

Marketplace drama: The 7-year war on downloading in 4 acts

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A fascinating new paper from the Journal of Consumer Research investigates the seven-year war on music downloading that unfolded among corporate music executives and music downloaders. Markus Giesler (York University) uses a performance-ethnography approach, studying the music marketplace as a cultural stage on which consumers and producers interact as dramatic players to reach their conflicting goals.

As a record producer during Napster's emergence in the late '90s, Giesler had first hand experience dealing with several issues: How does market evolution change price-value relationships for music? Will this fundamentally new way of music consumption herald the end of the music market? Was there a common pattern of historical transformation at work that, once revealed, could be used to better understand other instances of market evolution?

To answer these questions, he sought to identify both the fundamental cultural tensions that drive the performances of downloaders and producers on the market stage, and the dramatic plot structure that integrates the war on music downloading into a historical narrative of market evolution.

“These findings yield some novel theoretical insights for the study of market system dynamics,” Giesler says. “This study has argued for more attention to the idea that markets are staged compromises between sharing and owning.”

Giesler argues that, between 1999 and 2006, the music market moved through a process of structural change that involved much unusual drama. The drama unfolded over an enduring cultural tension: the conflict between utilitarian and possessive ideals as they applied to music as a cultural resource. These ideals influenced the behavior and statements of music consumers and producers.

Giesler then divides this dramatic conflict into four historical acts: In the first act, a breach was made visible by the violation of market norms (the emergence of Napster). The second act was a crisis or extension of the breach, during which each of the antagonists took a more radical stance towards the other camp and the breach widened publicly (the expansion of music downloading). The corporate response led to the third act, the application of redressive mechanisms to restore normalcy (the music industry's anti-downloading campaign and the prosecution of individual downloaders). The fourth act was a reintegration (the commercialization of downloading through Apple's iTunes and other corporate players).

“The profound implication here is that marketplace dramas can take place in every market—from music to organic food. The cast changes every time, but the story is more or less the same. These findings not only can be used to understand and predict other instances of market evolution; they also reveal the stuff that heroes are made of and the reasons why some of them fail,” Giesler explains.

Giesler points out that managers, consumers, and public policy makers can use the idea of marketplace drama to better understand and manage similar market conflicts. For example, the idea of markets as dramatically acquired compromises between sharing and owning informs the ongoing war between the Youtube community and the motion picture industry. Marketplace drama can also be used to better understand and explain the commercial cooptation and ideological reclaiming of market countercultures such as the organic food movement.

Source: University of Chicago

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