This Is The Art Form: Examining Concept Albums' Methods Of Constructing Meaning In The Digital Age

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THIS IS THE ART FORM: EXAMINING CONCEPT ALBUMS’ METHODS OF
CONSTRUCTING MEANING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Interim Dean of the Graduate School
Dedicated to Grandma, Grandpa, Mom, and Dad.
THIS IS THE ART FORM: EXAMINING CONCEPT ALBUMS’ METHODS OF
CONSTRUCTING MEANING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

By

MARIO ALONZO DOZAL

MA THESIS

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Abstract

This study examined how the communicative characteristics of concept albums (music albums that center on a specific theme) have been adapted from a traditional physical form to exist in the digital age. Using three rock concept albums, this study examined how three different formats (vinyl, audio compact disc, and digital download) of the same concept album communicated the overall theme of the album to listeners, and also examined the advantages and disadvantages of each format. Additionally, using discursive analysis, this study sought to expand the academic literature on concept albums by examining the role that supplementary material plays in helping communicate the theme of the album in the digital age. Discursive analysis was also used to analyze artist interviews regarding the creation of concept albums, and listener’s reception of the album’s concept.

Results of the study showed that while the traditional form of the concept album continues to exist in the digital age, the concept album is no longer fully communicated solely through music and album packaging. Instead, concept albums in the digital age have become more focused on communicating a greater immersive experience for the listener through various forms of interaction, which also leads to the concept existing outside of the album’s parameters. New concept album categories were also proposed in order to foster future research of digital age concept albums, taking into account the inclusion of digital supplementary material.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

According to the January 2nd, 1972 edition of the *St. Cleve Chronicle & Linwell Advertiser*, eight-year-old Gerald “Little Milton” Bostock wrote an award-winning poem and was subsequently stripped of his award by the Society for Literary Advancement and Gestation for uttering an obscenity on television. However, fortunately for Little Milton his poem lived on when rock group Jethro Tull decided to use it as the lyrical basis for their album *Thick as a Brick* (1972). Then for 40 years, the child prodigy produced nothing. No new poems, no new profanities, and no new illegitimate children. It was as if Bostock was as he was on the *Thick as a Brick* album cover, frozen in time. However 40 years later, *StCleve.com* (formerly known as the *St. Cleve Chronicle*) featured an article on its homepage welcoming Gerald Bostock as the newest resident to their community. The article makes note of Bostock’s poetic fame-and-shame, and cites a connection with Ian Anderson of Jethro Tull who, conveniently, appears in an advertisement for a performance of *Thick as a Brick 2* (2012) that is placed next to the article. What the website doesn’t mention however is that Bostock himself is the subject of *Thick as a Brick 2*, Anderson’s attempt to theorize what might have happened to Bostock in the 40 years that he has been away from the public eye. Then again, if you don’t feel like buying the CD or digital download of *Thick as a Brick 2* to find out about Bostock’s past, you could always just visit his Facebook page or follow his Twitter feed where he discusses life in St. Cleve and his love for the lead actor in the *Walking Dead* television series, Andrew Lincoln. Yes, Bostock is back and better than ever, and his posts on social networking sites make it appear as though he’s a real person who exists outside of his world: the world of the rock concept album.
Bostock’s move from concept album character in the 1970s to a digital entity that exists outside of the concept album today is just one of the examples in which rock concept albums, known for their musical bravado and over-the-top concepts have changed. Thus, the purpose of this study is to analyze the communicative traits of the rock concept album created during the last 10 years, a time period which, for the purposes of the study, will be defined as the digital age. Since the inception of the digital age, many art forms that have been available only in a physical format (i.e., books, film, music) have since begun to be distributed digitally through services like Amazon.com and Apple’s iTunes Store. Music, however, is sold differently when compared to other formats. While physical counterparts are sold as a whole, the digital marketplace offers a different method. In online music stores, consumers have the option of purchasing tracks individually for approximately one dollar each or they can purchase the entire album digitally for a few dollars less than retail price of a physical copy. By comparison, movies and books are sold for one set price and they are sold in full, not by their scenes or chapters respectively.

However, films and books have always been viewed as a whole, meaning that every part is equal as one cannot get from the beginning to the end without experiencing the middle. However to the average consumer, music is not viewed this way. Even before the digital age, a consumer may have purchased an album and after several listens decided that he/she only liked a few of the songs on the albums, so he/she would only listen to those tracks and skip the rest. In today’s digital age, people no longer have to buy the whole album and instead can construct their own playlists of only the songs they like from an album. As a result, music has become a commodity in which individual song preference drives sales as opposed to album preference. However, where do concept albums fit into all of this? From a structural standpoint, concept
albums are akin to film and literature in that they are one grand tale made up of individual components. They might tell a story through music or have an interconnected theme between songs, and the supplementary material supports whatever the concept may be. However, despite concept albums having a grand sense of cohesion that is similar to film and literature, in today’s digital music market they are sold just as other popular music albums.

The concept album, according to *The Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World,* is “more than a collection of unrelated songs, the ‘concept album’ calls attention to its ‘conception’ as an organic whole, with a deliberate coherence across its component parts … track sequence, cover art and/or liner notes, as well as music, lyrics, performance style and production” (Keightley, 2003, p. 614). As a result when the audience encounters the collective whole of the elements that make up a concept album, they get a multimedia experience instead of one that is solely auditory. Just as music as a whole is divided into categories, Letts (2005) proposes that concept albums can also be divided into three categories according to their content and structure: “narrative concept albums,” “thematic concept albums,” and “resistant concept albums.”

Narrative concept albums are “typified by having an explicit plot and characters, or at the very least a protagonist who undergoes some kind of trial or life journey” (Letts, 2005, p. 19). In popular music, narratives are often constructed to provide the basis for a song’s lyrics. In doing so, the narrative can focus on providing a deep social meaning as in the case of “Last Kiss” by J. Frank Wilson and the Cavaliers, about a teenager whose girlfriend dies as the result of a car accident, after which he resolves to be a good person in order to see her in heaven. The narrative can also provide a less significant social meaning as in the Charlie Daniels Band’s “The Devil Went Down to Georgia,” where the narrative focuses on a musical battle for the soul between a fiddle player and Satan. Instead of the narrative being contained to one song as in these two
examples, in a narrative concept album the story stretches throughout a number of songs that make up the album. In essence, each song allows greater detail and story expansion and can act as a scene for the overall production. This attempt at building a grand tale through various songs can be seen in The Who’s *Tommy* (1969) and Pink Floyd’s *The Wall* (1979), two of the better known narrative concept albums that have gone on to gain mainstream exposure through rock opera and feature film adaptations.

Another concept album classification comes in the form of the thematic concept album. Letts (2005) defines thematic concept albums as being either musical, in that the common theme is established through the use of certain instruments or certain note patterns that become common throughout the album; or lyrical, in that the common theme is established through the lyrical subject matter in the songs (pp. 19-20). Rather than being told a story as in a narrative concept album, the audience is instead treated to a collection of songs and other materials that share a common theme. Lyrically, Frank Sinatra’s *Come Fly With Me* (1958) can be classified as a thematic concept album because of the theme of travel that is present throughout the album’s lyrics, and supported by the images of airplanes on the album’s cover art. Musically, Paul Simon’s *Graceland* (1986) can be considered a thematic concept album because of its South African influenced sound.

Finally Letts (2005) classifies resistant concept albums as those that “stretch the parameters of the traditionally defined concept album…while still conveying some kind of concept beyond a single sequence of organized tracks over the course of an album” (p. 21). By this definition resistant concept albums are those that fit the mold of traditional concept albums through structure or presentation, but revise those elements in order to avoid a classification. According to her study, Letts (2005) defines Radiohead’s albums *Kid A* (2000) and *Amnesiac*
(2001) as resistant concept albums due to their traditional concept album structure that is modified to suit their own artistic needs for the album.

Several significant developments have helped shape the concept album’s current forms. First, the introduction of the long play (LP) record in 1948 afforded musicians the opportunity to make full-length albums, instead of singles limited to around four minutes on each side of the record. By increasing the time made available on records, artists could release collections of songs, as opposed to two songs per disc. Artistically, it also gave artists more freedom to expand the scope of their music, while economically, it allowed record companies to make a bigger profit for the increased content they were offering.

Ultimately, concept albums may have gotten their start in the mind of a jazz musician. According to Hegarty and Halliwell (2011), jazz musician Duke Ellington saw the potential of music to go beyond its traditional use. He saw it as having the “power to convey social meaning through experimentation with both content and form...a focusing of lyrical and musical themes in popular or hybrid idioms” (Hegarty & Halliwell, 2011, p. 20). For Ellington, this meant using music to bring attention to issues that mattered to him and making music something that could provoke thought from others. While Ellington had experimented with combined content and form as early as 1935, his 1943 suite Black, Brown, and Beige, and 1957 album A Drum Is a Woman presented clearer thematic and narrative elements. Ellington’s suite Black, Brown, and Beige (1943) was a thematic collection of songs telling “the history of the American negro,” while A Drum Is a Woman (1957) combined elements of narrative storytelling to create a musical narrative that explored the history of jazz (Larkin, 2006). With each song having a clear and deep message at its core, the seriousness of the content in combination with the music to
promote these concepts served as the precursor to the themes that would become the main focus of rock concept albums.

The beginning of the rock concept album is generally associated with the release _Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band_ (1967) due to its innovative nature (Coffey, 2009, p. 576). With regard to production, _Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band_ employed such innovative studio techniques that not only did the album standout from previous Beatles releases, but it also could not be performed live due to the amount of production needed to replicate the songs at that time. With regard to content, the songs on the album were not part of a larger narrative, nor were they linked thematically. Instead the concept revolved around the idea that what the public was listening to was not a collection of Beatles tracks, but as alluded to in the first track on the album, a theatrical performance of their alter egos: Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band. Supporting this concept was the album’s packaging, which featured a photo of “Sergeant Pepper” and his band standing alongside various cultural figures, including the Beatles themselves. Inside the album’s packaging were cutout mustaches and Sergeant Pepper military stripes, and posted on the back cover were the lyrics to every song on the album. This style of album presentation would serve as a model for concept albums that followed.

Beginning in the late 1960s, progressive rock would combine the music-as-a-tool-of-social-engagement-vision of Ellington and the presentation style of the Beatles to push the boundaries of the concept album, and refine it as an art form. Progressive rock concept albums focused on a wide range of subjects, from the trials of dealing with fame in albums such as _The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars_ (1972) and _The Wall_ (1979), to political commentary in albums like _Animals_ (1977); and some concept albums including _1984_
(1981), *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (1976), and *The Myths and Legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table* (1975) took inspiration from literature and mythology.

Concept albums also changed how the artists performed in front of a live audience, with acts often adopting the more theatrical style of performance to go along with the concept of the album. David Bowie assumed the role of “Ziggy Stardust” during live performances; Peter Gabriel donned elaborate costumes when Genesis performed *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* (1974); and during performances of *The Wall* (1979), crews would construct an actual wall between the audience and the band only for the wall to come crashing down toward the end of the performance. However, one progressive rock group would create the ultimate form of the concept album in both musical styling and presentation. When *Aqualung* (1971) was deemed a concept album by the British media due to religious content spread over several songs on the album, Jethro Tull’s lead singer Ian Anderson balked at the notion, and decided to show his displeasure with the categorization by creating *Thick as a Brick* (1972). Designed to be the “mother of all concept albums,” Ian Anderson stated that *Thick as a Brick* was done entirely “tongue in cheek,” and intended as a parody of the concept album format (Romano, 2010, p. 86). In a continuous 43-minute suite separated only by the time constraints of the vinyl album, the lyrics revolve around an award-winning poem created by 8-year-old Gerald “Little Milton” Bostock. The album’s packaging itself is designed with the sleeves folding out to create a 12 page newspaper that contains the album’s lyrics as news stories, and the story of Little Milton losing his award at the behest of the Society of Literary Advancement and Gestation (p. 86). Thus while intended as an over-the-top joke, the presentation of *Thick as a Brick* served as a benchmark of how far the concept album could go both musically and physically.
Concept albums continue to be released today, spreading across multiple genres of music. In 2005, country artist Willie Nelson released *Countryman* (2005), a thematic concept album that combined country and reggae music and imagery, as supported by the album’s cover art which features the colors associated with Rastafarian culture and several leaves of marijuana. Even hip-hop and rap concept albums that have been produced seem to have taken some inspiration from concept albums of the past. For example, Reiser (2008) contends that Andre Benjamin’s narrative hip-hop album *The Love Below* (2002) contains many musical similarities to *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), such as the first song on both albums containing a grand musical introduction for the main character; and the last song on both albums containing the phrase “A Day in the Life” (Reiser, 2008). Rapper Jay-Z’s concept album, *American Gangster* (2007), was inspired by the film of the same name, and is reminiscent of progressive rock concept albums that took their inspiration from select pieces of literature. Some artists have even used the concept album as a way to experiment with new sounds and musical personas. Garth Brooks released a rock album titled *Greatest Hits* (1999) under the persona of “Chris Gaines,” and punk group The Bronx released *Mariachi El Bronx* (2009), a self-titled album in which the band traded their punk sound for mariachi music. Some recent concept albums have even been sequels to previous concept albums, such as Queensryche’s *Operation: Mindcrime II* (2006), and Alice Cooper’s *Welcome 2 My Nightmare* (2011).

The concept album also continues to be used as a tool for social awareness. This can be seen in the most well known concept album of the digital age, Green Day’s politically-driven concept album/rock opera *American Idiot* (2004). Focusing on anti-war and media sentiments, youth culture, and the journey of its main character “Jesus of Suburbia,” the mainstream punk album sought to provoke social thought from its listeners much like the politically conscious
concept albums of the 1970s and 1980s. Over the top performances of concept albums also continue to exist. In 2006, pop-punk band My Chemical Romance released *The Black Parade* (2006), a narrative/thematic concept album that tells the story of an individual who travels through the afterlife upon his death. In support of *The Black Parade*, My Chemical Romance would take a page from the Beatles and change their image to fit the theme of the new album: donning black marching band uniforms, colorless versions of those worn by Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band, and performing the album in its entirety under the name “The Black Parade,” and with alter egos representing the marching band that led the main character of the album into the afterlife. As an art form, the concept album continues to retain its main goal of constructing a specific message through music, text, and visual performance.

Since the rise of Napster in 1999 and the *iTunes* Music Store in 2003, digital distribution has become the main source for obtaining music. Digital music changed not only how people get their music, but it also gives them the freedom that no other format had given them. Consumers can now choose which songs they want to purchase instead of purchasing the whole album, giving listeners the freedom to create their own compilations of a musician’s catalogue. Over the last ten years digital distribution has become so popular that Apple now offers record producers programming to convert recorded music directly to the *iTunes* audio format. Dubbed *Mastered for iTunes*, Apple supports its use by stating that “digital distribution is no longer an afterthought. It is today’s dominant medium for consuming music and as such needs to be treated with the utmost care and attention” (Apple, 2012, p. 1). While digital distribution has affected the idea of an album as a whole by giving the consumer the option to purchase only the tracks that they want, it has affected the traditional construction of the concept album even more. Many of the traditional aspects that combined to form the concept album do not have much of a place
in the digital world. In the past, physical releases offered extras that took the concept beyond the limitations of the medium and included artwork and liner notes that often closed the gaps that existed between songs on the album. In the digital age, much of the traditional supplementary material that used to further construct the meaning of concept albums has been done away with. For example, *Thick as a Brick* (1972) continues to be sold, but its digital format does not include anything representative of the newspaper that was packaged with the original physical release, thus leaving out important aspects of the original concept. This is not just a problem for older concept albums as even a concept album as recent as 2006’s *The Black Parade* does not offer any supplementary material when its digital version is purchased from *iTunes*.

It is important to study concept albums in the field of communication because music and its discourse are communication. Music communicates things like identities and ideals long after the first time we hear a song. Music influences the way a person dresses, the way a person lives their life, how they choose their friends, and ultimately the concerts they attend in order to be around others who have the same taste in music. If one song can communicate so much, then what influence might a concept album have? Concept albums might inspire others to become more socially aware, or its content might provide hope for a listener in their darkest hour. The music in a concept album might influence someone to pick up an instrument and attempt to create their own artistic and socially conscious songs. However, while concept albums continue to exist in the digital age, their purpose and form must adapt to suit the changing music consumer landscape. With digital distribution becoming the primary source for how people get their music, new technology must fill the creative void that it leaves. If the grand form of the concept album is expected to continue existing in the digital age and beyond, then something substantial must be offered in digital form that can construct significant meaning equivalent to that of the physical
album cover, liner notes, and artwork. This study aims to discover not only how concept albums that have been created in the digital age communicate their overall meaning, but also how three different formats of the same concept albums construct the same meaning.

In chapter 2, a literature review will focus on the concept album, music, communication, and digitization, with chapter 3 focusing on the methodology that will be used to analyze the artifacts. In chapter 4 the analysis of the selected concept albums and discourse are presented. Finally, in chapter 5 the findings and conclusion of the study will be discussed.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

During the Fall of 2006, the pop-punk band My Chemical Romance released their new album titled, *The Black Parade* (2006). This album signifies the continuing legacy of concept albums by drawing inspiration from many concept albums of the past. In addition to donning black-and-white suits similar to those worn by the Beatles in *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), they also borrowed largely from David Bowie. Just as David Bowie adopted the identity of “Ziggy Stardust,” My Chemical Romance performed shows as their alter-egos, “The Black Parade.” My Chemical Romance also changed their look to fit the guides-into-the-afterlife theme of the album, similar to how Bowie transformed himself to look the part of an alien rock-star. Theatrics also became important as lead singer Gerard Way adopted a more intense performance style, mimicking the movements of Bob Geldof from the film version of *The Wall* (1982), and late Queen singer Freddie Mercury. And just as Bowie began to lose himself as Ziggy Stardust, the Black Parade would also become the image that took over My Chemical Romance’s lives.

Even the musical style was adopted from concept albums of the past, as *The Black Parade* (2006) took on a classic rock sound that was different from the pop-punk style that their audience was accustomed to. When listening to the album’s opening track “The End,” musical comparisons can be heard that tie it closely to “In the Flesh,” the opening track on Pink Floyd’s *The Wall* (1979). In similar fashion, this study intends to take a page from *The Black Parade* (2006) and look to the past for inspiration. By doing so, the past can pave the way for the study of concept albums to move forward. Although this study does not intend to borrow much from
past studies the way that *The Black Parade* has borrowed from past concept albums, this study intends to add to the history of concept album research, much like *The Black Parade* adds to the history of concept albums.

This chapter will focus on reviewing literature from previous studies that have been centered on concept albums, music and communication, and the move toward digital distribution for most commercial art forms.

**The Concept Album**

The concept album has been tremendously understudied in academia and as a result, literature is extremely limited. Many of the studies on concept albums have gone unpublished or in the case of Letts, have only recently been published. The existing literature has been in the form of master’s theses or doctoral dissertations that have taken a musicological analysis approach where the lyrics, music, and notation are the main artifacts being examined, and other discursive features like album artwork have been excluded.

Elicker’s (2002) study of the “rock opera” focuses on defining characteristics of rock operas, and examining how rock operas both influence and reflect trends in society. Elicker states that rock operas have two definitions. The first definition she presents classifies the rock opera as being an extension of classical operas and musicals. The second definition she provides classifies rock operas as “song cycles in the mold of popular music concept albums” (p. 300). She supports this definition by making the point that musicals are performed on stage before being recorded, while a rock opera is recorded before it is every performed on stage. When examining the concepts that are presented in the rock opera, Elicker finds that many rock operas serve as tools for social awareness as they are used to make a large number of people aware of the flaws of political and social organizations (p. 312). On the other hand, Elicker points out two
dilemmas recording the rock opera. In the first dilemma, she points out that although it is a mixture of both classical and popular music, rock operas fail to bring together both classical and popular music audiences. Elicker claims this is because classical music fans dislike popular music, while popular music audiences dislike anything that is considered high-art (p. 311). The other dilemma she raises looks at how digital media has replaced live performances of rock operas in the last two decades. Consequently, she believes that a rock opera with “underlying concepts and interwoven musical and textual ideas has very little room in the new technology-based musical arena” (p. 310).

With hopes of bringing the concept album into popular music studies, Montgomery’s (2002) examination of the rock concept album analyzes the history of the concept album, and introduces discourse from artists and producers that are well known for their involvement with concept albums. Montgomery’s research shows that the concept album was partially generated as a response to the shift in recording technology and marketing that introduced the LP. While Montgomery describes Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band (1967) as the first album to serve as a template for future rock concept albums, he posits that Woody Guthrie and producer Moses Asch released the first concept album with Ballads of Sacco and Vanzetti (1960). According to Montgomery, Asch was concerned with creating an album of music that could serve as a document of history, and he found the opportunity to do so with the story of the trial and execution of two Italian immigrants, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (pg.86). As a result, Asch commissioned Guthrie to write a collection of songs that spoke about the “tragic story of social injustice which also exemplified the inequalities inherent in the American judicial system” (p. 84). Recorded in 1945, Guthrie’s songs served as a series of vignettes that told the larger story of Sacco and Vanzetti’s trial and execution. However, in 1960, Asch finally released
Ballads of Sacco and Vanzetti in two different formats (a single LP and a box-set) that contained the music, and booklets with photocopies of Guthrie’s lyric sheets (p. 85). As such, Montgomery views Ballads of Sacco and Vanzetti as the first concept album as it promotes a concept of social activism and awareness through the tale of Sacco and Vanzetti.

Nicholls (2007) examined how narrative theory could be employed to analyze narratives that appear in popular music. According to Nicholls, narratives in popular music can be divided into five levels with the first level containing no narrative connection between the music and the lyrics and therefore functioning as a “control level;” while in the second level, the song’s lyrics contain some narrative elements, but are unsupported by the music (p. 301). The third level is reached when the “lyrics contain elements of narrative discourse that are supported by the musical setting,” such as key changes or changes in instrumentation that coincide with a lyrical shift in the narrative (pp. 302-303). In the fourth level, Nicholls asserts that “music moves beyond mere support and ... plays an active (rather than passive) part in the storytelling” (p. 308). Finally, the fifth level acts as the ultimate level where musical narratives form the “concept album” because the narrative complexity covers an array of “multiple media, including lyrics, music, prose, and art work” (p. 301). As Nicholls points out in the case of The Who’s Quadrophenia (1973), album art can be used to coincide with the lyrics and provide a visual representation of the narrative (pp. 310-311). Nicholls details how the album art of Quadrophenia features thirty-three images that coincide with and reflect the lyrics of the songs, and a first-person narrative of the album’s events that appears as part of the liner notes (p. 310). Both the aural and visual components can exist separately, but together they communicate a much stronger message to the listener. By tying up both visual and aural components, this seems
to leave little room for misinterpretation as the artist is providing their own specific meaning by conveying to the audience what they should see and what they should hear.

Letts’ (2005) research on Radiohead and the resistant concept album focused mostly on the structure of Radiohead’s albums Kid A (2000) and Amnesiac (2001), and on their categorization as “resistant concept albums.” Letts first examines the implications of the success of the band’s prior release OK Computer (1997), and the experimental nature of Kid A (2000) before delving into a three part analysis that focuses on the aural experiences of listening to Kid A (2000), the associations that appear in the music and lyrics, and examining notation of several songs. What makes Kid A (2000) a resistant concept album is its adherence to, yet refusal to, follow concept album patterns. Structured as a narrative with no decipherable main character, Letts argues that halfway through Kid A, the subject dies only to return after a one-song intermission. The second chance begins with the character eager to do things right, but over the course of several songs the opportunity is once again wasted and the character again kills himself. Letts posits that the story continues on Amnesiac (2001) as images that appeared in Kid A (2000) seem to reappear in the lyrical and musical content of Amnesiac (2001), with Radiohead themselves admitting that both albums are actually one (p. 157).

In her thesis and case study on narrative music and The Downward Spiral (1994) by Nine Inch Nails, House (2011) determines that the concept album follows many narrative archetypes. After giving a brief overview of each song on the album and how they relate to the overall narrative of one man’s “bizarre path to self-destruction,” House focuses on the techniques that enhance the album’s narrative such as use of imagery in the lyrics, establishment of characters, and musical manipulation to document the narrator’s conversion from man to machine (p. 11). After briefly analyzing the entire album, House (2011) then closely examined three songs on the
album that act as turning points in the narrative, examining each one for its lyrics, musical content, and narrative structure.

Another study examines the narrative in Outkast member Andre Benjamin’s hip-hop concept album *The Love Below* (2003). Reiser’s (2008) look at the album focuses on the character and setting of the album, with the first half of the album focusing on the story of the “Love Hater” who avoids settling down in a relationship in order to keep playing the field, while the second half of the album focuses on new characters in stories that deal with the ups and downs of romantic love. Reiser (2008) describes the format of this album as a half-concept album, and compares it to the similarly formatted 2112 (1976) and *Hemispheres* (1978) by progressive rock band Rush. Using a combination of musical, lyrical, and sometimes notational analysis, Reiser (2008) interprets the meaning of the narrative through the songs on the album.

Green Day’s *American Idiot* (2004) concept album has also been analyzed for its connection to suburban punk culture in the track “Jesus of Suburbia.” In this study, scholars Chuang and Hart (2008) sought to examine the rhetoric of the song in order to find how it expresses and registers a connection to suburban punk culture. Claiming that the “music of suburban punks has been overlooked as nothing more than soft-core potty humor and thereby lacks examination,” Chuang and Hart were presented with the perfect opportunity through “Jesus of Suburbia” by Green Day, a suburban punk song by a suburban punk band (p. 184). Using ethos to examine Green Day’s past works and connection as representatives of suburban punk, and the illusion of life rhetorical perspective to analyze “Jesus of Suburbia” itself, Chuang and Hart determine that music can effectively communicate the suburban punk experience while informing and revealing itself to old and new audiences.
As seen from these previous studies, analysis of concept albums has been limited to studying the musical and textual content of a concept album and its meaning, leaving room to further study the concept album’s packaging and extra materials. Furthermore, much of the literature has focused on examining only narrative types of concept albums, giving little to no attention to studying the thematic concept album and resistant concept album.

**Music and Communication**

First, some studies have focused on how to effectively study music as communication by establishing communication models. Seeking to answer the question “why and how does who communicate what, to whom, and with what effect?” and seeking to make the study of popular music something that could be performed by everyone, musicology scholar Tagg (1982) proposed a communication model to study popular music (Tagg, 1982, p. 39). From Tagg’s perspective, popular music could not be studied in ways that music had been traditionally analyzed because popular music is a mass-produced commodity distributed in non-written form. Thus in his model, popular music was broken down and studied ideologically and through hermeneutic-semiotics to determine what message is being communicated in each song. Under this model, musical elements play a bigger role as listeners can take into account changes in performance style such as pitch, tempo, dynamics, and musical phrasing as methods in which meaning is constructed using music.

According to Chesebro, Foulger, Nachman and Yanelli (1985), popular music “creates socially shared meanings by exploring and celebrating a state of awareness or consciousness which a particular audience identifies with as an expression of its emotion and moral precepts” (p. 116). Chesebro et al. view the importance of studying communication in music through the rhetoric that exists in popular music. Ultimately, popular music allows listeners to identify with
the artist through the song’s lyrical content. However, Rein and Springer (1986) disagreed with the lyrical focus of popular music study that Chesebro et al. were espousing. According to Rein and Springer, too much emphasis studying only the lyrical content meant that “songs with diverse social implications” were being seen as “cut from the same cloth” (p. 252). Essentially, a song could convey one meaning through the lyrics, while an entirely different meaning could be conveyed through the musical style and production sound. Furthermore, Rein and Springer emphasized that taking into account “production and recording processes, composition techniques, music history, and literature and theory” would be necessary in order to develop new methodologies for popular music and communication studies (p. 254).

When evaluating the history of sound recording, Jones (1992) found that recording technology was initially created to transmit human voice. However, over time recording technologies developed new social and economic uses. At first, the quest of many inventors was to try and reproduce sound, namely the human voice. Once this goal was met, the next goal became to reproduce music. It was then that Emile Berliner, pioneer of the Gramophone, developed modern recording techniques when he created a zinc-based master disc for the Gramophone that could be used to reproduce music in larger quantities and at higher fidelity. From there, audio recordings would become valued for their use as entertainment. Eventually magnetic tape recorders and tape players would be introduced, along with stereo playback on both tape recorders and phonograph records. In the 1970s, Jones points out that cassettes and cartridges began to outsell records, as the teen market preferred cassettes due to the fact that cars now featured cassette players (p. 37). However, the introduction of both digital recorders and compact discs in the 80s created the first battle of digital versus analog, as the argument being based around which format sounded the most authentic. Ultimately, Jones states that new
technologies allow companies to profit from their back catalogues by releasing them in new formats (p. 47).

Inskip, Macfarlane, and Rafferty (2008) attempted to modify Tagg’s model as they found that Tagg’s model failed to take into account listener feedback. Regarding communication, Inskip, Macfarlane, and Rafferty (2008) state that although music as its own language is not easily understood due to everyone receiving a different message based on their own experiences, music is generally understood when considering how “large numbers of people do get a similar message to others” (p. 697). In their model, listener feedback becomes important as it communicates the listener’s own interpretation of the original meaning back to the artist, and can be represented through actions such as posting reviews online and reacting to live performances.

Many past studies on music and communication have focused on how music can be used to construct meaning about cultures for widespread understanding. One such study conducted by Avant-Mier (1999) looked at how students at a university on the U.S.-Mexico border identified themselves ethnically by way of their music preference. Using subjects that came from the U.S.-Mexico border was considered unique as the general population is categorized as minorities, yet, some try to identify more with one side of the border than the other to avoid stigma. It is because of this that Avant-Mier (1999) points out in the study that something as simple as listening to “a radio station can become a source that contributes to musical preference, and consequentially be linked to other factors such as language preference, identity, etc.” (p. 38). Ultimately Avant-Mier’s (1999) study determined that the population identified with many forms of music as opposed to just one, leading to the assumption that the population were a generation that were “more accepting and more forgiving of other types of people, lifestyles, and music” (p. 87).
Avant-Mier would further pursue the communicative connection between music and ethnicity when he examined the role Latinos play in the history of rock music. Designed to “combat the persistent and prevalent Black/White dichotomy in popular music research,” Avant-Mier’s (2010) study looks to expand the scope of the study of popular music research by re-appropriating rock music for Latinos (Introduction, sec. 5, para. 3). Taking a qualitative analytical approach, Avant-Mier examines different discourses, from border radio’s effect on multiple music genres to the influence of literature on Spanish rock, that provide proof that Latinos did indeed play a significant role in the history of rock music. Ultimately, Avant-Mier’s (2010) study proves that while genres like rock ‘n’ roll may be typified as being an American style of music, they have been influenced greatly by other nations and cultures.

Kun (2005) also studies how music can play a communicative role in not only defining culture but defining the American landscape as well. Kun defines “audiotopias” as spaces that contain “music’s utopian potential, its ability to show us how to move toward something better and transform the world we find ourselves in” (p. 17). For Kun emphasis of the study lies in showing that America is a musical melting pot that doesn’t contain one definitive sound but many.

Pineda (2009) also looks at how culture relates to music when examining mestizaje identity performance in The Town and the City (2006) by Los Lobos. Pineda (2009) defines “mestizaje” as the “performing identity and style influenced by many aspects of the culture,” and ties it to the performance style that is used by the band to tell the narrative of The Town and the City (p. 186). Furthermore, the album also acts as a representation of the individual immigration journey. The songs on the album offer a “sense of the struggle in taking part in a journey and the growth an individual experiences in looking back at the journey reflectively” (Pineda, 2009, p.
190). As a result, the mestizaje identity formed by blurring languages and music styles on the album is communicative of an old homeland meets new homeland situation that all immigrants face.

Njoora (2010) examines how music communicates meaning in personal compositions and determines that in his own compositions, music “is a great tool for constructing past history based on the collective memory of the community” (p. 44). Njoora also argues that African art music is not limited to Africans, as visitors and citizens also manage to create African art music based on their influences. Instead, music can frame cultural and contextual issues as “meanings of songs do not reside solely in their lyrical content” (p. 55). Furthermore, Njoora states music composition is generally shaped by the environment in which the creator grows, and as such defines “who we are and goes to some length in narrating musical history of our times” (p. 56).

Viewing the cell phone ringtone as communicative performance, de Vries and van Elferen (2010) analyzed how the ringtone could be used to construct identity. For one, a mobile phone ringtone “epitomizes the convergence of technology, entertainment, telecommunication, and marketing strategies,” that also manages to identify the self (p. 66). de Vries and van Elferen also reveal that a ringtone communicates what subculture a person may belong to, along with their musical history. Ultimately, de Vries and van Elferen conclude that “ringtones have the inherent capacity to function as publicly disseminated madeleines,” and “entails a rich amount of cultural information” that can be dissipated in a short amount of time (p. 72).

Matusitz (2010) chose to analyze the semiotics of a popular music song and artist that serves as an icon for youths in post-revolution era China. Matusitz states that popular music is a sign because “it could not exist if it were not interpreted” (p. 158). For this reason the song “Nothing to My Name” by Cui Jian serves as an anthem for the Chinese youth. Furthermore,
Matusitz cites Jian’s image as semiotics as well, claiming that Jian is a sign of visual communication as he is an icon of Chinese youth rebellion. During performances of the song, Jian would wear red bandanas to symbolize Communism, while also wearing a People’s Liberation Army uniform to express his hate for Mao Zedong. In turn, Jian became an icon for students, who would sing his song during the Tiananmen Square Tragedy and turn it into a symbol of change. Matusitz’s analysis of the semiotics of “Nothing to My Name” determines that the song “not only brought change among youths of his time, but it also helped redefine Chinese popular culture through the conveyance of imagery, hope, and rebellion against corruption and other ‘evils’” (p. 173).

In an effort to determine whether traditional music media, such as compacts discs, still has a place in the consumer market, Cain (2011) chose to survey over 250 respondents about their music purchasing habits and the way they enjoy their music. Cain’s results show that there is still a strong audience who prefer traditional music formats, so much so that they purchase entire albums because they view them as “complete works,” instead a “collection of individual songs” (p. 20). Furthermore, those who prefer digital media formats exhibit traits that are the exact opposite. These listeners prefer mp3 files over physical formats, as they tend to view albums more as a collection of songs, and they also tend to have less complete albums than those who prefer physical formats. In the end, Cain states that a market still exists for traditional music media, which could lead to financial gain if the music industry marketed toward specific consumer niches instead of lumping all consumers together.

**Going Digital**

One of the first ways that music took on a different format was through the music video. Grossberg (1993) sought to discover why the music video was being seen as a site of cultural
activity and why the music video had begun to compete with the music itself “as the site of salvation and transcendence in rock culture” (Grossberg, 1993, Chapter 10, para. 3). Examining the role that media has played in the construction of rock, Grossberg found that music performance has existed in television long before the music video, through television shows like The Monkees, American Bandstand, and The Ed Sullivan Show. However, he believes that much of the creation of music video is based off of the economic connection that was established with music and film, as the top five singles of 1984 were all a part of film soundtracks. Accordingly, rock music then became a part of 1980s youth films, most notably The Breakfast Club (1985) and Ferris Bueller’s Day Off (1986). As a result, Grossberg argues that the music in these films serves more as an identifier of the characters in the film, as opposed to a real person. In the end, Grossberg finds that music videos endanger the authenticity of rock culture, and instead inspire an in-authentic authenticity where a visual image becomes more important than the music.

Several studies have focused on the role that the Internet would play not only on the study of popular music but for the arts in general. In 1997, Tagg addressed the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM) on the issue of music studies moving into the digital age by way of the Internet. Seeing potential for the use of websites to further the study of popular music, Tagg (1997) proposed two categories of websites that could be used to inform those interested in popular music studies. Under the musical category, websites would offer materials relevant to the musical works themselves, and the tools for the creation and analysis of music. Under the metamusical category, websites would focus on providing educational content such as literature on music studies, comprehensive musical databases that can be searched depending on criteria, and music industry data such as sales figures for both artists and retailers (p. 2). However, one issue that Tagg raised was that of copyright and publishing rights. Tagg
deemed compensation for copyrighted work such a huge issue on the internet that it would eventually mean “when a user downloads a copyrighted music or text file, a charge will be debited to that user’s credit card or bank account” (p. 5). This would cause a problem for the study of popular music as music analysts needed to transcribe musical content for inclusion in studies and in some cases they needed the music to be available to study free of charge, which stringent copyright enforcers would not allow. And often, a researcher would not have time to seek out the true owner of publishing rights for a material that they would like to include. Ultimately Tagg would caution that for music to remain a part of popular music studies in the digital age, the contradiction between the artist’s right to payment and musicologist’s right to obtain knowledge about music and communication would have to be eliminated.

After conducting four case studies examining the role that digitization plays on the arts, Robinson and Halle (2002) come to the conclusion that digitization indeed changes how the arts are perceived by their users. For the users, digitization makes art more accessible and useful. This is true in three of the case studies, as Ebay, e-books, and Napster all make visiting a physical store to obtain a specific product obsolete. Instead, these online sources allow consumers to obtain the art form in the comfort of their own home. However, for copyright holders, the digitization of copyrighted material again becomes an issue when dealing with compensation. In the case of e-books, many users paid for only the first installment of Stephen King’s novel *The Plant* (2000), and would download later installments for free, which would ultimately lead to King’s scrapping of the entire novel. The same can be said with Napster where users freely shared and downloaded music they did not hold rights to, infuriating copyright holders and leading to lawsuits and an eventual shutdown of Napster. One point the authors do argue however is that the digitization of arts seems to have as much impact offline as it does
online (Robinson and Halle, 2002, p. 382). Digitization of music itself seems to have followed a cycle with the claim being made that just as small record stores were put out of business by national chain stores, digital stores would eventually do the same to the national chain stores.

Giles, Pietrzykowski, and Clark (2007) sought to discover the psychological meaning of recorded music ownership, and the effect that digitization has on a person’s perception of the value of music. After conducting twenty interviews with participants ranging from 16 to 42 years of age, Giles, Pietrzykowski, and Clark determined three core characterizations of music ownership. The first characterization shows that records are seen as sacred objects that the listener applies their own value to (p. 435). For some listeners the value exists in being a super-fan and having every record released by a certain artist. For others, the value exists in having a large record collection to display and share with others. The second characterization determined by Giles, Pietrzykowski, and Clark reveals that many people view records as a side of their personalities (p. 437). For these respondents, records serve as reminders of specific moments in their lives. Finally, the last characterization illustrates that some respondents value personal music collections more for the sensual experiences they provide (p. 439). Some people prefer the visual and aural experience that having a physical record provides. On the other hand, many listeners enjoy purchasing albums digitally because they can invest in a number of different songs, as opposed to only the songs on one album. Ultimately, the researchers found that digital downloads were associated with musical exploration, while purchasing a physical copy meant that the listener had a prior investment in the music.

In an effort to recapture some of the elements of the musical experience that are lost in an album’s digital format, Mott (2008) proposes construction of Hybrid Motion Albums. Hybrid Motion Albums do away with static album art and media player visualizations that provide no
narrative connection to the songs, and focus more on providing motion graphics that are tailored to fit the look of the album’s narrative. According to Mott, one of the advantages is that it is cheaper to design a Hybrid Motion Album than it is to produce a music video because motion graphics for multiple songs can be created for the price of one music video (Mott, 2008, p. 9).

Much like this study will look at the communicative differences between physical and digital concept albums, it is important to point out that one previous study found differences in new technologies that transmit the same message. One study conducted by Heyer (2008) looked at New York Metropolitan Opera performances that were broadcast live in high definition in select movie theaters. Through use of medium theory, Heyer determines that both being in attendance and watching in a movie theater provided the same experience of seeing a live opera, but the two differed in terms of what message the audience members received from viewing in the different settings. Attendees of the cinema broadcast version of the opera experienced the presentation with the same limitation as film viewing, seeing only what the director wanted them to see. Meanwhile audience members at the Metropolitan had a different experience that seemed to lead to more personal involvement by being able to look at whatever they wanted to during the play. However, when it came time for the intermission both media offered something entirely different to the patrons in attendance. For those who attended the cinema backstage interviews with the players were shown during intermission, while those in attendance at the opera house were given the opportunity to walk about and mingle with other audience members during intermission (Heyer, 2008, p. 594).

As seen in the literature review above, studies have been done on several modern concept albums, but those studies do not examine the discursive or communicative aspects. Montgomery’s (2002) study showed that the concept album was born out of a technological shift
that introduced the world to the LP record, but it focused more on establishing the concept album for academic study through history and discourse. While Reiser’s (2008) examination of The Love Below (2002) studies an album in its digital form, the focus remains on the narrative constructed in the music and text by Andre Benjamin, and did not examine how the music and text along with the album presentation as a whole was effective at communicating the narrative. In her study, Letts (2005) touches slightly on the artwork included in Kid A (2000) and Amnesiac (2001), but does not fully analyze how the artwork fully enhances the concept.

All of the above are reasons why this study can contribute much to the study of concept albums in academia. This study intends to cover new ground by both examining artifacts that past studies have not included in their research, such as album artwork; while also taking into account technological changes that others studies have not yet had the opportunity to analyze. Considering that the concept album was born out of technological change with the introduction of the LP, this study will show how the concept album has evolved in the digital age.

**Research Questions**

1. How have the communicative characteristics of rock concept albums changed in the digital age?

2. How do different formats of the same rock concept album help construct meaning of the album’s overall theme? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each medium?

3. What is the discourse related to the construction and reception of rock concept albums?
Chapter 3
Methodology

At times concept albums allow a band to challenge the limitations of the genre that confine them. For example, “progressive rock” grew from musicians wanting to create something more than just a three-minute pop single. Then, after years in which progressive rock was becoming more commonplace, punk rock was born as a response to the progressive rock genre that had since become oversaturated with music that tried too hard to be meaningful and artistic. However, punk music itself would eventually evolve to adopt the concept album as a way of communicating as well. Hüsker Dü’s *Zen Arcade* (1984) harkens back to the storytelling of progressive rock concept albums with its tale of a young man who embarks on a search for happiness, before finding that everything that he experiences throughout the course of the album is a dream and his circumstances never change. Despite having a complicated narrative, Hüsker Dü’s performance style does not reflect the over-the-top artistic performance style of past progressive rock concept album narratives. Meanwhile, the Minutemen’s *Double Nickels on the Dime* (1984) is a concept album that uses the concept of cars instead of a musically unifying theme. What it does offer musically is a challenge to the definitions of the punk genre by containing songs that have influences from other genres, such as jazz and even Latin music and Latino/a culture (Avant-Mier, 2010). Thus, just as these two albums challenged their genre by using concept albums, this study plans to challenge the way that concept albums have been studied in the past.
The Artifacts

There are many rock concept albums that have been released during the digital age. However, for the purpose of this study, I selected three rock concept albums that fit the classification of being a narrative concept album, a thematic concept album, and a resistant concept album. Furthermore, it is important to choose three rock concept albums that are significant and stand out from other rock concept albums released in the digital age.

In June 2011, Canadian hardcore punk band Fucked Up released *David Comes to Life*, a narrative concept album/rock opera that tells the story of “a factory yob in 1970s England transformed by his girlfriend’s death” (Dolan, 2011). This album stands out not only because it is a hardcore punk rock concept album, but also for the critical praise it has received since its release. *David Comes to Life* (2011) has been called one of 2011’s best albums by mainstream media outlets like *The Chicago Tribune* and NPR.org; and SPIN.com ultimately gave *David Comes to Life* the title of “Best Album of 2011,” praising the album for having a story that needed no explanation and “synthesized 40 years of rock into what’s ostensibly a hardcore record” (Marchese, 2011). Making the claim that digital music has now led to album art having to convey as much information as possible in one image, *Print Magazine* awarded *David Comes to Life* the title of third best album art of 2011 for meeting that goal with a simple design that communicated the narrative of the album (Wolk, 2011). As evidenced above, *David Comes to Life* (2011) is an appropriate narrative rock concept album to include in this study due to its accolades (namely being a concept album created in the digital age to be named album of the year), making it a standout from other narrative rock concept albums.

Released in April 2007, *Year Zero* by Nine Inch Nails is classified as a thematic concept album focused on presenting a “dystopian view of the future of the U.S.” through a collection of
songs that ultimately make it the group’s “strongest, weirdest and most complex record since *The Downward Spiral* (1994)” (NPR.org, 2011; Sheffield, 2007). While *Year Zero*’s (2007) subject matter of questioning the direction of the United States government is not groundbreaking, the way that the concept album is presented is. In the months leading up to the album’s release, a viral campaign was launched that would spread the word about *Year Zero*’s concept while requiring involvement of Nine Inch Nails fans on a personal level to keep the campaign moving forward. It began with simple tasks such as organizing the highlighted letters on the back of a concert t-shirt to form a web address, and searching the restrooms during concerts in hopes of finding a USB drive that contained an unreleased song. Yet while one might think that the unreleased song was the prize, it was not. Instead the leaked songs on the USB drives contained hidden clues that, when analyzed closely, provided clues that led to more websites. In an interview with *Wired Magazine*, primary member of Nine Inch Nails, Trent Reznor, revealed that the intent to use the websites was a way of providing the fans with a back story so that the concepts would be fleshed out and understood before *Year Zero* had been heard in its entirety (Rose, 2007, p. 1). To Reznor, there was a logical explanation for why the websites were being used to provide the back story of the album:

> At first, it went through a few iterations of the best media and ways to do that. It could have been liner notes, if there were such a thing these days, you know ... we want to make the world’s most elaborate album cover, you know, using the media of today instead of making people buy a vinyl record, which they’re not going to do, or a CD or an mp3, which has no artwork. (Rose, 2007)

Reznor’s comments justify why *Year Zero* (2007) is suitable for inclusion in this study as the thematic concept album. Musical content aside, just as *Thick as a Brick* (1972) served as the ideal form of the physical concept album by using the newspaper to provide a back story to the characters and to attempt to legitimize the concept in the world outside of the album, Reznor
builds up *Year Zero* (2007) to serve as the benchmark for the ideal digital concept album. As a result, the discourse that makes up the album can be analyzed to assess whether it truly does communicate the back-story well.

*Danger Days: The True Lives of the Fabulous Killjoys* (henceforth referred to as *Danger Days*), released by pop-punk band My Chemical Romance in November 2010, can be classified as a resistant concept album. Prior to the album’s release, several teaser clips began to appear on the band’s *YouTube* page. The various clips (all under one minute in length) showed surveillance footage from a desert setting, news reports and public service announcements from the antagonistic “Better Living Industries,” and even revealed specific characters, some of which were not the band members themselves. The weekend before the album’s release, an album listening party on the band’s *YouTube* page was hosted by “Dr. Death Defying,” a pirate radio DJ tasked with aiding the Killjoys by providing updates in between songs. With the information provided by the various teaser clips before the album’s release, a set of characters, location, and a basic plot can all be identified, and as a result it can be deduced that *Danger Days* is a concept album. However, My Chemical Romance lead singer Gerard Way has gone on record saying that the album does not rely on songs composed of narratives and thus is “not a concept record” (*NME.com*, 2010). Due to this denial, *Danger Days* serves as a good example of a resistant concept album in the digital age. Even though Way claims that *Danger Days* cannot be considered a concept album, the promotional material employs many elements that establish it as one. As a result, the album qualifies as a resistant concept album, because it contains elements of both narrative and thematic concept albums but refuses to acknowledge itself as one.

However in order to demonstrate how concept albums are different from other popular music releases, two popular music albums will be compared to the three selected rock concept
albums. The two popular music albums will serve as a comparison for popular music in the present, and represent the average music choice for the casual listener or more mainstream tastes. The first popular music album chosen for comparison is Adele’s 2011 release *21*. This album was selected because it is the top selling album of 2011 with over 3.7 million copies sold, and is the winner of six Grammy awards, including “Album of the Year” and “Record of the Year,” for 2012. The second album chosen was *Wasting Light* (2011) by the Foo Fighters. This album was chosen for comparison as it not only fits into the rock genre label that all of the selected concept albums fall under, but it won the “Best Rock Album” Grammy award, while also being the only rock album to be nominated for “Album of the Year” at the 2012 Grammy Awards. These albums will be compared to the rock concept albums to determine what differences exist in their musical and artistic directions.

**Formats**

The physical and digital formats for each of these albums will be examined to find how they support the concept created in the music. As a result of the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry reporting that *iTunes* is the leader in the digital music market with over 10 billion downloads since 2003, the digital versions of all three concept albums will be purchased from the *iTunes* Music Store (Moore, 2011, p. 7). Purchasing the albums from *iTunes* is also beneficial for the study due to the fact that *iTunes* offers the most extras with the sale of a digital album, including bonus songs, exclusive *iTunes LP* content, digital booklets, and music videos. Analysis of the concept album’s physical format will come from both CDs and vinyl records. CDs have been chosen due to their acceptance as today’s standard for physical releases and for their overall convenience for the average listener. However, vinyl records are also included in the study due to an increase in popularity and acceptance. The amount of vinyl
records sold in recent years has increased along with the number of affordable record players, and events like “Record Store Day” have pushed to revive the medium (Passey, 2011). In this study, vinyl records will also represent a symbolic connection to concept albums of the past that can be compared to the digital format.

Analysis

It is beneficial to first lay some groundwork as to what this study will not be examining. Although three different formats of the same album are being analyzed, this study will not be examining which format provides the best sound quality. While the sound quality of various audio formats may be different due to varying levels of audio compression, any audible differences such as increased range of instrumentation will be insignificant to the overall analysis of the project. Next, borrowing a page from Avant-Mier (2010), this project will not be a musicological study. While music and lyrics will be analyzed, no notation will be examined. A closer look at song notation may add something to the overall meaning but the average listener does not understand musical notation or review it when listening to albums, and it is outside the parameters of this current study.

However what this study will try to do is break new ground in terms of examining concept albums within the scope of popular music. While studies have established methods on how to study popular music, past studies on concept albums have not established a viable method with which to analyze concept albums. Furthermore, communication studies have not established methods with which to analyze the communicative traits of concept albums. First, the researcher has decided to use Tagg’s (1982) communication model for popular music as a baseline with which to decipher what the songs on the albums communicate to the listener. Although the revised model by Insip, MacFarlane and Rafferty (2008) takes into account listener feedback,
for the purpose of this study, listener feedback is not as important as the overall analysis of the artifacts themselves. Next, instead of relying solely on textual analysis, the study will take a qualitative content analytical approach, and include music to examine how the music works in conjunction with the lyrics to construct the meaning of the concept album for the listener. In popular music studies, musical interpretation is often overlooked in favor of lyrical interpretation. For the purposes of this study, musical analysis will take into account the sounds that communicate through the use of certain instruments, note patterns, relevant sound effects, and even vocal delivery to see if music can be used to communicate a concept.

A brief analysis of the linear progression of the album will also be performed in order to determine how effective the music and lyrics are at constructing a narrative, providing understanding of a grand theme, or proving that an album contains elements in the music that make it a resistant concept album. Once the musical and lyrical analysis of each album have been completed, the researcher will construct a specific concept in order to see whether the album’s supplementary material supports the concept or not.

Next, previous studies on concept albums have severely lacked studying the entirety of the concept album, by focusing only on lyrical interpretation and notation analysis. As a result of this major flaw, this study also seeks to examine the supplementary material that makes up the concept album. In this study, supplementary material will cover all media associated with the specified concept albums including album covers, internal art work, booklets packaged with the physical albums, e-booklets packaged with the digital albums, websites, and music videos. It is necessary to incorporate these elements into the study because they reflect the modernization of not just concept albums, but of popular music research as a whole (Avant-Mier, 2010). While supplementary material of concept albums in the past were limited to communicating the concept
through the album artwork and live performances, today’s concept albums have much greater resources that they can utilize to get the concept across. Use of these new resources is expected for all music albums so that they might reach consumers outside of their core audience. As a result, the inclusion of these new resources in the study is necessary for understanding how concept albums effectively communicate in the digital age. Therefore in this study, these items will be examined for how well they support the concept that was determined by the researcher.

Finally, just as previous studies on music and communication such as those done by Avant-Mier (2010) use a general discursive analysis to study how music creates meaning, this research project will also use discursive analysis to determine the meaning behind the creation of the concept album and how it is received by the audience. Since concept albums focus on communicating a specific message to the listener, their creation must be planned out more than a mainstream music release. The examination of discourse will aim to show how artists perceive the construction of a concept album and their reasons for creating them. Discourse regarding the construction of the album will be gathered from artist interviews that have been published by separate media outlets and, if available, postings from the artists themselves on their websites. The discourse regarding how the album is received will be selected from music critic and user reviews found on Metacritic.com. Reviews from this site will be filtered to focus on including only those that make specific mention of the selected album as a concept album, whether they strongly support or critique it, and these reviews will be used in the study to represent an overall view of public reception of the album.
Chapter 4
Analysis

On November 30th, 2012, Pink Floyd’s concept album The Wall (1979) will turn thirty-three years old. The music on the album has stood the test of time rather well, with tracks like “Comfortably Numb,” “Another Brick in the Wall, Pt. 2,” and “Young Lust,” still receiving a substantial amount of airplay on mainstream rock radio. In spite of this, The Wall suffers from the same problem that Thick as a Brick (1972) suffers from: The album’s packaging has never been translated into digital form. While The Wall (1979) has been available on iTunes for several years, an adequate digital representation of the album’s iconic cover and gatefold sleeves has not. However, that all changed on September 23rd, 2011, when the “Deluxe Experience Edition” of The Wall was released on iTunes.

Using Apple’s iTunes LP program, the “Deluxe Experience Edition” finally offered users the chance to interact with a digital version of the album’s gatefold sleeve. However, for older users who may already have physical copies to examine, how do you make something old new again? If you use technology, you adjust the experience to be more interactive, and you offer new content. The “Deluxe Experience Edition” offers a new way of experiencing the album for older listeners, while it provides high-tech involvement that younger audiences can appreciate. With a concept album like The Wall taking a step into the digital age over thirty years later, it provides a glimpse into what the results might be for the concept albums that are analyzed in this chapter.

Before the rock concept albums are analyzed, it is necessary to first examine two mainstream popular music albums. By examining mainstream popular music albums first, a
benchmark can be established for how concept albums are different from other popular music albums. In turn, the difference between popular music albums and concept albums will show why it is necessary to study concept albums.

21 (2011)

The first popular music album selected for this study is 21 (2011) by Adele. Aside from being chosen for being the most Grammy award winning and commercially successful album of 2011, 21 has been chosen because it is not a concept album, nor is it a rock album. Thus, 21 serves as a good example of popular music in general. The music on 21 is a mixture of pop and rhythm & blues, while Adele’s singing is characteristic of soul.

“Rolling in the Deep” is the subject’s response to being dumped and cheated on by her lover, in which she vows to make his life hell for doing her wrong. “Rumour Has It” tells a complicated story of the subject’s ex-boyfriend leaving his new partner to return to her, yet she reveals that she is leaving her ex-boyfriend for someone else. In this song, her delivery is rather smug and confident, as if she knew he lover would be back and now it’s her turn to lead him along. “Turning Tables” tells of the subject’s abusive relationship and her resistance to return to it. The music in “Turning Tables” is different from the first two songs on the album in that the music now reflects the melancholy lyrical subject matter. Most notably, there is no aggressive percussion, and the accompanying instruments only are piano and strings. The story in “Don’t You Remember” is about the subject’s desire to know why her former lover has just walked out of her life and forgotten her. The music in this song is similar to a pop/country ballad. As Adele sings the verses, she is accompanied by acoustic guitars. However, once she reaches the chorus, percussion and piano are added to the mix. In “Set Fire to the Rain” the subject reminisces over a relationship that she thought was perfect but ultimately turned out not to be. The image of setting
fire to the rain can be seen as her setting fire to old pictures that she has cried over. The musical style in “Set Fire to the Rain” has returned to the aggressive R&B style of the first two songs on the album. “He Won’t Go” is about the subject’s resistance to move on from an unhealthy relationship. Despite the relationship not working, the subject and her significant other refuse to give up on each other. Musically, the song has a classic soul/smooth R&B feel to it as it’s aggressive, but not as aggressive as the previous song.

The subject’s significant other leaves her again in “Take It All.” Accompanied by only a piano and a choir, she resigns to let him leave instead of trying to win him back. “I’ll Be Waiting,” focuses on the subject’s desire to be taken back by her partner after she cheats, although she places the blame for her infidelity on extenuating circumstances. Musically, the song is a mixture of pop-rock and soul. In “One and Only,” the subject seems to have fallen in love with a new person but both are cautious about entering the relationship as both have had bad experiences with love. She expresses her intentions to win his trust, and prove that she is the one for him. The musical arrangement in this song comes across as a mixture of jazz and R&B.

“Lovesong” is Adele’s cover of an original song by the Cure. Judging by Adele’s musical stylings and the theme that has been presented so far in the album, it can be suggested that she is no longer in a relationship and misses the person she was with. The music itself has been re-interpreted as a bossa nova-jazz groove. In “Someone Like You,” the subject has finally accepted that her former lover has moved on and, as a result, she is at peace with the decision to move on. Musically, the resolution is expressed in the use of a sole piano backing her up.

Taking into consideration the content of the songs, 21 (2011) could be considered a thematic concept album since all of the songs relate to a larger theme of love and relationships. Additionally, Adele sings entirely from her perspective. Accordingly, one can assume that since
every song is from sung her perspective, the songs are part of a larger experience. Furthermore, the music generally matches whatever emotional theme is presented in the lyrics.

**Wasting Light (2011)**

The second popular music album included in this study is *Wasting Light* by the Foo Fighters. As 21 (2011) serves as a benchmark of popular music in general, *Wasting Light* serves as a benchmark of mainstream popular rock music. As a result, it is beneficial to the study to include *Wasting Light* because it is in the same genre as the selected concept albums, and differences in the construction of the concept albums can be compared with more mainstream popular music albums.

*Wasting Light* opens with “Bridge Burning,” a heavy rock song in which the subject triumphantly declares his separation from his romantic partner. “Rope” is another heavy rock song that deals a subject who is pursuing a romantic relationship with someone. However, rather than being the one who’s being pursued, he’s now doing the pursuing since he’s coming undone for this person. His efforts to get her to commit to a relationship with him are proving fruitless as she’s indecisive and leaves him hanging. “Dear Rosemary” is a softer rock song with a slower tempo, that can be interpreted as the subject wanting to leave his significant other because the relationship is no longer working due to her unfaithfulness and commanding attitude. The subject references not being able to grow in her shadow, as if she is holding him back. He also references that she is guilty of lying to him and getting away with it. The song “White Limo” has a hardcore/thrash punk rock sound to it, including singing that is heavily distorted. It can be interpreted as being about living an extravagant, fast-paced life that’s full of dangers. The lyrical focus of “Arlandria” seems to be on an argument between the subject and his significant other
that has been blown out of proportion. A cause of the argument could be her jealousy over some fame that he has.

“These Days” is a song that displays soft rock tendencies during a good majority of the song, with hard rock tendencies taking over during the chorus. The lyrical focus of the song seems to be about dealing with a person who does not know the true meaning of life and only sees the end and not the journey. In a sense, Person A states that life will eventually end and he/she’s okay with it, while Person B thinks that Person A only values the end because he/she has never experienced life. Meanwhile, “Back & Forth” is about a subject who has become confrontational in a relationship. He references biting his lip and holding back for years, but now urges the other person to confront him the same way he is confronting them. The musical style of the track sounds similar to grunge, only slightly more upbeat. “A Matter of Time” sounds like a pop-punk track in both music and lyrics, as the song once again seems to focus on an argument developing between the subject and someone else in a relationship. “Miss the Misery” is again about a relationship, as now the subject is leaving his partner who has been too controlling of him. The music in “Miss the Misery” seems to be leaning toward 80s rock influence. “I Should Have Known” is about the subject finding out that his lover cheated on him. The music from this track begins as the softest on the album, but eventually builds and crescendos into hard rock near the end of the track. “Walk” is another song that exhibits both soft-rock and hard-rock styles, and the lyrical content seems to suggest that it’s about falling in love with someone new after a bad breakup.

_Wasting Light_ does seem to have some sort of thematic connection throughout the lyrics, as most seem to be based around relationships. However, while the lyrics are questionable, the one thing that is consistent throughout the song is the style of rock that the band plays. Whether
through low-key passages or a calm lyrical delivery, the style of rock is a mixture of soft and heavy, with little variation.

Interestingly, although both albums are not considered to be concept albums, _21_ (2011) and _Wasting Light_ (2011) both contain patterns that could be considered concepts. Lyrically, _21_ clearly tells multiple tales about a woman’s experiences with love and relationships. Musically, the message is carried quite well through music that supports the lyrics. When the character is initially upset in “Rolling in the Deep,” the music communicates the emotion through the use of charging rhythms and a full band adopting a more intense sound. When the character is at peace in “Someone Like You,” the lone piano’s style of playing reflects the calm and tranquil message of the lyrics. Meanwhile, the lyrics in _Wasting Light_ communicate a concept of love and relationships as well, but the music does a good deal to disguise the theme. The band might adopt a soft-rock style on tracks like “Miss the Misery,” and “Walk,” but the music still sounds heavy enough that one might not consider the songs to be about love.

**David Comes to Life (2011)**

_David Comes to Life_ (2011) is a concept album about love. However, unlike _21_ (2011) and _Wasting Light_ (2011), _David Comes to Life_ is characterized by telling a single linear tale instead of multiple non-linear tales. First, it is helpful to understand why Fucked Up chose to create a concept album about love instead of an album that is a collection of love songs. For one, Fucked Up embraces the concept album label wholeheartedly. The band’s biography on the Matador Records webpage states:

In the punk wars the rock opera was held up as the ultimate example of decadent capitalist-pig rock, the kind of opulent, navel-gazing fodder of faded rock dictators clinging onto power by their filthy fingernails and their tediously long records. It breaks the strict rules of punk and is precisely the reason why Fucked Up have presented this mammoth work. (Matador Records, 2011).
With this statement, Fucked Up convey the notion that they do not adhere to the conventions of the punk rock genre, because if being punk is about having no rules and going against the grain, then that means going against even those traits that pigeonhole them as a punk band. For example, their willingness to go against the grain is evidenced by their name, which was selected so the band would have less of a chance of selling out to corporate entities (Berman, 2011). The biography goes on to insinuate that Fucked Up are in the same vein as The Kinks, The Pretty Things, The Who, Hawkwind, and Crass, who were all forefathers to concept albums that were “darkly powerful works that let you enter a parallel universe” such as *David Comes to Life* (2011). However, an album (let alone a concept album) is different from the fair that Fucked Up usually offers. The band is known for regularly releasing vinyl singles as opposed to full length albums. According to singer Damian “Pink Eyes” Abraham, this reflects on not only the standard of punk music, but the standard of popular music as well.

Seven inches are the ideal format for any sort of pop-based music, which punk and hardcore is. The three-minute song is the great contribution of pop music. So for us, that’s why we did 7-inch singles. I can name a thousand great punk singles, but I can probably only name a hundred great punk albums. It’s harder to make an album. (McCormack, 2009)

In spite of this, Fucked Up looked to create an album that was a “hardcore musical,” as a complete joke (McCormack, 2009). According to an interview with AVClub.com:

We kept joking about it until after *Chemistry Of Common Life* (2008); there was no way we felt like we could live up to the praise that record got ... We decided at that point that since people would already be disappointed, why don’t we just do this crazy rock-opera idea, and that way, if it blows up in our faces, at least we tried it when no one was expecting anything. (Hyden, 2011)

For Fucked Up, the concept album is the ultimate gamble in overcoming comparisons to a successful album. In the case of *David Comes to Life* (2011), the gamble meant overcoming *The Chemistry of Common Life* (2008), an album which won Fucked Up the $20,000 Polaris Music Prize in 2009 for its high artistic merit (Briehan, 2009). According to Abraham, part of the
reason a concept album is such a huge gamble is because creatively there is nowhere to go after that point. He insists that once a group releases a rock opera, they’ve “showed it all at that point,” and it cannot be dialed back (Hyden, 2011). One important thing to note is that Abraham classifies *David Comes to Life* (2011) as a rock opera instead of a concept album:

I think there’s less pretension to a rock opera than a concept record, and I think the term ‘concept record’ is almost a cop out. You can say any record is a ‘concept record,’ you can find a concept with any record, where if you call it a rock opera you are definitely making a commitment to form. (Larson, 2011)

The form of the rock opera also makes it easier to put together an album, according to guitarist Mike “10,000 Marbles” Haliechuk:

It’s like writing essays in school, it’s easier to do something if you know what you’re supposed to be doing ... it’s just a framework, and then you color it in. To me, making this album was a lot easier. (Berman, 2011)

Guitarist Sandy “Mustard Gas” Miranda also expresses interest in the creativity that doing a concept record allows:

We try and do things differently every time we go in working on a new idea ... so we thought, why not go in and play with the style of writing and make it more narrative-based? So really that’s what it was. We’ve been doing this for 10 years and the last thing we want to do is play with the same things, so this was just another way that we could experiment and also see if we could even pull it off. (Sanders, 2011)

Abraham adds to that by saying that for Fucked Up, the idea of doing a concept record takes on a different interpretation from how other bands might conceive and create a concept album:

It just became an opportunity to reassess how we think about this band and whether or not we think this band is an extension of our own personalities or as sort of a larger exercise to things we’ve been contemplating. I think this album gives us the opportunity to do things we’ve never been able to do, which is talk about very specific historical times, the moments in those times, and how specifically they affect people. (Larson, 2011)

One way in which *David Come to Life* (2011) affects people is that it’s become a more personal album for the band. Abraham had to draw from his own sad experiences in order to bring the characters to life. These sad experiences serve as the basis for the album’s narrative, which
Miranda finds difficult to follow. According to her, following the lyrics does not reveal the full narrative but it requires the listener to piece together a story of “love, lost love, and revelation” (Sanders, 2011).

However, in order to communicate the concept of a tale of love lost and regained, the audience has to understand what the band is trying to say. With a user score of 7.9/10 on rating site Metacritic.com, the audience generally accepts of the concept of David Comes to Life. One user dubbed David Comes to Life a rock-opera masterpiece that is a “modern version of The Wall (1979)” (Marcbackman, 2011). Another user cited the lyrical content for enhancing the concept of an album that, as a whole, was considered to be stellar (Goodz2, 2011). On the other hand, just as the Foo Fighters’ style of rock masks the theme of love, users expressed the same problem occurring in David Comes to Life (2011) with Abraham’s singing. One user felt the “angst ridden vocals” did not fit the music, comparing it to “Arcade Fire being fronted by the Ultimate Warrior” (TAE, 2011). Meanwhile user “2hip2beahipster” loved the instrumentation, but hated that Abraham’s singing style makes the narrative hard to follow (2hip2beahipster, 2011).

Amongst music publication critics, the album has an approval rating of 86% on Metacritic.com, which is the highest among the three rock concept albums. The most critical review comes from TinyMixTapes.com, which calls the album an “overproduced mess” characterized by “overlong, overstuffed songs and arrangements, ridiculous album concept and lyrical conceit” (Tamec, 2011). Meanwhile, NOW Magazine gave the album a perfect score, calling it Fucked Up’s magnum opus that uncovers new layers with each listen (Trapunski, 2011). Prefix Magazine gave the album a 75% approval rating (citing that the album is not based on a story, but rather, on a concept), and praises the album for redefining what is considered pop music (Fiander, 2011).
From the discourse, it can be determined that *David Comes to Life* represents something that Fucked Up value quite highly: limitless artistic creativity. Just as the band chose to name themselves Fucked Up as a way of preventing commercialization, the choice to release a concept album reflects a desire to value artistic creativity more than mainstream acceptance. As seen in the reviews, some consider *David Comes to Life* to be completely overdone, while others consider it to be the band’s best work. Above all, the album is meant to be art, and the reviews demonstrate that people have different opinions on what constitutes art.

**Album Analysis**

Since Fucked Up themselves classify *David Comes to Life* (2011) as a rock opera, it must adhere to a certain form. Most notably, it must tell a grand narrative throughout the course of an entire album as opposed to within one song. The songs must act as scenes that make up the larger production, much like a musical.

The album begins with the instrumental introduction “Let Her Rest” that starts with a repeating tone similar to an alarm clock, followed by guitar, piano, and bass entering the track at short intervals. Eventually the beeping alarm morphs into the sound of a guitar that plays out of tempo from the other instruments, until it fades out and a heavier guitar riff fades in over it. The song “Queen of Hearts” is told from three points of view and as the characters, setting, and story are established, we learn that weary factory worker David and protestors Veronica fall in love outside of the factory. “Queen of Hearts,” segues directly into “Under My Nose,” a song in which the narrator sings of David’s newfound happiness due to falling in love, repeatedly singing, “It’s all been worth it,” to demonstrate how falling in love with Veronica has cancelled out every negative relationship from his past. David himself chimes in with “used to wake up screaming, stolen from our dreams; now I wake up beaming and the world just gleams,” to show
his contentment with being in the honeymoon phase of his relationship (Fucked Up, 2011). However, towards the end of the song David anticipates something bad happening, which leads into “The Other Shoe,” where David’s fears are realized as he and Veronica breakup. As a result, David returns to the pessimistic demeanor he had before meeting Veronica and sees only the negative in life.

In “Turn the Season” the narrator tries to point out to David that good always comes from bad. Meanwhile “Running on Nothing” is David’s proclamation that love is useless and therefore not for him. The humming of distorted guitars segues directly into “Remember My Name” where the narrator makes a case for understanding David’s suffering by making different comparisons about how it is better to be alone than to experience heartache. At this point, it can be assumed that Veronica has died, because David implores her to take his heart with her to the grave. Meanwhile, a shift in the narrative occurs because although the narrator makes a case for understanding David’s suffering, he also begins to place the blame for Veronica’s death on David. The narrator suggests that had David never loved her, she would not have been included in his story and she would still be alive.

During the calm and reflective acoustic guitar introduction for “A Slanted Tone,” a modified version of the alarm clock tone from the beginning of the album can be heard faintly before electric guitars take over the acoustic guitar’s riff. A new narrator appears and reveals the other narrator’s name to be Octavio. The new narrator states that her purpose is to expose Octavio as an impartial narrator, because he is trying to dictate the story without being included so that he can avoid the consequences of being an involved party. This new character shows sympathy for David’s plight, calling him an “innocent man reduced to a plea,” and furthermore,
breaks the fourth-wall by addressing the audience directly to let them know that David’s misery is not permanent.

Octavio once again takes over as the main storyteller in “Serve Me Right,” and he pleads innocence and claims that he has no control over David’s actions. Instead, he only sings about what he sees. However, Octavio blames David even more for contributing to Veronica’s death and suggests that the perfect punishment for David would be to:

Take his life for a refrain, make the verses his domain, put him inside of the frame and have him tell the tale again. A life in paper he will serve. The correction he deserves. A lifetime to recite, I think it serves him right ... more power in the sentence than in the power of the word, his time into tenses and his actions into verbs. (Fucked Up, 2011)

Ultimately, David surrenders, and accepts that he is responsible for Veronica’s death, as he stole love from life. Octavio is the sole voice in “Truth I Know,” a song in which he takes a turn breaking the fourth wall by defending his actions and by saying that although his actions are not pure, they provide the best outcome for everyone involved. He continues to vilify David by calling him the “dimmest bulb in the factory,” which insults David, but also clarifies in the context of the album that the factory at which David works makes light bulbs. The guitar alarm clock sound segues directly into “Life in Paper,” where David states that he is aware that he is part of a story which Octavio leads with a “crooked compass,” and a “slanted motive” (Fucked Up, 2011). David’s frustration leads him to question the existence of a fair God that would recognize that he has suffered enough.

David finally manages to clash physically with Octavio in a boxing ring on a “Ship of Fools.” However, since Octavio makes the rules, David accepts that he can never win as he’s only a “servant to the story.” David acknowledges that love has caused him too much pain and suffering in “A Little Death.” He considers love to be just a cliché and an emotion that people blow out of proportion because they experience it themselves, and concedes that being alone
from the start is the best way to avoid heartache. “I Was There” is sung from the point-of-view of the nameless narrator who exposed Octavio for his biased narration earlier in the album. The narrator admits to seeing Octavio kill Veronica with a bomb, and she reveals that she could not save Veronica because she is just another character in the story. Ultimately, the narrator turns out to be a woman who had a prior romantic relationship with David in which she suffered heartbreak, as she states:

I have the same scars from when part of me died but I lived and came out on the other side ... I saw the mind of my first love destroyed, the detonation that pulled him into the void. (Fucked Up, 2011)

The guitar alarm clock is heard again as a direct segue into “Inside a Frame,” a song in which Octavio declares not only his innocence, but David’s as well. Octavio recognizes his role as an impartial narrator, but claims that he never wanted to be the villain and that a greater force told him to “simply follow the story and remember the lines.” Having overstepped his boundaries, Octavio asserts that he is a false prophet and reveals that he too has been hurt by love in the past. This admission links him romantically with Veronica, and explains why he has made David suffer.

David’s former love interest appears again in “The Recursive Girl,” and speaks of her past experience with love, determining that even though some relationships end it is best to keep memories to look back on instead of erasing them. In the end she reveals that she still has feelings for David, but recognizes that by switching perspectives she sees David as the heartbroken man who loves another, just as she used to be the heartbroken woman who loved him. “One More Night” allows David the opportunity to speak with Veronica one last time. David accepts that he misses Veronica and wishes his negativity had not led him to try and forget every moment they shared. The ghost of Veronica appears to David, professing her love for him.
and urging him to move on but never forget the memories they shared. As a result, David concedes that if memories keep her alive, he’ll live in his head where she’ll never die.

The last track on the album, “Lights Go Up,” is sung from an older David’s point-of-view and provides a sense of closure as he looks back on his life. Musically, David’s age is reflected in the first part of the track in the way his voice has become a worn-and-weary growl, as compared to the other tracks where the growl is consistently powerful. David accepts that he lived a life he was dealt instead of the one he wanted, but admits that life was best when he was in love with Veronica. He also makes the case that he would go through everything again exactly as it happened because he has been through it before. This sets up the lyrical return to the beginning of the story as the last thing David sings:

It’s the morning again at the factory, someone will meet me there and rip me out of my dream. Warm my blood before I say goodbye, a new sun in the sky and love will never die. (Fucked Up, 2011)

Musically, the last few seconds of “Lights Go Up” close the album exactly as it began, with the repeated beeping of the alarm clock leading right back into the beginning of the album.

_David Comes to Life_ (2011) is narrative driven concept album about David, a factory worker who goes through a complicated series of events involving love, loss, guilt, anger, despair, and finally redemption, that ultimately lead him to discover the true value of love. While David’s story is the main concept, part of the concept involves the way that the album is structured. The structure is important because one must listen to the album twice in order to fully understand that David’s story is a never-ending cycle where he relives the same memories every day. Lyrics in the songs “Queen of Hearts,” “Running on Nothing,” “Serve Me Right,” “I Was There,” “One More Night,” and “Lights Go Up” all foreshadow the cyclical nature of the story. Even song titles like “Let Her Rest,” and “The Recursive Girl,” hint to the listener that the story doesn’t end when the last track is over.
There are also many allusions to David’s story being told as a theater production. David makes mention of this feeling of self-awareness in “Lights Go Up,” where he claims his relationship with Veronica “wasn’t a love for an audience” (Fucked Up, 2011). David concludes that there is still much unknown “after the lights go up and the curtains close,” but he tells himself to “empty the theater, rush through the door, start living the life you never could before” (Fucked Up, 2011). Musically, idea of the narrative being presented as a play can be seen in the use of certain devices related to Greek tragedies. For example, “Turn the Season” is the only song on the album where a chorus similar to those in Greek theatre is used. Since *David Comes to Life* can be classified as a tragedy, it makes perfect sense to use the chorus in the song. One can also view the re-appearance of Veronica’s ghost in “One More Night” as the use of deus ex machina. Just as the album is about to end with David remorseful that he no longer has Veronica, her re-appearance provides him with the solution of living in his memories where he can always be with her. The divine intervention on Veronica’s part allows the story to conclude on a happy note so it comes full circle and returns to the happiness that is felt at the beginning of the album.

One issue that can be raised musically is that much like *Wasting Light*, the music remains a rather static. With the exception of introductions in songs like “A Slanted Tone,” most of the songs do not sound like they would communicate the themes of love and loss. The one song where the music fits the narrative of the lyrics rather well is in “Ship of Fools,” where a speed punk style of playing supports the idea that David and Octavio have come to blows. Abraham’s singing also adds a bit to the confusion as it is unorthodox to hear growling convey songs about love. However, the musical presentation is all part of the band’s signature sound, and redefines the boundaries of what is expected from a rock opera about love.
**Album Booklets and Art**

For both vinyl and compact disc versions, the album has two covers. The main cover for the album is a picture of the two light bulbs that form a heart. In the vinyl version, this is packaged as a 12 inch x 12 inch card that acts as a cover sheet for the booklet. In the compact disc version, the cover is the paper sleeve that surrounds the hard plastic jewel case. On the back of the card and printed inside of the paper sleeve is a long form poem which is the band’s view regarding the album. The second album cover shows a reflection of the band in which only their backs are visible as a busy scene plays out in front of them inside a dance studio.

The vinyl version differs from the CD version in that it is packaged with a large, two-sided foldout. On one side of the foldout is a poem, and on the other side are the liner notes. On the liner notes side, a list of five characters for the story is presented with each one containing a subheading. The CD booklet contains the picture of the second album cover as the first page, and the poem as the last page. The inside of the CD booklet resembles a theater playbook as the lyrics are divided by pages, with a song occupying each page. The CD booklet displays the list of characters under the song “Let Her Rest.” David, Veronica, and Octavio are all identified in the music but two characters, Vivian Benson and Nick Fenstle, are never mentioned by name. Instead, Vivian appears as the unnamed female narrator who reveals Octavio’s motives and her past relationship with David. While at no point does Nick appear in the story, it can be inferred that since he is associated with the tagline “This is the truest road,” he is the one crafting the story and thereby putting Octavio in the villain role that he does not want.

The liner notes also include the songs and their lyrics divided into four acts, establishing *David Comes to Life* as a four-act rock opera. Under each act title and each song title are subheadings that offer a description of the coming events, such as the subheading of Act Three.
which states that, “Another character is revealed, putting Veronica’s death into question;” while the subheading for the first song in Act Three, “Truth I Know,” states that, “Octavio, the narrator, is revealed as a participant in the events of the play.”

**Web Presence**

Moving beyond album cover art, there is no supplementary content offered with the digital download. However, this is where *David Comes to Life*’s online presence plays a major role. As the digital version of the album does not come with an e-booklet, the band has instead managed to use both a Twitter page and a website to offer supplementary material so that the digital listener is not left out of the experience. For example, the same long form poem that appears inside of the compact disc’s paper sleeve and the back of the vinyl record’s card appears on the *David Comes to Life* Twitter page in its entirety. Each tweet is a verse, separated just as they are in the physical manifestations. The main focus of the *David Comes to Life* webpage seems to be offering only what is essential to the understanding of the album, as the website provides character listings, act listings, and song lyrics.

Another thing that the *David Comes to Life* website offers is downloadable posters of the characters that appear in the story. Each poster features one of the five characters in a different setting, along with their specified subheading and a set of lyrics. Some of the lyrics are not present in the booklet, but the reason for this is that Fucked Up released several 7-inch singles as exposition and epilogue to the *David Comes to Life* narrative. A theme that also appears in the images just as it does in the album cover, are light bulbs. In each poster a light bulb can be seen, such as the light bulb reflecting off of Vivian’s eye, and the lone light bulb that burns off to Octavio’s side.
**Music Videos**

Three music videos have been released for *David Comes to Life*, with each one tying into the narrative of the album in different ways. The first music video, released for the track “Queen of Hearts,” takes place at a schoolhouse in the English countryside. After opening with a quick clip of a student drawing the Fucked Up logo on the board, a fire is shown burning in the distance, followed by a teacher observing the fire from the doorway of the schoolhouse. The teacher then walks into the classroom and tells the students about the song “David meets Veronica,” which she says is about “hope” even though “war is on the horizon” and “David’s heart is full of love so he doesn’t see the big picture yet.” (MatadorRecords, 2011) The teacher instructs the students to sing and be mindful of their audience, referring to an old man with a scraggly beard sitting in the back of the classroom. The teacher presses the play button on a boom-box, and the song “Queen of Hearts” begins to play. For the next several minutes, the teacher frantically conducts, albeit in a serious manner, as the students sing along to “Queen of Hearts.” The boys sing the male parts while the girls wait patiently for their turn, and the boys sit out when the girls sing the female parts. When the video reaches the musical breakdown portion, the teacher suddenly snaps out of her intense conducting stupor, and the camera pans around her to reveal a man with earphones holding a boom microphone, indicating that this has all been a production. The teacher walks down the aisle and passes a production assistant who assists the boys with their singing. As she reaches the end, she stops to high-five the scraggly bearded visitor. Just as the album is recursive in that the end goes right back into the beginning, the video is recursive in that the last shot ends exactly as it began: focusing on the fire out in the distance.

The next video was “The Other Shoe,” and it focuses entirely on the relationship between David and Veronica, and Octavio’s interjection in the story. The video also features interspersed
shots of the band walking around the city. Essentially, this video is a condensed version of the entire narrative of the album. However, just as Miranda pointed out earlier that the various points of the narrative needed to be connected by the listener in order to be understood, this music video requires the viewer to do the same. One way this is achieved in the video is by focusing on Veronica’s appearance. For example, when Veronica has purple hair, she is still involved with Octavio; when she has brown hair, she is involved with David; and when she wears a red dress and walks the train tracks, she is dead. The video opens with David walking with a suitcase while the next shot shows him watching a newscast in which a reporter gives Brydesdale as the location of the story, and describes David’s sense of being:

Originally envisioned by its founders as a utopian garden city, Brydesdale has since fallen on hard times. Here the seasons never change, all the people shrug like weeds, and the angry thud of steel toe boots echoing through the streets. (MatadorRecords, 2011)

After the news report, purple-haired Veronica is shown opening a briefcase to show something to David, while the next shot shows a brown-haired Veronica walking with the briefcase and looking extremely worried. Finally, she is shown walking the train tracks in funeral attire. David is then shown from behind, walking through the factory with his head carelessly bobbing from side-to-side with each step. We next see the moment where David and a purple-haired Veronica meet on the sidewalk and fall in love, followed by David and Veronica walking down the street holding each other, laughing, and kissing. Octavio makes his appearance halfway through the music video when he appears next to Veronica in a lift. He is then shown playing the role of observer as he stands in the street and looks through a window at Veronica and David kissing. The next shot shows him running, possibly after having killed Veronica with the bomb. David is then shown using a typewriter, possibly trying to change the outcome of his story as he did in the music. However, Octavio sees what David has written, throws it away, and rewrites the story himself. Vivian appears to David in the mirror but she is gone as soon as he turns around, and the
next scene shows a smiling purple-haired Veronica and disturbed-looking Octavio walking down the street together. The next shots show David crying, followed by Octavio pursuing him. Finally the last scene of the video shows Veronica being reunited with David, while Octavio observes and walks up the stairs to hatch his plan.

The final music video created for *David Comes to Life* (2011) was for the track “Turn the Season.” The video communicates the overall concept of the album through much of the content that appears in the video. The video takes place in a dance studio during the photo shoot for the album cover of *David Comes to Life*. While the band sit and get photographed, the camera person travels around the studio recording different people, including the man who portrays Octavio in the poster, the scruggly bearded man from the “Queen of Hearts” video, and the man who portrays Nick Fenstle in the poster. At one point the camera pans down and in front of Fenstle is the script for the music video. Just as David becomes aware that he is involved in a play in the album, the theme appears in the music video as the script details the cameras movements straight down to the directions saying, “Camera pans down to see these notes.”

The final album-related event in the video refers to the bomb blast that kills Veronica. This occurs when Damian suddenly gets up and walks away from the rest of the band and over to the window. As he gets to the window, an explosion goes off, leaving the dance studio in darkness save for the light bulbs. While everyone heads toward the window, the camera focuses once again on Nick Fenstle as he calmly remains seated at the table. As he turns and looks directly at the camera, the footage suddenly cuts out.

Thus, *David Comes to Life* presents a concept that is not new in the scope of concept albums, but it does enough to be different while remaining traditional. Compared to 21 (2011) and *Wasting Light* (2011), *David Comes to Life* shows a greater cohesion between tracks. *David
Comes to Life also tells a specific story with defined characters that are built up progressively through the songs, while 21 tells stories from a first-person point-of-view but without any real forward progress. Additionally, whereas bands in the past have modified their sound when releasing a concept record to appeal to a mass audience, Fucked Up chooses not to. Instead, they present a punk rock opera about love and loss that doesn’t sound like one. The band plays a heavy mixture of punk, alternative, and classic rock that sounds completely uncharacteristic for mourning the death of one’s true love; while Abraham growls every lyric, no matter how romantic it is intended to be. The album booklets and website also show a great connection to the concept by not being so elaborate that they take away from the music. Instead the booklets are rather plain and simple to understand. They provide only information that enhances the concept of the album, such as the booklet being made to look like a theatre playbook. Meanwhile the music videos focus on supporting specific elements of the concept. One video focuses on the theme of David’s story as a production, another focuses on the story itself, and the final one presents different references to the narrative.

Year Zero (2007)

To break the string of albums that deal with the subject of love, up next is an album about dystopian governments and the end of humanity. Year Zero (2007) by Nine Inch Nails is a thematic concept album set in the year 2022, in which the United States has become a Christian-nation. Since the nation has been reborn, the year 2022 has become year 0000. So how did this concept record come about? Just as the album David Comes to Life (2011) is a musical experiment for Fucked Up, the album Year Zero (2007) is no different for Nine Inch Nails:

This record began as an experiment with noise on a laptop in a bus on tour somewhere. That sound led to a daydream about the end of the world. That daydream stuck with me and over time revealed itself to be much more. I believe sometimes you have a choice in what inspiration you choose to follow and other times you really don’t. This record is the
latter. Once I turned into it, everything fell into place as if it were meant to be. The record
turned out to be more than just a record in scale, as you will see over time.
(Montgomery, 2007)

But before Year Zero, Nine Inch Nails had prior experience releasing a concept album with The
Downward Spiral (1994). However, while The Downward Spiral focused on addiction,
destruction, and ultimately suicide, Reznor had hoped to release another concept album in 2005
that focused on dealing with overcoming addiction and getting sober:

I’d come up with this kind of elaborate storyline, and the record was gonna be a concept
record that had a number of pretentious elements to it (and) I was gonna talk about multi-
layered reality and waking up in a dream you can’t wake up out of, and eventually
finding acceptance after you go through this period of trying to fight it. It was all kind of
a big analogy for me getting sober. (Ultimate-Guitar.com, 2007)

However, while With Teeth (2005) touched on some elements of overcoming addiction and
achieving sobriety, it ultimately turned into a collection of unrelated songs instead of a fully-
formed concept album. However, Trent Reznor still looked to communicate a bigger message to
an audience. With most of his songwriting inspiration coming from his journal entries, the
thought of creating a concept album led him to look for inspiration elsewhere (Amska, 2007):

When it came to write the words I really wanted to focus on something that was at the
forefront of my consciousness which, as an American, I’m appalled by the behavior of
our government and the direction it has taken and the direction that’s taken everyone else
in the world and its arrogance ... I decided to write an essay about where the world might
be if we continue down the path that we’re on with a neo-con-esque government doing
whatever it pleases, which seems to be the way it works over here. (Gregory, 2007)

As a result, Reznor took the chance to create something that was not part of a generic collection
of songs but instead had a single meaning that listeners could focus on. For Reznor part of that
meant establishing a context the album would take place in, one that provided listeners not with a
view of the present but one that placed a “what if” question mark over everything:

I tried to imagine what the world might be like in the future, maybe 15 years or so in the
future. Just as an experiment I wrote out a synopsis of what life might be like in that time,
politically, relationship-wise, state of current events, state of the world, ecologically,
spiritually ... songs that turned out like different points of view of people who might be in that situation with varying opinions. (Amska, 2007)

For Reznor, creation of the concept album is rooted in its use as a tool for social change, just as some concept albums of the past raised awareness for certain causes. While Year Zero (2007) directly addresses corruption and the state of world affairs regarding the U.S.A.’s future, it does so in a way that is not too direct, with the focus being on possible future events that could occur if actions are not taken in the present. The concept album also provides the perfect setting for Nine Inch Nails to create the world of Year Zero. As mentioned earlier, one of Reznor’s goals was to create the world’s largest album cover with Year Zero, so that digital listeners would feel involved in the concept without having to buy a physical copy to read the liner notes. Since concept albums allow more overall creativity than a typical mainstream music album, Reznor was able to accomplish that goal.

However the creation of the world’s largest album cover also led to Year Zero’s alternate reality game being thought of as a marketing tool to help sell the album. This is something that Reznor did not appreciate as the game was less about marketing and more about immersion:

The term ‘marketing’ sure is a frustrating one for me at the moment. What you are now starting to experience IS ‘Year Zero.’ It’s not some kind of gimmick to get you to buy a record – it IS the art form. (Victoria Times Colonist, 2007)

For many users, Year Zero does represent the art form as reception of the album has been mostly positive. Of the three rock concept albums, Year Zero has the highest user rating at 8.9/10. One user gave Year Zero a perfect score and praised Reznor for the lyrics, saying that the lyrics were better than ever now that Reznor was writing outside of himself (AviD, 2007). Another user called the album brilliant for its use of a concept that is a problem in the present and for music that served as “beautiful melodic destruction” (JasonL, 2007). However Year Zero does have its fair share of people who do not enjoy the concept. One user criticized the music and the concept
by claiming that the album would not satisfy fans, and that the creation of concept albums about
dystopian futures was best left to rock band Queensryche (WestonT, 2007). Another called the
album “lyrically weak,” and went so far as dubbing the album the “biggest disappointment of
2007” (SteveT, 2007).

Overall, the album has a 76% approval rating from music critics. A positive review in
Stylus Magazine categorized Year Zero as a “forward-thinking” rock album in which every song
is a chapter that presents a bleak future (Inskeep, 2007). DrownedInSound.com called the album
a journey from beginning to end, and cited the songs for standing on their own yet making more
sense when combined with the rest of Year Zero’s related content (Nettleton, 2007). One of the
more critical reviews came from CokeMachineGlow.com and focused on the lack of depth and
originality of the concept. For the reviewer, this is evidenced by the problems that exist in 2007
being the exact same problems that are occurring in 2022. However the review also commends
the concept album for offering listeners layers of participation that “will still be interesting long
after you’ve stopped listening to the music” (Amenta, 2007, para. 8).

Thus for Nine Inch Nails, Year Zero is not a concept album but an experimental
experience. It’s a chance for the group to offer something outside of the box and something that
up to that point was a rather innovating concept in itself: create an album in which the listener
could not immerse themselves in aurally, but also physically and emotionally as well. They must
have succeeded because judging from the reviews, even when people disliked the album, they
enjoyed the fact that they could lose themselves in the world of Year Zero.

**Album Analysis**

Year Zero’s general classification is as a thematic concept album. As mentioned by
Reznor, the album tells of different stories from the perspectives of people who are living in Year
Zero. It is not supposed to be limited to just the people who are suffering but the entire population in general.

“Hyperpower!” is an instrumental track in which the music and sound effects establish a visual scene that introduces the audience to the landscape in which Year Zero takes place. A military style snare cadence kicks off the track, followed by the sound of a person giving marching orders, and an explosion of sound that introduces the guitar and the sound of boots marching on pavement. The marching is then joined by the indecipherable chanting from a large crowd that is followed by a rather sinister sounding guitar solo. The chanting eventually turns into distorted screams that crescendo and overpower the music until all sounds die suddenly, with the reverb segueing directly into “The Beginning of the End.” Where “Hyperpower!” works to establish the setting of the album musically through a military drumbeat and the sounds of marching, chanting, and screams, “The Beginning of the End” is the lyrical introduction to the collection of experiences people have about living in America during Year Zero. The first half of the song comes from one speaker who touches on the experiences of those who are wary of religion, the rapture, and authority figures that have drugged them, tagged them, and made them unrecognizable to themselves. Meanwhile, in the second half of the song, the introduction of electric guitars supports a shift in lyrics where the views of those who are in power and hoard resources are now being expressed. Another musical shift is heard when after the second chorus, the music crescendos slightly over a few measures until a synthesizer joins in with a sound similar to that of a dial up modem connecting to the internet.

“Survivalism” is the first song that focuses entirely on one character. This character is a citizen whose main goal is to stay alive during Year Zero, even it means turning his back on those who turn to him for help. He regrets having used up Earth’s resources and believing the
U.S. government’s propaganda, and critiques those in power who have made bad decisions. While sarcastically stating that propaganda, revisionism, and violence are traits that make America a great nation. “The Good Soldier” is told from the perspective of an American soldier who regretfully fulfills his duty. He describes streets he used to walk through that are now filled with dead bodies, and he assures himself that God is on America’s side even though he has trouble believing it.

“Vessel” seems to be from the point of view of someone who has begun to use some sort of psychoactive drug. The drug is used as a way of resisting the authorities and allows the user to experience feelings of god-like euphoria. However, the drug also seems to have a negative effect as musically the tone of the song and the style of singing become harder during the chorus where the person begins to panic. This indicates that while the feeling of euphoria is great enough to cancel out the user’s fears of living, the after effects intensify paranoia. Lyrically “Me I’m Not” is the hardest song to determine meaning from as it is not as clear and direct as the other tracks. However, this song seems to be about a character that cannot recognize his/her own reflection from “The Beginning of the End.” Considering that the character in “Vessel” is one who uses drugs for their own personal pleasure, “Me I’m Not” can be considered a song in which the character is being drugged against their own will as part of forced assimilation into society. In the first half of the song, the character describes a feeling of dependence on something that makes him lose control, while during the chorus the character woozily pleads that he wants to stop as he is no longer himself. Reflecting inward, he does not seem content with hiding and resisting the urge to fight in order to stay alive, but he also recognizes that the drugs are suppressing the urge to fight back.
“Capital G” is the first song on the album in which the listener hears an authority figure’s perspective, with that authority figure possibly being a corrupt member of Congress due to lyrics such as: “I pushed a button and elected him to office, and he pushed a button and he dropped the bomb, you pushed a button and could watch it on the television.” He uses his power to only benefit himself, leaving future generations and the rest of the world to fend for themselves. Meanwhile he criticizes those who hate him as being jealous of his power, believing they too are corruptible if given the amount of power he has. In the chorus, the character is explains that he has replaced “God,” with “Greed,” as his ideology. In “My Violent Heart,” the perspective switches to that of a resistance movement member who speaks directly to an authority figure and advises him to change his ways. The resistance member’s views have been shaped by the violence and corruption that fills America during *Year Zero*, and he sees violent uprising as the only way to fight back. He warns that the uprising will punish those in power, and although the group may be killed, their blood and spirits will be reminders of the atrocities committed by those in power.

In “The Warning,” a person describes being one of many to see an extra-terrestrial figure come down from the sky and deliver a warning. The extra-terrestrial warns that it has heard the Earth’s cries and it is giving humanity one last chance to repent for doing so much damage to the Earth. If the warning is not heeded, the figure has promised to wipe the Earth clean. “God Given” is sung from the perspective of a preacher who views “The Warning” as a sign of the rapture, and as a result he is trying to capitalize on the fears of others and convince them that he is the key to salvation. However, the preacher shows he too is a corrupt as he suggests one would not want to be caught praying to false gods, and entry into Heaven is based on skin color as white people are “the divine separated from the swine” (Nine Inch Nails, 2007). A musical
change is suggested in the chorus as the preacher’s voice is joined by several backing voices and
the chorus is structured to sound like prayer, followed by the music stopping completely and the
preacher whispering that he would never lie about God’s commands.

“Meet Your Master” tells a story from the perspective of a rebel who is in the process of
preparing to execute a kidnapped authority figure, possibly the corrupt President of the United
States. In the context of the song, the chorus focuses mainly on the impending murder of the
authority figure, but the lyrics allude in the larger context to the coming end of the world.
Moving on, “The Greater Good” doesn’t feature a narrative the way the other tracks have, but the
thematic connection exists through the lyrics and the suggestive nature of the song. The track
appears to be a brainwashing and assimilation session as, musically, the same note patterns from
harpas and marimbas are repeated. Lyrically, the song consists of a set of simple commands and
phrases such as “breathe us in slowly.” A slow and weary voice also repeats the words
‘persuasion, coercion, submission, assimilation,” as if to suggest that these are the steps towards
being a functioning member of society.

“The Great Destroyer” is told from the perspective of a vigilante whose only purpose is
killing everything evil. Presumably, this character is a former soldier, as he makes reference to
being watched by satellites, and the assimilation process from “The Greater Good,” in the verse
“turn it up, listen to the shit they pump in to your head, filling you with apathy” (Nine Inch Nails,
2007). While, the narrative from this track fills up the first half of the song, the second half is
entirely music based with blasting synthesizers and electronic drum kits that are musically
representative of the character’s instability and urge to go on a murderous rampage. An echo
from the distorted drums carries over into “Another Version of the Truth,” an instrumental track
divided into two parts musically. The first half, composed of piano and light static, develops a
sound that comes across as suspenseful. The static and piano crescendo until both stop playing, and reverb from the piano extends over several seconds into a much brighter and calm piano piece. The musical shift in the track embodies a shift in the story where chaos has now turned to an odd sense of peace, as people watch the extra-terrestrials return to Earth to make good on their promise to wipe it clean.

“In This Twilight” supports the idea of the Earth being wiped clean as one man tries to reassure his significant other that everything will be okay even though the world is ending. He reflects on things like seeing the sun one last time, calling it a friend yet wondering if it would say the same after viewing the way humans have mistreated the Earth. Finally, “Zero-Sum” continues the cleansing of Earth and provides a logical endpoint for the Year Zero story. While watching the extra-terrestrials reach down from the sky and clear the Earth, a man regrets not making the right decisions that could have helped avoid this moment. Musically, the verses are delivered as a spoken-word poem. There is also an interesting delivery to a portion of lyrics in this first verse where they are not completed, as the character asks:

Do you remember the time we ... and all the times we ... and should have ... and were going to ... I know. (Nine Inch Nails, 2007)

This suggests to the listener that they should reflect on the choices they make presently that could have a significant impact on the future of not only themselves but the entire world.

The determined concept of Year Zero is that it is a collection of songs that are sung from different points of view of those who are living in the U.S.A. during a period in which America has become a corrupt, watchdog-nation. While there is no singular character, the sum of all these smaller songs contributes to telling a larger story about a dystopian United States of America. Although Year Zero fits the categorization of being a thematic concept album more than narrative due to the lack of specific characters and the abundance of stories instead of following
just one, *Year Zero* still offers a grander narrative in the sense that the songs all represent a piece of a developing story arc. The listener can see the initial conflict in “The Beginning of the End,” while the rising action appears in “The Warning.” The climax of the overall narrative appears in “Another Version of the Truth,” with the falling action occurring in “In This Twilight,” and concluding in “Zero-Sum.”

Musically, the industrial rock style of Nine Inch Nails suits the concept perfectly because the gritty sounds represent a darker view of the end of the world. Had Nine Inch Nails adopted a different style, then the message of chaos and Armageddon would not be as powerful as they are. At the same time, the band’s decision to change the style of the last three tracks of the album to be dark, calm, and introspective plays brilliantly off the last three tracks that are focused on watching the world end. Instead of inspiring panic, the music inspires a calm moment where the listener is forced to think about the end of the world rather than fear it.

**Supplementary Material**

While all content is essentially the same across all formats, the formats do differ in the extras that they present. All formats feature the album cover of the “Presence” reaching into the Earth to rid it of humanity. The inside of the booklets all feature the same images of the “Great Divide,” and the layout for the lyrics are all the same. The Great Divide is a visual representation of the class warfare that exists in *Year Zero*. On one side of the wall are the well-kept houses of the rich, religious zealots who are in power. Meanwhile the other side shows torn up land, factories polluting the environment, and houses that belong to the rebels, as evidenced by the large “Art is Resistance” logo painted on the roof of a house. One noticeable difference in the digital booklet is the lack of two images that appear in the physical versions: “The Hand of Faith,” and “The Hand of Desperation” (Nine Inch Nails, 2011). These images also exemplify
the differences that divide society in Year Zero. The Hand of Faith represents the rich, religious zealots, as the person it belongs to is clothed in a suit, has a gold watch, and clutches a Bible. On the other hand, the Hand of Desperation represents the rebels who have nothing, as evidenced by the photo showing a sleeveless arm with the hand clutching only a machine-gun. The Hand of Faith also has a small red diamond marking on the inside of the wrist, while the Hand of Desperation has stitches where the diamond marking should be. This supports the claim that people are micro-chipped in Year Zero.

These two images grant the physical versions of the album another hidden extra over the digital version. In both the CD and vinyl edition booklets, the page with the Art is Resistance logo has the words “The Mailstrom” inscribed in the top left corner. Typing TheMailstrom.com takes the user to a site that asks for a “Wreckage,” and a “Shard” (Mailstrom.com, 2007). Located on the gun in the Hand of Desperation picture is a set of numbers and letters that form both a “wreckage,” and a “shard.” Typing these into the appropriate sections leads the user to an email from a Princeton University professor who is in the process of writing an academic conference paper about the Presence (BrianTsunoda.com, 2007).

While the digital version lacks those two images, the vinyl version lacks the “Bureau of Morality” warning and telephone number on the packaging. In the CD version, this warning is a sticker placed on the back of the CD case. In the digital booklet, this warning occupies the page after the album cover. However the CD version also offers a website that neither vinyl nor digital contain. The CD itself has a thermal label that when heated makes it change color from black to white. When this occurs, the white reveals a binary code that can be translated to form the web address Exterminal.net, which contains information that can be applied to better understand the story of Year Zero. While the digital version does not reveal the website that the CD does, it does
have the advantage to link directly to the websites, and immediately immerse the listener in this other world while they listen to the album digitally.

**Web Presence**

With a twenty-nine website “alternate reality game” that served the purpose of creating exposition and communicating the concept to the listener months before the album was released, *Year Zero* has the strongest web presence out of the three concept albums. The websites offer a wide array of content, but each one contributes to the larger concept of *Year Zero*. For example, *OperationChipSweep.net* shows the user how to remove their tracking microchip, which is the square marking that can be seen in the Hand of Faith image on the album’s booklet. Furthermore, *ChurchofPlano.com* shows why the preacher’s motivations are the way they are in the song “God Given,” while *BeTheHammer.net* explains the character’s motivations in “The Great Destroyer.” One notable method of maximizing the web presence of the concept is that most of the sites lead to other sites. For example, a person who picks up the album will find that the main access point into the online world is provided in the booklet with the web address *AnotherVersionOfTheTruth.com*. Going to this site displays a brightly colored image of a barn in a wheat field, with text proclaiming “A new beginning! Zero Tolerance, Zero Fear,” “America is Born Again,” and “Brought to you by the U.S. Bureau of Morality.” The page has no visible links but clicking and dragging the mouse begins to peel away at the image, and reveals a much darker one underneath. A black-and-white image shows both the barn and the wheat field destroyed while factories operate in the background, and the text now reads “Beginning of the End! Zero Hope, Zero Chance.” Once the user has peeled back the image, the words “America is Born Again” become “Another Version of the Truth” and a link is accessible. Clicking the link
takes the user to the forum page of the site where they can read other people’s experiences in *Year Zero*, and access links to other sites that exist.

Just as the songs operate as different scenes in the larger story of *Year Zero*, the websites operate to give the user small bits of information about the concept. Not everything about the concept can be learned at one site, and sometimes multiple sites are devoted to fleshing out a single part of the story. However, these websites are detailed enough that even though their main purpose should be to support the concept on the album, they can communicate the concept alone. Thus the music and the websites work together to add layers of detail that static album art and limited booklet space do not allow.

**Music Video**

One music video was created from *Year Zero* for the track “Survivalism.” The video is reflective of the nature of the album as it contains many different scenes that occur all at once. The video is shot from the perspective of person who is watching surveillance footage from multiple cameras at an apartment complex. Nine Inch Nails are shown performing in an apartment that is being monitored from several different camera angles. While Nine Inch Nails perform, the point-of-view moves around to look at the other scenes that are occurring in the apartment complex. The other scenes include a group of men who create Art is Resistance stencils and are later seen spray painting the design onto a wall; a couple who stare at the television with a portrait of Jesus hanging on the wall between them; a woman who is having the liquid drug, Opal, dropped into her eyes; and a group of soldiers who are raiding the apartment complex. Staying true to the concept even in the music video, a Bureau of Morality censorship warning is shown on several monitors. The uncensored version of the video shows that the warnings are covering a scene where two gay men are having sex, and another where a topless
woman applies makeup while in the bathroom; making it fitting that the Bureau of Morality would censor both images.

The soldiers are seen making their way through the apartment complex, and eventually they bust down the door to Nine Inch Nails’ apartment. While this commotion is going on, the point-of-view changes to show the people in other scenes responding to the noise. As the commotion calms down and the others are shown returning to their scenes, one of the final shots shows the Nine Inch Nails practice space empty of people, and in disrepair. Finally the camera focuses on a monitor where a soldier can be seen dragging Trent Reznor’s body down the hallway, leaving behind a trail of blood.

As can be seen, the concept of *Year Zero* is not limited to one categorization. *Year Zero* is similar to both *21* (2011) and *Wasting Light* (2011) in that the songs on the album are a collection of thematic narratives. However unlike *21* and *Wasting Light*, the songs on *Year Zero* help form a larger narrative. Part of this can be attributed to the fact that certain songs in *Year Zero* are developed as major points in the narrative and they are placed accordingly. Songs like “The Warning” and “Another Version of the Truth” are both major occurrences in the larger story and their placement helps establish a storyline. Instead of having a collection of songs that focuses only on the viewpoints of people living in America during *Year Zero*, these songs present scenarios like conflict and resolution so the concept actually makes a point.

Furthermore, while the music establishes a basic understanding of the premise behind *Year Zero*, it is the supplementary material that plays the biggest role in clarifying the concept to the listener. Since supplementary material in the digital age extends past what is packaged with the album, Nine Inch Nails capitalizes on using new technologies to flesh out concepts presented in the album. This allows Nine Inch Nails to avoid over-saturating the album with too much
information about the concept. Considering Year Zero takes place in a world where the government withholds information and knowledge is limited, it makes sense to have the characters in the album express only a surface level knowledge of everything that is happening as it makes the situations in the songs seem more realistic. For example, the person who’s using the drug in “Vessel” only describes the process and the feelings, not the name of the drug and other technical details. The same thing goes for the people who see the hand reach down from the sky in “The Warning,” as they only identify it as some sort of extra-terrestrial being and not by the technical name given to it in the websites. Thus, the supplementary material allows Nine Inch Nails to take an album as the foundation and lay websites full of information upon the foundation to create not only a concept album, but a large interactive experience.


While Fucked Up viewed the concept album as the way to overcome their most successful release, things were different for My Chemical Romance. For My Chemical Romance, their most successful album, The Black Parade (2006), already was a concept album. Thus, by Fucked Up’s logic the only way to go would be to release another concept album that would attempt to outperform their previous release; and that’s exactly what My Chemical Romance did. Or at least it seemed that way. Interviews with My Chemical Romance provide a conflicting view of Danger Days (2010) as a concept album. As mentioned earlier, lead singer Gerard Way stated in an interview with NME.com:

What I like about this record is that it’s not a concept record, there’s no story, nothing to read into like that. In fact, I find the songs to be extremely direct, um, even though you have Dr. D. kind of checking in with you, you know, even what he’s doing, he’s just painting a picture of a world and that’s what the record does. The world has metaphors in it like a utopian city versus the freedom, chaos and danger of living in the desert. But there’s no concept to this album. (NME.com, 2010)
However in an interview published several days earlier in the *Los Angeles Times*, My Chemical Romance guitarist Frank Iero describes *Dangers Days* as a “high concept” record in which a futuristic world with characters and situations has been created and “radio broadcasts from that future are the music on this album” (Boucher, 2010, p. 2). Iero goes on to state that rather than have the concept be the focus of the album, the concept is instead the focus of the music videos. As a result, the music videos tell the story while the album provides musical support for the story.

The band’s visible resistance to classify *Danger Days* as concept album seems to be rooted in several issues that arose as a result of the success of *The Black Parade* (2006). One issue that arose was misinterpretation of the band’s image and music. A 2008 article in the *U.K. Daily Mail* accused My Chemical Romance of being leaders of a “sinister cult of emo,” whose album influenced a 13-year-old girl to self-mutilate and hang herself (Rawstorne, 2008). The publication then went on to name *The Black Parade* as the “place where all emos believe they will go when they die,” after reading several online chat room posts made by the young girl.

Production of *The Black Parade* also took a substantial toll on the band members. Reports claimed that My Chemical Romance was on the verge of splitting up as both Gerard and Mikey Way battled depression while recording the album (*Contactmusic.com*, 2008). Touring also became a major issue for the band as Way describes life after touring:

> We’re living, decompressing – The Black Parade took over two years to tour and six months to make so that’s just a lot of existing in a fictional world, and we’re just happy to live in a real one for a while. (Way, 2008)

Guitarist Ray Toro also attributed touring as a big issue:

> We were spent, burnt, totally out of it. Being this costume band in black night after night, country after country, it was a grind. We started to see *The Black Parade* as an enemy, one we wanted to kill on the next record. (Bosso, 2011)
While the band overcame exhaustion from touring and the personal attacks launched by the *U.K. Daily Mail*, the issues seemed to have been enough to make the band change their creative direction. However, the change in creative direction seemed to focus more on doing away with the band’s use of concepts in their albums. In an interview with *MTV.com* in 2008, Way claimed that after releasing three concept records, he no longer had the urge to do more (Montgomery, 2008). Furthermore, when asked what to expect from the next My Chemical Romance album, Way replied that the only way to top a record like *The Black Parade* was to make one that did not try to be everything *The Black Parade* was (Montgomery, 2009). Way asserted that the new album would be entirely concept-free and would avoid “hiding behind a veil of fiction or uniforms and makeup” (Montgomery, 2009, para. 4).

Since concept albums were now the villain, My Chemical Romance would try to put together material for a new album that would not be confined by concept album parameters. With a goal to release an album of straight-forward rock music, the band recorded the songs and realized the new sound was not what they wanted. According to Iero, the problem became that the group had tried to define its new sound without letting it happen naturally, and they had stifled themselves:

> We had no concepts, no characters, no costumes, and no extra instrumentation, just stripped-down songs. That’s what we wanted the band to be…or so we thought. We listened back to what we had done, and we definitely accomplished the goal, but it didn’t feel right; it felt like we’d tied our arms behind our backs. (Bosso, 2011)

The band decided to take drastic measures, parting ways with their producer and electing to start over from scratch with Rob Cavallo, the producer of *The Black Parade* (2006). The end result of this collaboration became *Danger Days* (2010), which Iero views as a “celebratory record,” of a band that’s “having fun and being creative” (Bosso, 2011).
However, with a critical rating of 70%, and a user rating of 7.8/10, reviewers have generally accepted the album but have been split on the concept. AllMusic.com did not hate the concept of Danger Days (claiming that it was inspired by Gerard Way’s work in the comic book field), but referred to it as a “near-nonsensical narrative” that was secondary to the music (Erlewine, 2010). A user by the name of “Westbrook” thought that My Chemical Romance had hit their artistic peak with Danger Days, and found the album to be a “genuine rock album” with a “visual concept that’ll knock your socks off” (Westbrook, 2010). While the visual concept may have enticed fans of the album, the concept the musical concept communicated in the album is one that many reviewers found weak. Village Voice called the album a “convoluted rock opera” that suffers from lack of story development and heart (Weingarten, 2010). A review from PopMatters.com referred to Danger Days as a “disastrously confused concept album” that left much to be desired, specifically pointing out that the lack of establishing characters defeated the purpose of the concept (Sawdey, 2010). Several users agree with the critic’s criticisms of the concept. “Adela” challenged the concept by saying an album should not have been designed like a comic book, since the two do not belong together in this case (Adela, 2010). Furthermore, amongst users, a big issue seems to be the change of the band’s sound now that they were having fun. “Huffnat890” complained that the album was complete trash that sounded like hollow dance rock, and resulted in his decision to no longer be a fan of the band (Huffnat890, 2010). “Brittaniethekid” also said that she was no longer a fan of My Chemical Romance after listening to Danger Days, referring to the album as the “biggest disappointment of 2010” (Brittaniethekid, 2010).

From discourse and reviews, it’s apparent that Danger Days is a response to the trappings of The Black Parade (2006). While The Black Parade was successful, it also brought a great deal
of both misunderstanding and discomfort for the band. In their minds the only way to overcome both of these things was to completely strip away their theatrical, death-celebrating image. Nonetheless, their adoption of a straight-laced rock band identity didn’t seem to suit them creatively so they brought back concepts in their music. This time, though, they decided to place the emphasis more on promoting a concept of having fun rather than one that celebrated death. However, despite My Chemical Romance claiming that the album had no concept, the reviews tell a different story. Whether the reviews were good or bad, people still found evidence of a concept.

**Album Analysis**

With the discourse establishing that *Danger Days* is an attempt to distance the band from their “Black Parade” image, it will be interesting to note how the band does that through the concept of *Danger Days*. With the reviews also establishing that a concept exists, it will also be interesting to note how the band justifies through musical content why this album is not a concept album.

The album opens up with “Look Alive Sunshine.” In this track, the listener is introduced to Dr. Death Defying, an eccentric pirate radio DJ who acts as the eye-in-the-sky for the Killjoys. His introduction signals that it is the beginning of the broadcast day for the pirate radio station, and he provides a call to action that segues directly into the first song on the album “Na Na Na (Na Na Na Na Na Na Na Na Na Na Na Na Na Na Na Na Na Na).” In general, this song portrays an attitude of defiance through lyrics that are nonsense. There is an establishment of the setting as during the bridge of the song, the music changes moods and a spoken-word portion identifies the location as Battery City. The Killjoys also express their goal is to change the world, by any means necessary, including death.
“Bulletproof Heart” seems to be about a couple who are on the run. Musically, the song features phaser sound effects, and has a pop-rock feel to it. “SING” continues the trend of containing no narrative or thematic connection between tracks on the album as the song doesn’t reference the Killjoys or the setting in which the album takes place. Instead, “SING” focuses mainly on encouraging people to have their voice heard in a world where it can easily be drowned out. However, My Chemical Romance begin to explore a different musical style in “SING,” when they adopt elements of techno and fuse them with pop-punk. “Planetary (GO!)” seems to contribute to the story by providing a small understanding of what the Killjoys are fighting against, which in the context of this song seems to be processed fame and fake, sterilized youth idols. The shift in musical style continues in this track as well as “Planetary (GO!)” gets away from rock altogether and sounds like a dance track. Further supporting the dance track sound is the use of sirens and drum effects in the beginning, followed by synthesizers throughout the entire track.

“The Only Hope for Me is You” is a love song in which the narrator places the context of their relationship against destructive events, and cites his love interest as his only reason to keep going. This track is characterized musically by opening with synthesizers and sound effects before combining with the rest of the band to form a techno-pop sound. “Jet Star and the Kobra Kid / Traffic Report” is another vignette involving Dr. Death Defying. It is in this update that the listener once again gets a true connection to the narrative of the album as Dr. Death Defying announces that two of the Killjoys have been killed in action out on Route Guano. Dr. Death Defying then advises the listener to keep fighting at all costs before segueing directly into the next song. “Party Poison” has the same defiant feel as “Na Na Na,” but the lyrical focus emphasizes being the death of the party instead of the life of the party. Essentially, the song is
about being the last one dancing at the end of the night and even then you only stop because your
body just can’t take it anymore. In “Party Poison” the band has returned to an upbeat punk rock
sound.

“Save Yourself, I’ll Hold Them Back” opens with lyrics that seem as though they
contribute to the narrative but ultimately the song’s focus switches to address suicide prevention
and a general sense of never giving up when things look bleakest. This song can be seen as the
band’s response to the *U.K. Daily Mail* after the accusations that they influenced emo children to
kill themselves. Rather than address the newspaper, the band addresses the fans to let them know
they’re there to protect them and not hurt them. In “S/C/A/R/E/C/R/O/W,” a command is issued
to avoid being burned by the Scarecrow, who at this point can be considered one of the few
antagonists in the story. Musically, “S/C/A/R/E/C/R/O/W” has a pop-rock feel to it, with calm
verses and an intense chorus. The song is about sacrificing one’s self for the sake of protecting
another. “Summertime” seems to be both a plea from the Killjoy to his significant other to stay
and care for him, while touching some on their past and how they came to be a couple. The one
lyric that seems to relate this track to the narrative is “until we find our way, in the dark and out
of harm, you can run away with me, anytime you want” (*My Chemical Romance*, 2010). This
lyric contains both the running motif and the motif from the other two love songs on the album
that the Killjoy and his significant other believe they will eventually find a way out and into a
place where both can live happily ever after with each other. Musically, “Summertime” is the
calmest song on the album, with an emphasis on a style of soft-rock. While “Summertime” is
the calmest song on the album, “Destroya” is the heaviest pure-rock song on the album. It is
another song that touches on the sun motif in “S/C/A/R/E/C/R/O/W” and the running motif that
exists in several other songs. However, now the approach taken in this song is that even though the last remaining Killjoy is broken and beaten, he is still willing to fight all enemies.

“The Kids From Yesterday” can be viewed as the curtain call for the Killjoys as the song opens with: “Well now this could be the last of all the rides we take, so hold on tight and don’t look back” and “I’ll find you when the sun goes black” (My Chemical Romance, 2010). The chorus states that “you only live forever in the lights you make” and subsequently the narrator says that they are the “kids from yesterday, today” (My Chemical Romance, 2010). The chorus adds credence to the belief that the final Killjoy is no more after this song, with the highest possibility being that he has been killed in the aftermath of “Destroya.” Meanwhile the “kids from yesterday, today” verse seems to mean that even as adults, the Killjoys uphold the ideals that used to be important to them as children, which is something that many seem to forget as they grow older. Musically, the song combines a pop-rock and dance again.

“Goodnite, Dr. Death” is the final time the listener hears from Dr. Death Defying as he closes out the broadcast day at the station by telling the listener to avoid staying in the sun too long or they’ll combust, a reference to the plea to avoid the sun in “S/C/A/R/E/C/R/O/W.” Dr. Death Defying then plays a fuzzy recording of the Star Spangled Banner in which the last note is extremely distorted. This distorted note extends into “Vampire Money,” a song that again has no narrative or thematic connection to the concept established by the vignettes and at this point feels as though it is a bonus track on the album. The song starts off like The Sweet’s “Ballroom Blitz,” with a lyrical introduction of each member before moving into the core of song which discusses picking fights at airport bars, slick backed hair and popped collars, and how they “sparkle like Bowie,” and “glimmer like Bolan.” The music itself is can be characterized as classic rock meets proto-punk.
Musically and lyrically, *Danger Days* is not an album that presents a clear concept and it is not as deep conceptually as *David Comes to Life* (2011) or *Year Zero* (2007). Taking into consideration the album title, one would expect the album to be a narrative account of the Killjoys’ adventures, however this is not the case. Considering the progression of the album, the only things that establish *Danger Days* (2010) as a concept album really are Dr. Death Defying’s vignettes. Aside from “Na Na Na,” no other songs contribute to creating an overall narrative. Several themes such as running, being in love, defiance, avoiding the sun, and science fiction are referenced lyrically in the songs. Musically, the theme of science fiction is established through the use of laser noises and synthesizers. However, the theme established by the music is that *Danger Days* is a punk-rock/dance album. This evidence seems to show that *Danger Days* is more of a thematic concept album than a narrative one, as the songs are driven by themes.

Even though Dr. Death Defying’s vignettes are used to establish some sort of story progression through the veil of presenting points in his broadcast day, the connections to the songs are non-existent and cannot form a strong narrative concept. In fact, listening to the album without Dr. Death Defying’s vignettes makes the album sound like a collection of science fiction related dance songs with no hint of a story whatsoever. At that point the album sounds somewhat like *21* (2011) in that the songs have strong connections but no grand narrative development, unless the listener constructs their own narrative interpretation for the songs on the album. The fact that certain traits establish this as a thematic concept album with strong hints of narrative ambition, most certainly makes *Danger Days* (2010) fit the resistant concept album label that has been proposed by Letts.
Supplementary Material

The supplementary material is strongest with the digital version of *Danger Days* (2010), which utilizes *iTunes’ “iTunes LP”* program to provide an interactive experience while clarifying much of the concept of the album. The *iTunes LP* program offers a different level of interactivity by giving users a program that fits the theme and look of the album and acts as a self-contained hub for the album’s media. This is very similar to programs that appeared on “enhanced CDs” in the past, and seems to strive for the hybrid digital album presentation that was proposed by Mott (2009). In this case, the user has two options for how they want the *iTunes LP* template to appear: Killjoy themed, or Better Living Industries (BLI) themed. *Danger Days’ iTunes LP* keeps in-line with the concept of the album by labeling items as they would appear in the *Danger Days* world. For example, the *iTunes LP* identifies Dr. Death Defying’s pirate radio station as “WKIL 109-FMX,” whereas in the album Dr. Death Defying never mentions it by name. Clicking on the “WKIL 109-FMX” link produces a list of tracks set against the backdrop of a boom box. The BLI version labeled “BLND” produces a list of the tracks in plain black text against an all white background. Selecting a track then brings up the lyric sheet for the song along with the option to play it.

To view the music video for “Na Na Na,” and a video about the making of the “Na Na Na” music video, one clicks on the “Transmissions / SURVEILLANCE” link. Finally the “Art is the Weapon / COLOR IS NOT VALID” button leads the user to three selections that contain the biggest collection of material to support the idea that Danger Days does have a narrative concept. The first choice is “Propaganda” which contains a collection of singles cover art, promotional photos of the band and other characters that form the Danger Days concept; and extermination posters of the Killjoys. The second selection is “Process”, which is a collection of concept art
detailing the look and design of every character in Danger Days. The third selection is 2019 in Photos, a visual slideshow of the characters, landscapes, and important quotes that appear in the album.

The physical formats do not offer much that can compare with the supplementary material provided with the digital version of the album. For one, the vinyl and CD versions both fit the Killjoy look of the *iTunes LP*, without offering a BLI version for comparison. The vinyl record is packaged with a lyric sheet and the inside sleeves feature one large picture of Party Poison wearing a BLI MouseKat mascot head, while pictures of all the characters in the Killjoy narrative run along the bottom of the sleeves. The booklet for the CD version of the album is designed so that lyrics for two songs appear on the left page, while a character photo appears on the right page.

**Web Presence**

*Danger Days* uses several websites to that further construct the idea that a Killjoy narrative is the concept of the album. The strongest website to support the concept is the BLI website. The BLI website is Japanese based so much of the content has a Japanese translation alongside the English text. As soon as one accesses the main page (titled “Zone Report”), a video announcement from BLI appears where a woman speaking Japanese states that BLI has been around since the fires of 2012, that led to the conditions in California 2019. She also establishes BLI’s main goal, and what the Killjoys are fighting against, when she implores the user to let BLI take over their lives so that they can “quiet the mind, strengthen the body, and remove the burden of unwanted emotions” (BLI.jp, *Zone Report video*, 2010). The zone report at the bottom of the page indicates that BLI are looking for the Killjoys after they destroyed a S/C/A/R/E/C/R/O/W unit. Clicking on the “Products” link takes the user to a page where they
can purchase BLI products such as shirts and pencils. Unfortunately for the interested consumer, BLI laser blasters are listed as “sold out.” Another video pops up on the product page and in this video the Japanese woman reminds everyone that BLI scientists have determined that purchasing BLI products leads to happiness.

Finally, clicking the “Mission Statement” link on the BLI website takes the user to the over-the-top mission statement. In the statement, BLI promises synthetic happiness by living a monochromatic existence and taking medication. They also state that things like love and friendship are pointless because they have no monetary value, and they stir emotions and emotions are what make people weak. The organization also offers “Retinal Resorts,” a medication-induced vacation for the mind while the body stays dormant; and a “Soul Protection Plan,” that ensures participants experience BLI’s version of the afterlife.

There are several Danger Days related Twitter accounts but the one that has put forth the most content related to the concept has been the twitter account of Dr. Death Defying. The tweets that are posted are all done in character and, more importantly, the tweets before the album was released hint at a narrative. Dr. Death Defying tweets about things like occurrences in the Zones, getting the WKIL antenna fixed, and the price of the laser blaster on the BLI product page. He also interacts with Killjoy member Party Poison, and links to the promotional teasers on YouTube that are designed to look like surveillance footage. However, the most important occurrence from Dr. Death Defying occurred on Nov. 16, 2010 when he posted a series of tweets that led to an online listening party for Danger Days, which he hosted. The listening party featured Dr. Death Defying playing all the songs and engaging in vignettes. The tweets and the listening party itself show that the true concept of the album is to communicate some sort of story rather than just be a collection of tracks.
Four music videos have been produced from *Danger Days*, however only two of the videos relate directly to the concept presented in the album. A third music video relates loosely to the concept while the fourth and final video does not relate to the concept at all. The first video released was for “Look Alive Sunshine/Na Na Na.” In this video, My Chemical Romance play the Fabulous Killjoys, a group of post-apocalyptic rebels who fight against the evil Better Living Industries (BLI). BLI is an organization that has drugged the masses, causing society to lead sterilized lives that are free of risk. The video is a collection of scenes showing the Killjoys fighting BLI’s Draculoids (men in white suits who wear vampire masks) while traveling through the desert and protecting a little girl. While the video contains a narrative, it also serves more as an introduction to the cast of characters that make up the concept. For example, Dr. Death Defying and his roller-skating sidekick Show Pony are shown transmitting from WKIL 109-FMX in the beginning, while the leader of the Draculoids is identified on the cover of *Modern Exterminator* as “Korse.” The location is also established as a close-up of a map shows text reading: “Map of Battery City and Surrounding Zones – California 2019.” One image that supports the discourse of the band wanting to do away with *The Black Parade* (2006) image appears when the Killjoys walk through the desert and a skeleton wearing a black marching band coat can be seen partially buried in the ground. The scenes eventually lead to the climax of the video where after the Killjoys are identified as Party Poison, Jet Star, Fun Ghoul, and Kobra Kid, they engage in a laser gun duel with Korse and his band of Draculoids. Once the dust settles, the Killjoys have been defeated and Korse and the Draculoids take the girl while instructing the Killjoys to “keep running.”

The video for “SING” continues the storyline from “Look Alive Sunshine/Na Na Na,” as now the Killjoys are out to recover the child. The video opens with a BLI advertisement
proclaiming “The Aftermath is Secondary,” that dissolves to show the Killjoys driving their
Trans-Am in a tunnel. As they drive, advertisements for BLI keep popping up over the footage of
the Killjoys, displaying messages like “Keep Smiling,” “Everything is Perfect,” “We Can Fix
You,” and “Love is a Pill.” The Killjoys eventually drive through a BLI security gate, but not
without a security guard sounding the alarm. At this point, shots of the Killjoys driving into
Battery City are interspersed with various shots of the Draculoids and BLI Guards gathering
weapons, the little girl playing with a ball in a control room, and Korse in a hibernation pod. A
shot of a glass panel shows the symbol for the SCARECROW Unit, a security division of BLI.
The Killjoys finally arrive at the BLI Headquarters and storm the entrance, shooting and killing
several BLI Guards before entering the control room and rescuing the little girl. While they
occupy the control room, the woman from the videos on the BLI website awakens Korse from
his Pod, and Party Poison becomes concerned. The Killjoys, along with the girl, begin moving
toward the exit while Korse and a large number of BLI Guards and Draculoids pursue them. As
the Killjoys reach the exit, a firefight ensues. After unmasking and shooting a Draculoid in the
head, Party Poison is pushed up against the wall by Korse, and is killed. Kobra Kid shoots Korse
in the leg but he too is shot and killed, leaving the two remaining Killjoys to grab the little girl
and head for the exit. Jet Star and the little girl exit the building while Fun Ghoul locks the door
from the inside and sacrifices himself. Jet Star and the little girl keep running until Jet Star is
killed as well. Meanwhile, Dr. Death Defying, Show Pony, and a female driver pull up in a
WKIL 109 FMX van and rescue the little girl. The last shot shows Party Poison being placed in a
body bag.

Considering that one of the traits of a resistant concept album is the death of main
characters with no further reference to them, the music videos themselves provide reason that the
album can be viewed as a resistant concept album due to the Killjoys appearing in the first two videos and dying in the second one. The third video released for *Danger Days* (2010) was for the track “Planetary (GO!)” and in this video My Chemical Romance are back to performing as themselves, with title cards introducing each band member in both Japanese and English. Some images relating to the Killjoys and BLI concept appear, such as the Killjoy Spider logo on an American flag, Jet Star’s helmet on an amplifier, the drummer wearing a BLI Guy t-shirt, and some members of the audience wearing Killjoy masks. However, at this point the images are being used to identify My Chemical Romance and not the Killjoys anymore, thereby removing much of the narrative concept from the videos and establishing more connections to the thematic concept from the album. The final video, created for the track “The Kids From Yesterday,” focuses on being career retrospective instead of supporting the concept of the album.

My Chemical Romance were correct in saying that the concept for *Danger Days* (2010) exists in the music videos rather than in the album itself. In the music videos and specific characters and a storyline are established, whereas neither is established in the album. So while one might expect a story about the Killjoys to appear on the album, it does not happen at all. Instead one might believe that the real concept in the album is Dr. Death Defying presenting his radio show. He is the only character on the album and his presence must have a deeper meaning, otherwise his appearances in the album come across as useless in establishing a grander concept. When looking at the supplementary material that came with the albums, the physical versions of the album present rather weak support for the idea of the album as a concept album. They are extremely plain and don’t properly reflect the grand concept. On the other hand, the digital version of the album with the *iTunes LP* provides the best support for the argument that *Danger Days* is meant to be seen as a concept album. The material that is included in the program makes
it hard to argue that *Danger Days* is not a concept album when so much planning was done to develop the look of characters. The BLI website provides another piece to the puzzle of the concept of *Danger Days* with its content, but it is rather limited. It does just enough to explain who BLI are, what their motives are, and why you should purchase BLI merchandise from the BLI marketplace. All in all, different portions of the concept of *Danger Days* are scattered throughout the different media, but one thing is for sure: *Danger Days* has a concept, but the album plays only a small role in communicating it.

**Summary**

In summary, it can first be determined that *21* (2011) and *Wasting Light* (2011) both communicate some sort of thematic concept. Thus popular music albums are built around simple concepts, whether it be musical style, lyrical content, or thematic content. By comparison however, *David Comes to Life* (2011), *Year Zero* (2007), and *Danger Days* (2010) all communicate more elaborate concepts that require the listener to put in more work to understand what is being communicated. Furthermore, it has been shown that these concept albums all feature supplementary material that enhances the understanding of the concept album in general. For *David Comes to Life*, the supplementary material was extremely simple and effective. Meanwhile, *Year Zero* was on the other end of the creative spectrum, as websites that made up its supplementary material were complex and often required the listener to physically participate in order to uncover secrets. In conclusion, concept albums created in the digital age have shown that while the concept album may not be better, concept albums certainly have become bigger.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

After forty years wise men still don’t know how it feels to be “thick as a brick,” and despite their use of double-negatives, the children still clamor that they “don’t need no education.” Nonetheless, the aim of this study was to make the researcher, and future readers, say, “I learned something today” about concept albums in the digital age. While Fucked Up stated that the verses of *David Comes to Life* (2011) begged the attention of a scholar, in the digital age there is so much more for a scholar to examine. What was once only a unifying theme on an album has now expanded to become an album, music videos, websites, live performances, and even merchandise with a unifying theme. A concept album is no longer just a concept album; it is now a conceptual multimedia experience that aims to engage the audience by immersing them in the concept at the deepest level possible. Want to look like your favorite Killjoy? Buy the costume from the My Chemical Romance store. Don’t understand what the whole point of *David Comes to Life* is? Purchase the 7-inch vinyl single “Octavio Made the Bomb,” and Fucked Up will explain everything clearly for you; they’ll even tell you what they ate and drank while planning out the album in the food court of a mall. Want to join the Art is Resistance movement? Visit *FreeRebelArt.com*, and enter your name and telephone number. Just don’t be surprised if you receive a call from the Bureau of Morality letting you know that you’ve been added to a government watch-list… it serves you right for being un-American. Want to join the now 50-year-old Gerald Bostock as a resident of St. Cleve? Then do something newsworthy and get yourself published on *StCleve.com.*
In Chapter 1 of this thesis research, I presented a brief history of concept albums and of the changes in commercial music formats as a result of improvements in technology. Meanwhile, Chapter 2 reviewed previous research and existing studies on concept albums, music and communication, and music in the digital medium, in order to provide a background for this study, address an under-acknowledged area of research, and provide rationale for this research. In Chapter 3, a methodology was developed, based on the work of Tagg (1982) and Avant-Mier (2010), in order to provide a framework for studying the album and its discourse. In Chapter 4, a thorough analysis of each album was conducted, including analysis for two non-concept albums that served as a baseline by which to compare the three concept albums. The results showed that a wider range of available supplementary material (discourse) helps communicate the concept of an album apart from the music. This final chapter serves as the conclusion for this research.

Concept albums in the digital age demonstrate much more than the immersive experience for the listener. As this study has shown, the communicative characteristics of concept albums have changed more due to the use of technology than the necessity to change the form of the concept album. In fact, the rock concept albums seemed to borrow a bit from concept albums of the past. One example is how similar from a structural standpoint David Comes to Life’s (2011) beeping (tying the end of the album back into the beginning) is to (The Wall’s) “Isn’t this...where we came in?” (Pink Floyd, 1979) Still, one of the most visible changes resulting from technology is that concepts no longer have to be rooted in the music, as both My Chemical Romance and Nine Inch Nails used visual media to reveal the concept of their respective albums, months before the albums hit stores. Even though the concept is the same in both Year Zero’s (2007) songs and its supplementary material, the concept was established independently from the music once the first Year Zero related website was published. As evidenced by Danger Days (2010),
the concept can be created independently from the album so that the concept exists more as a visual entity than it does a musical one. The music videos established that the Killjoys were the main characters, while the album focused more on Dr. Death Defying and his broadcast day. One implication related to the concept existing outside of the album is that it helps the artist sell records as opposed to individual tracks on iTunes. By releasing the concept first, the artists drum up interest from an audience that they hope wants to hear an entire album where they interpret concepts like love and the apocalypse.

The discourse in the creation of concept records shows that for artists it is the point, creatively, where there is no turning back. As Damian Abraham pointed out, once a band does a concept record, the flood gates of ambition have opened. While the stigma used to be that a band that did a concept album were trying to establish themselves as high-art musicians, the stigma of putting out a concept album now seems to be that putting out a concept album generates future expectations from the band. If the concept album becomes a success then the next album is expected to be just as ambitious, which puts extra weight on an artist to keep putting out works of that level. If a concept album fails, then the artist is ridiculed for trying too hard. As Gerard Way stated, the only way to top a concept album is to release an album that does not try to be everything that the previous album was. This is a difficult proposition as a successful concept album may end up defining what others consider to be a band’s signature sound, which then results in the band being stifled creatively. Furthermore, an attempt to take a new creative direction could draw criticism from listeners who resist change and prefer a band to sound as they did on previous records. As seen in the user reviews, some people claim that the My Chemical Romance that released Danger Days (2010) is not the same My Chemical Romance that they fell in love with on The Black Parade (2006), meaning that some fans are resistant to
the change that a concept album may bring. Overall, concept records are a slippery-slope that artists must navigate with care; otherwise, they risk losing their musical identities.

However, this study also disproved my own preconceptions on what I would find. One characteristic that I expected to occur was that the physical version of a concept album would provide more meaning over the digital version. My assumption was that physical concept albums provided materials that digital distributors could not, and therefore some understanding of the concept would be lost on a digital listener. However after analyzing different formats of the same concept album, this proved to be untrue as digital distribution has provided materials that equal, and even surpass, those of physical concept albums. This can be seen with the digital format of *Danger Days* (2010) where the *iTunes LP* provided more clarification of the concept than both the CD and vinyl versions of the album. Even though *David Comes to Life* (2011) was not bundled with any digital material, it did have adequate digital representation of the physical format’s liner notes provided on the *David Comes to Life* website.

However, both digital and physical formats of concept albums have their advantages and disadvantages. One of the advantages of the digital format over the physical format is that it is the best choice for artists that seek to structure their albums in a way that the tracks sound as though they are endless and segue seamlessly into one another, despite having distinct points where they begin and end. Concept albums recorded in the past, such as *Thick as a Brick* (1972) and *The Wall* (1979), had to adhere to time limitations of the medium of vinyl, while today’s concept albums do not. Since digital distribution is the dominant method of acquiring music, today’s artists can create a much tighter concept album without having to worry about splitting their album into sections and thereby ruining any sort of continuity. This is especially true in *Year Zero* (2007), where every track segues immediately into the next. This also occurs in *David
Comes to Life (2011), where a special case is raised as the cohesion between the end and beginning of the album is more important than the cohesion between the other tracks. As a result, if one listens to David Comes to Life in its digital form and sets the playback function on a media player to automatically repeat the entire album, the listener experiences the album as Fucked Up intended it: a never-ending cycle.

Another advantage offered by concept albums in their digital form is that while there is no physical content to hold and examine, new technologies are being used to fill that void and provide a deeper sense of involvement in the concept. For example, out of the five albums included in this study, iTunes offered digital booklets for three of them: 21 (2011), Wasting Light (2011), and Year Zero (2007). These booklets are replicas of the booklets included with physical releases of the album, and as such nothing is lost content-wise when comparing the physical and digital booklets. However, out of the three albums, Year Zero was the only one that contained booklets (one for the album itself and the other for the “Survivalism” single) that allowed the user some interactivity. The last page of the Year Zero digital booklet features an image of a graffiti stylized flag on a wall, that contains a hyperlink that transports the user to the website of the “Art is Resistance Movement.” At this site the user can download posters, stencils and computer wallpapers featuring the logo of the Art is Resistance Movement, and also receive tips on the best places to place the stickers, which file format works best for creating t-shirts, and how to go about spreading the logo with both spray paint and hairspray. In the digital booklet for the “Survivalism” single, the last page contains a series of words that are hard to see due to the black text being placed on the black background. The words form a partially completed web address that must be highlighted, copied, pasted, and formatted correctly. When completed, the link takes the user to a site that lists the timeline for major events that led to Year Zero. This site
is interactive as well as it contains two portions that can be dragged and dropped to form a different list that displays an alternate timeline of the events that led to *Year Zero*. Thus while initially the user sees the government’s view of the events, the drag and drop portions reveal the Resistance’s perspective of those events and provide some exposition that *Year Zero* did not cover in the album.

Another advantage that digital has over physical is that new programs like the *iTunes LP* can be used for other concept albums the way that it is used for *Danger Days* (2010). If the artist manages to have a say in the design of the *iTunes LP*, then the program can be used to further clarify the concept of an album through visual presentation and extras. However a disadvantage that exists for the *iTunes LP* is that it is not accessible on portable music players, including Apple’s own portable devices. Instead, one must access the *iTunes LP* program through their personal computer. As a result, while the music is completely portable in its digital form, the extra features provided by the *iTunes LP* are not.

Digital has another disadvantage when it comes to the longevity of supplementary material of concept albums in the digital age. This problem was encountered when conducting the research as websites that provided background information on the concept of *Year Zero* (2007) have expired. For example, in the *Year Zero* liner notes Trent Reznor gives thanks to the Solutions Backwards Initiative which, according to the *Year Zero* case study page created by 42 Entertainment, is a group of scientists from the future who have sent information back in time with the hope that *Year Zero* can be averted by changing the present. The 42 Entertainment case study page also provides a web address for the Solutions Backwards Initiative, but clicking on the link reveals that the webpage is no longer functional. Given that it has now been five years since *Year Zero* was first released, one can estimate that in ten years time, most of the websites
will no longer be functional, and the world’s largest album cover that Reznor strove to create will cease to exist. Realistically this will occur with not just Year Zero’s websites but with other web-based media that concept albums use as well. It has already occurred for Danger Days (2010), as the Dr. Death Listening Party can no longer be viewed on My Chemical Romance’s YouTube page. It is likely that the website for David Comes to Life (2011) will eventually cease to exist as well, and so will the website for Danger Days’ antagonist Better Living Industries. As of this writing, the theme of My Chemical Romance’s webpage fits the look of the Danger Days album but eventually that will be redesigned to fit the look of their next album.

For the physical format, digital’s problem with longevity is both an advantage and disadvantage. When taking into consideration that older concept albums were designed for a physical format, one can see the longevity helps as, for the most part, those items have lasted. However the physical format of a concept album becomes a disadvantage when one considers the issue of storage space and practicality. While the digital format only takes up electronic memory, physical formats take up space in our homes and as a result, one must consider the content when purchasing a concept album and the items related to it. This is part of the reason why digital distribution is so popular; because rather than take up space in our homes, it only takes up space in our computers and portable music players. For example, fans who wanted the ultimate physical experience of Danger Days (2010) could preorder the “California 2019 Edition” which included a CD copy of the album, a three-song EP titled The Mad Gear and Missile Kid (2010), a “bad luck” beaded bracelet, a 48-page photo book, and one of four collectible Killjoy ray guns and masks. The retail price of the “California 2019 Edition” box set was around $70. However, while the “California 2019 Edition” offered much in the way of physical representation for the concept, it also appears as though much of what is offered may
seem essential to the enjoyment of the album at first but becomes seen as clutter much later. As a result, many who have purchased the box set have gone on to keep the music and put the other items up for resale on the internet, demonstrating that although the complete package is a nice addition to understanding the concept, it does not have a practical use outside of the concept.

**Limitations**

Several limitations arose in this study. First and foremost, while this study did contain user reviews for concept albums, it did not take into account race, gender, or class of the reviewers. As a result, issues regarding acceptance or rejection of concept albums cannot be attributed to a particular audience. Another major limitation in this study is that since the focus was on entirely on rock concept albums, there is a strong possibility that the results do not adhere to other genres of music. While rock concept albums have shown that sometimes the concept exists independently from the music, this may not be the way that concept albums are constructed in other genres. Country music concept albums may have the music be the focus of the concept as opposed to the image, or rap concept albums may distribute the concept evenly between the image and the music. Even things like subgenres within the “rock music” category and record labels can influence how the concept is communicated. One can assume that larger record labels would be able to produce large scale concept records compared to independent labels. This can partially be seen in this study as *Danger Days* (2010) and *Year Zero* (2007) are both major label releases that featured a grand concept spread across a large scope, while *David Comes to Life* (2011) was released through an independent label and featured a grand concept in a small scale.

Another limitation is that concepts have grown so large in scope now that it is almost impossible to try and analyze everything. Since concepts no longer have to exist exclusively in
the music and physical packaging, artists like Trent Reznor can let their imagination run wild as they think of new ways to incorporate the concept through unconventional means. For example, 42 Entertainment’s *Year Zero Case Study* page shows that the concept is not just limited to the music, album packaging and websites. Instead, additional clues could be found in concert t-shirts, Nine Inch Nails’ DVD cases, murals created throughout the world, in secret performances by Nine Inch Nails, and even in the time code of the “Survivalism” music video. In a sense concept albums have grown so large that a single concept album such as *Year Zero* (2007), could inspire its own study. Despite being the album that best represents a connection to concept albums of the past, *David Comes to Life* (2011) has a grand scope as well. Taking into account the four vinyl singles that provide exposition and epilogue to the story, and the compilation album of bands from Brydesdale, it becomes slightly more difficult to analyze. If one factors in that the singles and compilation album are all limited edition vinyl pressings, it is apparent that the researcher is left at a disadvantage for studying everything first hand.

The other limitation that I encountered as a result of the scope of concept albums increasing is that concepts are no longer static once the record is released. With the introduction of digital media, the concept can change freely. Every time Dr. Death Defying posts a tweet, new information related to the concept is created. The potential for that bit of information to change the way his character or an event in the album is perceived means that the concept of the album also has the ability to change. As a result, it is only when all supplementary material stops updating, that the final concept of an album can be truly examined for what it was trying to communicate and how that message came across to the audience.
Discussion

One thing this study has shown is that much like Damian Abraham of Fucked Up pointed out, any concept can be found when listening to an album. Although 21 (2011) and Wasting Light (2011) are not categorized as concept albums by the mainstream media, both albums do have concepts attached to them. Their concepts pale in comparison to the grandeur of the rock concept albums but they still exist. Another related thing this study has shown is that while Letts’ (2005) classifications do work to generally categorize concept albums, it is difficult to lump a concept album into just one category. Year Zero (2007) has proven to be an album that fits a thematic concept album label, but the use of a linear story arc constructed by the songs also shows that it can be classified as a narrative concept album as well. Taking into account the vast amount of websites that expand the concept of Year Zero complicates the categorization even more. Since the concept no longer exists only in the music, it is difficult to fairly categorize a concept album solely as being narrative-driven, thematic-driven, or resistant in the digital age.

As a response to the conclusions drawn from examining how rock concept albums in the digital age are constructed, I am proposing a new categorization of concept albums that takes into account not only the music but all of the supplementary material associated with the album. As demonstrated by Danger Days (2010) and Year Zero (2007), the concept of an album no longer has to be rooted primarily in the music. Instead, digital age concept albums have shown that they have become multi-layered experiences in which the concept is free to exist outside of the album. Therefore, what I am proposing is that concept albums be categorized according to the depth of the concept across all media, which would lead to concept albums being categorized as “low-concept,” “mid-concept,” “high-concept,” or “ultra-concept” albums.
Under this system, a low-concept album would be classified by having one simple concept that is clearly communicated through the music and the supplementary material. An example of a low-concept album would be 21 (2011), due to a consistent theme of love being communicated throughout the album and in the supplementary material. However, while this level of categorization focuses mainly on a single narrative or thematic element, it is not entirely based on those. Even an album like the *Double Nickels on the Dime* (1984) would fall under this category as the theme of the album is the car. An album could have a technical concept (i.e., production style) while having no thematic or narrative theme in the music. Being recorded in analog as opposed to digital in the digital age makes *Wasting Light* (2011) a low-concept album since the concept is the method in which the music was recorded. This classification would also include the Beach Boys’ *Pet Sounds* (1966) since the songs do not contain a specific theme or narrative but its production methods are different from other music releases of its time.

A mid-concept album would be categorized by having one elaborate concept or more that can be easily communicated within the album’s design. I would suggest that this categorization be applied to those concept albums released in the pre-digital age that communicated complex concepts within the parameters of a physical music release, such as *Thick as a Brick* (1972), or *Zen Arcade* (1984). A rock opera, such as the Who’s *Tommy* (1969), would fit into this category because rock operas are elaborate concepts that must be contained in the scope of an album. An example of this type of concept record would be *David Comes to Life* (2011) because although it has a complex narrative, the music and the liner notes manage to communicate the concept of the album. Since mid-concept albums are self-contained, a listener does not need to view other supplementary material like music videos or websites to understand the concept that is being communicated.
A high-concept album can be classified by having one or more elaborate concepts that can be fully communicated through the music and the supplementary material, yet can be understood independently from one another. An example of a high-concept album is *Year Zero* (2007) because *Year Zero* manages to clearly communicate its concept through the music and the supplementary material. While websites provide exposition to the *Year Zero* story, they are not needed to understand the concept of the album. One can easily determine a basic concept by listening to the songs and viewing the booklets and artwork that are provided with the album. The same goes for the *Year Zero* websites in that a person can become involved with the websites and understand the concept without ever listening to the album. However when the album and the supplementary material are combined, it leads to greater understanding of the whole concept and specific events in the album. For example, the song “Vessel” tells a story of a drug that makes the user panic after achieving a spiritual high. When this information is combined with information a website that mentions “Opal,” a drug that gives users a euphoric high, followed by a sense of panic caused by feeling the Earth’s suffering; then the listener achieves a deeper understanding of the concept.

Finally, a concept album where different elements of one or more elaborate concepts are spread randomly throughout the music and the supplementary material can be considered an ultra-concept album. An ultra-concept album differs from a high-concept album in that the ultra-concept album requires the listener to find more connections between the music and the supplementary material in order to develop a meaning of the concept since the parts cannot communicate the entire concept independently. In a sense, ultra-concept albums provide the audience with a conceptual puzzle that they must put together by engaging both the supplementary material and the album. While an ultra-concept album may be seen as providing a
grander conceptual experience for the listener, a major disadvantage is that the ultra-concept may become too large or confusing for the listener to understand. *Danger Days* (2010) can be seen as an example of a disadvantaged ultra-concept album because the concept’s many layers become too complex to communicate and instead they have lead to miscommunication. Essentially the supplementary material says one thing, while the music says another. On the album, Dr. Death Defying claims two of the Killjoys have been exterminated, while the “SING” music video shows all of the Killjoys dying at the same time. The album is not supposed to follow a narrative formula yet the supplementary material supports the concept of a Killjoy narrative more than it does the idea that the album is collection of the songs from the year 2019. From this analysis it may be difficult to put together an ultra-concept album due to the immense scope, but it is not impossible. The key to creating a logical ultra-concept album would be to make sure that even though different elements are spread across all media, they all present a unified concept and do not leave room for misinterpretation.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, concept albums continue to exist in both physical and digital formats, but the scope of how concepts are constructed is much greater. In addition to the specific concept albums chosen for this study, other mainstream popular music albums also contain concepts. As evidenced in this study, the general assumption can be made that almost every album revolves around a concept. The (intentional or unintentional) concept can be as simple as a loose collection of love songs, a simple experimental dance-punk music album, or it can present a musical interpretation of the apocalypse (or what the apocalypse could sound like). From a presentation standpoint, the difference may be that while the characteristics of digital music lend themselves to more user interactivity, the physical album may become seen more as the choice
for those who just want the music and not the excess content. Physical formats still provide a minimal understanding of the concept, but become rather static in constructing meaning when compared to a digital format concept album that can be updated. Yet, while Elicker (2002) believes that there is no room for concepts in music’s technological age, she has ultimately been proven wrong. Not only is there room for concepts in the digital age, but the digital age allows concepts to flourish and not be confined by the boundaries of any one communication medium. Rather than exist only on an album cover, in a booklet or lyric sheet, or in our heads, we can now experience the concepts, interact with them, and become involved on a deeper level. Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails hit the nail on the head when he stated, “it IS the art form,” to describe using concept albums in the digital age and how concept albums have become an art form (and communication medium) unlike others.
REFERENCES


Discography


Curriculum Vitae

Mario Alonzo Dozal was born August 9th, 1984 in El Paso, TX. In May 2002, he graduated from Bowie High School, and entered the University of Texas at El Paso in August of that year. As an undergraduate he worked for GEAR UP, an organization that sends tutors to provide in-class assistance for students attending at-risk schools. During this time he also worked as a tutor for the El Paso Independent School District, providing assistance for ESL, Speech, and Student Leadership courses at Bowie High School. In May 2010, he graduated with his Bachelor’s Degree in Electronic Media from UTEP, and subsequently entered graduate school in August 2010.

As a graduate student, Mario worked as an on-air DJ, producer, audio engineer, reporter, and student instructor for KTEP-FM. Highlights of Mario’s tenure at the KTEP-FM included being the station’s only on-site reporter for President Barack Obama’s visit to El Paso in May 2011; and co-creating and serving as an executive producer of Miner News Radio, a news magazine that was entirely student-driven. Having achieved everything professionally possible at KTEP-FM within one year, he left the suppressive atmosphere of the radio station to become a teaching assistant for the UTEP Forensics Team. He has also been involved with UTEP’s Media Changemakers, and the Social Justice Initiative.

In May 2012, Mario graduated from the University of Texas at El Paso with a Master of Arts degree in Communication. His continuing research interests include studying communication, popular culture, media, and education.

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