

**Analyzing the Personal Experience of a Rising Musical Artist as a Case Study in order
to Illuminate the Shift from consumer to prosumer within the Context of Musical
Digitalization**

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Introduction

In his reflection on the topic of music as an art form, famed French Poet Victor Hugo noted that ‘music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent’ (Graham, 1997). With these words, Hugo expresses his deep, personal connection to music, underlines the extensive impact his poetic works had on the musical landscape of the 19th and 20th century and reinforces the importance of music as a unique medium of expression for both the *creator* and *consumer*.

By drawing on Hugo’s remarks and keeping the importance of music as a medium of expression in mind, this paper aspires to analyze the personal experience of an up and coming musical artist in order to understand the shift from consumer to prosumer within the context of musical digitalization in an effort to make sense of the individual industry, holistic societal developments and future trends.

For this purpose, this paper will use an analytical structure consisting of four levels of analysis: Firstly, this paper **defines** the terms prosumer and consumer in order to identify their importance within the context of consumer culture. Secondly, the paper **outlines** the advantages and disadvantages of the digitalization of music in order to create an understanding of the environment. Thirdly, this paper **offers** background information on the artist studied in order to better grasp their role in the context of the study. Lastly, this paper **attends** to the artist in an in-depth manner by analyzing a conducted semi-structured interview in order to correctly understand the shift from a consumer to a prosumer within the context of musical digitalization.

As this paper will show, the digitalization of the music industry brings with it both benefits (the discovery of new music) and limitations (the oversaturation of a market) for **consumers** along with benefits (a platform for emerging artists) and limitations (financial exploitation) to the **prosumers**.

Consumer

According to the Buyer Behavior Model proposed Engel & Blackwell., consumer behavior refers to the ‘acts of individuals in obtaining and using goods and services’, defining a consumer

as an ‘individual who buys products according to their needs, preferences and buying capacities’ (Blackwell & Engel, 1981).

They further claim that *Internal* and *External* factors heavily influence consumer behavior and are inter-connected and work together to assist the consumer making process (Blackwell & Engel, 1981). *Internal factors* represent the consumer’s ability to benefit directly from the products and include components such as motivation, learning, and perception, allowing the consumer to justify an action based on perceived outcomes. *External factors* portray the environment’s effect on the consumer and include components such as family, social class and cultural background, allowing the physical surrounding to mold the consumption behavior.

Prosumer

The term ‘prosumer’ derives from Alvin Toffler’s work *The Third Wave* (1980). In it, Toffler argues that consumers are a phenomenon of the Industrial Age and that as society moves forward into a Post-Industrial Age, the number of consumers will decline (Toffler, 1980). They will be replaced by prosumers, people who produce their own goods and services, ‘make their own clothes, cook their own food, rear their own food and hang up their own wallpaper’, entering their own consumption (Toffler, 1980).

Toffler attributes the shift towards prosumption to various factors (Kotler, 1986).

Firstly, he argues that people will feel that they can produce better goods and services than are available in the market, especially as manufactured goods and services decline in quality. Secondly, as products become more mass-produced, people seek individuation in their goods and services. Lastly, Toffler notes that as the cost of skilled labor rises it will drive more people to do their own work.

Digitalization of the Music Industry

In line with the shift from consumer to prosumer, the music sector is currently undergoing a strong move away from purchasing music (ownership) to purchasing music platform subscriptions (access) (Petersen, 2016). This echoes Rifkin’s prophecy in *The Age of Access* in

which he spoke of an increasing irrelevancy of ownership to consumers, a notion that ‘will seem limited, even old fashioned 25 years from now’ (Rifkin, 2000).

The digitalization of the music industry follows this line of thought and prophecies that streaming music is the future, are starting to come true. In the last year alone, traditional CD revenues dropped 12.7% while subscription services such as Spotify, Apple Music and Sirius XM jumped 29% (Petersen, 2016). As a result, revenue generated by streaming music last year overtook the revenue made from CD sales.

Shift from consumer to prosumer

Social Theory

In an effort to make sense of the Individual Industry, Holistic Societal Developments and Future Trends, quantitative monitoring of changes within the up and coming artist and the examination of processes internal to him over time were employed in form of a semi-structured interview in order to illuminate the internal shift from consumer to prosumer within the context of musical digitalization (Coleman, 1990).

Artist Background

Valentin Fritz, born in Stuttgart Germany, is a twenty-year Old musical artist and producer pursuing his Bachelor of Arts in Musical Production and Sound Engineering at Berklee College of Music located in Boston, Massachusetts.

Interest

Valentine’s interest in music began at a young age. His Dad’s enthusiasm for the art form, who ensured ‘music (was) playing in the house and in the car at all times’, quickly passed on to his son. Once Valentine’s was able to purchase his own music, he often ‘spent hours at either Saturn or Media Markt’ listening to Xavier Naidoo, fascinated by the ‘beats and melody’ and his ‘extraordinary way of interpreting RnB for the German Market’.

Passion

Valentine's path from a normal consumer of music to producing his own songs was long and hard. Taking up various instruments from a young age, he struggled to find the one that was right for him. This scuffle to find his identity in music and a subsequent lack of confidence endangered his dream to become a musician. A change was needed and it came when he received his first drum set for Christmas.

It was old and used, the chambers attacked by rust and a miniscule hole in one drum producing an off-beat sound. Still, he remembers, the first time 'playing on the drums, something in my head clicked'. Regular practices with an instructor who was both an inspiration and a mentor, renewed Valentine's confidence in himself and reignited his dream to become a musician.

Musical Beginnings

Valentin began to pursue his dream with fierce ambition and drive. During school, he would spend more time in his self-made recording studio located in the basement of his parent's house, which 'included a broken chair, a piano, drums a mic and egg cartons for isolation' than at his desk doing work. The studio, as he refers to it was 'his refuge', an escape from a confusing, restless time on the search for his own identity, a German national living abroad, torn between two cultures, not quite belonging to the one or the other but not satisfied with being 'in between' either.

He started writing his own lyrics about life struggles and dreams, singing them over mellow piano chords and soft guitar strings. By the time he finished High School he had published numerous songs, earning him a full-scholarship to the Berklee College of Music.

Struggles

After joining various bands and continuing to sing and play the guitar at the prestigious music academy, Valentin noticed that and that it was not fulfilling. In an overnight decision, he left all the musical groups he had signed up for and chose to start a fresh, alone, as a producer. This proved to be one of the most difficult decisions to make and the feedback he received was poisonous. 'Compare playing in a band to being part of a sports team', he told me during one of our long skype interviews, 'when one of the key players leaves lets himself and the entire

team down, and that is exactly how it felt'. As relationships crumbled and pressure to deliver rose, Valentin kept his head up, wanting 'especially now to prove (he) could deliver'.

Success

He soon changed his artist name to VALNTN, a marketing strategy he came up with together with his new manager. The spelling is 'easier on the eye and more marketable'. In any case, when talking to him now, he seems for the first time at peace with himself and where he is in his musical career. Just a week before our talk, VALNTN released his first debut single, 'Can't Let Go' with Berklee Classmate Emilia Ali, receiving mentions in the various online music blogs, streaming over 100,000 times on Spotify and sky-rocketing into the Top 50 of the U.S. and German iTunes Charts

'It is still a long way to go, but I have a feeling to finally have found my own sound', he explains smiling, 'consumers don't realize the kind of journey artists go through until they release something that is 'successful' and even though I am grateful for the success of my debut single, I will have to keep working hard...'

As Valentin is both an avid consumer of music and a rising musical talent, he is the perfect candidate to provide the necessary expertise on both the consumer side and the prosumer side of a music industry, that he claims 'has been taking a 180 degree turn since the shift from the physical to the digital realm.'

Benefits & Drawbacks- Consumer

Inexpensive Access to a Plethora of Music

Attending to his role as a consumer of music, Valentin praises the shift in the music industry towards a digital market as an improvement for consumers as it 'has never been easier to consume music'.

In the case of Spotify, the streaming service amassed thirty million subscribers in six years. The service is particularly attractive for consumers as it is a) inexpensive, b) easy to use and c)

grants access to millions of songs. Moreover, the biggest benefit of streaming services is not just the amount of music one has access to but the variety of the music.

‘As a consumer I am now discovering small time emerging artists on a regular basis, resulting in a more moldable, richer, more diverse taste of music. Previously, with the financial implications of purchasing physical copies of music, this was not possible as I had no other choice but to purchase the music that I was exposed to through the radio, resulting in a mainstream, narrow and inflexible industry.’

Oversaturation & Homogeneity of Sound

On the contrary, Valentin voices critique of the digitalization of music for consumers, claiming that the ‘oversaturation of music’ and its ‘rapid development’ has led to a stark demise in music quality and fractured musical identity.

The **oversaturation** and **development** of music is extremely high.

This **oversaturation** blurs the lines between artists and genres but also reinforces a certain taste of music. Artists, aware of this subsequently cater to a certain sound, leading to a ‘homogeneity of music’ never before seen in a genre founded upon the pillars of diversity and risk-taking.

The **speed** at which artists and genres appear and disappear from the limelight is frightening. ‘An industry reliable on music platform- and social media promotion finds itself in a constant process of reinvention’. As a direct result, a consumers favorite artist may top the music charts one day, but in only six months completely disappear from the music scene. This undermines the creation of a traditional consumer-artist bond of previous decades and a subsequent loss of consumer identity.

Benefits & Drawbacks- Prosumer

Global exposure and Musical Freedom

Valentin names exposure, convenience, independence and connectivity as positive aspects for emerging prosumers in an era of music digitalization.

‘The way the industry is changing at the moment, it is a perfect time to be a musician.’

Valentin names a few benefits of digitalization in support of this statement. First and foremost, music streaming platforms make content more readily available, allowing the consumer to find more music from different artists and possibly giving artists the ability to become more popular. Secondly, artists ‘don’t need to rely on expensive studio rates’, as they can utilize the technology around them to create high quality music. Applications on Electronic devices are easy to use and provide a quality that exceeds those of traditional instruments. Secondly, artists ‘do not need to first sign with a major record label in order to get their sound heard’, as the promotion is done through social media networks and digital music platforms. ‘I realized that if I can find these small-time artists, other consumers can also find me.’ Valentin notes ‘this made me even more ambitious as it meant that ‘success’ was only a few clicks away. This exposure and digital proximity has taken various artists, such as Chance the Rapper, to musical acclaim without the backing of a major label, a notion unthinkable just ten years ago (Forde, 2016). Lastly, the connectivity of the digital era allows artists the ability to ‘communicate with potential collaborators, producers and managers’. Gone are the times of phone calls and lengthy communication chains. Whenever ‘an artist, small or big, wants to collaborate with someone else, he or she will just hit them up through twitter or Facebook messenger’.

High Pressure & Financial Exploitation

*Nonetheless, despite the benefits that accompany the shift, the digitalization of music is a monumental challenge for artists, especially due to **high performance pressure and financial exploitation.***

High Pressure

While the lucrative opportunity to fame and wealth has always been a pull factor to get involved in music production, recent technological development and the subsequent decrease of costs and ease in production have further lead to an increase in the number of individuals that want to pursue a career as musicians.

This has lead to the rise of increased pressure to perform. In order to stick out from the masses, artists are forced, now more than ever before, to produce high quality and unique music ‘at incredibly high speeds’ to stay relevant. They have to pioneer a trend rather than bandwagon. This increased pressure to perform and subsequent work overload can lead to stress and anxiety related health issues such as insomnia and depression.

Financial Exploitation

By making music more **accessible** to consumers at **lower prices**, the streaming industry is often criticized for failing to adequately financially reimburse the artists.

With music streaming services such as Apple, Pandora and Spotify determining the worth of an artist’s music by arbitrarily choosing to set a monthly price for their audiences to pay, the streaming platforms are **benefitting** from the entire transaction of publishing music, audiences seeking it out and listening to it.

On the other hand, as ‘there aren’t any strict regulations on streaming and exactly how much artists should get paid’, numerous musicians feel they are being robbed of the total revenue they deserve for their work. Artists claim that consumers using music streaming services is unjust and paying a monthly fee is the ‘same as going into a clothing store paying an entrance fee and then collecting all of the items you want’, threatening creativity and their survival. The impact, is ‘very detrimental to an entire branch of music’, namely small, emerging artists, as they rely on financial payments and the more money these artists lose to streaming, the less freedom they have to work and create for their fans, widening the gap between themselves and big name, mainstream musicians (Shapiro, 2016).

In order to counter this issue, streaming sites should provide monetary support for less well known artists and with an increase in popularity and financial means, the amount of money given by the streaming platform should increase in order to allow for small artists to grow and big artists to develop independently.

Conclusion

As we live in an ever-changing era of consumption, in order for consumers to **gain access** and prosumers to **deliver** the best product possible, both constituencies need to adapt to the respective environment. As this paper has demonstrated, changing environment and the adaption process bears with it both opportunities and threats for consumers and prosumers. The digitalization of the music industry is a prime example of this, and brings with it benefits (the discovery of new music) and limitations (the oversaturation of a market) for **consumers** as well as benefits (a platform for emerging artists) and limitations (financial exploitation) to the **prosumers**.

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