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BACHELOR THESIS

STREAMING THE *WHITE ALBUM* TO DEATH

Music streaming and the disaggregated album experience



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ABSTRACT

Music consumption has drastically changed over the last two decades, with the digitalization of music paving the way for music streaming services like the popular and controversial Spotify. In public debate, a new mode of music consumption means that a previously vital format to the music industry, the album, will drastically change or perish altogether. However, the academic world has not yet tried to study the impact of music streaming on the album format. This research wants to shift the academic focus away from economic and legal aspects of Spotify's impact and picks up where several researchers analyzing the impact of digitalization on music left off. It does so by trying to identify what music digitalization does to the album experience, focusing on the *disaggregation* of the album format: the reason for some to assume the album format is dying. The disaggregated album experience arises through what this research calls *recontextualization* affordances: how users are able to interact with the album as a unifying context for songs. The research method used to study the disaggregated album experience is a comparative affordance analysis of the Spotify, LP, and CD formats of the *White Album* by the Beatles. By studying how different formats of the same album afford the changing of album flow, the creation of new context, and the preservation of album context, it becomes apparent that recontextualization is afforded by all three formats. The Spotify album affords the most intuitive and sophisticated album recontextualization and, therefore, it facilitates the most disaggregated album experience of the three, although never fully because the album context is always preserved through album links. The LP album also affords recontextualization, but more tactile and freeform than its Spotify and CD counterparts, even allowing for a unique musical expression. The CD album affords similar recontextualization to the Spotify album, only more rudimentary and less intuitive. Both physical albums preserve the album context more than the Spotify album through their reliance on physical media. Ultimately, the disaggregated album experience is neither a direct consequence of digitalization nor synonymous with the death of the album since it can be seen as part of every album experience. Rather, the album is a dynamic format, changing in accordance with the mainstream mode of music consumption.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the CEO of popular music streaming service Spotify, Daniel Ek, made some controversial remarks in an interview with journalist Stuart Dredge.¹ Ek specifically reacted to an ongoing debate in the Western music industry about the alleged unfairness of the new music streaming model. In his words, artists “can’t record music once every three to four years and think that’s going to be enough.”² Thus, Spotify’s model essentially rewards artists that release singles consistently instead of only one album every so often, even if it means the same amount of music is released in the end. Sociologist Lee Marshall has provided an overview of the controversy surrounding Spotify, focusing on how musicians are unhappy with their meager streaming payments.³ This goes as far as artists calling Spotify the last breath of a dying industry, to artists and labels pulling their entire catalog from the streaming service out of protest. Although internet technologies do not provide liberation from old industry power dynamics, the controversy seems to allude to a structural recalibration of music consumption.⁴

As music scholar Keir Keightley explains, the long play album or LP had been the dominant commodity form of music consumption from the early 1950s until the end of the century when the online downloading of singles became a trend.⁵ The album format is inextricably linked to the analog limitations of the LP because of their shared history and there seems to be an ongoing public debate on how to redefine the album in times of music streaming. To music journalist Mark Beaumont, Spotify is putting commerce over art and that ultimately means the final nail in the coffin of the culturally vital album format: “the rounded statements of art that mark out our lives and identities” have died.⁶ Music journalist Caroline Sullivan had already predicted the album’s decline at the start of the twenty-first century when singles and playlists had become the new dominant consumption form on digital music stores.⁷ A more positive outlook is proclaimed by critic Ann Powers, who states that the album is currently in

¹ Stuart Dredge, “Spotify CEO Talks Covid-19, Artist Incomes and Podcasting,” *Music Ally*, July 30, 2020, accessed September 21, 2020, <https://musically.com/2020/07/30/spotify-ceo-talks-covid-19-artist-incomes-and-podcasting-interview/>.

² Ibid.

³ Lee Marshall, “Let’s Keep Music Special. F—Spotify’: On-Demand Streaming and the Controversy over Artist Royalties,” *Creative Industries Journal* 8, no. 2 (July 3, 2015): 177–189, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17510694.2015.1096618>.

⁴ Ibid., 188–189.

⁵ Keir Keightley, “Long Play: Adult-Oriented Popular Music and the Temporal Logics of the Post-War Sound Recording Industry in the USA,” *Media, Culture & Society* 26, no. 3 (May 1, 2004): 378–388, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443704042258>.

⁶ Mark Beaumont, “Spotify’s Daniel Ek Wants Artists to Pump out ‘Content’. No Thanks!,” *NME*, August 5, 2020, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://www.nme.com/features/spotify-daniel-ek-three-to-four-years-controversy-criticism-2721051>.

⁷ Caroline Sullivan, “Caroline Sullivan: Why Insist on 50 Minutes of Music When You Could Have a Perfect 10 - or Better Still, a Single?,” *The Guardian*, October 3, 2005, sec. Music, accessed September 28, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2005/oct/03/1>.

metamorphosis.⁸ The “death of the album”-debate thus ranges from a defeatist to a more nuanced outlook on the viability of the digital album, where this research sympathizes with the latter.

This public outcry is, however, not as noticeable in academics. Overlooking scholarly debate surrounding music streaming, media scholar Sofia Johansson reveals that the focus is mostly on piracy and new business models.⁹ Focusing on legal and economic aspects of music streaming alone, though, misses out on the changing experience of music. This research tries to shine light on how the digital music streaming format facilitates a new experience of music by analyzing the heavily discussed role of the album in times of music streaming.

Current research

This research combines an experience-side approach with a focus on the disaggregation of the album by comparing the consumption experience of the album on Spotify to that of the physical LP and CD formats. Contrary to subject-focused experience research, this research will use the affordances of album formats to represent the album experience. This research understands the album as a unifying context that bundles individual songs into one cohesive entity. To chart the disaggregated album experience, the affordance analysis will then specifically look at *recontextualization*: how users can reshape the album context and create new music contexts (like playlists) themselves. By analyzing the Beatles’ self-titled album (also known as the *White Album*) as an album-case, the recontextualization affordances of the album are comparable across different formats. Different recontextualization affordances across album formats would indicate differences in how an album is experienced, with more recontextualization affordances showing a higher propensity to a disaggregated album experience. The main research question is as follows:

How do the recontextualization affordances of the digital and physical formats of the *White Album* by the Beatles shape the disaggregated album experience?

⁸ Ann Powers, “The Album Isn’t Dead. It’s in Metamorphosis.,” *Slate*, December 17, 2019, accessed September 22, 2020, <https://slate.com/culture/2019/12/music-club-2019-concept-albums-not-dead.html>.

⁹ Sofia Johansson, “Music in Times of Streaming: Transformation and Debate,” in *Making Media: Production, Practices, and Professions*, ed. Mark Deuze and Mirjam Prenger (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 309–320, <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-36541>.

The following sub-questions structure the analysis by taking apart the affordances of the physical and digital album formats and comparing the disaggregated album experience they consequently facilitate:

1. How does the digital Spotify format of the *White Album* facilitate a disaggregated album experience through recontextualization affordances?
2. How do the physical LP and CD formats of the *White Album* facilitate a disaggregated album experience through recontextualization affordances?
3. How does the physical format of the *White Album* compare to the digital Spotify format of the *White Album* in facilitating a disaggregated album experience through recontextualization affordances?

Ultimately, this research supposes that the disaggregated album experience is not a new trend and it can be seen as pervading all three of the album formats. Spotify can be seen as the latest move toward a more disaggregated album experience because the album is in the end a dynamic format, changing with the currently accepted mode of music consumption.

The theoretical framework starts with the academic discourse surrounding music digitalization to end with the first central concept in this research: *the disaggregated album*. Important to note is that, in this research, music refers to Western popular music. After that, the theoretical framework presents the second central concept and contribution of this research to the academic debate: *recontextualization* as a way to understand the interaction with an album. This then leads to the theory behind the method of analysis: a comparative affordance analysis with a focus on album recontextualization.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Music digitalization

To illustrate how the digitalization of music ultimately shapes the album experience, this section starts by outlining the academic debate surrounding music digitalization as a technological change and traces it to the disaggregation perspective used to study the album. Digitalization, in this research, is defined in line with a description by media scholars J. Scott Brennen and Daniel Kreiss in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*.¹⁰ They describe it as the shaping of the many domains of social life around digital communication and media infrastructures, and as a result, the rising of new cultural production forms that are facilitated through digital technologies.¹¹ This research considers digitalization as constituting the new digital technologies through which cultural production is consumed and experienced, and tries to steer away from industry-centered and political economy discussions on digitalization.

Media scholars Jerald Hughes and Karl Reiner Lang call the fundamental characteristic of digital cultural products *transmutability*.¹² Before digitalization, the public consumption of cultural products was based on the ownership of static artifacts (such as vinyl, cassettes, or compact discs) and therefore expected to be passive. As cultural goods become increasingly digital, they are more easily produced, distributed, and subject to transformation by the user: they are transmutable.¹³ The user consumes digital cultural products such as digital albums actively instead of passively. This research principally supposes that the digitalization of music, with music streaming as the latest technological step, facilitates an active album consumption experience.

The digital music commodity and branded musical experiences

Discussion on the digitalization of music has followed the rise of the internet in the early 1990s. The internet first had a purely complementary role to music, maturing into the central role in music distribution and consumption it has today.¹⁴ The digital shift and its effect on music have

¹⁰ J. Scott Brennen and Daniel Kreiss, "Digitalization," in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*, ed. Klaus Bruhn Jensen et al. (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 1–11, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9781118766804.wbiect111>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5–8.

¹² Jerald Hughes and Karl Reiner Lang, "Transmutability: Digital Decontextualization, Manipulation, and Recontextualization as a New Source of Value in the Production and Consumption of Culture Products," in *HICSS '06* (Presented at the 39th Hawaii International International Conference on Systems Science, IEEE, 2006), 1–2, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/221181684_Transmutability_Digital_Decontextualization_Manipulation_and_Recontextualization_as_a_New_Source_of_Value_in_the_Production_and_Consumption_of_Culture_Products.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁴ Johansson, "Music in Times of Streaming," 310.

been met both with enthusiasm and skepticism, as has been the case with any technological change in the music industry.¹⁵ According to media scholar Jeremy Wade Morris in *Selling Digital Music, Formatting Culture*, early digital music platforms such as Winamp, Napster, and iTunes created a new music format: the *digital music commodity*.¹⁶ The new digital format marked a divorce from the otherwise conservative compact disc or CD through which music was consumed at the time. The digital music commodity is exemplary of a hard digital-physical division in academic debate on music consumption, and it is the hardness of this division that this research wants to challenge through the comparison of digital and physical formats.¹⁷

Media scholar Tom McCourt describes the digitalization of music as each subsequent music format having less of a physical presence and leaving more room for *user programming*.¹⁸ Described in light of the MP3-revolution and the first iPod, users were more than ever able to engage in dialogue with a musical work by recontextualizing it through mix CDs and playlists. Hughes and Lang distinguish this process as two categories within their concept of transmutability: the unbundling of albums into separate files and the re-bundling of these files into playlists.¹⁹ According to McCourt, the lack of materiality in digital music paradoxically heightens the sense of user ownership of music since users have immediate access to huge music catalogs and can create new music contexts themselves.²⁰

The user programmability or transmutability that came with the digitalization of music has become a central part of music consumption on streaming services. In an article focusing on music streaming, Morris and co-author Devon Powers call the fluid and abundant music content sold by streaming services such as Spotify *branded musical experiences*, as they do not sell the discrete and static artifacts that previously inhabited music consumption.²¹ As Morris and Powers explain, the amount of control users have over how they consume their music is one of the main features that streaming services use to brand and differentiate their musical experience.²² This research understands that music streaming services are encouraging the user

¹⁵ Ibid., 316.

¹⁶ Jeremy Wade Morris, *Selling Digital Music, Formatting Culture* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015), 2–22, <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1028682&site=ehost-live>.

¹⁷ The commodification of music is a complex discussion that is beyond the scope of this research, but it nevertheless comes up while researching music consumption. Here, the digital music commodity solely refers to the new music format because of digitalization. For further discussion on music as a commodity, see Timothy D. Taylor, *The Commodification of Music*.

¹⁸ Tom McCourt, “Collecting Music in the Digital Realm,” *Popular Music and Society* 28, no. 2 (May 2005): 249, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03007760500045394>.

¹⁹ Hughes and Lang, “Transmutability,” 4.

²⁰ McCourt, “Collecting Music in the Digital Realm,” 250–251.

²¹ Jeremy Wade Morris and Devon Powers, “Control, Curation and Musical Experience in Streaming Music Services,” *Creative Industries Journal* 8, no. 2 (July 3, 2015): 107, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17510694.2015.1090222>.

²² Ibid., 108–118.

to take active control over their musical experience as a whole and the album experiences that are part of it.

The disaggregated album

In *Selling Digital Music*, Morris also describes the digitalization of music impacting the album format.²³ He illustrates the splintering or disaggregation of the album, with digital music platforms such as Winamp and iTunes streamlining the reaggregation of individual files into playlists and making this process an inseparable part of the music experience. According to Morris, the splintering of the album into separate music entities (singles and playlists) has, in turn, sparked the ongoing “death of the album”-debate, where the fear notably stems from the apparent disrupting of listening practices that were fundamental to music before digitalization.²⁴ The *disaggregated album* is the latest and only academic redefinition of the album format in the digital age, and refers to the album not being experienced as a unified whole. It was formed, however, around early digital music platforms and has not been used in the context of music streaming. By studying the physical and digital album through a disaggregation perspective, this research can comment on the extent to which the change in materiality actually facilitates a disaggregated album experience.

Recontextualization

The existing academic debate on digitalization and its impact on the album depicts a departure from the physical and static musical artifacts that came before it. In this debate, fluidity, control, programmability, and transmutability (the term that is used here) all similarly describe the shift from passive to active music consumption, which means the consumer can now easily partake in various stages of the production process.²⁵ In illustrating this transmutability, authors also confusingly use various terms to refer to user transmutations of the album: Hughes and Lang use ‘unbundling’ and ‘re-bundling,’ Morris uses ‘disaggregation’ and ‘reaggregation,’ and McCourt uses ‘recontextualization.’ Furthermore, the existing terms are all used in reference to digital platforms of the 2000s, when digital music was thought of as the interaction with individual files instead of the holistic branded musical experiences of streaming services. In an effort to be coherent in adding to the academic debate, user transmutations of the album are here seen as stemming from the larger transmutability of music and is referred to as

²³ Morris, *Selling Digital Music, Formatting Culture*, 51–63.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁵ Hughes and Lang, “Transmutability,” 7–10.

recontextualization. This section, then, outlines a new broad conceptualization of recontextualization to understand the multifaceted interactions with the album as a context and how these relate to the album experience across different formats.

First off, to re-contextualize is, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, “to reinterpret or refresh (an idea, work of art, etc.) by placing it in a new or different context.”²⁶ A well-known example of recontextualization in the arts is by Marcel Duchamp, who submitted a factory-made urinal to a museum exhibition without altering its appearance (aside from rotating it 90 degrees and signing it), consequently removing the urinal’s everyday context as a bathroom appliance and presenting it as an art object.²⁷ The context in which an object is placed forms how the object is experienced and, as Duchamp probably knew, the recontextualization of an object can transform how the object is experienced.

Recontextualization of the album

The process of recontextualization can be traced to other contexts as well. In this research, the album is understood as a unifying context for songs in a pre-programmed order and when this original album context is altered in any way, the album is recontextualized. Album recontextualization occurs when the linearity of album playback is changed, individual tracks are played removed from their album contexts, and different songs are combined in new contexts like playlists and user libraries. The songs that were originally placed in a specific order on an album are experienced differently in a new order, removed from their album context, or among other tracks in a playlist. Essentially, the more the user can recontextualize the album, the more the album experience will be disaggregated.

Morris and Powers illustrate with similar terms how the transmutability of music is branded as part of the musical experience on streaming services like Spotify.²⁸ Because this research understands recontextualization as part of this transmutability, recontextualization can be seen as branded as part of the musical experience on Spotify as well. Before the digitalization of music, when album formats were physical, the album was branded without recontextualization in mind. This understanding is echoed by socio-cultural scholars Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward who, in trying to explain the resurgence of vinyl in the digital

²⁶ “Recontextualize, v.,” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, n.d.), accessed November 26, 2020, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/270984>.

²⁷ Louise Norton, “The Richard Mutt Case,” *The Blind Man*, no. 2 (May 1917): 5, <http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/blindman/2/>.

²⁸ Morris and Powers, “Control, Curation and Musical Experience in Streaming Music Services,” 115–116.

age, state that the LP album demands linear listening the way the artist intends it.²⁹ However, this does not necessarily mean physical albums are not recontextualizable. This research compares the LP, CD, and Spotify album format based on their recontextualizability to show how the album experience has changed with the changing materiality of music, and to comment on whether the disaggregated album experience is a purely digital phenomenon.

Changing album flow, creating new context, and album context preservation

The Spotify interface is not directly equivalent to physical album formats, so the recontextualization interactions are made part of three categories proposed by this research to enable a comprehensive comparison of their experience. When playing the album, recontextualization by skipping, shuffling, reordering, or altering the linearity of playback in other ways is part of the first category called *changing album flow*. These interactions occur within the album context, but affect the album context as a whole. McCourt describes changing the flow of an album as being facilitated by both physical and digital formats, but that digital formats put the control over music flow exclusively in the hands of the user.³⁰

The second set of interactions arises from what McCourt originally referred to with recontextualization: the dialogues users engage in with an album by creating mix CDs and playlists.³¹ Similarly, Hughes and Lang use the term to exemplify the creation of podcasts (where song selections are interspersed with original commentary) and the ripping and redistribution of songs from video games as music collections, which both confusingly overlap with their definitions of unbundling and re-bundling.³² For this research, interactions that require another medium outside of the album format itself, such as mix CDs or the means for creating a podcast, are not taken into account because the focus is on what the album format itself facilitates. By contrast, the creation of playlists and the saving of songs to user libraries are part of the Spotify album interface and therefore integral to the Spotify album format. These interactions are part of the second category of recontextualization called *creating new context*.

Lastly, the original album context is not always lost when a new context is created. For instance, the Spotify interface has album links attached to each song in a playlist. In other words, the recontextualizability of the album does not necessarily mean the decontextualization of individual songs. The physical album is in this sense even harder to decontextualize because,

²⁹ Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward, "The Vinyl: The Analogue Medium in the Age of Digital Reproduction," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 15, no. 1 (March 1, 2015): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540513488403>.

³⁰ McCourt, "Collecting Music in the Digital Realm," 249.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 251.

³² Hughes and Lang, "Transmutability," 4.

as Bartmanski and Woodward point out, the material packaging of the physical album explicitly carries the original album context through its cover art and liner notes, with the size of the LP sleeve even more so than the smaller CD jewel case.³³ McCourt similarly states that the LP and CD require the user to initially engage with the work on the creator's terms, while the digital album format gives this authority away to the user.³⁴ This third category, mostly associated with the physical album, is called *album context preservation*. The album context being attached to songs is an important part of how this research understands recontextualization, and it nuances the relationship between album recontextualization and the disaggregated album experience. The album experience will be seen as less disaggregated the more album context preservation there is. Recontextualization differs from other terms describing the transmutability of music because it applies specifically to the album context interactions and is not solely tied to either digital or physical formats. In the methodology, the theory and method behind analyzing these interactions as affordances and how these relate to the album experience will be discussed.

³³ Bartmanski and Woodward, "The Vinyl," 8–10.

³⁴ McCourt, "Collecting Music in the Digital Realm," 249.

METHODOLOGY

Affordance analysis

Experiencing music is inherently subjective and deeply personal, so this research uses album format affordances to represent the possible experience of an album. Overviewing the application of *affordance* in academic research, Sandra Evans et al. note an inconsistent conceptualization of the term and encourage specification when used as an analysis method.³⁵ According to their definition, affordances are relational structures between technology and users that enable or constraint behavioral outcomes. Affordances should not describe deterministic features or outcomes of technologies, but the possibilities for users that technologies facilitate.³⁶ Hence, affordances only suggest possible experiences and do not prescribe any definite experience. In contrast to other qualitative subject-based research into experience, an affordance analysis will result in a more general and objective understanding of possible experiences.

Examples of affordances can be found in everyday life. For instance, a chair affords sitting down, but a chair also affords the placing down of objects, support for standing on it, and being thrown. Essentially, anything that a person can think of doing with a chair is an affordance of that chair, with some affordances being more obvious than others. The affordances that are obvious when the object is interacted with are what psychologist Donald Norman calls *perceived* affordances in *The Design of Everyday Things*.³⁷ These perceived affordances can be used as *signifiers* to endorse a specific action and to show how an action should be done. Signifiers can be signs like “push” that communicate how to open a door or physical attributes like the form factor of a handlebar that communicate how to steer a bicycle. Signified affordances unambiguously communicate what the possible use is, and they do so through shared conventions.³⁸ An example of these shared conventions on audio devices would be the common understanding of many people that pressing a button with a triangle pointing to the right plays the music. For the album format to signify recontextualization, the recontextualization affordances need to be perceived. These affordances thus mostly come in the form of buttons (either on the Spotify interface, the turntable, or the CD player) that are designed to recontextualize the album.

³⁵ Sandra K. Evans et al., “Explicating Affordances: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Affordances in Communication Research,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 22, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 35–52, <https://academic.oup.com/jcmc/article/22/1/35/3976924>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 36–39.

³⁷ Donald A. Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, Revised and Expanded Edition. (New York, New York: Basic Books, 2013), 13–19.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 19, 145.

By studying the *White Album* by the Beatles as a specific example of a popular album that was initially released on LP and later on CD (both representative of the physical album), and is currently available on Spotify (representative of the digital album), this research compares how the same album is impacted by different format affordances. The next section gives a bit of background on the *White Album* as a case study and follows with a structural outline of the affordance analysis.

The *White Album*

The Beatles by popular rock band the Beatles, commonly referred to as the *White Album* because of its blank cover, was a massively popular album at its release in 1968 and still is 50 years later.³⁹ According to music scholar John Littlejohn, the *White Album* stands in stark contrast to its predecessor *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, which had solidified itself as an archetype for the rock LP as a cohesive work of art.⁴⁰ The *White Album* lacked the textual unity that tied the songs of *Sgt. Pepper* together and it stands out because of its sheer length as a double album (adding up to over an hour and a half of music). As music scholar Ian Inglis explains, the *White Album* flows fragmentary through many different styles and some songs feel more like demos or sketches than finished tracks.⁴¹ Essentially, the only thing that ties these songs together is that they are released in a shared context. Littlejohn supposes that the Beatles created an album that laid bare the album structure the Beatles were previously known for.⁴²

The fragmentary aesthetic of the *White Album* can be seen as lending itself well for a disaggregated album experience, even in its original form as a double LP. The disjointed album structure of the *White Album* makes some recontextualization affordances more plausible (like the skipping of tracks) that would make less sense with a unified album structure along the lines of *Sgt. Pepper*. With that in mind, this research uses this album as a case study to analyze format affordances because it serves as a good example of an album that was initially released as an LP, later as a CD, and is popular to this day.⁴³

³⁹ Keith Caulfield, "The Beatles' White Album Returns to Top 10 on Billboard 200 Chart," *Billboard*, November 18, 2018, accessed December 9, 2020, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/8485591/the-beatles-white-album-returns-billboard-200-chart-top-10>.

⁴⁰ John Littlejohn, "Sgt. Pepper and the White Album: The Establishment and Dissolution of the Album Form," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 22, no. 1 (September 4, 2020): 79, <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/764004>.

⁴¹ Ian Inglis, "Revolution," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Beatles*, ed. Kenneth Womack, Cambridge Companions to Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 120–122, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-companion-to-the-beatles/revolution/615DB30355D71979E244A4B0A52012FE>.

⁴² Littlejohn, "Sgt. Pepper and the White Album," 89–92.

⁴³ On Spotify, The *White Album* is a 2009 remaster released on Spotify in 2015. For the analysis of the LP album format, an issue from the original year of release in 1968 is used. For the analysis of the CD album format, a reissue from 2013 is used. Both physical albums contain the same number of tracks as the Spotify album.

Structure of the analysis

To systematically do an affordance analysis of the *White Album*, the analysis follows the structure of album playback for each format. Users intending to play the *White Album* will start by searching for it on Spotify or in their physical catalog. The analysis of Spotify studies the four screens of the desktop application that the user engages with in the album-playing sequence: the album page, the currently playing section, the queue, and playlists.⁴⁴ Affordances are perceived when elements on the screen appear or change in color when the cursor is moved. For instance, the play button will grow in size and become brighter when hovering over it with the cursor, indicating the possibility to click the button. Next to buttons, text that affords interaction will become underlined when hovering over it with the cursor. Perceived affordances on Spotify mostly come in the form of buttons or clickable text.

The analysis of the physical format of the *White Album* will feature both the LP and the CD and their respective players. The recontextualization affordances of the LP album are divided into interaction with the turntable and with the record itself. The interactions with the turntable are limited to the needle and the available buttons. These interactions are all perceived recontextualization affordances since they give immediate physical feedback to the user. The affordance of the vinyl record to be interacted with is also perceived, since this is necessary to play the album. In contrast to the turntable interactions, however, interacting with the vinyl record during playback is discouraged since it can damage both the record and the turntable. When playing a CD album, the interactions are limited to the CD player since the disc itself will be enclosed in the player. The only perceived recontextualization affordances of the CD player are its buttons.

⁴⁴ The desktop application is used for the analysis of the Spotify album format since it has the most features and therefore represents the most Spotify as a platform can offer in terms of recontextualization. The Spotify desktop application does have more screens than the four mentioned. One of which, the settings screen, houses automatic volume normalization and crossfading settings which impact the details in the relationships between tracks, but only when an album is shuffled or tracks are played in a playlist. These settings can recontextualize the album only when an album is already disaggregated, so for the analysis these settings will not be taken into consideration.

ANALYSIS

The Spotify album

This part of the analysis answers the first sub-question by focusing on the recontextualization affordances of the Spotify interface and the possible disaggregated album experience that is facilitated. The analysis is structured in line with the four different Spotify screens that follow each other in the sequence of album playback: the album page, the currently playing section, the queue screen, and playlists.

Album page

The album page, as seen in Figure 1, covers a large portion of the Spotify window. When the album page for the *White Album* on Spotify is opened, the play button which will start playback from the first track is at the top. Mimicking the CD format of the album which consists of two discs, the album's tracklisting on Spotify is also divided into two discs without requiring interaction from the user to go from the first to the second disc. This is an example of what is called a *skeuomorph*: the integration of the design of familiar technologies into new technologies to help the user navigate unknown territory.⁴⁵ In this case, the shared convention

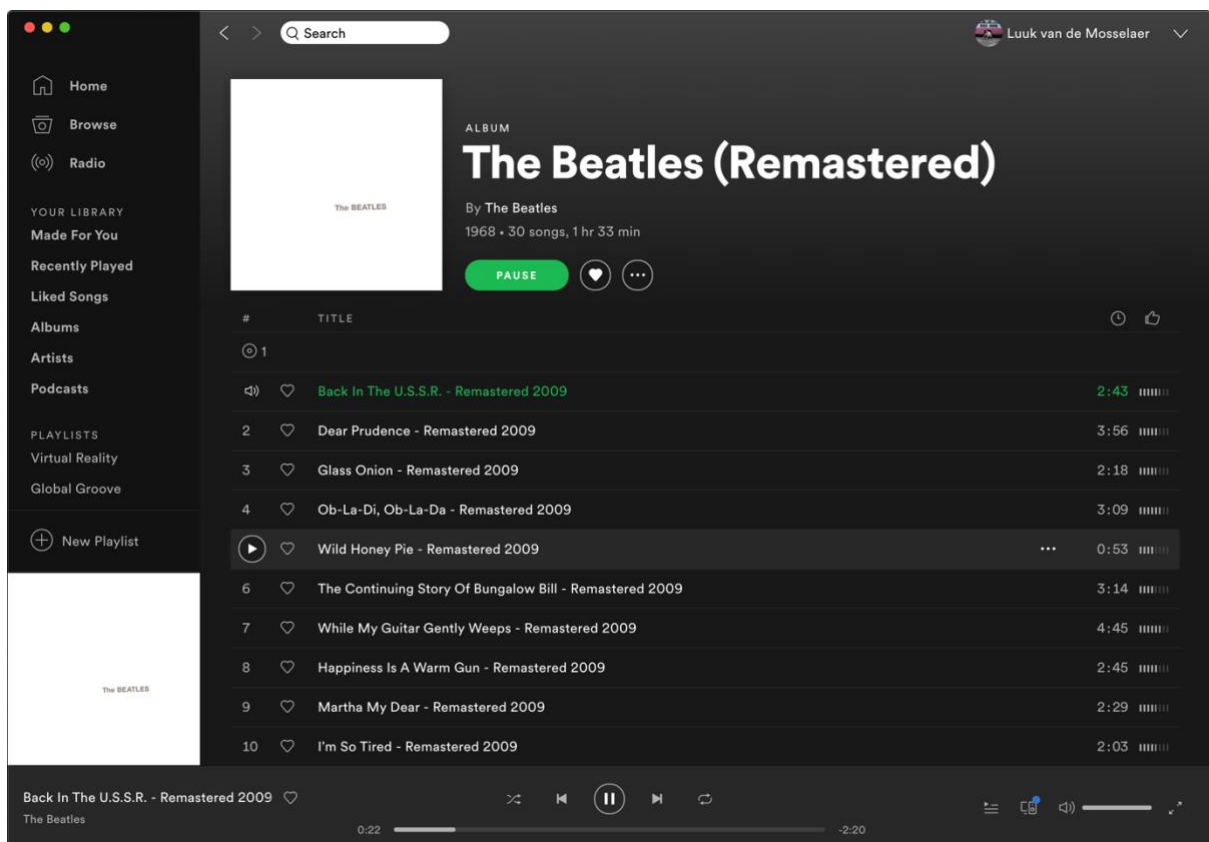


Figure 1. The album page viewed within the Spotify desktop application, with the *White Album* opened and playing. Screenshot by author.

⁴⁵ Morris, *Selling Digital Music, Formatting Culture*, 49–50.

that some albums are long enough to cover multiple discs can help the user figure out that the rest of the tracklisting is revealed by scrolling down. It is also evidence of the CD being a precursor to the Spotify album as the last physical format before the digital music commodity.⁴⁶

The tracks are each separated by a line and individually highlightable. To the left of every track is a heart button, allowing the user to save individual songs to their “Liked Songs”-playlist. The heart buttons are immediately perceived when the user opens the album page and they signify recontextualization by creating new context: the user’s “Liked Songs” as seen on the left part of the screen in Figure 1. When hovering over an individual track with the cursor, a play button appears to the left of this track. This button affords the user to start playing from any song in the album, and since this affordance is perceived to be connected to individual tracks, this affordance might incentivize the user to skip through the album. The individual play buttons symbolize recontextualization by changing album flow.

This recontextualization affordance is enforced by an eight-bar meter to the right of every track which represents the number of streams or plays that every individual track has. When hovering over this bar with the cursor, a popup will show the exact number of plays. The exact algorithm for how the meter and number of plays are calculated and relate to each other is unknown, but it is likely a combination of short-term popularity measurements and the overall number of plays.⁴⁷ Since the popularity meter varies in fullness from track to track (from zero to eight of the bars) and is presented to the user without requiring interaction, the album page shows the user plainly that some songs are more popular than others within the album. The combination of the skipping affordance and the perceived popularity data might incentivize listening only to highlights of the album rather than experiencing the album context as a unified whole.

The last recontextualization affordances of the album page are accessed in a drop-down menu that appears when the user highlights an individual track. In this menu, the user can add the track to the queue, interacting with which track will follow the track currently playing and thus changing album flow. Further down are options that afford removing a track from the album context and creating a new context for it: saving a track to “Liked Songs” (in the same way as the heart button) or to another custom playlist. This same action can also be accomplished by dragging a selected song to the screen section on the left where the playlists are located, but this affordance is less perceived as dragging is not suggested anywhere. When

⁴⁶ Ibid., 2–15.

⁴⁷ Rorey, “What’s the Popularity Meter Based On?,” *Spotify Community*, last modified October 13, 2015, accessed December 23, 2020, <https://community.spotify.com/t5/Spotify-Answers/What-s-the-popularity-meter-based-on/tap/1215806>.

perceived however, the dragging affordance can be a quicker recontextualization method for custom playlisting than the drop-down menu. The album page, the first engagement the user has with the album context as a whole, is providing many of the means for a disaggregated album experience through changing album flow and creating new context.

Currently playing

When the *White Album* starts playing on Spotify, the bottom section of the screen will display information and interactions for the currently playing song as shown in Figure 2. On the left are the song title (“Blackbird”) and a heart button (for saving the playing song to “Liked Songs”) underneath the *White Album* cover art. Clicking on the album cover or the song title will open the album page for the *White Album*, clicking on the song title specifically will also highlight its place in the album order as shown in Figure 2. The song that is playing will always keep playing, even when other pages are opened. Furthermore, the currently playing section will always remain visible at the bottom of the screen. This means that even when the user is browsing the vast Spotify catalog, they will easily be able to navigate back to the *White Album*. The album and song title links, the highlighting of songs in context, and the uninterrupted playback are examples of album context preservation. These affordances will counterbalance a disaggregation of the album experience because the album context in its original form will only be a few clicks away.

In the middle of the currently playing screen section is a shuffle button that will shuffle the normal playing order of the *White Album*, a previous button that will skip back one song, a play/pause button, a next button that will skip forward one song, and a repeat button that will loop the album sequence back to the beginning or repeat the song currently playing until turned off. Underneath these controls is a song progress bar with a play head that moves from left to right as the song is playing, with the progressed time on the left and the time remaining on the right. With this progression bar, the song playback can be interacted with by dragging the play

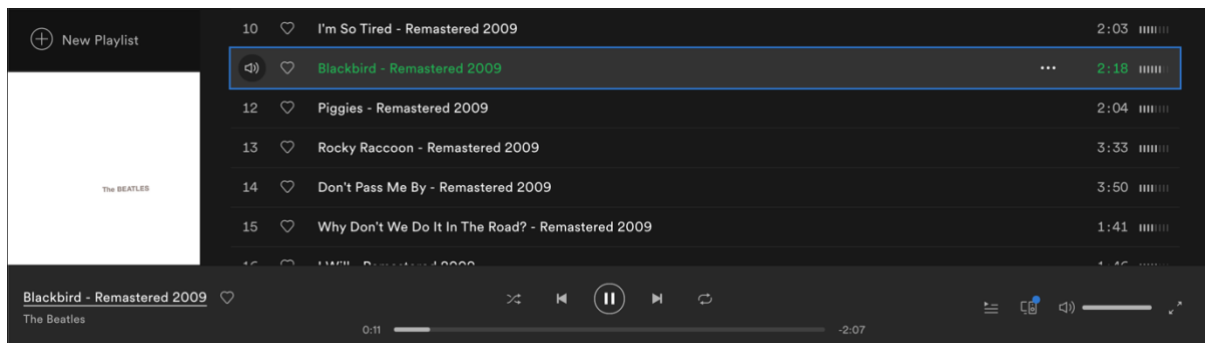


Figure 2. Crop of the currently playing section as viewed in the Spotify desktop application, with the currently playing song highlighted in the tracklisting. Screenshot by author.

head left or right. This way, parts of songs can be skipped or replayed. These controls all change album flow by interacting with the pre-programmed order of the songs. These recontextualization affordances are perceived because they are placed in the middle as interactable buttons, as opposed to the album context preservation links on the left which just display text and might not be perceived as affordances. Together, the affordances facilitate album recontextualization and therefore a disaggregated album experience, but because of the album context preservation, the album experience will never be fully disaggregated.

The queue

On the right side of the currently playing screen section is a button that will open the queue screen, covering the whole album page as shown in Figure 3. The queue screen consists of the main queue tab and the history tab. The main queue tab is open by default and, when the *White Album* is played from the start, shows the full tracklisting in the pre-programmed order. The queue looks similar to the album page tracklisting, with songs separated by a line and similar controls on individual tracks. The top of the screen shows “Now Playing,” with the currently playing track highlighted and separated from the “Next Up” tracklisting that shows the remaining songs in the queue. Both the tracks under “Now Playing” and “Next Up” show

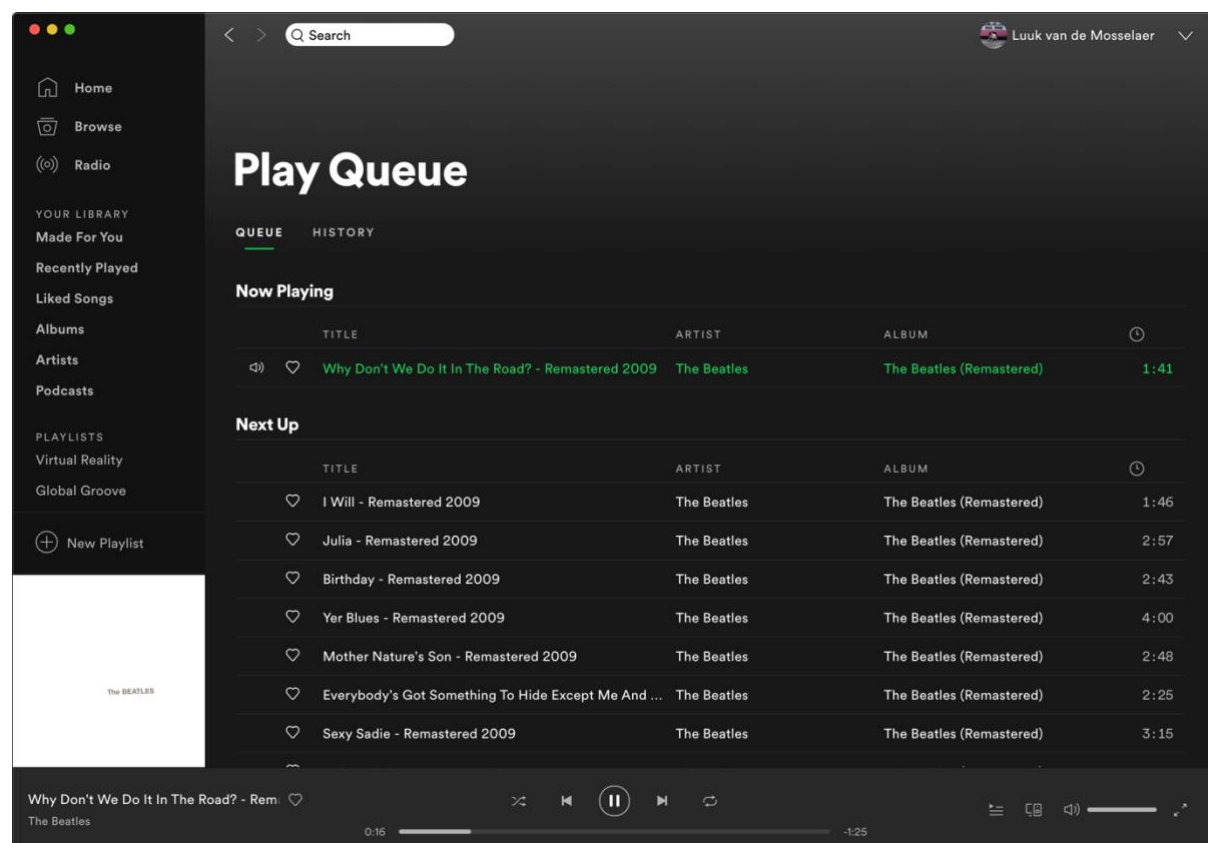


Figure 3. The queue screen viewed within the Spotify desktop application, with the main queue tab open by default. Screenshot by author.

similar controls to that of the tracklisting on the album page, with individual play buttons and heart buttons on the left and a drop-down menu on the right. The drop-down menu has the familiar recontextualization options, except for the addition of a link to the album page and an option to remove the selected song from the queue. The popularity meter is gone, but added is a clickable album title that refers the user to the album page.

The queue tab allows the user to drag around songs in their desired order, an affordance that is, again, not necessarily perceived. When perceived, this reordering feature allows for quick and intuitive changing of album flow. In the history tab of the queue are the songs that have been played previously to the currently playing song, starting from the most recent, and with the same tracklisting layout and options as the queue tab. This allows the user to go back and find a song they listened to before that they want to repeat or add to the queue again. All in all, the queue screen makes changing album flow intuitive, but only when the user knows of the dragging affordance. The only album context preservation is via the album links transporting the user back to the album page, which makes this screen one step further away from the original album context. The queue screen facilitates album recontextualization, and therefore a disaggregated album experience, much in the same way as the album page.

Playlists

Whenever the user clicks the heart button on the album page, the currently playing section, or the queue, the favorited song will be added to a playlist called “Liked Songs.” Whenever the user wants to create a custom playlist, they do so in the drop-down menus found on the album page and the queue, or by right-clicking on the song title in the currently playing section.⁴⁸ The “Add to Playlist” menu has an option for creating a new playlist with the selected song or adding it to an existing playlist made by the user. Playlists can either be accessed through links on the left side of the main screen (where the album page or queue would be) or searched for in the search bar at the top. As media scholars Maria Eriksson et al. suggest in their analysis of Spotify’s curational features, the playlist is a big part of the musical experience Spotify wants to brand.⁴⁹ Because of this, the playlist can be seen as pervading the Spotify album as well.

⁴⁸ “Liked Songs” and custom playlists have a few small differences (custom playlists have artwork and extra information, and are shareable), but for this analysis, these differences are neglected.

⁴⁹ Maria Eriksson et al., *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2019), 116–120, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=5654731>.

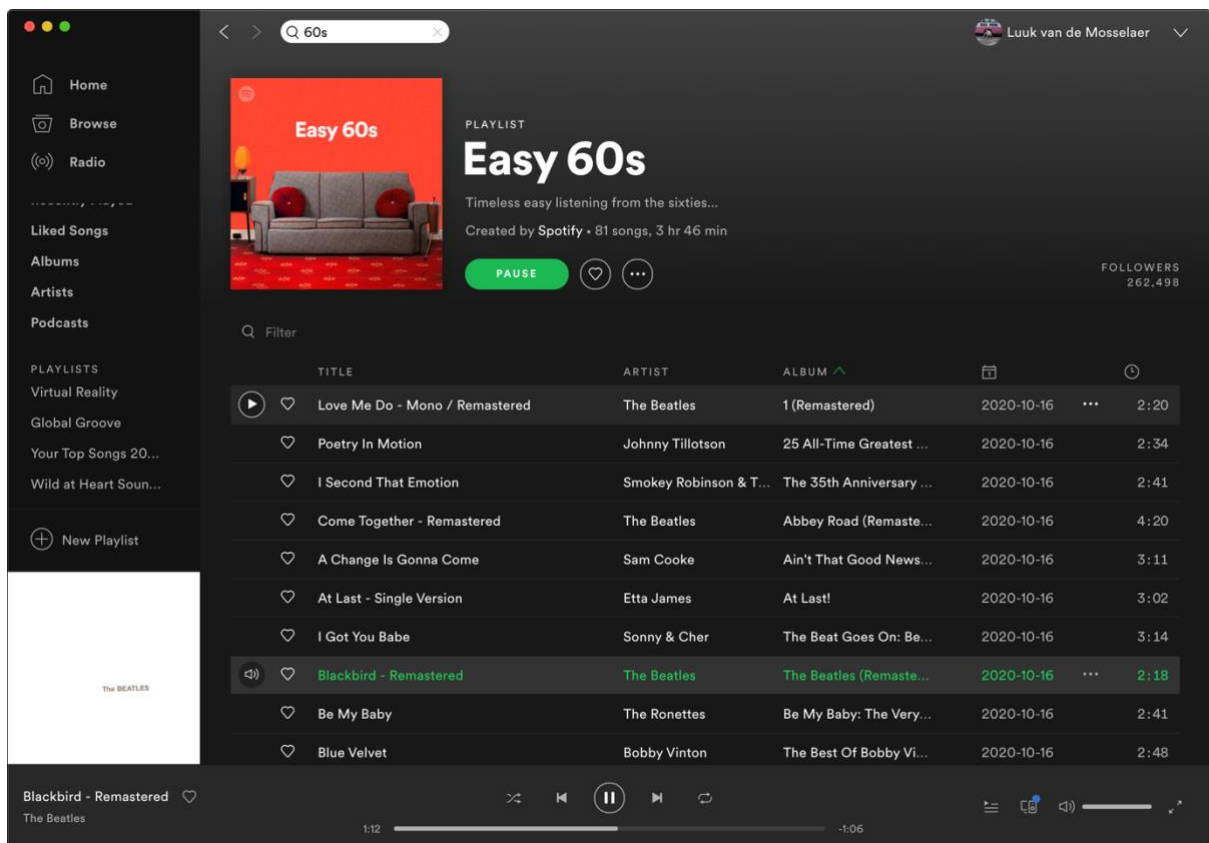


Figure 4. The "Easy 60s" playlist created by Spotify viewed within the Spotify desktop application, in this case sorted by album name. Screenshot by author.

The nature of a playlist is that it combines different songs from different album contexts in a new context, as shown in Figure 4 where the original *White Album* context for “Blackbird” is now replaced with what Spotify curators consider to be “timeless easy listening” songs from the 1960s. The act of playlisting songs from the *White Album* means the album is being recontextualized in the original definition of McCourt.⁵⁰ When the whole of the *White Album* is placed in its original order in a playlist, the album experience will not be disaggregated, because the original album experience is contained within the playlist. Aside from that singular case, playlists usually contain only parts or highlights of an album, which means the album experience is disaggregated.

Playlists have the same tracklisting as seen in the queue, with the date of addition to the playlist shown on every track. Playlists can be sorted by album title as shown in Figure 4, which will change the order of the list and group all tracks belonging to the same album in the pre-programmed order of that album. This can be seen as preserving album context, even though most of the time the full album will not be experienced this way in the playlist. Just like in the queue, the album links pervade the playlists. Even though playlists are the catalyst for the

⁵⁰ McCourt, “Collecting Music in the Digital Realm,” 251.

disaggregation of the album in the existing literature, playlists on Spotify also afford the preservation of album context.

The physical album

This part of the analysis answers the second sub-question by focusing on the recontextualization affordances of the LP and CD album format respectively, and the possible disaggregated album experience that both formats facilitate. The analysis is structured according to the physical interactions that follow the sequence of album playback on LP and CD: for the LP respectively the turntable and the vinyl record, and for the CD only the player.

Turntable

When playing the *White Album* LP, the user needs to place the needle of the turntable on the vinyl disc. To start at the beginning, the needle is placed at the outer rim of the disc from where it will move inward following the groove of the record. As a double LP, the *White Album* contains two vinyl discs, each containing two sides. Hence, to play the album from start to finish, the user needs to manually change sides three times and place the needle four times. According to Bartmanski and Woodward, the affordance of the LP to be flipped commands attention when listening and emphasizes the linear structure of the record.⁵¹ At the same time, this can also result in a possible disaggregated album experience when the album not attended to.

The second recontextualization affordance of the turntable that is perceived is interaction with the needle. The movement and placement of the needle require carefulness and precision on the user's part, especially since songs are marked only by a small gap in between the grooves. By looking at the tracklisting of the *White Album* (present on the vinyl disc and the album cover) and counting the number of gaps, the user can determine which track on the vinyl disc corresponds to the tracklisting. The needle can then be placed anywhere on the record to start playing, making it possible to easily start playing in the middle of a song. This form of skipping is one that can very immediately change album flow, especially when the user has a certain sleight of hand to move the needle quickly and precisely.

The second perceived recontextualization affordance is the speed control: a selection switch between $33\frac{1}{3}$ and 45 rotations per minute (RPM) for correctly playing albums and singles at their corresponding speeds respectively. Most turntables also have fine speed controls

⁵¹ Bartmanski and Woodward, "The Vinyl," 8.

in addition. Because the *White Album* is a 33¹/₃ RPM LP record, setting the speed at 45 RPM results in a faster rotation and thus faster playback. This speed control can be seen as recontextualization by changing album flow since it makes the album play faster and at a higher pitch than originally intended. Other than skipping and speed control, on its own, the turntable does not provide many recontextualization affordances.

Vinyl record

The vinyl disc or record affords recontextualization of the album via its physical properties when in rotation. Touching the record is necessary to place it on the turntable and thus perceived, but the affordance of a vinyl record to be touched and moved while on the turntable is not encouraged in the same way as interaction with the turntable controls. Interaction with the record while playing can damage both the vinyl and the needle. At the same time, the fact that the record plays music based on its physical properties makes some affordances possible that are not possible with the confined recontextualization affordances of digital platforms.

Because the rotation of the turntable platform determines the speed and pitch at which the record is played back, physically weighing down on the record will slow down playback while pushing the record forward will make playback faster. Next to manual speed control, pushing backward even allows for reversed playback, which is a form of changing album flow unique to vinyl. This manual dragging and pushing is fittingly called “scratching” in the DJ-community which, according to music technology scholar Kjetil Falkenberg Hansen, can function as an expressive musical instrument.⁵² When the user scratches or experiments with playback in these ways, the album is recontextualized and new context is created: the context of DJ performance.⁵³

The record interactions in combination with the turntable controls provide the LP album format with tactile recontextualization affordances that are very immediate and freeform. The result can be a disaggregated album experience, but throughout the recontextualization interactions, the album context is always preserved through the physicality of the album cover and vinyl disc (both informing the user of the album context). In essence, it is impossible to remove the original album context from the LP apart from destroying the medium itself, so a fully disaggregated album experience is not facilitated.

⁵² Kjetil Falkenberg Hansen, “The Basics of Scratching,” *Journal of New Music Research* 31, no. 4 (December 1, 2002): 357, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1076/jnmr.31.4.357.14171>.

⁵³ Ibid.

CD player

The same physical reliance is present with the CD album: the album context is always preserved through the disc and the jewel case the disc is stored in. In contrast to the LP, the CD does not have the same tactile recontextualization affordances and the limitations are now dependent on the CD player. These tactile LP interactions provide a certain recontextualization freedom that the CD lacks.⁵⁴ However, the CD and its player make use of digital memory, which creates new options for recontextualization that roughly approach the currently playing interactions and queue editing possibilities of Spotify. When playing the CD album, the player allows for shuffling and a user-programmed playing order. The programmable playing order as an affordance is not necessarily perceived, though, since it requires reading the manual and pressing a specific combination of multiple buttons. The CD player also has buttons for skipping forward and backward so the user can skip easily to the beginning of songs, and a repeat button for repeating multiple or single tracks. Changing album flow is indeed afforded, but the creation of new context is not. Ultimately, the CD album provides the means for a disaggregated album experience that is not particularly intuitive or sophisticated.

Comparison

This part of the analysis answers the third sub-question by focusing on how the physical album format compares to the digital Spotify format in facilitating a disaggregated album experience through recontextualization affordances. The comparison will be structured according to the three categories of album recontextualization: changing album flow, creating new context, and album context preservation.

Changing album flow

This research supposed that changing album flow is facilitated by both digital and physical formats. The Spotify interface seems to encourage the user to change album flow in its various screens, although sometimes a more straightforward interaction is not perceived. The CD album, by comparison, simply does not provide the user with the same ease and sophistication for changing album flow, but it is nevertheless facilitated. Changing album flow on an LP is more freeform and requires more carefulness from its user, but it is possible to skip songs

⁵⁴ Intentionally damaging the disc and then playing it back is possible in a similar vein as the discouraged scratching of vinyl records, only not during playback since the CD will be enclosed in the player. Furthermore, this form of album recontextualization requires other tools besides the CD album itself to create these intentional glitches. This research confines the recontextualization possibilities within the format itself, so this possible disc interaction is not taken into consideration. For further discussion of the intentional glitching of CD technology to create new musical expressions, see Torben Sangild, *Glitch*.

similar to the CD and Spotify album. Though changing album flow on an LP is not particularly encouraged, as Bartmanski and Woodward point out, the material manipulation of the vinyl album is more transparent and straightforward than that of its digital counterparts, especially as digital platforms get more sophisticated.⁵⁵ With the CD and Spotify format, these interactions are encouraged by the buttons that are designed for changing album flow, granted that these buttons prohibit a more freeform recontextualization like speed control. Additionally, the physical *White Album* formats are unique in their album flow because they require the user to change discs to play the full album. The *White Album* on Spotify, by contrast, plays in full without interruption. It could be said, then, that Spotify actually affords the most passive album experience of the three when strictly considering a linear album playback of the *White Album*. Disaggregating the album experience by changing album flow is possible on all formats, with Spotify facilitating it as an integral part of the album experience and the LP making it the most straightforward.

Creating new context

In the existing academic debate, creating new context is what has been described as one of the tokens of the transmutability of cultural goods, often while naming the creation of playlists.⁵⁶ It is therefore by no means a surprise that recontextualization by creating new context pervades the Spotify album in the form of playlists. Creating new context is made inseparable from the digital album, where it is less prominently featured within LP and CD albums. However, the freeform recontextualization affordances of the LP allow for scratching, which can be categorized as the creation of new context. The new context that is created, then, is that of DJing and performance, facilitating an experience outside of the more linear music consumption of an album or playlist.⁵⁷ Bartmanski and Woodward would state that DJs making use of this vinyl affordance are *prosumers*, a term usually associated with the active consumption of digital cultural goods and not with their physical counterparts that imply passive consumption.⁵⁸ This would then mean that the transmutability of music is not something wholly unique to digital music. The creation of playlists, on the other hand, can be seen as allowing for more user customizability for the context of a specific song, while scratching is always intrinsically connected to live musical performance. Although it is possible to go outside the conventional linear album experience with an LP by creating new context,

⁵⁵ Bartmanski and Woodward, "The Vinyl," 12.

⁵⁶ Hughes and Lang, "Transmutability," 2–4; McCourt, "Collecting Music in the Digital Realm," 251.

⁵⁷ Hansen, "The Basics of Scratching," 357.

⁵⁸ Bartmanski and Woodward, "The Vinyl," 12.

disaggregating the album experience by creating new context is the most accessible on Spotify. Scholars like Morris and McCourt are thus correct in assuming this form of recontextualization is becoming a bigger part in the consumption of digital albums.

Album context preservation

With both physical formats, album context is always preserved through the discs that are necessary for playback.⁵⁹ Album context preservation can thus be seen as associated mostly with the physical album, not in the least because the album as a format is shaped by the physical limitations of the LP.⁶⁰ In the case of the physical *White Album*, the vinyl record with its sleeve and the CD with its jewel case provide the user with liner notes and tracklisting, preserving the album context to the fullest. On Spotify, the user can easily find the original album context of a song and see it in place in the album sequence, which is a feature no physical album has. The disaggregation of the album, as it had been described in the light of early digital music platforms, has not grown into a fully disaggregated album experience on Spotify. Rather, it is an album experience that lets the user move in and out of the original album context while always being tethered to it, resembling the permanent tethering to the physicality of a disc or sleeve. The claim by McCourt that the digital album as a whole is not engaged on the creator's terms is thus incorrect in the case of Spotify.⁶¹ This last aspect of recontextualization shows that with the purported movement toward a disaggregated album experience on Spotify, the album context is still preserved in a recontextualization-focused interface, keeping the original album context vitally part of the Spotify interface.

⁵⁹ Interestingly, when a song is ripped from an album onto a mix CD or cassette, the original album context will be completely lost. As this is not an affordance of any album format on its own it is not taken into account for this research.

⁶⁰ Bartmanski and Woodward, "The Vinyl," 8.

⁶¹ McCourt, "Collecting Music in the Digital Realm," 249.

CONCLUSION

This research set out to study the experience of the album on popular and controversial music platform Spotify which some associate with killing the album as a music format. At the very least, it seems that a new music consumption technology changes how the album is experienced. To investigate this changing album experience tied to changing music formats, this research asked the following question:

How do the recontextualization affordances of the digital and physical formats of the *White Album* by the Beatles shape the disaggregated album experience?

The digital Spotify album affords recontextualization through changing album flow and creating new context, mostly facilitated in the four analyzed screen sections by visual cues such as the popularity meter and interactions such as buttons and the progression bar. Album context is also preserved in all of these screens via album links and the currently playing section. On Spotify, album recontextualization is very advanced, with some affordances being less perceived than others, but it is still clearly bound by what the Spotify design allows the user to do. The recontextualization affordances of the Spotify album format make for a controlled disaggregated album experience, but never fully because of the album context preservation.

The physical LP album affords changing album flow through its interactions with the needle and the record, facilitating a more freeform way of changing album flow. It does not afford playlisting, but it does afford creating new context by letting the user interact with the vinyl record during playback. Both changing album flow and creating new context are affordances that are perceived yet discouraged, and they facilitate recontextualization that is freeform and based on individual creativity. The LP is evidence of recontextualization, and therefore transmutability, being part of the physical album before the digitalization of music. Nevertheless, the LP album context is preserved through the physicality of the record and sleeve, which can be seen as preserving album context even more than on Spotify. The recontextualization affordances of the LP album format facilitate an album experience that is not necessarily disaggregated, but is at the same time beyond a conventional linear one.

The physical CD album affords recontextualization more similar to changing the album flow on Spotify, but not as sophisticated or intuitive. In the same vein as the LP, the physicality of the CD and jewel case preserves album context more than the album links on Spotify. The recontextualization affordances of the CD album format facilitate the least disaggregated album

experience of the three, yet these affordances are a definite precursor to the disaggregated album experience of Spotify.

The disaggregation of the album is not necessarily a consequence of digital music platforms like Spotify taking over music consumption. Rather, disaggregation can be seen as part of every album experience, physical and digital. The transmutability of music is thus not a purely digital phenomenon, but a phenomenon that is heightened by new digital technologies. Overall, Spotify does make disaggregating the album easier than it was before, so the disaggregated album experience is facilitated best by Spotify. This is not to say the album format is dying, rather, the album format is changing in harmony with new modes of music consumption, just like it has done before.

Recommendations

This research can only comment on possible experiences, but these are not definite in any way. For future research into album experiences on digital music platforms, it can be fruitful to carry out a subject-based study to examine if the possible experiences are actual human experiences. As a way of limiting the scope of this research, the changing ownership of music (from discrete objects to streaming service subscriptions) is not considered, but it seems to ultimately affect the musical experience profoundly. On top of that, this research only focused on three album formats even though more album formats can be analyzed in this lineage (the cassette, MP3-players, other music platforms like Bandcamp and SoundCloud). These might tell a different story when it comes to recontextualization affordances and album experiences. Lastly, the impact of Spotify on the album format would also benefit from research into the artists making albums, and how these artists might structurally make albums differently than before.

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