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# Create Attention to Attract Attention - Viral Marketing of Digital Music in Social Networks

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## **ABSTRACT**

Digitalization has led to a plethora of digital media. Especially with regard to music, consumers have the choice among millions of songs and artists. For artists and music labels the arising question is how to find their audiences and how to get attention for their music. Since music is naturally part of communications and interactions, viral marketing is a chance for them to (re-)gain attention. But viral marketing needs to accommodate digital music and its unique characteristics. In this paper, (1) the characteristics of digital music are identified and (2) it is analyzed how they affect the viral marketing process. The result shows, what critical factors are to be considered when conducting viral marketing of digital music. This contribution is important for the emerging area of research on music marketing and for music marketers in practice.

## **Keywords**

Information overload, viral marketing, word-of-mouth, digital music, social networks.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Digitalization has made media ubiquitous and almost unlimited in choice. Via the internet digital media is spread across numerous media devices (e.g. mobile phones, gaming consoles, portable music players) to enable consumption anytime and anyplace. Due to its simplicity, shortness and the ease of distribution, this counts particularly for music.

The breakthrough for digitalization of music came with the compressing format mp3 and the increasing bandwidth of internet connections (Ghosemajumder et al., 2002). The resulting omission of a physical carrier fundamentally changed the way how music is produced, marketed and consumed (Quah, 2003). Music can be produced at home or even via mobile devices, it can be immediately uploaded to the artist's website or his/her download store and shared with fans that can stream it with their phones, add it to their playlists, rate it or recommend it to their friends.

## **The Scarcity of Attention**

With digitalization, it becomes easier for artists and music labels (music providers), to enter the music market and to reach a broader audience (Quah, 2003; Lang and Hughes, 2003). The classical need for physical distribution dispensed, as a precondition to sell music. In consequence artists and labels can distribute their music to a global (internet) audience without the need for physical production and distribution (Bourreau et al., 2008). From the music providers perspective this means that more consumers can be reached but it also means more artists and more music (albums, songs) competing for the attention of these consumers. The question is how music providers can get the attention of their specific audiences (consumers), when the choice of music becomes so overwhelming (Gaffney and Rafferty, 2009; Berger, 2010).

Understanding and addressing this problem is critical for the improvement of marketing and for the development of future business models for digital music (Berger, 2010). This is of ever more relevance for the music industry due to the constantly increasing importance of the digital music market and the necessity to be successful in this market (IFPI, 2011).

## **Research Question and Methodology**

Music is inherently *viral* as a part of conversations and communication in various contexts (Ebare, 2004). Viral marketing can be used to unleash such word-of-mouth (WOM) communication among music consumers and to distribute attention (Ferguson, 2008). Social networks can be used to conduct viral marketing of music (Dhar and Chang, 2007; Ebare, 2004). But viral marketing needs to consider the unique characteristics of digital music since they affect how music is experienced and communicated and since they differentiate it in this regard from other digital media (e.g. movies) as well as music in

physical form. Hence, the question is what is critical to be considered particularly, when conducting the viral marketing of digital music. In this paper the goal is to identify such critical factors along the viral marketing process.

To answer this question, the rest of this paper is structured as follows: At first the characteristics of digital music are analyzed, based on an extensive literature research. The characteristics are then set into relation to general critical factors along the viral marketing process. Based on the relations which are evident in literature specific critical factors for viral marketing of digital music are derived.

## RELATED WORK

Research related to the particular problem of attention for digital music is very limited, especially from the music providers' point of view. Existing literature concentrates either on aspects of the underlying problem of digitalization (e.g. Bhattacharjee et al., 2009; Leyshon, 2001) and its various consequences for the music industry (e.g. Beer, 2005; Fox, 2002) or focuses on the opportunities and challenges of social media and social networks for the marketing of music (e.g. Kaya et al., 2010; Fields, 2011). For instance, Kaya et al., (2010) outlines how opportunities provided by social networks are used by artists and Fields, (2011) explores how artists build their social network structure of relationships. Gaffney and Rafferty, (2009) describe social networks and their relation to music discovery, from the users' point of view.

Others concentrate on more specific aspects, such as music recommender systems (Plaza and Baccigalupo, 2007; Mesnage et al., 2011), cultural aspects of the use of social networks by musicians (e.g. Shklovski and Boyd, 2006), and social relations and their impact on recommendations (e.g. Tran et al., 2011; McEnnis, 2008). Only very few investigate particularly on aspects of viral marketing of music<sup>1</sup> (e.g. Hoak, 2006; Salo et al., 2011). Peni, (2007) elaborates on mobile music recommendations and their acceptance by users, while Sun et al., (2006) focuses on antecedents and consequences regarding viral communication related to music and Salo et al., (2011) investigates concrete opportunities provided by social networks.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF DIGITAL MUSIC

Digital music is unique regarding its characteristics, compared to physical music (compact discs, records) as well as other types of digital media (e.g. movies, e-books). As described by Voermans, (2007) "*digital music relates to several different concepts: information goods, experience goods, digital products, and services.*" Digital music derives characteristics from such concepts and disposes of some additional characteristics which are specific for music as a medium (e.g. shortness).

### *Experience Good*

Music is an information good and especially an experience good (Nelson, 1970). Its value can only be perceived after consumption (Bourreau et al., 2008; Voermans, 2007). For a book, at least its story can be described with words, for a movie pictures can be additionally used to convey an impression of the actual product. Music is hard to describe with words, pictures or other means. It needs to be experienced to create such impression and relies on personal experience to be fully evaluated. Classically, the experience is conveyed via multiple channels (radio, concert, music video, club, etc.) and often made for the first time before an actual purchase, e.g. via radio (Lacher, 1989).

### *Simplicity*

Music is characterized by simplicity: A song does not need a specific context or explanation and no translation. Music is easy to understand by practically everybody (except for lyrics in a certain language), without the need for a special training to 'use' digital music (Voermans, 2007). The latter can be seen in contrast to e.g. magazine articles or books, which require the ability to read. This characteristic is connected to the *emotionality* of music. While books and movies are based on stories, music is based on emotions.

### *Shortness*

A song is generally rather short. The length of a song is averagely between 3 and 5 minutes. This average length can probably be attributed to the classical phonograph records, which contained a playing time of about 3 to 5 minutes per side (at 78 rpm), enough for one song each (Welch and Burt, 1994). Hence, it takes a comparably small time effort to consume a song while e.g. movies or books require more time for consumption. The shortness also supports the *repetitiveness* of music, based on the limited amount of time which needs to be devoted for consumption.

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<sup>1</sup> Ogden and Long (2011) provide a brief overview of the development of music marketing until today.

### *Emotionality*

Music is strongly emotional. It creates and supports emotions (e.g. joy, sadness) (Lacher, 1989; Ogden and Long, 2011). Lacher, (1989) characterizes music as a ‘hedonic product’, a product which is centered on emotions and aesthetics, in contrast to goods that are centered on information. While emotions are also an element of other digital media they represent the core aspect of music. The emotions a song comprises can be interpreted differently, as McEnnis, (2008) argues, and they can be supported and emphasized by videos and live performances. Due to its emotionality music is also very subjective.

### *Repetitiveness*

Music is usually consumed more than once (Lacher, 1989), what is typical for experience goods (Voermans, 2007). Due to its indestructibility digital music can be used an unlimited number of times. Its value is not decreasing through its usage (Shapiro and Varian, 1999). A song is usually consumed more times than other digital media items (e.g. books) and not necessarily only after, but also before purchase or sometimes even if not purchased at all (e.g. via radio) (Voermans, 2007).

### *Parallelism*

Music can be consumed while performing other activities, e.g. while doing housework, sports or while talking with other people. In contrast to other media, which usually require the undivided attention of the consumer (e.g. books), this is another differentiating aspect of digital music (Lang and Hughes, 2003). As a result, digital music is consumed in different contexts. Musical choice can be adapted to these contexts and activities, e.g. preferring more relaxed music while doing housework. This characteristic also allows music to be part of other types of media, such as movies, or TV advertisements (Voermans, 2007).

### *Sociality*

Being a digital good makes digital music ‘non-rival’, meaning that its consumption does not prevent others from the consumption of the same item at the same time (Shapiro and Varian, 1999; Quah, 2003). Digital Music is jointly consumable with others (e.g. at parties, concerts, etc.). Music is often consumed jointly with friends (social context) (Salganik et al., 2006) which allows to share and experience emotions together (while e.g. books are consumed alone), since its performance allows multiple consumers to participate. In that sense the live performance of music creates another form of non-rivalry.

### *Spreadability*

Due to its digital nature, digital music is non-rival as well as infinitely expansible (Voermans, 2007). An infinite number of copies can be made that are ‘attrition free’ (Wang et al., 2005), meaning that they do not lose quality over time or due to consumption. In consequence, copies of digital music can be made quickly at (almost) no cost (Shapiro and Varian, 1999). Considering the shortness, copies are comparably small (in file size<sup>2</sup>), which allows a quick and easy distribution of music in digital form.

### *Immediacy*

Due to its digital nature, without the need for a physical carrier, music can be provided and consumed ‘anytime, anyplace, via any device’ (Quah, 2003). With regard to consumption this form of immediacy for example allows the streaming of an arbitrary song via a mobile device (e.g. smartphone) from a music server at home. With regard to provision it allows provision in the moment of demand, e.g. the immediate provision of songs for purchase during or after the visit of a concert.

### *Transmutability*

Based on the transmutability of digital products, music can be changed after purchase (un-/re-bundling/combining). Songs can be combined in various different ways (changing selection and order) (Thall, 2002). For instance consumers can create playlists with music for a party, for sports, etc. This aspect differentiates music from e.g. movies, magazine articles and books, where such playlists usually do not provide an added value (though technically possible).

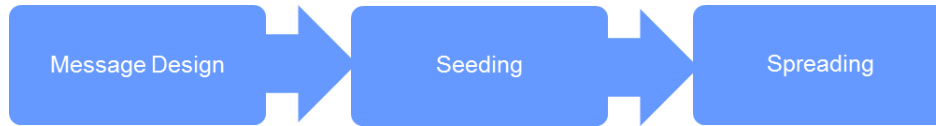
Recombinations of music differ from the antecedents they merge from and can provide a new or different added value (e.g. DJ mixes, personal playlists) and even represent new products (e.g. personalized artist-albums, with songs selected and ordered by the consumer) (Quah, 2003).

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<sup>2</sup> The exact size depends on the chosen format and quality (bit-rate).

## CRITICAL FACTORS ALONG THE VIRAL MARKETING PROCESS

The term ‘viral marketing’ is borrowed from biology and mainly describes the idea that a marketing message is distributed from one person to another, who distributes it further, like a virus (Kotler and Armstrong, 2006; Helm, 2000). Viral marketing basically comprises three phases (e.g. Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011; Bampo et al., 2008): *Designing a message (Message Design)*, *communicating the message to selected initial messengers (Seeding)* and *supporting the spreading of the message (Spreading)*.



**Figure 1. The Viral Marketing Process**

For each phase critical factors can be identified in literature. The factors are regarded as requirements for a viral marketing campaign: They are a foundation for successful viral marketing, even though they do not guarantee its success.

### Message Design

This phase contains the design of the message that is to be distributed virally. The message design needs to take into account the target group for the respective product.

Critical in this phase is a *simple message* (Gopalan, 2007), understandable immediately without the need for further explanation. Often such messages convey emotions rather than information (Bampo et al., 2008). Critical is further the *free availability* of the message (Gopalan, 2007). Only if it is freely accessible for everybody it can be spread unhindered (Rayport, 1996). The message also needs to provide *attractiveness* (Pousttchi and Wiedemann, 2007). Attractiveness draws the consumers’ attention. It can be achieved by providing, e.g. exclusivity or emotions (Helm, 2000; Pousttchi and Wiedemann, 2007).

### Seeding

In the seeding phase, the designed message is initially distributed by the marketer. The message is distributed to a selected number of consumers, who act as messengers and start spreading the message (Welker, 2002).

It is therefore critical that the initial messengers are *relevant messengers* (Pousttchi and Wiedemann, 2007). They should be active in communication and well connected to other consumers (Helm, 2000). Critical is also a *relevant message* (Phelps et al., 2004; Dobele et al., 2007). The relevance of the message for the messengers is a pre-condition for its further distribution. If a message is not of interest for the receiver, it will hardly get any attention.

### Spreading

Following the initial spreading to the messengers, in the last phase, the continued spreading among consumers is supported. The marketer needs to provide a fertile ground to spread for the virus he/she has seeded.

Critical in this regard is to enable an *effortless transfer* of the message (Wilson, 2000; Welker, 2002) and to *utilize existing resources* (Wilson, 2000; Welker, 2002). Means to distribute the message need to be provided and they need to be conveniently usable to ease the spreading. Existing channels and means for the spreading can be utilized for this, since consumers are used to them. Thereby, *exploiting common motivations and behaviors* of consumers is another critical factor (Wilson, 2000). The marketer needs to support consumers in their behaviour and provide tools to ease it. Critical is finally that the marketer motivates consumers to distribute the message and make use of the provided tools to do so. *Encouraging communication and creating engagement* is therefore important to spread attention (Pousttchi and Wiedemann, 2007).

## CRITICAL FACTORS FOR VIRAL MARKETING OF DIGITAL MUSIC

The characteristics of digital music affect the factors that are critical within each phase of the viral marketing process. Considering this, additional critical factors for digital music can be derived, based on how each of the characteristics affects the existing critical factors.

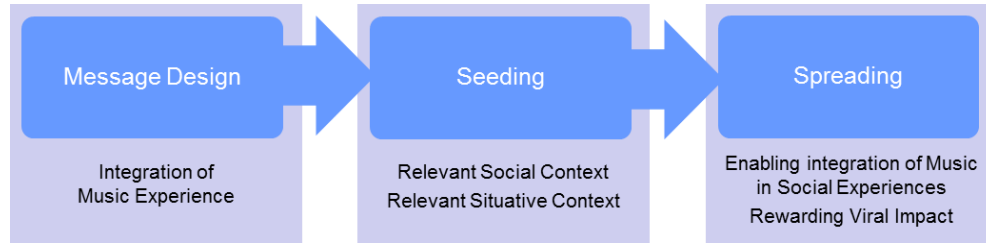


Figure 2. Critical Factors for Viral marketing of Digital Music

**Message Design**

*Integration of Music Experience*

Critical for the viral message is in general its *simplicity*, *availability* and *attractiveness*: It needs to be easily understandable, freely available and attractive enough to be distributed to others. Music is an *experience good*, characterized by its *emotionality*. Being an experience good, music can only be evaluated after consumption and its emotionality can only be conveyed through this consumption (Lacher, 1989). For music, a song itself can be regarded as a simple message, conveying emotions and thereby being understandable for everybody (Voermans, 2007). Simplicity lies in the song itself. So does attractiveness: To evaluate the attractiveness of a song it needs to be consumed (Bourreau et al., 2008). The consumption experience conveys emotions and attractiveness, which can hardly be conveyed otherwise.

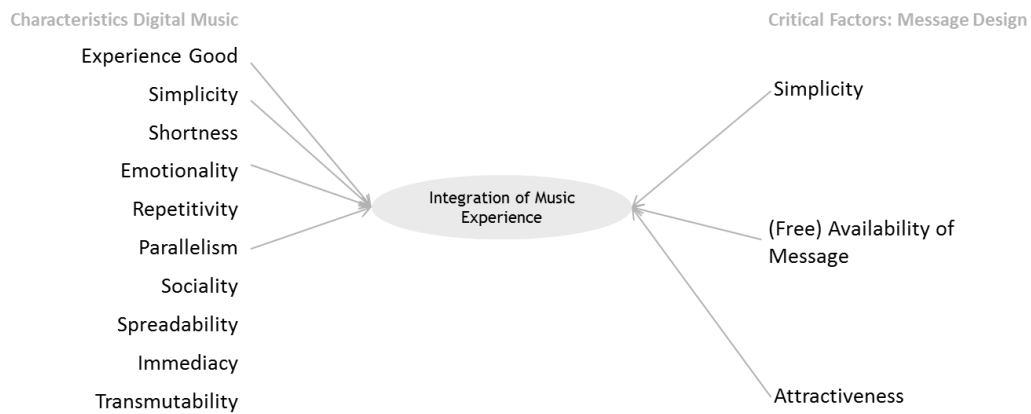


Figure 3<sup>3</sup>. Integration of Music Experience

In consequence, for music it is particularly critical that the music consumption experience is part of a music advertisement. An integration of the experience in the advertisement (e.g. as a sample or in a music video) ensures a simple message, that conveys attractiveness (of the product) but also that it is freely available to be distributed. The integration allows consumers to immediately experience music and evaluate it in the context of an advertisement. A positive consumption experience is the basis for viral communication (Westbrook, 1987).

**Seeding**

*Relevant Social Context*

For the seeding of the viral message it is critical that *relevant messengers* are chosen and that a *relevant message* is provided to these messengers. Music is characterized by *sociality* and *emotionality*. In particular, music conveys emotions that people

<sup>3</sup> Figures 3 to 7 show the characteristics of digital music and the general critical factors of viral marketing, the particular critical factor is derived from.

can share, when they experience music together or when they communicate about music (Quah, 2003). This social context of consumers<sup>4</sup> can influence the perception and relevance of music, what makes it relevant for the seeding of musical ads.

Since music is jointly consumed and communication starts within the social context, it is therefore also important that the messengers possess a relevant social context. A relevant social context comprises contacts that share a common taste in music and are engaged in communication about music, since communication is to be achieved rather than sole distribution of the message.

In order to stimulate and support such communication, music experience needs to be seeded in relevant social contexts rather than being only seeded to individuals. This creates visibility among friends and it emphasizes the awareness for the common interest, while it also provides a concrete motivation for communication. This can help to initiate group communication, as it motivates to express and share opinions, emotions and feelings within the group. Group communication again creates further visibility since it is not limited to the group.

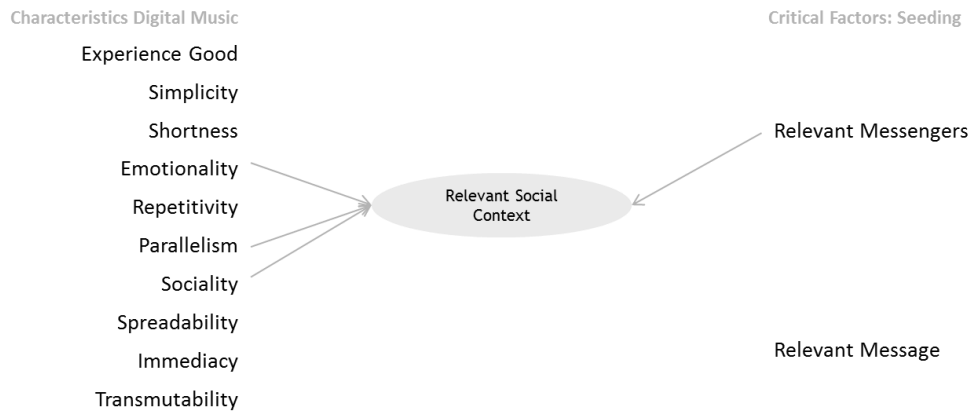


Figure 4. Relevant Social Context

*Relevant Situative Context*

As mentioned, it is critical for seeding that a *relevant message* is provided. If a message is not relevant a consumer will not devote attention to it. With regard to music the context gives music relevance (Lacher, 1989). Music can be consumed in the context of various activities (*parallelism*) (e.g. chatting with friends, doing sports). The *immediacy* and *transmutability* allows digital music to become part of our lives and activities. The context affects how music is perceived and music is perceived differently in different contexts. For instance, a relaxed and slow song might be appreciated when reading a book at home, whereas for jogging such a song could be perceived as too slow and less energetic.

Critical for digital music is therefore a seeding of advertisements in relevant situative contexts. The music experience needs to be seeded in situations where music is important (for the consumer). In order to ensure such situative relevance seeding can especially take place in the context of music related activities. Music accompanies consumers in social interactions, applications and games; it can be part of competitions and even offline activities. Seeding music in the context of such activities can thereby address situations in which consumers interact, where music can accompany them and where it can become part of their conversations.

<sup>4</sup> A group of friends or acquaintances of a consumer (e.g. sharing a similar musical taste)

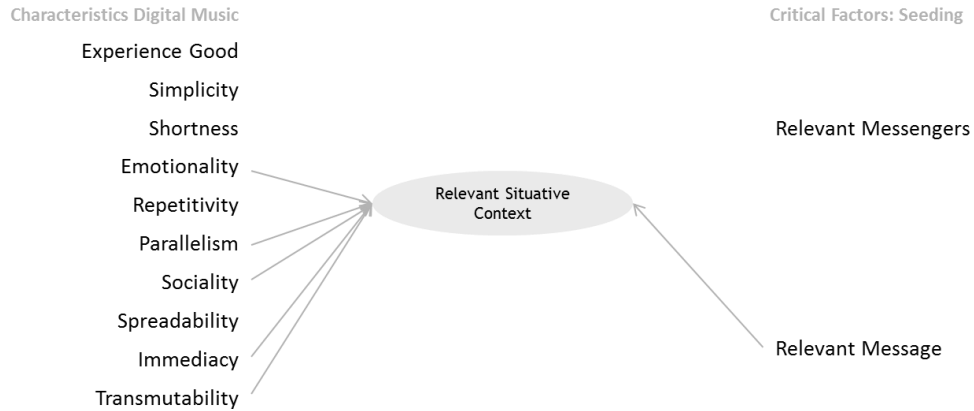


Figure 5. Relevant Situative Context

**Spreading**

*Enabling Integration of Music in Social Experiences*

To support the spreading of the viral message it is especially critical to provide an *effortless transfer* of the message, *exploiting common motivations and behaviors* and not least to *encourage communication and engagement*. Music is characterized by its *sociality*. Being additionally characterized by *parallelism* and *transmutability* enables music to accompany consumers in social activities and the related social experiences, on- and offline (e.g. sports, celebrations, meeting friends) (Lang and Hughes, 2003).

While this is critical to consider for the marketer in the seeding phase, it is also critical to help consumers with this in the spreading phase. To support the spreading, consumers need to be enabled to integrate music in their social experiences. This helps them to bring the music, which is to be marketed, into their lives and experiences. Consumers need to be enabled to discover, (jointly) consume, utilize, and communicate music in these contexts. Thereby music gets connected to the consumers’ activities and (positive) experiences and to the related emotions and music becomes part of the communication about these experiences (c.f. Dobeles et al., 2007).

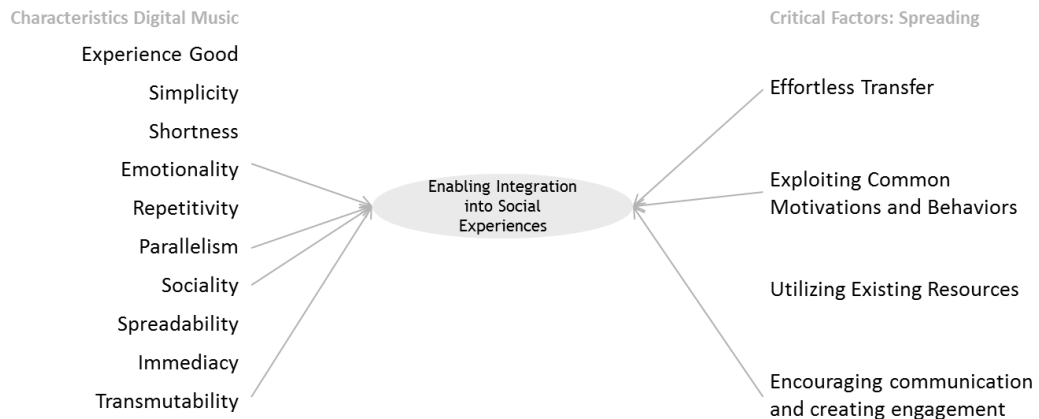


Figure 6. Enabling Integration of Music in Social Experiences

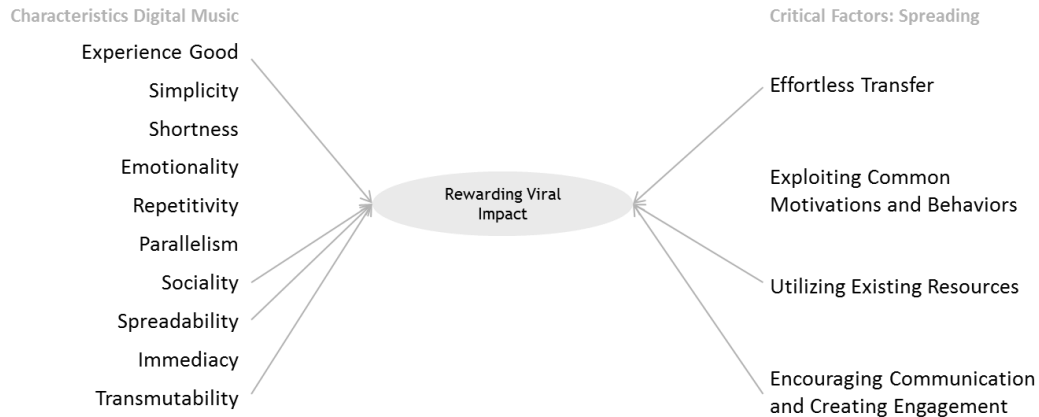
*Rewarding Viral Impact*

To support the spreading of the viral message it is also critical to actively *encourage communication and create engagement* and thereby to spread attention. Since digital music is both an *experience good* and characterized by *sociality*, attention for music strongly relies on consumption (e.g. Voermans, 2007). Considering further the integration of the music experience in



an advertisement and its importance, it is in consequence critical for digital music that consumers not only spread the advertisement but moreover that this results in actual consumption of the embedded music (viral impact). Only this consumption can create a positive product experience (Bourreau et al., 2008).

To encourage actual consumption, especially the social aspects of digital music need to be supported. Experiencing music together with others creates and spreads attention, wherefore the joint consumption experience is important. Encouraging joint consumption is the basis for a positive product experience and it creates visibility, since the consumption happens within the social network. It is important to enable this joint consumption and provide incentives for it. It can be supported by rewarding consumers for (joint) consumption of music within the social network, rewarding especially the listening frequency and listening time. They can also be rewarded for joint consumption within the social network, and how many other users they reached.



**Figure 7. Enabling Integration of Music in Social Experiences**

## CONCLUSION

In this paper it was outlined, why attention is increasingly challenging to gain in the world of digital music and why viral marketing is a chance for artists and music labels to re-gain attention. It was argued that the viral marketing process needs to be adapted according to the specific characteristics of digital music. We conducted an extensive literature analysis, analyzed what characterizes digital music and finally elaborated how these characteristics affect the viral marketing process.

The particular contribution is (1) the set of identified characteristics of digital music, which helps to understand better, what makes music special and (2) the critical factors for digital music, which extend the research on critical factors of viral marketing as well as they provide guiding points for viral marketing campaigns in practice. Social networks can then be used to conduct such campaigns.

The next step in these research endeavors is the currently ongoing evaluation of the critical factors of digital music. For this qualitative interviews with experts from the field of music marketing are being conducted. Based on the extensive knowledge and experiences of the experts, the validity of the critical factors along the viral marketing process for digital music will be evaluated.

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