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Article *in* Consumption Markets and Culture · August 2016

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To cite this article: Dominik Bartmanski & Ian Woodward (2016): Vinyl record: a cultural icon, Consumption Markets & Culture, DOI: 10.1080/10253866.2016.1212709

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2016.1212709

CONSUMPTION MARKETS & CULTURE, 2016
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2016.1212709

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Vinyl record: a cultural icon

Dominik Bartmanski[a] and Ian Woodward[b]

[a]Department of Sociology, Technische Universitat Berlin, Berlin, Germany; [b]Department of Marketing and Management, University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we use the case of the vinyl record to show that iconic objects become meaningful via a dual process. First, they offer immersive engagements which structure user interpretations through various material experiences of handling, use, and extension. Second, they always work via entanglements with related material ecologies such as turntables, speakers, mixers, and rituals of object care. Additionally, these engagements are complimented by a mediation process which emplaces the vinyl historically, culturally, spatially, and also politically, especially in the context of digitalization. This relational process means that both the material affordances and entanglements of vinyl allow us to feel, handle, experience, project, and share its iconicity. The materially mediated meanings of vinyl enabled it to retain currency in independent and collector's markets and thus resist the planned obsolescence and eventually attain the status of celebrity commodity with totemic power in music communities. This performative aspect of vinyl markets also means that consumers read closely the signals and symbols regarding vinyl's status, as its various user groups and champions try to interpret its future, protect, or challenge its current position. Vinyl's future, and the larger expansion of pressing plants and innovative turntable production around it, largely depend on processes of cultural and status mobility. In the current phase of market expansion, vinyl's status might be challenged by its own success. Neither a fashion cycle phenomenon, nor simple market conditions explain vinyl's longevity. Rather, cultural contextualization of vinyl as thing and commodity is crucial for avoiding symbolic pollution and retaining sacred aura.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 25 May 2015
Accepted 29 June 2015

KEYWORDS
Vinyl record; iconicity; music; materiality; aura; heritage; entanglement; marketplace icon

Introduction and evidence

The case of the vinyl record arguably shows us three fundamental things: the latent cultural fascination with death, in the current case displaced onto a thing which refuses to die; the reflexivity of markets and the performative construction of the commodity, in the current case visible in vinyl's status of a market celebrity in popular media; and, as if it should surprise us at all, an elemental cultural process is the veneration of supposedly sacred "authentic" things; to locate, sense, and experience their aura, and to handle their iconicity. Although the classic conceptions of sacred totem (Durkheim 1995) and the aura (Benjamin 2008) can be useful in a synchronic analysis of such objects, we have argued elsewhere (Bartmanski and Woodward 2013) that it is necessary to employ a more multidimensional category of cultural iconicity and account for the diachronic aspects of iconic process. On the one hand, iconicity enables researchers to systematically connect the discursive with the sensory and material registers of meaning construction in a way that emphasizes the role of time- and place-

CONTACT Dominik Bartmanski dbartmanski@googlemail.com

specific affordances in sense-making. On the other hand, iconicity allows us to think about meaning construction as a dynamic performative process, with meaning subject to framing and reframing effects of shifting socio-material conditions (Bartmanski and Woodward 2015).

The case of the vinyl format shows that it is not just commodities which have biographies and lifecycles, circulating meanings and organizing both consumption contexts and communities (Appadurai 1986). The vinyl format, now the fastest growing area of music sales, illustrates that markets have an obvious performative dimension, whereby producers and customers discuss the meanings of the markets in a range of public and digital forums. Markets evolve, the commodities offered within them do also, and these changes are themselves subject to discussion and sometimes fetishization. Here, vinyl is no exception, and is an excellent example of the hybridization tendencies inherent in how this "new, old" commodity is marketized in the context of the digital era of music consumption.

In this short paper, we draw on our previous work devoted to the relational construction of vinyl as cultural object and auratic commodity. One of the original questions animating our research was how can a mechanically reproduced cultural product regain its aura (Bartmanski and Woodward 2013)? We argued that to answer this question, we need to attend to a range of social and material mediations and contexts that give rise to constitutive iconic meanings of vinyl. This, in turn, led us to explore another key question that we developed in the book (Bartmanski and Woodward 2015), namely how the digital revolution reframed the emblematic analog format and created a cultural space within which its totemic status could be reclaimed. Here, we extend our argumentative scope and ask how this sacred position of vinyl can be destabilized, or reinforced and extended.

The vinyl record – here we refer to the medium of vinyl, combining all possible vinyl formats – continues to excite diverse cultural interests, partly because it has apparently been resurrected in mainstream culture. As a product, it coordinates a diverse group of technicians, engineers, and cultural experts in its making. As a commodity, its meanings are stabilized only within physical or digital marketplaces, where it sits on shelves or in bins awaiting purchase. As a good, its lifecycle demonstrates reflexivity of groups of consumers and non-linearity of market developments. Seemingly obsolete things can have a resurrection in the mainstream. And so, market agents devote much energy to observing and honouring that resurrection, qualifying and re-qualifying (Callon, Méadel, and Rebaharisoa 2002) the nature and meaning of the vinyl record and its voyage from hegemonic format, to marginalized and underground totem, and to achieving a revived status subjected to forms of curious celebration as an icon of culture.

Thinking about this fluctuating trajectory, one must remember that "the position of the vinyl has been eroded by the deliberate decision of some major companies to phase out the format" (Laing 1992, 109) and that at that time those companies "held 80% of the global market" (Laing 1998, 328), making it feasible for them to effectively replace the vinyl disc with the CD. The CD was many times cheaper to produce, but not cheaper in stores. The entire mainstream production scheme has been rewired which resulted in massive diminishing of the vinyl output and a decrease of pressing quality in the 1990s. Economically, corporations achieved their goal because "replacing the vinyl provided several years of mega-growth and super-profits for the industry" (Laing 1998, 329).

By 2007, the vinyl record seemed a critically endangered species of sound technology, as digitalization of music shifted listening practices towards the Internet. It survived the lean years due to the commitment of underground and independent musicians as well as collectors and audiophiles who never gave up on the format, and in fact endowed it with a special aura. Curiously, however, the more virtual music consumption was becoming, the more visible was vinyl's revival in the mainstream. In 2011, *Rolling Stone* magazine published an article titled "Vinyl sales increase despite industry slump." In 2012, the *Wall Street Journal*'s Eric Felten (2012) heralded the rebirth of vinyl with a piece titled "It's alive! Vinyl makes a comeback." In 2013, the *New York Times* published "Weaned on CDs, they're reaching for vinyl" (Kozinn 2013) and in 2014 "Watch out i-Tunes. Vinyl still lives" (Sisario 2014). In 2016, Chris Morris published for *Fortune* a piece entitled "Vinyl sales are at a 28 year high"

and CBS ran a story titled "Vinyl's resurrection. Sales at a record high." (CBS News 2014). The trend does not abate. On the contrary, Patrick Hinton (2016) wrote in Mixmag that record sales are continuing to rise, even though young customers do not necessarily play records regularly. We witness not just the mundane reporting of sales figures and economic values in major newspapers and financial journals, but the full-blown and wide-eyed veneration of a transformation of a good to iconic status. The story of how and why this happened is complex and multi-layered. In this piece, we give only a succinct overview, leaving our longer works to flesh out the conceptual and ethnographic richness (Bartmanski and Woodward 2013, 2015).

Thing, not brand

Vinyl has experienced the rebirth of its cool. It is a cultural icon. But the cultural iconicity of the analog record is not exactly an example of brand image or branded good (Holt 2004). It is a complex sensory signifier and multifaceted material object and therefore needs to be accounted for in terms of its affordances, qualities, sensualities, and a whole range of specific phenomenological references and performative traits. Vinyl as a signifier is not merely arbitrarily connected to its cultural meanings and the social myths surrounding its biography. As both researchers in the social sciences (e.g. Borschke 2011; Maguadda 2011) as well as practitioners in marketing studies (Rose 2013) have understood, one needs to take into account various pragmatic and experiential aspects and layered physical entanglements of the concrete medium itself.

Similarly, we have argued that the revival of the analogue record in the digital age indicates that music is not merely about *communication* of sonic data that transcends space. It is also an *experience* of objects and emplaced performance. It is not just about routine convenience provided by technological convergence of functions (e.g. multifunctional smartphone) but about ritual immersion and divergence of experiential contexts (e.g. professional turntable). In the case of vinyl, the format is not judged by its portability but rather by its aesthetics and entwinements as an object. This realization has been critically heightened and recontextualized by the general public only when the digital revolution seemed complete and consumption of music became virtual and thus easier than ever.

Although pragmatically and economically attractive, the ease of access can affect the value and meaning of the object negatively, as was already observed by Simmel (2008, 149). The story of vinyl's revival vis-à-vis popularity of digital files and virtual listening practices underscored the value of relative uniqueness. Each record is a physical copy, not an infinitely replicable clone. In the era of small-batch production, when the costs of pressing and distribution are high, most records are relatively scarce, and thus perfect as a gift or collectable item. Therefore, despite being "mechanically reproduced," vinyl can enjoy a kind of artistic aura. The scale and design of covers gives added value in this respect. As a music format, it offers not only a superb unique auditory value but also a whole range of tactile, haptic, visual, and even olfactory experiences. Vinyl is a labor- and care-intensive artefact, thus signifying effort and dedication. As a sound carrier, it has a long publishing tradition, with multiple references and stories attached to it. In the market of incessant upgrades and planned disposability, vinyl is an icon of durability and stability since the 1950s, when the technology was perfected and remained largely unchanged to this day. Record players like the iconic Technics SL-1200, or Rega's long-standing RP3, act in a similar capacity and are themselves celebrated by various market agents as examples of perfectly reliable long-lasting technological touchstones. This capacity of the vinyl record to become entangled within an ecology other things, themselves subject to market processes that drive iconicization, is one of its central features.

Heritage and iconicity

Partly because of its status as a technologically stable, perfected technique of production, and also its long-standing position as the hegemonic format for music reproduction and listening during the modern birth of the rock-pop canon (Regev 2013), vinyl has an advantage of being perceived as

the "classic," "real," and "authentic" format for listening experiences (Yochim and Biddinger 2008). Artists such as The Beatles, Bob Dylan, The Rolling Stones, Miles Davis, or John Coltrane released their most celebrated music on vinyl and indeed recorded and engineered it with the format in mind. "Serious" listeners who are committed to encountering the canon, demonstrating a learnt enthusiasm for it, or re-engaging with it, understand vinyl to be the authentic and "proper" way for such listening.

The heritage dimension of vinyl is afforded by and indeed reinforced by material engagements with its features such as the artistic scale of the front and back covers, special sleeve inserts, or gatefolds sleeves. This visual component matters, and is celebrated, for example, in coffee table books devoted to famous sleeves of seminal labels such as ECM, Factory, 4AD, Warp, or Ninja Tune. What is also featured on sleeves is information about the playing, codes and numbers which tell a story about who recorded the album, the instruments played, the location of recording, as well as who mastered the vinyl pressing, and information about the label that releases the album. This feature of enhancement is even more pronounced in current re-releases of classic or previously unreleased material, facilitated by major labels cashing in on their historical and archived music, or specialty independent reissue labels. In such reissues detailed stories, accounts, photographs, and interpretations of the material are offered to obtain meticulous knowledge or enhanced perspective on a famous album, at once performing and remarketizing its status as "iconic."

When this process intensifies further, we see that vinyl record collections by noted Disc Jockeys (DJs) and collectors such as John Peel, or Gilles Peterson and Claas Brieler, are celebrated as significant curations of popular and independent music (Paz 2015). In another notable case, the Brazilian record collector Zero Freitas came to media prominence (Reel 2014) for having the largest private collection of vinyl in the world. His collection of over six million records became identified and celebrated as an epitome of a comprehensive analogue musical archive and singular dedication to preserve rich musical cultures thriving beyond the popular canon. This is all the more compelling because, like in the cases of Peel and Brieler, it reflects the individual tastes as well as local knowledge and place-specific competence acquired by its owner–curator during a lifetime dedication to vinyl culture (Bartmanski 2016). More than this, there will likely be a growing realization that vinyl is a mass-produced commodity that spins a variety of local–global stories worth re-telling and preserving, a point reflected in the increasing number of exhibitions in art galleries narrating numerous histories through the popular means of vinyl records and their sleeves.

Agents, mediators, spokespersons

Vinyl can connect people in real space and time. Record stores are paramount in this respect, tying together physical product with cultural narratives, bringing to the mix intricate relations among things, labels, artists, buyers, and scenes. They are social spaces where knowledge and feelings are shared. Store proprietors are often experts in the field and typically play a role of tastemakers for a local community and beyond. Today record shops push this role a step further, acting as special party or concert venues. These independent champions of vinyl, to whom it largely owes its survival and coolness, remain crucial to vinyl's condition as a valuable product and critically important music format. They are collective agents of symbolic classification in music, in that records are ordered, stored, advertised, and displayed there according to stylistic criteria. Independent stores are therefore social institutions of genre categorization and artistic evaluation by organizing and promoting music in ways that transcend pure profit-orientation. Independent store owners are attuned to grass-roots developments, typically able to detect subtle yet meaningful changes in music quicker and more adequately than mainstream corporations. Importantly, they maintain ties with a range of independent labels and artists who are trendsetters, rather than followers. As Ben Sisario (2015) wrote in the *New York Times* about the commodification strategies of American label *Ghostly International*, such collectives sell an ethos, not just sound.

The future and iconic status

Vinyl's iconic status is achieved not just by the fact that it was the hegemonic sound carrier for most of the twentieth century, but because of its resurrection from a near-death experience at the time of intense digitalization. Importantly, this resurrection was facilitated by a process of diffusion across vinyl's user groups whose consumption of vinyl carried with them signals about the cultural values of vinyl as commodity.

The current fascination with vinyl, and its apparently ever-growing sales figures, clearly does not suggest vinyl will reclaim a hegemonic, dominant status among the range of music listening formats. Quite the opposite, in fact, the appreciation for vinyl as an analogue good is contextualized by the dominance of the digital music economy. We suggest that it is just as likely that vinyl's ascendancy to sacred thing may contain the seeds of its pollution and fall from grace. Vinyl has recently entered a rather dramatic and extensive contemporary phase of recommodification. It has a situation within popular culture where it is now something of a re-born celebrity commodity. The processes which allowed vinyl a renewed cultural mobility might begin to reinforce contradictory processes which push vinyl once again beyond the mainstream. This process will likely happen due to the relative cultural positions of vinyl's market agents – its consumers, communities, and intermediaries – in conjunction with processes of cultural valuing and symbolization. Here, we might point to leading stories in influential online music magazines such as Fact Mag, which ran a much-discussed story entitled "Pressed to the edge. Why the vinyl hype is destroying the record" (Hermann 2015), or the decision of leading independent record stores such as Oye Records in Berlin who opted out of participating in Record Store Day events in 2016, citing unnecessary vinyl reissues and increasing costs of new vinyl as being potentially harmful to the music communities they were supporting.

Much of these processes goes hand-in-hand with, and in some cases are underpinned by, the plights and fortunes of particular cities, scenes, and neighborhoods, as well as a web of meanings associated with contexts of production and reception. Neighborhoods, as well as the stores where vinyl is sold, the artists who release their music on vinyl, the innovations and permutations of vinyl as a physical format, and the degree of commodification of vinyl's necessary material ecology such as turntables, all give informing context to the longevity of vinyl's status as a contemporary icon. This charged cultural information is read and assessed by vinyl's cultural interpreters – consumers, onlookers, bookers, technicians and engineers, store owners, DJs, and marketing agents – who see in its recent transformation from the cultural underground towards the mainstream the potential for the voice of its cultural cool, authority and power to be muted by processes of symbolic pollution. For example, might vinyl's success crowd out the smaller independent labels who kept it alive during its marginalization in the digital era and who gave vinyl much of the symbolic capital it now has? Could this lead to cultural tastemakers then framing vinyl negatively? Will the way vinyl is moving from smaller independent stores into larger ones, and even into supermarkets and mega-stores such as Walmart or Urban Outfitters, signal the start of its symbolic decline? Might the fact that vinyl appears increasingly commodified, for example, by mainstream pop entertainers who now release on it like Justin Bieber, mean that its sacredness is no longer ensured by gatekeepers and tastemakers?

Every commodity is potentially subject to symbolic pollution. Records are no exception. However, resilient commodities that are more than just profit-generating products can withstand the "impure" market pressures. Markets are reflexive in that they can create niches out of which most innovations in music come. For one thing, because the vinyl record belongs to the world of music, it carries tremendous social power related to this form of expression. It takes part in establishing and developing music-related a "technology of the self" (DeNora 1999). Second, vinyl can and does mean different things to different people. This has been a key to its development in the second half of the twentieth century, the survival during the lean years, and the current revival. As an endangered media species, it survived its near-death experience due to its centrality to various social and market ecologies: DJs, collectors, audiophiles, and various alternative subcultures, from punk to techno. This differentiation

is supported by vinyl's multiple affordances described before and conducive to vinyl's ability to create and maintain a set of elective affinities with other commodities of urban fashion, such as books or clothing.

As a rediscovered mainstream good, vinyl may mean added value in music listening. A part of the story of reflexivity of markets is that rampant commodification can symbolically pollute its agents more than the object itself. There is a relative autonomy not only of cultural meanings but also of objects' affordances and historically constituted social distribution of value. Vinyl's continued importance within independent communities endows it with a status of the "king format" (Bartmanski and Woodward 2015), a hand-crafted "authentic" product that does not absolutely rule the market through economic dimensions, but reigns as a material condensation of quality, ritual, distinction, effort, and competence in music.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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