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The 'lonely raver': music livestreams during COVID-19 as a hotline to collective consciousness?

Femke Vandenberg , Michaël Berghman and Julian Schaap 

Department of Arts and Culture Studies, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This paper offers an explorative analysis of the online social practices of livestreamed concerts as one of the most popular cultural outlets during the COVID-19 imposed 'lockdown' in Europe. Ritual theory is used to investigate the potential of these virtual concerts in generating a collective consciousness, and the related feelings of social solidarity and resilience, specifically important in times of physical isolation. Through a thematic content analysis of the comments ($n = 1501$) posted during livestreamed techno concerts in the Netherlands, we find that both old and new ritual actions are used to form online communities. While these ritual activities mark participation and remind members of a previous collective feeling, the omission of visceral elements of a physical audience hampers the establishment of a renewed sense of social solidarity.

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KEYWORDS COVID-19; livestream; music; rave culture; social solidarity; ritual theory

Introduction

As European governments intensified their efforts in the fight against COVID-19 in March 2020, outlooks on social life changed drastically. Societal 'lockdowns' aimed at restricting human interaction to 'flatten the curve' of infections, had a pervasive impact in many social and economic domains. Consequences for the performing arts – including live music – were particularly severe, as concerts, tours, festivals and parties were rapidly cancelled. This is not only problematic financially for the sector but also societally, as (live) music can play a crucial role in, amongst others, generating social solidarity and fostering social resilience.

CONTACT Femke Vandenberg  vandenber@eshcc.eur.nl  Department of Arts and Culture Studies, Erasmus University, Rotterdam ESHCC Room M7-05 Burg. Oudlaan 50, 3062PA, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

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Music is often mobilised to provide the ‘routines, assumptions and occasions that constitute “social life”’ (DeNora 2000: xi) and, as such, give meaning to people and their social surroundings (Roy and Dowd 2010). In other words, apart from its immediate individual effects (emotional release), music has a social function (generating intersubjectivity). Live music events in particular often take on ritual characteristics, generating a ‘sonic bond’ which aids in connecting people in the reciprocation of emotions (Bensimon 2012). Durkheim (1995 [1912]) called this social-emotional experience ‘collective effervescence’ and linked it to the generation of social solidarity. Music thus, in a sense, works as a ‘hotline’ to the collective consciousness (Horsfall 2016: 52). Hence, during times of personal or collective crisis – such as a global pandemic – it is not unusual for people to turn to music, due to its connective purposes (Bodner and Gilboa 2009).

In the initial stages of the European societal lockdowns, musicians rapidly moved to the virtual sphere, with livestreams in particular proving to be a vital resort for artists and audiences. Although the practice of livestreaming was around long before the pandemic (cf. Hilvert-Bruce *et al.* 2018), the emphasis had predominantly remained on live experiences in the ‘traditional’ sense (Holt 2010). But when venues closed, there was little choice but to shift focus to the free and accessible livestreaming services of Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. As this changed the nature of the live experience, this begs the question: to what extent can livestreamed concerts conduce feelings of social solidarity and resilience when physical gatherings are impossible?

In this paper, we offer an explorative analysis of the emerging collective practices surrounding livestreamed electronic music events in the Netherlands. In doing so, our aim is not to study how livestreams are experienced in general, but we focus specifically on their potential to contribute to the development of a collective consciousness, and related feelings of social solidarity in a time of Corona-induced physical isolation. While previous research has predominantly focused on face-to-face rituals, more recent studies have looked into the capacity of social networking services such as Instagram, Facebook, and online games to generate feelings of collectivity resulting from collective rituals (Bartholomew and Mason 2020; Burroughs 2014; Gibbs *et al.* 2015; Simpson *et al.* 2018). By investigating music rituals in a virtual environment, we expand not only our understanding of one of the prominent ways the heavily affected cultural sector coped during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also of the role of online communities during a time of crisis. This is a specifically important

question in a period when collective involvement and cooperation is needed from each individual in the fight against the pandemic.

Raving online as a collective ritual

Sociologists emphasise the importance of rituals (Cohen 1985; Collins 2004; Durkheim 1995 [1912]; Goffman 1967) as a fundamental component of human behaviour and a key aspect to social agency (Knottnerus 2016: 3–4). Building on Durkheimian ritual theory, Collins (2004) connects the feelings of interacting with someone who has a shared focus of attention and mood – an interaction ritual – with the generation of emotional energy. When individuals with established feelings of participation are in close proximity and are mutually aware of one another, they can reach a state of collective effervescence (Collins 2004: 48). Such rituals can establish and ratify membership symbols, foster standards of group morality, and be conducive of individual emotional energy or confidence (Collins 2004: 49). Ritual theory hence supposes that if an interaction ritual is successful in generating collective effervescence, participants may be left with amplified feelings of personal resilience and social solidarity. Although much sociological work on collective effervescence and ritual theory is inspired by religious ceremonies, this can easily be extended to secular encounters such as music concerts.

No other music genre has been more likened to a ritual experience than electronic music – specifically the genres that fall under the category of rave (see for example: Partridge 2006; St John 2004; Sylvan 2013; Takahashi and Olaveson 2003; Gore 1997). Originating from the UK in the late 80s – but finding a prominent position throughout the European music scene in the early 90s – raves are dance events that feature electronically produced dance music (such as techno, house, trance and drum-‘n-bass) (Anderson and Kavanaugh 2007). Ravers and theorists alike have pointed to the importance of the shared feeling of connectedness during these events, as the ritualistic aspects of bodies involved in close and synchronised dancing generates ‘profound feelings of communality’ (Olaveson 2004: 85).

Recurring actions common to the audience (such as a stylised dance, movement, call, or the consumption of substances) act as ritual activities – or ‘stereotyped formulas’ (Collins 2004) – which provide a mutual awareness within the crowd. In being focused on the same activities, people become attuned to each other, leading to a collective consciousness and a heightened emotional energy. However, if this collective emotion

does not follow, the ritual ‘is merely “formal,” an empty going through the formal steps, even a dead ceremonialism’ (Collins 2004: 49). While intense collective effervescence may be transient, ‘symbols of social relationship’ of different shapes and sizes are charged throughout the event. Hence, feelings of collectivity generated during an event can live on in collective symbols. These emblems represent the collective identity of the group, celebrated by the participants and treated with great respect both during and after the event (Collins 2004: 49). But to what extent can this be extended to events that only have an online presence?

The ‘liveness’ of livestreamed concerts is defined in terms of time, rather than space. Although not experiencing the music in the physical presence of others (or the artist), the fact that one is attending a live performance – in real-time – lends to an ‘added sense of presence, heightened immediacy and involvement’ (Skjuve and Brandtzaeg 2019: 590), making the experience closer to the ‘real thing’ than pre-recorded videos. Comment sections provide the engagement needed for creating social ties and feelings of community, as they enable participants to move beyond immediate interaction with acquaintances and communicate to the audience in general. The fact that over ten times more comments are posted at livestream concerts than under regular videos indicates that people find it important to communicate their ‘presence’ during these online events (Skjuve and Brandtzaeg 2019); even when participants do not post comments themselves, the comment section signals the presence of an audience they do not personally know. The ‘liveness’ is crucial to the experience of these interactions as ‘the closer the flow of [messages] is to real conversational exchange, the more possibility of a sense of collective entrainment’ (Collins 2004: 62). This makes livestreams superior to traditional recorded videos in providing ritual experiences.

Materials and methods

To get a better understanding of online communities during the COVID-19 lockdown, we performed a qualitative content analysis of the comment section accompanying livestreamed raves on Facebook Live.

In sampling the livestreams for this study, we adopted the following criteria. First, we looked for Dutch music venues that began posting livestreamed concerts on Facebook after the initial lockdown commenced (in the Netherlands, 12 March marked the day that all events over 100 people were cancelled). We chose to look at pages of venues to avoid only focusing on the following of a particular artist. The broadcasted

Table 1. Outline of analysed livestream videos, comments, uploaded date, duration, views and shares ($n = 1501$).

| Comments | Uploaded date | Duration | Views | Shares |
|----------|---------------|----------|--------|--------|
| 156 | 12 March | 02:10:09 | 10,000 | 11 |
| 173 | 23 March | 00:58:16 | 7,000 | 56 |
| 197 | 30 March | 01:52:25 | 10,000 | 75 |
| 480 | 2 April | 01:58:25 | 9,000 | 0 |
| 459 | 6 April | 00:44:48 | 34,000 | 6 |

videos had to display live electronic sets of over 30 min and had to have received over 100 synchronous comments from viewers. Fitting within these criteria, we selected the Facebook profile of a well-established Dutch electronic concert venue (to protect the identity of its viewers, we will not mention its name). Since the early 90s it has accommodated large scale events and enjoys both national and international repute. Its Facebook page has a large following and turnaround of content.

For the analysis, we took the first five livestreams posted after the COVID-19 measures initiated, which meant that we focused on virtual events when the lockdown restrictions were at their heaviest. Thematic content analysis (Ditchfield and Meredith 2018) was used to analyse the comments of these livestreams ($n = 1501$; see Table 1). We used an iterative process to categorise comments into broader themes (such as informative contents related to the music – track, artist or DJ – small talk, mentioning of activities and alluding to past and imagined experiences). We also focused on the length and content of sequences of comments and conversations to identify recurring patterns.

Results

Old rituals as symbols

An essential element for a successful ritual is a mutual focus of attention (Collins 2004). In being collectively attuned to the same thing, a crowd reaches a shared mood, resulting in feelings of collectivity and, potentially, collective effervescence. Numerous comments left on the analysed livestream comment sections reflect a shared written discourse. Ample comments, for example, focus on activities and phrases typically found in a place-based concert: ‘see you at the left of the stage’, ‘do you have a cigarette?’, ‘where is the toilet?’ Despite the fact that participants are watching the livestream from their homes, they persistently keep up conventional dialogue heard during a place-based concert. The arguably ironic undertone of these comments, however, displays that they are not naive to this fact.

Apart from phrases common to any concert, some communication is also unique to these particular types of raves. For example, the comment sections are scattered with remarks about ‘hakken’, the customary dancing style at these events. Even more prominent, however, is the discourse about drugs-usage. A recurring theme is looking for or wanting to share drugs (‘does someone have a popper for me?’, ‘where is the bag at?’, or ‘someone for a line?’). The celebration of these activities is clear, with a sizeable number of comments dedicated to just a drug’s name. This is not surprising as drugs are considered to be central to electronic music, and rave culture in particular. Gore (1997: 52) writes that drugs are at the core of any rave, providing the energy needed to dance all night and inducing the feelings of ‘well-being, sociability and gregariousness’ of the audience. The ritual of drug use in unison with the music is used by participants to reach a shared mood, leading to collective effervescence (Olaveson 2004). If one is watching a livestreamed techno concert, it seems vital that drug use is also involved – if only discursively.

In sum, raves are formed around ritual activities, such as meeting people ‘at the left of the stage’, asking for a cigarette and sharing drugs. The symbolic importance of these routine and recognisable actions is particularly noticeable in the comments. However, the irony with which these activities are introduced, suggests that they are no longer rituals actually unfolding, but they have turned into mere symbols of an already established collective consciousness. These symbols rely on a preconstructed collective memory to mark participants’ membership, but they do not generate new feelings of collectivity.

New ritual actions

However, an exclusive focus on verbal mimicry of ritual interactions does insufficient justice to the particularity of online events. To express emotional charge of written discourses, digital interaction has broadened to include symbols and images, predominantly in the form of emojis (Novak *et al.* 2015).

Even on superficial inspection, the frequent use of emojis stands out. Although comments are rife with emojis of various faces, clusters of specific object-based emojis are observed at particular junctures in the livestreams. Especially during the ‘drop’ – a climactic change in the bass-line of electronic music – verbal communication makes way for the ‘fire’, ‘collision’ and ‘bomb’ symbol (see [Table 2](#)).

Table 2. Visual representation of the emojis used.

| Emoji | Description |
|---|-------------|
|  | Fire |
|  | Bomb |
|  | Collision |
|  | Woozy face |
|  | Sad faces |

source: <https://openmoji.org/>

Viewer one: Nice man [3 fire emojis]

Viewer two: Greeting from Germany [woozy face emoji]

Viewer three: He is going nicely! [3 fire emojis]

Viewer four: <3 [5 fire emojis] I miss you

Viewer five: [fire emoji]

Deriving from the common slang phrases ‘lit’ and ‘hot’, these emojis represent the viewers’ appreciation of the track. The recurring use of a limited range of emojis to express enjoyment indicates the establishment of a common symbolism, specific to online events. Use of this symbolism marks participation and displays an understanding of the group’s discourse.

Moreover, the fact that viewers tend to join in by replicating an emoji in a series of replies signals close observation of what others are doing and a collective awareness of one another. Emojis used in this manner constitute a new shared ritual that is specific to online collective gatherings around (popular) music. The symbols perform a social role to ‘maintain and enhance social relationships’ (Riordan 2017: 555).

These conversations, however, tend to be quite brief (clusters of emojis rarely exceed four or five comments). A partial reason for this may be that comments are presented sequentially, so the moment passes before larger numbers of people can join in. Moreover, these comments often come with a pessimistic remark, such as ‘I miss you’ (see quote above). In fact, the ritual generally seems to be structured as follows: a. drop – b. emoji – c. emoji – d. emoji – e. emoji with an expression of disappointment. Even if these new rituals achieve a collective awareness between viewers, they appear to have limited strength in generating a powerful collective emotion as they are too brief and halted by viewers who, despite

enjoying the music, also lament the ‘real’ thing – thereby stressing the inadequacy of these rituals.

Virtual concerts as an end in itself?

Recent research has argued for the capability of social networking sites to provide a ‘third space’, a virtual platform which not only connects people but can also generate the collective consciousness obtained from a successful ritual (Bartholomew and Manson 2020). Comments like ‘lonely raver’, ‘raving from isolation’ and ‘nice, just spacing out from home’ indicate that the livestreams are to a certain extent, successful in transporting the party to viewers’ homes. However, they also emphasise that the solitary nature is a conspicuous characteristic of the experience.

Furthermore, although the viewers clearly enjoy the music, many comments suggest that they consider these streams more in terms of a recording than a live experience. For example, ‘nice [name of viewer six], let’s play this during work tomorrow’. Instead of enjoying it in the here and now – virtually together – the viewer ignores the live component and treats it as a recording that can be played at any time. In fact, this message suggests that it is nearly more important to listen to the recording together, in person. There are a multitude of comments that similarly reflect the need to listen to this type of music physically together:

‘This is super hot, but I can’t dance ... not alone in a room’.

‘It is just painful to watch this from the couch, when all I want to do is be there with you guys dancing (3 sad face emojis)’

These can almost be read as outcries of frustration. The viewers recognise that they would normally dance to this music, but not having the rest of the audience around them (physically, because they are very much aware of the presence of others) stops them from being fully immersed in the experience.

In grief of not being physically surrounded by fellow participants, live-stream concerts are being compared to physical events and clearly disfavoured for not providing a similar collective experience. The viewers pay tribute to what they consider the ‘original’ ritual by mimicking particular aspects of it. However, they seem fully aware that an important aspect is missing to transform the individuals watching a concert into a unified entity attuned to one another. The virtual concert then seems to leave the viewers only missing the real thing more.

Discussion

Music events, whether live or livestreamed, present a break from the mundane; they represent a special occasion and an opportunity to connect with others. A clear example of this process could be witnessed during the ‘balcony concerts’ that took place in Europe (particularly in Italy) during the initial stages of societal lockdown. One of the most important features of livestreams, then, is the fact that they happen simultaneously for all viewers. In knowing that others are watching at the same time, individuals can feel part of something bigger. Thus, viewers are reminded of belonging to a community for the duration of the event. This may aid in dealing with the consequences of societal lockdown measures, as it preserves feelings of solidarity in a group that is already established.

Our analysis suggests that, to a certain extent, livestreams made after the initial COVID-19 outbreak can produce new ritual activities, where collective focus can turn into collective emotions. However, more prominent are the hints to established, pre-COVID-19 ritual activities, deriving from past physical experiences and verbally translated to the online environment. Viewers lament these lost ritual actions, specifically acknowledging the bereavement of the physical crowd itself. Although many more aspects differentiate the livestream experience from physical concerts (such as the sound, temperature and lighting), which no doubt impact how people feel, viewers’ insistence on the social dimension stands out. Without the physical proximity to other bodies, collective energy seems out of reach, regularly leading to utterances of frustration. This demonstrates the need for the small bodily cues and sounds of a crowd (Collins 2004). Without them the experience has little potential to foster a ‘hotline’ to a collective consciousness (Horsfall 2016: 52) and turns into a ‘dead ceremonialism’ of sorts. While interactions in comment sections enable a shared experience, without the ability to see or hear other participants in the ritual, it provides confirmation of established group membership rather than a strong collective consciousness – necessary to achieve strong feelings of social solidarity and resilience. Simply put, because the social experience of a rave is fundamentally about physical engagement, when this is removed, its essence is lost. A livestream can then be understood as a ritual-turned-symbol, a surrogate for social interaction, but not a substitute.

Clearly, our focus was on raves in particular, which are characterised by heavy audience engagement in the form of dancing. Likely, the amount of audience activity is a decisive factor in how successfully events make the transition to livestreaming. In that sense, it seems obvious that this is

more suited to events with a seated audience. From our perspective, however, the main question is whether this may be due to a lesser focus on feelings of collectivity at such events. These are crucial considerations for future research, particularly from a comparative perspective: differences among events, cultural genres (e.g. theatre, art performances), but also countries. Moreover, as our findings hint at the importance of physicality for feelings of collectivity, a fruitful avenue for exploration are online events lacking a physical counterpart, such as gaming-centred communities on platforms such as Twitch. If these manage to generate truly *collective* effervescence, we might simply conclude that the livestream environment may be unsuitable for live music. However, if they do not, the increasing transition to online interaction (whether in the form of livestreams, but also virtual work meetings) may have more far-reaching consequences to our sense of collectivity than we would hope.

Disclosure statement

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

Notes on contributors

Femke Vandenberg works as a PhD candidate and lecturer at the Department of Arts and Culture Studies at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her core research interests are popular music, cultural consumption and lifestyles, and social stratification.

Michaël Berghman is assistant professor sociology of art and culture at Erasmus University Rotterdam. His research focuses primarily on the social situatedness of art perception and appreciation, which he studies in relation to visual art as well as popular music and design.

Julian Schaap is an assistant professor sociology of music at Erasmus University Rotterdam. His research focuses on social stratification on the basis of whiteness, race/ethnicity, and gender in various cultural fields.

ORCID

Femke Vandenberg  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0425-744X>

Julian Schaap  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3656-4225>

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