



# Psychological ownership and music streaming consumption



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## ABSTRACT

Streaming is becoming the most common format from which people access, share and listen to music and it is suggested that such practices are indicative of a shift towards a 'post-ownership' economy. In the case of music, consumers may place greater value (emotional and monetary) on the physical product because of the lack of legal ownership and/or absence of perceived ownership associated with streaming. This article examines how experiences of ownership are articulated through music streaming formats via qualitative interviews and an online themed discussion group. Drawing from psychological ownership theory we identify motivations (place, identity and control), antecedents (investing the self, coming to intimately know the target, pride and controlling the target) and outcomes (loyalty, empowerment and social rewards) of psychological ownership that are evident in the consumers' experiences of music streaming. This has theoretical and managerial implications for our understanding of how consumers engage with the post-ownership economy.

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## 1. Introduction

The shift in consumer use from physical forms of music consumption (i.e. vinyl, cassette tapes and CDs) to digital spaces (legal – e.g. iTunes, Spotify and illegal – e.g. piracy), has attracted attention from researchers, questioning the impact this de-materialisation has on how we experience music in everyday life and use it to manage relationships, mood and our sense of self (Bull, 2006; Belk, 2013). Although the idea that music is becoming increasingly de-materialised has been challenged (Magaudda, 2011), there is still a sense that something may have been diminished with the digitalisation of music; that consuming music digitally leads to a loss in the perceived sense of ownership and relationship we have with the music product (see Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015). This potential diminishment of 'ownership' has been amplified further through the increasing use of streaming platforms (e.g. Spotify, YouTube, Apple Music) for music consumption, a business model that is based on shared access to music content. According to IFPI (2015), worldwide music streaming subscription services revenues grew by 39% in 2014 to \$1.57 billion with an estimated 41 million people paying for the premium versions of these services, a number that is increasing every year. This growth in streaming is in stark contrast to a global decline in digital downloads (–8%) and physical product sales (–8.1%).

It is only a relatively short period of time, since the invention of the phonograph, that music could be 'owned' in the same way we 'own'

possessions. While music as a means of consumption has been streamed since the invention of radio, contemporary subscription services offer unprecedented levels of choice and control over our music consumption, including when and where it is accessed. Premium versions of such applications allow the consumer access to an unlimited amount of music (ad-free) with the option to download their favourite albums to their devices. However, payment is not conducive (in a legal sense) to any form of ownership as streaming differs from the 'personal ownership model employed by other digital services, such as the iTunes store' (Richardson, 2014: 22). This approach to accessing music is similar in business structure to what is seen as an outdated media consumption model of renting movies or borrowing books from a library albeit without the added tangibility of the actual book or video (see Dixon, 2013).

It is this emphasis on de-materialisation in a digitalised world and the increasing dominance of streaming in other forms of media consumption (e.g. Netflix) as well as collaborative models in other industries (e.g. Uber) that has led to the insistence from some commentators (e.g. Belk, 2014: 1599) that we are entering a 'post-ownership economy'. Consequently, this study seeks to understand the experience of the consumer in this context using the theoretical framework of psychological ownership (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2003) with music streaming as a focus. As there have been calls for further empirical research 'to address the emergence of psychological ownership in particular types of situation and contexts or for particular types of ownership targets' (Pierce et al., 2003:103), and requests to consider the marketing outcomes of psychological ownership (Jussila, Tarkiainen, Sarstedt, & Hair, 2015), this study seeks to attend to these issues.

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Utilising a two-stage qualitative approach we find that the participants experience motivations (identity, place, efficacy and effectance) and antecedents (investment of the self, coming to intimately know the target, pride and controlling the target) of psychological ownership through contemporary music streaming practices. Participants use such platforms to organise their music consumption, manage and project their identity and establish a sense of control in their everyday routine. We present evidence that participants develop a sense of loyalty to particular streaming applications, experience feelings of empowerment and can attain social rewards through consumption. We argue that such findings illustrate many similarities to the use of traditional music formats. The key difference in a music streaming context is the element of control that such practices afford in relation to: the presentation of self and management of mood. Managerial and theoretical implications are discussed.

## 2. Literature review: psychological ownership

Pierce et al. (2003) argue that we can cultivate strong feelings of ownership for both material and immaterial possessions and that ownership is not necessarily tantamount to legality. Consequently, from a music consumption context psychological ownership can be used to examine our relationships with a variety of material products (e.g. CDs, vinyl), immaterial services (digital downloading, music streaming) and even particular artists, genres or abstract ideas. This sense of perceived ownership has been explored in psychology (developmental and social) sociology, anthropology, animal behaviour, geography and in consumer behaviour. For instance, Belk (1988) has played a crucial role in developing explanations of the relationships we have with possessions, how we project our identity through ownership of objects and expand our sense of self through consumption. This area of literature is sometimes referred to as psychological ownership, defined by Pierce et al. (2003: 86) as ‘the state in which individuals feel as though the target of ownership or a piece of that target is “theirs” (i.e., “it is mine!”). Drawing from over a hundred years of research Pierce and colleagues have developed a comprehensive conceptual model that considers the motivations of psychological ownership (efficacy and effectance, enhancing self-identity and having a place to dwell) and the antecedents (controlling the ownership target, investing the self in the target, coming to intimately know the target and pride [see Kirk, Swain, & Gaskin, 2015]). Pierce and colleagues argue that the motivations of psychological ownership can be experienced simultaneously and that the routes to psychological ownership can be both complimentary and additive. Importantly, they also identify potential outcomes of psychological ownership which are discussed below. This framework is used as a lens to explore the consumption of music streaming.

### 2.1. Efficacy and effectance: controlling the ownership target

Dittmar (1992) argues that one of the main motivations driving psychological ownership is gaining control over one’s environment and achieving desired outcomes through possession. Possession grants an individual a sense of power and drives the need for effectance. ‘Exploration of, and the ability to control, one’s environment gives rise to feelings of efficacy and pleasure, which stem from “being the cause” and having altered the environment through one’s control-actions.’ (Pierce et al., 2003: 89). This sense of control over an ownership target is an antecedent to increased feelings of psychological ownership. Bull has demonstrated how the introduction of the iPod has allowed for music users to control and integrate music strategically into their everyday lives, ‘fine tuning the relationship between mood, volition, music and the environment in ways that previous generations of mobile sound technologies were unable to do’ (Bull, 2006: 136). This raises questions about how consumers have incorporated more recent technological advances (i.e. streaming services) into their music consumption practices where the level of choice and control is even greater; increasing the

likelihood of efficacy to effectance. Kirk et al. (2015) have proposed that consumers who use new technologies that encourage discovery and provide opportunities for control and individualisation are likely to experience enhanced feelings of psychological ownership.

### 2.2. Identity: investing the self in the target

Interacting with and perceptions of controlling the target of psychological ownership affords a sense of pride (Kirk et al., 2015) and relates to the motivation of enhancing self-identity through psychological ownership. Consumer research has been at the forefront of identity research demonstrating the role that material goods play in developing and understanding the self (McCracken, 1986), expressing identity to others through the symbols of material objects (Levy, 1959) and ensuring a continuity of the self (Price, Arnould, & Folkman Curasi, 2000). Music is often used as an example of a consumer ‘good’ that is crucial to our sense of identity. For example, Bartmanski and Woodward discuss the importance of vinyl records as an expression of the self, even in the context of the digital age where such possession is not a requirement to access music. The material aspects of products such as vinyl allows users to signify their cultural consumption to others and ‘affords the crystallization of sense of self with a history stretching back in time.’ (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015: 107). The symbolic significance of music as cultural artefact provides the motivation for psychological ownership.

Furthermore, the route to perceived ownership of music, in this case the physical music product, is enhanced because of the investment of the self (Belk, 1988) and the psychic energy that goes into collecting, accessing, listening to and sharing music. Potentially there is a loss of relationship with music as a consequence of moving from physical products to digital consumption where the material aspects of psychological ownership are not as prominent (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015). How do we invest our sense of self in contemporary music consumption practices such as streaming? Does this de-materialisation of the music ‘product’ lessen the symbolic power of music to our sense of self? Belk (2013) argues that digital, sharing and access modes of consumption can provide valuable resources for constructing identity if not greater opportunities in which identity can be controlled and communicated to a greater number of people. However, he is still inclined to frame CDs and vinyl etc. as a more authentic way of listening to music and more important to our extended self than their digital counterparts.

### 2.3. Place: coming to intimately know the target

Pierce et al. (2003) also suggest that individuals who find a strong sense of identification and develop a considerable emotional connection with particular possessions come to see them as a safe place or a home. This is another key motivation for psychological ownership. Citing Porteous (1976), they argue that such possessions can be ‘thought of from the perspective of a fixed point of reference around which the individual structures a significant portion of his or her reality’ (2003: 91). In this way the physical music product allows for control over space as well as the assertion of identity. However, the digitalisation of music and the now increased emphasis on access-based consumption formats raises questions about how and where consumers structure their music consumption and what the significance is of place in contemporary consumption.

A key antecedent that can influence the perceived sense of ownership is the psychic energy that goes into ‘coming to intimately know the target’ (Pierce et al., 2003: 92). This is observed in record collectors who despite owning vinyl, cassettes or CDs that were mass produced came to know the unique scratches or idiosyncrasies of their individual copies. As Bolin writes: ‘It is not any version of a certain song or album, but the specific copy of a specific record (the vinyl copy with the original cover) that is the trigger of memories and emotional states’. (2015: 7). Without a physical copy questions regarding the influence that the

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