.

In this quote, music functions as an important mood-setter, stimulating feeling and setting the pace for sex. However, we should not interpret these stories as the music simply working upon the youth, with the musical properties mechanically changing their emotions and self-perception. What we see is an interaction where Sunnery tries to work with the music in order to achieve what he considers to be a good sexual experience. He also does not mind when the movements do not correspond with the music at all times. However, he does mention one song “where if you haven’t come yet as a guy, you should put some force behind it,” indicating that you would need to work with the music to get the optimal result; in this case he needs to be finished ‘in time’ before the cooling down songs start to play.

That this ‘working’ with the music is not an individual but a mutual affair, can be deduced from the fact that our participants are very consciously anticipating the possible needs and desires of the people they have sex with. Music often functions as a way for them to find out whether they are “on the same level” with another person (“sexually speaking”, says Sunnery) or as a means to create a situation in which they definitely are in sync. As Richard (a twenty-three year old Dutch lifeguard) explains: “I think that should be clear, that the sex is equally good for both parties. (...) you need to be on the same level a bit, I think, (...) that way the sex can be good for everyone.” Our participants also considered whether a particular record would not ‘work’ for the other person – for instance, because it would give off the wrong impression. Phi-Jay stresses that this would be “very appalling” indeed: “If she has nothing with the music and because of that can’t get into the right mood.” Because it can be hard to figure out what someone else’s musical preferences are, many of our participants indicate that they do not like to put on music when they have just met a new sexual partner. At the same time, however, it is also considered to be a ‘turn-on’ when this new partner coincidentally happens to appreciate the same music.

All this amounts to the idea that music functions as a resource for the configuration of sexual feeling, situations and agency. However, it also opens up questions about power and manipulation. On several occasions during the interview, Richard, for instance, is very consciously thinking about how his musical picks would affect the women he tries to have sex with. At one instance he discusses his pick of John Legend (ft. Ludacris – *Best You Ever Had*), “because that one would definitely warm up the ladies.” Further adding that this record is also not really ‘unfriendly towards women’, while he has other records in his playlist that are. He identifies Eminem’s *Shake That* (ft. Nate Dogg) as one such a record that he still included because he feels that “that’s just how some men think sometimes” and he also thinks that “some women (...) also look for that in a man sometimes,” adding that “especially in bed [I do think] that the man should be a little dominant.” Here we see an example of how gendered cultural discourses or repertoires also mediate music’s mediation of sexual practices.

Another male participant was also very clear about using the music to create more emotional distance during sex. Adam, a twenty-four year old Dutch real estate agent, also said in the beginning of the interview that some of the music he picked is ‘very aggressive’ and ‘unfriendly towards women’. When the interviewer asked him about one song, *Dick Pleaser* by Lil Wayne ft. Jae Millz, that she felt

fitted this description, he answered:

Adam: Yes, it's actually only about having as much women as possible and well... with such music, yea again, I'm just more able for myself that I can take more emotional distance from... yes really from the women, to feel less emotionally connected.

Adam's use of hip-hop music to emotionally detach himself from the women he has sex with seems to fit the theory that the highly charged sexual content of some of today's music promotes inequality and a disrespectful treatment of women and girls (some evidence for this position is found by Hall et al., 2012; Martino et al., 2006; Primack et al., 2008; Ward et al., 2005). However, our conversation did not provide any indication that the music itself implanted these desires into him. Adam mostly talked about how this music helped him to move on after a break-up, as he explains: "this music then helps me to move on and just to go fully for the next one." While the properties of the music play an important role in allowing him to do this, their influence should not be overstated. Their role is more that of giving certain parameters within which Adam can use the music according to his own personal needs. Of course, some of these parameters tie into larger cultural inequalities, enabling desires and forms of conduct that may even be violent, and constraining other configurations of good sex that are perhaps more respectful towards women. Yet, if and how music is mobilised for such conduct and desires is still dependent upon situated circumstances of use (cf. DeNora, 1997).

4.3. Turning it on and off

Many of our participants thus consider the presence of music to be a potential aid in stimulating and enhancing the embodied experiences that would realize good sex. Some of our participants, however, had a strong preference for switching the music off during sexual activities. This choice was based on living conditions, but was also very strongly connected to whether our participants felt able cognitively, emotionally and physically, to work with the music. This difference between participants that did and did not prefer the presence of music during sex, can best be expounded by giving a more in-depth comparison between two of our female participants: Tamara and Pallavi.

4.3.1. Pallavi: music enabling sexual agency

Pallavi is a twenty-five year old Hindu girl who attends a business school. When asked how she would define good sex she answered that there are several conditions: "first of all I have to feel really comfortable (...) and it's also important that I do it with a person I can have a laugh with. Because sex shouldn't be something serious, it has to be *fun*. (...) And good sex for me is also when someone also really looks at what I like. Because you also do it for each other, not just for yourself." Pallavi says that she has heard stories of men that only want sex for their own quick fix; something she has also experienced herself on occasion. "You know, that's not good sex. Someone should look at what you like and if that person knows what you like, he should also just do that." Pallavi considers music as crucial in putting this shared idea of good sex into practice:

Pallavi: I already have a great many *playlists* and for every *mood* I actually have a *playlist*. And also just for when I'm going to have sex (...) yes that's also something that needs music, I just think that music is very important everywhere.

The good sex playlist that she returned to us consisted of twenty-three songs, with R&B as the main genre and some influences from pop. When asked why she specifically selected these songs, Pallavi answered:

"Yes because these really are sex songs. These are all really sex songs and they all are actually also about sex. And in all of them there is just a nice rhythm and that's also something I think is really important. And yes, I also think of sex when I hear these songs, not just because of the lyrics, but also because of the rhythm or something."

Pallavi thinks that rhythm motivated her selection more than lyrics. However, these cannot be too far removed from sex, because then she would find the music disruptive. Here we thus see the properties of the music return as a type of musical affordances.

That is also visible in how Pallavi talks about the music she does not associate with good sex, like hip-hop, "I also listen to that a lot, but I really don't associate that with sex (...). You have songs about *bad bitches* and *hoes*, I would never have sex on that, unless maybe at one point when I would have *crazy sex* with my boyfriend, I wouldn't do it with someone I would have *casual sex* with." This also shows that it is not just the properties of the music, but also other situational factors, like the relation she has with the person she has sex with and the type of sex she intends to have ('crazy' or not) that mediate the effect music has on her sexual practices.

Pallavi got her first boyfriend when she was about nineteen or twenty and she really enjoyed having sex with him on music, because it enhances the sensation: "it really adds something to the mood" and "it sets a nice rhythm," she says. "It's just like when you light candles. That also sets the mood. And with music I also have that. That also just sets the mood of the moment." Recently she had sex with a boy who also enjoyed the music in the background and this made the sex 'more special' and 'better' for her.

Pallavi: Yes Tuesday I also did it with music on, and (...) with him it was really nice because he also really liked the music, the records I had on it, (...) and [then] it was actually (...) not like you just have sex, but it was just the entire evening having sex. (...) And with him it was also really different, because he really enjoyed the music. So he really played into that and that I think is super sexy. So then again you have that small part that makes it all complete.

For Pallavi music thus has the potential to enable good sex, as something that you develop and experience with a partner; repeating well-documented ideas about how the music affects experiencing the passing of time (cf. Bull, 2007). However, she also experienced that not everyone enjoys this the way that she does, and that for some the presence of music during sex can be off-putting. Her ex-boyfriend never wanted to have sex with music on.

Pallavi: He would get very distracted when there was music on, so (...) then he sometimes turned the music off, and that's something I always found too bad, because then it's just... Yes then you're together, but then you're also only just with each other's panting and so, and then (...) there's also not a nice atmosphere. It's just as if you blow out the candles that I just talked about.

While for Pallavi the presence of music under the right circumstances enables sexual agency (because it drowns out other sound, helps her focus and not overthink the situation and her presence in it), her ex-boyfriend had a harder time in reaching this state. His reaction to music in the bedroom is more comparable to Tamara's.

4.3.2. Tamara: music disrupting sexual agency

Tamara is twenty-two and studies media and culture at a Dutch university. She was actually the first person that we approached to take part in our research, and she returned a highly diverse playlist to us consisting of thirty-three songs. While the main influence in her playlist could be classified as electronic, it also contained cases of R&B, hip-hop, acoustic songs, ballads and pop songs (including Madonna's classic *Like a Virgin*). She told us her choices were based on a distinction between songs that represented good sex for her, and songs that are more stereotypically about sex which she assumed may represent good sex for other people.

Like our other participants, Tamara uses music as an expressive device to construct and communicate different ideas of what good sex is, but she doesn't play music during sex. Two songs in her playlist are most representative for her: *Live in the Bedroom* by Tim Moxam and *Heartbeats* by José González. Both are singer-songwriters who make calm, personal and poetic songs. The two particular songs are slow paced and the lyrics in both cases describe an all-night intimate encounter. For Tamara these lyrics describe some of the essential qualities of good sex, namely that it is about losing yourself in each other and the moment, savouring the experience all throughout the night:

"That you just live in the bedroom. That you (...) kind of get *entangled* with each other. You do have your life outside of that, but (...) [at that moment] there's just the two of you and nothing else."

Like Pallavi, Tamara emphasises that good sex, to her, is a joint experience. She felt such togetherness is missing in the more 'stereotypical' songs about sex that she included in her playlist, like Akon's *I Just Had Sex*, which she says makes her feel uncomfortable because they represent the idea "*what am I going to do to you*" instead of "*what I am going to do with you*". Tamara thinks that the more stereotypical songs about sex, for which she mainly refers to R&B, are dominant in the media and therefore come closer to what most young people would consider to be good sex.

Tamara: And I think that my idea of what is good sex is more that it is not just about, the right rhythm and such a *mood setter*, because I don't know, I get reasonably uncomfortable from those songs, then I think '*Oh my god*' (...). What I also think, if you really put on music during sex, then you really have to follow that rhythm, and then that determines the sex instead of you, you know, and that I think would only make it harder instead of making things easier.

Despite having clear ideas about which music represents good sex, Tamara doesn't like to have music on during sex. First, because, as she said, she fears the music would dictate the sex, in terms of pace and movements, instead of her and her partner together developing a good experience. Music thus makes it harder for her to have good sex. In addition, Tamara says to be 'easily distracted' and she feels that when the music is on during sex, she would focus too much on the music and not on her partner and the sex. Good sex for her does not allow distraction.

Tamara: I think that I'm having good sex, when I'm just... that's what I'm doing. My mind is not somewhere else.

However, Tamara does say she does like to put on music when she masturbates. Music then actually helps her to drown out other sounds that would otherwise distract her, and prevent her from getting into the 'otherworldly' state of mind which she associates so strongly with having good sex.

Tamara: Look, I believe that you don't need any music when you're with two people, because then there's the two of you, and well, (...) but if you're busy with yourself then I do think it's *chill*, also because I then use a vibrator which makes noise and that's just all... That's a-romantic so to say. It's really *mechanical*. And then I do think it's *chiller* to have music on, and that's also not music you can sing along to, but just, like *electronic dance music* and then just the ones I think are *chill*.

In both Pallavi's and Tamara's story we see how different situational factors mediate music's mediation of sexual agency. Besides the properties of the music (some of which they cannot appropriate for their ideas of good sex), there are also other factors: the presence of other sound, of the necessary cognitive and physical skills to work with the music, the pre-existing relationship with the other person, the knowledge and perhaps 'respect' that is already there, etc. Together with larger cultural and structural factors these all have a role in the everyday social-politics of young people's sexual experiences and practices.

5. Conclusion and discussion

With one very clear exception, our young research participants share basic ideas about good sex as something which you develop and do together. The accounts of music and good sex that our participants shared solidly show how they choose and use music to construct a good sexual experience. For some this involves the well-thought out selection and sequencing of songs that support their sexual preferences; for others it means actively resisting particular kinds of music they find unpleasantly and overwhelmingly sexual;

for yet others it means having no music on at all.

All of this gives further empirical detail to the sociological theories that have identified music as an important technology for defining the self and social situations (Bull, 2007; DeNora, 2000, 2003), particularly in a world that has become more complicated and demanding and offers less and less guidance from familial or other social bonds (Bauman, 2003; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992). Our method of music-voice revealed an as yet undocumented aspect of the everyday importance of music, namely that young people use music also as a resource for the *sexual* self. This outcome contrasts strongly with many of the studies about young people, music and sex, which try to find evidence for negative effects of sexualized music on sexual self-understanding and behaviour (see American Psychological Association, 2007). Our study showed how young people use music in two ways: particular sounds and lyrics help them develop and formulate their ideas about good sex, and they use music to actually construct a pleasurable sexual experience. They try to ‘work’ with the music in such a way that the music also ‘works’ for them. Some of them do this by tailoring playlists that they feel enhance their experiences of good sex. However, they also do this by diverting from these playlists when they feel the situation calls for it, or by turning the music off completely.

Admittedly, this is by and large a positive outcome about individual choice and agency, which also opens up questions of manipulation and control. Cultural critics may still argue against it that it does not pay enough attention to the context in which all of this happens – of a corporate commercial music industry, sexualized patriarchal culture, ethnic stereotyping and racialisation in certain music genres (see, for instance, the particularly sharp debate between Duits and Van Zoonen (2006, 2007); and Gill (2007)). Our young participants themselves are aware of these larger social contexts and limitations and sometimes bring them up in their conversations as well (see for instance Tamara’s criticism on ‘stereotypical songs about sex’), but their options to escape from them and construct radical alternatives are, of course, limited to non-existent. More importantly, in critical terms the pleasures of sexualised music are inherently contradictory: Halleh’s preference for Beyoncé, mentioned in the introduction, is as much evidence of the stereotypes of black female sexuality that Beyoncé is often said to embody (cf. Durham, 2012), as that it is an expression of her active sexual desire and agency that speaks against discourses of female passivity (see for similar discussions Attwood, 2006; Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Duits & Van Zoonen, 2011). While our research shows that sexualised music does not ‘affect’ young people as predicted under the sexualisation discourse, they are nevertheless caught into contemplating and negotiating such contradictions as they are part of the situational factors that mediate music’s mediations of sexuality. As such, they also influence the ways in which music can be mobilised by young people as a positive resource for good sex.

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Appendix A. : Overview respondents

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Education (highest level completed)	Occupation	Area
Pallavi (F)	25	Hindustani	Student Small Business and Management (higher vocational education)	Part-time shop assistant	Big city
Isabella (F)	20	Indonesian/ Dutch	One year of vocational education	Currently unemployed	Country
Halleh (F)	24	Afghan	English Student (higher vocational education)	Part-time shop assistant	Big city
Yasira (F)	23	Moroccan	Master Labor Law (university completed)	Front office at the municipality	Medium-sized city
Sophie (F)	23	Dutch	Human Resource Management (completed higher vocational education)	Internship at a beer-manufacturer	Medium-sized city
Richard (M)	24	Dutch	Four years of vocational education	Lifeguard	Country
Berivan (F)	18	Turkish	Student graphic design	Part-time shop assistant interior design store	Big city
Adam (M)	25	Dutch	Real estate and Brokerage (completed higher vocational education)	Real estate agent	Big city
Sunnery (M)	20	Surinamese/ Dutch	High school (lower vocational education)	Waiter	Big city
Veronica (F)	22	Dutch	Law student (higher vocational education)	Part-time at debt restructuring office	Big city
Tamara (F)	22	Dutch	Student Master Public Policy	Part-time sales assistant	Big city
Thomas (M)	24	Dutch	Two years of higher vocational education	Fire attendant	Country

Phi-Jay (M)	20	Surinamese/Dutch	Part-time home-study	Small company with friend, selling products via social media	Big city
Magda (F)	23	Angolese-Portuguese/Dutch	Two years of higher vocational education	Shop assistant	Big city
Lilly (F)	23	Surinamese	Student Public Management (university)	Currently unemployed	Big city

Appendix B. : Playlists

Characteristics of the playlists	
Total number of songs in the dataset	302
Total number of unique songs	254
Most popular song	“Or Nah” by Ty Dolla \$ign ft. The Weeknd, Wiz Khalifa & DJ Mustard (5 times)
Most popular artist	Trey Songz ^a (16 times)
Most popular genre	R&B ^b (144 songs)
Most common ethnicity of artist	Afro-American (141 times)
Most common gender of artist	male ^c (209 songs)
Amount of songs with explicit lyrics	128
Amount of songs which are about sex	160

^aHe was picked as an individual artist 12 times and 4 times in collaboration with other artists.

^b144 songs were labeled within the R&B category (including subgenres such as modern R&B, electro R&B etc.)

^cOf the total amount of 302 songs, 42 songs were by female artists and 41 songs featured a collaboration between male and female artists.

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