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Exploring the Impact of Social Media on the Music Industry—From Music Consumption and Discovery to Health and Wellness—And Developing a More Sustainable Future

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Abstract

Social media has ushered in transformative shifts in the music industry, reshaping artist-fan dynamics, music discovery, promotion, and the very role of artists and their teams as content creators. While platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube provide artists with unparalleled opportunities for reach and branding, they simultaneously impose pressures for continuous content generation and engagement. These digital demands, juxtaposed against the backdrop of traditional industry challenges, have heightened concerns around artists' mental health, inducing stress, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy. As the intertwining of a successful music career and active social media presence deepens, there's an imperative to cultivate more sustainable practices. This article delves into the multifaceted impacts of social media on the music world, emphasizing its potential toll on artist well-being. Proposing both industry-wide and artist-focused solutions, this research advocates for a balanced approach that prioritizes artists' mental health as the digital era advances.

Keywords: social media, music industry, music business, TikTok, Instagram, Reels, mental health, wellness, well-being, online presence, engagement, content creation, music discovery, music promotion, A&R, record labels, recording contracts, artist branding

Introduction

In an era of rapid digitalization and interconnectedness, the profound impact of social media on the music industry is increasingly apparent. As platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and others have reshaped the way artists create, share, and promote their work, the ever-present demand for online engagement can have significant implications on mental health and well-being. This article seeks to analyze these implications, shedding light on a subject that merits both academic scrutiny and practical attention.

Research on the convergence of social media and the music industry has been extensively conducted, illustrating the transformative role these platforms play in artists' careers. Numerous facets of this impact are examined, including how music is consumed and discovered, the paradigm shift in artist-fan interaction, and the advent of new promotional strategies, among others. However, the flip side of this digital revolution—its potential toll on musicians' mental health and wellness—is an area that warrants particular emphasis.

The omnipresence of social media in musicians' lives presents a dual-edged sword. On one side, it affords unprecedented reach and direct communication with fans. On the other, it ushers in an era of relentless self-promotion, constant content creation, and high susceptibility to public scrutiny, which can precipitate stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges.

This article is divided into nine sections, each serving a distinct purpose within the overarching narrative. Section I establishes the theoretical groundwork, delving into the rise of social media and its impact on digital media consumption. Section II explores the transformation of the artist-fan relationship, including how fans discover new music. Sections III through V build on this by exploring the resulting impacts on the relationship between artists and record labels, including how artists are discovered and signed, the new deal structures, as well as the pressure put on artists to stay active on social media and constantly create new content. Next, Section VI discusses the resulting changes in the role of musicians and their managers as content creators. Section VII then examines some of the potential impacts of social media on musicians' health and wellness, both as content creators and users.

The final two sections provide recommendations for a more sustainable way forward. Section VIII proposes innovative business practices

that can be implemented by music industry organizations (e.g., record labels and music publishers). Section IX offers strategies that artists and their teams can implement to ensure safe and healthy social media usage.

By unearthing the hidden costs of the digital revolution in music, this work aims to foster a critical dialogue around the intersection of social media, music, and mental health. The primary objective is that this research will contribute to healthier practices within the industry, empowering artists to leverage the potential of social media while safeguarding their well-being.

I. Social Media and Digital Media Consumption

The music industry has always been characterized by its dynamic nature, continuously evolving and adapting to new technologies. Going all the way back to the early days of radio and the advent of the phonograph, to the current streaming ecosystem, there has been constant flux in how music is created, consumed, and distributed.

However, a few key disruptive technologies that emerged at the turn of the millennium brought about a significant increase in the rate of change, leading to some major inflection points in the music industry. For example, the proliferation of the internet, combined with the ability for people to store digital audio files (e.g., MP3, WAV, or AIFF) on personal computers, led to the development of online file-sharing technologies, and ultimately widespread music piracy. The effects of this disruption were dramatic. According to the RIAA (2011), in the decade after file-sharing and Napster emerged, music sales in the United States dropped by 47 percent. In the years following, the traditional systems of brick-and-mortar retailers and physical music formats (e.g., vinyl, cassette tapes, and CDs), were nearly completely supplanted by digital alternatives (Tronvoll 2019, 7).

The early 2000s marked another significant inflection point that would radically transform the music industry—the advent of large-scale social media platforms. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines social media as “forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos).” Taken one step further, it has also been defined as “a honeycomb of seven functional building blocks: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups” (Aichner et al. 2021).

As of early 2023, over 4.8 billion individuals, or approximately 60 percent of the world's population, have some form of social media account (Petrosyan 2023), using applications such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, WeChat, and TikTok (Dixon 2023a). Globally, the overall daily average time users spend on social media is 2 hours and 27 minutes, skewing higher with Gen Z users. This is not to be confused with the global daily average of time spent online (e.g., social media, internet browsing, online shopping, or streaming), which is 6 hours and 58 minutes (Kemp 2022).

The statistics for the individual platforms are equally staggering. TikTok, the video-sharing social media app owned by Beijing-based tech company ByteDance, reached an audience of over 113.2 million users in 2023 in the United States alone. All that after launching in only 2017—as the international version of the popular Chinese platform Douyin—and then quickly rising to global popularity after the acquisition and rebranding of the Musical.ly app in 2018 (Ceci, n.d.).

TikTok allows users to create, edit, and share short-form video clips that are often accompanied by the latest music trends (Ceci, n.d.). Its immense popularity reflects recent changes in internet user behavior, such as shorter attention spans resulting in short-form video content becoming the dominant format. The platform has changed the way consumers are entertained, and its prevalence represents a “shift in the way consumers interact and absorb media content” (Broadhurst 2022, 8).

Facebook, founded in 2004 and owned by Meta Platforms, had almost three billion monthly active users worldwide as of early 2023 (Dixon 2023b). Instagram, launched in 2010 and also owned by Meta Platforms—which focuses on photo and video sharing (Meta, n.d.-a)—had a reported 143 million users in 2023 in the United States alone (Dixon 2023b). The platform's Reels feature is a direct competitor to the short-form video content on TikTok.

YouTube (n.d.), the popular video hosting platform owned by Google, boasted more than 2.6 billion active users at the beginning of 2023. One of its more recent features, YouTube Shorts—which enables users to create short-form video content (and thus compete in the same space as TikTok and Instagram Reels)—surpassed 50 billion daily views in early 2023 (Broadhurst 2022, 4).

Bearing all of these usage statistics in mind, it is easy to start seeing all of the potential ways that social media has radically impacted how peo-

ple consume digital media. Moreover, studies show that there is a strong connection between social media and music consumption—the most passionate music fans (i.e., those who stream music the most and spend the most money on it) are among the most active users of social media platforms (Cirisano 2023b).

Finally, the impact of social media on music consumption is further accentuated when analyzing the related revenues. Music streaming royalties from social media platforms such as TikTok and Meta/Instagram—separate from revenues generated by digital service providers (DSPs) such as Spotify and Apple Music—were estimated between \$0.8 and \$1.2 billion in 2021, a number that is only growing as the user base grows (Wasserman 2022). In the twelve months from July 2021 to July 2022, YouTube reported having paid over \$6 billion to music rights holders (Cohen 2022).

II. Social Media's Impact on Fan Engagement and Music Discovery

Social media has not only transformed how artists and their fans engage with each other, but also the manner in which people discover new music. The advent of platforms such as TikTok and Instagram has reshaped the music listening and content consumption experience, altering consumer behaviors and expectations in the process (Tronvoll 2019, 7).

Given the immense user numbers and expansive content-sharing capabilities, social media has become an absolutely essential tool for artists to promote music, as well as build and engage a fanbase. It provides opportunities for artists at every level, from emerging artists releasing their first songs and building an online community, to legacy artists reviving their catalogs (and sometimes careers) when an old release goes viral.

Michael Nash, EVP and Chief Digital Officer at Universal Music Group, stated that social media continues to present a golden opportunity for creative growth (IFPI 2023, 20). With 47 percent of listeners following artists they admire on social media, these platforms provide artists with opportunities to reach new audiences and explore uncharted territories in their careers (Wasserman Music 2022, 5).

Although traditional mediums such as radio, word-of-mouth recommendations, and film soundtracks maintain their relevance in new music discovery, digital avenues, including video games, commercials, and most notably, social media, play increasingly crucial roles in attracting new listeners. According to YouGov's research in seventeen global markets, mu-

sic streaming apps such as Spotify lead in new music discovery, boasting a 36% popularity rate. Radio is still a viable source for a third of global consumers, although primarily those over 35 years old. Social media platforms, with a global utilization rate of 32%, are particularly influential among the 18-34 age bracket, with TikTok and Instagram being the key players (Bruce 2022).

Key differences between Millennials and Gen Z are underscored by the diminishing influence of DSPs (e.g., Spotify and Apple Music) and radio on music discovery in younger generations, with platforms like TikTok becoming increasingly popular, as evidenced by the fact that 38% of Gen Z users discover music on TikTok (Cirisano 2023a).

This trend of social media redefining music discovery is not showing any signs of slowing down. TikTok, for example, served as the primary launchpad for contemporary superstar artists such as Lil Nas X and Doja Cat, as well as a hub for viral memes. The platform's significant role in introducing youthful audiences to fresh talent and diverse musical styles is indisputable, making it the foremost social media tool for music exploration. In fact, 45% of individuals aged from 18 to 24 discover new music via TikTok. Meanwhile, the 25 to 34 age demographic gravitates toward Instagram for their musical discoveries. Older enthusiasts aged 35 and above, however, prefer Facebook. These preferences not only reveal the demographics of each social network's user base, but also demonstrate that people are turning to the platforms with which they frequently engage to find new artists and tracks (Wasserman Music 2022).

Many of the social media platforms are also getting actively involved in breaking new singles and artists using discovery tools. For example, TikTok released its #NewMusic hashtag feature, which has garnered an astounding 18 billion views on the platform, demonstrating its influence in recent years. The hashtag serves as a springboard for emerging releases and "studio fresh" sneak peeks from global artists who elect to debut their latest singles primarily on TikTok. Notable songs such as Sam Smith's & Kim Petras' *Billboard* number-one hit "Unholy," Charlie Puth's impromptu "Light Switch," and Ed Sheeran's "Eyes Closed"—which inspired over a million video creations even before its official release—were first introduced to audiences through the #NewMusic hashtag (TikTok 2023).

In addition to people discovering new music via social media, it is also a place where catalog songs can go viral (the general industry consensus is that a "catalog" title is a release more than eighteen months old,

but is most often associated with legacy recordings). Perhaps the most famous example of this happened on September 25, 2020, when TikTok creator Doggface (real name Nathan Apodaca) posted a video of himself cruising down the road on a skateboard, sipping Ocean Spray cranberry juice, and singing along to Fleetwood Mac's 1977 hit "Dreams." Within one month, the video had amassed 51 million views on the platform, as well as receiving a shout-out from Mick Fleetwood and Stevie Nicks. In the three-day period following the post, "Dreams" racked up 2.9 million on-demand U.S. streams and three thousand digital download sales, up 88.7% and 374%, respectively, from their totals in the prior three-day periods, according to Nielsen Music/MRC Data (Aniftos 2020). Catalog does not have to be over thirty years old. A study conducted by *Billboard* of the leading ten thousand on-demand audio streaming tracks during the initial six weeks of 2022 revealed that TikTok propelled numerous songs from relative obscurity into the top 100. Notably, this included The Neighbourhood's "Sweater Weather" from 2012, The Walters' "I Love You So" from 2014, and Steve Lacy's "Dark Red" from 2017. While these songs were not new releases, they may have been perceived as such by listeners who had not encountered them before, especially when they were placed alongside newly-released music in DSP playlists after trending on social media. Speaking on this trend, Mike Tierney, Amazon Music's global head of music programming, stated, "We're seeing music that's chronologically older than 18 months that's trending as current music in a major way" (Knopper and Peoples 2022).

The new reality of fans using social media as the primary means of engaging with music and artists, is that the artists must be active on the platforms to facilitate that engagement. More and more evidence suggests that it is essential for artists to maintain a presence on social media in order to promote their brand and create a cohesive fan base in today's environment (Fryberger, Besada, and Kanga 2022). Being active on social media enables artists to connect directly with fans, promote their music, build anticipation, showcase their brand identity, and facilitate collaborations.

Platforms such as TikTok are now broadly recognized as the most powerful catalysts for streaming activity and fanbase development, leading many marketing strategies to focus on leveraging its user base to trigger the success of a release (Leight 2022). Staying active on the platforms and consistently engaging with fans is now "part of the work of being a creative individual" (Fryberger, Besada, and Kanga 2022).

III. Social Media and Artists & Repertoire (A&R)

Labels have been finding new artists online for years. Some of the biggest names in music launched their careers after being found on the internet. Justin Bieber was discovered by Usher and Scooter Braun after posting videos on YouTube in 2007. Shawn Mendes was discovered by the A&R team at Island Records after posting cover songs on Vine. Other examples include Calvin Harris—one of the highest paid DJs in the world—who was discovered after posting his solo recordings on Myspace. Charlie Puth, 5 Seconds of Summer, and Troye Sivan started as YouTube creators, and the list goes on (Magliola 2022).

With that being said, the number of artists getting signed to labels based on viral moments or large followings on social media in recent years has exploded. In 2020 alone, TikTok (2020) reported that over seventy artists who have broken on the platform have received recording contracts from major labels, and those numbers are only growing.

Some examples of artists who blew up after going viral on TikTok include Olivia Rodrigo, the little-known Disney actor who began a breakout career by creating on the platform. Within a period of less than three years, Rodrigo amassed over a billion streams of her music, received seven Grammy nominations, and was named Time’s 2021 Entertainer of the Year (Chow 2021). In 2022, she had the eighth hottest album, *Sour*, which saw a 1.438 million total album-equivalent consumption (Luminate 2023). Katie Gregson-MacLeod, whose song “Complex” went viral practically overnight on TikTok with a 45-second clip, was offered deals by three record labels (Campbell 2022). In 2019, Rhode Island artist Arizona Zervas was an independent artist who posted a short black-and-white clip of him dancing to his new song “Roxanne” on TikTok. The audio of the post went viral—getting featured in over 320,000 TikTok videos within months of getting posted—eventually leading to the song amassing over 50 million streams on Spotify, appearing in the top 40 of Billboard’s Hot 100 chart, and landing Zervas a record deal with Columbia (Harris 2019).

One of the common themes in label signings based on social media success has been that the decisions were primarily data-driven, and not necessarily based on the merits of the music or the preparedness of the artist to launch a sustainable career. Specifically, many of the deals have been offered based on a song going viral or an artist building a substantial following on one of the platforms. There have been several consequences to this—namely, an increase in both “one-hit wonders” and turnover of

signed artists (Leight 2023)—which will be explored further in the following section.

IV. Social Media, Labels, and Recording Contracts

With social media playing such a significant role in how music is consumed and discovered, as well as how artists engage with fans, there have consequently been some major shifts in how the record labels conduct business. More specifically, social media has changed how music is released and promoted (both new and catalog titles), the record labels' expectations for artists to create content, the types of recording agreements offered to artists, as well as an expansion of the record labels' rights to control an artist's online presence.

With the advent of digital music in the 2000s, which meant that consumers no longer had to purchase entire albums for one or two songs, combined with the more recent phenomenon of the “viral hit,” the music industry has become more singles-based than ever before. As a result, the trend has been for many of the major record labels to sign a string of short-term deals, based on songs that have already proven to have market potential. One of the consequences of this is that the music industry is witnessing a trend where platforms like TikTok are leading to an increased number of “one-hit wonders,” raising concerns about artist development and sustainability. A *Billboard* analysis of top charting songs from 2002 to 2019 showed that the annual percentage of artists classified as one-hit wonders (i.e., an artist who breaks into the top 40 but never returns) remained relatively constant, averaging 54%; although in 2020, this number rose to 70% (Leight 2023).

Several emerging artists have publicly shared how the industry's relationship with platforms such as TikTok has negatively impacted their ability to have a sustainable career that is aligned with their artistic integrity. For example, Sizzy Rocket, an up-and-coming singer-songwriter, tweeted that labels want her to write for their “viral artists” but do not support her solo project because her “numbers aren't high enough” (Rindner 2022). Singer-songwriter Vérité, who has chosen to maintain autonomy and release music independently for almost a decade, stated that it is “really disheartening when technology and culture shift in a way that ... is so blatantly focused on pure consumerism” (Rao 2022).

Diving deeper into the specifics of how recording contracts are changing—and considering the necessity for most artists to be present on

social media to build a fanbase and promote music—labels are now seeking assurances that their artists are active on the platforms. To receive such assurance, labels contractually provide protection for themselves in record deals by requesting some level of control over the artist’s online presence.

For example, the following sample language from a recording agreement contains longstanding language regarding the label’s ability to control an artist’s website:

Without limiting the generality of the foregoing, we and our Licensees will have the exclusive right during the Term throughout the Territory to, and to authorize other Persons to, create, maintain, administer, and host one (1) website relating to Artist or Artist Recordings, which shall be designated the so-called “official website,” and to register and use the name “[ARTISTNAME].com” (the “Official Site URL”) and any variations thereof as Uniform Resource Locators (or “URLs”), addresses, domain names or any other site identifier (whether now or hereafter known) for each website created by or for us or our Licensees with respect to Artist (each, a “Company Artist Site”). The Company Artist Site and all rights to or derived from the Company Artist Site will be our exclusive property in perpetuity throughout the Territory. During the Term, Label will obtain your reasonable approval regarding the “look and feel” and content of any Company Artist Site, and you will cooperate in any applicable assignments or transfers of Company Artist Sites. *Artist shall retain full control of Artist’s social media sites; provided, that during the Term, Artist shall grant Label mutual access to such accounts during the Term in connection with any exploitation of the Recordings, Audiovisual Recordings, Merchandise and/or Merchandise Rights hereunder.* For the avoidance of doubt, Label shall not have any rights to post to Artist’s social media accounts without Artist’s prior written approval. (emphasis added by authors)

Despite the quoted language above regarding social media posts, most labels take the position that they should in fact have the ability to

control an artist's social media, as evidenced by this sample contractual language:

In the event Label or its licensees reasonably requests that Artist post content (including, without limitation, textual, graphic, trademark, video, audio-visual and/or audio content) in connection with this Agreement or Artist's services as a recording artist (including, without limitation, in connection with Records hereunder), Artist will consider in good faith posting such content on each and every website under Artist's control (including, without limitation, so-called "social media" sites and Artist dedicated pages and accounts on any website) throughout the Territory relating to the Artist (each, an "Artist Controlled Site"). Notwithstanding anything to the contrary contained herein, during the Term, upon mutual agreement by both Label and Artist, Label will have the right, throughout the Territory, to authorize other Persons, to create, post content on (including, without limitation, textual, graphic, video, trademark, audio-visual and audio content), and maintain all video webpages related to Artist, including, without limitation, YouTube, VEVO and Vimeo, and to use Artist's name and any professional name of Artist heretofore or hereafter adopted, and any variations thereof in connection with and on such video webpages. Promptly upon Label's reasonable request during the Term, Artist will create links on all Artist Controlled Sites to Label's website and/or websites owned or controlled by third parties that sell, license or otherwise exploit Records hereunder. Label may use in perpetuity the name of Artist set forth on page 1 above, any professional name of Artist heretofore or hereafter adopted, and any variation thereof solely in connection with or as part of any address or domain name owned or operated by Label. (emphasis added by authors)

In addition, record labels have demonstrated a willingness in recent years to fund the creation of social media content:

During the First Contract Period, Label will establish a development fund for costs related to development and marketing of Artist and Artist's Recordings in an amount not to exceed XXXXXX Dollars (\$XXX,XXX) ("Development Fund"). *The Development Fund may be used, by way of example, for developing Artist's social media following, Artist's imaging, rehearsals, and content creation.* Such Development Fund will be administered by Label subject to good faith and on-going consultation with Artist. If used, the Development Fund will be deemed an Artist Advance hereunder. (emphasis added by authors)

As evidenced above, record labels place a high importance on social media and require contractual protection in the digital world in which they operate, where artists are beholden to algorithms, follower counts, video views, and streaming trends. Even if the label signs a highly sought-after, viral artist and pays such artist a considerable advance, the label is accepting the risk that the artist's following will fail to translate into continued streams, ticket sales, and sponsorships. Labels have acknowledged that virality has led to short-term thinking, where labels find themselves in a bidding war to sign an artist and end up paying arguably more than they should (Lebeau 2021).

Despite potentially giving up certain areas of control within a record deal as it relates to social media, signed artists conceivably have resources available to them that unsigned artists do not. Labels, especially those who have paid high advances to sign a viral artist, are typically willing to invest in the artist in meaningful ways to see a return on investment. However, if the number of social media impressions was the only reason a label signed a particular artist, it could also be the reason a label drops that same artist when numbers decrease. Even if a viral song causes an artist to get signed, if the label releases a single that does not achieve a certain chart position, then many labels cut ties.

Not only do labels use social media as a way to ensure fans know about new releases, they also use various platforms that allow users to preview new music to gauge consumer interest and they sometimes even pay influencers to market songs by posting videos to the songs (Dever 2022). Many record labels hire team members specifically for the purpose

of monitoring TikTok so they can certify that measures are taken to help a trending song climb the charts once it starts to take off (Whateley 2023). Andy McGrath, the Senior Vice President of Marketing at Legacy Recordings, a division of Sony Music, stated, “Our entire music catalog is effectively tracked on a daily basis . . . We’re constantly monitoring actions, reactions, and trends that happen on TikTok.” Tarek Al-Hamdouni, RCA Records’ Senior Vice President of Digital Marketing, acknowledged that the label relies on a series of criteria, including an increase in streams on Spotify or changes in views on YouTube to track the success of a TikTok song campaign (Whateley 2023). “If I see that in the course of a week our audience [on YouTube] went from being primarily 25-to-34-year-old male and a week later the majority is 13-to-24 female, then that’s a pretty easy bridge to connect between those two platforms,” shared Al-Hamdouni (Whateley 2023). With TikTok’s proven success as a marketing tool, labels are now adding line items to their marketing budgets to fund salaried positions focused on managing and running TikTok (Chow 2022).

Besides monitoring TikTok and helping fan the flames on a song as it starts to take off, some labels and artists take a more proactive approach and work directly with TikTok’s team to host private listening sessions with influencers and creators to devise a plan to promote a song before it is released (Whateley 2023). For example, before Miley Cyrus released her single “Midnight Sky,” her team partnered with TikTok and participated in two private Zoom meetings with over a dozen creators and influencers to allow them to listen to the track first (Whateley 2023).

Additionally, because remixes have gained substantial popularity on TikTok, many record labels are collaborating with remix and mashup artists in connection with song campaigns and release strategies (Whateley 2023). A remixed song allows the song to appeal to a wider array of consumers, and according to Nima Nasseri, the A&R lead for Universal’s music strategy and tactics team, “You want to be able to have your record get discovered in spaces that it normally wouldn’t be discovered in” (Whateley 2023). With the music industry’s prioritization of TikTok in launching artists and songs, TikTok has an internal music team led by former Warner Music digital chief Ole Obermann, who handles artist and record label relations, licensing deals, and other music-specific initiatives on behalf of TikTok (Whateley 2023).

While the value of a record deal and the resources of a label are recognized and welcomed by many artists, some artists prefer to release their

music independently, given the current digital landscape and tools available to them via social media. Before social media, record labels determined an artist's fate. The accessibility of streaming platforms and social media have created new opportunities for artists to build their fanbases and manage their careers, without the need for a label.

V. Pressures on Artists to Create Social Media Content

With social media playing such a crucial role in connecting with fans, promoting music, and building a brand, there is significant pressure on artists—both self-imposed and externally from labels or brand partners—to be active on the platforms and constantly create new content.

Many notable artists have spoken out publicly about this pressure. In a TikTok video that has been viewed more than eight million times, pop artist Halsey expressed frustration that her label, Astralwerks, which is distributed by Capitol Music Group, pressured her to use the app to promote her music (Rindner 2022). She stated, “Basically, I have a song that I love that I wanna release ASAP, but my record label won’t let me. I’ve been in this industry for eight years and I’ve sold over 165 million records, and my record company is saying that I can’t release it unless they fake a viral moment on TikTok. Everything is marketing” (Rindner 2022).

FKA twigs similarly shared her dismay with receiving pressure to post, stating, “All record labels ask for are TikToks and I got told off today for not making enough effort” (Rindner 2022). Florence Welch of Florence and the Machine posted an a cappella video last year with the caption, “The label are begging me for [lo] fi TikToks so here you go. Please send help” (Rindner 2022). Ironically, videos like these often become one of the artists’ most viewed posts (Rindner 2022).

While Adele was working on her 30 album, her label encouraged her to make music for TikTok to gain the attention of a younger generation (Rindner 2022). She refused to do so, saying, “It was like, if everyone’s making music for the TikTok, who’s making the music for my generation? Who’s making the music for my peers? I would do that job, gladly” (Rao 2022). Adele acknowledged that her goal was to make music for her own generation, but very few artists have the leverage to take a stand like she does (Rindner 2022).

Even after landing songs in the Top 40 charts, artist Raye struggled with her record label, Polydor, to get her debut album released, despite having a record deal for six years (Williams 2022). She stated that her

label needed the last single, “Call on Me,” to go viral in order to release the full album. Raye now releases music independently (Williams 2022).

Charli XCX also let her frustrations be known by lip-syncing over a sound clip of Naomi Campbell, saying, “Well, I didn’t really wanna be here, so I was made to be here, so obviously I’m just, like, wanting to get this over with and get on with my life. It’s a big inconvenience for me” (Williams 2022). She captioned the video as follows: “When my label asks me to make my 8th TikTok of the week” (Williams 2022).

Rebecca Lucy Taylor, professionally known as Self Esteem, stated publicly that the pressures surrounding TikTok and social media are particularly acute for women. Writing in *The Guardian*, Taylor stated, “I think it’s no coincidence that the recent examples of artists who say their labels have forced them to get on TikTok are all women. My pub-psychologist theory is that the music industry thinks of social media as an inherently female thing—it’s just another patriarchal idea that women and gay men are interested in the minutiae of other women, while men are just too busy and important to be interested in that stuff” (Taylor 2022). She went on to say, “There is something darker and more invasive in the way that women are encouraged to use it. It only furthers the nagging feeling that as a female artist your music and art aren’t taken as seriously” (Taylor 2022).

VI. The Artist and Manager as Content Creators: A New Paradigm

While it is now easier than ever to record, distribute, and promote music—as well as connect and engage with fans through social media—the result has been a highly saturated market, making it increasingly difficult to cut through the noise. In 2022, it was reported that over 100,000 songs were delivered to DSPs every single day (Ingham 2022). Speaking on the challenges of this new reality, an independent artist (choosing to remain anonymous) shared:

Independent artists are compared, often to signed artists, but in order to compete on a fast-moving global stage, the artist has to become media manager, publicist, graphic designer/art director, administrator/accountant, Booker/plugger/promoter, marketing director, playlist coordinator, Spotify manager, etc. etc. etc. I estimate if I spent a week just doing “band stuff” and cut out family/

friends, and all my other work commitments, less than 5% of that week would go on actual creative art, songwriting, practice etc. The rest is on promo, gig bookings, management, and all the other extraneous shit that 20 years ago, we'd have a legion of label people to do for us. Now, indie artists have to do all that stuff because it is expected – if you don't, you fall behind the curve of signed artists and the other artists who either DO do it, or have the money or people behind them to help them do it.” (Vandergast 2023)

Coming back to the discussion on inflection points in the early 2000s, the advent of social media completely changed how artists—and their teams—manage their time and resources, as well as the tools and skills needed to succeed in the new market environment.

Social media has blurred the lines between professional musician, content creator, and influencer. Many artists have expressed frustration that these new responsibilities are taking them away from the core of their artistry—which is making and playing music. This was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, where the primary means of connecting with fans was online via social media, and changed the artist-fan relationship dynamics and expectations for engagement (Majewski 2022).

In an op-ed, writer and music fan Lark Morigan (2022) stated the following in connection with artists becoming content creators and influencers:

But not all artists even want that. Making something hastily and bombarding it with hashtags for the sake of “pleasing the market” feels like a chore to them. Also why is there the rush to get famous? There are more worthwhile things to do than gaining popularity overnight with some TikTok trend.

Doing both and doing them equally well is also not a guarantee.

An artist who refuses to partake in influencer culture shouldn't be shamed for being lazier or less ambitious than those who do. (emphasis in the original)

Eventually, you will lose yourself and your art. You'll start making things that will disappoint your real fans, the ones who actually favored your eccentricity and original self-expression over something catered to people who never valued you or your individuality in the first place.

You'll probably get fake fans who only liked the fact that you went viral with some trending post that you felt obligated to make. (Morrigan 2022)

Not only are artists feeling the pressure to constantly create social media content, allocate tremendous amounts of time and resources, as well as learn the necessary skills and tools, but so are their managers. The Music Managers Forum (MMF), a U.K.-based trade organization that represents the interests of over 2,700 managers based in the United States, conducted several roundtables in 2022 after noticing at the NY:LON Conference that digital burnout among artists and their managers was a major issue (MMF 2022). Managers on the roundtables discussed the tremendous pressure applied by labels for artists to “generate a continuous stream of content” and how labels “judge an artist's value based on social media numbers rather than the integrity of their music” (MMF 2022). Other key takeaways from the roundtable include the following:

- Artists and managers are expected to become social media experts, in addition to their existing workload. “Managers and artists now need to master Photoshop, video editing, knowledge of algorithms and behaviors and other digital skill sets.”
- Some labels fail to recognize that each artist is different and not everyone is suited for the same social media platforms. Moreover, many artists prefer not to engage on social media at all and would rather delegate this responsibility.

- It is becoming increasingly difficult for emerging artists to gain visibility on social media platforms when competing with record labels that have larger marketing budgets and staff. This also results in fewer opportunities for brand partnerships and other financial support when they are unable to generate consistently high engagement metrics.
- Managers noted that “too much time and resources were needed for social media, which compromises mental health, commercial decisions and—most importantly—reduces the time and space needed for artists to be creative Labels insist on increased engagement, meaning artists rarely have ‘time out’ from social media. This leads to stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues.”
- Some managers noted that while taking responsibility off the artist’s shoulders can be helpful, hiring staff to help artists manage social media accounts can also pose a risk as the potential exists to lose authenticity with the artist’s fan base.
- Increasing pressure from record labels and other partners, coupled with the never-ending need for authentic fan engagement and interaction, is leading to a huge strain on the artist-manager relationship. Artists want to create and perform music, not engage digitally. Managers should learn to “say no” and push others to understand that not every artist feels comfortable in the role of an “influencer.”
- Record labels should provide a 15 to 25 percent social media management budget, in addition to the artist advance, to help artists cover the cost of administration and management of their social media accounts (MMF 2022).

VII. The Impact of Social Media on Musicians’ Health and Wellness

Human beings are inherently social creatures who have a fundamental need for connection with others (Young 2008). It is an essential contributor to health and wellness. Although social media can offer a means

for artists to connect and engage with fans directly—fostering a sense of community and enhancing their overall well-being—there are also negative aspects of social media’s impact on musicians’ health and wellness. One of the main challenges is the pressure to constantly maintain an online presence and the need to project a carefully curated image. This can lead to feelings of anxiety, stress, and self-comparison, as musicians may find themselves frequently comparing their success and popularity to their peers or struggling to meet unrealistic standards (Meshi, Tamir, and Heekeren 2015). There are also the adverse health effects of having to constantly create content (e.g., planning, production, editing, publishing, and promotion), in addition to the numerous other responsibilities of being a professional musician (e.g., writing, recording, releasing, and touring). Managing all of these tasks can be overwhelming, which is causing several artists—and their managers—to experience mental and physical burnout (Music Managers Forum 2022).

In recent years, there has been growing concern about the impact of social media on health and wellness, leading to some pioneering studies from both the private and public sectors. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, even some large platforms like Facebook have been conducting internal research on the impact of their product on the state of mind of its younger users. One of these studies found that a large proportion of teenage users blamed Facebook’s very own platform, Instagram, for increases in the rate of anxiety and depression (Gayle 2021).

Numerous other studies are now supporting these findings—that social media usage is one of the primary causes of mental health problems among the young (Gayle 2021). According to Claude Mellins, a professor of medical psychology at Columbia University, “Social media platforms are important sources of socialization and relationship-building for many young people. Although there are important benefits, social media can also provide platforms for bullying and exclusion, unrealistic expectations about body image and sources of popularity, normalization of risk-taking behaviors, and can be detrimental to mental health.... Young people’s brains are still developing” (Columbia 2021).

In a study performed by psychologist Melissa G. Hunt et al. (2018) at the University of Pennsylvania, it was determined that high usage of Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram increases rather than decreases feelings of loneliness, whereas reducing social media usage often leads to significant decreases in both depression and loneliness. These effects were

particularly pronounced for individuals who were more depressed when they came into the study (Hunt et al. 2018, 751).

Some of the most common negative emotional effects for excessive users of social media include depression, frustration, and social comparison (Social Media Victims Law Center 2023). New research also indicates that digital technologies can expose users to bullying, contribute to obesity and eating disorders, trade off with sleep, encourage children to negatively compare themselves to others, and lead to depression, anxiety, and self-harm (U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory 2021). A direct correlation exists between heavy social media usage and an increased risk for other negative behaviors, such as increased anxiety, feelings of inadequacy about life or appearance, fear of missing out (“FOMO”), social media addiction, isolation, cyberbullying, and self-absorption (Robinson and Smith 2023).

In addition to mental health issues faced by many users, with the increased use of social media, “problematic social media use” or “social media addiction” has also developed (Buda et al. 2021). Generally, this is the “inability to control one’s use of social media sites, displaying a range of behavioral addiction symptoms.... These symptoms may include mood modification, salience, tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, conflict, and relapse” (Buda et al. 2021). These issues are particularly concerning for young people as they tend to use social media more frequently, and the more frequently young people use social media, the more they develop addictive behavior.

Additionally, extensive use of social media is also associated with a less healthy lifestyle, such as not getting enough physical activity and poor habits, often leading to a lower quality of life and feelings of fulfillment (Buda et al. 2021).

VIII. Proposing Healthier, More Equitable Industry Business Practices

In the dynamic sphere of the music industry, artists’ well-being is often compromised because of the need to be constantly active on social media and create content. As delineated in the previous section, the ubiquity of social media has only heightened these pressures, acting as a catalyst for higher levels of stress and anxiety. Beyond the digital landscape, elements like touring, the unpredictability of income, creative pressures, and public scrutiny can also contribute to the undermining of an artist’s health and wellness. This section aims to propose solutions for the industry to

this escalating issue, focusing on comprehensive onboarding programs for new artists, facilitating access to therapy and wellness services, reevaluating existing industry practices, and offering social media content creation and management services.

1. *Onboarding Programs:*

A critical starting point for addressing mental health concerns involves thorough onboarding programs for new artists. Much like how corporations onboard new employees, the music industry can incorporate programs designed to equip new artists with the necessary skills and knowledge they need to navigate their careers, covering everything from health and wellness education to social media training. Take the approach of Sony Music Entertainment; in 2020, Sony launched the “Artist Assistance” wellness initiative designed to “educate and empower” their artists with resources focused on mental health and overall well-being (Stassen 2021). Incorporating modules on mental health awareness can empower artists with knowledge about potential risks and preventative strategies. Furthermore, providing education on industry workings, such as contract literacy and financial management, effective content creation and time management strategies, and more, can reduce stress and foster a sense of control over one’s career.

2. *Access to Therapy and Wellness Services:*

Another essential measure is providing artists and industry staff with accessible therapy and wellness services. One example is the work being done by Love Renaissance (LVRN)—a creative agency, management team, and record label—which launched a division focused on psychological wellness for its staff and artists. LVRN’s founders have been vocal about prioritizing and promoting mental health, working with therapists for team building and communication exercises. This move comes amid increasing awareness of mental health challenges within the music industry where rates of depression and anxiety are significantly higher than in the general population (Rocque 2020). Another example is Sony Music Entertainment’s Artists Forward Initiative (part of the Artists Assistance Program referenced earlier), where “on-roster Sony Music Entertainment artists can connect with a dedicated, licensed therapist at no cost to address stress, anxiety, depression, grief, family and relationship matters and more. Support is available in over 70 languages, and use of the program is completely confidential” (Artists Forward 2022). Additionally, providing services like regular mindfulness training, yoga sessions, and stress

management workshops can help individuals in the industry cope with their demanding lifestyles.

3. *Reevaluating Industry Practices:*

The industry must also critically examine and amend its own practices to cultivate a healthier environment. A common problem is the demanding and irregular working hours that come with content creation, touring, and studio time, which can be detrimental to mental health. A proposed solution could be for labels to strive for increased transparency when it comes to communicating their expectations for social media content creation, ideally leading to constructive dialogue with artists and their teams to ensure that it is aligned with their values and brand. Another could be implementing fair scheduling practices that respect artists' need for regular downtime and sleep. Furthermore, the industry can strive to normalize discussions around mental health and digital burnout. In 2019, the Swedish company Epidemic Sound implemented "health hour," an initiative where employees were encouraged to take an hour out of their workday to focus on their health. This endeavor demonstrated a significant step toward creating a healthier industry culture, showing that mental and physical health should never be secondary to career demands.

4. *Offering Social Media Content Creation and Management Services:*

Now becoming a lot more common because of its effectiveness, record labels should all consider offering artists access to a team that specializes in social media content creation and management (or alternatively, additional financing to outsource these services). This team would handle the editing, refinement, and posting of raw content provided by the artists, reducing the pressure on them to constantly create and manage content. Additionally, they could offer production services to facilitate batch content creation, enabling artists to focus more on their music and less on the constant demand for new content.

5. *Investing More Attention and Resources Into Artist Development:*

Although an obvious solution to this would be to change the current short-term deal structures for labels to commit to more long-term investment, this is likely too drastic and unrealistic. An alternative could be for record labels to create programs or talent-nurturing teams dedicated to artist development (brand development, social media management, performance skills, financial literacy, etc.), thus supporting those artists to create sustainable, long-term careers.

Through these strategies, the music industry can play an active role in fostering a healthier and more supportive environment for artists. Such an approach would benefit not only the artists, but also the industry as a whole by promoting sustainable, long-term success for all involved parties.

IX. Strategies for Artists and Their Teams to Ensure Safe and Healthy Social Media Usage

Considering the deleterious effects of social media use on health and wellness, as well as the pressures of having to constantly create content and engage on the platforms, navigating the digital landscape successfully while staying healthy and avoiding burnout is a challenging balancing act. With social media playing an indispensable role in an artist's career, it's crucial for artists and their teams to adopt strategies that marry constant content creation with overall health and wellness. The following are some general strategies collected from various sectors of the music industry, directly from social media platforms, and wellness resources:

1. *Conscious Use of Social Media:*
It is important for artists to set boundaries and establish mindful habits around social media usage, which may include setting daily time limits to avoid overconsumption, turning off notifications, and engaging with positive content to improve the algorithm (Radian Health 2022).
2. *Use of Digital Well-being Tools:*
Social media platforms themselves offer resources for maintaining balance. For example, TikTok's "Digital Well-Being" features include daily screen time to help control how much time is spent on the platform each day, screen time analytics, and prompts for taking breaks, as well as a restricted mode to limit specific types of content.
3. *Batch Content Creation:*
One effective strategy for relieving the pressure of constant content creation is batch producing and scheduling posts. This not only reduces the daily demand for new content, but also provides more time for artists to engage in other activities vital to their well-being and creativity.
4. *Utilizing Social Media Management Tools and Resources:*
Making use of services like Later, Hootsuite, and Sprout Social, or hiring a social media manager or agency, can assist in effectively scheduling and managing posts across various platforms. By

delegating these tasks, artists can reduce their workload and minimize the risk of burnout (Barnhart 2018).

5. *Distributing Responsibility:*
For groups or artists with a team, distributing the responsibility of content creation can significantly reduce individual pressure. This promotes a more manageable and balanced approach to online engagement.
6. *Prioritizing Authentic Engagement:*
Authentic connections with an audience can be more fulfilling and less mentally draining than merely chasing likes or followers. By focusing on genuine interactions, artists can cultivate a healthier relationship with social media.
7. *Safeguarding Online Security:*
Protecting personal information is crucial for artists on social media. Enabling two-factor authentication and being conscious about the data shared online can help secure accounts and contribute to peace of mind (Meta, n.d.-c).
8. *Protection Against Online Negativity:*
Using tools like Instagram’s “Hidden Words” feature can shield artists from offensive words or comments, thus creating a healthier online environment (Meta, n.d.-b).
9. *Incorporating Wellness Practices:*
Regular wellness routines that include activities such as yoga, meditation, journaling, and nature walks can help alleviate stress and promote mindfulness. A well-rounded wellness routine can “fill their cup,” providing the necessary energy and resilience for demanding careers.
10. *Seeking Professional Support:*
It is important to recognize when professional help is needed. Engaging a mental health professional can provide artists with tools to cope with the unique pressures of their profession, promoting their overall mental and emotional well-being. There are several organizations that specialize in offering counseling to artists and industry professionals including the Music Industry Therapist Collective, Music Minds Matter, Backline, Behind the Scenes, and HelpPRO (Billboard Staff 2021).

In sum, maintaining mental health and wellness amid the demands of a digital music career requires comprehensive, mindful strategies. With this holistic approach, artists and their teams can strive for success while preserving their well-being.

X. Conclusion

This article has offered an in-depth examination of the complex relationship between social media, the music industry, and artists' mental health and well-being. At its core, this exploration has illuminated the profound transformation of the music industry catalyzed by social media and digital technology. By enabling unprecedented access to global audiences and transforming artists' interaction with fans, social media has indelibly shaped the way musicians navigate their careers. However, these advancements are not without their drawbacks, presenting unique challenges that can exert significant pressure on artists' health and wellness.

The omnipresent demand for online engagement has introduced a new form of digital labor for artists, requiring continuous content creation, personal branding, and constant availability. While these endeavors can cultivate a strong online presence and foster deeper artist-fan connections, they also contribute to an intense culture of competition and comparison, manifesting in amplified stress and anxiety among artists.

This pervasive digital pressure, compounded by the industry's traditional stressors such as irregular income, public scrutiny, and the inherent unpredictability of a music career, has underscored the pressing need to address mental health within the music industry. The mental strain induced by these pressures can lead to various adverse effects, including depression, social comparison, feelings of inadequacy, and even social media addiction. These impacts are particularly pronounced among younger users, who form a significant part of both artist and audience demographics.

Despite these challenges, the industry is not bereft of solutions. A strategic approach to improving artists' well-being can include comprehensive onboarding programs, therapy and wellness services, fair scheduling practices, and social media content creation and management services. For artists and their teams, mindful social media usage, batch content creation, prioritizing authentic engagement, and seeking professional support can contribute significantly to maintaining a healthy balance between online engagement and mental well-being.

The intersection of social media, the music industry, and mental health presents a multifaceted landscape, one that demands ongoing scrutiny and adaptive strategies. As the digital era continues to evolve, it is incumbent on the industry, artists, and their teams to continue to reassess best practices and forge a path that safeguards artists' mental health while leveraging the potential of social media. By doing so, the music industry

can nurture a more sustainable, supportive environment that enables artists to thrive both creatively and personally.

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Uniting an Industry: *Billboard's* International Music Industry Conferences, 1969-1985

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Abstract

Billboard's International Music Industry Conference (IMIC) was where tough industry topics such as piracy were tackled, where technology debuted, where networking thrived, and where significant business deals were made. IMIC changed the traditional rules; decision-makers openly met to plan for the future as a united and collective industry. The conference immediately proved its significance; the Universal Numbering Systems Action Committee (UNSAC) was formed to pursue a universal numbering system for the recording industry at the first conference. The second conference began the process that ultimately led to the 1971 Geneva Convention against phonogram piracy. During its sixteen-year span—and thirteen conferences—IMIC brought a global industry together. A lack of finances ultimately led to its demise.

Keywords: *Billboard*, Music, International, Music Conference, Lee Zhitto, IMIC

In 1969, Neil Armstrong became the first man on the moon and David Bowie's "Space Oddity" climbed the music charts. John Lennon and Yoko Ono recorded "Give Peace a Chance;" the Beatles released their *Abbey Road* album and gave their last public performance. Another British band, the Rolling Stones, dropped the *Let It Bleed* album with its iconic cake cover art. The Woodstock music festival drew 400,000 attendees and featured thirty-two performance acts.

This was also the year *Billboard*—often referred to as the bible of the music industry—held its first International Music Industry Conference

(IMIC). The conference was quickly considered one of the music industry's premier events and the publication proudly proclaimed that "almost every conference featured the debut of something new."¹ The conference took a forward-thinking approach to not only music but to advancements in competing technologies. It was where tough industry topics such as piracy were tackled, where new technology debuted, where networking thrived, and where significant business deals were made. For example, the 1970 conference began the process that ultimately led to the 1971 Geneva Convention against phonogram piracy.²

Billboard praised the influence of IMIC, proclaiming, "Very few times has a meeting taken place that caught the eyes of so many influentials at one time. In the past, the policy has been to keep top level meetings under wraps."³ IMIC changed the traditional rules; decision-makers openly met to plan for the future as a united and collective industry. During its sixteen-year span—and thirteen conferences—IMIC brought a global industry together.

Scant research has examined *Billboard's* ascendancy as a prominent business publication for the broadcasting, music, and entertainment industries. Most academic research focuses on the impact of *Billboard's* music charts for identifying culturally and socially popular music. Most encyclopedia entries about *Billboard* are brief. Furthermore, despite its significance and impact on the international music industry, academic research has not investigated *Billboard's* IMIC. These conferences have received passing mentions, mostly related to technology debuts.⁴ But they provided a neutral ground for competing executives to share their concerns about the industry, to preview new technology impacting recording companies and home consumers, and provided a platform to discuss music piracy. Their history and the accompanying timeline of the changing music industry warrant exploration and analysis.

This study is based on the Lee Zhito collection at the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University. Zhito's *Billboard* career included roles as editor-in-chief, publisher, and executive vice president. He established *Billboard's* Conference Division as a separate cost center and spearheaded IMIC. The archive shows not only the significance of IMIC, but also how hard Zhito and *Billboard* worked to unite industry leaders.

Billboard's History, Entering the Conference Market

Billboard dates back to November 1, 1894.⁵ It began as *Billboard Advertising* and covered the billposting industry. In 1897, the name changed to *The Billboard*, and the focus expanded to include circus, vaudeville, and outdoor amusement activities. When the movie industry began, *Billboard* covered it, and in the 1920s added radio coverage. The popularity of the jukebox in the 1940s and the growth of music-dominated radio in the 1950s led to *Billboard's* music industry metamorphosis; the publication quickly became an invaluable resource for the music industry.⁶

While music industry charts made *Billboard* famous, it did not publish its first chart until the January 4, 1936 issue. The first national music chart polling retailers on record sales appeared in the July 27, 1940 issue.⁷ By the mid-1940s, the relationship between records and radio had been firmly established and *Billboard* focused its music coverage on radio jockeys, jukebox operators, and record dealers. In the 1950s, television was added. Its increase in TV coverage occurred at the same time the Top 40 radio programming format began.

In 1961, *The Billboard* changed its name to *Billboard Music Week*. In 1963, Lee Zhito was named *Billboard's* editor-in-chief, and the name changed again, this time to *Billboard*. In 1966, the magazine ventured into organizing conferences with The *Billboard* Tape Cartridge Conference, initiated to establish and unite industry leadership, something ultimately beneficial to *Billboard*.⁸ In 1968, with Zhito as associate publisher, *Billboard* held its second conference—a Radio Programming Forum—bringing together radio disc jockeys and program directors.⁹ The success of these two conferences led *Billboard* in 1969 to launch its premium global conference—the International Music Industry Conference. The event was a natural next step. Zhito said IMIC provided the industry “a place where the decision makers of this highly volatile, ever-changing business could gather from the far corners of the world, exchange their views on key issues, and together explore the challenges and opportunities of tomorrow.”¹⁰

Billboard touted the first conference as “an event of historic significance for every executive in the music industry,” with an objective of providing an exchange of ideas and discussion of new concepts to help expand the music business.¹¹ IMIC was open to anyone with a stake in the music industry.

The first IMIC was co-sponsored with *Billboard's* equivalent in the United Kingdom—*Record Retailer* (later named *Music Week*). *Billboard*

brought in its own people from all over the world to assist and almost sixty top industry leaders were speakers. As Zhito put it, “Money was no object in making this a successful event.”¹²

As soon as the agenda was published, a heavy flow of registrations began. Well ahead of the event—held in April 1969 at Paradise Island Hotel and Villas in Nassau, Bahamas—the event hotel and overflow hotel were fully booked, forcing *Billboard* to line up a travel agent to assist with accommodations.¹³ The inaugural event had over six hundred registered attendees.¹⁴

For \$150, participants could attend all sessions. The opening event was chaired by Glenn Wallichs, CEO of Capitol Industries and co-founder of Capitol Records. Conference-goers were treated to several special events, including a preview of “Music Scene,” a series based on *Billboard*’s music charts airing on the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) that fall.¹⁵ Attendees included Frank Zappa, Tom Smothers, George Martin, and Phil Ramone.¹⁶

The conference quickly proved its significance; the Universal Numbering Systems Action Committee (UNSAC) was formed to pursue a common numbering system for the recording industry to track from manufacturers to retail distributors. This was a significant industry move because at the time there were a multitude of systems in use, resulting in mix-ups and general chaos when tracking products.¹⁷

Billboard went all out covering the first IMIC. Its May 10, 1969 issue contained twenty-six pages devoted to the conference, with articles and photos of each session. Zhito stated the conference “result was electric. *Billboard* was immediately embraced as THE international voice of the music/record industry.”¹⁸ *Billboard* even published a hardcover book of the IMIC speeches for all attendees. Titled *The Complete Report of the First International Music Industry Conference*, the volume paid homage to the conference registrants and provided fifty-eight chapters reflecting the topics at IMIC. Jukeboxes and radio were discussed, along with performers and performance rights, and new technologies included more than just cartridges and cassettes; the conference and book included satellite distribution and cable television.¹⁹ These sessions and the accompanying book supported the forward-thinking view of Zhito and the International Music Industry Conference planners.

First European IMIC, Spain

The instant success spurred *Billboard* to continue and IMIC 2 was held at the Congress Palace of Palma de Mallorca, Spain. Because the Nassau event had drawn a seventy-five percent U.S. representation, the European location was expected to draw heavier international participation. This proved correct. Close to nine hundred people from twenty-six countries attended.²⁰ It was evident early on that IMIC 2 was going to be large as preconference registrations filled up seven hotels. Late registrations could not be accepted unless attendees provided proof of their own accommodations.

At the conference, held in April 1970, one of the heavy discussion points was the video cartridge. Representatives from Sony, Philips, Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), and the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) showed their systems and a keynote panel addressed ramifications the video cartridge had on existing music industry contracts. RCA, together with Motorola, unveiled their Quadraphonic 8-Track Tape System set to officially debut at the end of the year. In total, IMIC had seventy-five speakers, with speeches simultaneously translated into multiple languages.²¹ Attendees were treated to four world-firsts: an important antipiracy stand by all manufacturers, the unveiling of the Philips video cassette, the Quad-8 system demonstration by RCA and Motorola, and a demonstration of Victor of Japan's new video cartridge recording system.

IMIC 2 further reiterated the importance of the event; the most historically significant result was the passing of the International Antipiracy Resolution, leading to the framing of the 1971 Geneva Convention.²² Stephen Stewart, director general of the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), proclaimed it normally would take up to ten years from idea to action so "to have made such rapid progress is little short of sensational."²³ In addition, the Council for International Recognition of Music Rights (CIRMR) was formed with the purpose of opening dialogue between the Soviet Union, Eastern European countries, and the Western nations to increase the use of each other's music. *Billboard* called it "a natural and spontaneous outgrowth of IMIC."²⁴

This IMIC also resulted in a new *Billboard* division—the Music Industry Code Agency—to serve as the central registration agency for the new universal product numbering system. The system had been developed by UNSAC after the inaugural IMIC and meant each recorded product would now have a unique, ten-digit standard number, eliminating confu-

sion and duplication because of the previous global multitude of numbering systems.²⁵

The third IMIC—in Montreux, Switzerland, in June 1971—was expected to draw over 1,200 attendees. The conference format changed slightly; sessions were only conducted in the morning to allow for meetings and intra-company seminars in the afternoon. Essentially, networking was now prominently built into the conference agenda. There were two different types of meetings: conference sessions on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and seminars on Tuesday and Thursday, with plenary sessions simultaneously translated to English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish.

Billboard had learned its hotel lesson. Five hotels were pre-booked, and by May, three were full.²⁶ Early bird registration was \$210, with those registering later paying \$25 more. The registration covered the opening cocktail party, a closing dinner dance, as well as all sessions and work material. IMIC 3 yielded a new group of attendees—spouses of executives. Because about 250 wives had come to Spain the year prior, tours were added to entertain the wives while their husbands attended workshops. It would be several more years before *Billboard* and attendees would recognize female executives in specific IMIC sessions.

IMIC 3 saw the world premiere of the CBS four-channel disk and Columbia Records showed its quadrasonic disk that was slated to reach the market that year. Beyond the technology rollouts, IMIC 3 proved a great space to network. For example, the conference provided the first world meeting for personal managers; they met to discuss establishing their own European conference. A twenty-page report of the conference, complete with keynote speeches and photos, was published in the July 10, 1971 *Billboard* issue.²⁷

Personal Invitation Leads Conference to Mexico

At the Swiss conference, it was announced that IMIC 4 would be in Acapulco, Mexico, in late April and into early May 1972. The location was chosen after *Billboard* received personal invitations from Mexico's former president, Miguel Alemán, who now headed the national tourism agency, and Mexico's record manufacturers' association president, Guillermo Infante.²⁸

To help attendees get to IMIC, *Billboard* now provided a special "Group Inclusive Tour" offer with flights from Boston, Los Angeles, Chi-

icago, Detroit, Nashville, New York, Toronto, Montreal, and London.²⁹ Essentially, networking and deal making could begin as early as the plane ride to IMIC.

The registration fee was \$240, but *Billboard* added a lower fee—\$125—to encourage young, middle management executives under thirty to attend. In addition, while women could pay the full fee to attend, a \$40 registration was available that included all activities except conference sessions. This move resulted in more wives attending the conference than in prior years. Furthermore, while 50 percent of the participants were from the U.S., *Billboard* touted that participants came from every Latin American and European country. A larger group attended from Asia, or as *Billboard* referenced their location, “the Far East.”³⁰ The event drew more from Latin America and Japan than prior conferences, and over seven hundred people attended IMIC 4.³¹

This event had an IMIC first—an industry exhibit area—added because of growing requests. Companies bought exhibit space—eight feet deep by ten feet wide for \$800 each—and set up in a special area of the conference hotel. The fee included an IMIC registration.³² Companies displaying their wares included RCA, Panasonic, Motorola, and Sony.³³

It was initially announced that plenary sessions would be translated into French, Spanish, and Japanese, but English and Italian were later added. Furthermore, translations now covered all IMIC sessions.³⁴ There were nineteen seminars. One major draw was a seminar on young music buyers that included a country-by-country analysis showing record sales to youth under nineteen and those between twenty and twenty-five.³⁵ While this would be considered a standard market segment presentation today, it was eye-opening at the time. Another highly touted session was the art of deal-making as complexities permeated the music industry, especially internationally. The session not only reviewed the status of deal-making, but also taught attendees valuable negotiation skills.³⁶

Naturally, IMIC 4 included world unveilings. For example, RCA showed its compatible, discrete four-channel disk. IMIC was also quickly becoming the conference for music business group meetings. In Acapulco, the Light Music Division of the International Publishers Association held a meeting. Discussions about piracy and the International Antipiracy Resolution that had been signed by all manufacturers at IMIC 2 intensified. This time, record companies and trade unions were encouraged to share

the agreement with their national governments. As usual, *Billboard* followed up IMIC 4 with a full report.³⁷

After Acapulco, *Billboard* went radio silent in communicating the next IMIC. The conference had been held early each year, but it was not until its February 24, 1973 issue that *Billboard* commented on IMIC 5. The publication stated it had surveyed Acapulco participants and most felt the conference had covered the major pressing industry issues. This feedback led the publication to decide it was better to schedule IMIC every other year. *Billboard* announced plans for a panel of industry leaders to advise with conference planning. This International Advisory Committee for IMIC 5 ended up with eighty-one members from around the globe. Because IMIC 5 was to be held in the United Kingdom, a smaller, fifteen-person U.K. advisory group met in February 1974 to discuss the program, concluding that the first day would focus on Europe, the second day on North and South America, and the third day on the Far East, Australia, and other territories.³⁸

IMIC Heads Back to Europe

IMIC 5 was held in London, at the Grosvenor House Hotel in Mayfair in May 1974, a change from the resort settings in previous years. Registration was \$200 for early bird and \$220 for regular. There was a special wives category; they could register for \$68.75. Later the registration language for that category expanded to include wives and husbands. In addition, a special reduced fee was added for attendees under thirty. IMIC's five official airline carriers spanned the globe—American Airlines, Pan American World Airways, Air India, South Africa Airways, and Olympic Airways. *Billboard* teamed with Trafalgar Tours to provide participants with special vacation packages scheduled around IMIC.³⁹

Leading up to the conference, *Billboard* beat the IMIC publicity drum hard, both in terms of advertisements and articles.⁴⁰ Mort Nasatir, then *Billboard*'s vice president of international operations, called the London meeting “one of the most important music industry events ever to be held in the U.K.”⁴¹ Hugh Jenkins, the British minister for the arts, was set to speak on opening day, along with John Fruin, Polydor's managing director. The second day, Goddard Lieberman, the president of CBS Records, was the keynote. There were intensive seminars on significant industry issues each afternoon.

As with prior IMICs, companies held separate meetings. MCA Records conducted its international licensees meeting and RCA Records held a meeting to discuss its quadrasonic progress. Lee Armstrong, MCA's vice president of international operations stated it made sense to meet at IMIC because many executives would be there anyway.

Breaking from its tradition of publishing a full report on IMIC a couple issues after the event, *Billboard* added coverage to their May 18 issue, the first issue after the conference. *Billboard's* cover proudly boasted "500 Attend IMIC-5 In London," a figure later revised to 600.⁴² Articles outlined divergent opinions; Lieberman felt the music industry was moving away from the songwriter and artist being the same person, Fruin discussed how record companies needed to develop executives with an international orientation, and Jenkins asked if the music industry was doing enough to explore new artists and new music. The IMIC coverage continued in the May 25 issue, with photospreads and articles in multiple sections of the magazine. William D. Littleford, then *Billboard's* president, announced there would be an IMIC 6 the following year, with place and time to be determined.

Billboard's internal records showed London attendees had come from twenty-nine countries.⁴³ U.K. registrations accounted for the bulk of registration income, with the U.S. coming in second.⁴⁴ In total, the conference had 461 paid registrants, but over 190 additional registrations were complimentary to *Billboard* staff and correspondents, other media personnel, various speakers, and special guests. In mid-July, the first profit and loss statement for IMIC 5 was compiled. It showed a net loss of \$4,437 once expenses and income had been tallied. That was a \$40,000 income shortfall from initial projection, but *Billboard's* Nasatir said overall a good job had been done with cost control.⁴⁵ Attached to Nasatir's financial report was an IMIC recap. It stated the program had been successful, mainly because of what he called an overall lack of complaints. The main complaints were that the event was just too much; it was impossible to attend all sessions due to the concurrent schedule and some panels had too many panelists.

First IMIC on American Soil

Despite Littleford's statement in *Billboard*, there was no IMIC in 1975. The January 3, 1976 issue of *Billboard* featured an IMIC 6 advertisement—the first IMIC on American soil—in Hawaii. The ad took up

prime space on pages two and three. Early bird registration was \$225 with the regular fee being \$250. Spouses were \$75 for all social activities.

Lee Zhitto, now *Billboard's* publisher, boasted about the IMIC 6 international advisory board; it included executives from Sweden, the U.K., Mexico, Canada, Brazil, and Japan. *Billboard* lined up a special U.S. advisory board. These boards helped shape conference topics and board member names were prominently used in IMIC advertisements to attract attendees.

IMIC 6 took place at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel on Honolulu's Waikiki Beach in May 1976. A month prior, registration and initial projections showed representatives from fifteen countries and 500 to 600 attendees.⁴⁶ *Billboard's* profit goal was \$15,000; the staff had been conservative in their estimates of only 400 paid attendees.⁴⁷ Ultimately, these conservative estimates were correct as 400 attended, representing nineteen countries.⁴⁸ This IMIC was organized by *Billboard*, together with the U.K.'s *Music Week* (formerly *Record Retailer*) and Japan's *Music Labo*.⁴⁹

For the first time, IMIC had non-industry speakers—world-renowned in their field—as plenary speakers. The first day economist John Kenneth Galbraith spoke about the international economy.⁵⁰ The event used industry outsiders for panel discussions. One session featured international bankers discussing how to conduct business globally in light of monetary devaluations and inflation. In stark contrast to the beauty and warmth of Hawaii, the industry was dealing with the cold, harsh reality of inflation, currency devaluation, and rapidly increasing business costs, topics that overshadowed the conference. This did not stop Lewis Horwitz, senior vice president of the First Los Angeles Bank, to proclaim that the music industry was the safest and most profitable of all entertainment industries.⁵¹

Another first included an all-female panel focusing on women in the industry—with speakers from the U.S., Australia, and Japan—showing women were making inroads in the predominantly male music industry. The panelists argued women were an untapped resource, previously only visible in artist relations and publicity, but now spreading to positions across the industry, including executive positions.⁵² IMIC 6—for the first time—attracted participation from a then communist market. A session titled “Doing Business with Soviet Russia” featured Alexander Lebedev, the head of the Russian copyright society. Concurrent sessions were videotaped so participants did not miss anything.⁵³

At the closing banquet, publisher Lee Zhito announced that not only was IMIC back on an annual basis, but also that IMIC 7 would take place in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. He said, “A greater frequency is demanded for the key leaders of each industry to meet for an airing of mutual problems and the unified pursuit of solution.”⁵⁴ Zhito identified IMIC as a vital industry summit and this time *Billboard* featured articles from IMIC only two days after the event started. As a practical matter for *Billboard*, the conference provided ready-made editorial content and an advertising sales event for the magazine, an important consideration at a time of consumer inflation and change in both the music industry and magazine publishing field. The coverage continued in the following issue, with a full twelve-page report on May 29.

To further elevate the significance of IMIC, the 1976 year-end issue announced that *Billboard*'s Trendsetter Awards would be presented in Amsterdam. Normally the awards—given for unique or innovative industry accomplishments—were celebrated at a special January event.⁵⁵ The awards were now to be handed out at the closing banquet. IMIC would host a country music show, including artists Ronnie Milsap and Tammy Wynette, thanks to the Country Music Association.⁵⁶ IMIC had featured artists previously, but this was to be the largest such show, and it was to be broadcast on Dutch television.

The initial Amsterdam advertisement was published in the first issue of 1977. It declared IMIC to be held in May, with the Okura Hotel as headquarters and the Amsterdam Hilton as the overflow. The ad revealed a fairly significant increase in registration fees—early bird was \$300, regular registration was \$400, and spouse registration was \$150. While *Billboard* called it a spouse registration in advertisements, in editorials they still generally referred to it as a registration for wives.

This IMIC marked a subtle name change; *Billboard* called the event IMIC '77 instead of IMIC 7. In an internal memorandum, Zhito and Nasatir stated this was a way to “build upon the annual aspect of the event rather than the number we have held.”⁵⁷

In January, EMI's Sir John Read was announced as keynote speaker.⁵⁸ Others who were approached to be keynotes included U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. *Billboard* offered him a \$5,000 honorarium, transportation, and all expenses paid for him and his wife. Kissinger turned down the engagement, citing a schedule conflict.⁵⁹ He was invited to speak the following year, but that also failed to materialize.

Billboard once again teamed up with the U.K.'s *Music Week* and Japan's *Music Labo*. A *Billboard* article boasted that IMIC '77 "promises to be the biggest and most heavily attended to date," based on preregistrations.⁶⁰ However, that proved incorrect again, as about four hundred attended.⁶¹

Largely because of the overall success of IMIC, leading up to the 1977 conference Zhito proposed a new profit center for *Billboard*—an Industry Conference Bureau division.⁶² He felt they could earn larger profits by bringing conferences in-house, instead of using an outsider to help organize logistics. Thus, *Billboard's* conference division was born and quickly began putting on multiple conferences a year.⁶³

IMIC Gets Its Own Dutch Tulip

With an event held in Amsterdam, it is only fitting that IMIC '77 received an official conference flower, its own Dutch Tulip—a special rose tulip commissioned by Ariola Benelux. The Amsterdam event featured seventeen sessions with the main topics being a predicted sales increase and continued piracy concerns. The atmosphere was more optimistic than in Hawaii, although experiences showed the industry was not recession-proof.⁶⁴ IMIC '77 featured a look at the Philips video disk player with the consumer launch later that year, and the Sony Betamax video cassette recorder/player made its European debut. In addition, music publishers took steps to form a new international organization.

While *Billboard* had published articles about IMIC '77 leading up to it and during the event, it was not until a month after the event they published a full report. Of note was that they did not make an IMIC '78 announcement. Advertisements for IMIC '78 did not appear until January, which was late considering the event was taking place in Venice, Italy in May. Early bird rates were now \$350, regular registration \$450, and spouses could register for \$175. As was now standard, an advisory board was appointed to help with the schedule. Once again, Zhito proclaimed this IMIC was going to "be the biggest and best of all in terms of attendance and program interest."⁶⁵ However, the publication's own estimates showed they again anticipated about four hundred attendees.⁶⁶

Because *Billboard* now had its own conference bureau, and because IMIC required so many employees in attendance, new accounting procedures were incorporated. Each *Billboard* attendee's travel and entertainment expenses were charged directly to their expense account, thus

helping make IMIC financially viable.⁶⁷ The initial budget for the event pointed to a profit of over \$23,000.⁶⁸ It was clear *Billboard* was looking for ways to make money on IMIC.

The publication initially scored a coup with Italy's Premier Giulio Andreotti scheduled as opening keynote, the first time a head of state would speak at the event. Government officials had attended in Spain, the Bahamas, the U.K., and Mexico, but never the head of a country. *Billboard* wrote that "Andreotti's appearance at IMIC underlines the importance of the event as an international summit meeting for music and record industry executives meeting to discuss problems of the global industry."⁶⁹ Unfortunately, Andreotti canceled when Aldo Moro, a former prime minister and, at the time, president of Italy's relative majority party, was kidnapped and later found dead. Italy's minister of tourism and arts spoke instead, promising Italy would take a stronger legal stance against piracy.

Combating music piracy in the 1970s included not only fighting consumer analog copies made through home recordings, but also addressing distribution of illegally made and marketed recordings and promoting the awareness of forthcoming technology that would further facilitate music piracy. These were hot topics for the music industry and those discussions would dominate the first page of *Billboard's* nine-page IMIC special. Conference attendees voted to support a resolution to increase funding to fight piracy. Other topics included the use of computer technology and how to improve trade relations between East and West. One of the most controversial sessions, however, was a future of industry executives panel. When the discussion started to veer toward women executive growth, sparks flew. The female panelists felt there were not enough women to promote to executives because of the industry's traditional gender roles. In reporting about the panel, *Billboard* called it "perhaps the most controversial session of IMIC 1978."⁷⁰ Panelists argued more had to be done to prepare women for career success.

Deal-making and Vodka Drinking

One of the more colorful IMIC '78 comments came from music publisher Ron White, participating on a panel about business in Eastern Europe. He proclaimed his deal in the Soviet Union not only took two years to finalize, but "necessitated a certain amount of vodka drinking at 10 in the morning."⁷¹ Other interesting elements included artist panelists like

classical pianist Artur Schnabel, violin virtuoso Isaac Stern, and contemporary jazz pianist Herbie Hancock.

Several organizations used IMIC '78 for meetings including the United European Publishers "Common Market" Group, the International Federation of Popular Music Publishers' executive committee, and Vogue Records of Paris. Léon Cabat, Vogue Records' president, said "IMIC brings the industry together and so we are using it as a base for carrying on important business at the company level."⁷² Vogue was announcing annual sales awards at IMIC.

The importance of IMIC seemed apparent to group attendees with internal meetings held by individual companies, global awareness and exchange, and the focus on content piracy. Face-to-face interactions mattered, even as the cost and complexity of the conference expanded each year. *Billboard* continued its European tour for IMIC '79, this time in Monte Carlo. The regular registration fee was now \$300 more than when the conference began ten years earlier. Advertisements show the early bird at \$375, regular registration at \$450, and spouses at \$200. When *Billboard's* IMIC advisory board met that January, it became clear that piracy was still the largest industry concern; it became the number one issue at IMIC '79.

This *Billboard* event appeared on track to succeed, as long as *Billboard* devoted the time and attention to market it through the internal conference division and editorial content in magazine issues. But breaking from previous years, there were fewer articles leading up to the event, essentially radio silence—besides a couple of advertisements—until the May 5 issue when a small write-up appeared on the front page and continued inside the publication. The main issues for IMIC '79 were piracy, home taping, corporate mergers, and emerging markets. *Billboard* tried unsuccessfully to line up an all-star charity gala with Frank Sinatra to coincide with IMIC, with invitations extended to Prince Rainier and Princess Grace.⁷³

For the ninth IMIC, the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) general manager for radio, Aubrey Singer, was the keynote. He spoke about the emergence of digital disks, copyright, and piracy—areas where BBC's concerns overlapped the recording industry's.⁷⁴ Piracy remained hot as declining sales and piracy affected the industry's bottom line. *Billboard's* Eliot Tiegel compared piracy to cancer.⁷⁵ Ron Wetherington, an FBI supervisory special agent, revealed that the U.S. record industry was losing over \$350 million a year because of piracy.⁷⁶

The conference mood, and especially the panel featuring record company presidents, was described by *Billboard's* Gerry Wood as “sobering”.⁷⁷ The substantial softening of the recording industry was taking a toll. Manufacturers of new video and audio equipment were urged to standardize equipment or the result would lead to massive consumer confusion, industry chaos, and a continued financial decline. The industry gloom showed in IMIC’s attendance; about 350 people from fifteen nations attended. In July, *Billboard* devoted ten pages to IMIC.

One music genre that was highlighted—and a conference bright spot—was country music. In Europe, country generally had not received the same attention as other genres. However, in 1979, it was clear country was making strong inroads. A decade prior, country music had been virtually non-existent in Europe.⁷⁸

Politicians, the White House, and the Music Industry Converge

The January 12, 1980 *Billboard* prominently featured information about the tenth IMIC and its advisory panel. The location was Washington, D.C., so that, as *Billboard* put it, attendees were within earshot of U.S. lawmakers. It was the first time IMIC was held in the continental United States. The early bird fee was \$450, regular registration \$550, and spouses were \$225.

A March issue of *Billboard* had the bold headline “White House Briefs IMIC” and declared a U.S. government briefing on economic issues would take place as a part of the conference. The briefing—to be held in the executive building where the president held his press conferences—had limited space, so only two hundred were allowed. *Billboard* proclaimed, “This year’s event, because of governmental involvement, is now seen as the most important IMIC to date and should provide fertile ground for industry leaders to discuss the challenges of all aspects of the entertainment business during the 1980s.”⁷⁹ The briefing turned out to be interesting indeed. Speakers such as Madeleine Albright—then a National Security Council member and later the first female U.S. Secretary of State—spoke to IMIC attendees at the same time as Operation Eagle Claw took place. Eagle Claw was the failed attempt to end a hostage crisis at the U.S. Embassy in Iran, resulting in eight deaths.⁸⁰

In addition to the big White House session, IMIC featured speeches from James T. McIntyre, Jr., the director of the Office of Management

and Budget, and Alan Cranston, a California senator. McIntyre delivered a grave message about expecting the economy to slow down. Cranston discussed the economy but focused on the entertainment links in California.⁸¹ Another prominent speaker was Herbert S. Schlosser, RCA's executive vice president, who identified new communications channels emerging in the 1980s, and asserted the video disk was the one that would affect the entertainment industry the most. In Schlosser's opinion, it was going to "be the most significant consumer electronics development since color television."⁸² He naturally took the opportunity to plug RCA's VideoDisc system. Schlosser ended his speech by urging attendees to look beyond music, saying the horizon "can be as broad as entertainment itself."⁸³

CBS President John D. Backe identified the recording industry as "unquestionably at the dawn of a new day. A day of soundwaves becoming digits and motion pictures becoming phonograph records. A day when that what used to be called blue sky technologies are right over our heads."⁸⁴ Backe acknowledged increased competition in all areas of entertainment. Coen Solleveld, PolyGram's president who had also spoken at the first IMIC, said he "was struck by the fact that the same generic issues which we faced then are still very much with us today. We may be sadder these days in the music business but apparently not very much wiser."⁸⁵ But Solleveld added, "there will always be music."⁸⁶

And there was music. A special Wayne Newton show featured his Las Vegas revue. It was open to the public, but IMIC attendees had special seating.⁸⁷ Barbara Mandrell performed as a part of the opening festivities.⁸⁸ IMIC topics included a session called "Home Taping: Cancer or Scapegoat?" And like previous years, companies and industry associations held meetings in conjunction with IMIC. For example, the Country Music Association held its quarterly meeting.

The 1980 IMIC drew a bit over three hundred attendees.⁸⁹ *Billboard's* financial statements showed an estimated conference income of over \$30,000.⁹⁰ IMIC 1980 was highlighted in the May 24 issue with coverage spanning fourteen pages.

The eleventh IMIC meant a return to Europe, this time to Berlin, West Germany. IMIC '81 coincided with other recording industry events, including the German Phono-Akademie Awards and an international music market seminar for record dealers. As many as one thousand people were expected in Berlin for various music industry events, something *Billboard* hoped to capitalize on. Keynote requests went to prominent speak-

ers including U.S. Senator Edward Kennedy.⁹¹ Kennedy did not attend, but *Billboard* was able to provide participants with a letter from Karl Carstens, the president of West Germany, welcoming IMIC participants.⁹² Perhaps a cost saving measure, IMIC '81 had no traditional keynote speakers.⁹³

This IMIC had an early bird rate of \$500, a regular registration of \$600, and spouses were \$275. The event was at the Bristol Hotel Kempinski, but three other hotels were also lined up. *Billboard's* financials showed an \$11,500 profit.⁹⁴

The advisory committee's topics included video rights, satellite and cable, music markets in developing countries, artists and record promotion, and a survey of new music. Updates on piracy and home taping were also agenda items. New technology was having a clear impact on the music and recording industry. As *Billboard's* Zhito stated, "The primary problem is that each of the different entertainment media are vying for the same consumer's time."⁹⁵ But it was not only consumer's time that attendees were concerned about. It was clear video rights were, as *Billboard* referred to them, a minefield. The rights were different depending on each country's legislation. Copyright and who owned the right to what in terms of video, cable, and satellite were the main issues of interest, overlapping several sessions. New technology had made things both exciting and scary.⁹⁶

For the next conference, IMIC '82, *Billboard* distributed ballots for location voting, with choices of Greece, Austria, Malta, Canada, and Switzerland.⁹⁷ Greece was the winner; the conference took place in Athens in April. Early bird registration was \$500, with regular registration \$100 more. Spouses were \$275. The conference theme was "The Challenge of Change." *Billboard* launched a new young executives program; the publication split registration fees for up to three of a company's young executives to attend for the first time.⁹⁸

Keynote speakers were back and included Dick Asher, deputy vice president and chief operating officer for CBS Records, and Jan D. Timmer, Polygram's vice president of operations. Agenda topics included the threat of record rentals, the growth of home taping, and intellectual property rights.⁹⁹ Asher opened IMIC with a positive tone, assuring attendees that the record industry was due for a miraculous recovery. He said, "We are forgetting the place music has always had in people's lives and making the totally unsupportable assumption that it will, or could, cease to be important."¹⁰⁰ Asher urged the industry to add more creative excitement. IMIC '82 also included concurrent roundtable discussions, allowing key

issues to be analyzed by smaller groups. The roundtable findings were reported to the general assembly.¹⁰¹

Billboard featured a six-page IMIC spotlight in the June 5, 1982 issue. One frequent problem with *Billboard*'s coverage of IMIC was that full reports would sometimes run more than a month after the actual event. For IMIC '82, *Billboard* had been scooped on its own conference by *Music Week* with event coverage out on May 9. As Zhito put it, *Music Week* gave the event "a healthy plug but nevertheless from a news standpoint, beating us by a full month and thereby stealing our thunder."¹⁰² Notably, *Billboard* did not release IMIC '82 attendance numbers.

The next IMIC—the thirteenth—was held at the Alvor Praia Hotel in Algarve, Portugal, in May 1983. It touted a broad agenda spanning the entire entertainment spectrum, a move designed to draw more attendees. This IMIC was advertised with the slogan "1983—The Turn Around Year." Early registration was now \$575 with regular registration \$675. Breaking from the norm, spouses were free and the young executives' fee was only \$300.¹⁰³

Reception for First Time Attendees Added

One novel event for the Portugal conference was a First Timer's Reception to introduce new attendees to industry leaders. Many found out about this new event directly via a personal invitation from Zhito, *Billboard*'s publisher. As a way to increase the conference anticipation and participation, Zhito sent regular letters to previous attendees, telling them about conference developments, before details were published in *Billboard*; they heard it from Zhito first, a point that was emphasized in those letters.¹⁰⁴

The keynote draw was Televisa's President Emilio Azcárraga discussing the home entertainment industry and opportunities in satellite communications.¹⁰⁵ PolyGram's President Jan Timmer predicted CD sales would match LP sales by 1989, while *Billboard*'s Zhito called 1983 the year of the CD.¹⁰⁶ Other hot topics included new technology's impact on rights, television being a friend or foe, the rental market dilemma, and Africa as an emerging market.

Externally, *Billboard* was as positive as ever about IMIC. However, internally a battle was brewing as it was clear to management that IMIC was on a downward slope. The repetition of the conference eliminated some of its appeal and the economic affluence of the music industry was

diminishing. Correspondence showed grave concerns. In a memo to Tom Noonan, Zhito quoted Noonan as having stated, “I’m really now getting quite concerned about the state of IMIC this year.” Zhito’s response was that “if you who run IMIC—and are in a position to know—are that concerned, I’m worried sick.”¹⁰⁷ Zhito added that “if you are getting negative ‘vibes’—and I’ve learned to trust your vibes—then I urge that we drop this year’s conference and concentrate our efforts on other, more rewarding projects.”¹⁰⁸ Serious discussions about canceling occurred. Ultimately, a fear of ire from those with travel plans resulted in IMIC ’83 moving forward.¹⁰⁹

The 1983 conference suffered gravely from low attendance. It was mainly U.S. attendee numbers that declined, dropping more than fifty percent from the prior year. However, overall attendance figures showed only 129 total registrants and the conference was \$25,000 in the red.¹¹⁰ *Billboard* had issues with a late finalizing of the agenda, keynotes, and panelists. There was a lack of IMIC preview in *Billboard* issues. The magazine’s International Editorial Director Mike Hennessey called it “totally inadequate previewing,” adding that, “we must blow our own trumpet in the magazine and elsewhere and not undersell the Conference.”¹¹¹ All of this contributed to the lack of attendance.

Despite IMIC losing money and suffering low attendance, *Billboard* moved ahead with planning another conference. The ’84 IMIC was to take place in Killarney, Ireland in May. The theme was “Harnessing the New Delivery Systems.” *Billboard*’s coverage of its own event was not much better this year. Hennessey lamented how, “once again we are way behind schedule in terms of running stories and house ads in the magazine.”¹¹²

For Ireland, registration costs increased; the early bird was now \$600, with regular registration \$100 more. Spouses were free. *Billboard* added a category called “corporate registration.” That meant that if a company had several employees attending, the fees were \$450 for early bird and \$550 for regular registration. One of the early discussion points was Irish companies not being able to afford the hefty registration fee, and with an event in Ireland, it was important to have them represented. However, magazine staff were concerned if they lowered the fee for Irish companies, it would set a precedent for future conferences.¹¹³

Billboard touted topics such as the future of trade, the role of independent labels, and the continued impact of the CD. Turner Broadcasting’s President Ted Turner received an invitation to keynote the event.¹¹⁴

Opening remarks were to be given by Ted Nealon, Irish minister of state for culture. Another keynote speaker was to be William Agee, chairman and chief operating officer of Semper Industries.¹¹⁵ However, in a miniscule two-paragraph announcement on May 5—merely days prior to the event—*Billboard* announced the cancellation of the conference “due to an unusually high number of late cancellations among registrants.”¹¹⁶ Attendance had eroded to the point where the conference could no longer achieve its objectives.¹¹⁷ *Billboard* staff had quietly informed registered attendees about the cancellation before the article was published.¹¹⁸

What was to be the last IMIC took place in 1985, once again in Europe and in West Germany, but in Munich this time. *Billboard* asked several people to write commentaries on items to be discussed at IMIC to create event excitement.¹¹⁹ For the first time, a live feed of the conference was provided, thanks to European satellite channel Music Box. The live signal was relayed to monitors in the hotel lobby and the conference hall for attendee viewing.¹²⁰

IMIC '85 ran in tandem with the tenth Congress of the International Copyright Society (INTERGU). The two conferences held a joint session and the IMIC registration covered both events. Registration was \$550, with spouses free. There was a corporate fee of \$450 for companies with three or more attendees. Sessions were translated into German, French, English, Spanish, and Russian.¹²¹

Keynote speaker and Chrysalis Chairman, Chris Wright, blasted an unhealthy trend toward oligarchy in the industry.¹²² IMIC '85 ultimately resulted in a resolution calling for governments to recognize the importance of the creative copyright industries. The resolution came out of the joint IMIC and INTERGU panel.¹²³ The regular Trendsetter Awards were replaced by a special IMIC award, given to Bob Geldof and Ken Kragen for their efforts to combat African famine. However, Geldof and Kragen did not attend.¹²⁴

The Munich conference became the last IMIC as the event died a silent death. There was no mention of IMIC in *Billboard* in the next two years. The last mention is a photo of Zhito presenting Ken Kragen with his award in the December 7, 1985 issue.¹²⁵ That year is also the last year in Zhito's archival collection with an IMIC folder. The Munich IMIC's theme had been “The New Horizons: New Profit Opportunities.”¹²⁶ It was ironic considering this was the last IMIC, although in some ways strangely

fitting since *Billboard* was now clearly looking beyond IMIC for new horizons and new profit opportunities.

Concluding Thoughts

Billboard launched IMIC with a big industry bang and the conferences impacted music business practices, technology launches, and global business, but that impact diminished as music industry and global circumstances changed faster than IMIC could adapt. IMIC slowly faded away. Patrick Hurley, vice president for CBS International, called IMIC “a showcase for our industry,” while Zhito proclaimed, “We have always been proud of the fact that IMIC has been used by the world’s leading manufacturers as a launching pad of new concepts in our field.”¹²⁷ Rodney Burbeck, editor for *Music Week*, described IMIC as “one of the few occasions during the year that enables the industry to get together on neutral ground to discuss mutual problems.”¹²⁸

The music industry retrenched until it could reinvent itself, but *Billboard*’s IMIC could not find the formula for reinvention. In the best years, the conference added both revenue and publication legitimacy to *Billboard* as a leading voice in the music industry. It is notable that a media outlet united an industry and, in several ways, changed working practices. *Billboard* went beyond its focus as solely a trade magazine. For sixteen years, *Billboard* provided a global conference platform for industry competitors to meet, network, and unite around important topics such as a universal numbering system and piracy. *Billboard* was uniquely able to unite the industry it covered as a publication.

Zhito referred to IMIC as “the summit meeting of the music and home entertainment industry, attracting the top industry leaders from around the world.”¹²⁹ Yet, *Billboard* ended IMIC for several reasons. Zhito acknowledged that as a conference, IMIC “is the most difficult and unwieldy to organize and mount... this is due to the broad scope of the subject material treated, and the geographic spread from which participants and registrants must be drawn.”¹³⁰ IMIC was an opportunity for *Billboard* to cover its event with editorial content and advertising sales, but *Billboard* too played a part in IMIC’s demise by not publicizing it properly. What killed IMIC was a lack of enthusiasm within *Billboard* and among attendees; attendance dropped as a direct response to the financial softening of the industry. For *Billboard*, IMIC became a venture that cost more money than it was bringing in. Financially, the conference no longer made sense.

A&M's European Managing Director, Marcus Bicknell, wrote to Zhito, "The apparent drop in attendance rate over the last few years is very disappointing to me personally and is demotivating for those important executives attending."¹³¹ In Zhito's words, it was "not the registration fee but the airfare that makes IMIC the kind of luxury that only the top execs of a company are free to attend."¹³² With a recession hitting the industry hard, IMIC became a luxury few could afford. Ultimately, as Zhito declared, the success of IMIC had been in the participants' hands; *Billboard* merely provided the forum.¹³³

Endnotes

Unless noted, all archival materials are from the Lee Zhito Collection, Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, U.S.A., hereafter referred to as LZC.

1. Lee Zhito, "The Need for Dialog," *Billboard*, June 5, 1982, 53.
2. "After the Drums, the Dialog: A Review of 15 Years of Billboard International Music Industry Conferences," n.d. Box 6, folder 8, Lee Zhito Collection, Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Hereafter, LZC.
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Brands and Product Mentions in Rap Music: An Analysis of Branded Entertainment in Rap Music Lyrics From 2006-2020

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Abstract

With the way consumers access and engage with music changing due to the internet, record labels have looked at product placements as a crucial way to build declining revenue from music plays. The present study examines rap music's lyrical mention of brands in most popular songs on the U.S. Billboard charts from 2006 to 2020. Overall, it is clear that the appeal for brands to partner with the music industry, and for artists to include brand mentions in songs, is still prevalent. Yet, these partnerships must be strategically pursued to lead to benefits to both the artist and the brand.

Keywords: brand mentions, product placement, content analysis, music, rap, branded entertainment

Introduction

With the way consumers access and engage with music changing due to the internet, record labels have begun to look at product placements as a crucial way to build declining revenue from music plays. Branded placements in song lyrics and music videos are potentially lucrative for the record labels and the artists. Record labels earned an estimated \$15 million to \$20 million in revenue from product placement in music videos, which increased from previous years.¹ In 2021, total global product placement spending was expected to rise nearly 14 percent from 2020 to approximately \$23 billion.² However, much of the details of placement

agreements are kept private between those involved. With more people opting for “ad free” services on streaming music services, it is anticipated that product placement will increase.

From a marketing standpoint, the metric for the success of brand mentions is consumer sales. For example, Desiigner’s “Panda” was #1 on Billboard’s Hot 100 in May 2016 and BMW sold 712 X6s, compared to 565 in May 2015.³ However, advertisers cannot draw a one-to-one connection between the song lyric and the increase in sales. With limited empirical data available pertaining to the origin of the placement of brand mentions in rap song lyrics, the question of which placements were paid endorsements and which occurred organically as a result of the artist’s affinity for the brand or product has led researchers to explore the type and frequency of placements in entertainment media such as movies, television shows, and music videos. However, the extent and impact of brand mentions within music lyrics is still an emerging study area.⁴

It is estimated that users spend nearly 17 percent of their life listening to music,⁵ and between 2016 and 2017, music consumption is estimated to have increased by 12 percent.⁶ In particular, adolescents consume music at the highest rate⁷ and are four times more likely to list rap as their preferred genre.⁸ In the United States, rap is the fastest growing and most popular music genre, accounting for a quarter of all music consumption⁹ and six of the top ten most popular artists in 2019 were rappers.¹⁰

The frequency of brands mentioned within rap music has led some scholars to say that brand mentions are “a way of life in rap music.”¹¹ With rap music focusing on lived experiences more than other genres,¹² the genre may be a particularly good fit for brand mentions.¹³ However, as mentioned prior, it is not easy to know if any of these brands are mentioned as part of a paid arrangement or if the artist merely chose them for lyrical or status purposes. Regardless of the reason, rap music commonly includes brands.¹⁴

The present study examines rap music’s lyrical mention of brands in most popular songs on the U.S. Billboard charts from 2006 to 2020. It contributes to the current body of research on product placements in rap music by: 1) focusing on a variety of categories of product placements in a specific genre of music to present a more comprehensive picture of the genre’s connection to consumer culture; 2) answering Sánchez-Olmos et al.’s (2020) call for looking at brand mentions in specific music genres; 3) answering Mohammed-Baksh and Callison’s (2008 and 2015) call for

studying placement in lyrics over time; and 4) updating past studies by examining recent top songs.

Review of the Literature

Hip-Hop Culture

The terms rap and hip-hop are often used interchangeably to describe a genre of music consisting of stylized rhythmic music accompanied by a rhythmic and rhyming speech.¹⁵ The terms will be used interchangeably to refer to the musical genre in this paper as well. Rap music is one of the four elements of the hip-hop culture, including emceeing, breakdancing, and graffiti art.¹⁶ DJ Kool Herc is considered by many to be the originator of hip-hop for his innovations in emceeing while in the South Bronx area of New York City.¹⁷

Once a thriving borough of New York City, the demographic make-up in The Bronx experienced a significant shift, and by the 1980 census, Black and Puerto Rican residents, together with the other ethnic minorities, comprised the majority of the borough's residents.¹⁸ As property values fell, crime rose, and arson became rampant. This led to the closure of many neighborhood businesses and left much of the borough in ruins.¹⁹ Searching for entertainment and an opportunity to escape from the grim realities of the day, DJs turned the abandoned and burned-out buildings into a stage for block parties.²⁰

It was against this backdrop of violence, poverty, and racial unrest that the culture and sounds of hip-hop were conceived. According to Marcus Reeves, hip-hop historian and author of *Somebody Scream! Rap Music's Rise to Prominence in the Aftermath of Black Power*, the conditions led to a growth of ideas and a movement to escape from gangs and violence.²¹ While modern hip-hop lyrics can be viewed as inciting violence, discriminating against women, and craving materialism, some researchers believe hip-hop culture itself "is built on values of social justice, peace, respect, self-worth, community, and having fun."²²

It was not until the late 1970s that mainstream media began to embrace the genre and its growth soared.²³ The Sugarhill Gang's 1979 song "Rapper's Delight" is considered the first hip-hop recording to gain widespread popularity in the United States.²⁴ The mid-1980s saw the beginning of the so-called "golden age" decade of hip-hop with the 1986 release of Run-D.M.C.'s *Raising Hell* album, which has sold more than three

million copies to date. However, this era was also plagued with violence and crime, culminating with the murders of Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. in separate drive-by shootings in 1996 and 1997, respectively.²⁵ By 1999, hip-hop was the top-selling genre of music in the U.S., with over 80 million albums sold²⁶ and by 2017, it surpassed rock as the most consumed musical genre in the United States, due in part to its dominance on streaming platforms.²⁷

Branding, Music, and Business in Rap Music

Song lyrics are often aspirational, whether about love or lifestyle.²⁸ It should be no surprise that a genre launched in an impoverished neighborhood located only twenty minutes from the heart of the world's wealthiest city would emphasize extravagance and luxury.²⁹ Boasting about what one has (or wants) in the lyrics of rap songs provides a basis for developing promotional partnerships between the artists and the brands that represent the lifestyle they emulate. As an executive from Roc-A-Fella Records explained, the hip-hop culture "is about the things we want and own," thus making it a perfect branding opportunity.

Hip-hop artists often incorporate brands they use in their daily lives into their song lyrics and music videos.³¹ According to one marketing executive, the ideal situation would be for a mention of a brand name in the song, include the brand in the music video, and then have the brand and artist work together in other promotional opportunities.³² Although brand mentions do not always reach that "ideal relationship," brands have been intertwined with hip-hop music since its earliest days. For example, Run-D.M.C.'s 1986 hit, "My Adidas," considered one of the first modern examples of product placement in hip-hop song lyrics, pays homage to the footwear brand in its title and no less than twenty times in the lyrics.³³ Though not initially compensated by the brand, a subsequent sold-out Madison Square Garden concert led to a lucrative endorsement contract and a signature line of shoes when Adidas executives in attendance witnessed most of the massive crowd holding Adidas sneakers in the air during Run-D.M.C.'s performance of the song.³⁴ To obtain a similar number of impressions through paid advertising as that which resulted organically from the song would have meant a significant expenditure for Adidas.³⁵ Interestingly, Adidas was not the first brand mentioned in Run-D.M.C.'s song lyrics. Their 1984 hit "Rock Box" included the lines "we bake a little cake with Duncan Hines" and "Calvin Klein's no friend of mine." The lat-

ter was not construed as an approving nod to the brand, and the former did not engender the same audience reaction with boxes of cake mix that “My Adidas” did with the sneaker showing that not all placements turned into success for the marketers.

Eventually, advertisers started to pay close attention to hip-hop when Sprite’s “Obey Your Thirst” campaign, which launched in 1994 and ran through 2019, connected with its target audiences. The campaign featured notable and recognizable rap artists such as MC Rakim, Nas, and others. In 2017 the campaign flipped the messaging and, instead of “Obey Your Thirst,” told consumers to “Obey Your Verse.” The flipped campaign celebrated hip-hop artists by printing their lyrics on soda cans, solidifying the connection between the music, the artists, and the drink.³⁶

As mentioned earlier, not all brand mentions in song lyrics result from coordinated efforts by an organization’s marketing department. Busta Rhymes’ 2001 hit, “Pass the Courvoisier” (a high-end cognac), included the liquor brand purely as an artistic choice; however, after the brand’s parent company saw an 18.9 percent sales increase in the United States,³⁷ it entered into an agreement with the artist.³⁸ With the release of “Pass the Courvoisier Part II,” the brand’s sales increased almost 5 percent in the first quarter of 2002.³⁹ However, that spike did not last for long as by 2004, sales growth dropped as other alcohol brands mentioned in more popular songs saw a rise in sales.⁴⁰ Thus, showing that while brand mentions may provide a brand with an initial boost, the brand needs to find ways to capitalize on and maintain the spike.

Product placement in songs and music videos may be necessary as it is often difficult for artists to support themselves on music royalties alone. A recent example is when record labels such as Universal Music Group have partnered with tech companies and advertising agencies to allow retroactive ad placement.⁴¹ In retroactive placement, the agency and tech company insert brands into music videos at some point after the original release of the video. While some may see this as a way for artists to continue to earn money on old content, others see it as artists “selling out.”⁴²

Brand Mentions in the Media

Brand mentions are often studied in television shows,⁴³ movies,⁴⁴ and music videos.⁴⁵ Studies have shown that there is a connection between brand mentions and viewer attitude towards a brand,⁴⁶ intent to purchase

and selection of brands,⁴⁷ and a connection between the viewer's investment in the storyline and feelings toward the brand.⁴⁸

Given that the type and quality of brand mentions range from subtle incorporation of a brand name into a song to overt mentions by the artist of getting paid to mention the product,⁴⁹ the actual number of organic and paid placements in songs is unknown.⁵⁰ Usually, placements in song lyrics are discussed only when they have an overwhelmingly positive impact on sales or, as in the case of Lady Gaga's music video "Telephone," the brands are incorporated in an "obvious" and "extreme" manner designed to draw attention to the fact that brand mention is occurring.⁵¹

Due to the structure of, and out of necessity to see a rise in sales, the music business has turned to, and at times encourages, incorporating brand mentions in songs. Perhaps in an attempt to preserve the illusion that brand mentions are organic, most brand mention agreements are confidential.⁵² However, some artists are open about getting paid to mention and/or wear products. Fergie, for example, agreed to mention and wear the fashion brand Candie's for \$2 million.⁵³

Many studies of brand mentions in rap music focused on the appearance of brands in music videos. For example, Burkhalter and Thornton (2014) found that more than 90% of the music videos studied from 1995 to 2008 included some form of product placement. The researchers found that vehicles (418 mentions or 54.7%), clothing and shoes (133 mentions or 17.4%) were the most prominent references when looking at product categories. The researchers also found a slightly higher number of luxury items (400 mentions or 52.3%) over non-luxury items (364 mentions or 47.7%) within the videos.

In their study of music videos in the Billboard Hot 100 top thirty spots in each year from 2003 to 2016, Sánchez-Olmos et al. (2020) found that cars (608 mentions or 18.3%), caps (357 mentions or 10.6%), and shoes (277 mentions or 8.4%) were the most prominent types of products found in 420 music videos. However, they did find a new category represented in the brand mentions: technology. The authors point out that the appearance of technology (7%) had not appeared in previous studies. The top technology brands seen in the videos were Apple (56 or 1.8%), Nokia (34 or 1.1%), and Beats by Dre (43 or 1.4%). They concluded that the appearance of technology brands was to reflect users' lifestyles and a direct connection to the move to digital technology.

In addition to examining placement in music videos, scholars and advertising industry organizations have recently turned their focus to product placement in song lyrics. In 2004, American Brandstand reported that there were approximately one thousand brands mentioned in songs on the Top 20 Singles chart. These songs were predominantly hip-hop singles. The American Brandstand project, created by an advertising agency whose clients were often mentioned in songs, reported the most mentioned brand in songs on the Billboard charts in 2005 was Mercedes, followed by Nike and Cadillac.⁵⁴ Overall, 2005 saw 106 hip-hop songs with brand reference, total mentions down 6% from the previous year.⁵⁵ While fashion and beverage mentions decreased (9% and 36%, respectively), mentions of weapon brand names increased 19%.⁵⁶

News and business outlets have also reported on the number of brand mentions appearing in songs. Bloomberg (2017) reported that one of the most popular brand groups represented in hip-hop song lyrics is automobiles stating, “Eight of the 12 most popular product mentions have four wheels”.⁵⁷ The most popular in the group is Rolls-Royce, with mentions in eleven songs released between 2015 and 2017.⁵⁸ Of the 280 songs analyzed by Bloomberg across all genres, the most branded mentions were in the categories of automotive, fashion, and entertainment.

The National Public Radio show *All Things Considered* looked at brand mentions in the Top 20 songs for three years.⁵⁹ Although there were 212 unique mentions of brand names, these mentions are not always as explicit as advertisers might like, given that many songs use slang instead of actual brand names. By way of example, in the song “Bad and Boujee,” the Migos rap “hop in the frog” (referring to a Porsche) and “hop in the lamb” (referring to a Lamborghini).⁶⁰ As with the Bloomberg report, automobiles were the top product mentioned.

One longitudinal study found that brand mentions increased over multiple decades. The study analyzed 1,583 of Billboard’s top thirty pop songs from 1960 to 2013 and found that location mentions in song lyrics became more frequent in the mid-1990s, with the number of place names reaching a high of 86 mentions in 2006.⁶¹ As with other studies, Gloor found that automobiles, specifically Mercedes-Benz, Bentley, Corvette, and Cadillac, were the most frequent product mentions in song lyrics.

Mohammed-Baksh and Callison’s (2008) study of the top one hundred songs across genres, and using rankings from various sources, found that brand mentions and product mentions were more prevalent in rap

music than any other genre (56.67%), finding that rap songs tended to mention vehicles and luxury brands most often (40% and 72.82%, respectively). They also found that male rap artists were more likely than female rap artists to mention products in their lyrics (63.3% and 10%, respectively). Specifically, male artists mentioned automotive brands, and female artists frequently mentioned travel and entertainment brands. In a follow-up study, Mohammed-Baksh and Callison (2015) confirmed that gender played a crucial role in the number and types of product mentions, with, once again, female artists mentioning significantly fewer products than male artists.

Craig et al.'s (2017) study of the top 20 year-end songs from 2009-2013 found that rap had more product mentions (73.0%), inclusive of branded and non-branded products, than any other five genres studied. Following earlier studies, they found that male artists mentioned brands at a higher rate (33.3%) than female artists (19.8%). However, the type of product mentioned by genre differed from Mohammed-Baksh and Callison's study in that Craig's team found males mentioned clothing and shoes (27.8%) and female artists mentioned automobiles and auto-related brands (25.7%). Craig's study also found that clothing and shoes were the most frequently mentioned products. Interestingly, 54.5% of the songs studied included non-branded product mentions compared to 30.5% of the songs containing branded mentions. The large number of non-branded product mentions provides opportunities for collaboration between artists and advertisers subsequent to a song's success in the marketplace. An executive with Totes Isotoner stated that partnering with Rihanna following her 2007 hit "Umbrella" provided "an opportunity to see what we could do in the [celebrity] accessories category."⁶²

The literature reveals that branding is a significant component of music. Further, the type of brand or item discussed and the genre of the music also impact the frequency and type of mentions. However, there is limited research examining branding within rap music over time. Since this genre is the fastest growing in the United States and has been identified as containing more brands than other genres, it is essential to understand what messages are contained in this music.

Methodology

To address this gap in the literature, we examined the top 25 rap songs for each year, 2006 to 2020, to answer the following questions:

Q1: Has the number of brand mentions in rap music increased or decreased from 2006 to 2020?

Q2: Which brand categories were mentioned most often in rap music songs?

Q3: Which subcategories were mentioned most in rap music within each brand category?

Data for the present study are made up of rap songs identified through *Billboard*, which uses sales, airplay, and streaming counts to produce popularity charts. The authors utilized a convenience sample of the top 25 rap songs from the genre identified as “Hot Rap Songs” from 2006 through 2020 ($n = 375$). Next, the authors used www.AZLyrics.com to locate each song’s lyrics and enter the data into a qualitative software program, QDA Miner, to assist with analysis. Next, each song’s lyrics were contextually analyzed following an open coding concept, involving a thorough reading of the lyrics to identify themes and topics. Five broad themes were identified: food and non-alcoholic beverages, travel and destinations, transportation, entertainment, and fashion. Next, the authors examined the lyrics again using a closed or focused coding process, which provided additional coding and linking of data and confirms or disproves minor themes.

The process described above was repeated several times at each level: two independent passes when conducting open coding, and two read-throughs when completing the focused coding. This robust coding method ensured accurate identification and interpretation of the lyrics. There were instances where the exact meaning or message was uncertain, which is common in rap music; as Bogazianos (2012) suggests, this ambiguity creates controversy encouraged by corporate music businesses. When in doubt of the intended message or product, the researchers sought clarification using one or more of the following methods: watching music videos, listening to the music, or by using the annotations provided by www.genius.com, which allows registered users to explain the lyric and the community to vote (up or down) the interpretation as correct. Finally, once all codes were identified, a third review of the identified codes was undertaken by a researcher who had not reviewed the lyrics prior. Any discrepancies were identified, discussed, and the researchers worked together to resolve different interpretations, resulting in a consensus.

Results

Brand mentions within the most popular rap songs from 2006 to 2020 ($n = 375$) confirmed previous studies. Mentions of travel, transportation, and fashion products occurred in over 40% of songs, while entertainment was mentioned in a quarter of rap songs and food at just over 10%.

However, the number of songs mentioning some product type is only part of the analysis. We also examined the number of times each brand was mentioned within the songs to understand the prevalence of brand mentions. The total count (the number of times a brand is mentioned) across all the categories is 1,275. Table 1 provides a complete breakdown of the categories, the number and percentage of songs (cases) where the lyrics occurred, and the total counts. This analysis is helpful as it demonstrates that, for example, a fashion brand was rapped in 150 songs (40%) and that references to a fashion product (count) occurred 334 times within those 150 cases.

Product Category	Cases	Percent of Cases	Count
Food & Non-Alcoholic Beverages	43	11.5%	51
Travel & Destinations	166	44.3%	399
Transportation	157	41.9%	343
Entertainment	95	25.3%	148
Fashion	150	40.0%	334

Table 1. Brand mentions by product category, number of cases, percent of cases, and count.

Question 1

Examining the trends in lyrics about products from 2006 to 2020, both in code counts (the number of occurrences within the songs) and cases (the number of songs mentioning products), few trends were evident. During the fifteen years of the study, the average number of top songs that included a product mention is slightly over 19 (or 76%), and the average number of times (count) a product is mentioned is 85 per year. While this has fluctuated over time, there has been no substantial increase or decrease during the last fifteen years (see Chart 1).

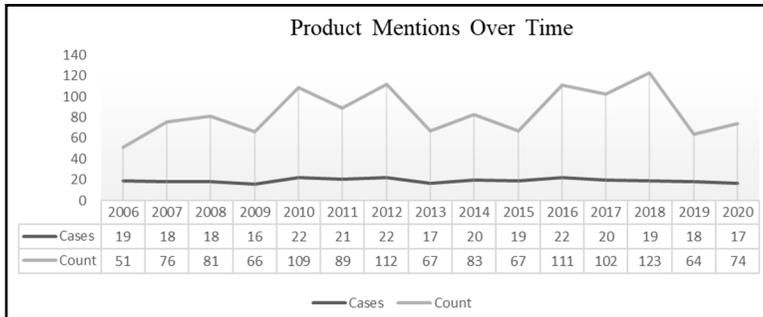


Chart 1. Product mentions over time.

However, within each category, some years stood out as having more mentions than others. For the entertainment category, sports mentions were most prevalent in 2010, movie and television mentions were most prevalent in 2016, physical technology was most prevalent in 2011, and software technology mentions were most prevalent in 2015. For the fashion category, shoe mentions were most prevalent in 2014, jewelry mentions were most prevalent in 2018, and clothing mentions were most prevalent in 2021. For the travel category, city mentions were most prevalent in 2007, and country mentions were most prevalent in 2011. For the transportation category, sports and luxury car mentions were most prevalent in 2016 and 2017, non-sports and non-luxury car mentions were most prevalent in 2008. The food and beverage category saw no years with large increases.

Question 2

The second question addressed is the most frequently mentioned category. Results indicate that the most frequently mentioned product was Travel & Destinations (44.3%), followed by Transportation (41.9%) and Fashion (40%). The least mentioned categories are Entertainment (25.3%) and Food and Non-Alcoholic Beverages (11.5%). This finding contradicts previous research,⁶³ which found that automotive and fashion⁶⁴ were the top categories mentioned (see Chart 2).

Question 3

Question three asked which subcategories were mentioned most in rap music. Table 2 provides the breakdown for each subcategory. In this section, we will describe selected findings. The most mentioned product

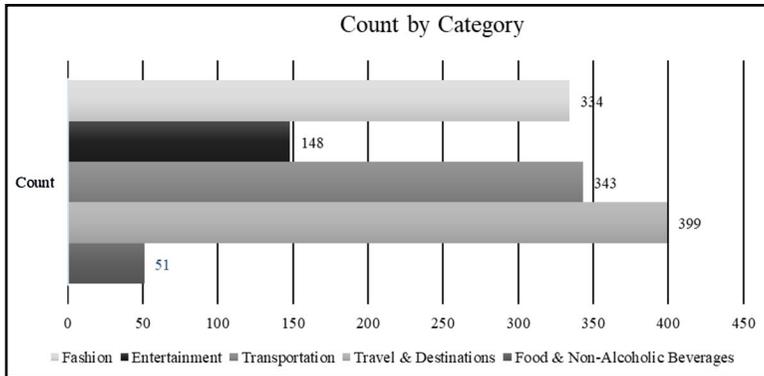


Chart 2. Count by category.

within the music (both by case and count) is sports and luxury cars which were rapped about in 140 songs (37.3%) and over 269 times. Just behind luxury and sports cars, cities were featured prominently, occurring in 118 songs (31.5%) and being mentioned 220 times. Luxury products (78%) were mentioned significantly more frequently than non-luxury products (22%). This finding is consistent with Mohammed-Baksh and Callison (2008) but inconsistent with Burkhalter and Thomas (2014), who found an equal number of luxury and non-luxury items.

In the entertainment category, BET was the most mentioned product (10 mentions); in the fashion category, Gucci (40 mentions), Jordans (34 mentions), Rolex (25 mentions), and Louis Vuitton (25 mentions) received the most mentions; in the transportation category, Rolls-Royce (57 total mentions, including 12 mentions specifically of Rolls-Royce, 25 mentions of Phantom, 14 mentions of Wraith, and 6 mentions of Ghost), Ferrari (32 mentions), Lamborghini (31 mentions), Mercedes-Benz (27 mentions), and Chevrolet (22 mentions); and in the travel category, New York (27 mentions), Atlanta (20 mentions), Los Angeles (18 mentions) were the most-mentioned destinations.

Sánchez-Olmos et al. (2020) was the first study to mention technology brands. Our findings show that technology brand mentions still appear in rap music lyrics. Overall, Apple products were the most prevalent brand mentions (11 mentions). However, when looking at hardware and software separately, Kodak (6 mentions) and iPhone (5 mentions) are the top mentions for hardware. FaceTime (6 mentions), Instagram (6 mentions), and Twitter (4 mentions) were the most prevalent mentions of software. Additionally, hardware mentions were limited to just two brands, while

software mentions were across six brands ranging from entertainment to maps. To provide a more nuanced understanding of each category, Table 2 provides an overview of the cases and counts for each product and associated subcategories.

Product Category	Cases	Percent of Cases	Count
Food & Non-Alcoholic Beverages			
Beverages	8	2.1%	10
Food	37	9.9%	41
Travel & Destinations			
Cities	118	31.5%	220
States	24	6.4%	32
Countries	44	11.7%	65
Venue	52	13.9%	68
Other Travel or Destination	10	2.7%	14
Transportation			
Sports/Luxury Car	140	37.3%	269
Non-Sports/Non-Luxury Car	35	6.3%	53
Other Transportation	17	4.5%	21
Entertainment			
Movies/TV/News	27	7.2%	38
Sports	22	5.9%	28
Technology - Hardware	15	4.0%	19
Technology - Software	24	6.4%	30
Other Technology	25	6.7%	33
Fashion			
Shoes	52	13.9%	79
Jewelry	45	12.0%	65
Clothing	61	16.3%	80
Accessories	40	10.7%	45
Other Fashion	35	9.3%	65

Table 2. Overview of the cases and counts for each product and subcategory.

Discussion

The study provides a current analysis of the trends in brand mentions in rap music from 2006 to 2020. When considered over time, the study's findings show that year-to-year changes in brand mentions in song lyrics are not consistent. There are spikes within each category across the time studied; yet overall, product mentions in rap music have remained fairly consistent from 2006 to 2020.

There was a shift in category dominance, however, when compared to other studies. While past studies found transportation or fashion the most frequent category appearing through branded mentions, this study finds that travel was the dominant category. This could point to a more significant change based on generational trends, such as people of younger ages preferring to spend their time and money on experiences.⁶⁵ For many rap artists, the mention of cities is connected to their growth or success. 118 songs announced that the artist was from a city or heading to a city.

A large number of transportation and fashion branded mentions shows that these categories are still prominent in hip-hop culture. Both fashion and transportation methods are ways people identify with certain groups and express their belonging. Displaying brands from these categories becomes a shorthand way of announcing group membership for many people. Fashion and shoes were often used as signs of status in rap music as people mentioned in the songs had Gucci (40 mentions), Louis Vuitton (25 mentions), or wore Jordans (34 mentions).

The Sánchez-Olmos et al. (2020) study found technology as an emerging trend in branded mentions, and this current study confirmed their findings. However, instead of hardware such as iPod, Kodak, and Nintendo 64 being the primary form of technology, software such as Google Maps, Instagram, and FaceTime were more common. During the fifteen years, it is worth noting that mentions of hardware has declined significantly while software mentions have increased (see Chart 3). Between 2012 and 2013, there was a clear shift from the mention of hardware (e.g., iPhone) to software technology (e.g., Twitter, Google). There is likely a connection between the growing popularity of software over hardware technology around the same time.

In line with previous studies, one consistent trend is that luxury items, specifically luxury vehicles, still strongly connect with rap music. Given that most younger people may not be able to afford a luxury vehicle, the mention of these brands in songs points to an aspirational goal and a

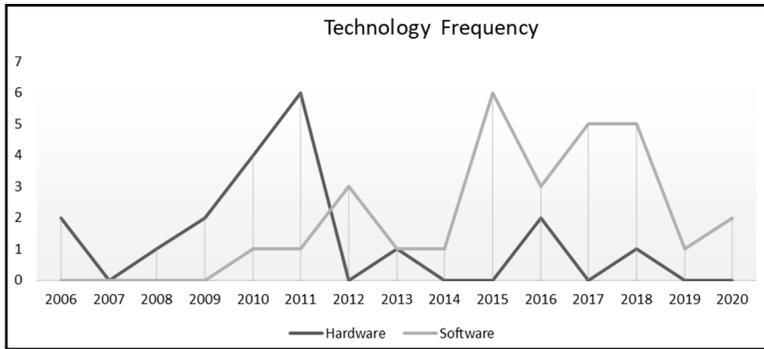


Chart 3. Technology frequency.

way of associating one’s own personal brand with these high-end prestige vehicles. When looking at the top subcategories, branded mentions of cities, luxury cars, clothing, and shoes, it becomes clearer that these items may reinforce and announce group membership regarding where people are currently and where they wish to be as aspirational goals. Although this study did find mentions of Chevrolet, Mercedes, Cadillac, and BMW as transportation brands, higher-end luxury vehicles were more frequently mentioned: Lamborghini (31 mentions), Ferrari (32 mentions), Rolls-Royce Phantom (25 mentions), Bugatti (16 mentions), and Maybach (16 mentions).

Industry implications

The data from this study point towards a selective approach to brand partnerships for artists, advertisers, and the recording industry. Instead of reaching out to top artists or recording labels, marketers need to consider the bigger picture of trends with the generation listening to the music they are considering. Additionally, studying the ups and downs of the year-to-year product mentions might provide marketers with crucial information on when to partner with artists and record labels so that their brand mention does not fight the branded mention noise.

Luxury brands could look to having their product names mentioned in rap songs for long-term status connections. While younger people may not be able to buy the product at the point of listening, hearing the product name mentioned in songs they relate to could point them in a direction for when they do have the financial ability to afford luxury items. Brands may

see an increase in desirability from being associated with a specific rap artist or song.

Limitations and future research

One of the limitations of this study is that the coders were focused on the mentions of recognizable brands mentioned in rap music lyrics. Therefore, some brand mentions which might have been slang or insider ways of referring to a specific brand might not have been coded. Additionally, this study did not explore recall and recognition in audiences listening to songs. However, the study does provide groundwork and context for future studies.

Future research should attempt to contextualize the brand placements in terms of context within the song and the cultural environment when the songs are on the top lists. This would provide a richer analysis and, perhaps, help predict when there will be high levels of branded mentions in songs. Additionally, future research could consider top rap songs from a more extensive period and include more songs to look for trends. Finally, this type of study area is not complete without adding the voice of the artists and record labels. Interviews with both the artist and marketer sides would help provide context for the number of branded mentions in rap music.

Conclusion

Overall, this study confirms that branded mentions are still prevalent in rap music. While there was no substantial increase or decrease in brand mentions over the time studied, there were fluctuations. This may show that rap music is not just mentioning brands to communicate reputation, but also to connect with real-world events. As with past studies, this current study also finds that the most frequently mentioned categories convey status, both aspirational and lived. The connection between brand mentions and lived experiences may also account for the rise in mentions of technology brands. As technology becomes more incorporated in daily life, both as a tool and a status symbol, the more consumers can expect the brands to be included in their entertainment.

Overall, it is clear that the appeal for brands to partner with the music industry and for artists to include brand mentions in songs is still prevalent. Yet, these partnerships, must be strategically pursued to lead to benefits for

both the artist and the brand. If there is no match between the brand and the artist, the mention becomes more noise for the consumer.

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Declaration of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest or financial incentive for this work.

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Becoming an Award-Winning Country Musician: A Study of the Many Paths to Success

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Abstract

Country music artists aspiring to sign with a major record label, win a music award, or achieve other goals associated with success in the music industry may experience difficulties in getting noticed by industry leaders and potential fans. Are there certain paths that are more productive, faster, or better overall for artists? The current study examines sixty-three award-winning country music artists who found success within the twenty-first century and the various paths they followed to signing record deals and earning awards. The authors identified and grouped paths into thirteen categories, such as performing at bars and events, participating in a singing competition, and moving to Nashville. The results conclude through data visualization and regression analysis that while some paths propel artists to sign a record deal or release a debut album in the least amount of time, other paths are more profitable, sustainable, and productive. For example, the results show that most artists move to Nashville, release music, and sign publishing deals as part of their paths to success. Most artists begin their journeys playing in a band or participating in live performances, both of which lead to the longest music careers and highest net worth amounts. Moving to Nashville remains one of the fastest paths to get signed by a major record label. The results also suggest that a social media following positively influences net worth for artists. The research presents career development guidance for up-and-coming country music artists who wish to achieve greater brand awareness and gain support from music industry intermediaries.

Keywords: country music, career development, career success, career path, music awards, record deal, singing competition, Nashville, music industry, music artist

Introduction

In the American country music industry, particular accolades for an artist signal the achievement of success. Winning an annual award from a prominent music academy, advancing to the final rounds of a televised singing competition, and signing a deal with a major record label are among milestones that an artist can accomplish on the journey to success. Given the plethora of media types and ways to become discovered by industry professionals, are some routes to noticeability and success more commonly taken, effective, and lucrative than others? The current study examines the paths to winning a prominent country music award, including the milestones an aspiring artist achieves and the various career development activities that an artist undertakes on the way to success.

Background

Previous literature has examined the effect of various factors on artist success, such as radio play's positive influence on song and album sales, newly released album sales' positive influence on the sales of older albums by the same artist, and the correlation between YouTube music video views and record sales (Dewan and Ramaprasad 2014; Hendricks and Sorensen 2009; Kretschmer and Peukert 2018). Leenders et al. (2015) clustered Dutch artists into different groups based on the paths each artist followed, such as television exposure, CD recordings, and social media usage. The authors found that artists take a variety of routes to achieve greater exposure for their music and that working with a record label may be more lucrative for some artists over others (Leenders et al. 2015). One notable cluster, deemed the Emerging Star group, benefits from a combination of old and new media (e.g., television coverage and internet music streaming, respectively) (Leenders et al. 2015). Many of the artists in the Emerging Star cluster also work with a record label to a much higher extent than the other clusters (Leenders et al. 2015). The results reveal a connection between artists aiming to reach mainstream success and the use of both traditional and new approaches to do so (Leenders et al. 2015).

A study by Tompkins et al. (2021) focused solely on new media, most notably Spotify, as a way for independent folk artists to gain exposure on a global scale. Among the eleven indie folk artists studied, 57 percent of the artists' streams stem from songs on Spotify playlists (Tompkins et al. 2021). Songs with a higher track popularity can catch the attention of Spotify curators who create editorial playlists, exposing independent artists to even higher listenership (Tompkins et al. 2021). Playlists increase the likelihood that listeners who prefer a specific music genre will hear and discover artists from their favored music categories, providing artists with an easier way to reach their target markets compared to using more broadcasted methods (Spotify for Artists 2019; Tompkins et al. 2021).

The aforementioned studies allude to a possible shift in the way artists gain further exposure for their music and gain the attention of industry professionals due to the rise of digital media. Despite the advantages of digital media, Everts et al. (2022) found that connecting with industry intermediaries to achieve long-term success remains a frequently traversed route among artists. Through twenty-one interviews of Dutch artists who performed at a music showcase festival, the authors learned that all of the artists plan to depend upon music industry intermediaries such as media companies, managers, and venues to achieve goals (Everts et al. 2022). As a way to get noticed by intermediaries, the artists develop a positive reputation through what they call milestones, such as releasing a single or playing a performance (Everts et al. 2022). Some artists liken achieving milestones to collecting currency or points, whereas the more milestones one achieves, the greater the career growth they experience (Everts et al. 2022). The artists also recognize the supplemental value provided by promotional tactics on social media platforms and listenership on Spotify, arguing that the tactics did not completely replace the value of working with intermediaries (Everts et al. 2022). Zawaan and ter Bogt (2009) interviewed music industry executives to gain insight into the way the professionals evaluate artists before signing a deal with them. The professionals identify the following traits typically present in successful artists: charisma, motivation, self-criticism, and the willingness to work hard (Zawaan and ter Bogt 2009). The professionals also mention the high frequency of connecting with artists through networking and further evaluating the artists through demos (Zawaan and ter Bogt 2009).

The current study aims to quantitatively build on the previously mentioned findings to examine the most commonly taken paths artists follow

to achieve success in the twenty-first century. One can define success for artists from many different angles, such as by overall profitability, record sales, recognition by other artists, and performance frequency (Zawaan and ter Bogt 2009). The current study defines and operationalizes *success* as winning at least one award bestowed by music academies and trade associations such as the Country Music Association Entertainer of the Year award, the Academy of Country Music Female Vocalist of the Year award, and many others. The research focuses on the paths of artists in the American country music industry. Country music maintains a promising position, especially as recent trends signal country music's strengthening popularity among younger generations. Generation Z and Millennials compose half of the listenership for country artists like Morgan Wallen, Luke Combs, and Zach Bryan (Garcia 2023). The 2023 Academy of Country Music Awards saw a viewership increase of 87% from 2022 (Grein 2023). Additionally, in 2022, the country music genre composed 8.9% of digital album sales and 12.4% of digital song sales (Luminate 2022). The country music industry, like other music genres, bears its own connections, cultural hubs, and rituals that give rise to a unique way of showcasing oneself and performing to gain popularity. For instance, Nashville, Tennessee has long served as an epicenter of country music and carries the reputation as an important part of the city's unique positioning (*Rolling Stone*, n.d.). An up-and-coming country music artist may experience varying levels of progress based on the specific paths one follows, such as moving to Nashville. By examining the career paths of sixty-three country music artists, the current study aims to answer the following three key research questions:

RQ1: What are the distinct paths to success taken by country music artists?

RQ2: What is the "best" path to success with regard to efficiency, speed, profitability, sustainability, and productivity?

RQ3: Does a social media following have a stronger positive impact on a country music artist's net worth relative to total albums produced and career productivity overall?

To date, while other studies examine the way in which artists achieve success in the music industry overall and within some specific genres, very few studies have examined artists' paths to success in the country music industry. Theoretically, the research builds on the work of Everts et al. (2022) to show that getting the attention of industry intermediaries and following a "traditional" path as an artist remains relevant in the current time and applies to the country music industry in the United States. The research provides scholars with additional evidence regarding the most effective ways to predict artist success and contributes to previous literature by extending the study of artist career paths to a specific genre. Managerially, the results show the most lucrative path for aspiring country music artists, proposing practical milestones and steps to achieve one's career success. The work also serves as a guide for music educators in mentoring students who wish to follow similar career paths. The study presents an original contribution to the music marketing industry by distinguishing different paths taken by country music artists and presenting evidence for why particular paths hold a high likelihood of yielding positive investments based on an artist's individual goals.

Methodology

In order to derive the most productive or fastest path for an artist, data was compiled on a group of twenty-first-century country singers. The study examined the journeys of solo country musicians who are deemed successful. Success, as previously defined, was operationalized by earning a country music award. The sixty-three artists used in the data were chosen based on the criterion of having received at least one award in the following fifteen major award categories from 2000 to 2023:

- Billboard Top Country Artist
- Billboard Female Top Country Artist
- Billboard Male Top Country Artist
- Billboard Top New Country Artist
- Country Music Association (CMA) Entertainer of the Year
- CMA Female Vocalist of the Year
- CMA Male Vocalist of the Year
- CMA New Artist of the Year
- Academy of Country Music (ACM) Female Vocalist of the Year
- ACM Male Vocalist of the Year
- ACM New Female Vocalist of the Year
- ACM New Male Vocalist of the Year

- Grammys' Best Country Solo Performance
- Grammys' Best Female Country Vocal Performance
- Grammys' Best Male Country Vocal Performance

All of these awards that define success are based on the artists' vocal skill, performance, and prominence in the country music genre. Furthermore, considering the top artist accolades awarded by different organizations provides a wider perspective on artists' accomplishments. For example, pulling from *Billboard* focuses on what the fans think of the artist while pulling from the Academy of Country Music, The Grammys, and The Country Music Association provides insight from industry leaders.

A partial thematic analysis and quantitative assessment was conducted by examining biographies, which include Wikipedia, Chartmetric, AllMusic, and Biography.com, and various news articles of each artist, and gathering information on age, gender, cumulative awards won (based on the awards listed above), the paths they took to gain exposure, the most dominant path, their first record label, the date of the record deal, their age when they received the deal, the artist's current record label and its parent company, net worth, total albums from AllMusic discography, followers from these social media platforms: Spotify, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, SoundCloud, Facebook, and Twitter, and if the artist was accepted or rejected by the singing competitions *American Idol*, *The Voice*, *Nashville Star*, and others. Additional data were collected from Chartmetric in 2023, which include the platform's assessment for the artist's career stage. The thematic analysis helped in creating categories or themes based upon which paths the artist took to achieve success. Descriptive coding was used to consolidate the paths. The authors discussed interpretive discrepancies among the group and reached 100 percent agreement on all path categories. A complete list of the sources can be found in the Appendix: Artist Data References.

The awards we investigated were ones presented from the year 2000 to 2023. Artists who were over the age of sixty and only received one award in the twenty-first century were removed from the sample, as the artists do not represent twenty-first-century strategies and paths. The removed artists achieved success during a time in which the factors in the external environment differed greatly from those in the last twenty years, and they were not dominant artists in the twenty-first century. The sample retained artists who were over sixty years of age but received more than one award, as the artists are still dominant in the twenty-first century, as

evidenced by their ability to receive more than one award. The sample retained artists who received one award but were younger than sixty years of age, as the artists represent aspiring musicians who want to gain exposure. Therefore, their paths and strategies are relevant to the study.

Analysis and Results

The authors analyzed the data using the approaches of data visualization and regression analysis. Tableau was utilized to visualize the data. The final sample contained sixty-three country music artists with an average age of 43.5 years. Sixty-five percent of the sample identified as male, 5% of the sample identified as African American, and 95% of the sample identified as White. According to Chartmetric’s assessment for the artist’s career stage, our sample included all five stages of artists: 2 in legendary status, 26 superstar, 26 mainstream, 6 mid-level, and 3 developing. The authors found 189 distinct paths, or actions taken (e.g., competing in a singing competition, performing in a band), by an artist. The authors coded each path into thirteen path categories, defined in Table 1.

The descriptions of the path categories are provided as well. Some categories include multiple similar activities, for example, “Released Music/Record” is used to group self-released single, self-released album, self-released EP, regional label album release, demo, etc. Some path categories are more specific in nature than others. “Networking Connection” and “Record Label Internship” both involve artists connecting with individuals in the music industry, but the paths differ in that the latter focuses on connections made specifically through holding a job position while the former encompasses a variety of ways in which one could make a connection (e.g., in a casual conversation, at an event, etc.). These categories were developed iteratively. First, the assessment of the path was conducted by two separate coders. The paths were coded using terms closely represented in the biographical documents. Discrepancies between the coders were discussed with collaboration of the third coder. The initial round of coding resulted in sixty-one unique paths. Then, three coders iteratively condensed the number of paths by categories down to the final thirteen.

Path Category		Path Description
1	Moved to Nashville	The artists who took this path decided to move to Nashville in order to pursue music. This path was made evident when researching the artist biographies.

Path Category		Path Description
2	Released Music/Record	This path consists of any type of released music or recording that is documented in their biography. This may include: recording, self-released single self-released album self-released EP regional label album release demo independently-released CD independently-released single privately recorded CD released a duet single
3	Publishing Deal	The artists who took this path signed a publishing deal with a major or independent publisher.
4	Band	The artists who took this path established a band and performed in clubs, bars, local events, etc. Some artists toured with their band across the country while others stayed in college towns. The main distinction between the band and performance paths is from the distinctions made in the research biographies of the artists. The research presented that the artist joined an already formed band or created a band rather than solely pursuing an individual career with musicians who backed up the artist. The entire band was the focus rather than the artist. For example, the band had a name rather than just the name of the artist. If the research did not provide band names, but mentioned that the artist “formed a band” or “joined a band,” the artist was considered to have taken the band path.
5	Performance	This path consists of any type of musical performance by the artist not including a band. If the focus of the performance was on the individual artist rather than the musicians performing with the artist, it falls into this category. They may include performing at: bars clubs local events church talent shows self-tours gigs parties resorts jamborees Dollywood cafes showcases Grand Ole Opry openings for another artist

Path Category		Path Description
6	Networking Connection	The artists who took this path made a networking connection by meeting someone who connected them with an industry professional. The path was classified as a networking connection especially when it was a spontaneous connection, a connection through people they knew, or a connection through a band that helped them meet those in the industry. It was not tied to a hired job position or a deal/contract with a label. While other artists may have made networking connections, the research did not distinguish that contribution.
7	Singing Competition	The artists who took this path tried out for a singing competition. Some artists were accepted into the competitions (and some of those artists won) while others were rejected. The path was attempted by the artist, so it is considered a path. The singing competitions included are: <i>American Idol</i> <i>The Voice</i> <i>Nashville Star</i> <i>Gimme the Mic</i>
8	Artist Development Deal	The artists who took this path signed an artist development deal or professional development deal with a major or independent label.
9	Acting/ Dancing	The artists who took this path had prior exposure through an acting or dancing career.
10	Songwriting	The artists who took this path decided to pursue songwriting, sign a songwriting contract, sign a songwriter development deal, or pursue a songwriting partnership (with another artist).
11	Moved to Los Angeles	The artists who took this path decided to move to Los Angeles in order to pursue music. This path was made evident when researching the artist biographies.
12	Record Label Internship	The artists who took this path got a record label internship in order to establish connections in the field. While this may also be considered a type of networking connection, it was separated from that category in order to provide more detail.
13	YouTube	The artists who took this path had music that went viral on the YouTube platform. While other artists may have had their music on the platform as well, the research did not distinguish that contribution.

Table 1. Major path categories.

Four artists in the sample took only one path. Overall, an artist takes three paths on average. Artists who take more than two paths spend about six years on the first path. Artists who take more than three paths spend about 2.4 years on the second path. Artists who take more than four paths spend 1.9 years on the third path. This analysis indicates that artists spend more time in earlier paths. Figure 1 represents the flow of multiple paths leading to career milestones of signing a record deal with a major record label and releasing a debut album. Regardless of the number or order of the paths taken, the combination of the paths lead to the two milestones for each artist in the sample.

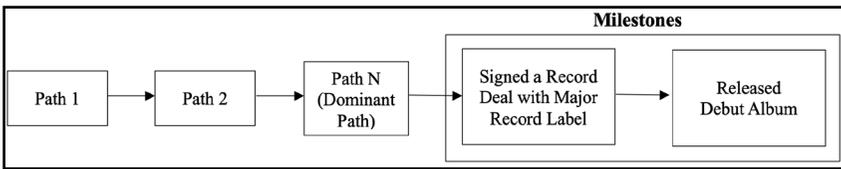


Figure 1. Artists' paths and milestones.

The five dark bars in Figure 2 represent the top five most frequently taken paths, taken by more than 40 percent of the artists. The names of the paths are listed to the left side of the figure. The length of the bar represents the number of artists in our sample who took that path, and the actual number of artists is labeled to the right side of the bar. A single artist is only counted once for one path or bar, although a single artist can be represented more than once within the figure since they may have pursued more than one path to obtain their success. Among the thirteen categories, “Moved to Nashville” displays the highest frequency, with 65% of the artists moving to Nashville at some point in their careers. The authors then examined the *dominant path*, or the path that immediately preceded an artist’s first signing with a major record label (Figure 3). A single artist is only counted once in this figure. The most frequent dominant paths comprises ten out of the thirteen total path categories, with “Released Music/Record” being the most frequent dominant path (21% of all artists). “Moved to Nashville,” the most commonly taken path, is the third most frequent dominant path. “Artist Development Deal,” “Record Label Internship,” and “YouTube” paths are not among the dominant paths. Only two artists took the YouTube path. One of the artists, Zach Bryan, has not signed a

record deal with a major record label. Therefore, the authors excluded the artist from further analyses.

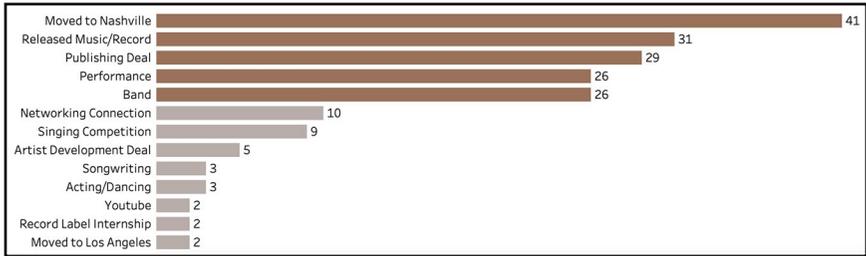


Figure 2. Paths most commonly taken by artists.

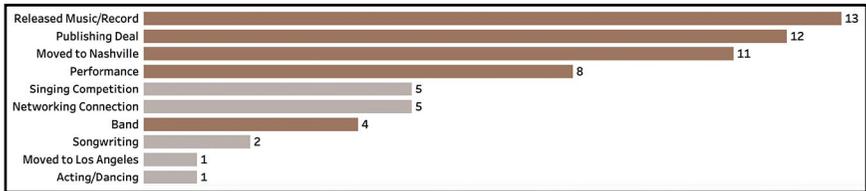


Figure 3. Dominant paths (paths preceding signing first major record label).

Next, the authors examined the first paths most frequently taken by the artists (Figure 4). A single artist is only counted once in this figure. A first path signifies the beginning of an artist’s career. “Band” claims the top spot as the most frequently taken first path, with “Performance” and “Moved to Nashville” being the second and third most frequent paths, respectively. “Band” and “Performance” differ in that the former denotes that an artist joined or created and performed with a band, and the latter includes any performance (e.g., performing at bars, talent shows) other than a performance from a band. Overall, 73 percent of artists took one of the top four paths as his or her first path. The most frequent first paths reflect only eight of the thirteen path categories. For instance, “Publishing Deal” is the third most commonly taken path, but it is not among the most frequent first paths.

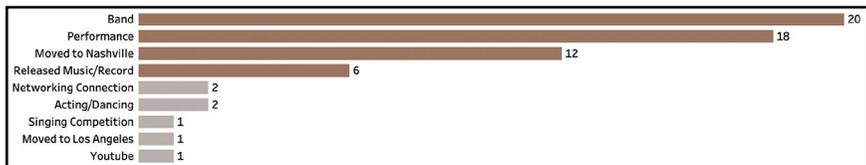


Figure 4. First paths.

The artist selection criteria for the research are awards; therefore, the highest numbers of awards were used to approximate the “best” paths. Figure 5 displays the average awards earned by each artist based on the first paths taken. “Performance” represents the best first path if an artist aims to receive a high number of country music awards. “Band” marks the second most awarded path, and “Moved to Nashville” yields the third highest average number of awards. In addition, the authors tested the differences in awards between the “Performance” path and the other top three paths. The “Performance” path results in a significantly higher number of awards than the paths of “Band” ($p < 0.05$), “Moved to Nashville” ($p < 0.05$), and “Release Music/Record” ($p < 0.05$). Other comparisons were not conducted due to small sample sizes.

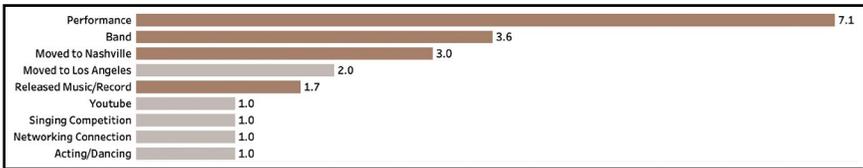


Figure 5. Best paths—average awards for paths.

In analyzing the fastest path to signing with a major record label, the authors used the first identifiable path in an artist’s career. The average number of years taken to get signed by a major record label indicates the length of the path. In other words, the shorter the length, the faster the path. Figure 6 shows the three most commonly taken paths highlighted in a darker shade. For each path, the average number of years taken to get signed by a major record label are listed to the right side of the bar. “Singing Competition” includes trying out and competing on a singing competition show (e.g., *American Idol*, *The Voice*) and represents the fastest path. “Performance,” the most commonly taken as well as the best path identified earlier, takes the longest (15.1 years) to get signed. “Band” takes an average of 10.1 years, and “Moved to Nashville” takes 6.1 years. It appears the best paths are inversely related to the speed to get signed by a major record label.

Once signed by a record label, artists take about 1.2 years on average to release a debut album. The shortest time again is the “Singing Competition” path, as it is contractually mandated to release the album for the winner. Figure 7 shows that the “Performance” path artists (1.28 years) release debut albums faster than artists on the “Band” (1.4 years) and “Moved

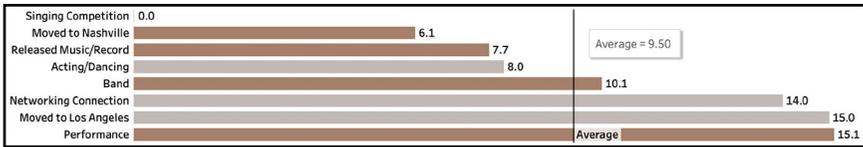


Figure 6. Fastest paths (beginning of career to signed by a major label).

to Nashville” paths (2.08 years). The finding reveals the importance of performance, which develops the foundation of an artist’s career. Through performance and playing music in a band in front of a live audience, an artist receives constant feedback from the audience and critics. The process presents opportunities for the artist to consistently refine and improve based on both negative and positive criticisms. The grit develops naturally through this process. Similarly, the process of creating and refining an album requires such character and persistence. Therefore, an artist who has been performing for years will have the skills and readiness to release an album relatively quickly.

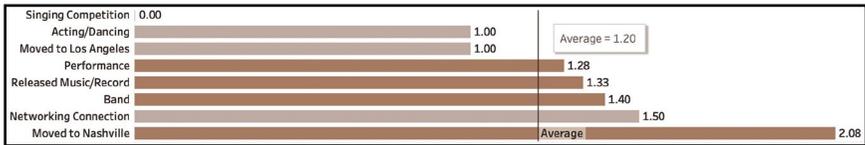


Figure 7. Fastest path (from signed by a major label to released first record).

The authors used the net worth of an artist to represent a path’s profitability. Figure 8 displays the most profitable paths of “Performance” and “Band,” with average net worth of over \$106 million and nearly \$83 million, respectively. The average net worth was about \$23.68 million. All other paths result in lower lucrativeness when comparing average net worth, which again enforces the relevance of an artist being equipped with performing experience. On average, artists who moved to Nashville to begin their careers amassed about a \$6.5 million net worth.

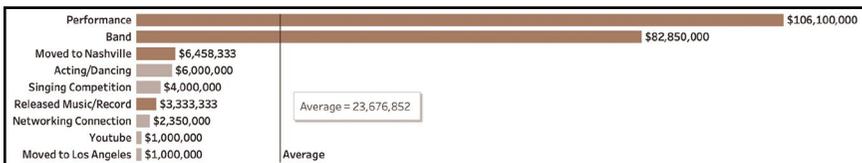


Figure 8. Average net worth for paths.

The artists in the sample vary by age, which means that some artists have had a longer period of time in their lives to be productive in music. To account for the difference in productive years across the sample, the authors measured the average net worth by dividing by the length of each artist’s productive career (the productive career starts from when an artist was first signed by a major record label). The calculation allows for a fairer comparison of the paths by comparing the net worth accumulation on a yearly basis. The same three paths (displayed in Figure 9) prevail as the most profitable: “Performance,” “Band,” and “Moved to Nashville.” “Performance,” which yields a yearly average net worth of nearly \$4.4 million, is followed by “Band” with over \$2.8 million. The average yearly net worth reaches almost \$1.2 million. “Moved to Nashville” and “Release Music/Record” both hover around a half-a-million dollar annual net worth. In addition, the authors found that the net worth of “Performance” significantly exceeds “Moved to Nashville” ($p < 0.05$). Similarly, the “Performance” net worth is significantly higher than “Released Music/Record” ($p < 0.05$). The small sample sizes of other paths disallowed an appropriate test for differences.



Figure 9. Average net worth by career length for paths.

To assess the sustainability and productivity of each path, the authors first compared the career length of the paths. The most sustainable “Band” path shows the longest career with just over 23 years on average. “Performance” shows a duration of almost 20 years, and “Networking Connection” marks the third most sustainable with 17.5 years. “Moved to Nashville” claims the fourth spot with about 14 years, which is also the overall average career length in the study. The most sustainable paths—“Band” and “Performance”—show that having strong networking circles can boost an artist’s career. Figure 10 displays the average career length for paths.

The authors also examined the productivity, or the average number of albums of the artists by path, displayed in Figure 11. Again, “Band” and “Performance” result in the most productive career paths, as artists taking

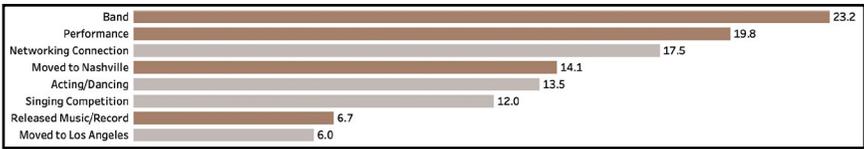


Figure 10. Average career length for paths in years.

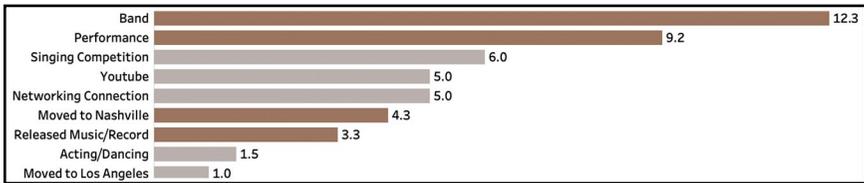


Figure 11. Average albums.

the paths produced the most albums. Specifically, the “Band” path yields an average of 12.3 albums and the “Performance” path yields an average of 9.2 albums. Overall, artists produce an average 5.3 albums.

Only two artists in the dataset were categorized as starting their journeys on social media. However, it is unarguable that to stay relevant in today’s music industry, artists need to be active on social platforms. Therefore, to assess the role of social media in a country music artist’s success, the authors conducted a regression analysis to assess the influence of social media followers, along with total albums and career productivity (the productivity of a given artist between the signing with the first record label to the present time), on an artist’s net worth. The authors collected the number of subscribers on YouTube and followers on Spotify, TikTok, Instagram, SoundCloud, Facebook, and Twitter before analyzing the influence of the number of followers on each type of social media platform on an artist’s net worth. The number of Facebook followers provides the highest explanatory power (32% of the variance) for net worth among all social platforms. The model in Figure 12 explains 60% of the variance in net worth, with all three variables—Facebook followers, total albums, and productive career—positively influencing net worth.

The research provides compelling evidence that “old school” paths such as “Performance” and “Band” have continued to be viable in the last two decades. The paths, although time-consuming, provide the environment and time artists need to develop and hone their craft. However, there are also young artists like Zach Bryan who started his career on YouTube and earned the ACM Award for New Male Artist of the Year in 2023. Does

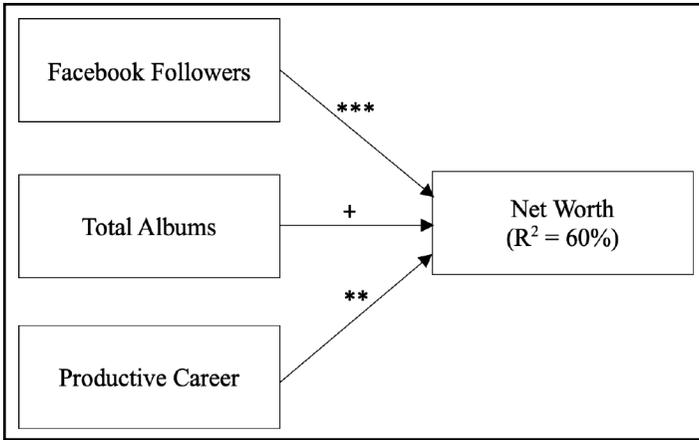


Figure 12. Regression model—factors influence net worth.

the data signal an emergence of a new order? While social media platforms have not marked the start of a career for most of the award-winning country music artists, platform use by younger artists as attempted “shortcuts” remains inevitable. The research indicates that while an artist may find it easy to start on YouTube, the artist also has to put in the work needed to develop oneself and perform in front of audiences. On the other hand, the research also highlights the importance of developing social media followings, as they can impact an artist’s net worth.

Discussion

In the current study, the authors aimed to explore the relationships between the paths taken by country music artists and the subsequent milestones of success, notably the achievement of at least one widely recognized award in the music industry. After collecting data on the demographics, awards, career paths, and social media performance of sixty-three twenty-first-century country music artists, the authors sought to answer three main research questions.

RQ1: What are the distinct paths to success taken by country music artists?

A *path* was defined as a major action or occurrence in an artist’s life that contributed to advancing one’s country music career, and success was operationalized as winning a country music award. The authors examined

the journey of each artist in the sample, beginning with the first path taken and ending with the reception of a country music award. The authors coded the paths into the thirteen distinct path categories defined in Table 1. Each artist took at least one of the paths during his or her lifetime, and most artists took more than one of the paths.

The results show that not all paths are taken in an established order. For example, artist Toby Keith originally performed with a band before moving to Nashville to launch his solo career. Keith distributed his music by playing gigs at night and performing on the streets during the day while handing out copies of his demo (Lamare 2018). Keith provided a copy of the demo to a flight attendant on the night he was going to quit (Lamare 2018). Coincidentally, the flight attendant knew a record executive at Mercury Records, which created a valuable connection to boost Keith's career. Carrie Underwood, another well-known country music artist, performed in church, plays, and talent shows throughout her youth before competing on the show *American Idol* (Ray 2022). Overall, while particular paths seem to increase an artist's likelihood for signing with a record label and winning a country music award, paths can be taken in various orders and combinations. An important message from analyzing this research question is that artists must be aware that multiple paths are perhaps mandatory to shape the success of an artist. Not gaining success from one path should not deter artists from their dreams. Persistent efforts over many paths over many years is typical for award winning artists.

RQ2: What is the “best” path to success with regard to efficiency, speed, profitability, sustainability, and productivity?

Upon suggesting that a country music artist can follow one of many paths as opposed to one “right” path, the study also shows that an artist's chosen path may differ based on the value one seeks. With further data visualization, the results reiterate Nashville's standing as the “Music City,” with most of the artists in the sample moving to the city at some point before getting signed to a record label (*The Tennessean* 2019). Many influential entities related to the country music industry and culture, such as the Grand Ole Opry, Music Row, the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, and a slew of country music bars, call Nashville home (Nashville Music City, n.d.; *The Tennessean* 2019). Given the connection to country

music and the anticipated industry network an artist has the opportunity to experience in the city, one could argue that the popularity of moving to Nashville to pursue success is expected.

The most dominant paths, or the paths preceding an artist's signing with a record label, equate to releasing music and undergoing a publishing deal. Industry professionals may view the release of music as an indicator of an artist's determination, recording experience, and capability of creating a final product. While some aspects of publishing deals remain similar to record deals, such as working alongside a record label to promote one's music, publishing deals allow artists to relinquish the copyright to the musical works they record and receive assistance from a record label with regard to promoting the songs and gaining more airplay (Roland, n.d.). One could argue that both releasing music and carrying out a publishing deal involve elements that make signing a record deal a natural next step. For example, Maren Morris tried out for *The Voice* and *American Idol*. After rejected from both competitions, Morris self-released an eponymous EP on Spotify in 2015 (Editors 2021). Morris continued to use the music streaming service to disseminate her music to her fans, potential fans, and industry executives (Editors 2021). Morris' EP led to Columbia Nashville, part of Sony Music Nashville, offering her a record deal (Editors 2021).

The most common first paths of "Band" and "Performance" reflect an artist's efforts to promote one's singing and reach greater brand awareness in front of an audience when getting started. "Performance" and "Band" also lead to earning the highest average number of awards per artist, which aligns with the criterion of quality vocal performance for many of the awards featured in the study.

Interestingly, competing in a singing competition aligns with the highest speed to getting signed by a record label, perhaps due to competitions' highly broadcasted nature, appeal to a wide variety of viewers, and structure of amenities for top contestants. For example, *American Idol* and other singing competitions such as *The Voice* award a record deal to the winning contestant, contributing to a singing competition as the speediest path to achieving milestones (Spencer 2021; *The U.S. Sun* 2022). Once signed by a record label, artists who take the "Performance" path experience one of the shortest time durations out of all of the paths before releasing a debut album. Though moving to Nashville and singing in a band render lucrative results by other measures, performing enables an artist to

continue to refine singing skills and the ability to connect with the audience.

The paths of “Band” and “Performance” show further advantages when evaluated for profitability, sustainability, and productivity. The two paths consistently relate to achieving a high net worth, experiencing a long career, and producing the most albums. The results paint a scene of the striving artist who performs in bars and at events, interacting with the audience, and creating a memorable experience for listeners. Performing and playing in bands helps an artist to increase exposure, promote brand awareness, and build a fan base, which will hopefully lead to signing a record deal and winning a country music award.

RQ3: Does a social media following have a stronger positive impact on a country music artist’s net worth relative to total albums produced and career productivity overall?

To address the final research question, a regression analysis of social media followers on net worth revealed a powerful influence from Facebook follower quantities. A strong social media following positively contributes most to an artist’s net worth, surpassing the influence of an artist’s total number of albums and overall career productivity (i.e., the length of time from signing with a major record label to the present). Social media currently stands as one of the most prolific ways to gather a following, spread information, and interact with fans. For instance, Luke Combs used social media in his early career, posting YouTube videos of himself playing. Although the social media exposure failed to result in a record deal, the exposure enabled Combs to build a fan base before moving to Nashville (Dineen, n.d.). Taylor Swift, another well-known country music artist, uses Facebook to promote herself through project updates, articles, and blogs. Additionally, she establishes a connection with her fans and contributes to her brand image via Twitter (Azyan, n.d.). While the results show that Facebook follower quantity most significantly influences an artist’s net worth compared to the number of albums produced and overall career productivity, results in the study also provide support for more “traditional” paths, such as moving to Nashville and performing live. In the current time, artists would do well to pursue both traditional paths and maintain an active social media presence.

Conclusion and Future Research

The research findings managerially and theoretically contribute in several ways. First, the study builds on previous literature by exploring music artist career paths in the country music genre and proposing data-driven solutions for artists aiming to achieve specific goals and career success. Qualitative interviews in studies such as Everts et al. (2022) set a foundation by discussing artist characteristics and tactics aligned with career success. The current study extends the academic literature by showing specific tactics and paths that help artists achieve milestones, like signing a record deal and winning an award, based on a sample of artists who have already achieved such milestones. The data points analyzed were gathered from a vast multitude of sources and combined to produce a detailed set of career paths for sixty-three country music artists. Scholars can expand upon the dataset to conduct future research analyses that examine other aspects of country music artist careers.

From a theoretical standpoint, the research findings show that though social media tactics can positively boost an artist's journey to success, paths seen as more "traditional" in nature, such as performing at live gigs and releasing independent albums, remain the primary drivers of artist milestone achievement. Our study makes a significant contribution to the literature and understanding of career development and success of country music artists. The findings of our study can also be relevant to professionals who develop and market artists in the music industry, as well as to educators who play an important role in the growth and guidance of their students. It's important to identify artists who have spent adequate time honing their craft. Talent managers and music labels need to provide realistic guidance to young talent and provide insights from this study to encourage a steady stream of development activities.

Future research could further explore the role of social media in one's path to success. Of consumers aged 18 to 24 years, 45% rely on TikTok for music discovery (News Team 2023). Even more, 67% of TikTok users will likely look up a song via a streaming service after hearing the song featured on a TikTok post (Whateley 2023). The nature of the current study could also be expanded to other genres such as hip-hop. Alternative definitions of success could be employed to study, for example, independent musicians. Even more, future studies could explore whether different markers of success are most beneficial at certain periods in one's music career. Additional research could also consider the lifestyle deci-

sions musicians make, as well as the struggles they undergo, to support themselves and maintain a sustainable source of income in the live gig economy. Lastly, artist paths in country music could be examined from a gender standpoint to observe differences and the ways in which one's gender may advantage or disadvantage working toward success. Watson (2019) revealed inequitable gender representation in the country music genre, shown by trends such as the outperformance of females by male country music artists with various chart performance measures. A comparison of the paths of male and female country music artists, as well as other factors like ethnicity, could be further explored in the future to spot and provide insight into inequities in the industry.

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The Next Verse: Challenges for Mechanical Licensing in the Metaverse

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed a paradigm shift in the music industry, compelling live music promoters and consumers to explore novel avenues for artist engagement. The emergence of remote-accessible online interactions laid the groundwork for a symbiotic evolution of consumer technology and the music industry. Livestream concerts, hosted in the burgeoning realm of the metaverse, offered a unique and shared music experience, transcending physical boundaries. Simultaneously, the surge in demand for exclusive content fueled the popularity of non-fungible tokens (NFTs) in 2021. As shared virtual environments become intertwined with music delivery, questions arise regarding the applicability of existing U.S. copyright law to music content in the metaverse, particularly mechanical licensing pursuant to Section 115. This paper scrutinizes the current mechanical licensing framework's adequacy in addressing the reproduction and delivery of music in the metaverse. The paper delves into the debate over the interactive nature of metaverse concerts, questioning their classification as "interactive." It explores the lack of legal precedent regarding mechanical reproductions in NFT minting and distribution, raising uncertainties about Section 115's applicability. The discussion underscores the need for potential revisions to Section 115 or the creation of a new exclusive right specific to the metaverse. The paper concludes with reflections on the challenges posed by compulsory mechanical licenses for NFT records and the evolving market standards required for NFT transactions within the metaverse. In the era of Web3.0, where metaverse experiences redefine the music industry landscape, this paper advocates for a nuanced approach to copyright law that aligns with the dynamic and decentralized nature of the emerging digital frontier.

Keywords: metaverse, livestream concerts, non-fungible token, NFT, music copyright, Section 115, mechanical licensing

Rise of the Metaverse

Emerging from the dust of the COVID-19 pandemic, live music promoters and music consumers were forced to find new ways to engage with their favorite artists. Since remote-accessible multi-participant online interactions became an accepted norm during the pandemic, an opportunity emerged for new consumer technology and the music industry to evolve together. Artists found success performing livestream concerts in lieu of in-person touring, for only select fans that were granted exclusive access to view the performance online.¹ This offered a unique music experience from the comfort of one's home, but one that was shared with other participants in virtual spaces. The cyberspace hosting such shared virtual experiences is often referred to, collectively, as the metaverse.

What Exactly is the Metaverse?

The concept of a metaverse has been described as a “shared online space that incorporates 3D graphics, either on a screen or in virtual reality.”² Within these virtual environments, users can experience social and economic interactivity similar to our reality by exchanging digital assets and property.³ There is no one singular metaverse—rather, a metaverse environment may be created by a particular collective of individual entities providing access to a shared environment. While it may sound like a futuristic concept, metaverses are not new. The video game industry has provided metaverses in games such as *Second Life* (developed by Linden Lab in 2003), *Roblox* (developed by Roblox Corporation in 2006), and *Minecraft* (developed by Mojang Studios in 2011). All these games provide avatars for their players who then use virtual materials to build or acquire property, hold events, or add dress or design to their avatars—with no specific goal or objective.⁴ These are considered open worlds where users can mirror reality in a virtual setting. Metaverses have even been represented in popular culture, such as “The Matrix” depicted in the Warner Brothers film franchise of the same name which began in 1999, or the “OASIS” metaverse described in the 2011 novel *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline and depicted in Steven Spielberg's film adaptation thereof, released by Warner Brothers in 2018. In the OASIS, players would enter a multiplayer online role-playing game set in a virtual world. Even in such a virtual world, engagement with music is attractive for the user experience. The crossover between metaverses and music has been steady since at least the launch of games such as *Second Life*. In 2006, the band Duran

Duran held concerts within the *Second Life* virtual world.⁵ We have especially seen significant growth of music applications in the metaverse during and since the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, Epic Games' *Fortnite* delivered to its users a Travis Scott concert which brought 27.7 million unique players, and the game platform *Roblox* delivered a Lil Nas X concert attracting 33 million player/viewers.⁶

NFTs and the Metaverse

Given the consumer's proven appetite for exclusive access to content offered by artists during the COVID-19 pandemic, it should have been no surprise that the demand for non-fungible tokens ("NFTs") became exceptionally popular in 2021, conveying exclusive ownership rights to limited digital assets released by artists. NFTs are digital certificates that link to digital assets (such as digital photos, audio files, and video files), which can be traded, resold, and otherwise transferred in the metaverse. NFT transactions are verified and stored on a decentralized digital ledger, known as a blockchain. Each NFT contains a specific code that makes it unique and non-interchangeable with any other token. They are powered by smart contracts which contain the metadata associated with ownership and rights pertaining to the NFT, which cannot be altered.⁷ One of the first artists to release an album as an NFT collection in 2021 was the band Kings of Leon, who grossed over two million dollars in the first week of its release.⁸ Notwithstanding the success of such NFT record releases, the initial hype over NFTs has significantly faded since 2021, as NFT sales revenue decreased from \$6.2 billion in August 2021 to just \$1.1 billion in August 2022,⁹ and NFT trading decreased 90 percent across all sectors.¹⁰ According to a 2022 report released by the technology consulting firm Activate Consulting, 2023 will mark "the conclusion of the Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) hype cycle." The study forecast this downturn would lead to a more practical use of NFTs in social networking and e-commerce.¹¹ NFTs have served as a vital commodity within metaverses, providing digital assets and currencies which may be transacted for virtual goods and services—including exclusive access to music within a metaverse. Even if NFT collections have lost their mass appeal as standalone properties, their value and functionality within a metaverse, or any shared social media space, should not be overlooked.

Web3.0 and Music Rights

Web3.0 has been the buzz term for the next iteration of the world wide web—one that would be based on the notion of decentralization, token-based economics, blockchain, and “bottom-up” design.¹² In the Web3.0, code and platforms would not be controlled as proprietary by any small groups, but would be developed within everyone’s access and view, and there would be no central authority controlling content or operations. Business transactions would be peer-to-peer exchange, without intermediaries handling data, currency, or ownership.¹³ In this vision of a re-democratized world wide web, shared virtual experiences in the metaverse and the use of NFTs as commodities exchanged in peer-to-peer transactions seem like natural inclusions in the Web3.0 premise. Because NFTs, albeit faded in popularity, may remain vital to metaverse applications, the Web3.0 concept is paving the way for the metaverse to emerge as a viable new forum for the music industry to capitalize upon. As shared virtual environments become increasingly intertwined with the delivery of music experiences in the next generation of the world wide web, this increasing interconnectivity and decentralization may reveal the inevitable dichotomy between existing United States copyright law and evolving technology—the specific focus in this discussion being the application of compulsory mechanical licensing rights, which are enumerated in Section 115 of the U.S. Copyright Act¹⁴ (“Section 115”), to music content delivery in the metaverse.

This issue is all too familiar, as the Music Modernization Act of 2018¹⁵ (the “MMA”) was thought to have simplified mechanical licensing in new forms of digital delivery of sound recordings (namely, streaming music) by implementing a blanket mechanical licensing structure in lieu of the previous song-by-song compulsory licensing scheme. However, since the enactment of the MMA, the rise of metaverse concerts and the deployment of NFTs have created new revenue streams for music reproduction within a digital environment, requiring further consideration of Section 115. This paper examines the extent to which current mechanical licensing systems may be applied to various forms of reproduction and delivery of music in the metaverse. Furthermore, this paper acknowledges that Section 115 of the U.S. Copyright Act currently does not apply to metaverse concerts nor secondary NFT sales, but raises questions as to whether the scope of Section 115 and/or the U.S. Copyright Act generally requires

expansion to balance the interests of rights owners and consumers in the wake of Web 3.0.

Mechanical Licensing: Past and Present

What is a Mechanical License?

Every recorded song consists of two copyrights: 1) one for the recording of the song, and 2) one for the underlying musical composition embodied on such recording (i.e., the melody and lyrics of the song). Copyright owners are afforded a bundle of exclusive rights in connection with their copyrighted work, including the exclusive rights to reproduce and distribute their work.¹⁶

A mechanical license is the permission from the copyright owner of a musical composition to reproduce and distribute that musical composition in a recorded form. Thus, every sale or distribution of a recording containing a copyrighted musical composition requires a mechanical license from the copyright owner of that musical composition (if not from the songwriter's music publisher, administrator, or publishing designee who may control such licensed rights). Without a mechanical license, such commercial sales and distributions of recordings would be copyright infringement of the underlying musical compositions. Mechanical licenses are not required, however, for the use of musical compositions in audiovisual works, e.g., films, television, commercials, video games, lyric videos, etc., (but note that other types of licenses are required).

The Compulsory Mechanical License

The origin of our compulsory mechanical licensing structure in the United States dates to the 1909 U.S. Copyright Act where Congress first created a compulsory license allowing anyone to make a mechanical reproduction of a musical composition as a sound recording, commonly referred to as a "phonorecord," or within the music business, simply a "record." Congress' creation of this compulsory mechanical licensing scheme was in response to the technological development of the player piano which raised questions as to whether copyright owners should be compensated for the mechanical player rolls containing musical compositions which were then performed by the player piano, and whether a copyright owner's exclusive rights extend to such mechanical reproductions of their work.¹⁷

Historically, pursuant to Section 115 of the U.S. Copyright Act, a licensee was not required to obtain consent from the copyright owner of the musical composition to create a mechanical reproduction so long as the musical composition had previously been distributed to the public by the copyright owner (i.e., after the so-called “first use”),¹⁸ subject to other conditions provided in Section 115, including the payment of a mechanical royalty at a rate determined by a panel of judges comprising the Copyright Royalty Board.¹⁹ Section 115 has thus provided a song-by-song licensing scheme which is deemed “compulsory” in that a license is automatically granted under those circumstances.

Compulsory Mechanical Licensing for Digital Phonorecord Delivery

When it comes to digital delivery of records, this song-by-song approach to mechanical licensing has been reliable with respect to digital retail, such as permanent download purchases through the iTunes store or Amazon Music. When digital music files first became available for consumption, Section 115 applied to digital phonorecord delivery (“DPD”) in the same manner it did for physical goods such as vinyl records or CDs, on a song-by-song basis. The only practical difference was the accounting of the mechanical revenue streams. Retailers of permanent digital downloads, such as iTunes, did not assume the legal responsibility for obtaining mechanical licenses or paying mechanical royalties. Rather, the record companies and distributors remained liable for those payments and obligations, given that their royalty and accounting departments were already capable of administering mechanical royalties. Digital download services would pay record companies and distributors revenue that was deemed to be inclusive of mechanical payments.²⁰ In this manner, the original system for mechanical licensing was able to fit squarely within the new digital model of record distribution. However, this system was viable only until technology evolved further to provide a new delivery method in the form of interactive streaming music platforms, such as Spotify or Apple Music. It may have been convenient to presume there was no difference, with respect to mechanical royalties payable, between the delivery of a digitally downloaded file vs. an interactive stream. However, those delivery methods differ greatly. Whereas digital downloads are merely the online equivalent of purchasing a single recording as a physical good, interactive streaming also included a public performance and the ability to initiate a

tethered download—the latter of which is a mechanical reproduction that is stored only for a limited duration. Furthermore, interactive streams are considered DPDs because recorded copies of a musical composition are cached on the server utilized by a streaming service, as the source material to stream and download from. To clarify the definition of DPD, the U.S. Copyright Office has stated that DPDs are:

...the individual digital transmission of a sound recording resulting in a specifically identifiable reproduction by or for a recipient, regardless of whether the digital transmission is also a public performance of the sound recording or any underlying nondramatic musical work. ...The reproduction may be permanent or available to the recipient for a limited period of time or for a specified number of performances. A DPD includes all phonorecords that are made for the purpose of making the delivery. Permanent downloads, limited downloads, and interactive streams are DPDs.²¹

The song-by-song compulsory mechanical licensing system was problematic for licensing the delivery of recorded musical compositions on a streaming platform, due to a confluence of factors. First, there has been an extraordinary surge in the volume of new music being released in the streaming era. This is partially due to the fact that music can now be produced on digital audio workstations, which may be utilized ubiquitously—songs may be written, recorded, mastered, and then self-distributed through independent distribution channels (e.g., CD Baby, TuneCore) all from a portable device. Artists no longer necessarily require expensive professional studio rentals, outboard gear, or production personnel. Because this eliminates some of the barrier to entry for many emerging artists, the volume of music being released has naturally increased. This surge in volume imposed tremendous stress on the song-by-song licensing system.²²

Additionally, in the streaming era, music publishers no longer want to use record labels as an intermediary for collecting mechanical royalties—instead favoring a direct relationship with streaming services. This is in part because in 2008 the Copyright Royalty Board established mechanical royalty rates for interactive streaming and limited downloads

based on a percentage of the streaming revenue. Such rates required royalty calculations that differed vastly from the previous (and then-standard) penny rate for mechanical royalties of 9.1 cents per song for each recording sold. Record companies' royalty structures had been historically based upon the previous penny rate which stemmed from a retail sales model of record distribution.²³ Furthermore, unless the streaming services negotiated for complete songwriter information and metadata to be delivered to them by the record labels, there was no legal obligation for record labels or distributors to provide this information to the streaming services. (There still is no legal obligation for this.) This can be problematic to the extent a streaming service makes available recordings without accurate rights data concerning their underlying musical compositions, as the music industry will play a game of "telephone" as to who is to be compensated for mechanical rights, and how those monies would be split according to ownership percentages.

Without an accounting system set up for the new statutory mechanical royalty calculations, and potentially without complete or accurate songwriter data, mechanical licensing on a song-by-song compulsory licensing system proved to be no longer viable for streaming music business models. Unable to financially and administratively fulfill their obligations with respect to mechanical licensing, the doors for litigation opened up to music publishers and individual songwriters who sued streaming platforms for failure to obtain mechanical licenses.²⁴ Notwithstanding settlements resulting from such litigation, these legal woes for both copyright owners and streaming platforms were more adequately addressed by the implementation of the MMA's new blanket mechanical licensing system.

Blanket Mechanical Licensing

The MMA created two fundamental shifts in compulsory mechanical licensing. First, it modified the "first use" requirement for streaming music services to obtain a compulsory mechanical license for interactive streams, limited downloads, and permanent downloads.²⁵ The need for the work to have actually been previously reproduced and distributed has been eliminated, but the label still must obtain first use permission to reproduce and distribute it. Thus, pursuant to the MMA, if this permission has been obtained by the label, digital service providers such as Spotify and Apple Music are eligible for a compulsory mechanical license even if the first

instance of distribution of a record's underlying musical composition is through their streaming service.

Second, the MMA replaced the song-by-song licensing process with a blanket compulsory licensing system.²⁶ The Mechanical Licensing Collective ("The MLC") was established pursuant to the MMA to streamline the process of mechanical licensing specifically for interactive streaming DPDs. A streaming platform now only needs to obtain a mechanical license through The MLC, authorizing the streaming service to issue DPDs to consumers for any musical compositions eligible for a license pursuant to Section 115.²⁷ Copyright owners seeking mechanical royalties for DPDs of their musical compositions on an interactive streaming service (a service that is relying on the blanket license available pursuant to the MMA) may now register with The MLC to collect those royalties. (Note that MLC membership is not required; if they choose, copyright owners are still free to negotiate directly with a digital music service rather than have their mechanical royalties collected and paid by The MLC.)

The MLC's blanket mechanical licensing scheme provides some predictability in the administration of mechanical licenses; however, it is only currently utilized for streaming platforms and download services, the latter of which may either adopt the blanket license system provided by the MMA or continue to license music on a song-by-song basis. As the concept of streaming evolves into a virtual space, the MLC's blanket compulsory mechanical licensing system may not be a permanent solution for adequately compensating copyright owners.

Applying Section 115 to the Metaverse

As the metaverse offers new platforms and revenue streams for uses of music, we must determine to what extent mechanical licenses are currently required for such uses, and then whether our current licensing structures adopted pursuant to Section 115 would sufficiently balance the interests of rights holders and consumers. While we haven't fully realized all potential uses of music in the metaverse, some methods of music exploitation thus far have included 1) virtual concerts or DJ parties that may only be attended within the metaverse by NFT holders, 2) streaming music within the metaverse, and 3) sales of NFTs associated with digital music files. Each such exploitation is analyzed in turn below.

Metaverse Concerts

As the law currently stands, Section 115 does not apply to metaverse concerts nor background music within the metaverse. The Copyright Act's definition of a DPD includes the stipulation that "A digital phonorecord delivery does not include the digital transmission of sounds accompanying a motion picture or other audiovisual work as defined in section 101."²⁸ Because a virtual environment, particularly a virtual concert, includes a virtual image that accompanies the music, a metaverse concert may be regarded as an audiovisual work—not a DPD, which simply delivers a digital copy of a recording. The Copyright Act defines an audiovisual work as "a series of related images which are intrinsically intended to be shown by the use of machines, or devices such as projectors, viewers, or electronic equipment, together with accompanying sounds, if any..."²⁹ Additionally, whereas Section 115 applies to only *interactive* streams (in addition to limited and permanent downloads), metaverse concerts would not be considered "interactive." An interactive stream is one that is transmitted through an interactive service—one that "enables a member of the public to receive a transmission of a program specially created for the recipient, or on request, a transmission of a particular sound recording, whether or not as part of a program, which is selected by or on behalf of the recipient."³⁰ A metaverse concert playlist is not specially created for any individual recipient, and is not created upon any user's request, the same way a service such as Spotify or Apple Music allows a user to curate and play music on demand. A concert attendee in the metaverse has no control over the music played by the performer.

However, the question may be raised, as a policy matter, as to whether a metaverse concert should be deemed a non-interactive audiovisual work in the first place. It may be advantageous for songwriters and music publishers to argue that a live concert experience in the metaverse is different than a traditional audiovisual work because it is an entirely new use and revenue stream for musical compositions. As such, delivery of metaverse concerts should require a separate license from traditional audiovisual synchronization. It could also be argued that because of the inherent digital environment of the concert, any composition performed therein creates a reproduction of those compositions which is cached on the servers of the platforms sharing metaverse space. Under such a theory, each song's performance could be considered a DPD under Section 115, in that the metaverse operates as a dynamic collective platform which includes

streaming music from a copy stored by the entities that have partnered to provide that specific metaverse. Additionally, entry into a metaverse concert could be argued to be “interactive” as applicable to Section 115. Metaverse concerts are ticketed events which can be limited and exclusive to NFT holders and/or specific metaverse participants. Because a metaverse concert could be limited to a specific audience, the metaverse could arguably be an interactive service, in that it is transmitting a program specifically created for individual participants, and the songs featured therein are selected on those participants’ behalf.

In this view, the term “interactive” stream would require new meaning in the metaverse context. It would not relate to a participant’s ability to stop, play, or skip songs during the concert, but rather a specific participant’s immersive engagement and perception of the composition in a fixed digital world. Under this premise, a live metaverse concert performance could arguably be treated as an equivalent to a DPD—thus theoretically licensable pursuant to the existing provisions of Section 115. If this argument is accepted, a blanket mechanical licensing scheme would make the most sense to apply to this exploitation, as “venues” within the metaverse would be able benefit from a comparable system to the blanket venue licenses available from performing rights organizations in the real world, such as BMI and ASCAP.³¹ Furthermore, to the extent those experiences are exchangeable by way of transferring those NFTs which grant access to specific metaverse concerts, it raises additional questions as to whether any mechanical rights are implicated by such NFT transfers. This leads us to the discussion of NFT holders and digital assets exchanged in the metaverse.

NFT Records

Currently there is no legal precedent nor statement from the U.S. Copyright Office that addresses when or if mechanical licenses (and mechanical royalty payments) are required in connection with NFT record sales. Theoretically, if a basic music streaming service was offered within the metaverse itself, just like any other DPD in reality, such delivery of recordings would likely fall under Section 115; however, if a recording is sold in the metaverse in the form of an NFT, it is different. NFTs present specific challenges to the purpose of Section 115, as our existing compulsory mechanical licensing structures do not support NFT and blockchain technology in a manner that is advantageous to copyright owners. This is

because of the minting process of NFTs, the lack of clarity as to whether NFTs are for private or commercial use, and the fact that transfers of NFTs are not considered mechanical reproductions—yet such transfers are precluded from protection under the “first sale doctrine” of copyright law, further discussed below.

Minting and Mechanicals

NFTs are initially created through a process known as minting, just like any other physical currency. Some may consider the minting of an NFT itself to be a process of mechanical reproduction, where the digital file is turned into a crypto collectible and stored on a blockchain. In this view, a mechanical license would be required for minting the NFT itself—before we even consider the subsequent sale or distribution of that NFT. However, this view should be reevaluated. It would be a misconception that an NFT is the same as the digital asset it represents. Rather, the token merely represents title and ownership over the asset to which the token is linked. The digital asset itself (the digital file of the copyrighted work) is linked within the code of the NFT, but the audio file is held on a storage server—not the blockchain.³² Rather, it is the NFT marketplace offering the asset which enables the ability to stream or download the recording that is associated with the NFT.

In this regard, the sale of the NFT would not count as a mechanical reproduction, because the file itself would not be reproduced on the blockchain. Only the linked digital file containing the copyrighted work, wherever stored online, would require a mechanical license. The storage of that file is different from the process of minting a token that contains a link referring to the digital file. For analogous purposes, the title to a particular car may change hands when a car is sold, but that transaction does not create a duplicate car for the new owner. Because each NFT has its unique code making it non-fungible, it will likewise not be duplicated to deliver the token to a new owner. The NFT simply moves from one owner’s wallet to the successive owner’s wallet. The actual recording and musical composition are not reproduced in this process. Under this lens, no mechanical license nor mechanical royalty payments should be required for either the initial minting of an NFT or the subsequent transfer of the NFT, because the creation and sale of a token is distinct from the creation and sale of a recording itself.

Conversely, it could be argued that since multiple NFT holders would be linking to the original digital file stored on an NFT marketplace, that storage would function like a digital locker service requiring a mechanical license. While it is the case that an NFT must be minted from a digital file stored on an NFT marketplace (or on any server), and that such a process requires a mechanical license, the mechanical reproduction only occurs in connection with the upload of the recording file—not in the creation of the token. Therefore, it may be true that a mechanical license is required to link a file to an NFT, but the minting process of the token itself, arguably, may not fall within the type of activity requiring a mechanical license. This means that copyright owners of musical compositions may not be entitled to payment for this new revenue stream.

Private or Commercial Use?

Even if we alternatively assume that the transfer of an NFT amounts to a mechanical reproduction, another obstacle for the application of Section 115 rests upon the ambiguity over whether NFTs are distributed for private use vs. commercial use. Digital distribution of musical compositions in the form of sound recordings are permitted under Section 115 for private use only of the work.³³ Thus, for digital copies of sound recordings which are downloaded, or even where the consumer may be entitled to a tethered download, the consumer is not allowed to then subsequently distribute or transfer their rights to that copy. Like any crypto asset, NFTs are transferable in secondary markets online, which may be transacted through automated smart contracts requiring no permission from the copyright owner of the musical work embodied in the recording linked to the NFT. In fact, it is plausible for entire metaverse secondary markets to exist where NFT records are traded, auctioned, or sold. Consumers may choose to enter these secondary markets purely for commercial gain. Although the *possession* of digital audio files is not exchanged in these secondary markets (as argued above), the right to access those files are—creating a new revenue stream in connection with NFTs. Accordingly, it is not clear whether secondary NFT record transactions should be deemed “commercial” or “non-commercial” exploitations of music. If a compulsory blanket mechanical license structure is implemented to compensate copyright owners for NFT transfers as a matter of law (as opposed to mere terms of a smart contract), this may be contradictory to the notion that Section 115 is only applicable to private uses.

Similarly, still alternatively assuming for argument that an NFT sale constitutes a mechanical reproduction, a song-by-song compulsory mechanical licensing structure would be problematic. In each instance of an NFT sale, copyright owners must rely on the terms and conditions of NFT marketplace platforms to ensure that their works are being licensed for private use only. Whether or not NFT transfers can be restricted for private use only depends on the terms and conditions of the smart contract, which often do not include provisions as to how those terms can be enforced. Unfortunately, there has been no proper legal contract coded within the NFT itself. Rather, the marketplace offering provides terms and conditions regarding the distribution of the assets. This is an inherent flaw within existing smart contracts, as they are only able to effectuate simple “if-then” operations. Smart contracts are not able to detect the intent of an NFT holder simply from the transfer of an NFT. Thus, any legal restrictions governing these transactions, such as private vs. commercial use, are limited to an NFT platform’s restrictions, and would need to be enforced in an applicable court outside of the metaverse.

Lack of Legal Consistency for Transferability

The final challenge in applying Section 115 to the distribution of NFTs is the inconsistency between legal treatment of resales for digital assets vs. physical products. At their foundation, NFTs are digital commodities. The U.S. Congress and courts have established that digital goods may not be resold without a license, and this has been applied to sound recordings specifically. The “first sale doctrine” of copyright law, as codified in 17 U.S.C. § 109(a), states:

Notwithstanding the provisions of section 106(3), the owner of a particular copy or phonorecord lawfully made under this title, or any person authorized by such owner, is entitled, without the authority of the copyright owner, to sell or otherwise dispose of the possession of that copy or phonorecord...³⁴

This notion was confirmed in 2013 when a federal court in the case of Capitol Records, LLC v. ReDigi, Inc., held that the first sale doctrine would not allow customers to resell their pre-owned digital music files.³⁵ ReDigi operated a website permitting the resale of digital files in an on-

line secondary marketplace. The court reasoned that the first sale doctrine only applies to a purchaser's *particular* phonorecord—i.e., a non-fungible good:

[A] ReDigi user owns the phonorecord that was created when she purchased and downloaded a song from iTunes to her hard disk. But to sell that song on ReDigi, she must produce a new phonorecord on the ReDigi server. Because it is therefore impossible for the user to sell her “particular” phonorecord on ReDigi, the first sale statute cannot provide a defense.... Here, ReDigi is not distributing such material items; rather, it is distributing reproductions of the copyrighted code embedded in new material objects, namely, the ReDigi server in Arizona and its users' hard drives.³⁶

Under this reading, all digital assets require a license for *secondary* distribution. Although this paper argues that sales of sound recording NFTs are not sales of digital files of sound recordings themselves, even if we assume for argument that such sales were indeed transfers of sound recordings, then such sales would require a license for their resale because they are digital assets. Therefore, regardless of whether a mechanical reproduction has occurred within the sale itself, the copyright owner must always issue a license for the subsequent distribution of an NFT—which conflicts with the ability for an NFT holder to freely trade the NFT in secondary markets. Current NFT smart contract functionally enables the automatic resale and payment to the original NFT owner a predetermined royalty set by the original NFT owner. This technology does not conform to the current copyright law affirmed in *Capitol Records, LLC v. Redigi, Inc.*, which would require permission from the original copyright owner in each instance of an NFT transfer. It remains unclear whether this permission would be a mechanical license or an entirely new type of license for NFTs, which are distinct from both digital audio files and physical goods. The smart contract functionality of NFTs will likely create the circumstance where the free market will establish industry practices, and Congress will need to address these changes through additional legislation.

Mechanical Licensing is Premature for the Metaverse

There needs to be some protection for copyright owners to capitalize on evolving revenue streams developed in metaverse environments, beyond simply a one-time synchronization license for pairing visuals with music. If copyright owners desire to be compensated with royalties for metaverse exploitations of music, this could be done by either adopting a compulsory song-by-song licensing approach, or a compulsory blanket licensing approach, such as in Section 115. However, based on the foregoing discussion, it is debatable as to what extent Section 115 is applicable to copyright owners with respect to certain metaverse uses of music.

It is not clear whether metaverse public performances require any cached copy of the compositions performed “live.” There is a provocative argument over the “interactive” nature of a metaverse concert and whether it should be retrofitted into the definition of an interactive digital stream of music. Nor is there established legal precedent as to whether there is any mechanical reproductions in the minting or subsequent distribution of NFT records, apart from the initial server copy or the album which is uploaded online and linked to the NFT. The difficulty in fitting Section 115 into metaverse applications of music delivery might suggest that either Section 115 should be revised to incorporate the metaverse uses into its scope, or that Congress should legislate a new exclusive right for copyright owners of musical compositions, which exists solely in the context of the metaverse.

As the metaverse and Web3.0 will continue to provide new revenue streams to copyright owners, simply applying preexisting licensing structures may be a simpler but possibly more inadequate way of addressing music rights moving forward. If a songwriter releases an album as an NFT, would compulsory mechanical licenses be available without regard to a first use? Moreover, would a compulsory mechanical licensing system diminish the songwriter’s ability to capitalize on this new revenue stream (for sales and secondary market sales) by eliminating the ability for the songwriter or publisher to choose their licensed uses? Blanket compulsory mechanical licenses may resolve any song reproduction issues for metaverse concerts (if it becomes settled law that any reproduction and/or DPD exists in those contexts), but may be premature for the NFT records, as we do not yet know how metaverse economics will evolve with respect to NFTs. Congress should observe industry norms which develop with respect to fees paid for secondary sales of NFT recordings, and the

way such transactions may require regulation—prior to any immediate attempt to apply Section 115 to such uses. The booming auctions of NFTs in 2021 are likely not to resurface, but NFTs will not disappear. They will remain a constant asset in the metaverse, and it is only a matter of time before the music industry develops market standards to accompany NFT transactions. Whether Congress will need to inject protections like it did in Section 115 to this market will depend on how much commercial interests (whether by consumers or record distributors) will outweigh the interests of songwriters’ protections. Web3.0 is not on the horizon—it is already here, and Congress must keep its ears open.

Endnotes

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Reviews

Alison Ellwood (Director). *Laurel Canyon: A Place in Time*. Epix, 2020. [epix.com/series/laurel-canyon](https://www.epix.com/series/laurel-canyon)

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Popular music history is a critical component in many music business curricula. Studying pop music history is enlightening, from developing an understanding of musical foundations to facing historical challenges with an eye toward a more enlightened approach to helping students relate with their future (and older) colleagues through common pop music knowledge. A challenge is bringing to life the music, artists, companies, executives, and systems that might seem increasingly distant and unrelatable to students as time marches on. There are helpful textbooks, journals, magazine articles, and foundational recordings by artists known and unknown to the student population. Offerings with visual aspects, such as documentaries, allow the people who created pop music history to tell their stories and keep students engaged. Unfortunately, while there are some undeniable classics, much material becomes dated over time.

A new “rock doc” rarely comes along that grabs the viewer by revealing meaningful, unique information. However, a great resource that does just that is the 2020 Epix documentary *Laurel Canyon: A Place in Time*. It looks and sounds like a big production, directed by Alison Ellwood (*History of the Eagles*) and with opening credits including MGM, Amblin Television, and Warner Music Entertainment. *Laurel Canyon: A Place in Time* also stands out as a deeper dive, with commentary from less celebrated but consequential musicians such as Richie Furay (Buffalo Springfield) and Johnny Echols (Love), in addition to more famous figures including David Crosby and Joni Mitchell.

This two-part film features up-to-date interviews with many who were part of the Laurel Canyon scene. It comes to life with stunning pictures from two primary narrators, photographers Henry Diltz (also of the Modern Folk Quartet) and Nurit Wilde. In addition, rare home movies, photos, and music from Joni Mitchell, Jackson Browne, the Doors, the Byrds, and more, add tremendous value. New interviews for the two-part production include those with Linda Ronstadt, Graham Nash, Bonnie Raitt, Don Henley, and others from this legendary time and place. Besides

on-camera interviews with Diltz and Wilde, a standout aspect is that this film primarily utilizes new and old dialog from those in the Laurel Canyon music community underneath the visuals. For example, the viewer sees the actual “Our House” as Graham Nash explains how he wrote the song.

Episode one begins shortly after pop music’s shift to Los Angeles when native Southern California surf rock bands and newly relocated folk rock groups defined the LA pop sound. The second episode moves from the Woodstock era of the late sixties to the mid-seventies with groups like the Eagles. A stark difference is apparent in the first episode being idealistic and the second revealing the growing industry soon to become the behemoth record business. Throughout, there is a robust sociological aspect to this production. Artists from the Byrds to the Monkees to Frank Zappa to Alice Cooper and the Mamas and the Papas were friends and neighbors, often showing up randomly at each other’s houses, with one such occurrence leading to the formation of Crosby, Stills and Nash. Viewers might also become more aware of a blurring of pop/rock and commercial/non-commercial that defined Laurel Canyon as a unique locale and era in popular music history.

Laurel Canyon: A Place in Time is a modern and thorough look back, expertly and lovingly told by those who were there, matched with well-placed photos, films, and recordings, via big-budget Hollywood production values. Additionally, it does an outstanding job of weaving (even previously well-known) anecdotes about each group together to tell the larger story of Laurel Canyon.

As an educational tool, *Laurel Canyon: A Place in Time* brings to life the roughly 1964-1976 period in which Los Angeles became the epicenter of the music industry. This documentary reverently captures an era that forever changed the music business and could be part of a course section about the sixties or seventies. Moreover, such a top-notch presentation of engaging content will pique the interest of students whose grandparents are contemporaries of the pop music icons featured in it. As a result, *Laurel Canyon: A Place in Time* is an excellent resource for any twentieth-century pop music history course.

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Ross Cole. *The Folk: Music, Modernity, and the Political Imagination*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021. ucpress.edu

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Folk music enjoys an almost mythic place in our popular imagination, a fact perhaps best evidenced by the cyclical revivals it experiences in public interest and the frequency with which major artists “return to their roots” in late career retrospectives. The aura of purity and sacredness that permeates popular understanding of folk music means that we rarely stop to question its origins, its ideological underpinnings, or its cultural effects. Ross Cole has expertly addressed this gap in our understanding in a book that is especially deserving of attention in our current political moment.

The Folk centers on Anglo-American folk traditions and cultural memory circa 1870-1930. Central to Cole's argument is the idea of a “folkloric imagination” which he defines as a “paradigmatic trope: the folk as distant, waning, but eternal, and the modern world as over-bearing,

insubstantial, and fake” (p. xii). On the first page of the Introduction we see mention of names we expect in a book about English language folk music such as Alan Lomax, Woody Guthrie, and Bob Dylan. The narrative quickly turns, however, as the book establishes itself as deeply historical in methodology and taking a critical cultural stance in its theoretical outlook. This book goes beyond a romantic view of folk music informed by popular revivals of the mid-twentieth century to interrogate how its underlying ideologies might manifest in myriad ways from utopianism to socialism to fascism.

Chapter 1 explores how the practice of “collecting” folk music in mid-nineteenth-century England eventually reified the mythological status it enjoys today. A focus on collecting “material” as opposed to documenting individual or community expression helps to explain why we view folk music now as authored anonymously or collectively. Reification can be defined as the conversion of the ephemeral to the repeatable, and *The Folk* contains several interesting discussions of how the phonographic and photographic technologies that enabled mechanical reproduction figure into our folkloric imagination. The central irony of this phenomenon is, of course, that folk collectors enthusiastically used the very technologies of a modern world that they simultaneously decried for destroying a disappearing culture. Chapter 2 documents counterpoints to such mainstream practices and views. Even before the twentieth-century, voices such as Joseph Jacobs could be heard at London’s Folklore Society describing the imaginary nature of “the folk” and pointing out that publishing firms had a vested interest in popularizing anonymously authored material for which they had to pay no royalties. In this sense, collecting can be understood “not as the discovery, but as the *manufacture* of culture” (52) and can be viewed as part of a colonialist mindset in which the creative labor of lower classes is appropriated by the intelligentsia for their own economic and political ends.

Chapter 3 centers on the interweaving of politics and culture by Arts and Crafts Movement pioneer William Morris. For Morris “folk revivalism manifests a special kind of utopian thinking” (74) that meshed perfectly with his ideas about the centrality of art to a truly fulfilled life. Morris believed that folk arts could awaken the political consciousness of subjugated classes. His vision was also an explicitly socialistic one at the turn of the twentieth century that would influence subsequent cultural revolutionaries who sought to wed music and politics. Chapter 4 shows

the wide variety of perspectives taken by collectors and scholars of black folk music. The contrast between white collector's working in colonialist modes and black scholars working to celebrate and preserve the traditions of their own communities is stark. But perhaps even more interesting is the range of opinion among black scholars themselves. W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, from which the chapter's subtitle takes its name, is unsurprisingly discussed at length. But the perspectives of black artists and authors like W. C. Handy and Jean Toomer, who actually created work inspired by the black folk tradition, are given attention as well. These histories remind us that no group is a monolith and help to uncover perspectives of folk music that have been obscured by dominant narratives.

Chapter 5 focuses on that most prolific of turn-of-the-century folk collectors: Cecil Sharp. This chapter becomes the full statement of the book's theme about the malleability of folkloric imagination to be shaped by who gets to do the imagining. Sharp's internalized racism, his commitment to Social Darwinism, and above all his "position[ing of] himself at the helm of the movement serving as a gatekeeper to the folk" (143) help to shine light on the darker aspects of Anglo-American folk music history (Sharp famously entwined the two nation's folk histories when he crossed the Atlantic in the early twentieth century to collect songs among the descendants of Scotch-Irish in the Appalachian Mountains). Especially interesting is the discussion of Sharp's emphasis on the use of traditional folk music in education, an emphasis that resonated with Nazi Germany's educational projects a few decades later. By shining a critical lens on lionized figures like Sharp, *The Folk* helps us to see beyond a folk mythology that obfuscates and perpetuates inequality in the music industry and creates a breeding ground for reactionary messages disguised as sacred history to circulate. In fact, as Cole discusses in the book's Coda, folk music is being put to such uses in the present day as those styling themselves as minstrels of the alt-right remake popular folk melodies to spread their racist, fascist, and nationalistic ideologies.

This book has interesting intersections with many current trends in the study of popular music. Personally, I found Cole's insight about the appropriation of black folk culture as communal property by John Lomax to be particularly salient. While notions of collective, anonymous authorship might seem to have an air of nobility that puts the focus on the music rather than the musician, in practice such ideas have often been used to classify the creativity of minorities and marginalized groups as public

domain. More generally, this book provides an excellent example of using cultural phenomena to examine political communication. Perhaps the most generalized takeaway is that folk music is truly music of the people in that its actual history reflects all the complexity and contradiction of human life. Folk music does not have any mystic power to heal or destroy on its own, its power resides in who gets to play it and to what ends.

Cole has done popular music studies a great service in tackling the central questions of folk music scholarship: How do you critically analyze something so many view as sacred? As much as this book might benefit political pundits who exploit folkloric imagination to make their audiences nostalgic for a past that never existed, it is unlikely that they will take its lessons to heart. This book would be excellent for use in a graduate seminar, but for those of us who primarily teach undergraduates the book's deep engagement with theory may be challenging for many students. Still, we who teach students aspiring to enter music industry careers bear some responsibility to push back against mythologies that obscure harmful realities. Just as Cecil Sharp understood the power of education to shape worldview, we can teach our students this book's lesson that folk music, or any kind of creative expression, is not inherently any particular thing. It is what we make it.

Jason Lee Guthrie

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Scott Orr. *How to Start a Record Label: A 30 Day Guide. Other Record Labels*, 2021. [otherrecordlabels.com](https://doi.org/10.25101/23.8)

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In recent years, the industry has undergone a drastic shift from the physical product model to the digital streaming model.¹ Releasing music digitally has lowered the cost of distribution and made it possible for the average person to release music without a record label. Essentially, these artists are their own record label. The rise in streaming and the low cost of releasing music has also spawned many entrepreneurs to start record labels and sign artists. As a music educator teaching at the college level, I have been searching for a supplement for my courses that will help to add the do-it-yourself (DIY) record label component to reflect the changing times of the music industry. In university music business programs, knowledge of record labels, their history, and their structure are important aspects that should be covered, but it is also important that the DIY style of record labels be considered given today's market changes. Author Scott Orr adds to this discussion and the literature on DIY record labels in his 2021 book *How to Start a Record Label: A 30 Day Guide*. His book focuses on releasing music independently and gives a step-by-step guide on creating an independent label entity and releasing music. Orr is a Canada-based entrepreneur, podcaster, musician, and author. In 2010, he started his independent record label Other Songs for the release of his own music, which has garnered over thirteen million streams. His podcasts include interviews with industry executives and advice about the art and culture of running a DIY record label.

How to Start a Record Label is divided into four parts with a total of forty-seven chapters. The first part is separated into two chapters with an introduction to the book and an explanation of what Orr considers the four pillars of building a successful record label: be consistent, persistent, intentional, and generous. He describes consistency as creating a plan and sticking to it and persistence as focusing on that consistency over the long term. The chapter also recommends having a clear strategy in everything you do. The fourth pillar, generosity, applies to signing new artists and giving them the tools they need to achieve their goals. The author dis-

1. Dan Galen Hodges Jr., "Cultural Implications of International Companies Acquiring Nashville Publishers," *College Music Symposium* 62, no. 1 (2022): 69-81. <https://doi.org/10.18177/sym.2022.62.mbi.11560>.

cusses generosity with the idea of helping to provide others knowledge gained from experience. The section provides a good foundation for Orr's step-by-step guide and a philosophy or mindset to follow as a record label entrepreneur.

Part two includes thirty chapters and is Orr's daily breakdown of what to do in the first thirty days of the process of starting a record label and releasing music. The book starts with the basics of planning, which is a process that many overlook due to the emotional tug of releasing their music to the world. A good plan is an example of what Orr describes in part one as the pillar of being intentional and can help set a label and its music up for better success. Starting with picking a name and defining goals and audience, labels and artists must create a brand that they want to emulate and for the public to see. Next, the author explains setting up the infrastructure for the label and its releases. Advice is given on building a proper website, finding artists, finding a music attorney to create contracts, and deciding on royalty splits with artists. Next, Orr explains that label owners should decide what type of medium fits their possible consumer base. If the primary consumers are identified as vinyl album purchasers, then a manufacturing plan is necessary. The book outlines some great things to consider when going the manufacturing route. If the primary consumers are identified as streaming customers, the label can save manufacturing expense and focus monetary efforts elsewhere. Only after all the preliminary planning does Orr suggest launching a record label.

The author explains that the launching of a label and its recorded product should include some crucial elements. The first is to build an email list of possible customers for a direct connection between fans and the label's artists. Next, build a press list of potential companies with individuals to review the label and its product. Press is essential in an album or single-release campaign. The power of lead time is also explained pertaining to a release. Focusing press releases on a future release can help build anticipation for the product, which can help generate sales or streams. As expenditures mount for releasing and promoting your product, Orr recommends that label owners always be mindful of their budgets. As a label gains traction, cash flows may need to be diversified. The author explains that offering label services for other labels can be a good source of additional income, while also displaying the pillar of generosity discussed in part one.

Part two wraps up with discussions on releasing music product as well as furthering your product once it is released. First, Orr explains to not be afraid to ask for advice from others. Always strive to learn and improve based on entrepreneurs that have gone before you. The author stresses the necessity of social media in targeting your specific audience so you can maximize promotion efforts. Regular posts on relevant platforms can be a great boost for a release. “Thinking outside the box” is an over-used term in business, but the author does have some good points on how to do so. Grassroots efforts like engaging the community or offering special offerings depending on where the consumer connects with the product can be great tools. An independent label owner cannot simply upload music to Spotify or Apple Music without employing an external aggregator. Orr suggests the aggregators CD Baby, DistroKid, and TuneCore as viable options. Once released, pitching to the press and promoting daily on social platforms is extremely important in keeping the release at the forefront of consumers’ minds.

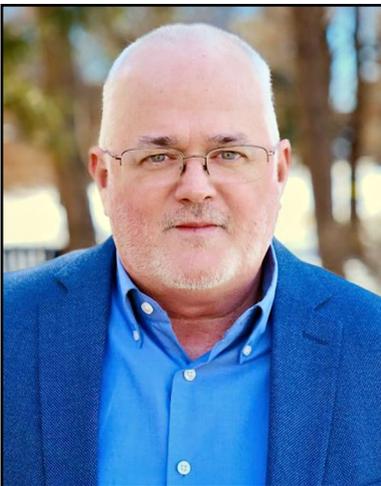
At this point in the book, the author veers off topic and inserts a section on publishing. While the songwriter side of the music business and how songwriter royalties are earned are important topics to understand, they are more complicated than a three-page description and don’t relate to record labels unless the label is also acting as the artist’s publisher of their written works. Part two begins to wrap up with discussions on physical distribution and streaming playlists. If you are releasing physical product, you need to decide where that product is going to be offered and how to place it in those locations. There are independent companies available that can offer distribution services. For digital streaming, it is important to get to know playlist curators at the various streaming platforms and attempt to get them interested in your music. The final thoughts that Orr shares in part two is to always be mindful of the artwork for your releases. The visual element can help draw consumers to your product. Lastly, the author says to have fun, celebrate every win, plan long-term, and maintain the pillars of consistency and persistence by staying connected to your community and fans.

Part three offers six chapters, a conclusion, and some final thoughts encouraging readers to take the leap to becoming record label entrepreneurs. In addition, the section includes FAQs with common questions from those thinking about starting their own label. Orr gives a checklist outlining the main points of part two’s thirty-day process as an easy ref-

erence for label owners. The section closes with some marketing ideas as well as a short biography on Orr. Part four of the book does not offer new information but does include some valuable supplemental resources: worksheets for release schedules, contact lists, branding, objective/goal sheets, yearly and weekly calendars, catalog listings, and to-do lists. There is also a supplemental workbook available with more worksheet resources to help in the planning process.

Overall, Orr's book is a valuable guide for the budding entrepreneur record label owner or independent artist. The topics are explained well so that anyone can understand them, and his recommended steps are laid out in a way that the reader can see each step of starting a record label along with the importance of each. The information provided can make the daunting task of chasing one's dreams of being a record label owner possible by laying the process out in an easy-to-follow checklist for maximum success. The book is also an excellent supplemental resource for a college course due to the rising number of DIY record labels and independent artists releasing music to streaming platforms. As a college professor, I see many students releasing music without adequate planning. Orr's guide would be a great help to allow them to see the importance of a solid release strategy over the emotional tug of rushing music out into the marketplace because they are so excited for the world to hear it. I would not, however, recommend this book as a standalone resource for record labels as it lacks discussions on the history of record labels, major label structures, and how labels operated before and during the digital age.

Dan Galen Hodges Jr.



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Hodges has had his research published in the *College Music Symposium* and *The Journal of Business Diversity Journals* and has presented his research at the annual MEIEA Summits in 2022 and 2023.

Paul Saintilan and David Schreiber. *Managing Organizations in the Creative Economy: Organizational Behaviour for the Cultural Sector* (Second Edition). Oxford: Routledge, 2023.

[routledge.com](https://www.routledge.com).

<https://doi.org/10.25101/23.9>

A second edition of *Managing Organizations in the Creative Economy: Organizational Behaviour for the Cultural Sector* has been released by Paul Saintilan, a creative industries “pracademic,” author, teacher, and industry consultant, and currently CEO of the Australian Performing Arts Conservatory in Brisbane, Australia, and David Schreiber, Associate Professor and Chair of the Creative & Entertainment Industries program at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee. This edition builds on the strong base established in the original 2018 version. And, it is a part of the Routledge *Discovering the Creative Industries* series which seeks to “provide essential reading for those studying to enter the creative industries as well as those seeking to enhance their career via executive education.”

This book focuses on organizational behavior which the authors define as the “field of study which investigates human behavior in organizations, for the purpose of improving organizational effectiveness and performance, and the satisfaction of those working within the organization.” Rather than creating a text that solely focuses on theoretical and traditional management practices, this book draws from such disciplines and moves forward to considering how creative and cultural firms implement such theories as they face a “complex system.” It reminds the reader that the creative firms must be “agile, flexible and adaptive and provide space for creative autonomy.”

As posited in the 2018 review in the *MEIEA Journal*, this book remains of “particular benefit to anyone who might attempt to work in the creative industry, as well as professionals and students in arts management, organization studies, music business, and the broader study of the

entertainment industries.” The authors recognize that much has changed in our world since 2018, when the initial edition was released. As such, changes to this edition include more focus on the “increased impact of digitization and social media, the rise of the #MeToo movement, concerning research on mental health issues facing creative industries workers, and the growing attention being paid to sustainability, carbon footprint and climate change.” Additionally, the authors have moved material around to support the changes in this edition, and in some instances, have created additional chapters, such as Chapter 10 “Teams,” due to the importance of the topic. This book is well-structured as its chapters build upon one another and create cohesive learning.

Of particular importance is the last chapter, Chapter 14 “Ethics in creative organizations and conclusion.” It is imperative readers recognize that ethical issues arise especially in the cultural and creative industries, and the response to such issues has great implications for the brand.

This text is highly recommended not only for the classroom but for any industry professional. Readers will appreciate the straightforward, practical, and thorough way the text is built.

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Survey, Business Law I, and Business Law II. She is a member of the inaugural class (2021-22) of the Nashville Entertainment & IP Law American Inn of Court. Among other journals, she has been published in the *Journal of Critical Incidents*, *Journal of the Music & Entertainment Industry Educators Association*, *Midwest Law Journal*, *Southern Journal of Business & Ethics*, and *Southern Law Journal*. She has also worked with PBS creating educational resources to support *Country Music: A Film by Ken Burns*.