

The Shift from Album to Playlist: How Music Perception has Transformed Digitally

Music has been an integral part of the lives of many individuals today. We listen to it on our walks, while cooking, honestly, while doing practically everything. In recent years, there has been a significant shift in the way we listen to music and, in turn, perceive it. In Week 7, we discussed the various ways in which albums can be defined as digital texts. From the oral storytelling, to how music albums are hives for digital word art. This lecture allowed me to redefine the importance of albums and their individual expression; it also made me realize how long it has been since I listened to an album from start to finish. This research paper aims to analyze this shift in the digital perception of music albums to individually curated playlists. Specifically, how this shift impacts the greater definition of music as digital media, the integration of AI in streaming platforms, and digital music consumption holistically.

What is an album?

As an avid not-so-continuous music listener, I spent a significant amount of time pondering over what constitutes a music album. I came to a relative conclusion that a sensible definition would be a collection of curated songs, ordered in a specific order, named in a specific way, all uniquely and intentionally done by the presenting artist(s). Music artists pour their heart and soul into the creation of these albums, often taking years to release new music, simply because of the sheer amount of time and effort it takes to create an authentic, raw, curated album. From *Bad Indian* to *CHROMAKOPIA*, we analyzed the way in which artists tell stories filled with repetition, hidden meaning and literary mechanisms. Essentially, it was shown that creating an album is no small feat, yet as listeners, it seems we may be taking it as one.

The Dismemberment of The Album

Digital streaming services have essentially taken over the music industry (Cole and Robinson). Consequently, people are listening to albums less and are turning to their personalized curated playlists more. Playlists have become a form of self-expression for many, and they are used to define moments of our lives. We create repetitive playlists for our workouts or specialized playlists for once-in-a-lifetime events, such as weddings. Looking back and seeing this from a different perspective, it seems as though we are cutting off parts of albums and sewing them into our own "Frankenstein" adjacent albums. Similar to how Steffen Holter articulates his art gallery reference (Holter para.12), imagine if we could do the same with physical art, such as paintings. If we could go into museums, pay a fee, and cut off pieces of world renown painting to create our own painting. Of course, I recognize that playlists are not literally dismembering the original album; how I see it, in a metaphorical way, they are. Playlists are reducing the user visits to artist pages and album pages, which reduces the traction and monetization that these artists could be getting. Also, in a way, they are "watering down" the expression of the artist and reducing the original intent, which removes the deeper meaning behind the art. Presently, music is much more easily moulded and acquired. An influx of remixes and the consumption of any chosen song at any given time is reflecting back into the type of music that is now beginning to be created. These themes of mass creation have been shown all throughout this course in many ways, consisting, but not limited to, our examinations of generative AI. Even to an extent, the "Instagram" poetry analyzed in this course embodies a form of poetry that is more palatable to the modern audience. My aim is not to criticize the poets or the playlist creators, but rather to assert that it is clear that the playlist seems to have negative implications for artists.

Impacts of Generative AI on Music

Hodgson expresses in his article *Spotify and the democratisation of music*, that there is a consistent increasing bridge between Generative AI and our music tastes. From AI-produced playlists that everyone has access to, to curated song recommendations that push listening to one genre over another, AI is rampantly present so effectively that listeners do not even recognize it (Hodgson). As we peel through the layers of our digital media consumption, there are more and more findings that allow consumers to question whether the media they are consuming is actually in line with their interests, or rather something that has been intentionally fed to them. To connect this with the largest discussion of music albums, it's clear that there is a favouritism in these streaming platforms' recommendations towards "singles" rather than albums. Singles are easier to grasp, require less attention to absorb and can be quickly "liked" rather than whole albums (Hodgson). Recently, more popular artists are increasing the planned release of singles rather than full albums. As consumers, this notes that artists are also fed up. They are tired of not being recognized for their individuality in their albums, so they have resorted to releasing singles to receive the monetary, social and emotional satisfaction of releasing new music. In a way, we can compare this to the driving force of many young adults using AI to complete school assignments. The fear of failure and constructive criticism is causing students to resort to unhealthy forms of assignment completion. In the end, the assignment does get completed, but the purpose of education, learning and being a student falters.

Does a playlist count as digital text?

Playlists are online, digitized forms of musical archives, individually created by listeners. I would argue that they do count as digital media. I find myself at a crossroads. Throughout this course, after analyzing each varying digital text form, we always return to the same question.

Does this count as a digital text? And each time, I lean towards yes. The articulation for this debate has become very clear throughout this course, and increasingly so, it has become more and more difficult to discern what counts and does not count as digital text. I do believe playlists count as digital media, and they are not inherently bad. However, like all things, they have negative implications that we should be aware of as listeners. In Lüders's study, they examine how individuals express their needs for "exploring and archiving music" (Lüders). This study offered a critical lens into individual music consumption patterns, and findings indicated that individuals value exploring new music just as much as creating their archival playlists (Lüders). They also examine how Spotify serves as an "autonomous" agent that algorithmizes recommendations (Lüders). Similarly, the article by Hodgson also mentions that Spotify, as an organization, understands that the greatest form of music recommendations comes from a real human friend (Hodgson). When a friend reaches out to share a song specifically with you, there is a significant emotional element to that. A person who knows you considerably well has reached out to share something that they believe resonates with their image of you. It makes sense that this form of music recommendation would be the strongest and most successful. I found this quite striking because in a way, Spotify creates curated, specific playlists based on your particular music taste, often titled generalized vibes such as "Upbeat" or "Breakup Anthems". In the world of big streaming platforms, playlists exist for every mood, event, and experience, which is remarkable because these intentional playlists may also shape our perception of that mood, event or experience. Parallel to how we reach out to our friends during certain periods of our lives, their opinions may influence/shape our thoughts. Music is used by many to self-soothe and elevate certain moods, which makes Hodgson's claim even more significant, considering the aspects of machine integration with music archival practices and

recommendations. The question of a playlist “qualifying” as a digital text seems to hold true. In my opinion, fanfiction and user-created playlists can be compared. Two forms of digital texts utilize an artist's or author's expression to create their own expression; the impacts of machine-learning algorithmic listening, such as Spotify-generated playlists, are much different.

Killing the Story

As discussed in lecture, music albums offer digital storylines. With careful curation, albums create digital documentations of depth and meaning. For the sake of this paper, it may be viable to examine an album through the lens of a book. Just like a book contains many chapters that orchestrate its story, albums are composed of many songs in an orderly fashion. It would be quite odd to read only a chapter from a book and to understand the whole story; similarly, it would be increasingly difficult to understand the storyline of the album without listening to it through its entirety. All in all, creating a playlist could be compared to writing a book composed of various chapters from other novels, which could be a good book, but it takes away from the original story if it's given more importance than the original novel. One of the key reasons for playlist creation surrounds organizing music in a way that works for the listeners (Cole & Robinson), but could it be that we are rearranging something that was already pre-arranged for us?

The digital age of music consumption is transforming the way we understand the exploration, archival and sharing of music. Although we are creating more than ever before, a gap exists in our learning about artists and their stories. Holter mentions in his article, “I honestly recommend asking your friends about who their favourite artist or musician is. I think you will be surprised by how many people struggle with this nowadays. How can you choose a favourite artist when hundreds flash in front of your screens every day?”(Holter) The point of this paper is

not to censure individualized digital music archival; rather, it is to bring awareness to the impacts of sole playlist use on the greater music industry. Generative AI, mainstream streaming platforms, and music algorithms all demonstrate significant impacts on the behaviours and patterns of listeners, and with that, it becomes increasingly relevant to pay close attention to playlist creation in all forms, individual or machine-driven.

Works Cited

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