

Universität Potsdam

Institut für Künste und Medien

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## **Exposé zur Bachelorarbeit**

Grooves in Numbers:

The Influence of Digital Technologies on the Performativity of DJing

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## **Topic and motivation**

This thesis aims to empirically compare analog and digital DJ technologies with regard to the performativity of the disc jockey. The DJ has been historically underrepresented in academic discourse despite his cultural relevance. The human ritual of collective dancing to music is an ancient pillar of culture and society. The emergence of the DJ in the twentieth century constituted a detachment of this ritual from the performance of live music in favor of recorded music. His peculiar postmodern function as a “meta-musician” has exerted considerable influence on dance culture and the development of numerous music genres.

Traditionally, the craft of DJing has been bound to vinyl records, but recent technological developments have increasingly digitalized the profession, which has facilitated access for aspiring DJs such as myself, but also generated some criticism for “devaluing” the art of DJing. As a digital DJ who has always worked with DJ-software and a MIDI controller instead of turntables, I will attempt to learn to mix songs in the traditional way of using vinyl records over the course of this project. I will also explore a Digital Vinyl System (DVS), the popular hybrid of digital and analog DJing methods which enables DJs to use turntables to play digital music formats. My goal is to examine how the aesthetic and technological options and challenges of these different systems affect the performativity of the DJ as an artist and as a mediator between the world of music and the audience.

## **Method**

The thesis will be divided into a creative and a theoretical part. The project will involve the real-time production of at least one DJ mix with each technology. This is necessary to provide reference points for the theoretical analysis, although the essence of DJing is invariably attached to the live performance in front of an audience, which would lose its unique atmosphere in any recording. Nonetheless, a good live performance does require the DJ to practice beforehand, which is generally conducted in solitude at home. Additionally, the recording of mixes to distribute for promotional purposes has been a widespread practice among DJs for decades, whether on tape, CD or online. However, if possible, it would be beneficial to the reviewers’ insight to arrange a demonstration prior to the disputation, preferably with an audience.

To ensure a reasonable scope, I will confine myself to the genre of hip hop music, which is not only one of the genres that arguably owes its existence to the DJ, but also offers a variety of mixing possibilities. However, I will not aspire to the level of turntablism, which is a highly challenging art form in itself. Instead, I will restrict myself to the domain of the typical club DJ, who plays a “collage” of songs by creating transitions through beatmatching or other methods.

In the theoretical component I will first provide a brief history of the DJ to establish a working definition of the term and illustrate his cultural significance. Following this, I will compare the aforementioned technologies – vinyl on turntables, MIDI controller and DVS - with regard to the three central aspects of DJing: selection, composition, and presentation. The recorded mixes will serve as points of reference, but based on existing research and my own continuous performing experience I will transfer my observations to the realm of live performance as accurately as possible.

First, I will analyze how the shift from vinyl records to digital music formats impacts the music selection process, both in relation to what is colloquially referred to as “digging” – the constant search for and acquisition of new music – and to the selection of songs in a given DJ mix or live performance. Secondly, I will describe the differences in how the technologies are used to produce a set by arranging songs in a specific order while constructing transitions between songs or even creating mashups through beatmatching, looping and other practices. Thirdly, I will discuss the DJ’s self-image and self-portrayal as well as his interaction with the audience. Over the course of my analysis, I will refer to research on performativity, digitalization, audio technology, self-fashioning, hip hop culture, dance/club culture and DJing itself. Another interesting perspective could be provided by elements of computer game studies.