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Understanding Collector Preferences for Vintage Turntables Among Audio Enthusiasts in Malaysia

Memahami Keutamaan Pengumpul Piring Hitam Vintaj dalam Kalangan Peminat Audio di Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The global resurgence of vinyl records has catalyzed a significant secondary market for vintage playback hardware. However, empirical research on specific preferences about collectors, particularly within a Southeast Asian context, remains limited. This study investigates the factors influencing collectors' preferences for vintage turntables among audio enthusiasts in Malaysia. This study employed an exploratory mixed-methods design combining descriptive statistical analysis and thematic qualitative interpretation with 15 vintage audio collectors across various Malaysian states, including Selangor, Kuala Lumpur and Perak. Respondents were asked about their ownership habits and eight key preference attributes, namely Sound Quality, Build Quality, Aesthetic Design, Brand Reputation, Ease of Restoration, Rarity/Collectability, Nostalgic Value, and Price/Value. The findings reveal that the vintage audio community is predominantly male, with a notable concentration of younger collectors in the 20 to 39-year-old age group, suggesting that the hobby transcends generational boundaries. Descriptive statistical analysis shows that Sound Quality and Build Quality are the primary drivers of preference, ranking significantly higher than emotional or economic factors. Technics emerged as the most preferred brand, favored for its durability and spare parts availability, while Direct Drive was identified as the leading technical system. Qualitative feedback further reinforces that the pursuit of "analog warmth" and mechanical stability outweigh considerations of price or rarity. The study concludes that Malaysian enthusiasts are "performance-oriented" collectors who view vintage technology as a superior alternative to modern digital audio. These results provide valuable insights for the high-end audio market and the heritage restoration industry, highlighting a growing demand for high-performance analog hardware in a digital age.

Keywords: Vintage Turntables, Audio Enthusiasts, Collector Behavior, Analog Audio



1. Introduction

The global music industry has witnessed a remarkable cultural phenomenon over the last decade: the "Vinyl Revival." Despite the convenience and ubiquity of digital streaming services, physical media have reclaimed a significant portion of market share, triggering a parallel surge in the demand for vintage playback hardware (Beverland & Eckhardt, 2024). In the Malaysian context, this trend is particularly evident within a dedicated community of audio enthusiasts who eschew modern, mass-produced turntables in favor of vintage machines manufactured during the "Golden Age" of audio, spanning the 1960s to the 1980s.

The preference for vintage equipment over contemporary alternatives is often driven by a perceived superiority in craftsmanship and sonic character. According to Bartmanski and Woodward (2015), the vinyl experience is inherently "material," where the mechanical interaction with the turntable is as important as the music itself. For many collectors, vintage turntables represent the pinnacle of the analog engineering period, where brands like Technics, Thorens, and Garrard prioritized heavy-duty build quality and longevity (Magrini, 2020). Unlike modern entry-level players that often utilize plastic components, vintage units are frequently characterized by high-mass plinths, precision-engineered tonearms, and robust drive systems that many enthusiasts believe provide a more stable and "authentic" sound.

Beyond technical specifications, the motivation for collecting vintage turntables is deeply rooted in the concept of "Analog Warmth." This term describes a specific harmonic distortion and frequency response that listeners often describe as more "natural" or "musical" than digital audio (Davis, 2017). This pursuit of a specific sound profile is often coupled with nostalgic value. For older collectors, these machines are a tangible link to their youth; for younger "digital native" generations, the vintage turntable serves as a retro artifact that provides a tactile counterpoint to the intangible nature of digital files (Hayes, 2021).

In Malaysia, the vintage audio market has grown through online communities and independent record stores in urban hubs like Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh. However, while the sociological aspects of record collecting have been studied, there is a gap in empirical research focusing specifically on the hardware preferences of Malaysian collectors. Understanding the weight enthusiasts place on factors such as sound quality, brand reputation, and ease of restoration is crucial for documenting this subculture.

This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the primary drivers underlying the acquisition of vintage turntables. By analyzing the demographic profiles and preference factors of Malaysian enthusiasts, the research identifies which attributes—ranging from build quality to nostalgic sentiment—most significantly influence the decision-making process of the modern collector.

2. Research Problem

The contemporary music landscape is currently defined by a "digital-analog paradox." While digital streaming services provide unparalleled access to the global music catalog with high-fidelity precision, the industry has seen a massive resurgence in analog formats. This "Vinyl Revival" is not merely a trend in media format (records) but has sparked a significant secondary

market for vintage hardware. However, a critical research problem arises from the examination of why consumers deliberately choose technologically "obsolete" vintage turntables over modern, precision-engineered alternatives that are more readily available and often more affordable.

In the Malaysian context, the vintage audio community is expanding, yet there is a profound lack of empirical data regarding the motivations of these collectors. The primary issue is the tension between objective technical performance and subjective emotional value. Theoretically, digital audio provides a cleaner signal-to-noise ratio and higher dynamic range than analog playback (Rumsey, 2021). Despite this, enthusiasts often claim that vintage equipment offers a "superior" or more "musical" experience. Without empirical investigation, it remains unclear whether this preference is based on measurable technical attributes, such as build quality and sound characteristics, or if it is driven by what has been termed "the nostalgia of the object," where the physical history of the machine outweighs its performance (Guffey, 2014).

Furthermore, there is a significant "knowledge gap" regarding the specific attribute hierarchy of Malaysian collectors. While global Western-centric research often highlights the cultural importance of high-end European brands, the Malaysian market operates under unique socio-economic conditions, including varying levels of brand availability and local community influences. As noted by Bartmanski and Woodward (2015), the value of analog technology is often "situated" within specific local scenes. Without a systematic study of the Malaysian demographic, it remains challenging to determine if local preferences align with global trends or if they are shaped by distinct regional factors such as the "Ease of Restoration" and local brand reputation.

The sustainability of this hobby also presents a practical problem. Vintage turntables are mechanical devices that suffer from physical degradation over time (Kalchev, 2024). As the supply of functioning vintage units dwindles, the "maintenance gap" becomes a critical concern. If collectors prioritize "Aesthetic Design" or "Rarity" over "Ease of Restoration," the longevity of the Malaysian vintage audio scene may be at risk. Currently, no academic framework exists in the local context to evaluate how repairability influences the acquisition process (Magrini, 2020).

Consequently, this research addresses these multifaceted issues by investigating the primary factors influencing the preferences of vintage turntable collectors in Malaysia. By identifying the most valued attributes, ranging from sound quality to brand heritage, this study aims to bridge the gap between historical audio engineering and modern consumer behavior, providing a clearer understanding of why "obsolete" technology remains a dominant force in the modern Malaysian audio market.

3. Literature Review

The revival of analog audio technology in a predominantly digital age has been characterized by scholars as a "materialist turn" in consumer culture. While digital formats offer unparalleled convenience and precision, they lack the tactile and ritualistic elements inherent in analog playback. Bartmanski and Woodward (2015) argue that the vinyl record and the turntable are "affordance-rich" objects: they require physical interaction—cleaning the record, placing the needle, and flipping the disc—which creates a deeper psychological connection between the

listener and the music. This resurgence is not merely a nostalgic retreat but a reaction against the "incorporeality" of digital streaming (Magrini, 2020). In Malaysia, this global trend is mirrored in the growth of independent record stores and "listening bars," where the turntable is positioned as a centerpiece of intentional, slow-form consumption.

A primary driver for the preference for vintage turntables is the perceived superiority of "analog sound," often described by enthusiasts as "warm," "natural," or "musical." From a technical perspective, this is often attributed to the harmonic distortion profiles and the lack of quantization errors inherent in digital-to-analog conversion (Davis, 2017). According to Rumsey (2021), the preference for analog is frequently a preference for "euphonic distortion", a coloration of the sound that the human ear finds more pleasing than the clinical transparency of digital files. Vintage turntables, particularly those from the "Golden Era" (1970s–1980s), are often engineered with heavy-duty motors and high-mass platters designed to minimize "wow and flutter" (speed variations). Collectors often argue that the mechanical simplicity and over-engineered components of vintage units provide a more "organic" soundstage that modern, entry-level plastic turntables cannot replicate (Hayes, 2021).

The engineering philosophy of the mid-20th century differed significantly from the modern era of "planned obsolescence." During the 1970s, flagship turntables from brands like Technics, Thorens, and Garrard were built as lifetime investments. Guffey (2014) notes that the "build quality" of vintage objects acts as a proxy for authenticity and reliability. High-end vintage units often feature:

- **Direct Drive Systems:** Pioneered by Technics with the SL-1200, providing high torque and extreme durability (Magrini, 2020).
- **Belt Drive Systems:** Favored by audiophiles for isolating motor vibration from the platter, a hallmark of brands like Thorens.
- **Materiality:** The use of real wood, heavy alloys, and precision-machined bearings, which contrast sharply with the lightweight polymers used in modern consumer electronics (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015).

In the Malaysian market, where humidity and temperature can affect electronics, the "tank-like" construction of vintage Japanese and European gear is highly valued for its resilience.

The act of collecting vintage audio is also a pursuit of "social capital". Owning a specific model, such as a Technics SL-1200 or a Thorens TD-124, signals a level of connoisseurship within the audio community. Brand reputation is not just about performance; it is about the "narrative" of the brand. Technics, for instance, carries a legacy tied to both high-fidelity listening and the birth of DJ culture, giving it a dual appeal of professional-grade reliability and cultural coolness (Hayes, 2021).

Furthermore, the "rarity" and "collectability" of certain units create a sense of exclusivity. As noted by Guffey (2014), the vintage object allows the owner to participate in a "curated past," where the choice of brand reflects the collector's identity and their knowledge of audio history.

In addition, nostalgia plays a dual role in the vintage turntable market. For the "older generation" (those 50 and above), these machines represent a return to their formative years, a

concept known as "personal nostalgia" (Davis, 2017). However, a significant portion of the market is comprised of "digital natives" (Ages 20–39). For this group, the attraction is "vicarious nostalgia", a longing for an era they never personally experienced but perceive as more "authentic" or "aesthetic" (Guffey, 2014). This aesthetic appeal is crucial; the visual design of a vintage turntable, with its brushed aluminum and tactile switches, serves as a statement piece in modern interior design, bridging the gap between functional audio gear and art (Abdul Malik Ahmad et al., 2023; Mariusz, 2023).

Finally, the "Ease of Restoration" has emerged as a significant factor in the literature regarding vintage electronics. The "Right to Repair" movement has found a home in the vintage audio community. Unlike modern integrated circuits that are nearly impossible for a hobbyist to fix, vintage turntables are mechanical and discrete, allowing for maintenance and "upgrading" (Magrini, 2020). This "maker" aspect of the hobby—where the collector is also the technician—adds a layer of "functional intimacy" with the device. In Malaysia, the availability of specialized technicians and the ease of sourcing spare parts for popular brands like Technics further drive the preference for specific vintage models over obscure ones.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to gain in-depth insights into the preferences of vintage turntable collectors in Malaysia. The methodology was structured to provide a systematic analysis of both demographic trends and specific hardware attributes valued by the local audio community.

A self-administered questionnaire was employed, as it is appropriate for identifying patterns, trends, and opinions within a specific population at a single point in time. This approach allowed for the collection of standardized data that could be statistically analyzed to rank the importance of various turntable attributes, such as sound quality, build quality, and brand reputation.

The target population for this study consists of audio enthusiasts and vintage turntable collectors residing in Malaysia. Given the niche nature of the hobby, a purposive sampling technique was utilized to ensure respondents possessed the necessary expertise and experience with vintage audio equipment. Data were collected from 15 active members of the Malaysian audio community, representing various states, including Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Johor, Penang, and Perak. This diversity ensured a broad geographical representation of the Malaysian vintage audio scene. Due to the niche and specialized nature of the Malaysian vintage audio community, a smaller purposive sample was deemed appropriate for exploratory thematic inquiry.

The primary instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire divided into three main sections:

1. **Demographics and Ownership:** Collected data on age, gender, years of collecting, and current hardware ownership (number of turntables, preferred brands, and drive systems).
2. **Attribute Rating:** Respondents rated eight key factors influencing their preference, namely Sound Quality, Build Quality, Aesthetic Design, Brand Reputation, Ease of Restoration, Rarity/Collectability, Nostalgic Value, and Price/Value - using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Lowest, 5 = Highest).

3. **Open-Ended Feedback:** A qualitative section allowed respondents to provide specific comments regarding their preference for analog over digital audio.

The survey was conducted electronically to ensure ease of access for participants across different states. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, adhering to established ethical research standards. Respondents were identified through local audiophile forums and social media groups dedicated to vintage Hi-Fi in Malaysia.

The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify common themes and patterns related to the ownership habits and preference factors of vintage audio components. This approach allowed for the extraction of recurring ideas and insights from the qualitative responses. The findings from the thematic analysis provided a clear understanding of what Malaysian collectors value most in vintage audio preferences and motivations. In addition, the ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and provided their consent before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and data were stored securely to protect participants' privacy.

5. Findings and Analysis

This section presents the results of the data analysis on fifteen vintage turntable collectors in Malaysia. The analysis is categorized into demographic profiling, ownership patterns, and a detailed examination of the factors influencing collector preferences.

The data indicate that the vintage turntable hobby in Malaysia is primarily a male-driven interest, with most respondents identifying as male (80%). Interestingly, the age distribution reveals that the hobby is not restricted to the older generation. The largest respondent group falls within the 30–39 age group (33.3%), followed by the 20–29 and 40–49 groups (26.7% each). This supports the "vicarious nostalgia" theory proposed by Guffey (2014), wherein younger generations seek out analog technology as a counter-culture movement against digital ubiquity.

In terms of experience, 33.3% of collectors have been involved in the hobby for one to three years, while 26.7% have four to six years of experience. This suggests a recent growth in the Malaysian scene. Furthermore, the commitment to the hobby is evident in ownership metrics: while 33.3% own a single unit, 20% of respondents own four or more turntables, indicating a high level of "collector-investor" behavior.

The analysis of brand preference identified Technics as the most prevalent brand (20%), followed by Thorens and Pioneer (13.3% each). The dominance of Technics is consistent with its historical reputation for durability and the availability of spare parts. As noted in the qualitative feedback, one respondent stated, "Spare parts are easier to find," highlighting that brand preference is often tethered to the practicalities of maintenance (Magrini, 2020).

Regarding driving systems, Direct Drive was the preferred (46.7%), followed by Belt Drive (40.0%). This marginal difference reflects the classic audiophile debate. Direct drive is favored for its torque and speed accuracy, while belt drive is often preferred for its perceived ability to isolate motor noise, a factor critical to "Sound Quality," the highest-rated preference factor in this study. The results are summarized and interpreted as follows:

Table 1: Factors Influencing Collector Preferences

Factor	Mean Score	Interpretation	Rank
Sound Quality	4.60	Very High	5
Build Quality	4.53	Very High	5
Aesthetic Design	4.40	High	4
Brand Reputation	4.40	High	4
Nostalgic Value	4.07	High	4
Rarity / Collectability	4.00	High	4
Ease of Restoration	3.73	High	4
Price / Value	3.47	Moderate-High	3

Sound Quality emerged as the most critical factor (4.60). Qualitative responses from the participants strongly reinforce this, with comments such as *"The sound of vinyl is too different... digital is warm"* and *"Analogue sounds better than digital."* This aligns with Rumsey's (2021) observation that enthusiasts prioritize the "musicality" and "harmonic warmth" of analog over digital precision.

Build Quality followed closely as the second most important attribute (4.53). Collectors in Malaysia appear to value the mechanical integrity of vintage machines. One respondent noted that their turntable was *"Well built and stable,"* suggesting that the physical weight and engineering of "Golden Era" equipment provide a sense of reliability that modern alternatives lack (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015).

Aesthetic Design and Brand Reputation shared the same rank (4.40). This indicates that for Malaysian collectors, the turntable is both a high-performance audio tool and a visual centerpiece. A respondent specifically noted, *"Looks beautiful in my room,"* confirming that the mid-century modern aesthetic of vintage gear is a significant draw. Brand reputation serves as a shortcut for quality; collectors trust heritage brands like Pioneer and Thorens to deliver a specific standard of performance (Hayes, 2021).

While Nostalgic Value (4.07) and Rarity (4.00) scored high, they were ranked lower than technical and aesthetic factors. This suggests that while the "emotional" link to the past is present, it is not the primary driver for Malaysian collectors. They are "performance-oriented" collectors rather than "sentiment-oriented" ones. They seek a vintage turntable primarily because it performs better or looks better, rather than simply because it is old.

Interestingly, Ease of Restoration (3.73) and Price/Value (3.47) were the lowest-ranked factors. The lower ranking for Price/Value suggests that the Malaysian vintage audio community is a "premium" niche where enthusiasts are willing to pay more for quality. The moderate score for Ease of Restoration indicates a potential challenge for the future of the hobby; while collectors value the gear, they may be underestimating the difficulty of maintaining these aging mechanical devices over the long term (Magrini, 2020).

The data reveals a clear hierarchy of preferences: technical performance (Sound) and physical construction (Build) are the foundational requirements, while aesthetics and brand prestige provide the secondary motivation. This contradicts the common misconception that vintage collecting is purely a nostalgic or "hipster" trend. Instead, it is a calculated choice by

Malaysian enthusiasts who view vintage turntables as superior engineering achievements compared to modern, cost-optimized digital audio products.

6. Conclusion

The resurgence of vintage turntables in Malaysia represents a sophisticated intersection of mechanical appreciation, auditory preference, and cultural identity. This study sets out to identify the primary factors influencing collectors' preferences and to examine the attributes most valued by audio enthusiasts in the local context. Through a qualitative analysis of collector data, several key conclusions can be drawn regarding the state of the analog hobby in Malaysia.

Firstly, the research concludes that the inclination toward vintage hardware is primarily performance-driven rather than purely sentimental. While the "Vinyl Revival" is often dismissed by critics as a trend rooted in hipster aesthetics or simple nostalgia, the data from Malaysian collectors suggest a different narrative. Sound Quality and Build Quality emerged as the predominant factors, each maintaining a "Very High" interpretation score. This indicates that enthusiasts are seeking specific high-fidelity experience and a level of mechanical durability that they perceive modern, mass-produced alternatives to be lacking. The preference for "analog warmth" is a tangible technical requirement for this community, reinforcing the idea that vintage turntables are viewed as superior engineering achievements.

Secondly, the demographic shift in the hobby is significant. The findings show that a substantial portion of the collector base consists of individuals under the age of 40. This suggests that the market for vintage audio is sustainable and growing among "digital natives" who value the tactile and intentional nature of analog playback. The dominance of brands like Technics, Thorens, and Pioneer in the Malaysian market further highlights a preference for heritage and reliability. These brands have successfully transitioned from being tools of the past to becoming symbols of social capital and connoisseurship in the present.

However, the study also identifies a potential vulnerability in the hobby: the lower ranking of "Ease of Restoration." As these mechanical devices continue to age, the availability of technical expertise and spare parts will become the defining factor for the hobby's longevity. While collectors currently prioritize sound and aesthetics, the long-term sustainability of their collections will eventually depend on the repairability of the units they choose.

In summary, vintage turntable collecting in Malaysia is a thriving subculture defined by a pursuit of quality over convenience. The Malaysian enthusiast is a discerning consumer who values the over-engineered stability and harmonic character of 20th-century audio technology. To build upon these findings, future research should consider a larger sample size to facilitate a comparative analysis between different Malaysian states. Additionally, a longitudinal study could track how the "Ease of Restoration" impacts brand loyalty over a decade, as components for certain vintage models become increasingly scarce. Finally, exploring the economic impact of the secondary vintage market in Malaysia could provide valuable insights into the broader circular economy of vintage electronics.

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