

Features, Functions, and Fanfare: A Framework for Understanding the Appeal of a Music Website

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Introduction

At this point it should come as news to no one that the music business is in the midst of the greatest period of upheaval in its modern history. While the industry has never been particularly stable by the standards of the corporate world, the methods by which artists were signed to record labels and promoted via radio and live appearances for the primary purpose of selling recorded music certainly provided the music business with a functional commercial model. But throughout the industry, enormous changes have been coming so quickly over the past decade that the term “crisis” has been widely used to describe recent conditions (Callahan, 2005; Henley, 2004; Wolff, 2002). Eroding sales, an oversaturated market, and the dramatically increased cost of marketing a new artist or release, all represent challenges to the established record companies, but the real seismic shift has been the result of the on-line digital distribution of music, for which another term is widely employed, “revolution.”

Ten years ago Dannen (1999), referring to the emergence of digital, on-line music sites, wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, “A revolution has occurred in the way music is distributed, and the big record companies are in a state of panic” (p. 9). This panic has not abated despite persuasive research that has shown on-line file sharing having a minimal impact on industry profits and little evidence that the downloading of musical content has led directly to lower sales (see Oberholzer-Gee & Strumpf, 2007). Without question, on-line distribution of music has established a direct point of connection between the artist and the audience, undermining the gatekeeping function that the major (and even smaller) record labels have used for decades to control the industry. In his paper “The Internet Music Revolution,” Collard (2006) observes “if the industry is to survive, it needs to modernize itself and adapt to these new technologies, taking full advantage of them to regain the monopoly and control it once enjoyed” (p. 5). In fact the return to dominance Collard references is unlikely, and at the center of this shift in power has been the social networking site, MySpace, and particularly its music division MySpace Music. As Burrell (2007) has written, “Revolution is not too strong a word to describe the changes introduced by MySpace. There's no better example of this than Enter Shikari, a St. Albans band who have been so successful in building support online that they have been able to shun all approaches from the record industry” (p. 28). The revolution concerns not only the diminishing power of the traditional record labels and the increased potential for artists to have their music heard by the public, but perhaps even more the ability of the audience to browse, sample, and experience new or unfamiliar artists.

The Digital Arcade

MySpaceMusic might be envisioned as the world's largest jukebox with the added appeal that it is not necessary to insert a coin and the number of “plays” is theoretically endless. But there is another, older model that might be employed in order to understand the profound economic and cultural changes taking place in the on-line musical arena, that of the arcade, as described by Walter Benjamin (1999) in his sprawling, unfinished masterwork, *The Arcades Project*. In *The Arcades Project* Benjamin presents a series of intersecting, overlapping, fragmentary ideas about literature, art, history, commerce, and modernism (to name but a few of his concerns) all centered around a study of the labyrinthine

passageways of the Parisian arcades of the late 19th century which can be thought of as the forerunners of the contemporary shopping mall. For Benjamin the arcades were “a world in miniature ... in which customers will find everything they need,” as well as a “a world of particular secret affinities: palm tree and feather duster; hairdryer and Venus de Milo, champagne bottles, prostheses, and letter writing manuals” (p. 874). Benjamin saw the arcades as not only places of boundless commerce, but places where connections were made, where networks of linkages could be explored, where the past and present melted into one another in an unbroken flow. They constituted a world of “strict discontinuity; what is always again new is not something old that remains, or something past that recurs, but one and the same crossed by countless intermittences.”

In so many ways, Benjamin’s (1999) depiction of the arcades can be seen as similarly descriptive of the virtual world of commerce on-line and more specifically of the seemingly infinite marketplace of on-line music. The unexpected connections, the endless variety of commodities, the promised potential for finding everything one might need, all resonate with the structure of the arcades. What this means for the consumer is connected to Benjamin’s description of the *flaneur*, the wanderer, the window shopper, the free agent, the master of the space of the arcade. Benjamin notes, “The *flaneur* is the observer of the marketplace. His knowledge is akin to the occult-science of industrial fluctuations. He is a spy for the capitalists, on assignment in the realm of consumers” (p. 427). The empowerment of the consumer, the freedom of movement, desire, and choice, has its roots in the *flaneur* of the arcades but is intensified in the new arcade of the Internet by physically bringing the arcade to the consumer rather than the shopper to the mall. Mobility is heightened and choices are multiplied geometrically. This authority of the consumer in the realm of music comes at the expense of the power of the record companies which until recently controlled access to the musical marketplace. It is a new world in the new arcade. Benjamin points out that in their period of decay, the arcades “became the hollow mold from which the image of ‘modernity’ was cast,” and similarly we can see today’s post-modern experience reflected in the de-centered, networked, user-focused realm of sites like MySpace Music.

MySpace History

MySpace, developed in 2003, is a free social networking Internet service that allows registered members to communicate with others using blogs, e-mails, web forums, and visual tools such as audio and video postings and pictures. MySpace is considered a “Web 2.0 site,” a term used to designate a second generation of web sites and services which facilitate both communication and collaboration amongst their users. These Web 2.0 sites have proliferated rapidly in the past five years and can now be credited with transforming the way potential music purchasers understand the way services and functions of the Internet connect website creators and/or businesses to the consumer (Knowles, 2007).

MySpace founders Chris DeWolfe and Tom Anderson initially targeted the social networking site to actors, musicians, and artists. Since many local bands and club owners were used to publicizing the site when MySpace first launched, these same individuals were also the first to create their own customized band pages. Drawing on existing fan bases, these artists (many from Indie Rock bands) already had a large number of people eager to view their pages. A brief eight months after MySpace went “live,” the rate of growth of new users quickly surpassed that of other existing social networking sites such as Friendster (Bosworth, 2005). The ever-increasing number of artists using MySpace to promote their music (over 2.5 million in the rap genre alone) and the equally enormous number of viewers/consumers (top Rock artist Hinder had over 70 million page views as of 5/2/02) reveals the site to be, in Benjamin’s terms, a massive digital musical arcade. The artist or band sites allow individuals to have creative control over the design and functions of their page, which are currently a vital part of marketing new artists. As a result it becomes essential to gain a clear understanding of how the features of the site attract and communicate to the musical consumer.

The Conceptual Framework

The Framework (see Figure 1) outlines a model for understanding the operations of online music sites from the perspective of the “Digital Arcade.” Consider the users; they approach music sites with one or more of five principal needs. First, they may want to obtain goods or services, music CDs, paraphernalia like T-shirts, tickets to performances, etc. Second, and more important for many, they may log onto a site

to form or maintain relationships with other users or with the artist(s). Third, the user may want to be entertained, to listen to music, to see interesting graphic displays, read/hear amusing ideas, etc. Fourth, a user may want to explore a new persona, a self-identity via playfully identifying with an artist, or by learning the argot, dress standards and mannerisms that constitute a new set of traits for the user. Finally, the user may wish to learn the terrain of his or her social environment, the immense variety of people, places, and things that comprise the user's world. These needs are not mutually exclusive, nor are they of equal priority to a user. Further, they are not independent; satisfying one need can be instrumental in stimulating another.

On the artist's side, the artists (or bands) can also have a number of goals. First, the artist may want to sell music, CDs, tickets to events, etc. directly to fans. If, as in the case of MySpace Music, the sales cannot be done on the web site, then the artists can direct fans to other online or offline locations. Second, they can seek to establish relationships directly with: a) individual fans, or with clubs/organizations of fans, b) other artists, e.g., to form cooperative business relationships, to form friendly associations with "kindred spirits," or c) music corporations, organizers of festivals, and other entities that offer a platform for contracts, fees, and other revenue streams. Third, they seek to provide pleasure to users through their music, by the other content on their sites, and by serving as gatekeepers to clubs/festivals, and other sources of entertainment. Fourth, they seek through their site features (e.g., pictures/videos of the artists, graphic styles, selection of friends) to establish an image or representation. The images can be seen as constructed personae, e.g., the band of dangerous rebels; the spiritual, sensitive folksinger; the streetwise, hardcore rapper. Finally, they can attempt to stay up to date (or even to define what is to be considered the frontier of change) and configure their site so as to convey this cutting edge quality to users. As is true for user needs, the artist's goals are not exclusive or of equally desirable. And again, one is often instrumental to achieving other goals.

Linking the artist and the user is the music site (see Figure 1). The attributes of a site act within five *Operational Domains*, corresponding to the five arcade-inspired linkages between the artist goals and the user's needs. Within each Operational Domain, *Features* act to perform certain *Functions* that determine how successfully the site operates to mesh the artist's work with the user's needs.

Illustratively, consider the Commerce Operational Domain (see Table 1). Extensive research by social, information, and marketing scientists has explored the contribution of site features contributing to the success or appeal of a commercial site (B2B or B2C). Sets of dimensions or factors that determine how effectively a site operates as a commercial venue have been proposed by Torkzadeh and Dhillon (2002) and subsequently fine-tuned by Chang, Torkzadeh, and Dhillon (2005); by Ranganathan and Ganapathy (2002); and by Chakraborty, Lala, and Warren (2003), among others. Other conceptual models have suggested additional factors or processes that can determine the success of a site. Among these are Roger's (1995) model of the adoption/diffusion of innovations, the theory of reasoned action of Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), and the Technology Acceptance Model, devised by Davis, Bagozzi and Warshaw (1989) and later modified as "TAM 2" by Venkatesh and Davis (2000) and Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, and Davis (2003). Another is presence, defined as an information receiver's sense that there is no barrier or medium interposed between the receiver and the information source (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). Presence has been found to impact online consumer shopping (Gefen & Straub, 2004; Jahng, Jain, & Ramamurthy, 2000). These dimensions or factors constitute the Functions in our Framework. Table 1 provides an integrated list of these commercial Functions drawn from the aforementioned sources.

Additionally, two Functions are proposed based upon the reactions of participants in a series of focus groups conducted as part of the present project. The first is "graphic load," the quantity of information in the audio and visual stimulus array. The load is derived from the stimulus variation, intensity, and complexity contained in the site. High load is perceived by users as busy, cluttered, emotionally overwhelming, and often too much to perceive in its entirety. Low load is perceived as overly sparse, simple, and potentially boring. We propose that users have, based on past experiences, an optimal level of load which they find particularly appealing. The second added Function is "site stability," the degree to which a site continues over time with the same URL and content. On the low end is frequent change in structure (due to intentional updates by the artist, technical problems etc.) and at the high end is a total

lack of change. At least a minimal amount of stability is required to conduct commerce, while too much stability can be unattractive to users.

A site's Features, alone or in combination, are the means by which the site executes these Functions, and can be visualized at either a "Macro" or a "Micro" level. It is at the former level that the vast majority of research on online sites as commercial venues has been directed. Macro Features are based to some degree upon user's perception or evaluations. For example, from Table 1, consider vendor trust as a Function important to the operation of a music site as a commercial venue. Bart, Shankar, Sultan, and Urban (2005) explored the attributes or features of a B2C commercial site that can enhance user trust in the vendor/site and, thereby contribute to the users' willingness to shop at the site(s). The investigators found that these trust inducing features clustered into eight groups (see Table 2).

Thus, in our Framework, Table 2 lists the Macro-Features that provide the vendor trust Function and thereby allow the site to operate as a commercial venue (Commerce Operational Domain). Each of the other Functions in the Commerce Operational Domain has its own corresponding Macro Features. The same hierarchical structures of Functions and Macro-Features also apply to the other four Operational Domains.

The Micro-Features are the constituent elements that combine to produce the structure of the site, the bits of audio and visual information that a developer must orchestrate in order to construct a Macro Feature. The five categories of Micro-Features are: Music, Still Images, Video, Text, and Graphics. For example, consider Text, one of the five categories of Micro-Features available to the site developer. Information about the band, band and fan blogs, reviews, tracking history, performance schedules and a discussion wall, are all site characteristics that comprise the Micro-Features of Text. This five-category listing of Micro-Features is similar for all Macro Features for all Functions within all five Operational Domains.

Method

Participants

In April 2008, eighteen focus groups were conducted on campus with 130 Cleveland State University undergraduate students. The authors, assisted by a larger team of graduate students, prepared the moderator's guide. Six graduate students acted as moderators during the focus group sessions in which participants were encouraged to discuss different aspects of MySpace Music (MSM) sites. In order to facilitate data collection, each focus group was recorded via audio-cassette and videotape.

The 130 participants, aged 18 or older, were required to sign a consent form and were informed they were being recorded both by audio and videotape, and received individual class credit and/or extra credit for their participation in the focus group.

Procedure

Recorded discussion comments were studied to look for patterns that echo or refute conclusions emerging from the literature reviews. Almost 50 MSM Features, both Macro- and Micro-, were gleaned from the focus group participant comments and used to compare with existing online shopping literature to identify patterns and gaps where site Functions have not been previously recognized as exhibiting Features that might appeal to or repel the online user.

MSM Focus Group Data

The discussion recordings were reviewed by the entire team to determine the fit with the Framework in Figure 1. For the purpose of this paper the following results illustrate selected Functions within one domain, the Commerce Operational Domain. The other discussion recordings for the remaining four operational domain categories can be found at Cleveland State University's Research Reports in Consumer Behavior (<http://academic.csuohio.edu/cbresearch/>).

Privacy-Security and Trust Functions within a Commerce Domain

It was expressed countless times by the participants that they would not purchase music (i.e., CD's, apparel, or concert tickets) directly from the MSM sites. Specific Functions encompassed within the Commerce Domain include a perceived risk of the site and trust of the vendor:

Privacy-Security Function: The user may be afraid of "friending" the artist/band site because of spam e-mails, because the "friended" band will send numerous concert notifications, or because the band may

possibly sell or share e-mail addresses with other artist or bands of a similar genre. The user may seek safety when viewing a page, and does not want to get a virus for clicking on items or features on a page.

Trust Function: Does the user trust artist or band enough to purchase merchandise, i.e., shirt, or songs or does the user trust MySpace as a vendor? Are buyers more trusting when purchasing from a well-known source, e.g., iTunes, or going to the artists' concerts or official webpage to purchase goods?

Many of the participants indicated they would not "purchase" a song from MySpace and might instead seek alternate "pirating" methods to download songs they liked. If a person wanted to purchase a CD or apparel items such as t-shirts or hats, they would buy this merchandise at the artist or band's concert. The reason offered for this was so the individual could support the artist or band and the proceeds would go directly to them instead of a third party, i.e., iTunes. Furthermore, if a fan wanted a CD, it was often purchased as a collector's item or memorabilia from a concert. However, the top reason stated during the focus groups for MSM visitors to be deterred from making purchases from a site was lack of trust in relaying personal and confidential information such as credit card numbers for transactions on MySpace. If the individual wanted to simply purchase a single, they would follow a click-through on the artist/bands' page to an online music vendor site such as iTunes, Target, or Amazon. Overall, participants clearly stated that if there are free items to take advantage of from the artist/band site (e.g., free song downloads for ringtones, or concert tickets), then this would appeal to the viewer. In addition certain Text Micro-Features were seen as giving the site more credibility, including, a more "professional" layout. These findings are just the beginning of an in-depth study seeking to understand how the manipulation of certain features will influence the significant Functions of the individual MySpace Music web page.

Discussion & Future Implications

The crisis for the recorded music industry is, upon closer examination, not a crisis at all. It simply represents a radical challenge to the way the major multinational corporations who have controlled access to the ears of the consumer will maintain that hegemony. Or perhaps fail to do so. The revolution that began with the digital exchange of musical content over the Internet a decade ago is now nearly complete, and in the new arcade of on-line distribution, the power has shifted decisively to the individual web surfer, the content browser whether aficionado or novice, the virtual *flaneur*. A comprehensive knowledge of the desires, the deterrents, the predilections, and the preferences of this empowered wanderer/consumer, is the key to understanding the dynamics of the digital music arcade, and on this front the data and analysis presented here are merely the first steps in a lengthy and laborious process. Though we have presented a compelling framework for study, much more research is necessary before we can clearly understand in a reliably predicative way the relationship between the Features of MySpace Music and the Functions they serve. The complexity of the Features and the multiple overlapping and intersecting Functions they perform for the user demands closer, more detailed investigation, but using the model we've developed that fuses a semiotics of the web page with focus group testing of their effects, the task, though daunting, is possible. It is also, given the direct artist-to-consumer connection that the digital arcade provides, unquestionably necessary.

Additional information on this research initiative can be found at Cleveland State University's Research Reports in Consumer Behavior (<http://academic.csuohio.edu/cbresearch/>).

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Figure 1
The Framework

Artist Goals	Music Site Operational Domains	User Goals
Sales →	Commerce	← Obtain Goods & Services
Establish Relationships →	Networking	← Establish Relationships
Entertain →	Entertainment	← Enjoyment/Hedonic Consumption
Project Image (persona) →	Imaging	← Self Identity (persona)
Be Cutting Edge/ Up-to-Date →	Information/News	← Stay Current

Table 1

Commerce Operational Domain: Functions

Vendor trust (Torkzadeh & Dhillon, 2002)	Privacy/Security of information (Ranganathan & Ganapathy, 2002)
Smooth customer-vendor relationship (Torkzadeh & Dhillon, 2002)	Entertainment (Chakraborty, Lala, & Warren, 2003)
Value (PRICE/quality) of product (Torkzadeh & Dhillon, 2002)	Trialability (Rogers, 2003)
Product choice (Torkzadeh & Dhillon, 2002)	Compatibility with one's social environment (Rogers, 2003)
Online payment arrangements (Torkzadeh & Dhillon, 2002)	Observability (Rogers, 2003)
Convenience of shopping (Torkzadeh & Dhillon, 2002)	Normative support (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975)
Shipping/handling error (Torkzadeh & Dhillon 2002)	Presence (Gefen & Straub, 2004; Jahng et al., 2000)
Personalization (Chakraborty, Lala, & Warren, 2003)	Graphic load (CSU Focus Groups)
Non-Transaction related interactivity (Chakraborty, Lala, & Warren, 2003)	Stability of site (CSU Focus Groups)
Transaction related interactivity (Chakraborty, Lala, & Warren, 2003)	

Table 2

Macro-Features Driving Vendor Trust Function within Commerce Operational Domain (from Bart et al., 2005)

<p>Privacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privacy policy easy to find on the site • Site clearly explains how user information is used • Site's use of cookies is clearly presented • Text of privacy policy is easy to understand • 	<p>Brand Strength</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Products and services with reputable brand names • Quality company or organization
<p>Security</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust seals present (e.g., TRUSTe, Verisign) • Signs placed by third party companies indicating site has been reviewed for sound business practices 	<p>Advice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Useful shopping tools (e.g., a calculator or planner) provided • Explanation of services/products offered • Recommendations based on user's previous purchases • Helpful on reaching my buying decisions • Comparisons of all competing brands
<p>Navigation and Presentation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legible images, colors, and text • Simple language • Readily available site map • Useful links to other sites • Information can be obtained quickly 	<p>Order Fulfillment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A variety of payment methods • Easy ordering and payment mechanisms • Shipping and handling costs listed up front • Return policies or other measures of accountability are present • Order confirmation via e-mail
<p>Community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Endorsement by celebrities • Testimonials by past users • Possible to interact on the screen with a shopping adviser • Photos of people/family/kids on site • Bios of executives • User has direct posting to site (e.g., bulletin board, e-mail) 	<p>Absence of Errors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptable download time • Text and menus displayed properly • No pages "under construction" • No errors or crashing • Internal links in working order • Does not require user to download programs (e.g., a "flash" program to view videos)