

# Against Ephemerality: Understanding Physical Media Audiences in the Age of Streaming

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ALEXA CLYMER presents

## THE CASE OF ORBIT DVD



### Background

Orbit DVD Video Store in Asheville, North Carolina, is an independent physical media retailer known for its curated selection of boutique DVDs, Blu-rays, rare content, and cult cinema. The store serves as both a commercial space and a community hub for collectors and amateurs seeking alternatives to algorithmically curated streaming platforms.

### Objective

This research examines how contemporary audience-consumers engage with retail physical media (VHS, DVD, and Blu-ray) in a media landscape increasingly dominated and defined by digital streaming of media content.

### RQs

(1) How do media audiences understand their consumption practices around physical media products, given the dominance of streaming video for audience-consumer distribution?

(2) How do retail video stores cultivate nostalgic experiences and/or affects for potential and returning customers?

### Methodology

Qualitative Ethnography (observation and semi-structured interviews)  
 Constructivist Grounded Theory

## FINDINGS: Anti-Ephemeral Media Practices

### (1) Preserving Physical Formats

Participants repeatedly emphasized that physical formats offered a sense of stability that streaming platforms lacked. The value of the physical was not only that they functioned as objects, but that they represented forever access that could be owned, returned to, and relied upon.

*"More of a believer in physical media now more than ever, with Netflix being a kind of illusion of choice."*

### (2) Collecting as Resistance

Ownership becomes a strategy for reclaiming control over viewing practices, ensuring permanence, autonomy, and freedom from platform control. Buying physical copies allows participants to step outside of the streaming service realm and reassert agency over what, when, and how they consume.

*"We are trying to get off of subscriptions and get kind of more back to, you know, not being controlled by fucking everything?"*

### (3) Connecting to the Past

Nostalgia and memory emerged as central forces shaping participants' engagement with physical media, structuring which titles were purchased or valued and how this format was understood as a meaningful object in everyday life.

*"A lot of the best-selling stuff is movies that were on TV when you were kids"*

### Implications

Preservation is enacted every day by individuals who care about which media survive, how it is accessed, and who controls it. Physical media consumers are reframed as active participants who are imperative in shaping today's media culture, both present and future. Treats the video store as a productive site of contemporary media culture, revealing tensions and values otherwise obscured when scholarship focuses on platforms and algorithms.

ORBIT DVD

