

Vinyl Records: The Future of Consuming Music?

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Short Abstract:

Despite having been deemed to be obsolete nearly 30 years ago, vinyl records are enjoying since 2011 a major revival and seem to change the way we listen to music again. This paper uses an ethnographic approach to explore the nature and extent of the growing popularity and deep resonance with today's consumers. As nearly 48% of vinyl consumers these days are under the age of 35, attention is also paid to examining whether the resurgence of vinyl's popularity is a sign for another dramatic evolution in the music marketplace. We found that young consumers experience the material ritual of handling and playing vinyl records as "new" and exciting, which are also seen as technologically superior. We also found that many consumers have felt exploited, oppressed and betrayed by the digital music providers and, hence, turned to vinyl as a music format that is seen to be dependable, trustworthy and personal.

Keywords: vinyl records, resurgence, marketplace evolution.

Introduction and Research Aim

An unexpected, strong wind is blowing and changing the way music is consumed these days. After having survived near-extinction, vinyl is enjoying since 2011 a major revival with a year-on-year sales growth of 40% (Jones, 2018; Sarpong, Dong & Appiah, 2016). This paper, however, suggests that vinyl records have not just made a surprising comeback but are the future of how we listen to recorded music (again). Obviously, such a statement contravenes the popular discourse in the media and among marketing and CCT scholars, which has for more than 20 years championed the digitalisation of music as a disruptive technology that is revolutionising and “democratising” the music industry (Giesler, 2008) and, thus, the way present and future consumers access and listen to recorded music with the promise of convenience, unrestricted mobility, freedom of choice and personal fulfilment (Denegri-Knott, 2015; Elberse, 2010). Every newly-emerging digital format from CDs (Daniel, 2019; Plasketes, 1992) over MP3s and digital downloads (Denegri-Knott, 2015; Elberse, 2010; Giesler, 2008) to streaming (Brown, 2016; Fuentes, Hagbert & Kjellberg, 2016) has thereby been hailed as the future of how we access, consume and enjoy recorded music how-, where- and whenever we want – only for it soon to be replaced by the next emerging digital format.

Vinyl consumers, on the other hand, are discussed as the “other” in a digital society (Fleck, Rossi & Tonsho, 2010; Goulding & Derbaix, 2019). Even though official figures since 2016 clearly show that 48% of vinyl consumers these days are under the age of 35 (Hassan, 2016), vinyl consumers are still depicted as nostalgic middle-aged and older individuals, who cling to an analogue technology and their memories of a romanticised past (Fernandez & Beverland, 2019). To that end, vinyl consumers are said to assign magical properties to vinyl records that digital formats would lack, such as a fuller, superior sound and a “better feel” (Fleck, Rossi & Tonsho, 2010; Goulding & Derbaix, 2019). Some studies even suggest that many enthusiastic vinyl collectors today would not even own a turntable and are primarily interested in the artwork of vinyl records rather than actually listening to them (Sonnichsen, 2017; Yoshim & Biddinger, 2008). This raises the question why CCT scholars and the media are so reluctant to adapt to an unexpected change in the marketplace, which conflicts with the dominant discourse. Is it possible that we are experiencing another “drama in marketplace evolution” (Giesler, 2008), where vinyl consumers now occupy the role of sonic warriors and pacifists in the modern digitalised music marketplace championed by the academic literature?

The aim of this study is:

To explore the growing popularity and deep resonance of vinyl records with today’s consumers to understand whether it contributes to a changing music marketplace.

We address two research questions in line with this aim:

RQ1: What is the extent and nature of today’s consumers’ renewed interest in vinyl?

RQ2: How does vinyl’s deep resonance with consumers relate to the marketplace?

Methodology

This research takes an ethnographic approach, where the researcher explores from an “I’m-the-camera”-perspective and through social interactions (Wohlfeil, 2018) how consumers today perceive, experience, relate to and negotiate their personal preference for vinyl records within the digital age. The data was collected over period of 6 months during regular visits to two independent stores and two HMV branches as well as during the local World Record Store Day. The researcher’s personal experiences, observations and conversations with vinyl consumers were recorded as written field notes in a notebook diary. A hermeneutic approach was used to analyse the data. The field notes were examined through repeated part-to-whole

readings to identify underlying patterns, which were then interpreted for deeper meanings. The following three main themes have emerged iteratively from the hermeneutic analysis.

Results and/or Discussion and Contributions

(Re-)Discovery of the obsolete “old” as the exciting “new”

Despite being well aware that vinyl is an old analogue music format that was deemed to be obsolete nearly 30 years ago, today’s vinyl consumers, irrespective of their age, are found to actually experience vinyl records as an exciting “new” recorded music format. The dominant narrative in every conversation is that of an unintentional discovery. Many of the middle-aged vinyl consumers had in the 1990s replaced their vinyls with CDs and, later, MP3s. The accidental rediscovery of vinyl records has acted as powerful reminder of what they believe to have been missing since turning digital. Most of the young consumers have discovered vinyl by chance. Some have found their parents or grandparents turntables and records; others have been introduced to vinyl by their friends, before buying their first turntable with their own money. Due to being primarily used to MP3s and streaming, it is the material ritual of handling and playing vinyl records that they experience as “new” and exciting.

Reversed perception of technological superiority

In line with recent studies (Goulding & Derbaix, 2019), this research finds that today’s vinyl consumers consider the “old”, analogue vinyl technology to be superior to any of the digital music formats when it comes to sound quality, “feel”, reliability and longevity. In fact, every new emerging format and update in the digitalisation of music is viewed as being another step in a long decline of quality and choice. Digital platforms like iTunes, Spotify, etc. are perceived as restrictive, impersonal and designed to meet corporate rather than consumer interests. By contrast, vinyl is said to offer consumers the feeling of being again in full control of use and ownership, which is credited as a main reason for its growing popularity.

Growing dissatisfaction with digitalisation of music and feelings of betrayal

One of the most important driver in the resurgence and growing popularity of vinyl identified in this research is a growing dissatisfaction among both younger and middle-aged consumers (male and female) with how digital music providers increasingly interfere and restrict their consumption choices and marketplace participation. One of the main reasons cited for turning to an analogue technology like vinyl is the feeling of being betrayed by once trusted digital music providers, who have seemingly no qualms, as Apple’s decision to shut down iTunes shows, to wipe out on a whim a consumer’s entire digital music library that has taken a large investment of time and money to build. Thus, the vinyl revival is not just a nostalgic return to a romanticised past, but seen instead as a return to a dependable, reliable and trusted music format that offers independence and full control. As one young female consumer puts it: “It is highly unlikely that someone suddenly knocks at your door and takes all your records away.”

Implications for Theory and Practice

This research contributes to theory by (1) offering insights into why vinyl resonates deeply with young and middle-aged consumers nowadays; (2) ascribing vinyl’s popularity as an old analogue technology to the perceived failings of modern digital technology providers; and (3) proposing that the current vinyl revival represents a dramatic marketplace evolution in line with Giesler’s (2008) framework – but with reversed roles of dominance and rebellion.

The managerial implication is: A deeper understanding how consumers may feel let down, oppressed or even betrayed by digital service providers can enable marketers to position their non-digital products, services or stores as a reliable, dependable and trustworthy alternative.

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