Digital Virtual Consumption

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Contents

List of Figures and Tables ix

1 Introduction to Digital Virtual Consumption 1
JANICE DENEGRI-KNOTT AND MIKE MOLESWORTH

PART I
Contexts and Perspectives

2 A History of the Digitalization of Consumer Culture 11
VILI LEHDONVIRTA

3 Young American Consumers and New Technologies 29
ALLADI VENKATESH AND NIVEIN BEHARY

4 True Values of False Objects: Virtual Commodities in Games 46
DAVID MYERS

5 First Person Shoppers: Consumer Ways of Seeing in Videogames 60
MIKE MOLESWORTH

6 Transforming Digital Virtual Goods into Meaningful Possessions 76
JANICE DENEGRI-KNOTT, REBECCA WATKINS, AND JOSEPH WOOD

7 Reflections in Spacetime: Reconsidering Kozinets (1999) Twelve Years Later 92
ROBERT V. KOZINETS
Figures and Tables

FIGURES

3.1 Everyday life activities of young consumers. 32
4.1 A three-part semiotic model (based on Peirce). 51
8.1 The process of performative integration of the iPod in the classroom as a gift visualized in form of chain of internal co-evolution of elements constituting practice. 117
8.2 The process of performative integration of the hard drive in musical practice visualized through the chain of internal co-evolution of practice. 120
8.3 The process of performative re-integration of vinyl records in musical consumption practices visualized through the chain of co-evolution of practice. 123

TABLES

3.1 Respondent Pool by Age and Gender 31
3.2 Consumption Strategies and Themes 32
8 What Happens to Materiality in Digital Virtual Consumption?

Paolo Magaudda

THE MATERIALITY OF DIGITAL VIRTUAL CONSUMPTION PRACTICES

The transition toward the digitalization of consumer practices and other forms of digital virtual consumption (DVC) clearly represents a key characteristic of the contemporary age. In the last ten years, not only most of Western society has started to buy goods through different means available on the Internet, but digitalization has also triggered deeper changes in overall approaches to the consumption of goods and services. With the aim of furthering our understanding of DVC, this chapter proposes a perspective that looks at how materiality still remains a relevant dimension in DVC practices. Although decisively influenced by the emerging role of virtual and de-materialized objects and interactions, DVC practices do not imply that there are no material objects involved or that these objects do not play an important part in shaping consumers’ experiences. In short, what I want to make evident is that in DVC materiality still matters. And it matters a lot.

The relationship between DVC and materiality is a relevant and not a simple issue. In conceptualizing DVC, Denegri-Knott and Molesworth have rightly highlighted that the relationship between virtual consumption and materiality is not only important, but it is also complex and variously articulated, pointing out that DVC is related to “a hybridization of the material and the virtual-as-imagination,” which implies that “the digital virtual may contain the actualizing potential of the material with the idealizations of the virtual!” (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010: 114–115).

In this chapter, I will focus on the relationship between virtuality and materiality in DVC practices by presenting an example of the persistent role of material objects in the digital music consumption. My aim is to show that the analysis of DVC practices also requires taking serious consideration of the status of materiality in shaping and making sense of new emerging digital consumer cultures.

Looking more generally at transformations of contemporary consumption, we can say that digitalization of consumption and the changing role
of materiality are intriguing at both the theoretical and empirical levels. On the one hand, one of the main features of the DVC is the massive shift toward the de-materialization and virtualization of products and goods that people consume. This is especially true in relation to the consumption of many kinds of cultural objects, such as music, books, magazines, and movies as well as for other creative and leisure practices, such as amateur photography, home movies recording, and gaming.

On the other hand, anthropologists and sociologists of consumption know that the material dimension of consumption is a fundamental and constitutive element in the consumer’s life and culture. Since the works of scholars such as Mary Douglas and Byron Isherwood (1978), Arjun Appadurai (1986), and Daniel Miller (1987), we have come to accept that the materiality of consumption is not just the external form of internal psychological processes or the superficial mirror on which consumers project their socio-cultural desires and dispositions, but also represents the pragmatic interface that actively generates meanings, actions, and social connections. From another perspective, advances in the social study of technology (Bijker et al., 1987; Latour, 1987) have shown that everyday life artefacts and technologies are both outcomes of the society that has created them and active agents influencing the social context where they are used. When we take on these well-established perspectives, the need to research and reflect on the changing role of materiality in the context of the DVC practices appears even more pressing. Illuminating on the complex relationship between the material and DVC provides both anthropologists and sociologists an opportunity to better understand the relationship among cultural meanings, their material substantiations, and the social world where the interaction with material objects occurs (see Vannini, 2009).

DVC, MATTERIALITY, AND PRACTICE THEORY

In order to understand the interplay between DVC and materiality, I adopt an approach rooted in the general framework of practice theory (or theories) (Schatzki, 1996; Schatzki et al., 2001). To put it very shortly, practice theory is a theoretical framework based on the idea that social phenomena should be better understood considering “practice” as the main unit of analysis and, consequently, that the sources of change in behaviors and activities should be identified in the evolution of the practices themselves (Sassatelli, 2007; Warde, 2005). In consumer studies, practice theory assumes that consumption activities are the result of individual performances involved and intertwined in a complex socio-material context where meanings, objects, and embodied activities are arranged in specific configurations of “practices.” In this framework, the concept of “practice” is regarded as a whole, shared, and stabilized “configuration” consisting “of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the forms of understanding, know how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge” (Reckwitz, 2002: 249).

In consumer studies, practice theory has been specifically developed by Shove, Pantzar, and other scholars (Shove and Pantzar, 2003; Shove et al., 2007), whose main contribution was to assume that the heterogeneity of elements constituting a “social practice” can be more easily simplified according to three main analytical dimensions intertwined with one another. These three dimensions are: (1) the dimension of meanings and representations; (2) one consisting in objects, technologies, and material culture in general; and (3 and one including embodied competences, activities, and “doing” (see especially Shove and Pantzar, 2005). Thus, practices represent the outcome of the performative linkage of these three elements, a linkage in which materiality evidently plays a crucial role (see Halkier et al., 2011). This articulation of the theory of practice has put specific emphasis on the situated understanding of dynamics of change and transformation of social practices that give us an interesting conceptual vantage point to begin to make sense of emerging DVC practices because it hones in the material dimension of social life, recognizing materiality as a constitutive element in the evolution and change of social practices. In the following sections of this chapter, I am going to adopt a practice theory-based framework to account for the role of materiality in the co-evolution of music consumption practices after the diffusion of digitized music. Specifically, I will focus on listeners’ experiences and the iterative relationships unfolding among materiality, cultural representations, and consumers’ pragmatic activities. However, before showing and discussing these examples, I will elaborate on some broader considerations on the relationship among materiality, consumption, and the rise of digital music.

THE RISE OF DIGITAL MUSIC AND THE “RE-MATERIALIZATION” OF CONSUMERS’ EXPERIENCE

Music consumption is probably one of the most interesting areas to analyze the processes surrounding the relationship between materiality and DVC practices. Music has been the first cultural object among the traditional ones (literature, movies, magazines) to become fully digitized (in 1995 with the technical patent obtained for the creation of the MP3 codification), to be appropriated by big industries (in 2003 with the launch of the iTunes Store), and, above all, to outclass physical formats in terms of sales (in 2008, iTunes became the largest seller of music, including physical music formats, in the US, prevailing over the Wal-Mart chain; see Apple 2008).

At the same time, we have also note that, in the last decades, music has flourished within a consumer culture where material objects have unquestionably been fundamental. This is not only due to the fact that music
listening would not even be conceivable without the material technologies invented since Edison's 1877 phonograph (Sterne, 2003), but also because popular music cultures mainly (see Symes, 2004) grew around the value of, the attachment, and sometimes the addiction to material objects like albums, artists' t-shirts and clothes, personal stereo, and memorabilia of any sort (Eisenberg, 1987). The social history of music after the rock and roll age could not even be imagined without making some sort of reference to non-musical objects that people appropriated, consumed, and loved.

If we consider more closely the field of digital music consumption, we can see that in the last ten years, the music market has undergone a period of deep transformation as a direct consequence of the process of digitalization of music and the development of Internet-based services such as peer-to-peer networks and online music stores (Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Katz, 2004; Millard, 2005). We have witnessed many changes in the world of music consumption due to the shift from a fixed materiality of music consumption—represented, for example, by audiotapes or compact discs—to the fluidity of intangible digital formats. These changes affecting musical consumption practices have often been analyzed in terms of loss of relevance of music materiality, with greater emphasis being placed on the different ways that music consumption has become virtual, free, and boundless, giving space to the metaphor of music circulation as the “water that flows from the sink” (Kuzek and Leonard, 2005; Rodman and Vanderdonckt, 2006). While it is clear that the changes that occurred in music materiality have deeply influenced the ways in which people consume music, we also have to recognize that interpreting these changes as a loss of relevance in the role of material objects in shaping people's habits and cultures may be somewhat misleading.

The first counterintuitive consideration we can make is that today we can find many and varied material objects connected with music listening as never before in the history of music consumption. While the first and more evident example we can give is the iPod's successful and widespread diffusion (and we will come back to it later), we can also note that the diffusion of digital music has coincided with the multiplication of several music listening material objects and, consequently, with the proliferation of cultures and politics surrounding the use of these objects.

Let's take the example of the musical headphones. The mainstream US online store Amazon lists for sale (in July 2011) about 2,000 different models of headphones and ear-buds, which range from $5 to $2,749 (the more expensive is a German limited-edition model of luxury headphones). If interested in knowing more about headphones, we have at our disposal many different websites on this topic like Head-fi (www.head-fi.org), which counts (in July 2011) with about 160,000 members and 6.5 million posts, with an average number of more than 3,000 posts per day. Recently, the problem of the high volume emitted through the headphones has also become a social problem directly handled by the European Union (EU). In October 2008, the European Commission officially warned that listening to personal music players at a high volume over a sustained period can lead to permanent hearing damage and that 10 million people in the EU may be at risk (European Union, 2009). In sum, the large diffusion of digital sounds seems to have grown along with a renewed interest in the material accessories needed to interface with these sounds. The growth of headphones and interest surrounding them are indicative of how the diffusion of virtual consumer practices co-evolved with a “re-materialization” of the experience with new and renewed musical material objects.

My point here is to stress the idea that, far from causing a decline in the role of material objects and artefacts within music consumption, the rise of digital music (and generally of DVC) has also triggered a whole process of reconfiguration of the materiality of sound and music, a process that I define as “re-materialization.” This re-materialization essentially consists of processes through which a social practice—in this case musical consumption—witnesses a radical reconfiguration of the relationships among cultural meanings, artifacts, and practical activities. At a closer look, the present transition toward digitalized and de-materialized consumption practices—in music as well as in other cultural spheres—is a rich form of re-materialization.

In the next sections of the chapter, I will clarify what I mean by the process of re-materialization in digital music listening consumption by showing three examples of how meanings, artefacts, and ways of doing are intertwined with each other, starting from situated experiences of the consumption of digital music. In order to make clear the process of co-evolution among objects, meanings, and ways of doing involved in digital music consumption, I will illustrate these examples by using a visualization device, which consists of a chain showing the co-evolution of the relationships among objects, representations, and behaviors in consumers' experience and whose structure is theoretically based on a practice-theory framework. The quotes from the interviews I use come from qualitative research on the appropriation of music listening technology carried out in Italy between 2005 and 2007 with young music listeners (for more details on the research, see Magaudda, 2011).

THE IPOD AND THE “RE-MATERIALIZATION” OF DIGITAL MUSIC CONSUMPTION

When we look at the recent history of digital music, we see that the whole reconfiguration (at the same time technical, industrial, cultural, and situational) of music consumption has been reorganized around one specific object: the iPod portable Mp3 music player. It is not a case that the iPod is a beautiful and materially attractive object and that it is incredibly satisfying to use. A brief look at the iPod as a material object makes evident how materiality played a role in the universal appropriation of this player.
and in the commercial success it brought to Apple. For instance, one of the key functions that differentiated the iPod from other MP3 players was the "click wheel," which replaced the conventional play and stop buttons, making possible a new and original experience. The question is not whether the development of digital music consumption in these last few years has been determined by the aesthetic and functional qualities of the iPod, but how its aesthetic and functional qualities had a relevant part in the process.

In this respect, the work of Michael Bull (2007) is one of the best examples of the ways in which the use of portable players has made possible a new relationship between people and the objects that surround them. The iPod has also become a powerful, key cultural and symbolic icon of the new century and, moreover, has opened up the marketplace for the development of further portable personal devices, such as the iPhone and the iPad. In the music consumption context, which is characterized by a shift to intangible music digital flows, the iPod clearly represents a material object around which the digital music realm has been reconfigured culturally, socially, and economically (Dant, 2008).

Elsewhere consumer culture and material culture researchers have considered the various ways in which newly introduced objects are appropriated or domesticated. Drawing from that body of work, we can see digital music consumption as entailing a whole range of materially mediated practices through which artefacts are appropriated or singularized, such as the adoption of other artefacts such as headphones. Often people feel the need to carry their iPod around in a case (to protect it from damage), and they generally tend to choose a case that makes this beautiful, but anonymous, musical object more personal. An example from my research illustrates this point. A 32-year-old man told me that he found one of his mother's old jewelry cases and used it for safeguarding his iPod so that he could emphasize the symbolic distance that he wished to create between himself and the mainstream trend of having the iPod on show:

I don't care so much about the idea of the iPod as a status symbol, I don't give a damn about that. [...] That's why I don't buy accessories. [...] I carry it around in a small velvet bag from a jeweler's that I found in a drawer in amongst my mum's old stuff [...] , that way it's not so visible and I can hide it so that strangers can't see it. (Marco, M, 32 years old)

This personal way to appropriate the iPod is a good example of what Grant McCracken (1988: 83–87) defined as a "ritual of consumption" and also highlights the fact that new devices need to be articulated at a material as well as a cultural and symbolic level, according to personal dispositions, feelings, and participation in trends and cultures. Moreover, this example helps introduce the fact that the adoption of new digital music devices has not only affected the ways people use music in social context—as it has already been highlighted by Michael Bull's (2007) work—but more broadly changed the intimate material landscape of listeners' experience.

Now we will see how adopting a practice-based analysis allows us to develop a more articulated understanding of the processes of change and transformation within music listening practices, emphasizing the mutual articulation of meanings, objects, and ways of operating in relation to the appropriation and use of the iPod. In order to illustrate this point, I would like to consider an example that does not directly concern the practice of listening but is part of the ways in which students create groups and generate a sense of belonging within the context of a high school through the appropriation of MP3 players. One of the most relevant contexts in which the iPod has been more readily adopted and incorporated into shared social practices is the teenage context. Teenagers interviewed in 2006 told me about the sudden and widespread adoption of the iPod and similar players among their schoolmates, as the following excerpt from the interview with Margherita—a 17-year-old high school student—clearly shows:

This year [2005/2006] has been the year of the boom [of the iPod]. At the beginning of the year, only one person in 30 had a music player. But during the last year people asked to receive them as gifts for birthdays, anniversaries and other events, and I noted that this fact of having the iPod was [...] the iPod became a compulsory gift, desirable above all the others: "What can I give? I might just give an iPod." Yes, I think that more people received an iPod as a gift than bought one. It's the perfect gift. (Margherita, F, 17 years old)
A closer look at Margherita’s short account reveals many interesting elements, which are useful in making sense of the socio-material processes involved in the adoption of the iPod among young students. We can articulate this account along the chain of co-evolution of elements constituting digital music consumption practices in order to explain the changing evolution of the relationship among materiality, representation, and way of doing. This is visualized in Figure 8.1.

The chain of co-evolution starts with step 1, when a new object, the iPod, appears in the context of the classroom. The process of socio-material appropriation of the iPod in the classroom produces different forms of value-production around that object, which are connected with its novelty and usage (step 2: meanings). The emergence of these social values among students consequently enables the development of new shared habits and practices, and, among these habits, Margherita traces the routine of giving the iPod as a gift on occasions of recognized social events such as birthdays (step 3: doing). The practice of giving the iPod as a gift helps re-produce a sense of belonging to the group of peers, so in doing establishing a new sign for group affiliation in the classroom (step 4: meanings). Finally, we can see the consequences of the socio-performative integration of the iPod in the classroom in terms of crystallization of the iPod’s widespread presence in the school setting (step 5).

In this case, we see that the materiality of digital music seems to acquire a new constitutive role in redefining personal relationships. In particular, because the iPod is seen as an ideal gift, which in turn has a constitutive role in social relations and organization. On this basis we are able to recognize that iPod gift-giving and possession represents a way through which new digital music devices and technologies have been socially integrated and re-materialized among the younger generations.

THE RE-MATERIALIZATION OF AN EXISTING OBJECT BELONGING TO A DIFFERENT PRACTICE: THE CASE OF THE HARD DISK DRIVE

A second example regarding the way an object belonging to a different practice has been re-materialized inside the digital music world. It’s the case of the hard drive used to store music. Indeed, digital music is not only used and stored in specific music devices such as the iPod, but more often in other and more generic kinds of devices, such as personal computers and external hard disk drives. One of the consequences of the increasing amount of music available for purchase on the Internet is the increased amount of music that one can possess and store: This makes it necessary to find new ways of storing digital music and, therefore, to often adopt and use an external hard drive, which was designed and produced primarily as a personal computer accessory.

What Happens to Materiality in Digital Virtual Consumption? 119

The hard drive is an object that already existed in social practices, but it was not previously integrated into musical listening and collection practices. Indeed, the hard drive primarily belongs to the universe of IT and computers, and only recently, with the diffusion of digital music, it has been introduced into the practice of music consumption, often becoming an essential device. Thus, the following example shows what happens when a material object passes from one practice to another and how meanings and activities previously related to them are translated into another specific practice.

The integration of the hard disk drive into music consumption practices constitutes an interesting case in considering the trajectory of an object that previously belonged to a different practice and the processes by which this object has passed from one practice to another. As Alan Warde (2005: 143–145) stressed, the potential of adopting a practice-based perspective in consumption studies is also connected with the potentiality to understand how different and separated practices relate to one another. One case showing how devices previously only used for music are now, with the diffusion of digital music, transformed into objects useful for multiple purposes and practices, is the use of the Mp3 pen drive, which can be utilized to both store various files and reproduce music. Different users interviewed in the research reported that they actually use this device to both listen to music and store other kinds of files and information, thus showing how new material devices emerging in digital music constitute a crossroads between social practices previously separated. One specific example of the heterogeneous use of the Mp3 pen drive comes from the experience of Luciano:

Yes, I have a player, one of those small pen drives that you can directly connect to the computer, which can also store files such as photos, word processor files, and emails as well, so that I can have them whenever I don’t have my personal computer with me. In short, yes, I use it as a music player but, as far as I’m concerned, it has a double function. (Luciano, M, 28 years old)

For many music listeners, starting to use the hard disk for music purposes requires the development of new knowledge, strategies, and activities around the use of these devices. Hard disks are extremely useful for storing a large amount of music and also make it extraordinarily simple to share music with friends and other people; but unlike cassettes or CDs, hard disk drives are very sensitive and can be easily broken, damaged, or deleted. This sensitivity may depend on software problems, such as when a virus affects it, or on material and concrete flaws, when for example a hard disk falls on the floor and, in the majority of cases, becomes inoperative. The hard disk drive therefore not only represents a relatively “new entry” from outside the realm of music, but probably also constitutes the most evident example of the complex and problematic relationship, in a digital context, between the fragility of materiality and the persistence of unmaterial and
intangible contents. A concrete example of these kinds of issues regarding the fragility of music stored in the hard disk is provided by the account of Antonio, a digital music listener who told me that after he lost all his music due to a hard disk failure, he was compelled to develop new strategies involving the backup of his music:

It was a gift for my graduation, I asked my friend to give me an external hard disk because once I lost all my data, all my data...so I need this hard disk drive to store a copy of all my 30 GB of music and some 40 GB of movies. And I'm very fond of this hard disk, because I have such a fear of losing all my music. So, I use this hard drive as a sort of backup, containing a copy of all my music and also as a box to carry music around with me to share with my friends. (Antonio, M, 30 years old)

As in the previous case, we can understand more clearly and concretely the process of "performative integration" of the hard drive into Antonio's musical practices by considering this little experience in terms of the chain of co-evolution of practice. We can assume our point of departure is the material passage from CD to digital MP3 and the digital storage of music (step 1), which produces a change in the subjective value accorded to the data stored in the hard drive (step 2), which is now perceived through the lens of the socio-cultural frame of the attachment and affection felt for one's personal music collection. This new feeling about the relevance of data, and the management of music as data, produces a development of new competence and knowledge for storing music as digital data (step 3), which is the premise for the acquisition of a new musical object consisting of a hard drive especially devoted to backing up music (step 4). Consequently, we also see a reconfiguration of the meanings and affections toward this object (step 5) and a fully reconfigured behavior regarding music collection and storage (step 6) (see Figure 8.2).

In carefully considering the process of performative reconfiguration of music collections and storage practices, several issues emerge as relevant. One of the more evident is that the re-materialization of digital music has required the listener to elaborate an effective material strategy, which allows us to understand that the process of integration of a new material device typically brings about changes in the attachment and affection for an object, as well as in the ways this material device is embedded into a more complex shift of actions, behaviors, and forms of doings. Thus, the example of the hard drive shows us how the evolution of digital musical practices can be explained by looking at the re-adaptation of objects previously belonging to different contexts through which consumers develops processes of re-materialization.

RE-MATERIALIZING AN OBSOLETE MUSICAL OBJECT: THE VINYL RECORD

What happens to older existing objects when new digital material objects are introduced into the practice of music consumption? While an intuitive answer would suggest that existing materialities should lose relevance in favor of newer ones, the analysis of listeners' experiences can lead to a rather different conclusion. Indeed, the last example takes into consideration the process of re-materialization of an object that already existed in music consumption that seemed to have been marginalized in the practice of music listening: the long play vinyl record.

The historical trajectory of the long play vinyl record is quite a long one. It was introduced in 1948 and reached a high popularity in the 1970s, but since the 1980s it has been replaced first by the audiotape and then the digital compact disc (Millard, 2005). From the turn of the 1990s onward, the vinyl record seemed to have disappeared from shops as well as from common musical consumption practices and cultural representations. However, its continued use for both practical and symbolic reasons in different musical subcultures—such as alternative post-punk, ska-reggae, and especially in many dance-based musical genres—allowed vinyl to outline the on-going process of technical innovation (Plasketes, 2004). Moreover, vinyl has remained the central focus of interest of many music collectors (see e.g., Milano, 2003).

Nevertheless, the use of vinyl records does not only concern older or more nostalgic listeners. For example, by using qualitative interviews focused on attachments to music, Haynes (2006) has shown that vinyl
records and turntables have also come back into use in more widespread and newer consumption contexts. Young consumers adopt them in order to express a resistant attitude toward contemporary industry-regulated modes of music consumption and thus to enhance their personal agency (Haynes, 2006). On the side of music creation and production, the material interaction with the old vinyl disc is today at the basis of the development of new forms of use of music, for example, through the adaptation of some of the material features involved in the vinyl’s manipulation into the new technology of the digital vinyl systems (see Attias, 2011; Lippit, 2006). Moreover, considering listening practices, here it is relevant to consider that the use and consumption of vinyl records is also connected with a whole reconfiguration in the materiality of listening enabled by these objects, which involves a different material activity in the moment of listening music. The different relationships established with music when listening to vinyl records in comparison with CDs is well illustrated by the 28-year-old Jacopo:

The vinyl record is, in a certain sense, something that holds the attention. . . . You put on a record, and there is no way you can forget you have put it on, as it can happen with a compact disc, because after a while the stylus reaches the end of the record and you have to change side. . . . It does not last as long as a CD. . . . Maybe you were just about to forget that the vinyl was on, and it is already time to change side. It is like the vinyl asks for your attention when you are about to forget that the turntable is on. (Jacopo, M, 28 years old)

These kinds of accounts shed light on the role of vinyl in specific music cultures, which cannot simply be dismissed by the emergence of a new technology, and that the use of vinyl records, as in the case of Jacopo’s experience, expresses a different pragmatic relationship with music and with the act of listening itself.

From the perspective of practice theory, we can add that the change of music into intangible data also produces a wider reconfiguration of existing materialities that can acquire a renewed role in expressing meanings as well as in serving as mediators for partially different activities and ways of doing. Indeed, in the same way that new music objects such as the iPod require the development of new meanings and practices, older ones can call for a similar process of reconfiguration, almost as if the whole reconfiguration triggered by the spread of digital music had produced the need for intense material relationships, which has to be reallocated to old and maybe obsolete objects.

In this regard, we can consider the arguments of Fabio, a 27-year-old guy, who had recently began buying and listening to music on vinyl. He tells us about the reasons and feelings that encouraged him to switch to this old music technology:

What Happens to Materiality in Digital Virtual Consumption? Because in my opinion [digital music] dehumanizes the relationship of listeners with the artist. Before, with the classical approach—I mean when we were teens—you were seeing music on television, then you would buy the CD and maybe read an article in a magazine. Today everything is on the computer screen, from music and videos to reviews, photos and everything else, and everything remains inside the screen. [. . .] Today there is the risk that bands could become a mere space occupied in a computer folder, and maybe it is for this reason that people like me have started to buy vinyl discs. Maybe it’s because of the need to have human contact with the artist, even if this happens to be through fetishes. (Fabio, M, 27 years old)

What is particularly relevant here is the fact that the changes that affected music consumption when digital music activities began to pass through the computer screen have generated a sense of loss of meaning and cultural value around the musical experience. While Fabio defined this sense of loss as a “dehumanization” of music, we can regard it as a crisis of “authenticity” of the musical experience, which is one of the bases of the process of cultural value production in the realm of music. This loss of authenticity is perceived by Fabio not as a consequence of the digitalization of the music in itself, but as an outcome of the shift of the whole set of material activities and forms of doing in musical consumption, which also include, for example, the change in the way music magazines are read.

Once again, when we render the experience of this music listener through the chain of co-evolution of practice, we are able to show and make sense, in a more effective way, of the relationship between the construction of the experience and the change in practice and materiality of music (see Figure 8.3).
CONCLUSION: MATERIALITIES AND RE-MATERIALIZATION IN A DVC

When we look more closely at the changes in the listeners' experience as a consequence of the diffusion of digital music, the reduction of transformation only to the features connected with the de-materialization and digitalization of consumption is highly problematic. The material dimension of consumption, both in terms of material objects actually used and meanings ascribed to these objects by their users, reminds us of the embodied and material experience of social life. Whereas DVC represents a sort of liminal space between what is imagined and tangible objects, this liminality implies not only that the material and the symbolic are strictly interlaced and interwoven, but also that it is impossible to think of DVC without making reference to the changing forms of materiality in social life and to how this materiality contributes to shaping possibilities and constraints, opportunities and barriers of DVC.

This is particularly true when we think about the ways DVC experience is shaped and configured by the technical artefacts indispensable for interfacing with the Web and for inhabiting other digital virtual spaces of consumption. The more advanced and sophisticated personal computers and devices become the more relevant their role as material mediators of users' experience; hence our need to understand emerging patterns in the experiences of consumption.

This is not only true for music, but also for many different media products as in the more recent case of the digitalization of books and newspapers. Indeed, transition processes in written texts from traditional paper to digital objects have gained momentum only recently, when some specific material objects—first Amazon's Kindle and then, and more decisively, Apple's iPad—found a way to catalyze the attention of both cultural industries and consumers, allowing them to imagine a new attractive scenario of production and consumption of digital written texts. From the perspective advanced in this chapter, the recent success of iPads, ebooks, and emojis can be easily seen as a process of re-materialization in the practice of reading texts in the digital virtual world. Similarly, we can expect that in the future we will probably witness many other forms of re-materialization in virtual digital consumption practices.

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Part II
Places and Practices