

Element One Written Proposal

Theoretical Framework Essay 2,500

Introduction:

This research will investigate the theory underpinning the decision of an industry artist to produce a Vinyl Long Playing (LP) record, the growing willingness of the money purchasing public to invest in Vinyl and the romantic association around the nostalgia of a product once deemed obsolete (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2015).

The industry artist in question (and author) was brought up in a household filled (strewn) with musical instruments, books and magazines on music, musicians and music technology. CD/cassette/radio players of differing quality could be accessed in all areas: bedrooms, garage, workrooms. The one overriding non-variant was the ‘family Hi-Fi’: ONKYO TX SV444 amplifier, inputting a Marantz CD player and current television (TV) – outputting through a pair of KEF Q35 speakers. But we also had a Bang and Olufsen (B&O) turntable for the ‘old’ stuff; the ‘classic’ stuff. This is where music was played loud; this is where music was played which had made the ‘cut’ from the other ‘areas’; this is where the ‘classic’ albums were played – on Vinyl!

Digital music compact discs (CDs) were launched into the European and Japanese public buying markets in 1982 (United States of America (USA), 1983). By 1990, worldwide sales were almost one billion (Downes, 2010). The designers and producers were the Dutch and Japanese firms, respectively Philips and Sony, who had boasted a product which they claimed would alleviate irritating and annoying standards associated with record playing; Vinyl records could be replaced with their ‘... small, silvery plastic discs [...] with extremely low distortion and without surface noise’, marketing their revolutionary product as ‘Perfect sound, forever’ (Downes, 2010, p. 305). It was at the time of the millennium that CDs reached the pinnacle of their sales, hitting the sales market of the Vinyl record album uncompromisingly hard (Sarpong, Dong and Appiah, 2016). At this point, the sales of Vinyls in the USA had dropped to below five million (Ritcher, 2021). Growing in strength and popularity, the CD provided ninety per cent of album sales, with a value of eight hundred and thirty eight million dollars. However, by 2010, the CD plateaued and sales had reduced to just to three hundred and twenty-six million dollars. This could have been perceived as surprising, as it was in complete contrast to a huge expansion in the digital movement, showing a thousand per cent growth in the digital music industry itself (Goulding and Derbaix, 2019).

Downes (2010) says Compact Discs claimed to provide a better way to listen to music, it is clear and without interference, an established perfection; a standard industry of technical data known as 'Red Book' was a *go to* and accepted specification which was all well and good if you were a mainstream consumer (Downes, 2010). From the very introduction of CDs, a hardcore, almost underground movement rejected the arrogance of the CD to muscle in on their beloved Vinyl (Sarpong, Dong and Appiah, 2016). Unlike the general public, the music enthusiast or 'audiophile' did not approve of results from perceived style or imbued mastering of sound - all of which they deigned 'awful', disregarded and initially refused to accept (Hracs, and Jansson, 2020). Downes (2010) says the inability of the self-professed enthusiast to accept new technology can be explained, in the instance of the audiophiles, due to inherent challenges to 'their customary modes of interaction with the technologies of their hobby' (p. 306).

The choice by which to consume music, whether perfectly delivered by CD (Downes, 2010) or that nostalgically experienced on Vinyl (Goulding and Derbaix, 2019) must also compete with free digital legitimately streamed music and also music illegally digitally sourced. Brown, Caldwell & Knox (2016) say that 'individuals engaging in digital piracy [...] are most likely to be young males' (p. 80). Young women aged under thirty were more likely to pay for musical downloads, they may even purchase the entire album, particularly if they liked one or more tracks; they were less likely to purchase or would consider illegally downloading if they felt they were receiving poor value for money (Brown, Caldwell and Knox 2016). Papies and Heerde (2017) say that the 'unbundling of album tracks' allowing consumers to cherry pick in the digital medium, encourages a reduction in the likelihood of musical sales, and also piracy. Rushan (2020) says consumer preference has changed exponentially because of advances in digital technology and of course the Internet. Music is accessed through a multitude of different mediums including our cars, computers, sound systems, Bluetooth and wired – 'seamless music streaming [...] globally 176 million customers are using paid streaming services, of which 76% are streaming music through mobile phones' (Rushan, 2020, p. 1) Morris (2020) accuses online streaming platforms such as Spotify of reducing producers of music and musicians to software developers. He states they are forced to prepare their music as data with 'an intermingling of sonic content and coded metadata [...] readied for discovery' (p. 3).

There are those who will always decide that a new technology is lacking in some way and that with the introduction of the **new**, something has been lost or is just not as good as the old version; the fact is that the new version is simply not what they are used to, it just sounds different (Gnomes, 2016). Katz (2004) says if we dissect the evolution of designs, we can

identify several reasons for success within the introduction of new musical formats. He reasons there is not just a search for better sound quality; there is also the need for portability and accessibility within our consumption of music. The downloading of digital sound, due to the ease of accessibility, is deemed a non-rivalrous source as the *new user* is not reducing or degrading the quality of the original file, just copying it (Katz, 2004). Therefore, it is argued that downloading is a harmless endorsement of another's work as 'it [...] is not to use or take someone else's song file, but to copy it' (Katz, 2004, pp. 163/4).

Gnomes (2016) says naturally CDs sound superior to LPs, as they play at 45 revs per minute (rpm), opposed to 33 rpm; it is the discerning ear of the purist who mourns the loss of authenticity. He cites the lyrics of a song by rock band Pearl Jam's front man Eddie Vedder, who affectionately praises the Vinyl LP 'You are so warm/oh, the ritual' (Gnomes, 2016, p. 2).

Even though CDs undoubtedly changed the way music was experienced, it is digital sound and the Internet which has seen the most remarkable change in the way music is consumed. Shops selling CDs are closing and it is the Internet which 'is taking its place as the way to access music' (Gnomes, 2016, p. 5). Incredible then to perceive that an obsolete, enfeebled and awkward object to transport, delicate to use and manoeuvre - the Vinyl LP - has clung on and survived through, what is referred to as the first digital wave of the Compact Disc (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2015).

Resurgence of the Record Shop:

Beaumont-Thomas (2020) writes about the event called RECORD STORE DAY (RSD), auspiciously named as it is a bi-annual event. RSD first started in 2007 to promote the sale of Vinyl records, but just as importantly, independent record shops themselves. RSD is a global event and continues to grow in stature. Independent artists are well represented and enjoy positive consumer support. Record labels also take advantage of potential increased sales by issuing limited editions; some stores even have live shows with bands playing. Rough Trade Records, East London site for example, is a regular venue for RSD (Rough Trade, 2021). The worldwide pandemic will have had an effect on consumers' ability to seek out their local record store, but they do now have the option of browsing. DJ Mag promoted the opening of stores following the first lock-down, and advertised the addresses of over one hundred shops who were open for business (Fielding, 2020).

The ability to open a record shop is positively encouraged by some outlets, but Spice (2014) questions whether individuals should leave the *pipe dream* or *adolescent fantasy* exactly where it is? He goes on to quote owners of Love Vinyl, an independent music shop in East London, who say it is not an easy business and they know they are never going to get rich. They opened the business for their love of music and to have fun: '[...] there's not huge mark-ups, there's not huge profits' (Spice, 2014, para. 5). Alternatively, such *Pipe dreamers* could be encouraged to open a record shop franchise. With an initial cost of around twenty thousand pounds, a small business model can be put into place, with retail outlets already in negotiation within garden centres throughout the United Kingdom (UK) (Revolution Records, 2021).

Studies, surveys and consultations regularly investigate the mass market music consumers and hardened music purists alike. Whether the age of those participants is young or old, they all evoke an unequivocal sense of apparent rekindled historical nostalgia, vintage tangibility, depth of value and relish the real touch of a Vinyl LP (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2015). Subjectively, the Vinyl LP appears to be unquestionably superior to the market rivals:

Digital is not reality. It never was and never will be. The frustrating, rough, rainy world outside of our screens is the place where our bodies and minds are at their best ... Analog gives us the joy of creating and possessing real, tangible things in realms where physical objects and experiences are fading (Harper, 2019, p. 53).

Bartmanski and Woodward (2015) discuss the media view which appears to consider Vinyl LPs are very much here to stay. Instead of labelling increasing Vinyl sales as a fad, a craze or novelty, or even the 'passing effect of fetishistic nostalgia, briefly fuelled by the ultimate triumph of the digital' (p. 4), they say prominent DJs who may themselves not use Vinyls within their workspace, are still captivated by their allure and charisma. Neither then is the hypnotising effect of the Vinyl LP lost on the contemporary musical artist. For example, international musician and performance artist Björk says although most music consumers do not physically visit record shops and therefore do not experience that process, the actual 'hunger for [a] physical experience' is still present (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2015, p. 4). This point of fact is a view shared by sociologists; it is evident we can enjoy a mix of the old and the new (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2015). An objective, multi-faceted and comprehensive research study into global Vinyl record sales found that 'the latest trend gaining momentum in the market is the promotional activities' (Research and Markets, 2021, para. 4). The study which took account of varied sales and consumer environments (including socio-economic), worked in collaboration with major industry representation, using both primary and

secondary sources, including a SWOT analysis (strengths/weakness/opportunity/threats) (Research and Markets, 2021). An overwhelming incentive remains integral to the success of the Vinyl LP and ‘major drivers for this market, is the culture, classic, and contemporary feel of vinyl records’ (Research and Markets, 2021, para. 2). Sonnichsen (2017) discusses the growing industry of Vinyl Tourism ‘[...] a direct by product of the music fan’s emotional, material investment in the art [...] record collecting is a significant testament to the materiality of music consumption’ (p. 237). In the USA, sales of Vinyl LPs had risen by thirty per cent between 2019 and 2020 – in 2020 sales were approaching almost thirty million (Ritcher, 2021). Richards (2020) says sales of Vinyl LPs has been rising steadily in the UK for the past thirteen years. He quotes the British Phonographic Industry (BPI) who say sales approached five million in 2020. They say figures reveal nearly one in five of all album sales were Vinyl; these figures are nearly twenty per cent up on those of 2019 (Richards, 2020). Henshaw (2019) says the resurgence of Vinyl LPs is to be congratulated, as on many levels it is a beautiful thing to behold. He cautions of unscrupulous opportunists who may attempt to resell vintage warped Vinyls which have been reheated in an oven to straighten them. He also alerts us to poor pressing of new vinyl, where the consumer could encounter bubbles on the Vinyl surface, off centre pressing or excessive noise interference from over waxing (Henshaw, 2019).

Vinyl LP – The Product:

Compact discs remain a staple within the professional artist sales repertoire. However, the discerning fan will now also expect to be able to purchase their favourite artist on Vinyl. For example, ‘Sparks’ by Imogen Heap was released in 2013 with a multitude of special edition CDs and downloads, even playing cards and a coffee table book - she also included a double 10” Vinyl album (Anon, 2013). Imogen Heap is an English artist; a record producer, audio engineer and singer-songwriter, who has managed to harness immense support from a fanbase, with which she has almost ‘employed’ as: supporter manager, confidante and subsequent promoter. A self-styled *ambient artist*, she ‘solicited their input on demos, [...] aspects of the production process [...] design of her album art [...] writing of her press biography’ (Morris, 2014, p. 273). Heap has used every digital medium at her disposal to promote her work. Using Facebook, Myspace and YouTube, she was able to provide her eager fans with a dialogue and running commentary of her musical expression and her journey. In this way, her fans became

an almost ‘family’, following and urging her on as passive participants to her success (Morris, 2014).

Major Project Proposal:

The aim of this Major Project is to produce a double sided Vinyl LP of LOVE LIFE. LOVE LIFE is a CD which I have written, recorded and produced for digital distribution. It is the intention to reproduce this digital album specifically for the Vinyl LP record public.

For an individual to consider producing fifty Vinyl LPs twenty years ago, would have seemed incredibly expensive for most. In addition, an attempt to market such an item would also have been seen as financial folly. However, due to the seismic change, and enormous purchasing power of the music consuming public, producers of Vinyl records are realising a very healthy trade, regardless of the worldwide pandemic of 2020/21: ‘The entire vinyl industry is currently experiencing unprecedented demand. Longer production and delivery times should be expected’ (Mobineko, 2021).

Numerous small run manufacturers on the internet offer packages to create 50 fully marketable Vinyl LPs for between £780 and £1,500. For example: Premium lacquer cutting/Black Belt Mastering;12" Black Vinyl - Regular Weight; 10"/12" Full Colour Vinyl Label; Unprinted 150gsm White Paper Inner sleeves; 12" 350gsm Digital Short Run 3mm Spined Sleeves; Matt Lamination (Mobineko, 2021 and Vinyl Pressing, 2021). The individual production price of each Vinyl LP would be between £15.50 and £30.00. Alternatively, larger runs can bring the manufacturing price down substantially i.e., 500 Vinyl LPs could cost just £3.38 each. For Example: 12" DMM Cutting & Production of Stampers (2 Sides); 12" Standard Weight Black (or Eco-mix Colour) Records (140g); Colour Printed Labels;12" White Paper Inner Sleeve (2 Holes); 12" Printed Outer Sleeve; 300gsm White-White Card, Gloss Machine Varnish 3.5mm Spine; Assembly & Sleeving Boxed and Delivered (DMS, 2021). Advice and suggestions can also be sought online from industry sources, for instance the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), who provide online programmes for artist just starting out, with links to website and tips warning of pressing too many copies: ‘once you've made your masterpieces, start reaping

the rewards' (BBC, 2021). The process (and journey) of how LOVE LIFE was changed from a digital CD format to analogue Vinyl will be explained in detail in the concluding assignment.

Conclusion:

The theory behind the historical and contemporary view of a product which some have said should have been left behind many years ago, due to amongst other things its cumbersome fallibility, has been catalogued in this research (Brown, Caldwell and Knox, 2016). Digital sound production, accessibility and portability has been proven to be superior (Katz, 2004, Downes, 2010), yet the feel touch and homogenous physical presence of the Vinyl LP Record has been stubbornly resurrected and lives again (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2015). The intention to reproduce an analogue Vinyl LP from the digital LOVE LIFE CD should be realised as a worthy major project. Due to the inhibitive price of small production runs, 500 copies will be more financially justifiable. I look forward to listening to the Vinyl LP LOVE LIFE on the hallowed B & O turntable in the near future - delivery dates permitting.

(word count: 2,702 plus indented quote 58)

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