

Mainstream popular music research: a musical update

BERNHARD STEINBRECHER 

Department of Music, University of Innsbruck, Austria

E-mail: steinbrecher.bernhard@gmail.com

Abstract

This article reviews studies that examine internationally circulating music which has reached the upper echelon of all-genre single charts in the 21st century. The examinations will be used as examples for the analysis of sonic aesthetics that are embedded in a particular frame of cultural debate, which the article conceptualises as ‘mainstream popular music’. The research field is then mapped and discussed with regard to prevailing objectives, methods and findings, including elaborations on how future research might advance understanding of the aesthetics within the discourses of mainstream popular music and, thus, of contemporary culture at large. The literature review focuses on music- and listener-based analytical directions and critically reflects on the frequent absence of theoretically well-founded and empirically underpinned, context-sensitive music examinations, particularly with regard to quantitative and audience research. The concluding section calls for a more integrated perspective on mainstream popular music as a discourse and praxis formation.

Introduction

Mainstream notions play an important role in music-cultural analysis. But instead of being deployed as a particular lens through which to advance understanding of contemporary music’s characteristics, meanings and functions, the concept of the mainstream has often only been used to demarcate, rather vaguely, the binary other to the authentic, honest, subversive, and creative (Huber 2013, p. 8). As Alison Huber puts it, it ‘has been working quietly behind the scenes, upstaged by the romantic bravado of concepts such as “subculture” and “resistance”’ (Huber 2013, p. 4; see also, e.g. Thornton 1995; Taylor *et al.* 2013; Jost 2016). Difficulties arise already when trying to clearly define, in connection with music, the term *mainstream*, with its ‘significant cultural value’ (Taylor *et al.* 2013, p. ix), and thus to go beyond its often (apparently) commonsensical and ‘haphazard’ application (Taylor *et al.* 2013, p. viii).

In the past 20 years, some attempts have actually been made to frame the term theoretically (e.g. Toynbee 2002; Martel 2011; Huber 2013; Weisbard 2014; Jost 2016). However, the different ways in which it is being defined and what side of it is brought to the fore depend strongly on the particular scholar’s perspective and intention, so there is still not really a consensus ‘on what its use describes’ (Huber 2013, p. 11). In the opening section of my article, I do not strive to stipulate what *the*

mainstream is in musical or other aesthetic terms, i.e. what type of music the term suggests (see Toynbee 2002, p. 149), but will conceptualise the implications that go along with when something or someone is/becomes ascribed to mainstream popular music.

Mapping the concept

Most basically, notions of the mainstream are considered in this article in the context of popular music, i.e. as music-related phenomena attached to internationally circulating styles such as pop, rock, hip-hop or EDM. The general relationship between popular music and its mainstream might be defined in such a way that the latter is the superlative or pinnacle version of the former: mainstream popular music is *very popular* popular music, striving for *maximum* popularity with the *largest part* of the listening audience and to succeed in *top positions* of the charts, which 'define the most popular of popular music, the goal, the pinnacle of success' (Parker 1991, p. 205).¹

Somewhat similar to *popular music* though, *mainstream popular music* does not refer to a coherent musical category in the form of, for example, a defined genre which can be characterised by distinct formal, technical, semiotic, social or other 'rules' (Fabbri 1982). Instead, the term *mainstream* mostly functions additionally, as an attribution to more specific, and diverse, kinds of popular music. In relevant contemporary literature, for instance, one can find (albeit mostly vaguely defined) terms such as 'mainstream hip-hop' (Hansen and Hawkins 2018, p. 168; Duinker 2019a, p. 430), 'mainstream rap' (Singh and Tracy 2015, p. 98), 'mainstream 1980s music' (Traut 2005, p. 57), 'mainstream rock' (Christenson *et al.* 2018, p. 3), 'mainstream contemporary R&B' (Danielsen 2017, p. 12), 'mainstream EDM-pop' (James 2015) and 'mainstream pop' (Bradby 2017, p. 35; Brøvig-Hanssen and Danielsen 2016, p. 56).²

Seen from this perspective, common metaphorical ideas of the mainstream as representing the principal stream of a river claiming any nearby water (Huber 2013, p. 10), a 'central subfield' around which the field of pop-rock is scattered (Regev 2013, p. 83) or a 'stylistic middle ground' (Toynbee 2002, p. 150) might just be as misleading as relating *mainstream* to terms like 'normal' (cf. Huber 2013, p. 4) or 'normalising' (Weisbard 2014, pp. 263–5). Because in the examples given, the *norm* or *centre* is probably rather to be found at hip-hop, rock or R'n'B themselves than in these genres' stylistically subordinated *mainstream* offshoots, which evolved – similar to their *alternative* offshoots – out of them (and not necessarily vice versa; see also Middleton 2000, p. 62).³

¹ I have presented this definitional 'superlative' notion already elsewhere briefly, as well as my thoughts about uses of the term *commercial music*, in connection with musical nuances in popular music (Steinbrecher 2021, pp. 113–14). Of course, popular music is itself a complex and discursive term, and popular music studies have struggled since their early days with a narrow framing of their core topic, by means of, e.g. quantitative, economic-technological, sociological or music-related criteria (Steinbrecher 2016, pp. 18–26). There is at least some agreement on the common concern of the popular music research field, according to Hesmondhalgh and Negus, which is – and for me, this is also true regarding mainstream popular music – 'questions about the relationship between music meaning, social power and cultural value' (2002, p. 2).

² A simple google search shows that word combinations the other way round, such as 'pop mainstream' or 'rock mainstream', are way less common.

³ Today, the rather paradoxical term *alternative mainstream* has become a label on its own, used, for example, in the musical self-description of the popular Austrian public radio station FM4 (<https://docplayer.org/26470765-Presseinfos-zu-der-jugendkultursender-des-orf-fm4-homepage-fm4-orf-at-mail.html>); accessed

A more operative definition of the mainstream attribution might read as follows: it is an evaluative term with strong adherence to economic aspects that refers to a process. Other than the (mostly non-judgementally used) terms *popular music* or *pop music*, *mainstream* is a description and an evaluation simultaneously (see also Jost 2019, 1:45–1:55). Hans Otto Huegel notes that the term *mainstream* very often is used *ex ante* to devalue the aesthetics of the popular as cheap, trivial and trashy, with the consequence that its structures and qualities are being flagged as something not worth discussing (Huegel 2007, p. 10). *Mainstream* music is music that is discredited as being ‘banal, homogeneous, unsophisticated, undiscerning, uncultured, low, inauthentic, fake, commercial, conservative, unimaginative, conformist or just plain stupid’ (Huber 2013, p. 8). Something might sound ‘(too) mainstream’ (Jost 2019), listeners define themselves ‘against the “mainstream” of commercial taste, wherever that might lie’ (Frith 1998, p. 66) and artists are loath to create anything viewed as mainstream.

Hence, when examining sonic, visual or other objects by the concept of mainstream popular music, analysis can interpret them as to their embedment in a specific cultural debate (Wicke 2016, c. 1696) that entails particular discursive instruments for negotiating musical value (see Jost 2016, p. 167). On that account, I would like to build up on Christofer Jost’s mainstream considerations (2016, 2019). Drawing on Erving Goffman (1977), he conceptualises the mainstream as a frame, i.e. ‘a scheme of interpretation that arises from collectively communicated experiences’ (Jost 2019, 21:40–21:50). Against the backdrop of the cultural knowledge circulating at any given time, mainstream popular music is a particular praxis formation of producing and perceiving music that incorporates specific ways of collective thinking and action as well as underlying logics (Jost 2019, 20:40–20:50). It is a specific ‘discursive framework’ in Lee Marshall’s terms (2011), giving listeners ‘the tools to make sense of the sounds they hear’ and to create musical meaning through their position within it (p. 159).

An essential instrument in this mainstream popular music frame concerns economic notions or notions of *commerciality*. Not only did cultural studies scholars such as Dick Hebdige (1979) consolidate the view that mainstream culture’s principal objective is profit-maximising reproduction (and the strengthening of hegemonic power relations; see Taylor *et al.* 2013), but it is particularly the term *commercial music* that becomes central in this regard. The term often appears either as an equivalent to the term *mainstream music*, or else both terms are considered as an entity in that the adjective *commercial* is put in front of the word *mainstream* (see, for example, the quote above from Frith). However, the respective use of this adjective, particularly in everyday language, is seldom neutral in terms of a description of state, i.e. of music generating (maximum) revenue, being marketed to a broad (as large as possible) audience and ‘addressing a large market which traverses geographical and social space and can be sustained over time; precisely a mainstream in other words’ (Toynbee 2002, p. 160). Instead, the term *commercial music* most often functions as an ascribed intent associated with the music’s creators. Drawing on Michael Parzer’s content-analytical study on musical taste (2011), mainstream popular music is understood not merely as a commercially successful product, but also

30 September 2020). For further elaborations on the alternative mainstream see Keunert (2015); for the concept of a ‘mainstream of minorities’ see Holert and Terkessidis (1996).

one that raises suspicions that it was created solely out of economic interests, i.e. exclusively with the intention of gaining (the highest-possible) financial profit rather than for its own aesthetic sake and, thus, lacking authenticity, artistry and creativity (Parzer 2011, pp. 160–8; see also Ackermann 2019, pp. 188–91).

Thus, when popular music becomes interwoven into the mainstream debate, evaluations happen against the backdrop of an imaginary conception of particular intentions and production practices within capitalistic conditions, triggering specific beliefs as to why and how certain music is made. Basically, respective value judgements tend to refer more to the (commercial) process of development than to the aesthetics of the final (commercial) product. This becomes apparent, for example, when considering that mainstream popular music often carries the image of being polished, pre-processed, cut-and-dried, overproduced and removed of any edge whatsoever (Steinbrecher and Pichler 2021). Such attributions relate more strongly to how the songs were produced than to the music's inherent aesthetic qualities (such as its alleged catchiness⁴).

In this context, ideas of professionalism together with technological changes play a peculiar role. While professional musicianship is usually positively charged at least in terms of an appreciation of musical skills,⁵ the artistic value of popular chart tunes is questioned precisely because they are written and produced by professionals, i.e. by people who can make a living out of music, follow a pre-defined plan (rather than act intuitively) and use state-of-the-art tools and equipment. The latter becomes relevant especially in the age of digital music production, where the skills that are required to work on a professional level are shifting more and more towards technological skills, towards creating and manipulating sounds in digital audio workstations. As a result, professionally made *very popular* popular music is also strongly involved in (re-)current discourses about the decline of musical quality in connection to the degrading relevance of conventional playing and singing skills.

What makes the negotiation of mainstream notions in relation to popular music also somewhat exceptional is that there is a concrete benchmark rather than an abstract one, namely high chart placements, to evaluate, for better or worse, whether these professionals succeeded in gearing musical aesthetics towards their (true or imputed) intentions. However, this confirmation (of aims or beliefs) is based only upon a momentary snapshot that needs to be taken at weekly, or today even shorter, intervals. On that account, I want to elaborate in more detail on my above-indicated idea of an inherently processual nature of musical *mainstream(-ness)*: something or someone crosses over into the mainstream, becomes mainstream, is brought to the mainstream or slips out of the mainstream.

To analyse popular music as to this in-and-out process means to sharpen the focus on those instants when particular aesthetics, practices and discourses intermingle in such a way that they successfully correspond to (inter-)nationally prevailing fashions and trends of the day. Music that gains such a 'mainstream momentum'

⁴ If pop songs are defined through their focus on catchy hooks (Shepherd 2003, p. 508) as well as their simplicity regarding beat, melody, harmonic accompaniment (Kramarz 2006, p. 61) and structure (Everett 2000, p. 272), then mainstream pop songs are potentially the epitome of catchiness and simplicity – 'the most popular blend of different types of catchy, easy-on-the-ears, literally "popular" music' (Gillet 1970 in ter Bogt *et al.* 2011, p. 299).

⁵ In some case, like in punk, professional musicianship might also be deliberately neglected for reasons of attitude.

enters the broad public sphere, becomes visible (and hearable) in far-reaching media channels and gets interwoven in public cultural commentary.⁶ Hence, sovereignty in matters of interpretation is suddenly shared among many commentators, going beyond music-centred or scene-specific discourses, and the music takes the function of a more general cultural evaluation surface on which society negotiates its dominant conceptions, narratives and ideologies.

This doesn't necessarily mean, though, that music which has successfully run through the process of integration and assimilation into the broad public sphere must merely be, at any given time, an aesthetic reflection or aural mirror of dominant discourses or practices. It can also act contrarily, as an active agent of interrogation. Either way, mainstream popular music can be analysed as a society's loudest but most provisional stage on which to perform or contest normativity and to reproduce or rework hegemonic constructions of gender, sexuality, race, class or identity. Within this perspective, it is important to consider that such broadly mediated musical objects, images and artist personae do not act unidirectionally but enter specific contexts of perception, in which a large number of listeners 'from diverse social groups and across large geographical areas' (Toynbee 2002, p. 150) find favour with them and load them, together at the same (short) time, with their own cultural meanings, values and experiences.

Hence, mainstream popular music provides a multiple casement window through which it is possible to identify and critically understand, comparatively, the mechanisms of cultural globalisation influence and the individual and collectively shared realities of meaningful experience (Jost 2016, p. 164) that the music is capable of bringing about at particular moments in time (see also Steinbrecher forthcoming). As David Riesman remarked in 1950 in 'Listening to Popular Music', 'we must go out and talk to various sorts of people in various moods to get at them. It may then appear that it is the audience which manipulates the product (and hence the producer), no less than the other way around' (Riesman 1950, p. 361).

Mapping the field

In the following sections, a mapping of relevant literature aims to advance understanding of the sonic aesthetics that have been negotiated within the mainstream popular music frame in the last two decades. In the course of this review, research gaps and potentials for future research are discussed. In the light of my considerations so far, I operationalise the term *mainstream popular music* for capturing music which achieved commercial success as measured by its appearance in top regions of main single-charts and, thus, got potentially interwoven with the evaluative interrelationships above conceptualised.

⁶ According to a study of Steinbrecher and Pichler (2021), the term *mainstream* evokes strong associations with music that is played on the radio. For some adolescents, music becomes *mainstream* as soon as it is played on the radio, and when it already is *mainstream*, it '[could] simply be played on the radio and it would be absolutely OK' (p. 8). Viewing big, public and commercial radio stations as one main platform for mediating *mainstream popular music's* sounds opens up an additional perspective on *mainstream-related* evaluations: they relate to music where the traditional manner of one-to-many broadcasting remains highly important. Thus, *mainstream popular music* might somewhat be already an antiquated term, because of its strong adherence to an old-fashioned concept of music distribution and, more generally, against the backdrop of fragmented media consumption, genre fluidity and (probably) outdated ideas of subculture.

Structurally, the literature review starts with the mapping of research that directly takes the musical characteristics of 21st century hit records as a starting point for interpretation (which I broadly categorise as *music-based analysis*). What sounds have entered (and left) the mainstream frame of popular cultural debate? What do respective analyses tell us about zeitgeist matters and professional creators' production practices driven by commercial interest? The section starts with a relatively lengthy, critical reflection of quantitative big data examinations and continues with a discussion of music-theoretical perspectives, including an elaboration on production-focussed analysis.

The second section emphasises research in which the audiences of post-2000 mainstream popular music is the focus (*listener-based analysis*). It will ask specifically whether these kinds of studies also incorporate closer examinations of the music's sonic aspects and, thus, enhance knowledge of how international hits' sounds are experienced and adapted by its listeners in the current millennium, why they like or dislike it and what kinds of social, psychological and aesthetic functions it fulfils.

Owing to limited space, the mapping of literature does not consider, for the most part, studies that are primarily concerned with 21st century mainstream popular music's artist personae and use musical analysis as one method for interpreting, for example, performative aspects and identity notions (approaches of this kind might be categorised as *artist-based analysis*).

My review includes peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs, edited volumes and PhD dissertations in the fields of popular music studies, music theory, music information retrieval (MIR), music psychology and sociology, ethnomusicology and media and celebrity studies, as well as, when appropriate, semi- or non-academic sources. Most of the review had to be done manually by scanning through titles and texts in search of matching research objects, because the search string 'mainstream' applied to various scholarly databases did not lead to satisfactory results (which, actually, underlines the aforementioned observation that the concept is seldom addressed explicitly).

Music-based analysis

Drawing on the assumption that the sounds within the mainstream popular music frame adhere to the music-cultural zeitgeist of any given time, it becomes a reasonable approach to examine charts quantitatively to show historical transitions, depict trends or, as in the case of so-called 'Hit Song Science' (Dhanaraj and Logan 2005; Pachet and Roy 2008; Pachet 2012), discuss success predictability. Relevant studies can be grouped loosely in the MIR field using digitised, music-related, big data collections that are, to a certain extent, publicly available and/or originating on the web.⁷ The favourite object of study in this regard is the US Billboard Top 100 charts, which have been analysed frequently in recent years, with the UK charts already also having been a focus.

⁷ For example, Million Song Dataset, Million Musical Tweets Dataset, wasabi.i3s.unice.fr, musicbrainz.org, acousticbrainz.org, the.echonest.com, info.geerdes.com, last.fm, libre.fm, discogs.com, genius.com, soundfacts.org or Shazam, which offer metadata about artists, songs, albums and production, as well as audio descriptions, acoustic features, MIDI transcriptions and information about lyrics. Moreover, they open up possibilities to examine user behaviours by making query data and geo-temporal data accessible.

To start this review section, I critically reflect on the findings, methods and data sources of such statistics-oriented approaches, particularly of those that retrace developments in the charts until at least the late 2000s. I consider a rather detailed discussion of big data examinations as important insofar as they are, at the moment, probably the most prevalent in media representation of popular music research and have thus become themselves a key driver of the mainstream popular music debate. However, what do they tell us about hit-songs' ever-changing sonic aesthetics? Two major emphases are aspects of emotion and homogeneity.

According to Schellenberg and von Scheve's (2012) findings, there was an increasing emergence of minor mode and slower tempos during the 1965–2009 period on Billboard's Top 40 charts, indicating that popular recordings 'became sadder-sounding and more emotionally ambiguous since the 1960s' (von Scheve 2012, p. 200). Interiano *et al.* (2018) similarly observed increasing negativity in the UK, noting that from 1985 to 2015, according to semantic descriptors, most songs experienced a 'decline in happiness and brightness and an increase in sadness' (p. 8). However, successful songs seem to defy this downward trend in mood, as they display a tendency to be happier, more party-like and danceable, less sad, more feminine and possess a brighter timbre than songs that fail to enter the charts (pp. 3–4 and 8).

Askin and Mauskapf (2017) find, regarding, for instance, what they call 'objective musical features' (p. 17) of tempo, mode and key, that the most popular songs on the Billboard charts between 1958 and 2016 employ the 'similarity–differentiation (or familiarity–novelty) tradeoff' (p. 34) most successfully; that is, they do not sound too similar or too novel in relation to other successful songs from their eras. Mauch *et al.* (2015) claim that 'contrary to current theories of musical evolution' (p. 5), they have found no evidence that music on the charts between 1960 and 2010 is becoming progressively homogenous, as to matters of harmony and timbre. Regarding the relation between a song's popularity and the number and types of instruments, Nunes and Ordanini (2014) detect some sort of homogeneity, in that two standard configurations have been used repeatedly between 1958 and 2012, but they assume that adding a distinct, standout instrument on top increases the chances of succeeding on the charts (p. 406). Serrà *et al.* (2012) recognise certain general trends in the evolution of Western popular music between 1955 and 2010, noting that pitch transitions tend to have less variety, the timbral palette is getting more homogenous and the volume dynamics are becoming poorer in connection with more overall loudness (p. 5). Regarding song lyrics, studies by Nunes *et al.* (2015) and Morris (2017) indicate that frequent repetition helps attain success on the US Billboard charts.

On first sight, statistical approaches such as the ones I have spotlighted here might act as a helpful orientation guide for pinpointing some aesthetic changes or continuities within the mainstream popular music frame. They might be of use in situating a song or artist musically in a certain period of time and in examining whether specific musical or lyrical aesthetics correspond with or deviate from some of the 'most common' characteristics. However, from a critical perspective, in my opinion, two principal limitations exist that need to be discussed.

First, these big data analyses do little to support our knowledge of why certain trends and transitions have happened and how they connected to broader contexts. Owing to the studies' methodological orientation towards large-scale data and representativity, they are hardly able to explain the cultural, psychological, media-related

and other reasons for why so many people bought and streamed, at a certain time and place, particular songs with particular sounds. Yet many of the authors seem to be aware of this fact.⁸

The second problematic issue regarding these quantitative accounts, particularly from a musicologist's perspective, is the authors' tendency to generalise and/or simplify certain findings and deduce from them some sort of universal validity,⁹ as well as their reliance on often questionable information provided by external databases. Statements about the increase or decrease in musical heterogeneity, or in emotional states transferred through certain musical particularities, are received gratefully in the media, but are standing on shaky scientific ground. For example, Schellenberg and von Scheve's assumption of the existence of widespread and stable stimulus–response schemata in music, such as minor mode and slow tempo providing reliable cues on sadness in Western culture, remains dubious, even though they consider it 'well established that [...] sad-sounding music tends to be slow and minor' (p. 1). Not only are there plenty of other musical¹⁰ and non-musical¹¹ factors that may induce sad emotions, but popular music also can be rather ambiguous regarding tonal centres/tonic chords and modes (e.g. Capuzzo 2009; Moore 2012; Everett 2012; Welch 2015; Peres 2016; Spicer 2017; Richards 2017; Sterbenz 2018). Moreover, I question whether the tonic chord is psychologically always so important that it kind of superimposes over all of the other chords (p. 199) which, of course, all can be major chords. The global 2017 hit 'Despacito' is not necessarily a sad song, nor is LMFAO's 'Party Rock Anthem' (2011).¹²

Many of the studies must also be scrutinised insofar as their findings are based, to a large extent, either on quite arbitrary-seeming, machine-generated annotations provided by databases such as acousticbrainz.com (e.g. Interiano *et al.* 2018), or in the case of the timbre classifications from Mauch *et al.* (2015), on human 'expert' annotations to concatenated sounds that are, in my opinion at least, not immediately

⁸ 'At the present time, we can only speculate about the causes and mechanisms driving this change, and it is unlikely that a single causal explanation would suffice' (Schellenberg and von Scheve 2012, pp. 201–2); 'We have not addressed the causes of the dynamics that we detect. Like any cultural artefact – and any living organism – music is the result of a variational-selection process' (Mauch *et al.* 2015, pp. 16–19); 'We do not want to overstate the implications of our findings. Certainly marketing, artist preference, genre, catchy hooks, and other factors play a role in determining a song's relative success. For example, the star power of Rihanna may overcome any effect of instrumentation' (Nunes and Ordanini 2014, p. 401); 'We also recognize many factors unrelated to the music itself often are involved in determining what songs are popular, which the current studies did not (and could not) control for' (Nunes and Ordanini 2014, p. 406); 'We encourage the development of further historical databases to be able to quantify the major transitions in the history of music, and to start looking at more subtle evolving characteristics of particular genres or artists, without forgetting the whole wealth of cultures and music styles present in the world' (Serrà *et al.* 2012, pp. 5–6).

⁹ 'Those who wish to make claims about how and when popular music changed can no longer appeal to anecdote, connoisseurship and theory unadorned by data' (Mauch *et al.* 2015, p. 9)

¹⁰ 'Low pitch, narrow pitch range, falling pitch contour, minor mode, slow tone attacks, slow tempo, dull and dark timbres, low sound level, little sound level variability, little highfrequency energy, microstructural irregularity and legato articulation (Huron 2008; Juslin and Laukka 2003; Post and Huron 2009; Turner and Huron 2008)' (Taruffi 2016, p. 3).

¹¹ Brain-stem response, evaluative conditioning, emotional contagion, visual imagery, episodic memory, music expectancy and cognitive appraisal (Juslin *et al.* 2010, pp. 620–3).

¹² Krumhansl (2017) also is sceptical: 'Schellenberg and von Scheve (2012) hypothesised that this shift to minor mode and slower tempo would make more recent songs sound sadder, although they did not test this empirically' (p. 1).

comprehensible.¹³ Mauch *et al.*'s data source, Echo Nest, provides no information on how attributes like 'danceability' are ascribed any further than: 'how suitable a track is for dancing. This measure includes tempo, regularity of beat and beat strength'. The definition of 'energy' is similarly insufficient: 'A perceptual measure of intensity throughout the track. Think fast, loud and noisy (i.e. hard rock) more than dance tracks' (Askin and Mauskopf, 2017, p. 10). 'Danceability' is also one of the high-level information criteria on acousticbrainz.com, which is 100% sure that Calvin Harris' tropical house hit 'My Way' is 'not danceable' and 'not party',¹⁴ and that Drake's 'God's Plan' is 'atonal' (probability 96.4%).¹⁵

Concerning such classifications, we must take into account that in-depth research on the correlation between certain musical dimensions in actual songs and listeners' movements remains in its early stages (e.g. Iyer 2002; Eitan and Granot 2006; Kozak 2015; Godøy *et al.* 2016), that related notions of groove are a multidimensional field of research (Middleton 1999; Pressing 2002; Danielsen 2006; Klingmann 2010; Pfeleiderer 2010; Gerischer 2010) and that not that many analytical approaches towards energy and intensity processes exist that go beyond tonal function (e.g. Berry 1987; Huron 2006; Butler 2006; Steinbrecher 2016; Peres 2016). Altogether, to make a reasonable music-based interpretation of 21st century mainstream popular music possible through the lens of statistical feature-extraction methods, it seems necessary to first take a few steps back towards potential fundamentals of contemporary hit-records' musical language and see what current music theory has to say about it.

Stressing the metaphor of centre and periphery, it cannot be said that international top hits of the current millennium are in the centre of 'popmusicology's' (Bielefeldt *et al.*, 2008, p. 7) analytical canon. Asaf Peres remarks that:

Although the body of popular music scholarship in music theory has grown substantially in the last ten to fifteen years, 21st century commercial pop music is still little represented as a research subject in this field. [...] This is a significant gap in the literature, considering not only the cultural impact of this music, but also the technological and artistic revolution that it represents. (Peres 2016, pp. 4–5)

The scope of popular music analysis has clearly expanded beyond its traditional focus, which used to be primarily the sounds of (classic and progressive) rock music and the Beatles, but 'analyses of top 40 pop, hip-hop or electronic dance music [...] are still hard to find', as von Appen *et al.* note (2015a, p. 2; see also de Clercq 2020). In recent collections of popular music analysis, they also play a rather subordinate role (e.g. Scotto *et al.* 2018; Julien and Levaux 2018). However, a closer look at current literature reveals that music theoretical approaches towards post-2000 hit records are slowly becoming more numerous. Broadly speaking, there are two ways in which the sounds are viewed in these studies.

On the one hand, rather conventional methods of harmony and form analysis are applied to a broad repertoire of Billboard Hot 100 songs. For example, Mark Richards (2017) shows, on the basis of an analysis of 2,715 songs (1990–2016), how

¹³ The 35 classes used in their T-Lexicon can be heard at Soundcloud, for instance the topic 'female voice, melodic, vocal': <https://soundcloud.com/descent-of-pop/sets/t-topic-08-female-voice> (accessed 28 January 2019).

¹⁴ <https://acousticbrainz.org/98df2a93-9ee5-476d-8b3b-195822f557ee> (accessed 8 March 2019).

¹⁵ <https://acousticbrainz.org/7bc3d832-09fb-4e57-a266-fd8cfa15b6f3> (accessed 8 March 2019).

diverse and tonally ambiguous the harmonic ‘axis progressions’ of Am–F–C–G (and its transpositions) can be, which ‘have become staples of mainstream popular songs from the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first’ (para. 1). Harald Scholz similarly concludes that there is variety within simplicity regarding the harmonic layout of the ‘musical mainstream’ from 2001 to 2010, after analysing 326 US Top 10 R&B and hip-hop songs (Scholz 2014, p. 316). New song forms in the ‘current pop mainstream’ featuring single-loop repetitions, post-choruses and ‘pop drops’ are shown in an ongoing corpus analysis project that examines the Billboard Year End Top 10 from 2006 to 2016 (von Appen and Frei-Hauenschild 2018).

On the other hand, authors take hit songs from the 21st century as representative examples to discuss new analytical conceptualisations regarding particular features of popular music. For instance, Robin Attas’ consideration of the buildup introduction process in popular music (2015) includes an analysis of Nelly Furtado’s ‘Say It Right’ (2006). Attas hears the song’s beginning, in which the step-wise addition of instruments increases the textural and metric density, as a typical example of a so-called ‘projection shift’; that is, an in-time musical process that offers listeners different metric interpretation possibilities depending upon their choice of focus (pp. 282–3). Mark Spicer, in his text about ‘the sometimes tricky question of tonality in pop and rock songs’ (2017, abst.), picks out Daft Punk’s ‘Get Lucky’ (2013) as a ‘textbook example’ of an ‘autotelic groove’ (para. 25). Owing to the (rather fragile) harmonic–functional make-up and the anacrustic bass line, the first measure of the song’s fundamental four-bar loop can be perceived, according to Spicer, both as a beginning and an ending.

Somewhat similarly to Attas and Spicer, Ben Duinker (2019b), Kyle Adams (2019) and David Forrest (2017) identify ambiguities in the sounds of post-millennial hit records. Duinker illustrates hybrid tonics and plateau loops within the Chainsmokers’ ‘Something Just Like This’ (2017) and Sam Smith’s ‘Dancing with a Stranger’ (2019), among others. Adams shows, with the examples of Flo Rida’s ‘Cake’ (2017) and David Guetta’s ‘Don’t Leave Me Alone’ (2018), notions of formal instability in connection with timbral aspects and subtle changes in texture. A ‘perceptual paradox’ is observed by Forrest, who analyses Twenty One Pilots’ ‘Heathens’ (2016) as one example in which minor-mode melodic half-step motions against harmonic major-third progressions evoke an uncanny experience and invite the listener ‘to question the line that divides consonance and dissonance into two mutually exclusive categories’ (para. 2). In one of my own articles (Steinbrecher 2021), I provide a very nuanced view, literally, on hit songs of the 2010s. I discuss and conceptualise how microrhythmic and microtonal nuances potentially affect – for example, through tiny offset-anticipations, subtly nested asymmetrical rhythms or articulatory vocal variations – the aesthetic experience of tensivity and motion within the hooks of broadly commercialised songs such as Lukas Graham’s ‘7 Years’ (2015), Calvin Harris feat. Rihanna’s ‘This Is What You Came For’ (2016), Post Malone’s ‘rockstar’ (2017) and others.

However, as to the process of building musical theory concerning sounds that entered the mainstream popular music frame recently, more comprehensive examinations of a broad variety of songs are certainly required to be able to explain whether the musical features identified in these case analyses are integral parts of international hit singles of a certain period, or rather exceptions to the norm. In the context of phrase analysis, Robin Attas remarks that:

Finally, it might be objected that to study phrase rhythm in such mainstream artists as Sarah McLachlan is to miss the truly interesting manipulations of phrase and phrase rhythm that exist in popular music. I would respond by citing the work of Philip Tagg (1987), who has argued that the basic musical codes, the general ways in which popular music communicates to the masses, need to be examined before the exceptional effects of alternative practices can be fully understood (284). (Attas 2011, para. 38)

PhD dissertations such as those by Peres (2016) and David Geary (2019) provide important contributions to enhancing understanding of these ‘general ways’, because the scholars illustrate their expanded analytical models – on sonic energy (Peres) and the rhetorical function of drum patterns (Geary) – on a broad range of contemporary Top 40 music examples, including songs from artists such as Ariana Grande, Major Lazer, Zayn Malik, Cardi B, Ed Sheeran, DJ Khalid and others. Peres finds that mainstream 21st century pop music uses timbre, gesture and spatialisation ‘in a highly systematized and categorizable way’ (2016, p. 184) and he illuminates a central sonic syntax consisting of setup, buildup and peak as its three major functions (p. 183). According to Geary’s Billboard charts analysis, the ‘top fifty mainstream popular songs of 2018’ have an average number of approximately eight drum pattern changes per song and, thus, an emphasis on drum pattern variety that ‘often outweighs the variability of other musical elements such as harmonic progressions and melodic lines’ (2019, p. 119).

Viewed from a more specific perspective, the outlined music-theoretical approaches actually reveal a significant blind spot regarding a central aspect of mainstream popular music discourse, i.e. they hardly touch on production and technology topics. A lack of production-based theoretical analysis that considers in detail ‘the technical aspects of a song’s production’ (de Clercq 2016 para. 8) is certainly an issue in popular music analysis in general. Bates and Bennett (2018) indicate awareness of this, stating in the introduction of their co-edited companion *Critical Approaches to the Production of Music and Sound* that ‘analytical work such as that carried out by [Philip] Tagg and [Allan F.] Moore is notably absent from the discourse’ (p. 12; see also de Clercq 2016). Brøvig-Hanssen and Danielsen (2016) also note the importance of generating more music analysis of technological aspects (p. 4) in their book about digitisation’s impact on the aesthetics of popular music. Ben Duinker raises even broader criticism of the lack of music theoretical work that takes ‘as a starting orientation the practices of composition and performance’ (2019b, para. 7.4).

Generally, 21st century hit-records’ music often is given only short shrift in recent publications on sound and recording issues in popular culture. For example, it is neither in the focus of the critical ‘phonomusicological’ (p. 1) approaches in the aforementioned companion edited by Bennett and Bates (2018), nor is it explicitly addressed in Schulze (2015), Mazierska *et al.* (2018) and in the *Journal on the Art of Record Production*. One small spotlight can be found in the *IASPM Journal* special issue, ‘Perspectives on Popular Music and Sound Recording’ (Bennett and Klein 2016), in which the recording studio processing of Miley Cyrus’ highly audible breath sounds in ‘Wrecking Ball’ (2013) is analysed (Weinstein 2016). Weinstein finds that through this artificial construction of humanness, a ‘mismatched woman’ is mediated to ‘assure[s] listeners of the authenticity and wholeness of the woman’s musicking body’ (p. 131). A somewhat contrary use of technology is noted by Brøvig-Hanssen and Danielsen (2016), who analyse the autotuned voice of Lady Gaga in

the song 'Starstruck' (2008) as an explicit withdrawal 'from the authentic expression generally implied by (and expected of) the pop singer' (p. 130).¹⁷

Examinations of sound effects and individual sounds may turn out to be one essential key to closing the gap between production-oriented approaches and music-theoretical approaches, focussing more strongly on aesthetic matters. For example, Immanuel Brockhaus (2017) analyses prototypical, 'iconic' sounds in music from the Billboard charts (1966–2014) – such as the hand-clap sound or side-chain compression – aesthetically, technologically and sociologically in his book *Kultsounds*.¹⁸ A broader production-focussed perspective is provided by Simon Zagorski-Thomas, whose musical analysis of Kings of Leon's 2008 international hit 'Sex on Fire' discusses how the production techniques foster specific perceptions of narrative structure, gestural activity and participants' interaction (2015). In the same edited volume in which Zagorski-Thomas' text was published, one can also find a rather experimental text from Ralf von Appen, who fictionally renarrates, 'as a fly on the wall' (2015, p. 46), how Ke\$ha's 'Tik Tok' (2010) came into being and subsequently reflects on how the song fulfils functions such as, for instance, to 'hijack listeners from their daily routines', 'positively influence the listeners' mood' and 'reflect current developments in society' (pp. 47–8).¹⁹

Compared with purely scholarly discourse, there seems to be more interest in how mainstream popular music's sounds are made on the edge of academic and journalistic work. Worth mentioning are, for example, podcasts like Switched On Pop, 'about the making and meaning of popular music' (Sloan and Harding 2019; see also the book by Sloan and Harding 2020) and 'And The Writer Is ...', with Ross Golan, which features songwriters and producers of Top 40 songs. An extensive source for hit-songs' analysis is the platform songlexikon.de, which is published by the University of Freiburg (Fischer *et al.* 2019). At the moment, it contains more than 220 short song examinations of 'All-Time Greatest Hits' (38 of them released after the year 2000), providing information about the songs' musicians and origins, as well as their production context, content and reception.²⁰

Moreover, plenty of YouTube channels provide detailed tutorials and song breakdowns, often from the composers and producers themselves.²¹ They can be found on channels such as Deconstructed (Genius), The Breakdown (Pyramid), Internet Money, Dave Pensado, imamusicmogul, Diary of a Song (*New York Times*), *Future Music* magazine and others. Although the motivation for these

¹⁷ Similar interpretations of mainstream pop singers' manipulated voice, with a main focus on aspects of gender identity, can be found in James (2008), Mueller (2018) and Hansen (2018).

¹⁸ Discussions on the autotune effect can also be found, for instance, in Bonz (2015), Marshall (2017) and Reynolds (2018).

¹⁹ The edited volume *Song Interpretation in 21st-Century Pop Music* puts an emphasis, already conceptually, on 21st century popular music. It aims 'to shed light on how popular tunes that many listen and dance to work musically', also 'highlighting mainstream pop (Lady Gaga, Ke\$ha, Lucenzo, Amy MacDonald)' (von Appen *et al.* 2015a, p. 2).

²⁰ <http://songlexikon.de/songs-in-chronological-order> (accessed 21 September 2020).

²¹ For example, see the Chainsmokers on making their song 'Roses' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HIUGRbPLn-4>), singer/songwriter Mike Posner on the podcast Switched On Pop (<http://www.switchedonpop.com/entering-beard-phase-with-mike-posner/>) or producers Martin Garrix and Charlie Puth talking about the creation of their songs 'Animals' and 'Attention' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CfCmoEixxro>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IU8BEMi8UyM>).

kinds of examinations is often not primarily scholarly, but rather educational and/or marketing-driven, they offer valuable musicological insights into current production techniques. From the perspective of knowledge transfer mechanisms, such production-related videos generally are becoming increasingly important to the whole popular music creation process. This becomes apparent when commercially successful current artists, particularly in the field of chart-oriented hip-hop and EDM, openly speak about how they learned and professionalised their skills from YouTube tutorials.²²

A systematic analysis of these sources – which, to my knowledge, has yet to be conducted – could reveal superordinate aesthetic production schemata (Diaz-Bone 2002) and, thus, support the understanding of the mainstream popular music frame and the aesthetic (sonic) objects within. Topics that could be examined are, for instance, the ubiquitous principle of trial and error, the self-evident handling of DAW presets, the seamless crossing-over between idea-sketching (on a smartphone) and recording, repeatedly stressed instinctiveness notions, (fast) production pace and adding ‘live(li)ness’ or ‘human elements’ to the digital texture, or, more generally, the technology-related change from auditory-based to visually/computer-screen-based creation and recording.

Listener-based analysis

Titling this second section of my literature review ‘Listener-based analysis’ might seem a rather odd choice at first because most – but actually not all – of the aforementioned hit-record examinations are based on the analysing person’s listening impressions. Certainly, there has been a rising awareness in popular music analysis of the reflection of the analyst’s subjectivity in hearing, experiencing and interpreting music (e.g. Moore 2012, pp. 329–30; Doehring 2012, pp. 37–8; von Appen *et al.* 2015a, p. 1). It is somewhat remarkable, though, that in recent analyses particularly of mainstream popular music, some scholars take their personal aversions as a starting point for song examinations (of course, without making general value judgments; Helms 2015; Doehring 2015; von Appen 2017). However, considering that popular music musicologists are usually not among those who make mainstream popular music an essential part of their cultural practices and aesthetic experiences (or at least listen and dance to it frequently²³), their elaborations do not really enhance understanding of what heavy Top 40 music listeners exactly do with, and how they make sense of, ‘their’ music and why they like or dislike certain sonic constellations.

Thus, this section’s attention is directed towards empirically underpinned audience studies in connection with 21st century mainstream popular music and the question of how music analysis is interwoven into these approaches. The necessity of such entangled research has already been tied to MIR approaches, and it is noted further by von Appen, who remarks that:

²² For example, Alan Walker (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6N9JP9ygf4>), German rapper RIN (<https://juice.de/rin-titelstory/>; accessed 7 March 2021) or Post Malone (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/post-malone-on-teaching-himself-guitar-making-music_b_5841a400e4b0b93e10f8e170; uploaded 21 June 2017).

²³ See Elijah Wald (2014, p. 29).

A vocal phrase or a drum pattern is intersubjectively perceived as ‘cool’ [‘lässig’] or ‘pushing’ [‘drängend’] – but what kind of compositional processes in connection with micro-rhythm and -intonation cause that perception? How do you accomplish maximum hardness? What has to be given so that a bass pattern is described as ‘funky’? [...] Producers of huge chart hits seemingly know by trial and error how danceability is achieved, how a chorus takes off and how to make the catchiest possible melody. But wouldn’t it be important to understand such processes also scholarly? (von Appen 2012, p. 15, transl. BSt.)

Given that ‘hooking’ the listener is obviously a fundamental aspect of hit tunes (see also Steinbrecher 2021), a potentially fruitful resource of listener-based research is one that focusses on notions of catchiness and song memorability. Surprisingly, however, the cognitive psychology research field concerned with involuntary music imagery has very little to say about the musical properties of actual earworms, such as Lady Gaga’s 2009 hit ‘Bad Romance’ (Jakubowski *et al.* 2017). Liikkanen and Jakubowski (2020), in their review of empirical research in involuntary music imagery, state that ‘research on the importance of musical characteristics is still in its infancy’ (p. 15). Some insight has been provided by Jakubowski *et al.* (2017), who indicate, on the basis of a mixed-methods approach using online questionnaires and melodic-structural feature extraction from commercial MIDI files, that fast-tempo and arch-shaped melodic phrases are helpful in generating earworms (p. 130). The actual shortcomings of applying this kind of automated music analysis is noted by the scholars themselves, who remark that their data analysis is only symbolic because they do not measure song recordings’ actual audio features, ‘such as loudness, timbral content, rhythmic clarity and so forth’ (Jakubowski *et al.* 2017, p. 133).

By and large, also in the listener- and listening-function-focussed area of mainstream popular music analysis, one can observe a trend towards the use of quantitative (computerised) measurement instruments.²⁴ However, recent studies concerned with a vast amount of songs from the UK or US charts in connection with notions of emotion and mood, for example, North *et al.* (2018; 2019a, b) and Krause and North (2020), skip the step of asking listeners directly for their experiences in favour of artificial intelligence processing. Some other quantitative studies utilising machine learning in the field of music emotion recognition integrate popular music listeners’ perspectives to some extent in that they combine audio feature extraction with the retrieval of social, tag-based emotion annotations from services such as Last.fm (Song *et al.* 2012; Jamdar *et al.* 2015; Aljanaki *et al.* 2017). In its current state, though, this research field provides hardly any concrete or differentiated information about emotional responses to popular music in general and mainstream popular music in particular (see also Beveridge and Knox 2018, p. 412), as it seems to be concerned mostly with methodological issues in connection with dataset choices or classification processes. Markus Schedl sees one fundamental reason for relevant scientific work remaining in a ‘fledgling state’ in that ‘involving users, which is an obvious necessity to build user-aware approaches, is time-consuming and hardly feasible on a large scale – at least not in academia’ (Schedl 2016, p. 2).²⁵

²⁴ North *et al.* (2021) find that two out of the three themes which have emerged to date in ‘corpus-level work concerning music aesthetics’ (p. 736) are concerned with either psychological features or with the ‘relationship between particularly pop music and various social psychological and socioeconomic indicators’ (North *et al.* 2021).

²⁵ An example for another listener-based, quantitative approach towards hit-records’ sounds is Kaneshiro *et al.* (2017), who examine the influence of musical features on Top 5 songs’ discovery via Shazam and

Mainstream popular music analysis and music-oriented emotion studies generally turn out to be a rather bad match. Eerola and Vuoskoski (2013), in their music and emotion studies literature review, state that 'it is somewhat surprising that many popular genres such as R&B/soul, dance or chart pop are featured rarely or not at all in the studies on music and emotion' (2013, p. 320) and that music-specific emotion models overall are 'still relatively rarely used' (p. 324). For example, a 2018 Beveridge and Knox study uses semi-prepared popular music tracks in 'a style similar to UK chart-orientated music of the last decade' (p. 412) as stimuli in listening tests and concludes that rhythm and articulation are the most important factors in expressing emotion through vocal melody (p. 420).

The latter study is noteworthy insofar as the scholars played (at least somewhat) actual songs for participants to gain differentiated insights into how listeners perceive and make psychological use of mainstream popular music. Particularly in research using experimental methods, 'there exists a general aversion to the study of emotion in pop music from the listener's perspective' (2013, p. 17), as Emery Schubert remarks. In his own study, Schubert examines emotional responses to participants' freely self-selected music, finding that songs such as those from Justin Bieber, Lady Gaga and Bruno Mars 'evoke and express emotions that are equally powerful to high-art music' (Schubert 2013, para. 46). As for the question 'What do young people hear when listening to music?' Herbert and Dibben (2018) show, by conducting an online listening study, that 10- to 18-year-old listeners are likely to claim ownership of a 'four-chord pop' song like Kelly Clarkson's 2004 hit 'Behind These Hazel Eyes', as they link extracts of it to personal everyday functions (p. 384).

In my opinion, it would make sense to connect music-analytically to approaches like those of Schubert and of Herbert and Dibben to better understand, for instance, which 'extracts' the listeners gravitate towards precisely and why they pick them. In other words, focus even more strongly and 'simultaneously on the intra- and extra-musical meanings young people attach to music when listening' (Herbert and Dibben 2018, p. 388). Greb *et al.* (2018) also point to the need for a stronger entanglement of music analytical methods in the study of listening functions, admitting that in their own examination of individual and situational variables in everyday-life music interactions, they did not address the question of 'which music with specific musical characteristics people are listening to in order to fulfil the various functions of music listening' (p. 790).

As for uses of mainstream popular music in particular, concrete music-analytical connection points are difficult to find – either in Greb *et al.*'s or in similar survey- and interview-based studies. Rather than being addressed explicitly as their own category or phenomenon in their own rights, mainstream notions are included in seemingly self-explanatory hybrid proxy genres like 'pop' or 'pop/rock'. Given that 'pop' is, according to some studies, 'upbeat and conventional' (Vella and Mills 2017), 'rhythmic and intense' (George *et al.* 2007) and 'percussive, electric, energetic and not sad' (Rentfrow 2012, p. 408) music that is preferred by people who are 'high in extraversion, value social recognition, endorse more gender stereotypes, have more permissive attitudes about sex and consider themselves

find that 'the onset of vocals and the first occurrence of the chorus in particular drive an increase in queries' (p. 5).

physically attractive' (Rentfrow 2012), then it would be interesting to see what listeners think about and how they relate to pop's pinnacle mainstream version. At least regarding listeners' negotiation of musical preferences, explorative studies such as those from Parzer (2011), Taren Ackermann (2019) and Steinbrecher and Pichler (2021) have already indicated mainstream notions' important role.

Ultimately, by placing more emphasis on mainstream popular music listeners, thereby supporting a culturally relativistic stance towards the music's analysis more aggressively (Mendivil 2019, p. 123), more comprehensive qualitative audience research focussing on everyday listening contexts seems to be required. Naturalistic data-collection approaches, such as the experience-sampling method (e.g. Greasley and Lamont 2011; Krause *et al.* 2015), could be supportive in this regard, as can ethnographic methods. For example, Pruett (2011) states that 'the need for an ethnographic approach to mainstream popular music in the United States is particularly strong, but examples are few' (Pruett 2011, p. 3), and Eliot Bates notes, in his 2013 analysis of popular music studies journals, that 'few ethnographic articles concern the music of Western Europe, Canada and the US' (p. 19). Remarkably, none of the studies in his review examines mainstream currents. After all, referring to the argument at the very beginning of this section, a listener-aware understanding of mainstream popular music's sounds might already be enhanced by a shared approach challenging scholars' individual readings, for example, in the form of the group analysis method proposed by von Appen *et al.* (2015b, pp. 3–6 and pp. 175–276).

Conclusion

The different approaches that I have outlined in this article reveal – or potentially might reveal – various facets of 21st century mainstream popular music's sounds from diverse perspectives. However, owing to these (and other) approaches' diversity, the research field presents itself as quite fragmented, raising the question of how a more integrated perspective could be shaped, one that more strongly considers the interrelations between the aesthetics, acts and actors within the frame of cultural debate that I conceptualised, drawing on Christofer Jost, as mainstream popular music.

Jost (2016, p. 170) also suggests a possibly fruitful conceptual grasp of the field's research goals. He directs the main focus of mainstream popular music analysis towards the rhetoric of success, enabling a retracing of the structures of need and experience within a society. Simply put, how does something (musical) materialise that comparatively many people like, and in which circumstances do these people get to be sympathetic to it? The duality of presentation and production is a pivotal aspect in examining this formation's characteristics, requiring a cross-disciplinary, praxeological approach that integrates both production- and reception-oriented methods (p. 171).

Along these lines, context-sensitive music analysis equipped with an extended repertoire of music-theoretical concepts is, essentially, the key method for examining the role of the sounds within the actions and logics of the mainstream popular music frame, that is, for evaluating how sonic aesthetics contribute to the mainstream momentum of a particular song or artist in certain – musical and non-musical – contexts. In this regard, extensive qualitative case studies – comprising a combination

of music, technology, media and discourse analysis with ethnographic and experimental methods – are certainly better suited to enhancing understanding of mainstream popular music than quantitative-only approaches. However, computed analyses from the fields of MIR or music emotion recognition potentially also might be useful in drawing a bigger picture, given that they add to qualitative research and, thus, focus more specifically on the music of particular artists in particular time periods and regions.

Of course, an essential part of such an integrated perspective on contemporary culture must concern mainstream's artist personae and the question of how they use the far-reaching mainstream stage to perpetuate or interrogate dominant conceptions and ideologies through their musical performance. The fact that I have generally left out artist-based analytical directions in my literature review doesn't mean that there is not already a growing body of studies to inform future research in this regard. Relevant analyses focussing, for instance, on gender-related aspects provide some fruitful indication about the range of possibilities (and limitations) for artists to successfully negotiating, by musical means, identity formations within the mainstream popular music frame(s) of the 21st century.²⁶

Important connection points for the analysis of these interrelations might also be found in research areas dealing with the construction, identification and functioning of stardom and celebrity culture.²⁷ Given that contemporary stars are an 'individualised, personalised reflection of broader social or cultural meanings' (Loy *et al.* 2018, p. 1), then these meanings are potentially reflected in the stars' current musical output, too. By focussing critically on the musical-aesthetic processes interrelated with an artist's star status, which has rarely been done on a theoretical level yet (Menrath 2019, p. 36),²⁸ it is possible to advance understanding of the myriad dimensions interwoven through a media persona which is appealing to a global audience and is integrated strongly into broad public (mainstream) discourse.

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²⁶ For example, Djupvik (2014), Bradby (2017), Hansen (2018) and Hansen and Hawkins (2018).

²⁷ See, for example, *Celebrity Studies* (2019), Loy *et al.* (2018) and Baade *et al.* (2019).

²⁸ A recent example of such music-oriented deliberations can be found in a *Journal of Popular Music Studies* special issue edited by Vernallis *et al.* (2018) in which 10 authors wrote a 60 page analysis of the Carters' 'Apes**t' (2018).

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