You Are What You Listen To

Users of digital music sharing system judge others by their playlists.

by Jane M. Sanders

Apparently, your choice of music helps co-workers form impressions of you — for better or worse.

A recent study by human-computer interaction researchers showed that co-workers sharing digital music in one workplace via Apple Computer’s popular iTunes® software judged each other based on their musical libraries.

Employees reported that they worked to portray themselves in certain ways through the collections of music they shared with co-workers, some of whom they barely knew. Sometimes their self-portrayals were misread by co-workers with different musical interests and knowledge.

Nevertheless, music sharing served to build a community within the mid-size U.S. workplace the researchers studied. This finding has design implications for music-sharing technologies that are primarily created as individual jukeboxes, according to researchers from the Georgia Institute of Technology and Palo Alto Research Center (PARC), who presented their findings in April at the Computer-Human Interaction conference. The study was funded by PARC and the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST).

Music files reside only on their host machine and, when shared, are streamed to another user’s computer.

Prompted by news reports of college students sharing music in dormitories, Voida and her colleagues investigated whether co-workers are doing the same. The researchers interviewed 13 iTunes users in one unidentified company.

“In the workplace, music sharing plays with the boundaries around things you as an employee might not want to share with other employees,” says Beki Grinter, a Georgia Tech associate professor of computing.

People sharing music in our study were aware of the comings and goings of others in the office because they noticed the appearance and disappearance of others’ music on the network,” says Amy Voida, lead author of the paper and a Ph.D. student at Georgia Tech. "They imagined what other people might think about their music collections, and they were aware of the musical holes left when someone left the company…. What once was an individual jukebox became a music community.”

Digital music sharing among people on the same local area network became possible with iTunes in 2003 when Apple added the optional feature to its dual-platform software, which was designed primarily for home users. Users can share their entire digital music libraries or selected playlists. In contrast to previous online music sharing technologies, iTunes does not support copying music over the Internet.
“We found that sharing your music is actually quite a strong personal statement.”

The researchers’ report is filled with vignettes that illustrate this finding. Researchers altered the artists and music genres cited to protect the anonymity of study participants.

When one user decided to share his music, he recalled: “I just went through it to see if there was not like stuff that would be annoying, that I would not like people to know that I had.” Sensing that his library was “not very cool,” he added more music to create a “balanced” portrayal of himself.

Another participant was worried about what his co-workers would think of the Justin Timberlake and Michael McDonald music he had purchased for his wife and included in his library. Yet another user crafted his library around his German nationality and collection of German band music he thought others wouldn’t have. Meanwhile, other users hid their expertise because they thought their co-workers would not relate to it or find it distasteful.

“My favorite vignette is about the manager who joined the network,” Grinter recalled. “When the manager showed up and could start looking through people’s music collections, people began to speculate that the manager’s presence might be influencing the way others were managing what music they shared.”

Despite users’ efforts to portray a certain image with their playlists, these signals sometimes were misread based on the users’ musical expertise and knowledge, Voida notes.

Researchers also discovered that users tried to figure out which music collection belonged to which employee. It became somewhat of a detective game, Voida says.

“Most people didn’t want to listen to anonymous collections, even though they didn’t always want to talk to the playlists’ creators,” Grinter says.

iTunes is a trademark of Apple Computer Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries.

Read more at: gtresearchnews.gatech.edu/reshor/rh-ss05/musicshare.html