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"All we hear" navigating our relationship with music in the age of Spotify

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"All We Hear"[1]

Navigating Our Relationship with Music in the Age of Spotify

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Vassar College

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A Senior Thesis in Media Studies

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[1] Taylor, R. (1984). Radio GaGa [Recorded by Queen]. On *The Works* [record] Los Angeles: EMI, Capitol. (1983)

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<u>Acknowledgements: "It's Such A Wonderful Thing to Love"[2]</u>

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To my family for always supporting and believing in me, and for inspiring an unlimited love of music in me.

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[2] Welch, F., Haynie, E., Bartlett, T. (2018). Patricia [Recorded by Florence and the Machine]. On *High as Hope* [CD] London: Virgin EMI, Republic.

Introduction

"I Just Know That Something Good is Gonna Happen"[3]

      My first instinct (after crying, texting my friends, laying on my bed in self-pity, etc.) when I feel a strong emotion is to create a playlist on Spotify. I have created over 150 playlists since I joined Spotify in 2016, and that number is continuing to grow (more rapidly than usual, given the current state of high anxiety in our world). To me, nothing is more cathartic than listening to a song that feels like it could have come directly from my diary, or when a song transports me to a different dimension, or when a song brings back the exact emotions I felt at a certain time in my life. While people have always connected emotionally with music in a way that goes beyond what words can describe, Spotify has definitely enhanced my emotional experience of music by giving me endless tools to choose and organize what I listen to according to my tastes, my identity, my emotional state, and more.

      In this thesis, I will look at the existing literature on music, emotion, and identity, as well as Spotify and its capabilities and potential uses. Then, I will put these areas of research together in order to explore which individual differences may predict certain uses of Spotify. The advent of streaming platforms that exist simultaneously as personal archive and social media service provides an extremely rich environment for academic study that I seek to tap into with this senior project.

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[3] Bush, K. (1985). Cloudbusting. On *Hounds of Love* [record] EMI. (1984)

Chapter 1

"Let's Go Girls"[4]: Literature Review

The following is a summary and analysis of existing literature on the psychology of music, the history and capabilities of Spotify, and an overview of Uses and Gratifications theory as it applies to social media.

I. "Make Me Feel Alive"[5]: The Psychology of Music

Music has been studied extensively within the context of psychology. The major areas of study that I focus on are music and the body, music and emotion, music and identity, and music and community.

A. "It's Hard to Explain, We Feel It"[6]: Music and The Body

In his seminal work *Music and the Mind*, Anthony Storr (1992) asserts that listening to music is largely a physical experience. When we listen to music attentively, we are in a heightened state of arousal, defined by Storr as "a condition of heightened alertness, awareness, interest, and excitement" (Storr, 1992, p. 41), and arousal, in its many forms, is something that humans crave (Storr, 1992, p. 46). Listening to music arouses us, while remaining low-risk, and

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[4] Lange, R.J. & Twain, S. (1999). Man! I Feel Like A Woman! [Recorded by S. Twain]. On *Come On Over* [CD] Mercury Nashville. (1997)

[5] Hoost, & Sawayam, R. (2018). Cherry [Recorded by R. Sawayama]. London: Dirty Hit.

[6] Barnes, G. (2017). Feel It [Recorded by Georgia]. On *Seeking Thrills* [CD] Domino Recording Co.

it never causes "unbearable" arousal, so it is a safe way for us to fulfill that craving (Storr, 1992, p. 47). However, the extent to which music causes arousal can vary greatly based on many different factors - how much musical knowledge the listener has, the listener's mood, among many others (Storr, 1992, p. 49). Further, the arousal felt from listening to music is just a general state of arousal, rather than a specific emotional response, and the emotions experienced by listeners also vary (Storr, 1992, p. 50). Because of this, music can be used to "structure time" in performances and events, prompting the audience's arousal to peak at the same time (Storr, 1992, p. 51).

In addition to arousal, music lives in the body in the form of rhythm, which drives many daily functions, from walking to the heart beat. Since rhythm can be "imposed from the outside," listening to music can impact the rhythms that our body moves according to (Storr, 1992, p. 53), which may explain the benefit that listening to upbeat dance music while exercising tends to have on performance. Because we easily embody the rhythms of the music we listen to, it can even be used to ground us and "order our muscular system and….mental contents" (Storr, 1992, p. 64).

B. "Emotional Motion Sickness"[7]: Emotional Attachment and Regulation

Greenwood and Long (2009) look into which emotional regulation factors predict media use patterns. They determine that "difficulty controlling one's emotions or behaviors when upset was the primary predictor of using media in a negative mood" (Greenwood & Long, 2009, p. 619). This indicates that those with less control over their emotional states may turn to forms of

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[7] Bridgers, P. & Vore, M. (2017). Motion Sickness [Recorded by P. Bridgers] Los Angeles: Dead Oceans.

media as an external way to help regulate emotions. The authors also find that, while boredom is a strong predictor for television and film media use, "individuals may derive more emotional satisfaction from music, which they can tailor to fit or uplift various positive and negative mood states" (Greenwood & Long, 2009, p. 620).

Greenwood and Lippman (2012) provide a great overview of reasons why people may listen to music, and why certain music is more emotionally resonant, in their study titled "A Song To Remember: Emerging Adults Recall Memorable Music." In general, they assess that music is often used by people to make sense of complicated emotions (Greenwood & Lippman, 2012, p. 8).

One reason Greenwood and Lippman's study suggests for how people may use music to regulate emotions is that people may listen to sad music when they are already feeling sad "because of its ostensible ability to facilitate an emotional release" (Greenwood & Lippman, 2012, p. 9). Listening to sad music is a way for people who are already sad to channel those emotions, feel them fully, and hopefully experience catharsis from it. This could be one explanation for the prevalence of "sad" playlists on Spotify. This comes from a "strategy of emotional regulation," which is "the capacity to reconceptualize negative emotion as nonthreatening and temporary" (Greenwood & Lippman, 2012, p. 16). Listening to music that helps you sort through your negative emotions can make them seem more manageable, and, therefore, music plays a key role in very tangible and potentially beneficial strategies for emotional regulation.

These ideas of emotional regulation extend to the ways the authors discuss music listening as a way of escape. According to the authors, "intense emotion expressed in a song

provides a strong anchor point for confronting, reappraising, or disassociating oneself from the potent events of the day" (Greenwood & Lippman, 2012, p. 16). Especially during adolescence when emotions feel particularly intense, listening to overtly emotional music can help redirect those emotions at things outside of real life. Greenwood & Lippmann (2012) conclude that music, "more than other forms of media" is used by "young adults" in " both positive and negative moods" (Greenwood & Lippman, 2012, p. 17). People have many different reasons they might listen to music, and it is tied to emotional states in general, not any one in particular.

Additionally, Storr (1992) discusses the way music can elicit empathy in listeners, "identifying with its expressive aspects, allowing ourselves to be aroused emotionally, without paying much attention to its formal characteristics" (Storr, 1992, p. 159). In other words, we can experience emotional, empathetic reactions to the music we listen to, separate from listening to the technical musical elements. The technical elements come together to create an emotional experience that is far greater than the sum of its parts.

Ruth Finnegan (2003) situates music listening within multidisciplinary research on emotions, explaining the way emotional states are a result of, among other factors, cultural context (Finnegan, 2003, p. 187). Using musical lamenting as a case study, Finnegan discusses the way an artist's lament on their own emotions helps audiences perform necessary work on their own emotions, creating a cathartic experience for listeners.

Finnegan explains the emotional connection that occurs between listener and artist, as well. When we physically engage with an artist, when we dance to their music or scream their name at a live concert, we are creating a bond. Kurtin, et. al. (2019) elaborate on the parasocial relationships formed between music listeners and performers as an important element of

emotional attachment. The authors determine that parasocial relationships with musicians are different from other parasocial celebrity relationships, particularly in the fact that attraction is less important than exposure on social media and through listening to their music more (Kurtin, et.al., 2019, p. 44). Additionally, emotional attachment forms with an artist based on the relationships formed among fans (Kurtin, et.al., 2019, p. 45). An important element of music-listening is fandom around certain artists. Being a fan of a particular artist can bring people closer to the people around them who are also fans, as well as allowing fans to meet new people, on social media or at concerts or in any other capacity, solely through being fans of the same artist. This deepens the emotional connections with the artist and their music.

C. "I'm Now Becoming My Own Self-Fulfilled Prophecy"[8]: Identity Formation

Literature on music and identity has been extremely prevalent across a range of disciplines. It is important to note that people are constantly actively consuming their media by incorporating the attitudes and behavior they learn from it into their own identities, especially adolescent audiences, a crucial stage for identity formation.

Steele and Brown (1995) discuss the ways adolescents interact with media, in general, with some specific focus on music, in their everyday lives. The main argument made by the authors is that adolescents are actively engaging with the media they consume, and using it in conjunction with the identity and emotional self-work that is occuring at this stage in life. The authors state that adolescents will make choices about which media and genres to attend to, will pay attention to some kinds of content and not others, will identify and model some media

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[8] Diamandis, M. & Kurstin, G. (2010). Oh No! [Recorded by Marina and the Diamonds]. On *The Family Jewels* [CD] London: Atlantic. (2009)

characters, and may create new meanings and uses for what they do select" (Steele & Brown, 1995, p. 553). Adolescents are not just passively absorbing the music they listen to.

The authors identified and defined a few key ways adolescents may interact with media and incorporate it into their lives. Application is defined as "the concrete ways in which adolescents use media - how they make it active - in their everyday lives." Under the branch of "application," appropriation is defined as "an active use of media that is frequently visible in room decorations, media-related activities, or teens' own accounts of why specific media content is important to them;" incorporation is defined as "an associative use of media that often builds on existing attitudes, feelings, and prior learning" (Steele & Brown, 1995, p. 559). All of these are used regularly by adolescents when internalizing the lessons and identities learned from their media.

Sociomusicologist Simon Frith (2011) discusses music and identity in great detail. While he acknowledges the certain music is made with specific identities as their target audience - "African-American music is music made by African-American….the difference between male and female experience will be embedded in male and female music" (Frith, 2011, p. 109) - he also asserts that listening to and enjoying music is not a perfectly binary experience, and, regardless of who creates the music and who their target audience once was, music takes on a life of its own when experienced by different listeners (Frith, 2011, p. 109). He argues that identity is mobile - constantly evolving, "a process not a thing" - and that music is "an experience of this self-in-progress" (Frith, 2011, p. 109). Through choosing our musical preferences, and discovering what feels right to us, "we both express ourselves, our own sense of rightness, and suborn ourselves, lose ourselves, in an act of participation" (Frith, 2011, p. 110), and gives us a

lense through which to make sense of our world (Frith, 2011, p. 114). He emphasizes the individual experience we can each have with the music we listen to, stating that "we absorb songs into our own lives and rhythm into our own bodies; they have a looseness of reference that makes them immediately accessible" (Frith, 2011, p. 121). Also of importance to Frith's argument is the idea that we seek out narrative forms of media as a way to create a narrative of our identity, which is something we are constantly constructing as opposed to something inherent within us (Frith, 2011, p. 122), and that music allows us to do this by "plac[ing] ourselves in imagined cultural narratives" (Frith, 2011, p. 124) because music is free of standard boundaries of narrative, and therefore, allows us to create various imagined identities for ourselves (Frith, 2011, p. 125).

Susan J. Douglas provides a historical case study into the girl-group the Shirelles. Douglas discusses the importance of the introduction of the Shirelles and other girl-group pop into the mainstream music scene, which, Douglas argues, "has been denied its rightful place in history by a host of male music critics who've either ignored it or trashed it" (Douglas, 1994, p. 85). She explains that when rock music first became popular in the 1950s, it centered male sexuality and rebellion (Douglas, 1994, p. 84). Girl-group, pop music provided the perfect antithesis to rock music. This music portrayed girlhood in all of its nuances, complexities, and juxtapositions. Douglas describes the voice of this music as "simultaneously lush and spare, conformist and daring, euphemistic yet dead-on honest" (Douglas, 1994, p. 84). The content of the music also presented these juxtapositions, especially in terms of singing about both love *and* sex - women were now given choices, which was not present in mainstream media before this era.

Douglas also talks about the fundamental tug-of-war between private and public selves, which is at the center of pop music. This is not framed as a necessarily positive or negative element of music listening. Of this phenomenon, Douglas says that "this music was, simultaneously, deeply personal and highly public, focusing our neurotic, quivering inner selves with the neurotic, quivering inner selves of others in an effort to find strength and confidence in numbers" (Douglas, 1994, p. 87). There is a reason people say that music is a universal language. Music, and especially this specific type of new pop music, according to Douglas, has the ability to connect the innermost parts of people with the innermost parts of other people. Listening to music has always been an extremely private, public activity. Way before Spotify turned music listening into social networking, people were sharing their personal music taste in dance halls, at parties, driving in cars together, and much more. Douglas sums this up by saying that "we were all alone, but we weren't really alone at all. In this music, we found solidarity as girls" (Douglas, 1994, p. 88). Music has the power to bring people together by bringing out private identities and emotions.

D. "Dancing On My Own"[9]: Music and Community

As Douglas (1994) addresses in the context of the Shirelles, music can be both public and private. Storr (1992) discusses the history of music as communal vs. solitary. Music's original function was to bring people together at social events and rituals - a function which music is clearly still used for (Storr, 1992, p. 153). While listeners can have their own individual response to the music, it has historically been a largely communal activity, and it was not until fairly

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[9] Robyn, Berger, P. (2010). Dancing on My Own [Recorded by Robyn]. On *Body Talk Pt. 1* [CD] Stockholm: Konichiwa.

recently that modern technology allowed for music to become a completely isolated experience. With the advent of home stereo systems, records, cassettes, and eventually CDs, music fans no longer needed to go to a live concert to hear quality music (Storr, 1992, p. 155), and the advent of the walkman, MP3 player, and personal headphones would continue to push this farther in the years following the publishing of Storr's text.

Storr cites musicians who have decided to stop performing live because of the way the pressure to perform perfection inhibits their ability to emotionally connect with the music (Storr, 1992, p. 157). When a behavior becomes public, the pressure of how you appear to others may hinder your authenticity. In the age of social media and public streaming on Spotify and other platforms, listeners have to choose between curating a persona for their followers and having an isolated listening experience, and this may lead to a less authentic listening experience.

When listened to in isolation, music can temporarily reduce loneliness and make the isolation slightly more enjoyable. This may be a way that listeners develop attachment to musicians - a pseudo-relationship is formed from having loneliness alleviated by one's favorite musical artist (Storr, 1992, p. 158). Even in isolation, music can be, and often is, used to form connections in some way.

Participants in the Greenwood & Lippman (2012) study also asserted that music listening could be a positive, communal experience. Some participants associate their most memorable songs and musical artists with celebration - music they remembered from parties, singing with friends and family, and other social activities (Greenwood & Lippman, 2012, p. 17).

While modern advancements in technology have allowed music listening to be a more isolated experience, it seems like music has followed a pattern seen across social media

platforms. Humans crave connection, and even though new media is often associated with a lack of connection, it has also allowed for new ways to connect. Social music streaming platforms bring listeners together in a new way.

II. "They're Playing Our Song"[10]: Spotify as a Medium

A. "Take Me Back"[11]: A History of Spotify

Spotify was founded in Sweden in 2008 by Daniel Ek. At the time, Sweden was an epi-center of music piracy, or illegal free downloading of music, due to the government's relaxed stance on the issue - the Swedish prime minister had deemed illegally downloading music acceptable if it was only for personal use. Ek says that Spotify was created in response to this. The accessibility of free music was important to Ek, though he acknowledged that this would unfairly impact artists' compensation. Spotify, a "free-mium" service, could bridge these two concerns (Ek, 2018). Spotify has actually been "credited with curbing nonauthorized (or "pirate") forms of file-sharing, transforming a formerly unruly market into a constant global revenue stream" (Vonderau, 2019, p. 4). The creation of Spotify helped to "mediate between the interests of two conflicting economic actors, the music industry on the one hand and nonauthorized file-sharers on the other" (Vonderau, 2019, p. 8). Instead of fighting music pirates, which didn't seem to stop the problem, Spotify attempted to create a happy medium between these seemingly at odds groups.

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[10] Polachek, C., Geiger, T., Nigro, D. (2019). So Hot You're Hurting My Feelings [Recorded by C. Polachek]. On *Pang* [CD] Perpetual Novice.
[11] Haim, A., Haim, D., Haim, E. (2012). Don't Save Me [Recorded by Haim]. On *Days Are Gone* [CD] Polydor.

Spotify started expanding its capabilities in 2012 when it introduced playlist curation to the service. Listening to Spotify's curated playlists was intended to provide listeners with a "radio-like" listening experience, as opposed to needing to listen to a specific album or artist, or a specific playlist of their own creation. Spotify hired curators, which were humans with a wide breadth of music knowledge, though they were not required to be experts on specific music - rather, they crafted these playlists around emotions or situations. The current curation system that Spotify uses combines a computer algorithm with the "cultural knowledge and affective expertise" of these curators (Burgess & Dhaenens, 2019, p. 1195).

Today, Spotify has over 113 million subscribers, with 248 million listeners using the service on free mode, in 79 different markets around the world. More than 50 million musical tracks and 500,000 podcasts are available for streaming. There are over 3 billion public playlists on the app (Spotify, 2019).

B. "You Never Thought It Could"[12]: How Spotify Works

In order to understand how people interact with Spotify, it is important to understand Spotify's capabilities. The following is a description and analysis of these capabilities.

A person's experience with Spotify is easily customizable, and there are many different ways to use the app's features depending on the user's preferences. First of all, Spotify can be used for free, which allows users to access some of its features, but not all, and listening is interrupted with ads every few songs. So while Spotify is rather accessible, listening with a paid subscription gives users a much smoother listening experience.

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[12] Nicks, S. (1981). Bella Donna. On *Bella Donna* [record] Modern, ATCO.

Spotify subscribers have access to a range of features. Users have their own library of music. This music can be albums or specific songs they have selected and "liked". Users also have the ability to create playlists that they can add to their own library. Users can follow other users, both regular listeners, as well as favorite artists. Aside from following people, users can follow playlists, meaning a playlist made by another user or by Spotify itself will be added to your library.

Spotify is also known for the way it helps users discover new music. Every Monday, Spotify releases your "Discover Weekly," which is a personalized playlist of 30 songs that you haven't listened to before that Spotify's algorithm believes you will like based on your previous listening activity. On Fridays, you get a customized playlist called "Release Radar," which is a personalized playlist of 30 recently released songs recommended for you based on listening activity. Beyond this, Spotify creates 6 "Daily Mix" playlists for you that are updated every day. Each playlist reflects a different genre or style of music that you listen to, and they contain a mix of music you already enjoy and listen to and new music that they predict you will like. Spotify also creates a plethora of playlists that correlate to moods, events, or genres. Anyone can access these playlists. Examples include: "Happy Hits!" ("Hits to boost your mood and fill you with happiness!"), "Life Sucks" ("Feeling like everything just plain sucks? We've all been there."), "POLLEN" ("Genre-less. Quality first always."), "Guilty Pleasures" (Embrace your secret favorites."), among countless others. These playlists can be found under the "Browse" tab, but Spotify will also recommend specific ones for you on your homepage that are similar to your own playlists or artists you frequently listen to. Spotify also suggests new music to its users by its automatic setting of playing related music when the playlist or album you're streaming ends.

Spotify will create a "radio" station based on what you were listening to that continues the general vibe, but with new songs, some of which may be new to the listener, and some of which may be songs you have already listened to.

Spotify also makes listeners' experiences customizable with special features such as your yearly Wrapped playlists. At the end of each year, Spotify releases a custom playlist of the 100 songs you listened to the most throughout the year. Along with this, Spotify sends you graphics with other statistics about your music use throughout the year - your most streamed artists, how many minutes you spent listening and how many minutes you spent listening to specific artists, your most streamed genres, and more. This personalized experience is extremely popular on social media, and posts sharing this data tend to overpopulate Instagram and Twitter at the end of the year (Spotify, 2019).

Because of the way Spotify personalizes each user's listening experience, a library of music that was once infinite suddenly becomes much smaller. The amount of music we actually interact with, or are prompted by Spotify to interact with, is in reality much smaller than the amount of music that is in theory available to us on the service (Burgess & Dhaenens, 2019, p. 1195). Additionally, simply adding a song from a small indie artist to a Spotify-curated playlist or a lot of Discover Weekly's could pull that song out of relative obscurity lost in cyberspace to viral hit. Therefore, "Spotify has the power to make certain artists and songs hegemonic while "burying" lesser known songs and "difficult" genres in the back of Spotify's archives (Burgess & Dhaenens, 2019, p. 1202)." This usually occurs because the success of Spotify depends on people liking what is recommended to them; therefore, Spotify is more likely to recommend types of music that are safe and more palatable by the general population.

Spotify also has several features that can be adjusted in order to make your listening experience more or less private. Following another user doesn't just mean you have access to their playlists, it also means their listening activity is published on a live-updated feed that is constantly on the side of your screen that shows you what everyone you follow is listening to as they listen to it. It is possible to listen in a "private session," which cannot remain the default setting and instead must be actively turned on every time you want to use it, in which your listening activity will not be published to your followers, and also won't be counted as a factor in the creation of your Discover Weekly, Release Radar, and Daily Mix playlists. New playlists are also made public by default, though users can choose to turn that off by selecting "make secret" in the menu. Spotify also makes it very easy to share what you're listening to on other platforms. For example, if you select "share to Instagram stories," Spotify will export a song or album to your Instagram story, perfectly formatted, with you needing to put in any extra effort. The same is true across other social media platforms. Instagram stories even has a filter that allows users to play a song from Spotify over whatever they're posting on their story. On top of being a social networking platform in itself, Spotify can be directly used in conjunction with other social media platforms (Spotify, 2019).

C. "There's No One Road"[13]: Collecting and Curating on Spotify

The article "'Press Play for Pride': The Cultural Logics of LGBTQ-themed playlists on Spotify" by Frederik Dhaenens and Jean Burgess served as an entry-point into existing literature on playlist creation and curation and identity. This article focused mainly on Spotify's LGBTQ

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[13] Williams, H., Farro, J., York, T. (2009). Misguided Ghosts [Recorded by Paramore]. On *Brand New Eyes* [CD] Los Angeles: Fueled By Ramen.

pride playlists, as well as select LGBTQ-themed playlists made by Spotify users, and used these to analyze the way playlists are used to communicate identity on Spotify.

This article recalls music before the streaming age. When physical copies of CDs or records had to be purchased, tangible attachments formed with the music. First of all, music had to be purchased individually, meaning more thought and care would have been put into which music you selected, and once purchased, there was more pressure to enjoy the music, since you paid for it. Beyond this, the act of physically holding a record or CD gives the listener ownership over a tangible object connected to the music, as discussed earlier. An unlimited, abstract amount of music did not just exist in cyberspace - music was something that people could have autonomy over. Because of this shift in the streaming age, "the requirement to choose carefully and then to maintain an attachment to our choices" is removed. Creating playlists may serve a similar function to purchasing an album. It helps narrow down a seemingly vast and "infinite" library of music into something more manageable. Playlists may also have replaced albums in terms of archiving trends and narratives in popular music, which is lacking in a modern music industry oversaturated with singles that are pre-packaged for virality (Burgess & Dhaenens, 2019, p. 1195).

This article also speaks on identity, particularly LGBTQ+ identity, and the way it can be reflected through playlists. In this specific case, Dhaenens and Burgess argue that curating these identity-specific playlists "can raise awareness about social inequality, bring people with marginalized identities together in online networks, and build equity for neglected, oppressed or minority communities" (Burgess & Dhaenens, 2019, p. 1196). For marginalized groups, who

often face isolation because of it, creating online identities has provided opportunities for development of community.

The article also touches on ideas of public vs. private identity. The authors explain how creating playlists around ideas of emotions, feelings, identities, memories, or other personal elements can help people "experience mastery over the self," and understand these parts of themselves and their lives that may be hard to make sense of. This is something that can occur both privately and publicly (Burgess & Dhaenens, 2019, p. 1196). The authors go on to discuss how, in the digital age of social media, the "boundaries between self-representation and public communication" have been blurred (Burgess & Dhaenens, 2019, p. 1196). Because of this, the most private of emotions and experiences may be shared publicly through a playlist, but beyond this, current social media trends, like "finsta" accounts and sharing thoughts on twitter, turn private emotions into an entire online identity.

In her study titled "The Playlist Experience: Personal Playlists in Music Streaming Services," Anja Nylund Hagen (2015) discusses the prevalence of playlists on Spotify and WiMP Music, a popular streaming service in Norway. This study emphasizes the individuality in the way users can participate in popular streaming services. She differentiates playlists into two main groups, dynamic vs. static, where static playlists are completed playlists that the user has stopped editing, and dynamic playlists are those that are consistently being changed and updated; users have the power to switch a playlist from static to dynamic at any given moment (Hagen, 2015, p. 632). Hagen also discusses the way that users can be dynamic in their approach to the service. For example, one participant in the study described herself as "playlist oriented," meaning she was creating playlists very frequently, and even deleting old playlists frequently,

preferring a completely planned and curated listening experience, which is in direct contrast to those Spotify features, like playlist or artist radios, that emphasize randomness as a pro (Hagen, 2015, p. 633). Others use Spotify playlists to organize the music they listen to by categories like genre or artist (Hagen, 2015, p. 635), showing how these standard classifications of music bleed into the way we use the new media of Spotify. Spotify also gives users the ability to "become content producers of contexts and structures for their music consumption" (Hagen, 2015, p. 635) - on Spotify, users, who are no longer buying physical CDs they can feel ownership towards, claim this ownership of the music they listen to in new ways, by creating their own listening experience.

Danckwerts and Kenning (2019) talk more about the role ownership plays in music streaming, asserting that we are in a "post-ownership economy," where services such as Spotify, Netflix, and Uber prevail (Danckwerts & Kenning, 2019). An analysis of this "post-ownership economy" is beyond the scope of this thesis, though it is clear to see how Spotify exists within this model, since users do not own any of the music they listen to. The authors discuss the phenomenon of psychological ownership, or how people can feel ownership towards something even if they don't legally own it (Danckwerts & Kenning, 2019). The authors discover that the more control users have over the way they consume the music, the more psychological ownership they feel towards the music (Danckwerts & Kenning, 2019). Spotify gives users a lot of control, or at least the illusion and feeling of control, by allowing users to organize the music however they want using their own playlists, as well as many options to discover new music so users can go about that according to their own preferences. Investment of self is another important criteria for feeling psychological ownership over music services, meaning that the

more time and effort users invest into creating playlists, sharing songs with friends, and

otherwise using Spotify's services, or, in other words, the more of the self that they invest, the

more psychological ownership they will feel over the music. Additionally, Spotify's extremely

personalized, frequently updated generated playlists and recommendations, allow users to feel

that more of the self is invested in the service (Danckwerts & Kenning, 2019).

III. "Love Me, Love Me, Please Retweet"[14]: Social Media Uses & Gratifications

The Uses & Gratifications (U&G) theoretical approach has been widely used to study

users motivations for social media use. Rathnayake & Winter (2018) develop a social media

U&G scale that centers the novel U&G created by the new media itself (Rathnayake & Winter,

2018, p. 372). This model builds upon previous U&G study in regards to new media. Sundar &

Limperos (2013) describe U&G as "an audience-centered approach, which posits that individuals

have particular needs that drive selection of certain types of media" (Sunday & Limperos, 2013,

p. 506), and assert that many users of social and new media do so to fulfill needs that older types

of media have been fulfilling for years, such as entertainment, escapism, and arousal, among

others (Sunday & Limperos, 2013, p. 507). Rathnayake & Winter expand on that and define

social media U&G according to the following categories: realism, coolness, being there, agency,

community building, bandwagon, filtering, interaction, activity, responsiveness, browsing, and

play. These provide the bases for uses and gratifications of social media and give insight into

why users may engage with social media platforms. A full analysis of this is beyond the scope of

[14] Germanotta, S., Zaslavski, A. (2013). G.U.Y. [Recorded by Lady Gaga]. On *ARTPOP* [CD]
Streamline, Interscope.

this thesis, but provides important context for the social media landscape that Spotify exists within.

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Chapter 2

"A Woman's Work"[15]: The Study

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I. "I've Got Way Too Many Questions, Always Learning Lessons"[16]: Goals,

Research Questions, and Hypotheses

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After completing a literature review and background study on the psychology of music listening and Spotify and the way people use it, I began work on a survey to collect novel research on the way Spotify listening practices relate to certain individual differences and psychological tendencies to determine whether a public music listening experience changes our reasons for listening, and the way certain individual differences may predict Spotify listening tendencies.

Since Spotify operates as both a social media platform and a personal archive, I am interested in the way this added social element situates Spotify within academic study of personal attachment to music.

Below are the research questions and hypotheses that guided my planning and execution of the survey. Some essential questions that guided my research included:

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[15] Twigs, F.K.A., Blanco, B., Jaar, N., & Høiberg, M. (2009). Mary Magdalene [Recorded by F.K.A. Twigs]. On *MAGDALENE* [CD] 38:48.

[16] Smith, A., Wyatt, A, Picard, C., Ronson, M., Picard, M., & Axelrod, V. (2019). Don't Leave Me Lonely [Recorded by M. Ronson & Yebba]. On *Late Night Feelings* [CD] Columbia.

Q1: How does the public nature of Spotify inhibit our ability/willingness to emotionally attach to music?

Q2: How do listeners use Spotify's features to enhance their emotional connection to music?

Q3: How do listeners determine which music to keep private and which to make public?

A. Research Question

RQ1: Will participants who have a higher need to belong have more or less public Spotify content?

B. Hypotheses

H1: Participants who score higher on the social media uses and gratifications scale will have more public Spotify content and be more in tune with friend's public content.

H2: Participants with better emotional regulation (score lower on DERS-18) will have more playlists and playlist creation motivations will be centered around emotions.

II. "We Know Exactly What We're Doing"[17]: Method

A. "Don't You Know Me"[18]: Participants

The original sample was 183 (n=183) students at Vassar College; 25% first years, 23% sophomores, 32% juniors, and 20% seniors. Students were from all majors and chosen from a random name generation through the office of a registrar. Students were given the incentive of entering a raffle for a $50 Amazon gift card for their participation, and ten students were chosen

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[17] Swift, T., Martin, M., & Shellback (2016). New Romantics [Recorded by T. Swift]. On *1989* [CD] Stockholm: Big Machine. (2014)
[18] Hadreas, M. (2014). Queen [Recorded by Perfume Genius]. On *Too Bright* [CD] Matador.

as winners. Of the 183 students who participated, 20 did not have active Spotify accounts, which

disqualified them from completing the rest of the survey. We then excluded anyone who

completed the survey in under five minutes (n=36) and left incomplete data, leaving a final

sample of n=127. Of the participants, 65% were female, 24% were male, and 11% were

non-binary, which is skewed more towards female participants than the general Vassar

population and could impact results.

B. "Crawling on Your Knees Toward It"[19]: Materials and Procedure

Participants were sent the survey via an email from my adviser, Professor Dara

Greenwood, and they completed it in their own environment. The survey was divided into two

sections: first, a section of questions I developed regarding participants' Spotify listening habits;

second, a section of various psychological scales. The scales I used were the 18-item Difficulties

in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS-18), which was broken down into the following subscales:

lack of awareness, lack of clarity, goal disruption, impulse difficulty, nonacceptance, and lack of

strategies (Victor & Klonsky, 2016), the Need to Belong scale (NTB) (Leary, 2013), and a

modified Measure of Social Media Uses and Gratifications (Social Media U&G), which included

the following subscales: bandwagon, agency, realism, and community (Rathnayake & Winter,

2018).

The questions specific to Spotify use were developed based on my previous background

research on Spotify's features and my knowledge of the platform as an avid user. Questions

centered around playlist creation (why and how often), socialization on the platform (how much

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[19] VanWyngarden, A. & Goldwasser, B. (2008). Kids [Recorded by MGMT]. On *Oracular Spectacular* [CD] Columbia. (2004)

it is used for personal motives vs. how much it is used to connect with others or portray a certain curated identity online), and some questions about specific listening activity (most listened to genres, artists, etc.). Some questions asked for quantitative answers, and some collected qualitative information and asked participants to describe their usage in their own words.

III. "I've Been Searching For You"[20]: Results

A. "I Can't Control It Anymore"[21]: Breaking Down The Data

In terms of general trends in Spotify use, 49.6% of participants said they have used Spotify for 1-3 years, 37.8% have had an account for 4-7 years, 8.7% have had an account for less than a year, and 3.9% have had an account for more than 7 years. The highest number of participants (39.4%) said they sometimes (once/month) create original playlists, while 37% said they rarely (once every few months) do so. 19.7% said they often do (once/week or more), and only 3.9% said they never do.

In response to RQ1 (*Will participants who have a higher need to belong have more or less public Spotify content?*), the results found that participants who listen publicly often (once/week or more) compared to those who listen publicly less than that (once/month or less) do not differ in their level of NTB. There is a marginal positive correlation between the number of playlists set to "private" and NTB; $r(110) = .19$, $p = .05$. In terms of playlist creation motivations, there was a positive correlation between creating playlists to organize musical tastes

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[20] Cohen, S. & Van Etten, S. (2019). Jupiter 4 [Recorded by S. Van Etten]. On *Remind Me Tomorrow* [CD] Jagjaguwar.

[21] Jepsen, C. R., Batmanglij, R., Zolfo, T., & Cruz, J. (2015). Warm Blood [Recorded by C. R. Jepsen]. On *Emotion* [CD] Interscope.

and creating playlists to play at a social event or gathering, as opposed to the more personal/revealing motivations, like reflecting emotions.

In response to H1 (*Participants who score higher on the social media uses and gratifications scale will have more public Spotify content and be more in tune with friend's public content.*), the study found that participants who "often" (once/week or more) listened to Spotify on a public listening session compared to less often (once/month or less) score higher on social media agency; additionally, there was a negative association between how often participants engage in private listening sessions and social media realism scores. In terms of motivations for making Spotify content private, not wanting followers to see playlists positively correlated with bandwagon. When it came to motivations for making playlists, social media agency was positively correlated with creating playlists to organize music taste, to mark events, and to reflect emotions; social media bandwagon was positively correlated with creating playlists to organize music taste; social media realism was positively correlated with creating playlists to receive feedback from others; social media community showed no correlation with any playlist motivations. On top of this, social media bandwagon and community both showed positive correlation with need to belong.

In response to H2 *(Participants with better emotional regulation (score lower on DERS-18) will have more playlists and playlist creation motivations will be centered around emotions.)*, the study found that lack of strategies and goal disruption were both positively correlated with creating playlists to reflect emotional states. Lack of clarity was positively correlated with creating playlists to *improve* emotions. We can also note that participants who

often create public playlists have more difficulty with emotion regulation strategies than those who make playlists public less often.

We also tested correlation between public Spotify practices and the amount of followers participants have. Number of Spotify followers was positively correlated with social media community, as well as paying attention to friends activity, visiting friends profiles, and viewing Spotify as a social media platform (as opposed to a private, personal archive).

B. "People are Talking"[22]: Summary of Free-Response Answers

Trends appeared in the answers to each free-response question. The major reasons participants gave for choosing to make playlists private were because they revealed personal emotional states, they were worried friends would judge them/they were embarrassed by the type of music on the music on the playlist, the playlist was viewed by the user as unfinished, or the playlist was made for one specific person or group of people only. The major reasons participants gave for why they would make a playlist public were that the default setting is public and they did not care enough to change it, they worked hard on their playlists and wanted to show off, or because they were made for specific situations and they wanted friends to be able to listen to the playlists in those situations. The answers participants gave for why they would choose to share Spotify content on another social media platform were either to communicate an indirect message about their emotional state, show off their taste and give recommendations, or they said they did not share publicly on other social media platforms, but regularly shared music among friends.

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[22] Yelich-O'Connor, E. & Little, J. (2013). A World Alone [Recorded by Lorde]. On *Pure Heroine* [CD] Auckland: Republic.

IV. "Music Can Be Such a Revelation"[23]: Discussion

A. "I've Been Watching"[24]: Analyzing Data

The data indicates that NTB was associated more with private Spotify content, which may indicate that individuals with a high need to belong are more concerned with how they look to others, and are therefore more protective over the info that might reveal more about them to their followers.

The social media bandwagon measure also indicated the same thing, which makes sense, given social media bandwagon was associated with high need to belong. Those that are more concerned about people's opinions about them on the internet are likely to keep their content private. High scores on social media realism, or believing the experience on social media is equal to real life, showed significant positive correlation with creating playlists to receive feedback from followers, which is the most direct form of communication/socialization over Spotify in any of the possible answers. The social media community measure did not predict any motivations for creating playlists, which was surprising at first, though there are many more ways to interact with "community" on Spotify outside of creating your own playlists, and that would have been interesting to account for in the survey.

The results for correlations with the DERS-18 gave a lot of insight into the potential of using Spotify for emotional work. Participants who scored high on lack of strategies and goal

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[23] Madonna & Bray, S. (1985). Into the Groove [Recorded by Madonna]. On *Like a Virgin* [record] New York City: Sire, Warner Bros. (1984)

[24] Olsen, A. & Babbitt, B. (2019). All Mirrors [Recorded by A. Olsen]. On *All Mirrors* [CD] Jagjaguwar.

disruption regarding emotions also tended to create playlists for the purpose of reflecting emotions. People who lack strategies to deal with their emotions may turn to external strategies, like creating a playlist, to make sense of their feelings, which is in line with the findings from Greenwood & Long (2009), mentioned earlier. Additionally, those who were distracted from productivity when in emotional states were also more likely to create playlists to reflect their emotional states - creating a playlist can definitely be a distraction in a time of emotional distress. For those with lack of clarity regarding emotions, there was a positive correlation with using playlists to improve mood, which could reflect a general need to use music to improve mood, instead of trying to make sense of that mood if that feels impossible for people who lack emotional clarity.

Finally, participants with more Spotify followers were much more likely to view Spotify as a social media platform and engage with other user's content on the platform. Amount of followers could be a major predicting factor for whether a user views Spotify as a way to socialize or as a way to organize their personal archive of music.

B. "I Can See Something More"[25]: Analyzing Free-Response Trends

Answers written in by participants for questions with free-response answers provided some particularly significant information and insight as well.

1. *Why did participants choose to make certain playlists private?*

Overwhelmingly, participants cited playlists being too personal as a reason for why they would make it secret, particularly playlists that were sad, dark, or depressing. Some

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[25] Grimes (2015). World Princess Part II. On *Art Angels* [CD] 4AD.

participants cited not wanting friends to worry about them because of these dark, emotional playlists. This gets at a phenomenon common on social media - deliberately posting something so that people check in on you. On Spotify, it is not uncommon to see a friend listening to something sad in your Friend Activity feed, send them a screenshot, and say something like "hey, I noticed you listening to *Born to Die* by Lana Del Rey all day, is everything ok?" While some might seek this out from friends, others may know it's a possibility and deliberately hide the music that may make friends check in. For some participants, music they kept private was attached to emotionally significant events, like a breakup, or people - one participant said that they "don't want everyone to see….that [they are] hanging on to things and people that [they] shouldn't be."

Others kept playlists private because they were embarrassed by the content. This largely had to do with the genre of music, (one participant said the songs were "embarrassing showtunes," another said they don't want people seeing the *Glee* cast on their playlists). Many participants expressed fear of judgement from followers in response to the music on their playlists, and some said that would upset them a lot, since music has personal meaning and is "sacred" to them. A full analysis of which genres or artists people choose to keep private is an interesting avenue for further study, but beyond the scope of this thesis at this point.

Another major reason participants gave for keeping playlists private was that the playlist was made for a specific person in their life, and wasn't meant for broad listening. This is a way that people use Spotify's social capabilities, but still keep the extent of that under their own control.

Some said they kept "unfinished" playlists private, meaning that the playlists they set to public have reached a certain level of completeness that feel ready for public consumption. This suggests a certain level of performance in a public Spotify persona, and a level of curation that is present across all social media platforms.

Some participants answered this question by saying that they don't view Spotify as social media in the same way they view Instagram or Twitter, and many just use it to organize their own music collection. One participant said that they "don't want to use Spotify like social media, but more as just my own music library." This is important to note because, even though Spotify *can* be used like other social media platforms, music is still largely viewed as a personal thing that listeners want to feel ownership over, and Spotify use still somewhat reflects that.

2. *Why did participants choose to make certain playlists public?*

On the other hand, many participants acknowledged that they made playlists public because that is the default and they don't think or care to change the settings. Some said they were "too lazy" to change the setting. It is interesting that Spotify has made this setting the default. It encourages listeners to engage with the platform socially and publically, which likely benefits Spotify.

Some participants stated that they like having their playlists public to show off (or, in the words of one participant, "to flex") their music taste because it is something they are proud of (several participants wrote that they "think they have good taste in music," or something else to that effect) and like having the ability to share it with others. Some said they carefully curate their playlists and work hard on reflecting their identity through their Spotify content,

and therefore it operates as an extension of the public self, similar to the way other social media platforms operate. One participant even said that they "want people to know …. what [they] like to listen to" because "it's a segment of [their] personality," and another said that they "like curating a public vibe." Spotify gives people another way to share aspects of themselves with the people in their life.

Some participants felt that nobody cares about or looks at what is on their Spotify, even if they have followers, and therefore do not feel the need to make anything private. Spotify is different from other social media platforms in that the primary information being shared is just music, not necessarily personal pictures or stories that users might feel more inclined to protect.

Some participants said that the playlists they keep public are for events, like parties or to get pumped up before an athletic event, and their friends might want to listen to those playlists when they are engaging in those activities. Some participants also said that they use Spotify to share music with their friends and that all members of the friend group check in on each other's profiles to share music with each other, in somewhat of a ritualistic way. As we have previously discussed, music has always been used to bring people together socially. Though Spotify is a completely new platform, it is still mostly fulfilling the functions of music that have always been in place.

3. *Why did participants choose to share Spotify playlists/songs on other social media platforms (i.e. Instagram?)*

Participants were also asked about their motivations for sharing Spotify content on other social media platforms. One of the most common reasons participants gave for sharing music

on another social media platform was to reflect mood and share that with their followers. Many said that they will share a song on their Instagram story as an indirect message, either to a particular person or about their own emotional state. One participant cited the fact that "music is a powerful voice" through which they can express emotions they may not be able to in words or a photo, and therefore, shares music on other platforms when they have something they do not know how else to express. Another participant said that "music is like a personality trait," so sharing music on their Instagram was another way to curate their online identity and may serve as an extension of the identity they are already curating on their Instagram accounts. While some might do this simply by creating a Spotify playlist or listening to certain music, Instagram can be used to amplify this, since many have significantly less followers on Spotify.

The other major reason participants gave for sharing Spotify content on another platform was to give recommendations. Some said they posted songs and playlists they thought their followers would like, and others said they posted songs and playlists that they liked to show off their taste in music. One participant said they "want people to see that [they] have taste," and another said they do it "for cultural capital" because they thought their music taste would give them that.

Some participants said that they never share playlists or songs on other social media platforms, but frequently share them among their friends privately. This might be a less performative way of engaging with the social potential of Spotify since it is a more direct communication, as opposed to presenting musical preferences to a vast and anonymous audience.

C. "I Think I'll Regret This"[26]: Limitations

Since there is not too much existing literature on this exact intersection of study,

narrowing the focus of the survey was a challenge. I chose three individual difference scales to

measure Spotify use against that I felt encapsulated most of the ideas I was interested in

studying, though there were many more that could have applied and provided useful information.

Some questions that I left open-ended because I wanted to analyze answers that way

could not be compared to responses to the individual differences information, which would

definitely have been valuable, and could be adjusted in future iterations of the study.

None of the questions on the survey were required, which means some participants left a

handful of questions blank, which definitely could have skewed the results.

Additionally, we are relying on self-report data, which always has the potential to be

inaccurate.

D. "I Still Got A Lot To Learn"[27]: Further Study

The Spotify questions of this survey could be altered to reflect some of Spotify's other

capabilities and the way those intersect with the individual differences in question. It would also

be interesting to track other social media use more closely and compare that with Spotify use. I

would also be interested in a more content-based study on why people choose to put certain

genres or artists on private playlists vs. public playlists. I also think it would be interesting to

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[26] Mitski (2016). Your Best American Girl. On *Puberty 2* [CD] Westchester: Dead Oceans.
[27] Tashian, D., Fitchuk, I., Musgraves, K. (2018). Slow Burn [Recorded by K. Musgraves]. On *Golden Hour* [CD] Nashville: MCA Nashville. (2017)

study potential gender differences among these ideas. Further study in the area of Spotify's

corporate interests and how that connects with users' experiences of the platform would be an

interesting and productive element to add to the conversation.

Chapter 3

"Tell 'Em How You Feel Girls"[28]: Personal Reflections on Music and Spotify (And Quarantine)

The reason I was so interested in studying Spotify for my senior project is because of my

own obsession with the streaming service. I have always connected very personally to the music

I listen to, even before I made a Spotify account my senior year of high school, though I was

always somewhat inhibited by the monetary bounds of needing to purchase music. Spotify

allowed me to explore new music with virtually no limitations, and eventually it allowed me to

discover a new outlet for my emotions. Since then I have created playlists for every possible

reason - to organize my music, for events, to reflect my emotions, to improve my emotions, to

send to a specific person, to commemorate milestones, and more. Though I didn't include this in

the final version of this project, working on it has allowed me to reflect on my own music more

than ever. I'm questioning the authenticity of my public playlists, questioning why I choose to

make certain playlists private, thinking about why certain songs make me feel certain emotions,

and thinking about how I group them together to create a cohesive playlist and a singular

message.

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[28] Germanotta, S. & Garibay, F. (2009). Dance in the Dark [Recorded by Lady Gaga]. On *The Fame Monster* [CD] Interscope.

The state of our world has also caused me to reflect on this project. When we first found out we would not be going back to school because of the coronavirus pandemic, I honestly lost a lot of my motivation to complete this project. It felt so unimportant in the grand scheme of things going on in the world right now, and it was just really hard for me to concentrate on this project in the midst of all of the anxiety I was feeling about everything else going on in the world. Even though, because of that, this project is probably not as fleshed out as it would have been, conversations with several different people about this concern led me to realize that it actually has more relevance and poignancy at this time. Since quarantine started, I have made more playlists than ever, and several of them have been collaborative or made for another person. I've turned to Spotify at this time to sort through my own emotions, creating playlists that make me feel calm when I'm panicking about the state of the world or playlists that lift my spirits when I need a pick-me-up and playlists that help me process my feelings about the relationships and experiences I'm leaving behind, and I've also turned to Spotify to connect with others more than ever.

Music is always going to be relevant. There is a reason people call it a universal language. Music can express things that we don't know how to express any other way, it can make us feel emotions we can't articulate, and it quite literally crafts our identity. As media and technology evolves, these emotional bonds remain. It is just the mediums we use to engage with these feelings that change.

Author's Note: Each section of this thesis is titled after one of my favorite songs (this was a last minute addition so some of them might be a stretch!). I have also created a playlist with all these

songs, which can be accessed by clicking the link below, or by scanning the pink QR code (open

up the Spotify app on your phone, click the camera icon to the right of the search bar, and scan!),

so you can listen along and get a view into what my playlists look like!

Link:

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0wmJsLGxVwJcRaemVZT7In?si=teFUinbOTHa7_n4a9yWF5

w

Code:

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