When materiality ‘bites back’: Digital music consumption practices in the age of dematerialization

Paolo Magaudda
University of Padova, Italy

Abstract
Dematerialization of artefacts and material objects is a relevant issue in consumer studies, especially when we consider the ongoing changes regarding the consumption of cultural goods. This article adopts a theory-of-practice approach to analyse the consequences of dematerialization on the practices of digital music consumption. From an empirical point of view, the article is based on data collected during research into the appropriation of digital music technologies and based on 25 in-depth narrative semi-structured interviews with young Italian digital music consumers. The analysis mainly focuses on the appropriation of three specific technologies involved into the contemporary consumption of music: the iPod, the external hard drive and the vinyl disc. In order to understand the role of materiality in the age of dematerialization, the article adopts the ‘circuit of practice’, an explicative model that enables empirical analysis and that is aimed at highlighting the changing relationships between materiality and social practices. The analysis shows that music digitalization does not mean less materiality in the actual practice of listeners, that material ‘stuffs’ still occupy a relevant position in digital music, and that materiality nowadays seems to ‘bite back’, being even more crucial in shaping consumers’ practices.

Keywords
‘circuit of practice’, cultural consumption, dematerialization, digital music, theory of practice

Corresponding author:
Paolo Magaudda, Department of Sociology, University of Padova, Via M. Cesarotti, 12 – 35123 Padova, Italy
Email: Paolo.magaudda@unipd.it
Introduction

This article has been developed with two main contrasting and interwoven purposes. On the one hand, it aims to offer an empirical-based analysis centred on the use and consumption of music listening devices in order to shed new light on the debate about the dematerialization of cultural artefacts and consumer goods in general. On the other hand, it also aims to bring new inputs to the ongoing theoretical and empirical works that, in these last few years, are being developed around the concept of ‘practice’ by taking into consideration the recent developments in approaches rooted in a ‘theory of practice’. In so doing, this article embraces some of the theoretical advances on the theory of practice made in the field of consumer studies (Shove and Pantzar, 2005; Shove et al., 2007; Warde, 2005) in order to put under scrutiny the consequences of the process of dematerialization on digital music consumption practices.

Dematerialization of artefacts and material objects and their reduction to electronic information nowadays represents a relevant and topical issue, especially when we consider the consumption of cultural goods more in general terms, where the more obvious consequences of digitalization are unfolding. This article adopts a theory-of-practice approach in order to show that music digitalization and the dematerialization of musical goods do not mean less materiality and do not imply a less relevant social role for material objects within consumption processes. In fact, we will see that digitalization of music reveals itself, quite paradoxically, as a process in which the reconfiguration of the relationship between materiality and culture leads to a renewed role played by material objects in people’s life and activities. Thus, it will be shown that material ‘stuffs’ still occupy a relevant position, and materiality seems to ‘bite back’, playing an even more essential role in consumer practices and life. The present analysis of digital music materiality is also aimed at stimulating the development of empirical-based applications of the ‘theory of practice’ by proposing the adoption of the ‘circuit of practice’, which consists in an explicative model that helps us to empirically visualize and understand changes and transformations of social practices from the point of view of the experience of people participating in these practices.

Data collection and analysis methodology

From an empirical point of view, this article is based on data collected during research on the appropriation of digital music technologies involving 25 in-depth narrative semi-structured interviews with young Italian digital music consumers (approximately in the age group between 15 and 30 years). The interviews were carried out in two Italian cities between 2005 and 2006. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with a specific focus on the users’ appropriation of music listening technologies in everyday life. Each interview lasted from 60 to 120 minutes. The sample of interviewees has been selected on the basis of a theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006: 96ff.) with the aim of collecting data from young
people with different and heterogeneous music habits and listening practices. Data coming from these interviews have been analysed and interpreted on the basis of a ‘grounded theory’ approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967); the interview excerpts used in the present analysis are the result of the ‘coding’ and analysis of the most significant examples regarding the emergence and changes in the practices of digital music consumption.

In the ‘coding’ and articulation of empirical materials relating to theoretical references rooted in a particular set of areas – such as consumer studies, science & technology studies, and media studies – the changing relationships between listeners and the materiality of digital music has emerged as a crucial issue to be addressed among the processes of diffusion of new music devices and services. Thus, in the present study, a variety of examples have been selected as particularly relevant. This article mainly focuses on three of them, concerned the shifting relationships between listeners and digital music material devices. The study first considers the introduction of a new object (the iPod); second, an existing object previously external to music consumption (the hard drive); and, finally, an old and obsolete object (the vinyl record). These three examples will be presented and analysed adopting the tool of the ‘circuit of practice’ in order to highlight the new emerging relationships between materiality and digital music consumption practices.

Digitalization of music and its consumption

The outcomes of the process of dematerialization of goods and services are sensitive and complex issues. Nevertheless they have been addressed only partially and superficially, and from very few perspectives, such as for example in the fields of economics and environmental studies (see Geiser, 2001; Hermann et al., 1989; Wernick et al., 1997). Considering more specifically the changes occurring in cultural consumption practices, dematerialization has hardly been analysed in terms of changes to and transformations of consumer practices and cultures. While, since their beginning, the sociology and anthropology of consumption have developed a wide interest in the symbolic role of materiality and material culture in contemporary society (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; Kopytoff, 1986; Miller 1987; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988), very little attention has been paid in recent years to the consequences of the process of digitalization of cultural goods and the relationship between materiality and symbolic values. As recently highlighted, the role of materiality in consumer studies still remains to be explored and further developed (Watson, 2008).

If we consider the field of music consumption more closely, we can easily see that during the last 10 years the music market has undergone a period of deep transformation as a direct consequence of the flourishing of digital music and the development of internet-based services such as mp3, peer-to-peer networks and online music stores (Katz, 2004; Millard, 2005; Hesmondhalgh, 2009). Consequently, we have witnessed many changes in the world of music consumption because of the
shift from a fixed materiality of music consumed – represented, for example, by audiotapes or compact discs (CDs) – to the fluidity of intangible digital formats. Online music distribution has clearly increased with the development of the mp3 music format, the iPod (or other portable music players) and broadband internet connections, as we can see from the fact that in 2008 Apple’s online music store iTunes became the largest seller of music (including physical music formats) in the USA, prevailing over the Wal-Mart chain (Apple, 2008).

More generally, we can see that the process of digitalization occurring in the realm of music is only a part of a broader change in cultural consumption markets, consisting of the increasing importance of the digitalization of cultural and leisure entertainment content, including movies, games, books, photography, newspapers, and so on (see, for example, Couldry, 2008; Gillespie, 2007; Hand, 2008; Lehdonvirta et al., 2009). The change in the material dimension of cultural consumption practices has been a key issue in the recent analysis of the development of both production and consumption behaviours, stressing that the shift toward immaterial cultural products is deeply affecting the consumer practices and markets (Anderson, 2006). All the cultural and leisure sectors are today involved in a process of deep re-articulation of the relationships between content and material media. In this sense, music represents an emblematic case for analysing some of the features of the ongoing process of digitalization of people’s consumption practices in the cultural and leisure sphere.

While the changes occurring in music listening practices have been partially addressed from productive, legal or economic perspectives, their consequences on the sociocultural level and the level of consumer practices still need to be fully considered. Often, the changes affecting musical consumption practices are analysed in terms of loss of relevance of music materiality, and great emphasis is placed on the different ways music consumption has become free and limitless, 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 changes have occurred in music materialities and that technologies have deeply influenced the ways in which people consume music, yet 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.

There are at least two different arguments that suggest ‘dematerialization’ is a misleading approach for addressing the ongoing changes in music consumption. The first, which is a more theoretical argument, regards the fact that if we consider dematerialization as a crucial element in the changes occurring in musical and cultural consumption, we risk considering that a technological change (from tangible albums to intangible digital formats) directly affects people’s practices and habits. In contrast, the usual social studies point of view of technology helps us to understand that this interpretation draws on a form of ‘technological determinism’ that gives primary relevance to the effect of technology on society, and underestimates the social embeddedness of technology in social practices and cultures, and the relevance of the actual processes of the appropriation of technology to its users.
(Latour, 1987; Oudshoorn and Pinch, 2003; Pinch and Bijker, 1984; see also Wyatt 2008).

The second argument that suggest ‘dematerialization’ is a misleading approach regards what we can empirically observe around us in relation to the social presence of musical objects and accessories. Since mp3 and other digital music formats have become more widespread, we have also witnessed the greatest development in new music listening technologies, devices and objects ever experienced. The diffusion of new internet-based intangible music formats such as the mp3 coincided with the launch of a new material device, the iPod, which, ever, having rapidly achieved a leading position in the music market, both economically and symbolically, probably represents one of the most successful music devices ever (Been 2008; Dant 2008). For example, while the Sony Walkman introduced in 1979 sold 50 million units in 10 years (Sony, 1999), Apple sold the same number of units of its more expensive iPod player in less than half that time. The number of accessories and gadgets exclusively produced for use with the iPod is actually immeasurable: from thousands of different kinds of headphones – the website www.iheadphones.co.uk lists 10 different categories of iPod headphones – to special connectors for cars and airplane seats (see Apple, 2008). The number of material devices conceived for music listening and collection in general has increased over the last few years: not only iPods, but also personal computers, cell phones, cables, headphones and any other accessory related to portable digital music players, fall within a new group of high-tech devices that have definitely won consumers over.

On the basis of these theoretical and empirical considerations, the ongoing process of digitalization in music listening practices hardly seems explicable in terms of loss of relevance for what concerns materiality. As the empirical part of this article will show, in the last few years the flourishing of digital-based musical consumption practices has been developing along with a broader reconfiguration of the relationships between musical practices and materiality, and a renewed presence of musical materialities in people’s practices.

**Materiality, theory of practice and the ‘circuit of practice’**

In order to address the issues concerning the relationship between materiality, music digitalization and consumption practices, this article adopts a perspective rooted in the ‘theory of practice’ (Schatzki, 1996; Schatzki et al. 2001), starting from the theoretical framework developed by Reckwitz (2002a, 2002b) and from its explicit articulation in the context of consumer studies done by Sassatelli (2007, 107–9), Shove and Pantzar (2005) and Warde (2005). Following these scholars, it is assumed here that consumption activities are the result of individual performances imbricated and intertwined in a complex socio-material context where meanings, objects and embodied activities are arranged in specific configurations of ‘practices’. Thus, the concept of ‘practice’ is adopted here – following Reckwitz (2002a: 249) – in the sense of a whole 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’.

More specifically, following the work of Shove, Pantzar and colleagues (Shove and Pantzar, 2005; Shove et al., 2007), we assume that the heterogeneity and complexity of ‘social practices’ can be more easily simplified into three main dimensions intertwined with one another. These three dimensions that contribute to shape practices as socially shared patterns of activities are: (1) that of meanings and representations; (2) that consisting of objects, technologies and material culture in general; and (3) that represented by 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 plays a crucial role in the creation, change and stabilization of the whole range of activities and practices. In this manner, Shove and Pantzar’s articulation of the theory of practice has posed a specific emphasis on the understanding of dynamics of change and transformation of social practice, providing the theoretical perspective developed by Schatzky and Reckwitz with an empirical articulation in the realm of everyday life and mundane practices.

It should be noted that Shove and Pantzar’s articulation of the theory of practice heavily draws on a whole set of positions and arguments developed in the field of science & technology studies (STS) and by actor–network theory (ANT), as it emerges through their recurrent references to the works of scholars such as Callon, Woolgar and Bijker, and, particularly, to that of Bruno Latour (see for example the Introduction in Shove et al., 2007). The connection with the STS theoretical environment especially concerns the emphasis on the centrality of the interaction between humans and objects (defined as ‘non-human actors’) in shaping social processes and activities, and the implication of this relationship on the role of objects in social life.

While Shove and Pantzar’s articulation of the theory of practice can be considered as the translation of STS and ANT frameworks – the landscape of everyday life always remains secondary and often residual – their work goes further than that. Indeed, we can note that, from a theoretical point of view, adopting a perspective focused on the ‘practice’ as the main unit of analysis allows us to move from traditional STS approaches concerning the use and appropriation of single artefacts and technologies in favour of a wider consideration of the complex nature of everyday activities. Moreover, having developed an empirical work within a practice theory, these authors have made it possible to integrate some of the fundamental positions of STS – and especially this crucial idea of the generative role played by non-humans in social processes – together with other and more general theoretical frameworks better equipped to make sense of the complexity of the processes of everyday life. For example, the adoption of the theory of practice significantly contributes to bridging the gap between two traditions, which both have fruitfully focused on the centrality of materiality in society – on the one hand STS and on the other hand the material culture approaches developed by Appadurai, Kopytoff and Miller – and that have mostly remained separate and disconnected until recent years.
When we approach the analysis of materiality from the point of view of a ‘theory of practice’, we see that the emergence of new objects and technologies can therefore be interpreted as a process consisting in their ‘performative integration’ within the pre-existing configurations of practices (see Hand and Shove 2007). The emphasis on the performative dimension of the integration process of new materialities into pre-existing practices helps point out that the change of materiality inside a specific social practice is a contingent, never-ending and to some degree unpredictable process, during which all the elements constituting the practice constantly influence each other. From this point of view, the change and evolution of materiality can be usefully analysed through the lens of the dynamics of evolution of social practices as a whole, so as to address materiality not as a single entity, but as one of the elements interacting with larger processes of emergence, transformation and decline of socially embedded practices. Seen from this perspective, this application of the ‘theory of practice’ represents a further step in the advancement of an ongoing ‘material turn’ in social sciences, which influences not only consumer studies, but wider and more heterogeneous sectors of social sciences such as organization studies and economic sociology (Orlikowsky and Scott, 2008; Pinch and Swedberg, 2008; see also Vannini 2009).

In order to develop the theoretical focus on the dynamics of practice change, the present analysis evolves the tripartite scheme of ‘practice’ as elaborated by Shove and Pantzar, and turns it into a ‘circuit of practice’. The ‘circuit of practice’ (see Figures 1, 2 and 3) is an analytical scheme for analysing the processes of change in consumption patterns on the basis of the analytical concepts and general framework developed in the field of the theory of practice. The ‘circuit’ is made up of three main analytical elements (objects, representations and doing) constituting the ‘practice’ as a whole entity, and it is aimed at explaining the dynamics of practice change and transformation from the point of view of consumers and human actors. In Figures 1, 2 and 3, the solid grey lines represent the constant relationships between the three elements constituting the practices as a whole entity, while the dotted black lines show the actual relationships and influences these elements dynamically establish in people’s experiences. Thus the ‘circuit’ represents both an analytical and a visual tool to account for the work of reconfiguration of the practice as actually experienced by consumers, focusing on the individual and concrete level in which practices are created, stabilized and transformed.1

In the sections that follow, the ‘circuit of practice’ will be adopted in order to make sense of the experiences of music listeners facing the changes occurring today in digital music consumption. More specifically, the ‘circuit of practice’ will be used to show three specific examples concerning the relationship between changes in materiality and the transformation of music consumption practices in the age of digital music. The first example focuses on the appropriation of a new object in music consumption, the iPod; the second example considers the appropriation of a device already in existence, but previously not related to the field of music consumption, the hard drive, for storing digital music; the third and final example focuses on the re-appropriation of an old musical object, the vinyl record.
A new object in digital music practices: The iPod

The first example of reconfiguration of materiality in digital music consumption concerns the process of appropriation and domestication of new objects and technologies (Kopytoff, 1986; Miller, 1987; Pantzar, 1997; Silverstone and Hirsh, 1992), and takes into account the ways in which listeners need to interact with, and develop new attachments to, new musical objects and devices. In this regard, the most relevant example in digital music is the adoption of personal and portable music players, such the well-known Apple iPod. In this case, we will see what happens when the spread of a new object, such as the iPod, paves the way for the development of a whole re-articulation of the practice configuration involving objects, meanings and doings.

In the development of consumption practices connected with digital music, the spread of portable music players has clearly played a central role in enabling the agency of the listener and in articulating new practices, meanings and attachments toward music. In this respect, the work of Michael Bull (2002, 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 musical 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, whether culturally, socially or economically (Dant, 2008).

The consequences of the introduction of new objects have been considered in various consumer appropriation and domestication studies, and the case of the introduction of the iPod represents a paradoxical example, enabling us to consider how these objects are generally appropriated by consumers in a personal and active way, for example in relation to the choice and adoption of specific accessories, such as cases and 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: it is the case of a 32-year-old man who told me that he found one of his mother’s old jewellery 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 jeweller’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, male, 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 on 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 way people use music in social context – as has already been highlighted by Michael Bull’s (2007) work – but more generally changed the intimate material landscape of listeners’ experience.

Now we will see how adopting a theory-of-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 practice of forming groups in a high school classroom through the appropriation of a musical device. 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 spoke about the sudden and widespread adoption of the iPod and similar players among their schoolmates, as the following excerpt from an 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 for 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, female, 17 years old)

A closer look at Margherita’s short account reveals many interesting elements, which are useful for making sense of the socio-material processes involved in the adoption of the iPod among young students. Thus, we can articulate this account by using the ‘circuit of practice’ in order to explain the changing evolution of the relationship among materiality, representation and doing. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

The ‘circuit of practice’ 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 the 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 contributes to re-producing a sense of belonging to the group of peers, and in so doing establishes 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 (in step 5).

In this case, we see that the materiality of digital music seems to acquire a new constitutive role in redefining people relationships. That fact especially emerges considering the role of the iPod as a material gift among scholars and focusing on the fact that – as has been widely recognized in consumer studies following Marcel Mauss’s work (Pieters and Robben 1998; Sherry, 1983; Ruth et al., 1999; Wolfinbarger, 1990) – gift exchanges and circulation play a constitutive role in social organization. On this basis we are able to recognize that the iPod gift-giving and possession has represented a way through which new digital music devices and technologies have been socially integrated among the youngest generations. Considering this aspect of the social integration of new musical technologies

Figure 1. The process of performative integration of the iPod in the classroom as a gift visualized through the ‘circuit of practice’.
allows us to catch a glimpse of how the material dimension of music consumption is not only directly related to the ways people listen to music, but also to the ways in which objects help people to perform their social life, thus illuminating the different ways in which the new materiality of digital music acquire relevance in social practices.

**Reconfiguring an object coming from a different practice: The hard disk drive**

Digital music is not only used on 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, often to adopt and use an external hard drive, which was designed and produced primarily as a personal computer accessory.

While the first example concerned the appearance of a new object that did not previously exist in music consumption, this second example involves the appropriation of the hard drive, an object that already existed but was not previously present and 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 digital music diffusion, has it been introduced into the practice of music consumption, often becoming an essential device in musical practices. Thus, the following example will show 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 musical 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 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 (Warde, 2005: 143–5). Considering the process of the performative passage of objects between practices, such as the passage of the hard drive from IT to music consumption, constitutes a specific perspective for taking into account how different social practices evolve and change in connecting with one another.

One example of how a device previously only used for music is now, with the diffusion of digital music, transformed into an object useful for multiple purposes and practices is the mp3 pen drive, which can be utilized both to store files in various formats and to reproduce music. Different users interviewed in the research reported that they actually use this device both to listen to music and to store other kinds of files and information, thus showing how new material devices emerging in digital music represent 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, the owner of one of these devices:

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, male, 28 years old)

For many music listeners, starting to use the hard disk for musical 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 easily be broken, damaged or deleted. This sensitiveness may depend on software problems, such viruses, or on material and concrete flaws, such as when a hard disk falls on the floor and, in the majority of cases, is irreparably damaged. 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 immaterial and intangible content. A concrete example of these kinds of issues regarding the fragility of music stored on a hard disk is provided by the account of Antonio, a digital music listener, who told me that, after he lost all his music after a hard disk failure, he was compelled to develop new strategies involving the back-up 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 f----g fear of losing all my music. So, I use this hard drive as a sort of back-up, containing a copy of all my music and also as a box to carry music around with me to share with my friends. (Antonio, male, 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 experience by means of the ‘circuit of practice’ (see Figure 2). We can assume as our departure point 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 on the hard drive (step 2), which is now perceived through the lens of the sociocultural 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 towards this object (step 5) and fully reconfigured behaviour regarding music collection and storage (step 6).

In carefully considering the process of performative reconfiguration of musical collection and storage practices, at least two issues emerge as specifically relevant. The first one consists in the fact that the road to the use 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 to and affection for an object, as well as in the ways this material device is embedded into a more complex shift of actions, behaviours and forms of doings. The second element regards the specific content of the strategy developed by Antonio, which consists in the practice of backing up. The practice of backing up data is not completely new, and shows the adaptation of a common practice in the world of computer and IT to the realm of music. What is particularly interesting in this form of adaptation of the hard drive from IT to

Figure 2. The process of performative integration of the hard drive in musical practice visualized through the ‘circuit of practice’.

Magaudda
music consumption is that it allows us to focus on the interchange of objects between different practices. As Alan Warde pointed out (2005: 143–5), evolutions and changes in consumer practices are increasingly related to the ways in which different practices intersect one another. Thus, the example of the hard drive shown here represents a useful case for seeing how the evolution of musical practices can be explained by looking at the adaptation of objects previously belonging to different contexts. Objects’ exchange between practices represents a really relevant dimension of intersection between practices, highlighting one more time the relevance of digital music materiality in the process of evolution of music consumption practices.

Reconfiguring an old and obsolete object: The vinyl record

When new digital material objects are introduced into the practice of music consumption, what happens to older existing objects? While an intuitive answer would suggest that existing materialities should lose relevance in favour of newest ones, the analysis of actual listeners’ experiences can lead to a rather different conclusion. Indeed, the last example takes into consideration what happens to an object that already existed in the musical consumption, but seemed to have been abandoned or marginalized in the practice of music listening: the long play (LP) vinyl record.

The historical trajectory of the LP vinyl record is quite a long one. It was introduced in 1948 and reached the height of its popularity in the 1970s, but since the 1980s has been replaced by the audiotape and especially by the digital CD (Millard, 2005). From the turn of the 1990s onwards, the vinyl record seemed to have disappeared in shops as well as in 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 outlive the ongoing process of technical innovation (Plasketes 2004). Moreover, vinyl has remained the central focus of interest of many music collectors, who are recognized as forming a subculture because they are characterized by peculiar forms of affection and attachment (see for example Milano, 2003).

Nevertheless, the use of vinyl records not only concerns older or more nostalgic listeners. For example, by using qualitative interviews focused on attachments to music, Haynes 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 towards contemporary industry-regulated modes of music consumption and thus to enhance their personal agency (Haynes, 2006). Moreover, it is relevant to consider that the use and consumption of vinyl records is also connected with a whole reconfiguration of the materiality of listening enabled by these objects, which involves a different material activity at the moment of listening. The implications of the different relationships established with music when listening to vinyl records in comparison with CDs were expressed 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 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 the side. It is like the vinyl asks for your attention when you are about to forget that the turntable is on. (Jacopo, male, 28 years old)

These kinds of accounts rightly explain vinyl’s comeback by recognizing that the role of vinyl in specific musical cultures 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 a theory of practice, we can add that the change of music into intangible data also produces a wider reconfiguration of existing materialities, which 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 musical 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 man, who, a short time before our interview, 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.

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, male, 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 – adopting the perspective developed in popular music studies by Simon Frith (1986 and 1996) – 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 ‘circuit 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 3).

Figure 3. The process of performative re-integration of vinyl records in musical consumption practices visualized through the ‘circuit of practice’.

Here, the circuit starts from the spread of different forms of digital and computer-based musical objects and activities (step 1), which have an effect on listeners’ habits and activities (step 2) that are now increasingly performed through the screen of a personal computer. These changes in the tools and activities used for familiarizing with, acquiring and listening to music generate a change in the listener’s approach to his or her musical experience, which is now perceived as less authentic and significant (step 3). These feelings therefore produce a change on a material level, pushing the listener towards the adoption of vinyl and a turntable (step 4), the appropriation of which is one of the elements that contribute to the
development of a process of reconfiguration of meanings, values and feelings around the use of the obsolete LP (step 5). Finally, the re-integration of vinyl records as a socio-material musical practice is the basis for the development of new activities and behaviours, which involve the buying, listening, conservation and appreciation of the vinyl and turntable (step 6).

This last example helps to clarify that, with the digital transition of music consumption, not only does materiality not disappear as a relevant element in consumer practices, but its relevance can also find a renewed role through the reconfiguration of old and obsolete objects. Fabio, as well as other listeners interviewed, explained that along with the use of vinyl records, he also continued to listen to digital music on the computer, in so doing showing that new objects and devices and old ones are not mutually exclusive, and that their material configurations enable the development of different listening practices in terms of both material activities and symbolic value. In this sense, the relationship between materiality and digitalization calls into question the whole set of material, cultural and social elements constituting the practice of music consumption, even marginal or obsolete objects as in the case of vinyl records. In this process of reconfiguration, the adoption of the ‘circuit of practice’ helps to highlight how changes in materiality are part of a more general performative integration where objects, feelings, personal experiences, cultural values and activities are constantly involved in a process of mutual co-shaping and co-evolution.

Conclusion

The present analysis of the process of digitalization of music consumption has shown that, although music has changed in the passage from tangible records to intangible data, musical material objects and technologies still play a relevant, and to some extent even more important, role in music consumption practices. All the examples considered here contribute to showing that the changes in music consumption generated by the process of digitalization have not led to the dematerialization of consumption and to the disappearance of material objects, but have rather generated forms of ‘re-materialization’ – the re-articulation of the relationships among materiality, cultural meanings and people’s pragmatic activities. More generally, at least three kinds of considerations can be developed on the basis of the empirical results presented above.

The first consideration concerns the nature of the change of material stuff within contemporary digital music consumption. The dematerialization of music consists in the diffusion of immaterial, intangible digital music files, which have replaced the material, tangible albums that used to be purchased (e.g. on cassette, vinyl and CD). As pointed out here, today new and old objects and devices remain relevant and indispensable to support or compete with the consumption of intangible music formats. The material devices and other accessories needed for the reproduction of music also existed in the pre-download period, but today the ways of appropriating these objects and technologies have become even more central in the whole practice
of music consumption. In this sense, the article sheds new light on the evolution of music practices in the digital age, confuting those interpretations that claim the shift toward the digital realm is a step towards a loss of relevance of material objects in the music experience. On the contrary, the article shows that, in the age of digital music, as well as in the previous decades, music consumption always needs to be ‘extended and mediated by a number of “off-the-record” practices, both material and discursive’ (Symes, 2004: 245), and that digital music consumption remains a practice deeply rooted in an embodied set of activities and social relationships ‘inscribed and hardwired into the design of material artefacts’ (Shove et al., 2007: 7).

A more theoretical consideration concerns the fact that, adopting the ‘circuit of practice’ to understand and show changes occurring in music consumption practices, this article contributes to the articulation, on an empirical level, of ideas and categories developed by the theory of practice, especially in relation to the context of consumer studies. The ‘circuit of practice’ has been thought of as an analytical scheme to be used for empirical analyses, based on the theoretical model developed in recent years in the field of the theory of practice and especially in consumer studies. It is based on the idea that ‘practice’ should be fruitfully considered as a whole unit of analysis consisting in the interaction between material objects, sets of embodied knowledge and competences, and cultural and symbolic images (Shove and Pantzar, 2005). As developed here, the ‘circuit of practice’ aims to account for the way in which meanings, activities and materiality relate to one another in shaping changes in music consumption, and we also believe that it could demonstrate its usefulness in analysing different spheres of consumer practice, especially those examining radical alterations of material stuffs and tools involved in consumption processes. If one of the questions around the practice theory approach regards, as Alan Warde pointed out, the ways in which it is possible – from the perspective of a general theoretical framework, which tends to ‘be idealized, abstract and insufficiently attentive to the social processes involved in the creation and reproduction of practices’ (Warde 2005: 135) – to develop useful empirical analysis, the ‘circuit of practice’ offers both an example of how to turn concepts surrounding the practice theory into empirical terms, and a viable tool for developing further research and similar kinds of analysis.

Moreover, we should also point out that the present use of the ‘circuit of practice’ identifies a specific field for a useful application of the theory of practice: that of the changes in cultural consumption practices when they are integrated in the context of digital goods and services. Indeed, while the adoption of the ‘theory of practice’ in consumer studies is contributing to steering the debate in the direction of a more sensitive and accurate understanding of the relationship between people, objects and consumption, excluding the field of digital photography (Hand, 2008), it has poorly considered the digitalization of cultural consumption. In the last few years, many other cultural consumption fields have examined similar forms of integration in the digital realm, such as movies, games and books, which are likely to feature similar forms of dematerialization and re-materialization.
The ‘circuit of practice’ and theory of practice can be useful in shedding light on changes occurring in these other cases, as they are able to highlight the heterogeneous nature of digital consumer practices and their process of mutual interaction between materiality, culture and embodied activities.

A final consideration concerns how the present work contributes to pushing forward the current debates developing around consumption processes. From this perspective, this work focuses more thoroughly on the interaction between people and material objects as a crucial terrain for studying consumer practices, and how they take shape, evolve and change. Focusing on ‘practices’ as units of analysis allows a better understanding of the trajectories of evolution of single practices, of the relationship between different practices, and of the possibility of connecting these trajectories and relationships with internal changes related to the consumer’s experiences. In the present case, we have seen that changes in the way people consume music are inherently connected with more general processes of mutual co-shaping of objects, cultural values and embodied activities.

Clearly, these processes of change in the role of materiality in the digital age affect the ways of incorporation of (tangible and intangible) commodities and goods into everyday life and context. This raises the question of how changes concerning materialities and digitalization in consumer culture intersect with the proliferation of forms of ‘craft consumption’ (Campbell, 2005) and practices of do-it-yourself (Watson and Shove, 2008), which often imply an intense relationship with the flexible material qualities of objects and technologies. Moreover, ‘re-materialization’ in musical practices also highlights the increasing relevance of the appropriation of technology and devices in shaping the changing consumer experiences. Indeed, looking more generally at the contemporary consumer landscape, an increasing number of consumer spheres are involving digitalization and forms of dematerialization (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010), such as in the case of forms of ‘digital virtual consumption’ (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2010). With respect to this issue, the case of digital music tells us that the material dimension implied in the interaction of consumption in general with digital media remains crucial and requires to be carefully addressed in the future.

Thus, while this article focuses on the changing role of materiality in the specific practices regarding digital music consumption, it also aims to stimulate further researches on how such forms of materialization and re-materialization proliferate and become relevant within distinct practices and spheres of consumer culture.

Note
1. The ‘circuit of practice’ is also partially inspired by the idea of a ‘circuit of culture’ developed in the field of cultural studies (see du Gay et al., 1997) and represents a further adaptation of a perspective articulated by Shove and Pantzar aimed at explaining in visual terms the dynamics of practice change (see, for example, Pantzar and Shove, 2006).
References


Paolo Magaudda is a post-doctoral fellow in Sociology at the University of Padova, Italy. His current research concerns the relation between technology and consumption in everyday life with specific reference to digital media, music and cultural consumption.