

Preliminary Analysis (Artifact Analysis) or YouTube Music

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YouTube Music (YTM) is an application and website that allows users to listen to songs and podcasts available on YouTube. There is a premium version for \$10.99/month and a free version with ads. Unlike the free version of Pandora, YTM allows users to navigate to different points within songs and podcasts. Another feature YTM offers that its competitor, Pandora, does not, is a robust availability of international music. Online, users express that they appreciate a free music streaming platform, but feel the “radio” option does not have a good algorithm behind it; they feel that Spotify’s algorithm delivers related music that’s a better fit for them than the related artists/songs than YTM. This is one reason why users don’t want to pay for YTM. They also don’t understand why YTM is not included in a bundle with a YouTube Premium subscription.

YouTube Music is a highly individualized product that serves users options based on their previous viewing and listening history. I’ve listened to many Beyonce songs in my life and Beyonce’s new album was first under the “New Releases” category of my home page. This was followed by a new single co-produced by three Russian artists, one of whom I have listened to many times. This demonstrates that this product was created for highly individualized people who are interested in engaging with their preferred music, rather than music that’s popular in their neighborhood, age range, or friend group. The highly customizable nature of the application (the ability to “like”, “dislike”, and save songs to playlists) suggests that the user is expected to come from a culture with a relatively high indulgence score (according to Hofstede Insights), meaning people are encouraged to pursue their personal interests and passions. Rather than having to enter their favorite songs manually, the songs and artists populate on their own. This suggests that the user is, at the very least, not offended at being taken care of—being served.

The material analysis of this product is interesting, as it does not exist on its own; it’s a technology brought to life by a laptop, PC, or smartphone. This immaterial analysis says about the product that it exists in a time when the value of a product is not determined by its physicality (the ability to be re-sold, which represented value in generations past) but by the ephemeral emotional value it can bring in the moment. Its interface is as minimalist as possible, with high-contrast colors and artist/channel icons

pulled from the channels themselves. The UI is as neutral as possible and allows the artists and channels to speak (design) for themselves.

Aesthetically, the UI is neutral-leaning-relaxing, with sans serif font and constant references to the user—“Mixed for you”, “Podcasts to get you started”, “From your library” creating a welcoming and low-pressure atmosphere. The black backdrop makes the screen easy to look at. While the highly individual icons pulled from artists and channels give a dysfluent impression, it’s effective because it immediately and clearly differentiates artists and channels from one another. Seeing images of familiar podcasters’ faces side-by-side adds an element of parasocial comfort.

Operationally, the app can play music and podcasts, hands-free. The phone or laptop can be set aside to play music for the user while they clean, dance, or follow along with a podcast’s instructions. This affords users the freedom to physically do as they please as they use the app. The user can personalize their playlists and what the YTM algorithm will feed them by “liking”, “disliking”, and saving tracks. This enables the user to create more and more specific line-ups and playlists.

Contextual aspects of the app are that it’s owned by Google and available in a mobile or stationary format. YTM pulls music and podcasts from YouTube, so the data used to create the experience is pulled from an external application. Having access to what users are listening to, watching, and listening to in a format that’s explicitly hands-free can represent value and control for Google. With knowledge about user preferences, Google can leverage user data as a feature of their ad services to prospective advertisers. This makes them increasingly powerful, trading the user’s personal information for the ability to listen to music on the go.

Notable: One way YTM could be misused would be a natural consequence of how the suggestion algorithms work. Listening to podcasts featuring misinformation or extremist perspectives and “liking” such videos causes more to be lined up for them. YTM’s affordance of being able to listen with an inactive screen makes it easier for users to passively digest online content, increasing the potential for constant exposure to misinformation or extremist views.