

The Increasing Trend of Legacy Downloading MP3's

The digital age is without a doubt upon us. As the years go by, the digital world continues to expand and improve. It is hard to deny the impact that digital technology has had in the past and continues to have today. The 1980s was a decade that brought forth the personal home computer and the Compact Disc. The Compact Disc, otherwise known as CD, caused all but the death of the popular music medium of that era, the vinyl record. The CD's advantage over the vinyl is that the CD utilizes digital technology. Music found on a CD is nothing more than a computer file. As the CD became popular, home computers continued to be improved upon. By the 1990s, home computers and music became inseparable. Recordable CDs and CD recording drives for home computers were introduced. Music lovers could now arrange mixes of different tracks from multiple CDs. Instead of carrying around a large library of CDs, now only a small booklet of discs would be needed. Even with this solution, however, music lovers were still searching for a more convenient way to acquire and listen to their favorite music. In the mid-1990s, the Fraunhofer Institute for Integrated Circuits US and Thomson developed a new digital music file for use on the personal computer known as the mp3 (Quain). This new file-type has since become a household product, proof positive that the digital age continues on.

The mp3 became popular for many reasons. Firstly, the mp3 file is much smaller than a traditional CD file. The mp3 analyzes the music file located on a CD and compresses the original music file by stripping away any audio information that the human ear cannot detect. Shrinking the original file allows personal computer users to store many more mp3 songs on a hard drive than CD songs. Another reason for the mp3's popularity is its ability to recreate the same sound quality that the original CD file produces. The combination of high quality music in a very small file size was enough of a one-two punch to solidify the mp3 as a mainstream product. As the mp3 became popular, it also gave birth to an unprecedented trend in the digital age.

The popularity of the mp3 became very evident with a new and still increasing trend of legally downloading music. The digital age continued to see improvements and enhancements of existing technology, as well as the introduction of new technology. Personal computers now have blazing processing speeds, and using the internet is easier than ever. Fast computer speeds and easy internet use have become a perfect fit for the tiny mp3. Computer users are now capable of using the internet to find, transfer, and legally download music. Legally downloading mp3s began strong and hasn't shown any signs of slowing. Within a five month period in 2004, legal downloads of mp3s increased three-fold among consumers who normally purchase CDs (Amdur 4). A notable online music store, iTunes by Apple, sold over one-quarter-million mp3s during its first day of business (Garrity, Newman). The same online music store now sells an average of more than one-half-million mp3s every week (Garrity). There is no question that there is a trend in legal mp3 downloading and that it is still on the rise. There are, though, three major causes contributing to this increasing trend. One cause is the commercialization of the mp3, another important cause of the trend is the mp3's ease of use, and the third major cause is the mp3's portability.

Perhaps the most undeniable cause of the increasing trend of legally downloading mp3s is the commercialization of the mp3. Apple developed a legal downloading service in which users visit the Apple online store, iTunes, which allows consumers to browse through its catalog of available mp3s. With a simple click of a button, the user can easily purchase a high-quality music file at 99 cents per song. Along with the development of iTunes came its counterpart, the portable mp3 player called iPod. After the development of the music store and the portable player, Apple took the mp3 market by storm with an advertising campaign which cost the company millions of dollars (Garrity, Newman). With this approach, Apple was able to saturate the market with television commercials, magazine ads, large billboard signs and other forms of visual communication. Some marketing exploits by Apple include pairing the iPod with a Volkswagen Bug, featuring the iPod in music videos such as "Love @ 1st Sight" by Mary J. Blige, and allowing comedian Chris Rock to parody iPod advertisements (Osterheldt). The marketing campaign worked. According to a youth newsletter released in August of 2004 by an organization called Look-Look, just before students returned for a new school-year in 2004, the iPod was the second most popular

purchase (Osterheldt). Over the span of two years, Apple sold over one million iPods and increased the iPod's storage capacity tenfold (Osterheldt). This meant that a user could now store approximately ten-thousand mp3's on his or her portable device.

Rivals to Apple began surfacing, or in some cases resurfacing, to take a piece of the new mp3 market. The once infamous Napster, known for its illegal file-sharing technology, has become a legitimate online store for legal mp3 downloads. Consumers can now catch Napster's logo-based feline in television and internet advertisements (Burrows). Both Apple and Napster continue to flourish in the new-found success of the legal mp3. Marketing and advertising their brands appear to have made a positive impact. In fact, it has been documented that "Apple's early success appears to be based on two factors: marketing and ease of use" (Garrity, Newman).

Ease of use is another cause of the success and increasing trend in legal mp3 downloading. According to Phil Leigh, analyst for Inside Digital Media, the internet allows consumers to instantly acquire any song or album without having to leave the house to purchase the same song or album at a store (qtd. in Crowley). The only things that the consumer requires are a computer and an internet connection. After that, the consumer only needs to worry about performing a couple of clicks. Even transferring a catalog of mp3s is as simple as plugging an iPod into a computer and performing a few more clicks. What can be easier than attaching the portable iPod to a belt-loop, turning the iPod on, and pressing its play button? Computer users can even create their own mp3s with just the click of a mouse. This lack of complication certainly hasn't hindered the popular legal mp3 download trend.

The third major cause of the currently rising trend in legal mp3 downloading is portability. As discussed earlier, the mp3 file size is significantly smaller than the original music file size found on a Compact Disc. Jenee' Osterheldt notes that Apple's iPod takes advantage of the small mp3 file size. The iPod, a small hand-held computer weighing less than a couple of Compact Discs, currently offers at least three different players. Each player comes with built-in hard drives of different sizes ranging from 10 gigabytes to 40 gigabytes. This allows the consumer to store up to ten-thousand mp3's on just one, tiny, hand-held portable (Osterheldt). What this means is that a user can store an entire catalog of Compact Discs on one, easy-to-use, small, and light portable device. This would seem ironic since the vinyl record fell to the CD for that very reason.

Arguably, the iPod's portability contributed to its own success as well as the demand for mp3s. According to Joseph Palenchar for TWICE, December 2004 saw an enormous sales increase of portable audio devices by over 50 percent; mostly due to the iPod. For the entire year, portable audio sales reached a total of over \$2.5 billion, a near 25% increase from 2003 (Palenchar, 4). Also reported by Palenchar, statistics reported by Consumer Electronics Association shows that the much slimmer mp3 portables alone increased by well over 200 percent in 2004 while the much bulkier portable cassette tape, radio, and/or CD player decreased in sales by just over 30% in the same year (Palenchar). These statistics seem to indicate that portability is indeed a deciding factor when it comes to purchasing portable audio players. It could be argued that the increasing sales of mp3 players, such as the iPod, directly effects the sales and legal downloads of mp3s. In other words, the portability of the mp3 is a major cause of the continued increasing trend of legal mp3 downloading.

The digital age will continue on in the years and decades to come. As usual, improvements will be made to existing technology, and new technologies will be invented. The mp3 itself has proven to be popular enough to receive technological enhancements. The inventors of the mp3 are now working on a version of the file-type that would support surround sound (Quain). Without a doubt, had the mp3 not been marketed so well, had the mp3 not been so easy to use, and had the mp3 not been so portable, there would not have been the enormous demand for the mp3 as there continues to be today. Without that demand, improvements and enhancements to the mp3 would not even be considered. Now we'll just have to see if these new and improved mp3s are as popular as the current ones continue to be.

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