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Music As Connectivity: Young Consumers' Virtual Live Music Event Experiences During Covid-19

By: **Pia A. Albinsson**

Abstract

Music, which is often used as entertainment and atmospherics in various servicescapes, enhances consumer wellbeing. With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, consumers' experiences of live music events changed for the unforeseeable future. This article seeks to understand the ways in which young consumers engage with virtual live music events (VLMs) during Covid-19. Thematic data analysis of seventeen in-depth interview transcripts resulted in three preliminary emergent themes: Music rituals -- I 'Gotta' keep dancing, Music as Mood Enhancer, and Shared Music as Connectivity.

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Music as Connectivity: Young Consumers' Virtual Live Music Event Experiences during Covid-19

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Music, which is often used as entertainment and atmospherics in various servicescapes, enhances consumer wellbeing. With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, consumers' experiences of live music events changed for the unforeseeable future. This article seeks to understand the ways in which young consumers engage with virtual live music events (VLMEs) during Covid-19. Thematic data analysis of seventeen in-depth interview transcripts resulted in three preliminary emergent themes: Music rituals – I 'Gotta' keep dancing, Music as Mood Enhancer, and Shared Music as Connectivity.

Introduction

During Covid-19, consumers' engagement in digital virtual consumption (DVC) increased significantly as many worked from home while having limited access to the typical entertainment options (e.g., movie theaters, concerts, museums, and art galleries). While live music performances are the primary offering at concerts, shows, and music festivals, they are often offered in conjunction with other consumption experiences at local pubs, restaurants, wine tastings, and craft festivals. However, increasingly, many consumers engage with music through DVC via online streaming services such as Spotify, Apple Music, and iHeart Radio. As such, these shared platforms for music consumption have lessened the physical ownership of music (Sinclair & Tinson 2017). Music provides “routines, assumptions, and occasions that constitute “social life”” (DeNora 2000: xi). Having rituals and routines help consumers establish meaning in themselves and their social surroundings (Roy & Dowd 2010). What happens to consumers' music consumption when their physical and social surroundings are removed?

Literature Review

It is important to understand that music provides a resource for self-construction (Giesler 2008). As it can have a positive influence on consumers' wellbeing, engaging with virtual live music events (VLME) may assist consumers in their identity work during a health crisis. Research suggests that though virtual consumption is different from material goods, DVC can 1) stimulate consumer desire for tangible and virtual goods, 2) assist in achieving desires and daydreams through enactments and play, 3) actualize the impossible or fantasies such as attending a live concert of an artist, and 4) and allow for experimentation of new roles in the marketplace (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth 2010). In terms of psychological ownership, consumers tend to use streaming platforms “to organise their music collections, manage and protect their identity and establish a sense of control in their everyday routine” (Sinclair & Tinson 2017, p. 2). Consumers project their identities through ownership of items but also through consumption including streaming services. This exploratory study is guided by the literature on a post-ownership world, psychological ownership and music as a means for wellbeing.

Method

In-depth interviews with seventeen young U.S. consumers, eleven females and six males were conducted via video conferencing software. The convenience sample consisted of young consumers between 19-24 years of age. Interviews lasted between 35-62 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. Iterative readings and thematic analysis were utilized for data analysis. The preliminary emergent themes of *Music rituals – I “Gotta” keep dancing*, *Music as mood enhancer*, and *Shared music as connectivity* are discussed below.

Findings

Data analysis indicates that music is an important part of young consumers' lives, and they routinely utilized music streaming services during Covid-19. Oftentimes, with their smartphones as constant companions, they continue their music consumption as they leave their homes, plug it in their car and keep listening throughout the day. The theme *Music Rituals - I 'gotta' keep dancing* reveals how the sudden isolation hampered many young consumers' regular activities. In response, some, utilized music to move, get things done, and sometimes even dance in the middle of the night. The enactment and play (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth 2010) that informants experienced during their music streaming allow for them to escape the stress and anxiety created by the pandemic. Some shared that although they sometimes felt silly dancing alone, they also felt normal for a short while. Extant research posits that VLME that are heavily dance focused such as raves are “fundamentally about physical engagement” when the aggregate crowd of dancers are removed, the “essence” is lost (Vandenberg, et al. 2021, S149). While Belk (2013) question whether consumers can

become attached to immaterial possessions, it is clear that despite music streaming being dematerialized and non-material, consumers display strong attachment to music and utilize their favorite music rituals to enhance the self. For example, in the theme *Music as Mood Enhancer*, informants shared that narratives of music help them “bring up the mood and lift your spirit.” In addition, by choosing the VLME, consumers customize their investment of the self. In essence when consumers post, tag, or comment on specific VLME’s, they co-construct the self (Belk 2013). By selecting specific VLME’s and enacting an ideal self of the past, present, or future (Albinsson, et al. 2017), consumers can reaffirm oneself within a specific fan group or brand community. The last theme *Shared Music as Connectivity* discuss how music streaming services and VLMEs function as a sense of shared place online (Belk 2014). While some informants shared of their frequent concert going experience pre-Covid-19, only a few had attended VLME. Informants’ experiences of seeing a favorite artist or band through VLME is a way of ‘actualize’ the sometimes impossible (e.g., travel during Covid-19, having time and money to travel, or attend a regular concert) (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth 2010).

Discussion and Conclusion

This article sought to gain a deeper understanding in the way young consumers interacted with virtual live music experiences during Covid-19. Although preliminary, the emergent themes presented above showcase how music helps consumers engage in their everyday music rituals even during isolation brought forth by a pandemic. Limitations to this study is the lack of generalizability due to the qualitative aspect of the study.

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