4.4. A survey on graphic communication and publishing practices in the Portuguese independent music scene

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Abstract

In this paper, we present a research project on the use of graphic media within the Portuguese independent music scene, with an emphasis on traditional printing techniques. To better understand the DIY cultural practices taking place in Portugal and assess the relevance of traditional printing techniques, we surveyed the social actors participating in the contemporary independent music publishing about the media they use, how they use it and their impact on the graphic landscape of the independent music scene. The results of the questionnaire show that digital media prevails, but print media are also important to add a tangible extension to the communication, which can be enhanced by the use of traditional printing techniques.

Keywords: Independent music, Traditional Printing Techniques, Survey, Graphic Design, Portugal

Introduction

Graphic communication is closely tied to the publishing of music projects. With the decline of a music industry underpinned on major labels, a new generation of independent publishers has risen, developing its own communication strategies.

From a designer perspective, the independent music scene may represent an interesting work opportunity. Being an independent context it is free from the usual client/market constrains, with music becoming not only "a product to pack and sell" but also a genuine source of inspiration for creativity. It establishes a territory for researching and developing a personal line of work that usually is not possible when developing commercial projects. Whether to enhance portfolio or to improve skills, the motivations are diverse but shared by many designers and other professionals such as, photographers, illustrators, film directors, among others.

On the technological side, the emerging digital media offers a wide range of possibilities for DIY music projects and are being used not only during the recording process but also in the branding/communication process. As they can be cost free and ubiquitous, we would expect them to be used in exclusivity, but some artists find value in other media like, for example, traditional printing techniques.

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Regarding the distribution and promoting process, Internet assumes a central role in the current music scenario. It became a powerful communication vehicle and brought the possibility for musicians who where confined to a local sphere to reach a vast global audience with a relatively small investment. This reality brought a change of paradigm in the music industry. In some way the record sales may have decreased, but there has been noticed an increment in live events like concerts (Connolly & Kruegger, 2004) and artist are finding new ways to generate income beside gigs, such as the creation of soundtracks and jingles (Brousseau, 2008). Independent music projects self promote and self publish their work through small labels, in many cases created by the artists themselves. They promote and distribute autonomously, and cooperate with independent intermediaries. Many bands promote their own advertise and manage their concert tours. There are also small producers, promoters or labels that work on the independent music circuit.

To better understand how synergies can be fostered between musicians and other cultural agents we needed to understand how musicians are addressing their communication. Each person may have his/her own perspective about the subject and may inquire a small group of persons about their usage of the media but an objective perspective over the "big picture" is difficult to achieve. Such challenge, in conjunction with the lack of information in the literature, justified and motivated this study and made essential to create a survey to better understand and characterize the idiosyncrasies of this community.

We aimed at collecting information not only from musicians, but also from other intervenient who collaborate with them along the process, such as producers, agents and label owners.

Acknowledging the Internet as an important resource for communication we sought to understand how it is being used in Portugal and, at the same time, to ascertain the role of print media in a digital era.

In short, the goal of this research was to identify and characterize the media used by the Portuguese independent music projects in promotion/branding activities.

Methodology

In order to find an answer to our research question, we opt by using a survey method based on questionnaires. The questionnaire design, sample and distribution are presented next.

The sample

The target sample for conducting the survey where active members of the contemporary Portuguese independent music scene, including musicians (on a band or solo), DJ's, promoters, labels and producers. We excluded all the individuals that were associated with any of the grand phonographic labels like EMI, Warner, SonyBMG or Universal (The Association of Independent Music, 2011). Using the "rule of thumb" for social surveys, we calculated the size of the sample to be a minimum of 50 individuals (M. Hill & A. Hill, 2009).

Survey design

The design of the survey obeyed the best practices found on social science research methodology, and was crafted based on semi-structured interviews with individuals and small groups of people with an active role in the independent music scene. We also consulted

graphic and web designers on topics related with the media and an advertising copywriter to validate language aspects.

We made a preliminary survey with a sample of 10 individuals to identify possible misunderstanding of the questions, to measure time of response and to improve the quality of the survey.

Structure of the survey

The survey was organized in five blocks of questions, grouped according to their aim and function. The average time of response was estimated in 18 minutes, so we have decided to include a feature for saving and continue later in order to minimize the turn away.

In the first part of the survey we characterized the respondents regarding their social and demographic aspects.

The second part was dedicated to identify and define the music project of the respondent, and their positioning in the music scene. We defined two possible categories. The first one gathered people that created and performed music, such as musicians, bands, DJs. The second category included people that are indirectly related with the music creation, such as label managers, agents, promoters and producers. These categories were not exclusive, so the same respondent could be simultaneously a musician and manager of a label, for example.

The third part inquired about the media used for disclosure, which media are being used and how. In the forth part we identified the publishing habits and channels.

Finally, the fifth part was dedicated to gather information about the importance attributed to each media, and the advantages and disadvantages of Internet and print media for disclosure. This was an optional part, comprised of open-ended questions.

Collecting data

Since the sample was scattered all over the Portuguese territory, the idea of conducting face-to-face questionnaires was declined. Assuming that the majority of the audience was Internet proficient, we concluded that the best way to reach the respondents was through the Internet with a self-applied survey (Janet, Steve, & Healy, 2001; Brace, 2004).

After testing several platforms we chose Survey Gizmo[3], for having all the features needed and being free for academic purposes. We designed the survey and generated an URL, which was distributed mainly through email and social networks.

We sent approximately 500 emails and made approximately 600 contacts thought Myspace and Facebook.

We also address the survey thought known channels in the independent music scene like Raquel Lains[4], A Trompa[5] e Sergio Hydalgo[6]. This resulted in 200 emails sent to musicians and concert producers by Raquel Lains and a banner in A Trompa website with an URL to the survey.

The survey was self-filled so we created an introductory text explaining the goals of the research and the criteria for being considered in the sample. In this text there was also a request for the respondents to forward the survey for their contacts.

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[3] http://www.surveygizmo.com/ (consulted at 17/05/2014)
[4] http://www.letstartafire.com/ (consulted at 17/05/2014)
[5] http://a-trompa.net/ (consulted at 17/05/2014)
[6] http://www.mafama.blogspot.pt/ (consulted at 24/2/2011)

The data was collected between January 15 and April 15 in 2011 gathering a sample of 72 individuals from musicians, producers, DJs, and independent label managers.

Data analysis

For statistic analysis we used the SPSS v.18 software. For descriptive analysis of the variables (nominal or ordinal scale) we calculated the absolute and relative frequencies.

With continuous variables we used hypothesis test, T test. We used a significance level of $p < 0.05$.

For the open answers analysis in the last part of the survey we grouped the answers by similarity to further descriptive analysis using absolute and relative frequencies.

Results

Social and demographic aspects

The majority of the responses came from Lisbon (53%) followed by Porto (13%). Almost all the respondents where male (89%) and the majority had ages between 25 and 34 (72%). 78% of the inquired had a degree or other higher education diploma, and all them used the Internet on a daily basis.

About the projects represented

Half of the surveyed respondents had only 1 musical project and a quarter had 2. Approximately a quarter of the surveyed had 3 or more projects. The majority of the surveyed (84%) started their project before the year 2000, and, as seen in the Figure 1, 2005 registered an increment of new musical projects.
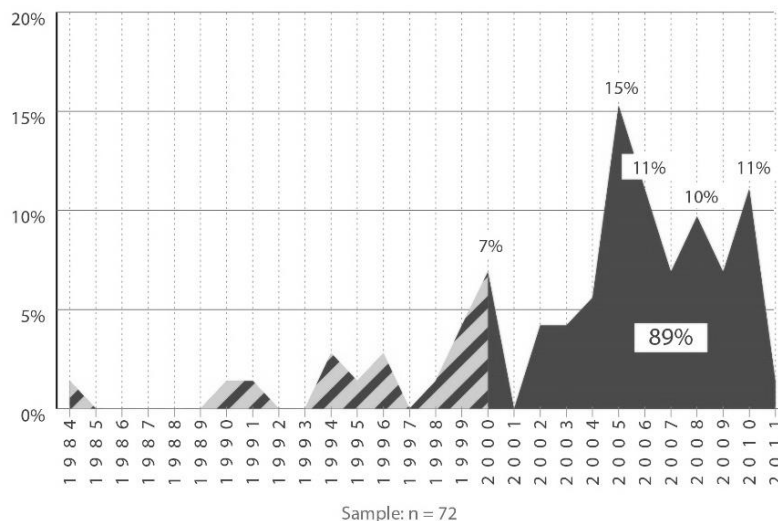

Figure 1 - Beginning of the projects

According to the activity of each respondent we defined two categories. The one related with creating and performing music, gathering musicians, bands or DJ's was represented by 63% of the respondents. The other category including people with an activity surrounding the music creation (producers, promoters, label owners or agents) represented 38% of the respondents.

To inquire the level of activity of each respondent, we asked how many events they had organized or have participated in the last 12 months. 79% promoted 1 or more events and 82% participated in at least 1 event organized by others.

From this sample those identified as being in the surroundings of music creation exhibited more activity on the promotion of events, organizing 6 to 10 a year (26% against 7%) and 11 or more events a year (44% against 24%).

They also have been more active in events organized by others, participating in 11 or more a year (56% against 31%).

Media used for disclosure

Advertising media

When asked about who developed the artwork for any graphic media related with the musical project, such as posters, disc covers, flyers and photography, the majority resorted Very Often or Always to active members of the project (83%) and/or friends (47%), as seen in Figure 2.
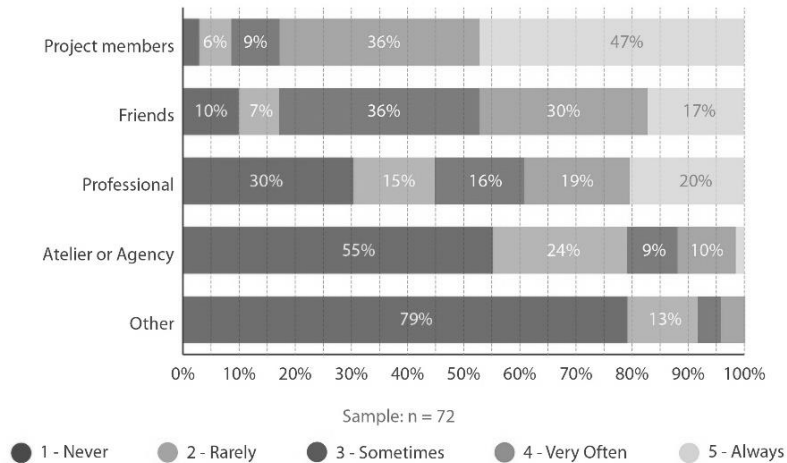

Figure 2 - Who developed artwork for graphic media

Another significant figure is that 30% never hired a professional to do this kind of work, and 55% never turned to an atelier or agency.

When asked about the media used to disclosure their project(s), almost every respondent elected the Internet (96%) as the preferable medium, followed by print media: flyers (75%) and posters (74%). 29% of the survey claimed to use "other print media than posters or flyers".

When asked about which other media they used besides Internet and print media they pointed radio and publications like newspapers or magazines, or even more personal channels such as mobile SMS and word of mouth.

When asked about which media they considered as Very Important for promotional purposes, 76% of the enquiries elected Social Media, 61% mentioned Radio and 54% declared newspapers/magazines (Figure 3).
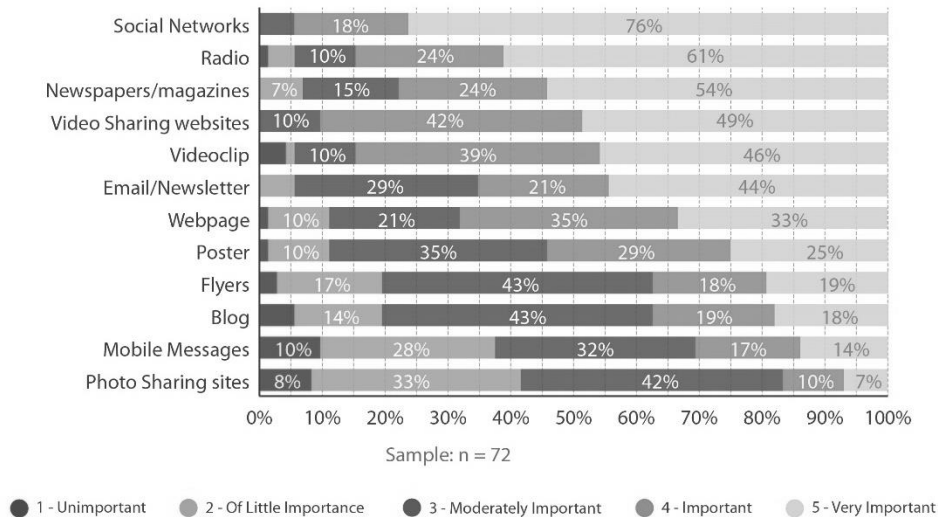

Figure 3 - Importance of media

Video was considered a relevant medium since sites like Vimeo.com or Youtube.com where referred as Very Important (49%) or Important (42%). Similarly, regarding content, the video clip was also considered Very Important (46%) or Important (39%). Email and newsletter were pointed as Very Important by 44% of the surveyed. In print media, posters and flyers where considered More or Less Important, respectively by 35% and 43% of the sample. Posters where considered Very Important by 25% and Important by 29%. Flyers where considered Very Important by 19% and Important by 18%. In a period of 12 months before the survey, 72% of the respondents used print media to disclosure at least once.

Print media

The print formats most common among the surveyed are the A4 and the A3. The majority never used larger formats like 50x70 cm and never printed more than 500 copies of posters. The most frequent number of copies was less than 100. For flyers the most used format is A5, and as for the posters, the majority (63%) never printed more than 500 flyers and the most common amount is less than 100 copies.

How they are using the Internet

We identified three main platform used by the surveyed. The majority of the respondents always use Social Networks (74%), Website (55%) and Email (52%) as seen in Figure 4. Video sharing sites, like Youtube or Vimeo, where used Always by 22% and Very Often by 22%. The majority Never used Blogs (51%) or photo sharing sites like Flickrs or Picassa (62%).
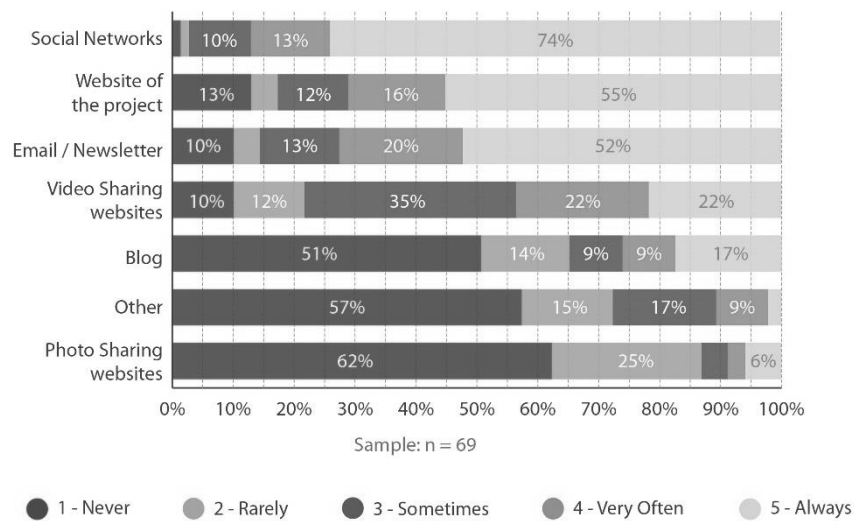
Figure 4 - Usage of each Internet channel

Publishing habits and channels

When enquired about the audio formats used for publishing, those who have published a record (87%) have elected the MP3 format (70%) - through net-labels or similar –, the Industrial CD (68%) and home recorded CD-R (48%) as the preferable formats. To distribute the copies, 89% have used the Internet and 85% made their own personal distribution without recurring to intermediaries.

Print Media *versus* Internet (Advantages and Disadvantages)

When asked about the advantages of the Internet 64% pointed the ability to reach a vast audience. Other advantages have been referred like being low cost (44%), fast (38%) and accessible (26%). The fact of being multimedia, combining different types of content like video, photography, sound was pointed as an advantage by 13%. The possibility of a direct contact with the audience was also referred as an advantage by 11% of the surveyed. The disadvantages of the Internet registered disperse answers, but there was a clear reference to the excess of information, pointed by 49% of the surveyed.

Some of the respondents mentioned that the Internet is not accessible to everyone (11%) and that it has low impact on communication (11%). For print media, distinction was the main advantage (33%). Being tangible was also referred as an advantage by a quarter of the respondents. The ability to disclosure to a wider audience was referred as an advantage by 19%. The graphic potentiality of the media as a support was also referred as an advantage (17%) and the ability to distribute in strategic spots closer to the target audience (17%). The main disadvantages for print media where it's cost (50%) and issues related with logistic and distribution (27%). Ecological concerns where also referred by only 11% of the surveyed.

Discussion and Conclusion

By crossing information we concluded that 46% of the surveyed used a combination of Internet, posters and flyers to disclosure their projects. Twenty five percent used Internet and

flyers and only 19% used the Internet as the only communication medium. None of the inquired used only print media without using Internet (Figure 5).
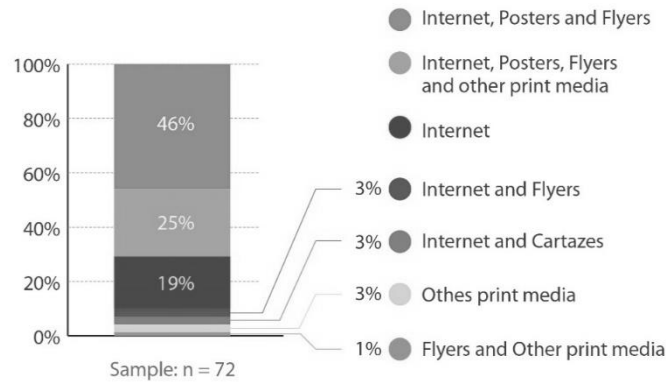

Figure 5 - Usage of mixed media

The majority of the responses where submitted from Lisbon region (53%), followed by Porto (13%). This ratio (4,1) does not match the population ratio between the two cities (2,3), which led us to conclude that the sample distribution was biased due to the fact that most of the contacts where addressed from Lisbon. Therefore, we cannot draw conclusions regarding the geographic distribution of independent music projects. The age group of the majority (72%) of the sample lies between 25 and 34 years old. This data may be a consequence of the distribution platform of the survey, as an online survey may be easier to respond to a younger audience. On the other hand, this age group is more propitious to the participation on independent music projects.

We registered an increment on the creation of new projects since 2001 with a particular grow in 2005. We need to considerate that 2005 was a year when the researcher collected a great number of contacts used on this survey[7]. This may have influenced the data collected, but we should consider that since the year 2000 there was an increasing demand for live shows in Portugal. And 2005 was a year with a singular increment. According to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry there was an increment in the demand for live shows since 2005 (IFPI, 2010). In Portugal we observed an increment since the year 2000 with a slight decrease from 2008 to 2009 (INE, 2001, 2002, 2009, 2010).

Regarding the promotion of events, the respondents in the category "editors, promoters or producers", despite representing a smaller percentage of the sample, promoted more events during the last year than the group of "Band, Musicians or DJ's". This result matched the expectations, since the first category usually represents several bands or musicians.

The Internet was the main media used by the respondents. It was also the most important media. Social networks where the main channel used by the respondents and were also considered the most important, more than some traditional great diffusion media like radio or press. The importance attributed to video sharing sites like youtube.com or vimeo.com and

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[7] Some of the contacts where made through themailing ered the most important, identify wich media the respondents had in mind.mportant to define a more specific period for t list of Cãoceito, a project co-founded by the investigator that was also founded in 2005.

the videoclip was revealing. We concluded that video communication was highly valued by the respondents.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that Social Media was considered the most important way for promotion, none of the other media was completely neglected. When comparing the average of the classification given to each media, we realize that the variation is small, 3,7 (in four) for Social media, against 1,7 (in four) for images sharing sites.

When asked about the advantages of the Internet, the respondents referred the wide-range, low-cost, fastness, being accessible and multimedia. Comparing these results with the importance attributed to each medium, we concluded that our sample values a multiplatform approach for disclosure, combining sound, image and video.

The main disadvantage pointed to the Internet was the excess of information circulating that interferes with the communication and makes difficult to stand out.

The Internet was the most valued media, but in print media posters registered some importance. They where considered "Very Important" or "Important" by 54% of the respondents, against 11% that considered the Importance of the poster "Small" or "None". The majority of the surveyed already used flyers (75%) or posters (74%) for disclosure and on the last 12 months 72% of the surveyed used print media to advertise at least one event.

The promotion of events was not always followed by a disclosure with print media. Especially when the respondents promoted more than 11 events a year. This means that the respondents that promote more events don't always do it through print media. They use it, but more occasionally using always other on-line media. When printing posters the respondents used mainly 100 series. Higher number of copies where used, but the higher they where the least frequent they where. The cost of print media was probably the main reason for that, but there can also be other reasons for these results like distribution issues.

The most frequent printing formats where the A4 and A3 most frequently printed in small series. Notice that these formats are easy to find in consumer print shops of home printers. Larger standard formats that require printing on other kinds of print shops are less frequent.

Comparing these results with the advantages and disadvantages, we conclude that the usage of small runs and smaller formats is related with the costs and the difficulties on the distribution in large quantities. We registered similar behavior to poster with flyers. Higher numbers of copies where less frequently used. For the printing sizes, we couldn't draw conclusion.

The main advantage pointed to print media was its distinction from other media, maybe because of the issues with the excess of information found on the Internet. The tangibility of printed objects and its potential as a media was also valued as qualities. An important advantage attributed to print media was the possibility to post in strategic spots, closer to the target audience. The main disadvantages pointed to print media where the cost, and issues related with logistics and distribution.

We believe that this data sheds some light over the new possibilities under the new wave of Makers and DIY scenes. After running this study, became obvious to us that print media is still an important complement to the digital promotion channels. However, the price and distribution issues refrain promoters and creators to use them in large scale. The challenge now is to find methods to produce interesting print materials, in a low-cost and sustainable way.

We find examples in the Portuguese and in the international landscape of traditional techniques like screenprint, printmaking, engraving, being used in small printshops or at home

(Figure 6 and Figure 7). They may have a word to say, since they can be produced without the use of expensive equipment or by recovering old equipments that aren't in use and find another purpose.

This study followed a convenience sample, so the range of the conclusions is limited.

We identified some aspects to improve in further studies.

We identified a high number of responses in "Other print media than poster or flyers" (29%). It would be important to identify witch media the respondents had in mind.

Figure 6 - DIY screen-print device at Paulo Arraiano Studio.

Figure 7 - Nick Sambrato - Printmaker

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