How the Internet Facilitates the Activity within a Consumer Culture

- A Study of the Online Vinyl Record Network

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to describe and analyze how the online vinyl record network functions from both a consumer and retailer perspective, in order to gain an understanding of how the Internet facilitates the activity within a consumer culture. The vinyl record industry is experiencing a revival, with an upswing in sales and media attention and a significant increase in the amount of online trading. This inductive study contains data from qualitative interviews with ten vinyl record consumers and four vinyl record retailers, as well as observations of three relevant online forums. The study shows that the online vinyl record network is an e-tribe built upon a number of genre-specific member groups where the Internet facilitates consumption by informing, inspiring, and allowing network members to interact. Among the respondents, consumers with sufficient resources in their offline network rely to a lesser extent on their online network for interaction. The study further indicates that retailers have little influence on the network, compelling them to adapt the information and structure of their marketing activities to the preferences of the individual consumer groups. In all, the online vinyl record network does contribute to the recent growth of the vinyl record industry.
**Important Definitions**

**Consumer Culture** – A culture that comes into existence as people identify with certain objects or consumption activities and, through those objects or activities, identify with other people. Consumption communities and e-tribes are considered to be particular groups within consumer cultures.

**Consumption Community** - A specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand or cult object.

**E-tribe** - Specific subgroups of virtual communities whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity. Considered to be identical to virtual communities of consumption.

**Netnography** - The practice of studying online cultures and communities, where both the textual account and the fieldwork are methodologically informed by the traditions and techniques of cultural anthropology.

**Online Network** – Defined as an individual’s network where the communication takes place over the Internet.

**Personal Network** – Defined as an individual’s offline network, that is, people in his/her network sharing the same interest.

**Virtual Community** - Social aggregations that emerge from discussions in an online environment, eventually leading to webs of personal relationships.
# Table of Contents

## 1. BACKGROUND

1.1. PURPOSE
1.2. DISPOSITION

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK – MASSES, FRAGMENTS, TRIBES & NETWORKS.

2.1. CONSUMER CULTURE THEORY
   2.1.1. CONSUMPTION COMMUNITIES
   2.1.2. TRIBES
   2.1.3. E-TRIBES
   2.1.3.1. Member Types within E-tribes

2.2. SOCIAL NETWORKS
   2.2.1. THE STRUCTURAL COMPONENT
   2.2.2. THE RESOURCE COMPONENT
   2.2.3. THE NORMATIVE COMPONENT
   2.2.4. THE DYNAMIC COMPONENT

2.3. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

## 3. METHOD

3.1. A NETNOGRAPHIC APPROACH
3.2. INTERVIEWS
3.3. SAMPLE SELECTION
   3.3.1. CONSUMER RESPONDENTS
   3.3.2. RETAILER RESPONDENTS
3.4. OPERATIONALIZATION
3.5. OBSERVATION

## 4. THE ONLINE VINYL RECORD NETWORK

4.1. CONSUMERS
   4.1.1. RESPONDENT BACKGROUND
   4.1.2. PERCEPTIONS OF THE MARKET
   4.1.3. PERSONAL AND VIRTUAL NETWORKS
   4.1.4. BLOGS
   4.1.5. ONLINE FORUMS
   4.1.6. OTHER IMPORTANT SOURCES OF INFORMATION

4.2. RETAILERS
   4.2.1. RETAILER BACKGROUND
   4.2.2. MARKETING

4.3. OBSERVATION

## 5. ANALYSIS

5.1. STRUCTURAL COMPONENT
   5.1.1. NETWORK STRUCTURE
   5.1.2. ACTORS & TIES

5.2. RESOURCE COMPONENT
   5.2.1. MEMBER TYPES
   5.2.2. INFLUENTIAL ACTORS

5.3. NORMATIVE COMPONENT
   5.3.1. NORMS & VALUES
   5.3.2. CONSUMER PERCEPTION OF THE MARKET AND MARKETING
   5.3.3. RETAILER PERCEPTION OF THE MARKET AND MARKETING

## 6. CONCLUSION

## 7. REFERENCES

APPENDIX 1-4
1. Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>RCA Victor presses the first vinyl record.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Compact discs outsell vinyl records for the first time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Vinyl record sales amount to 0.02 percent of CD sales.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Amazon launches its vinyl-only section, offering more than 250,000 vinyl records to online customers worldwide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>The vinyl record market reaches its highest sales number since 1991. Major record labels begin to reissue titles from their back-catalogue and release new albums on vinyl.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The vinyl record was considered virtually obsolete in the late 1980s when the CD became the standard audio format, and a majority of people gladly threw out their entire collections of vinyl records, never to look back. However, a small group of nostalgics, audiophiles and collectors unwilling to surrender their hobby, kept on buying, selling, discussing and listening to the dated record format. Recently, the vinyl record has had a revival, experiencing an upswing in sales and increased media attention (New York Times, 2008; Rolling Stone Magazine, 2008; Wall Street Journal, 2009). In today's digitalized age, when virtually all music is instantaneously accessible as mp3 files online, why would anyone want to buy a vinyl record?

Consumers have previously been limited to whatever top-selling products deemed profitable by the stores in their local area, but are now given the possibility to browse, compare and order almost any product through the Internet. This is the starting point of Wired Magazine editor Chris Anderson's book “The Long Tail”, where he proposes that people, when given the opportunity to access previously hard-to-reach products and services, will find offerings that better fit their own preferences further down the 'tail' of the product demand curve (Anderson, 2006). Previously unprofitable products have become profitable as people are utilizing the Internet to discover that their preferences are not as mainstream as they might have thought, something that in turn contributes to the increased popularity of niche products such as the vinyl record.

Not only does the Internet facilitate access to products and services, it also gives followers of particular niches, brands or products the possibility to interact and exchange information. The term consumer culture is a broad concept referring to groups of people gathered around different
consumption activities. An e-tribe refers to a geographically dispersed consumer culture group, consisting of people with a specific interest in common, interacting in an online setting (Kozinets, 1999). These types of groups are becoming increasingly common, and researchers believe that the future’s market will consist of a myriad of online networks revolving around different brands and consumption activities (Maffesoli, 1988; Kozinets 1999; Cova et al. 2007). Contemporary research emphasizes the importance of understanding these online consumer cultures in order to successfully market towards them (Kozinets, 2006).

The Internet increases the complexity and influence of niche market consumer networks, making it a difficult and costly process for a retailer to target a customer or customer group individually (Kozinets 1999). Within the online vinyl record network, collectors, audiophiles and enthusiasts discuss, recommend and debate particular artists, albums or genres, where each member has her particular preferences. The network includes all vinyl consumers active in an online environment where the main consumption activity is trading and listening to vinyl records.

The supplier side of the vinyl record market is almost as fragmented as the consumer side, with a large number of small professional and private sellers, each representing a small share of the aggregated market (Göteborgsposten, 2009). Furthermore, the specificity and scarcity of the records traded contribute to the complexity of the network. In order to understand the vinyl record’s counterintuitive growth, it is important to study how retailers market themselves and the consumers’ receptiveness to those activities.

1.1. Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to describe and analyze how the online vinyl record network functions from both a consumer and retailer perspective, in order to gain an understanding of how the Internet facilitates the activity within a consumer culture.

1.2. Disposition

The first section of the thesis consists of a theoretical framework, covering consumer cultures and network theory, intending to provide a background of the research within the field and to present the analytical framework used for the study. It is followed by a methodological account, results from the qualitative interviews and observations conducted, an analysis of the collected data and a brief review of the conclusions drawn from the study.

This section provides a background of the research within consumer cultures, leading to Kozinets' (1999) definition of an e-tribe and the categorization of its four member types. Further, Davern's (1999) four components of social networks are described, where three of the components are used in the analytical framework in order to describe the dynamics of the online vinyl record network.

Modern marketing is argued to have emerged at the turn of the last century when more academic attention was given to the field of market distribution (Wilkie & Moore, 2003). Since then, marketing has developed and shifted its focus from early agricultural distribution processes via scientific marketing and marketing management to more modern approaches such as relationship marketing (Egan, 2008). During a considerable part of the twentieth century, the market has been viewed as a mass market, where positioning and segmentation by gender, age and income have been important tools for success (Egan, 2008). However, researchers have argued for decades that mass markets are eroding, and that they are becoming increasingly fragmented (Kotler, 1986; Firat & Shultz, 1997; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Recently, several scholars have elaborated on that notion, arguing that the fragmented markets are being replaced by markets consisting of various consumer cultures (Cova et al., 2007; Kozinets, 1999).

2.1. Consumer Culture Theory

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is an area of research addressing the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) and has its historical roots in calls for consumer research to investigate these dimensions of consumption in context (Belk, 1987). CCT is not a unified grand theory, but rather a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). One important orientation of CCT is the study of communities and their interconnected system of images, texts, and objects; consumed for self-identification and social belonging (Maffesoli, 1988, Firat & Shultz, 1997).

2.1.1. Consumption Communities

One of the focal aspects studied by consumer culture theorists is the dynamics and implications of societal communities. Bender (1978:145) defines a community as “a network of social relations
marked by mutuality and social bonds”. Other researchers highlight the common interest and reciprocity, pointing out that communities allow for members to share and exchange a number of resources, the most important one being the creation and negotiation of meaning (McAlexander et al., 2002). Shared meaning may rely on for example religion, geography, a common cause or consumption interest. In fact, CCT researchers have studied communities thoroughly and identified a variety of related community types with various purposes, including consumption communities, communities of limited liability, and brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Boorstin (1973:89) introduced the concept of consumption communities, describing them as “invisible new communities... created and preserved by how and what men consumed.” Muniz & O'Guinn (2001:414) elaborated on Boorstin’s description, describing a consumption community as a group with “community members placing special emphasis on some type of consumption as part of a celebration, ritual, or tradition.” The consumption community thereby closely resembles what Maffesoli (1988) terms a tribe.

2.1.2. Tribes
In the book “Time of the Tribes”, the researcher and sociologist Michel Maffesoli describes what he terms 'neo-tribalism' as members of a group “characterized by fluidity, occasional gatherings, and dispersal” (Maffesoli, 1988:76). Put simply, he proposes that mass markets have become heterogeneous fragments, that is, “groups which are distinguished by their member's shared lifestyles and tastes” (Maffesoli, 1988).

A tribe is similar to a consumption community in the sense that they both are based on a set of social relations among admirers of a brand, cult object or consumption activity (Cova & Cova, 2002). 'Neo-tribalism' represents the notion that the individualized offerings required by customers are replacing the mass market, which is in turn being replaced by small groups of people sharing an interest in a particular product or brand. An individual can have an interest in any number of consumption activities, and consequently be a part of any number of tribes.
2.1.3. E-tribes

E-tribes are also known as *virtual communities of consumption*, and are specific subgroups of virtual communities. The term “virtual communities”, originally coined by Internet researcher Howard Rheingold, describes the online social aggregations that emerge from discussions, eventually leading to webs of personal relationships (Kozinets, 1999). Previous research has suggested that these virtual communities not only act as sources of information, but also influences what decisions consumers make and how they make them (de Valck, 2005). Kozinets defines e-tribes as “*affiliate groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities*” (1999:254). The e-tribes are in reality online consumption communities, where the common interest in a product such as the vinyl record compels members to become part of the online community. The term e-tribe is hereafter used to describe the online vinyl record network.

The 2007 book 'Consumer Tribes' provides a comprehensive picture and implications of a number of virtual and real life consumer tribes. It provides case studies concerning the topic, identifying tribes as different as Harry Potter fans, Hummer enthusiasts, and the Stockholm brat enclave (Cova et al, 2007). Members of e-tribes have a genuine interest in a certain consumption activity, and share experiences and information on the topic in a virtual setting. Tribes are essentially held together through shared emotion and passion, providing the members with a sense of identification. Group members value notions such as community, locality, and nostalgia (Cova & Cova, 2002). Maffesoli’s tribalization of society seems to be turning into an e-tribalization (Kozinets, 1999), one where cultures and subcultures are accessible to everyone and the dimensions of time and place have become irrelevant.

### 2.1.3.1. Member Types within E-tribes

The focus of consumer cultures and tribes are the relationships and the reciprocity between members, making the member's interaction important. Kozinets (1999) identifies two factors determining the 'member types' active in e-tribes. The relationship the individual has with the consumption activity and the intensity of the social relationships the individual possesses with other members of the tribe jointly determines the individual's member type. Four types are identified as depicted in figure 1. Worth noting is that the role of an individual member is dynamic and may change over time.
The tourist is an individual lacking strong social ties within the network holding little or no interest in the consumption activity. Such a person is unlikely to participate actively in discussions of either social or informational nature. The mingler maintains strong relationship ties, but has a negligible interest in the consumption activity itself. The mingler's opposite is the devotee, who has both an interest in and enthusiasm for the activity, but usually does not engage in social interaction. Finally, the insider has strong social ties within the network, as well as strong ties to the consumption activity.

These four member types represent the generalized picture of the network members; naturally the four types and everything in between exists. This study will focus on the insiders and devotees within the network, since a genuine interest in vinyl records acts as a foundation for the existence of the entire e-tribe.

2.2. Social Networks
Kozinets (1999) sees virtual communities, and consequently e-tribes, as social aggregations built upon webs of personal relationships. In order to understand the behavior within such groups, a social network approach is necessary (Davern, 1997). All networks consist
of nodes and connections, which within social network theory are equal to actors and ties (Handcock & Raftery, 2007). The term actor represents either an individual or an aggregation of individuals, and the ties represent a relation between any two actors within a network (Handcock & Raftery, 2007). In an e-tribe such as the online vinyl record network, an understanding of these actors and ties is necessary in order to explain how the network functions.

Davern (1997) stresses the importance of these actors and ties, and proposes that social science studies should put more emphasis on the social networks as a research topic. He further argues that social networks consist of four basic aspects; namely the structural, resource, normative, and dynamic components. Davern suggests a relation-centered approach where the components represent the relations between actors, the respective access to resources, the networks' norms and values and the frequent formation and dissolution of ties.

Four components of social networks, adapted from Davern (1997:288)

2.2.1. The Structural Component

The configuration of actors and ties within a network is the main concern of the structural component. The arrangement of them with respect to each other greatly influences the actors' behavior and the outcome of it, meaning that an altered arrangement of actors and ties will alter the social consequences (Davern, 1997). For instance, a network consisting of three people can have the shape of a straight line, giving one of the actors a power advantage. The person connecting the other two then has a more powerful network position. Conversely, the network takes on a triangular shape if all actors are connected directly, making them equally powerful.
The strength of the ties also has influence on the structure of the network. It is measured in a number of different ways, including relationship duration, emotional intensity, and level of business interaction. The structural aspect thus takes into consideration both the strength of the tie and the geometry of the connections (Davern, 1997).

2.2.2. The Resource Component
In a network context, resources are what actors rely on for help or support in order to achieve their goals (Davern, 1997). Put simply, the resource component takes into account the resources available to an actor, either individually or through her network. Resources are a function of the actor's own resources as well as all her contacts' resources, and are, in the online vinyl record network context, knowledge of specific artists or genres, status, prestige or connections with particular buyers or sellers. A person with several high-status individuals in her network thus has access to large amount of resources.

2.2.3. The Normative Component
With time, all networks develop certain social norms, regulatory rules, and effective sanctions, explicit or implicit, which can facilitate or hinder processes of exchange (Davern, 1997). Within a network, trust among members, the network's governing rules and enforcing sanctions are important normative considerations. Networks are often self-regulatory, meaning that the norms are implicit and known by group members, and the sanctions risked by members if they were to violate the norms are greater than the possible gains (Davern 1997).

2.2.4. The Dynamic Component
Davern (1997) mentions a fourth aspect of social networks, the dynamic component. It concerns changes in a network over time, and is according to the author the least-studied area within social network studies, and one that deserves more attention. The focus of this study is on the three components mentioned above, since the objective is to describe the network at its current state.

2.3. Analytical Framework
In order to be able to understand and describe the online vinyl record network, it is necessary to identify the network’s main areas of interest. For the purposes of this study, Kozinets' (1999) member types act as a basis for the fundamental categorization of respondents. The study identifies
similarities and differences between the two member categories, mainly concerning access to resources. Similarly, network, actors, ties, and activities are analyzed using three out of Davern's (1997) four components of social networks as depicted in figure 2.

![Analytical framework, based on Davern’s (1997) social network components and Kozinets' (1999) member types.]

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of how the Internet facilitates the activity within the network, it is necessary to investigate the network’s structure, members, their respective resources and what norms and values exist. The structural aspects of the online vinyl record network are investigated by studying the respondents' perception of the ties between actors, the ties' respective strength, as well as the network structure and its influence on a particular actor. By investigating the members' online interaction, the study aims to identify the available resources within the online network and how they affect the strength of the actors' network position. The personal and online networks are inherently interconnected, making the resource allocation between an individual’s online and personal networks an aspect of interest (Kozinets 1998). Although the study covers the online vinyl record network, identifying differences between respondent’s personal and online networks can give insight into what role the Internet plays for how the respondents’ pursue their interest. Important normative aspects to study are what norms and regulatory rules exist in the online vinyl record network and what possible sanctions network members risk when violating the norms and rules, as well as the norms' impact on retailer marketing activities. These components are broad and fairly general, but act as a starting-point for the investigation as they determine the important areas of the online vinyl record network.
3. Method

This section provides the reader with a background to the practice of netnography, as well as accounts of the methodological choices made.

Studies in Consumer Culture Theory are often qualitative as they focus on experiential and sociocultural dimensions of consumption that are often not accessible through surveys or experiments (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Methodological pluralism is encouraged if needed, and several methodological approaches can be exercised within the field of CCT. One commonly used method when conducting case studies about consumer cultures is ethnography and its online equivalent netnography. For this study of the online vinyl record network, a netnographic approach has been chosen, as the study is exploratory and descriptive in its nature.

3.1. A Netnographic Approach

Netnography is a recently developed method, devised specifically to investigate the consumer behavior of cultures and communities present on the Internet (Kozinets, 1998). It is largely based on the traditions and techniques of cultural anthropology, adapted to the contingencies of the online environment (Kozinets, 2006). The origin of netnography – ethnography - aims to clarify the ways culture is constructed by people's behaviors and experiences, and has four distinct features (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994).

The four features suggest that ethnographic researchers must (i) produce a systematic data collection and recording of human action in a natural setting, (ii) generate interpretations which are found credible by both research subjects and intended audience, (iii) participate and observe extensively and (iv) use multiple data sources in order to generate varying perspectives on the matter studied (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994). In line with these features, Kozinets argues that netnographies require “an immense combination of cultural participation and observation”, resulting in the researcher becoming “a recognized cultural member” (1998:366). This is traditionally done by actively seeking and becoming part of the focal culture. The netnographic approach in the actual study will not cover an extensive participation of the network, as the study's time frame is limited. However, as both of the authors are vinyl record collectors and immersed in the culture in several aspects, the prior knowledge about the network is sufficient to ease the
apprehension of the collected data. It also facilitated the process of finding adequate respondents for the study.

The vinyl record network is what Kozinets (1998) terms a “derived cyberculture”, where a “real world” culture has taken its community online. Some features of netnography are therefore used as methodological tools in this study, where observations of forums used by the e-tribe's members are conducted in order to gain an understanding of how they interact.

In line with the recognized guidelines for netnographic studies, qualitative interviews and observations were conducted (Kozinets, 1998; Muñiz & Schau, 2005). The interviews were semi-structured in their design, allowing the respondents to speak unobstructed around the questions, providing a deep understanding of the complex context of the vinyl record network. The qualitative interviews were structured around, but not limited to, an interview guide with a set of previously decided upon topics derived from the theoretical framework. As is often the case with qualitative research, the study was conducted with an inductive approach where the collected data is viewed with an open mindset (Bryman & Bell, 2007). However, it is important to mention that nearly all inductive research also contain some traces of deductive method (Bryman & Bell, 2007). In this study, Davern's framework of network components served as our analytical framework by which the interviews were structured and the data categorized.

3.2. Interviews

Semi-structured qualitative interviews with consumers of vinyl records and retailers selling vinyl records online were conducted until enough information to answer the research question was acquired. In line with Kozinets (1998) view that as much data as possible should be collected when studying derived cybercultures, members of the network were interviewed face-to-face, by phone, and through email (Appendix 1-4).

Before conducting the first interview, conceivable questions rooted in the analytical framework were discussed in detail and chosen in agreement between the authors. The questions formed two different interview guides, one for retailers and one for consumers, which were used at all personal and telephone interviews with slight variations depending on the respondent. The interview guide also came to develop over time as interviews were carried out and important questions were
crystallized. Shorter versions of the interview guides containing more succinct questions were created especially for the e-mail interviews in order to receive as comprehensive answers as possible. E-mail interviews are not as comprehensive as personal interviews, but to compensate for this fact, the interview guide was structured around the same topics.

During the personal interviews, one of the authors asked questions and acted as a facilitator while the other author took notes. Notes were chosen rather than tape recording, as it tends to be more comfortable for the respondent. Although information may be lost in the process when using notes, the fact that two interviewers were present was seen as sufficient to compensate for this risk. In the face-to-face and telephone interviews, the discussion evolved and also touched upon other topics than those mentioned in the interview guides. However, the main focus of the discussion was on the areas covered in the interview guides.

3.3. Sample Selection

All respondents contacted and interviewed in the study were categorized as either 'insiders' or 'devotees', meaning that they all had a genuine interest in the consumption activity (Kozinets 1999). In order to find suitable respondents, a combination of a convenience sample and a snowballing method was used. The convenience sample consisted of people in the authors extended networks, that is, collectors, audiophiles, and DJ's with whom the authors were able to get in touch. Additional respondents were added to the study through a snowballing method where some respondents recommended other people involved in the online vinyl network. An open request for respondents was also made, using online forums identified by previous interviewees as important meeting places for network members (a similar technique used by Thornton, 1995), which yielded two respondents.

Although the method is not optimal in terms of identifying key actors, it does provide a primary insight that led to a number of subsequent interviews, in turn creating a more comprehensive picture of the network. In line with the view of Halinen & Törnroos (2003), as much information as possible was gathered, to later be screened for relevance and substance.
3.3.1. Consumer respondents

All respondents were either 'insiders' or 'devotees', and different consumer types within the network were represented in the study. Artists, music journalists, DJ's, and collectors were included in the study in order to receive different perspectives on the network. Also, the respondents were chosen based on their taste in music, ranging from easy listening to pop, folk, black music, and techno, so that possible differing viewpoints on the network across genres could be explored. Respondents are henceforth referred to by the particular music genre they are interested in instead of by name. Respondents within essentially the same subgenre are referred to as Techno1, Techno2, etc. and the two respondents with preferences difficult to classify are simply categorized as Other. This is meant to ease the reader's process of differentiating between the respective respondents' answers.

All respondents have a substantial amount of experience and information concerning the market for vinyl records and its online network. For example, one respondent has utilized the internet to pursue his music interest since 1993, another has been nominated for a Swedish Grammy and a third is currently a DJ in Berlin. On average, each group member owns more than 1500 vinyl records and has 16 years experience of buying vinyl records.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Group member</th>
<th>Age &amp; occupation</th>
<th>Type of interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009-05-07</td>
<td>Carl Hedberg</td>
<td>Black 1</td>
<td>28, sales clerk</td>
<td>Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-05-12</td>
<td>Erik Svensson</td>
<td>Techno 1</td>
<td>25, student</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-05-13</td>
<td>Billy Rimgard</td>
<td>Pop 1</td>
<td>32, artist/journalist</td>
<td>Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-05-13</td>
<td>Rickard Masip</td>
<td>Black 2</td>
<td>34, student</td>
<td>Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-05-13</td>
<td>Markus Wästlund</td>
<td>Other 1</td>
<td>35, nurse</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-05-16</td>
<td>Karl Marthon</td>
<td>Northern Soul</td>
<td>31, sales clerk</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-05-17</td>
<td>Jonas Lundqvist</td>
<td>Other 2</td>
<td>33, art director</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-05-19</td>
<td>Martin Larsson</td>
<td>Pop 2</td>
<td>28, student</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-05-20</td>
<td>Erik Möller</td>
<td>Techno 2</td>
<td>36, artist/journalist</td>
<td>Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-05-20</td>
<td>Fredrik Östling</td>
<td>Techno 3</td>
<td>33, artist/programmer</td>
<td>Personal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1, List of consumer respondents

Although the respondents had different occupations, different levels of involvement in the network and different taste in music, the group turned out to be very homogeneous in terms of gender and
The study does not contain a single female, and how unfortunate this may seem, our sample seems to be in line with the network in general with regards to representativeness. An overwhelming majority of buyers, sellers, and active forum members are men, a perception that was reinforced by all respondents when brought up.

### 3.3.2. Retailer respondents

In order to receive a second perspective of the network, four vinyl record retailers were interviewed. Two aspects were of interest, how they use the Internet to sell vinyl records and if they use the Internet for marketing purposes. Retailers had to fulfill three criteria in the selection process; they had to have (i) a substantial assortment of vinyl records, (ii) an online store, and (iii) cover several genres. All four respondent companies were perceived as established and respected within the network and the respondents were all store managers, founders or well-informed employees, assuring their knowledge of the studied area. Worth mentioning is that the respondent Carl Hedberg was interviewed at two occasions, the first time as a consumer and the second as a retailer. The store manager was unavailable for an interview at several proposed occasions, but Hedberg was deemed as being knowledgeable of the firm’s marketing activities, due to his extensive experience as a full-time employee over a period of three years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Name of store</th>
<th>Genres represented</th>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Type of interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009-05-15</td>
<td>Vinylium</td>
<td>Pop, rock, indie</td>
<td>Jöns Mårtensson</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-05-18</td>
<td>Hot Stuff</td>
<td>Pop, rock, indie</td>
<td>Per Faeltenborg</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-05-18</td>
<td>Sound Pollution</td>
<td>Rock, punk, synth</td>
<td>Daniel Astgren</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-05-27</td>
<td>Record Mania</td>
<td>Soul, jazz, disco etc.</td>
<td>Carl Hedberg</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2. List of retailer respondents.*

### 3.4. Operationalization

The interview questions were derived from the analytical framework, with the purpose of identifying general topics of interest within the studied network. The consumer interview guide contained four main categories; introductory questions, questions about the buying process, questions regarding online activity and perceptions of marketing. The introductory part, intended to reveal the respondent's member type, included questions concerning personal information, vinyl record interest, genre preferences, and thoughts on the popularity of the vinyl record (see
Appendix 1, question 1-6; 28-32). The three latter categories mainly focused on the structural, resource, and normative components of Davern's (1997) social network theory. The questions concerning the buying process covered online/offline buying habits and preferences (see Appendix 1, question 7-12), whereas the ones covering online activity mainly revolved around forum and blog activity, the Internet's influence on how they pursue their interest, relationships, and their influence on the respondents' buying habits (see Appendix 1, question 13-22). The questions concerning marketing covered the respondents' perceptions of online marketing, its influence, and their opinions on effective online marketing within the network (see Appendix 1, question 23-27). To further study the aspect of the online forum activity in depth, an observation was later conducted in order to gain a deeper understanding of the culture and how members interact.

The retailer interview guide consisted of three categories of questions, introductory questions, questions concerning executed marketing, and questions revolving around desirable marketing. The introductory questions concerned sales figures along with respondent, company, and industry background (Appendix 3, questions 1-6; 12-15). The marketing related questions covered Davern's three components of social networks. The executed marketing section covered online as well as offline marketing, but also how the companies perceive their market and marketing efforts (Appendix 3, questions 7-10). The category desirable marketing covered how the retailers' would market the store if resources were unlimited (Appendix 3, questions 8-11). This was done with the purpose of revealing the retailers' perception of how successful marketing should be employed.

3.5. Observation

During the interviews, four main reasons for online forum participation were provided by the consumer respondents; interaction, information, inspiration, and transaction. Based on these four motives for participation, observations of forum threads were carried out in order to explore how members of the network interact at online discussion forums, similar to previous research by Muñiz & Schau (2005). Three different online forums were observed, all identified by respondents as websites where people active in the network meet, discuss, and debate. In each forum, the ten most recent forum threads were analyzed and later categorized into one or several of the categories of communication provided by the respondents. Two of the forums were aimed at vinyl consumption in general rather than any specific sub-genre, while a third forum was oriented towards vinyl consumers within the soul scene.
4. The Online Vinyl Record Network

This section is structured around the interview guides' main categories of questions, as each category of questions concerns all three of Davern’s network components. It contains the empirical findings from the consumer and retailer interviews as well as the subsequent observations of three online forums.

4.1. Consumers

4.1.1. Respondent Background

The enthusiasts interviewed are all loyal to the record format. In fact, only Techno2 claimed to buy CDs to any greater extent, whereas the other nine respondents focus solely on vinyl records and digital files. The general opinion, expressed by a majority of the respondents, is that a CD is simply "a more troublesome way of listening to an mp3", meaning that the CD sound is identical to the one of a digital file, but it lacks the esthetical appeal of the vinyl record. Nostalgia, sound quality and the genuine feeling of the record are other features appreciated by the respondents. Worth noting is that all respondents are dedicated to their hobby in the sense that the interest takes up a significant share of their time.

"Playing a CD instead of a vinyl record is like drinking instant coffee out of a paper cup instead of cappuccino out of a real mug."

- Techno1, DJ in Berlin.

All ten respondents believe that the vinyl record market will remain stable or grow in the upcoming ten-year period. The most common explanations given were that the Internet will increase the consumers' accessibility even further, and that young people looking for something 'genuine' in the future are likely to turn to vinyl records rather than CDs or digital files.

4.1.2. Perceptions of the Market

The respondents' perception of the individual vinyl consumer is that it is a friendly, honest and music-loving man, pursuing his music interest passionately. The network revolves around several subgenres, where specific norms and values mostly exist within the sub-genres, rather than in the online vinyl record network itself. Trust was mentioned as an important characteristic of the
network, exemplified by the grading system used when trading with used records. Several standards exist, but the grading of individual records is inherently somewhat arbitrary, which requires honesty from individual sellers. The respondents consider sellers overstating the condition of a record to be uncommon, as they would risk their reputation within the network.

"The average vinyl enthusiast is a friendly nerd, passionate for the music"

- Pop1, Journalist

The buying process differs depending on genre, where certain genres, such as the soul and black music genres, focus more on used records and the techno genre focus solely on new releases. Since both consumers and retailers sell used records, websites such as Ebay are important meeting places for the network members interested in genres focusing on used records. Northern Soul, Black1, and Black2 emphasized the importance of the music, but also stated that the collecting itself is important to their devotion to the vinyl record.

The respondent base generally considers marketing to be positive, as long as it is relevant to their specific preferences. However, few respondents had experienced marketing relevant to them, and considered it to be more of a nuisance in its current form. Other2 suggested personal e-mail updates on recent arrivals based on the individual customers' previous purchases as a way to overcome this obstacle. Several respondents mentioned that marketers had to have sufficient knowledge of the group, that is, essentially being as knowledgeable within the area as the consumers. They prefer stores to have a focus on one or a few genres, rather than a small assortment of records within each genre. If a store has the 'right assortment' in the eyes of a consumer, they are passively communicating that they are in fact informed and a part of the network, according to the respondents.

4.1.3. Personal and virtual networks

Black1, Techno1, Techno2, Techno3, and Other1 all claimed that they are more dependent on their personal, real life networks than on their virtual ones. The personal networks include people with an interest in the same particular genre, giving them the opportunity to interact and discuss the music face-to-face with their peers. It relieves their need for interaction, making their online exposure for social purposes less important. The Internet is important for them in a number of
different ways, but interaction and socialization are not the most significant reasons. Techno1 added that online interaction was significantly more important to him before he moved away from his hometown, as very few people with an interest in the genre lived in that area.

Similar to how Techno1 felt before he moved to Berlin, Northern Soul, and Black2 stated that the social aspects of the online forums are crucial to them, and one of the main reasons behind the magnitude of their participation in the online network. They have no actual face-to-face contact with people sharing their specific taste in music. They perceived their preferences to be shared by a minimal group worldwide - Black2 approximated his online network to consist of 20 people - which compels them to utilize the internet in order to be able to discuss music, buy records or exchange information regarding their particular genres.

Pop1 and Other2 differ from the other respondents in this aspect. Pop1 stated that he had been acquainted with the people interacting in his immediate virtual network even before the online communities existed, making his online and real life networks more or less identical. Other2 perceives his preferences, leaning towards the folk-rock/psychedelica genre, to be shared by a group of people generally not active online. He stated that he therefore lacks both a personal and virtual network interested in the same type of music. Some Facebook groups and obscure forums discussing the genre exist, but they are rarely very active. As Other2 himself put it; "it does get a bit lonely from time to time".

4.1.4. Blogs

The importance of blogs seems to vary depending on the individual's particular genre of interest. According to Techno1, blogs hold little relevance for his genre, whereas they are one of the few accessible sources of information in Other1's easy listening genre. Northern Soul reads blogs to widen his horizons and learn more about jazz and Other2 reads them exclusively to find new music within his own genre. The respondents perceive the blogs as being important sources of information and inspiration, as they are reliable and unbiased. The respondents generally retrieve information from blogs concerning particular artists, record reviews, and recommendations.

Pop1, an active blogger himself, has an RSS feed (a service aggregating chosen web content) with approximately 80 blogs, which he reads regularly. They act as a source of inspiration, information,
and recommendations, and have also led him to buy records from time to time. Incidentally, Techno2 mentioned Pop1's blog as one of the blogs he reads on a regular basis. Blogs generally cover particular music genres as in the case of easylistening.blogspot.com, 'House is a Feeling', and Discobelle.net.

When asked about influential network members, several respondents mentioned bloggers they trust. They act as a source of inspiration for finding new music and provide information about artists, which is something desirable for fans of specific genres. The significance of blogs seems to relate to the respondent's particular genre of interest, but holds relevance to some extent for a majority of the respondents.

4.1.5. Online forums
The importance of forums differs greatly between respondents. Techno2, Techno3, Other1, Other2, and Pop2 do not utilize forums at all; Techno1 and Black1 are solely observers whereas Pop1, Northern Soul, and Black2 are active members of several online forums. The reasons given for not participating in the discussion varied, but included lack of activity within the respondent's genre, access to a personal network and a disbelief in the Internet as a forum for valuable discussions. All respondents, even those not active members in any forums, realized the forum's importance when it comes to socialization and information for the members participating.

The consumer respondents identify four recurring reasons for utilizing online forums, namely interaction, information, inspiration, and transaction. Two respondents actually referred to the online forums as "virtual living rooms" for the enthusiasts, meaning that the discussions concerned particular details about artists or songs, hi-fi equipment or even details about members’ personal life. The four reasons mentioned above act as a base for the observation provided in section 4.3.

4.1.6. Other important sources of information
One effect the Internet has had on the market, according to the respondents, is that it has made the pricing process more efficient. All buyers can access information on previous auctions, approximate going price and even ask peers about the reasonable price of a particular record. A
site frequently mentioned was popsike.com, a webpage listing previous auction results for over 700,000 rare records. Although no two respondents go about searching for and accessing information in the exact same way, the general process was similar. Overall, the respondents utilized search engines, blogs, forums, online stores, and other online sources to gather information, interact, seek inspiration, and buy/sell records. Popsike.com, the artist and label database discogs.com, and online marketplace gemm.com, are, among others, important sites said to be contributing to the information-seeking process and improving the overall efficiency of the market.

4.2. Retailers

The respondent base consists of four retailers; Hot Stuff, Record Mania, Sound Pollution, and Vinylium, which all offer vinyl records in both physical and online stores. All retailers interviewed stated that they have experienced a sales increase in vinyl records during the last couple of years.

"Relevant marketing is key."
- Per Faeltenborg, founder of Hot Stuff.

4.2.1. Retailer Background

Vinylium is a small record store in Göteborg offering both used and new records mainly within the pop and rock genres. The firm's online sales fall below those of the physical store, at the moment accounting for roughly 30-35 percent of total sales. According to the owner Jöns Mårtensson, this might be due to the fact that he has operated the physical store for two years, while the online store only has been active for one year. Vinylium's online store only allows for shopping within the EU, but the respondent stated that customers from the US and Asia have contacted him with requests of buying records. Mårtensson added that he has acquired some records considered slightly valuable which he intends to sell at Tradera or Ebay with hopes of raising the price.

The Stockholm based store Record Mania reports that over 90 percent of their total sales stem from their online store. It is a niche store; mainly selling used jazz, house, afro, soul, hip hop, and disco records. According to the respondent, Carl Hedberg, it would be impossible to run a store like theirs, nearly entirely selling used records, without the Internet. Record Mania's online store has been active since 2001 and according to Hedberg, the firm has experienced steadily increasing
sales over the years, as their customer base has grown bigger and more customers have found their way to the online store. Record Mania's complete assortment can be found on Ebay, where they are auctioning off their used records, while also having "buy it now"-offerings to allow customers to buy records at a fixed price. Ebay has had a positive impact on the companies aggregated sales, according to Hedberg.

*Hot Stuff* is a retailer based in Älmhult, Sweden, and provides pop and rock collectors with rare vinyl records, CD's and merchandise mainly through the online store. Hot Stuff sells almost all its records online, although customers are welcome to drop by the physical store. Before the Internet came to change the business environment for music retailers, Hot Stuff sent out printed lists of their full assortment and new releases four times per year to nearly 20 000 customers, which incurred a cost of nearly 500 000 SEK per year. In contrast, the operational expenses of the online store accounts for roughly a tenth of that cost. As an example of the vinyl record's renewed popularity, Faeltenborg stated that they sold a mere five copies of Håkan Hellström's newest album on CD, while the vinyl edition of the same record sold around 500 copies. This would surely not have been the case some ten years ago, according to Faeltenborg.

*Sound Pollution* is a retailer located in Stockholm where they operate its physical store and warehouse. Sound Pollution, like Hot Stuff, previously sent out printed booklets with its full assortment and new releases to customers, making cost savings significant when the online store was in place in 1997. Daniel Astgren, store manager at Sound Pollution, stated that 80 percent of the revenue still comes from the physical store. According to Astgren, the reason behind this distribution of sales is that the store has a lot of regular customers that often drop by the store to buy a record or two, certainly thanks to their favorable location in the heart of Gamla Stan in Stockholm.

**4.2.2. Marketing**
Marketing aimed at e-tribes can be difficult for companies to execute as the consumers being targeted are likely to possess great knowledge and tenacious preferences for the products being marketed (Kozinets, 1999). Vinylium and Record Mania both claimed to have limited resources available for marketing, compelling them to allocate their resources effectively in order to make a profit out of marketing. Hot Stuff also highlighted the importance of choosing marketing channels
in order to target the right customer groups. Various online and offline sources are used by the retailers, the most prominent online ones being banners and Google Adwords. The retailers' limited marketing budgets compel them to make choices, as they perceive each marketing activity to be excluding the firms from another.

Vinylium owner Jöns Mårtensson stated that marketing is very important for small stores in order to attract people's attention. He concluded that the niche product assortment and unfavorable location of the store puts the firm in a situation where marketing is of utmost importance. Online, Vinylium has allocated their advertising budget to banners and Google Adwords. The firm has used banners in intervals on two different hi-fi forums, announcing new releases and communicating that Vinylium is a store for vinyl enthusiasts. The choice of hi-fi forums rather than music forums is first of all, according to the respondent, a result of his own interest in and knowledge of hi-fi technology. Google Adwords is another marketing channel that Mårtensson perceives as cheap and rather efficient. Using Adwords, he can choose his own search words and control the money spent. Offline, Vinylium puts up posters around the city of Göteborg announcing their existence. As a type of cheap marketing, the retailer also hands out flyers to hi-fi stores and during specific events. According to the respondent, this type of traditional "do-it-yourself"-marketing is rather efficient but time-consuming.

Jöns Mårtensson stated that Vinylium would put more effort into marketing if more capital were available. For a store his size, marketing is a rather large, but nonetheless very important, expense. The respondent stated that Vinylium would use more posters and flyers, but would also have more adverts in music magazines with a broader range of readers. Vinylium's focus would be towards more traditional offline marketing, if given more resources.

Record Mania does not put much effort into marketing. They do not use banners or Google Adwords, and neither do they have any cooperative efforts together with artists in the shape of links or banners. Their emphasis is rather on making the Ebay store easily reachable and lucid, in order to attract and hopefully retain some customers. Record Mania sees Ebay as a one of the easiest ways to reach a larger customer base, as well as an opportunity to increase the price on particularly rare records. Their focus on Ebay rather than more traditional online marketing is largely due to their assortment, which contains a substantial amount of collectibles.
When selling records on Ebay, Record Mania cannot advertise their own online or physical store; only provide contact information in the margin of their Ebay store. This is an obstacle that Record Mania would like to overcome, as Ebay often adds 15-17 percent on the final sale price to the customer. With the possibility to advertise the online store, customers could be directed there and experience the full assortment in a convenient way, without having to pay anything extra for the records.

Hot Stuff employs several online marketing methods, while relying on adverts in printed magazines as the only offline channel. Faeltenborg emphasized the importance of being noticed and targeting the right segment of customers, and further stated that relevant marketing for the recipient is crucial. Hot Stuff uses Google Adwords, a weekly newsletter to registered customers, and banners on the websites of artists to market the online store. Faeltenborg stated that the banners are effective as they are virtually free and may reach a very responsive target group; the fans of a specific band. Overall, Faeltenborg stated that people today have become more restless and elusive in the midst of all information overflow, and want to find what they seek instantly at a fair price. Because of this, Hot Stuff is putting more emphasis on having the 'right' assortment of records rather than a wide assortment.

Hot Stuff's Per Faeltenborg stated that with more capital available for marketing, the firm would try to increase the number of banners and links to the online store on relevant websites rather than employ new marketing channels. The respondent stated that more money also would be spent on Google Adwords.

Sound Pollution store manager Daniel Astgren explained that the firm's marketing methods mostly involve traditional offline marketing. The retailer considers street posters, flyers, and adverts in print music magazines as being the most effective channels. Sound Pollution has also put up banners on Swedish alternative online community site Helgon.net, as the retailer perceives it as hosting a significant share of potential Sound Pollution customers, in an attempt to target the specific member group. The large share of total sales stemming from the physical store is the main reason behind the focus on offline marketing channels, according to the respondent.
Astgren argued that Sound Pollution, if given more resources, would increase the emphasis on already established marketing methods; more posters would be posted and more flyers handed out. The respondent also added that he would consider expanding into radio advertising, as the firm is currently paying for adverts in all of Sweden's big printed music magazines.

### 4.3. Observation

A distinction is made between the four main types of discussions identified by the respondents. *Informational* discussions are all discussions aimed at providing or retrieving information about such things as record pressings, artists or labels. *Inspirational* discussions revolve around questions or statements from forum members about providing or taking advice on favorite music, new artists, good trading-sites etc. The third category consists of *interactional* discussions, which are of a more relational character. The fourth and final category is *transactional* discussions, in which forum members put up their records for sale, or submit posts concerning records they wanted to buy.

> "Any Information On "Lola West" Female / Late 70/s Recording? Thank You."

- Alanbonthrone. Forum member at Soul Source forum.

Although all four categories were relatively equally represented in all three forums, informational threads were the most common. These discussions usually started out with someone asking for information about a certain pressing, artist or producer, and in several cases lead to an information exchange back and forth with forum members adding posts with additional information or questions about adjacent artists or pressings. In less common cases, a member provided valuable information to fellow forum members from the start. In one case, a forum member told other forum members not to buy vinyl reissues from Sony and Universal and in another thread, information about a new label releasing what was perceived as top-notch quality vinyl records was posted.

Except for informational threads, discussions of an interactional nature were the most frequently observed. Interactional discussions were more common on the generic vinyl record forums than on the soul forum and often concerned topics that were more general in nature. One forum member started off a thread by telling people that he had just bought his first vinyl and emphasized how
much he loved the format, while another thread started with a forum member initiating a discussion around extended tracks.

"Ok, so everyone knows about Miles Davis' Kind of Blue as probably the best or best selling jazz album of all time. Then you probably have John Coltrane's A Love Supreme. What other jazz albums would you rank as the best or most important? And why?"

- Fitzrick. Forum member at Vinylfanatics forum.

Inspirational discussions, although not as frequent as their informational or interactional counterparts, served as a catalyst for several threads. These discussions dealt with forum members seeking inspiration equally as often as members giving inspiration to others. The observation also contained transactional threads, although not in the same numbers as the other three categories. Transactional threads were most common on the soul forum, but were also observed at the more general vinyl forums. Worth noticing is that only one forum thread started off as transactional, while threads within other categories occasionally shifted into transactional discussions.

The observed forum threads often contained more than ten posts, and when so were the case, the threads usually shifted between the different categories of discussion over time. Informational discussions often shifted into inspirational discussions and vice versa, while transactional discussions often emerged after several posts of another nature had been posted in the threads. Inspirational discussions received a lesser amount of replies than the other categories of threads; however, these posts were often similar to informational posts, and emerged in and out of threads. In the observed forums, Abbreviations were commonly used on the observed forums, and occasionally individual forum members took their discussion out of the thread and continued it using PM's (personal messages).
5. Analysis

The structure of the analysis is based upon the analytical framework depicted below, where the respective findings are categorized as belonging either to the structural, resource or normative component.


5.1. Structural component

The structural component covers network structure, actors, ties and their respective strengths. Within the online vinyl record network, the general structure is characterized by fluid roles and small sub-networks organized around particular music genres.

5.1.1. Network Structure

All respondents acknowledged that the Internet has changed the way they buy, compare, and find information about vinyl records. It has brought the group closer together, and facilitated the exchange of both records and information. The members value how the Internet makes it possible to screen information for what is relevant to them, which usually is genre-specific content. The information-seeking process differs between genres and respondents within the network, but they all acquired information in similar ways; through search engines, blogs, forums, and other informative sites. Although it is hard to grasp in its entirety, the individual respondents perceive the network as quite manageable as they can utilize search engines and recommendations from more general forums to narrow down to the sources of information relevant to them. The network plays a different role for the members at different points in time, and an individual member can
take on different roles, that is, act as the buyer, seller, informer or inquirer depending on the situation. The dynamics of the network facilitates the information-seeking process, and appears to allow for all network members to benefit from the interaction.

The retailers are generally not involved in the network itself, but are however compelled to adapt to the contingencies of it. They appear to be disconnected from the network, in the sense that they do not have any direct influence on the members’ habits and demand. The respondents did not mention any online stores that they stay particularly loyal to, implying that it is difficult for an online store to retain customers. The narrow preferences of a majority of the respondents further give retailers a difficult task in marketing towards them, as the network members require information that is relevant to them, that is, specific enough for them to be able to use it. The retailers interviewed, on the other hand, carry a relatively broad assortment of vinyl records, which decreases the efficiency of targeting very specific groups of consumers. Retailers generally put more emphasis on keeping customers aware of their existence than update them on recent arrivals.

The consumer interviews revealed that the online vinyl record network is built upon a large number of small groups, dedicated to specific genres. Most forums are dedicated to one or a few adjacent genres, where members are connected through their interest in the music as well as the vinyl record. However, the observation also showed that specific vinyl forums exist, where the activity revolves around both the music and the vinyl format itself. According to the respondents, the vinyl record plays a different role depending on genre, but is seen as a preferred format in all of them. The market for used records is also slightly different than the one for new releases, as websites such as Ebay is utilized to a greater extent. These factors contribute to the fragmentation of the market, where network member groups are organized around particular genres. Retailers approaching particular member groups thus need to be aware of their preferred sales channels, in order to reach the relevant customer groups.

5.1.2. Actors & Ties
The online vinyl record network consists of a geographically dispersed group of people, all selectively choosing where to find information about and discuss records. It consists of private and professional buyers, sellers, forum members, bloggers and within the techno genre even DJ's and record labels, all affecting the dynamics of the network. The underlying force driving the entire
network is the individual and collective consumer demand for products and information. However, retailers are not particularly influential, but contribute to the network by increasing the overall accessibility to, and supply of, vinyl records. Within the network, some active and renowned members have more powerful network positions, as they can access information from a wider range of sources. For instance, Pop1's long-term commitment has rendered him a member on several closed mailing lists, where members within his online network share recommendations and information about artists and events. He can then sort out and forward this information through his blog, giving him the opportunity to influence other network members through his powerful network position.

The observation revealed that forum members range from seasoned enthusiasts to complete beginners, discussing everything from the first record bought to producers of rare northern soul 7-inch vinyl records. Within these forums, all members interact fluently regardless of experience and knowledge. No clear hierarchy could be identified, meaning that members do not discriminate against each other on the grounds of knowledge or status. However, members possessing more information, rare records, or insider knowledge appeared to be more respected, and seemed to have more powerful network positions.

The retailers acknowledged the need to cater to the needs and wants of the customers, and emphasized the importance of relevant marketing aimed at the right crowd. Although the overall network is fragmented, the respondent base frequently mentioned a few sites such as Popsike, Gemm, and Discogs as being important sources of information used by a majority of network members. They have successfully created a fairly comprehensive knowledge base facilitating the process of finding information regardless of genre, which has increased market efficiency in terms of price. More generic sites such as Ebay and Google also play a part in the network, as network members use them to find records and information. The information is accessible by all members and evenly distributed across the network, which allows for all consumers to gain knowledge within their genre of choice. This can in turn ease the process of determining what they want and how much they are willing to pay for it.
5.2. Resource component

The resource component covers the different member types found in the network and what influential actors exist within the network. A significant difference between insiders and devotees was the reliance on the online and personal networks, where insiders often lacked the latter. Influential actors identified in the network included DJ's, bloggers, and forum members.

5.2.1. Member types

Based on their activity in online forums and other websites containing genre-specific content, the respondents can be categorized as either insiders or devotees. In this study, Techno1, Techno2, Techno3, Other1, Other2, Black1, and Pop2, are classified as devotees as they are only retrieving information from forums and websites. Pop1, Northern Soul, and Black2 are both retrieving information and contributing to the discussion, and are thus classified as insiders.

The insiders and devotees differ significantly in terms of resource allocation between the personal and online networks. The insiders seemed to be reliant on the online network not by choice but by necessity. They all stated that they lacked individuals in their personal networks with the exact same taste in music, compelling them to go online to find peers with whom to interact. Without the Internet, they lacked the resources to find new music and interact, making the Internet a way of increasing the resources within their social network.

The devotees were less dependent on their online networks, the most common reason being that they felt that they could rely on their personal networks for interaction and inspiration. When the group of devotees did go online, they acted as observers, quietly absorbing information. Several devotees interviewed also stated that they would more likely go online if they would not have the people interested and knowledgeable in their genre, that is, access to the available resources, within their personal networks.

Overall, the devotees preferred real life interaction with the members of their personal networks, whereas the insiders seemed content with their current online network. The virtual and personal, real life networks seem to be more or less mutually exclusive for the individual collector. The only respondent claiming to be interacting both online and offline was Pop1, and his networks consisted of essentially the same group of people. Regardless of member type, all respondents utilized the
Internet for information-seeking purposes, implying that online sources are more important for information than interaction. The observation of the online forums also revealed that the constant flow of information tended to be very specific in nature, covering particular events, pressings or producers. This indicates that consumers active in online forums have very specific preferences and are knowledgeable within their genres. Furthermore, the devotees Internet activity indicates that it provides them with information unavailable in their personal networks.

5.2.2. Influential actors

Several respondents identified bloggers as important sources of information and inspiration within their particular genres. The bloggers mentioned by respondents are generally perceived as having greater resources than their readers, meaning that they have access to more sources of information concerning for example artists and new releases. They thus act as aggregators of information along with offering what is perceived as 'expert opinions', thereby increasing their influence within the network. In a similar fashion, certain forum members take on the same expert role in discussion threads, where their opinions are valued higher than those of the other members.

The influence on other members depends on the degree of expertise and how aligned their preferences are with those of the individual consumer. If a blogger is perceived as having similar preferences and being knowledgeable within the genre, their influence on another network member becomes greater. The observations also exhibited several situations where the influence of certain forum members became clear, as some particularly knowledgeable members were perceived as more reliable sources of information. However, both insiders and devotees identified certain sources in their online environment they have trust for. For instance, Techno1, Techno2, and Techno3 mentioned certain influential DJ’s and the play lists posted after gigs as important sources of information and inspiration.

This implies that aligned preferences and expertise within certain genres are what the consumers interviewed in the study value the most. The Internet provides the respondents with the specificity that they desire, allowing them to further explore their genre of choice, making their knowledge greater and their preferences more specific. In turn, this can even increase demand for particular niche products as consumers' tastes become more refined.
5.3. Normative component

The normative component covers the various norms and values that exist within the online vinyl record network. Norms found within the network affected not only the actors, but also the way retailers are able to market themselves towards the network.

5.3.1. Norms & Values

The respondents viewed the online vinyl record network as a group consisting of passionate music lovers, regardless of genre. The entire respondent base view the vinyl record as superior to other formats, although it was preferred for different reasons depending on the respondent. No respondent mentioned trust as being an issue within the network, indicating that fellow members are seen as honest and reliable. Overall, the network members appeared to value their co-members, and realize their importance for them to be able to pursue their interest. Although members of the online forums are knowledgeable in the field to varying degrees, no real hierarchy between the members could be identified neither in the consumer interviews nor forum observations. The self-regulation of the network appeared to be efficient, as the individual members are dependent on the network and unlikely to risk losing trust in order to achieve a short-term economic gain. The standard for grading the condition of used records is an example of a self-regulatory norm, as sellers not following the standard would risk being perceived as unreliable and dishonest otherwise.

5.3.2. Consumer Perception of the Market and Marketing

Given the specificity of the respondents' preferences, marketing activities need to be adapted to each genre or even sub-genre, which can become costly if executed towards all segments perceived as relevant. Retailers need to find ways to increase customer retention and the efficiency of their marketing activities, by focusing on the right content in the right places. Given their limited resources, using existing customer information is one way to effectively target and retain customers within the online vinyl record network, which was also suggested by one of the respondents.

The network consists of consumers with access to virtually all information, an insight into their own preferences and comprehensive information within their own genre. These factors contribute
to the complexity of retailers marketing activity, as they are targeting small groups of customers who cannot be double-crossed. All consumers within the network, even those with limited prior knowledge, can access information about artists or the price of an album. The consumers generally know what records they want and what they are willing to pay for them, which compels marketers to be well-informed and price products fairly. Consumers can often sense if the information source is honest and genuine, based on the way they present their message. Thus, the retailers need to connote their understanding and involvement in the network in order to be trusted and perceived as knowledgeable and reliable. The study indicated that trust is built upon an understanding for, and adaption to, the network and its members.

5.3.3. Retailer Perception of the Market and Marketing

Overall, the retailers realize the importance of the online network, and have an understanding of the widespreadness of it as well as the importance of targeting the right audience. However, not all activities mentioned by the respondents corresponded to the mind-set. Rather, the marketing activities were fairly broad and mostly directed towards a generic group of 'vinyl record buyers'. One respondent company, Vinylium, had occasionally targeted forums, but they were hi-fi forums rather than devoted to a particular genre of music. Although the activities were not in line with respondents' view on marketing, this was most likely related to the fact that the individual consumer's preferences are narrower than the range of genres covered by a given online retailer. The retailers view on the marketing activities can be seen reasonable, given the consumers’ ability to compare different sources for price and condition of a particular record,

Hot Stuff has recently begun reorganizing their assortment, focusing more on niche content and less on the mainstream artists. This is in line with the consumer respondents' preferences, as they prefer a 'niche' assortment over a wide assortment of records. All stores are focused on only a few genres, but their assortment is nowhere near as specific as the preferences held by the consumer respondents. The retailers have to choose between appealing to a broad range of customers, and carry the most popular records within a number of genres, or put emphasis on certain customer groups, offering a deep assortment of records within the genre. Although the vinyl record is a niche product, large player such as Amazon and Ebay carry a substantial amount of records within all genres, implying that it would be a more beneficial strategy to cover the deep assortment not available through those major players.
Overall, the retailers with a majority of sales stemming from online sales seems to have a view of the online market more in line with the consumer respondents'. This is logical, as their dependence on the network compels them to adapt to the contingencies of it. The offline-minded retailers appeared to utilize the online store mostly as a marketing tool and complement to the physical store. If given unlimited marketing resources, the retailer respondents stated that they would put more emphasis on existing marketing activities, rather than try on new marketing methods. This indicates that the retailers view themselves as being either an online or a physical store. They are however all adapting to the movement in the market, as they expect a larger portion of sales to stem from online sales in the future.
6. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to "describe and analyze how the online vinyl record network functions from both a consumer and retailer perspective, in order to gain an understanding of how the Internet facilitates the activity within a consumer culture."

The study showed that the online vinyl record network is an e-tribe built upon a number of genre-specific member groups, all loyal to the vinyl record format. Differences identified between the various genres mostly concern the buying and information-seeking processes, where resources are utilized in different ways. The Internet has radically altered the way the respondents pursue their interest, as it has made information about artists, genres, and the price of records available to everyone. Nowadays, it is possible for consumers to access virtually any record online; either used or new, and according to the respondents the Internet has also evened out price differences between markets.

Sites such as Ebay, Amazon, and Gemm facilitate the process of finding particular records whereas informational sites such as Discogs and Popsike ease the process of comparing prices and finding information about artists, albums, labels, and pressings. Other than the sites mentioned above, innumerable blogs, online forums, and related sites exist, where consumers interact, exchange, and retrieve information, all related to their specific genre of interest. Amazon and Ebay carry the top-selling records within all genres, indicating that a more beneficial strategy would be for retailers to cover the deep assortment not available through those major players, when marketing towards the enthusiasts interviewed in the study.

Further, as almost all information is available to all actors within the network, what differentiates network members is the amount of resources they have within their own social networks. These resources can provide the members with additional information and substantially increase their influence within the network. Personal networks often contain people with similar preferences, and the devotees rely on the people within their personal networks to a greater extent than on information from most online sources.
Networks are built upon activity and interest, where a longer engagement in the online vinyl record network appear to give actors more powerful network positions, increasing their influence. Overall, the network appears to influence its members to a large extent, as a majority of both information and recommendations come from within the network. A significant difference noticed between the devotees and insiders is that the insiders generally lack a personal network with the exact same preferences, compelling them to go online to find peers with whom to interact. The study indicates that influential actors within the network are more influential than retailers, as they seem to have virtually no influence on the network members included in the study.

The well-informed consumer base appears to limit the retailers' influence, and gives the consumers the upper hand in the interaction. The network members’ access to information further prevents retailers from overpricing products, compelling retailers to know the perceived value of products. In order to be able to market towards this e-tribe, retailers have to focus on information relevant to each consumer group, and present it in such a way that the consumers are willing to embrace it. When dealing with the network’s members, retailers further have to connote their understanding for the network and its subgroups in order to be perceived as genuine. The consumers are receptive to all marketing activities, as long as the information is relevant, which makes marketing a difficult but potentially profitable endeavor for retailers.

In conclusion, within the studied network, the Internet acts a source of information, inspiration, and interaction, dramatically altering the consumer behavior and facilitating consumption. The study further indicates that the Internet facilitates the exchange of vinyl records by allowing consumers worldwide to access information and trade records. Although it may not provide a comprehensive explanation for the increased demand of the vinyl record, the study shows that the activity within the online vinyl record network does contribute to the overall growth of the market.
7. References

Electronic Sources


Printed Sources


