Social Playlist: Creating connectedness through collaborative music listening

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ABSTRACT
Music plays an important role in our everyday life, and many functions of music use are social in nature. This paper explores ways of enhancing social relations and connectedness through collaborative music listening. The Social Playlist allows users to manage identity and interpersonal relationships through listening to a common playlist, which provides facilities for discovering new music through friends and awareness of other listeners’ presence.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
H.5.3 [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: Group and Organization Interfaces - Synchronous interaction; H.5.5 [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: Sound and Music Computing - Methodologies and techniques

Keywords
Music; sharing; connectedness; awareness; presence; ubiquitous computing; mobility.

1. INTRODUCTION
Music is one of the most widespread and significant cultural objects of everyday life. Hargreaves and North [3] point out three specific domains of music use, namely in terms of cognitive, emotional and social functionality. According to Hargreaves and North, the social functions of music are most notably manifested in the management of self-identity and interpersonal relationships [3]. They point out that self-identity is managed through listeners joining music subcultures as a means of defining themselves, and that preferences of music form the basis of social groups providing appropriate ways for maintaining relationships [3]. Hence, music choice and preference can either reinforce or undermine social relationships [3].

In this paper we present the Social Playlist, a collaborative music listening service for facilitating social relations through connectedness and implicit hints about friend’s activities.

2. BACKGROUND AND PROJECT FOCUS
Connectedness is characterized as an emotional experience of being in touch with one or a group of persons [5]. A sense of connectedness may be contributed to through interactivity and social presence [6]: interactivity indicates the experience of connection through synchronous and near-synchronous two-way communication; while social presence refers to the perception of other participants. Rettie [5] discuss different communicative expressions and conclude that connectedness may occur in situations with very little or no active communication and information exchange.

Recently, there has been an increasing interest in music applications addressing social aspects of music listening and discovery [1, 2, 4]. These projects are heavily concentrated on issues of interactivity and deliberate communication. The Social Playlist is a music listening service which aims to facilitate social relations by enhancing connectedness; balancing the elements of interactivity and communication with an awareness of the presence of friends.

3. DESIGN PROCESS
The project started out with a general research session and a field study centered on music use. After this, we developed and elaborated variations of different concepts within our scope. A prototype used for presentation purposes was produced. We have yet not reached the phase of user evaluation.

4. FIELD STUDY
We conducted a five day field study addressing music use on both the individual level and in the social domain. Our studies were carried out in Malmö, Sweden, during the fall of 2006. The study includes site visits and observations at concerts, record stores, the city library, an upper secondary school and at people’s homes. We conducted 13 interviews with people aged between 16 and 30 years old (7 women and 6 men), at the above mentioned locations. Following are a summarization of the key findings that mainly drive our design decisions.

Music is discovered through friends
Despite the variety of different channels people can learn about new music, all our participants have indicated that they mainly discover new music through friends. It usually occurs when visiting a friends’ place, at school when friends exchange headphones, by the exchange of self-compiled or bought CDs or through recommendations on IM services.

Music choice is strongly related to mood, activities, and places
Most people don’t always prefer a particular genre of music. The music choice is more related to the current mood, what they are doing right now, and where they are. Following are some quotes from our participants:
“when you are down, you listen to live house; when you are more happy, you listen to punk, skate punk, rock, whatever; when the weather is like this, down, it’s live house.” (Male, age 18)
“When I need to sleep, it’s calm music; going to school is fast music; when I am angry, I am listening to all kinds of music; when I am sad, I listen to something else.” (Woman, age 23)

Music provides a social ground for further interaction
Most participants use music as a starting point for conversations. School kids exchanged headphones to show their peers both good and bad songs and they also need to keep up-to-date on topics around music, such as the music videos and the gossip of artists, in order to join conversations. Furthermore, participants start the communication in IM services by sending a MP3 to their friends or ask for music recommendations while chatting.

5. SOCIAL PLAYLIST
Deriving from the implications of previous research and our field studies, the Social Playlist create a means for discovery of new music through friends and provides a continuous social channel. We take advantage of the association between activity and location in relation to music choice to provide a way for indicating presence of friends in an implicit way, in order to establish connectedness and enhance connection among friends.

5.1 General setup & song assignment
The Activity-Based Social Playlist is accessed through a mobile device for music listening with an internet connection and GPS connectivity. Channels are created and administrated by its members. Setup and personal settings are administered through a web interface. Users first create a set of meaningful activities and then assign them to corresponding geographic locations at their own appropriate level of detail. For example, users can create everyday activities on the local level such as “Working”, “Shopping”, “At home”, as well as “Going to school”. From their personal music archive, users assign different songs to different activities, according to personal preferences and how songs are perceived to relate to certain activities.

5.2 Generation of the playlist
Depending on listeners locations and the activities that their location respond to, appointed songs get a certain probability of being played. When a song belongs to an activity location that a large amount of listeners in the channel are currently within, the song gets a high probability of being played. Opposite, songs belonging to activity locations that less people are currently within get less probability to get played at the moment.

5.3 Experience of listening to the channel
Music played in a channel is streamed to each listener’s mobile device. The system keeps track of each user in the channel, their location (through GPS transmission) and settings. Each listener hears the same music as the other members in the channel. The interface of the listening device displays the number of members currently in the channel, information on the current song, which user assigned it and what corresponding activity the song belongs to. There are also options for giving feedback to the songs played and to get list of what members are currently within the channel.

5.4 Scenario
The following scenario shows how users discover new songs, how they learn more about their friends, and, most important, how awareness of the presence leads to the sense of connectedness.

Johan is on his way home from work and listens to a Social Playlist channel. There is a song by Kylie Minogue currently being played, “Can’t get you out of my head”. He sees that this song was assigned to the activity of “Working” by one of the friends in the channel. Johan smiles to the fact that most of his friends are still at work. He sees that the Kylie-song was chosen by his new friend Daniel. “I didn’t know he was into Kylie Minogue”, Johan thinks. The bus arrives and as Johan takes a seat the song fades out and a new song turns up. This time it is a song from Pet Shop Boys assigned by him. He feels happy about the fact that his friends will get to hear it. As the song belongs to the activity of “Going home” he assumes people are now starting to drop out of their office.

6. DISCUSSION
The Social Playlist provides a channel for sharing own favorite songs and discovery of new songs through the preferences of others. Through the channel users get a status of what members are online, and an implicit hint of what activities they are currently up to, according to what music is played in the channel. This provides a means for enhancing the group belonging among friends through providing a shared experience and connectedness, and creates a way to get a better understanding of friends’ musical preferences throughout different activities. The presence of other members provided in the channel is implicit without a need for deliberate communication.

7. CONCLUSION
In this paper we introduced the Social Playlist as a means to enhance social relationships through connectedness with mobile music applications. We believe that the Social Playlist provides an interesting direction for future work, using activity as a means for selection of music, by providing hints to what friends’ are currently up to and by creating connectedness through the social presence of friends.

8. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
We would like to thank Helge Fischer and May L. Kronemann, with whom we collaborated in the project.

9. REFERENCES