

Music marketing in the digital music industries – An autoethnographic exploration of opportunities and challenges for independent musicians

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Abstract

The digital music industries have encountered major structural transformations driven by a rapidly evolving new media environment and the evolution of music streaming as the dominant consumption format. Much analysis has been on broad macro issues driven by the concerns of major stakeholders such as record labels and music publishers. Through autoethnography, the micro-perspective of an independent musician is presented, highlighting the challenges of music marketing planning in a dynamic digital business environment. Future directions for independent music marketing practice are explored.

Keywords: Music industries, independent musician, digital marketing, social media, new product development, music business

1 Introduction

The Worldwide Independent Network (WIN) (2019) highlights the growing importance of the independent recorded music sector which is made up of smaller labels, micro businesses, and independent musicians. It states that the independent sector now represents 39.9 percent of the 17.3-billion-dollar global recorded music industry in 2018 (WIN 2019; IFPI 2019). The International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) (2019) estimated that major record companies have only 7,500 signed artists on their roster globally. Most independent musicians will never be signed to a record label. In Australia alone there are over

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35,000 unsigned artists on independent radio station triple j's² 'Unearthed' program and an estimated 95,000 songwriters and composers registered with the copyright collection agency APRA, the majority unsigned (APRA/AMCOS 2019; ABC 2019). Most of these independent musicians navigate the digital music industries (DMI), largely unsupported, especially in the early stages of career development (Morrow 2018; Hracs 2012; Anderton, Dubber & James 2012).

Independent musicians operate in a turbulent industry which has been undergoing major structural transformations since the arrival of digital piracy at the start of the 21st century. These include changing digital product formats; increased access to a larger global music catalogue at lower prices; the fragmentation of music broadcasting and media (from the dominance of radio and television to online and mobile alternatives); and the proliferation of new digital communication channels for music promotion (Dubber 2012; Ly 2012; Meier 2017; Baker 2018; Barnhart 2018; Armit & Oliver 2019). These changes have also happened in a relatively short timeframe compared to previous transitions in the music industry (Hesmondhalgh & Meier 2018; Hracs 2012; Ogden et al. 2011).

Much has been written about these changes at a macro level focusing on technology, its impact on changing consumer behaviour and the restructuring of the bigger music industry players such as major record and publishing companies, media companies and the overall economic paradigm shifts (Anderson 2004; Kusek, Leonhard & Lindsay 2005; O'Reilly, Larsen & Kubacki 2013; Coelho & Mendes 2019; Sun 2019; Tronvoll 2019; Miller 2019). Less is known of the impacts on the independent sector. Hesmondhalgh & Meier (2015: 95) point out the lowering of the barriers to entry that were evident in the traditional music industries has led to the emergence of many more smaller record labels and micro-independents catering to a wide range of music tastes and niche markets, coexisting side by side with the larger corporations and

² triple j is a tax-payer funded radio station in Australia that broadcasts nationally. It is a part of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and is a youth focused station. Its branding policy requires its name to be stylised in lowercase letters (ABC 2019).

multinationals. Anderton et al. (2012: 36) define these micro-independent labels as "*small-scale businesses run from home by musicians and/or music enthusiasts*".

There is literature that has explored the necessity of musicians to adopt an entrepreneurial mindset to develop a music career (Blanning 2008; Cohen 1993). Hracs (2012) highlights the transition to digitally-driven music production and more recently Morrow (2018) expands on these ideas and explores agile management practices in a digital industry acknowledging the need for financial planning on limited budgets at the startup phase of artistic careers. There is also literature that explores the broader impacts of these digital transitions on independent artists and musicians (Stewart 2018; Armit & Oliver 2019; Prey 2019; Tronvoll 2019). This literature however, is limited in its exploration of strategic marketing principles from the marketing field and the relevant implications at a micro-level facing the growing number of independent, self-managed artists. One of the key business functions that record labels provide for new artists is marketing expertise and it makes sense to explore best practice in this discipline for independent musicians who may never be signed but are still intent on creating a sustainable music career (IFPI 2015; Miller 2019). Allen et al. (2016) offer some good applications from the marketing discipline addressing the research gap and this paper builds upon this approach. There are also a variety of online websites, podcasts and 'how-to guides' for marketing in the DMI which are useful as a valuable data source but lack the necessary academic rigor required for empirical research. Drawing on autoethnographic data, a multidisciplinary study is presented, integrating emerging themes and issues with these 'DIY' contemporary perspectives on independent music marketing. Relevant academic literature across multiple fields is also explored in order to develop a more robust investigation into the nexus of contemporary music, artistic process, and marketing processes in the DMI.

This paper explores strategic marketing insights into new digital music marketing techniques and provides a conceptual framework for new product development (NPD) in the DMI from the perspective of an inde-

pendent musician. It also builds on previous work by Evans et al. (2013) which explored artistic success indicators for the music industry and evolves a model on what it takes to become market-ready as an independent musician working in the DMI. Challenges include the difficulties in navigating the myriad of complex artistic and marketing partnerships necessary to compete in an oversupplied music marketplace. Furthermore, independent musicians must re-orientate themselves from an innate focus on songwriting and product development where they derive much intrinsic satisfaction, and become motivated to understand and implement sophisticated marketing processes that require learning new skills in strategic digital marketing and its associated technology (Caves 2000). There are increasing demands on independent musicians beyond their instrumental and musical ability (Evans et al. 2012: 6). Throsby & Zednik (2010) identify a lack of marketing skills and financial resources for artists promoting their work as being factors that inhibit artists' career development. This has significant implications for contemporary music educators designing programs that should cater to these skill deficiencies.

The opportunities and challenges facing all industry players in the DMI are vast and complex. The DMI is only at the early stages of development into the new streaming formats and related media ecosystems. Even less is known of the impacts of these changes on independent music marketing practice. Miller (2019) states that the fundamental principles of the music business; such as good songs, quality recordings, developing an artist brand and promoting this to an interested audience is the same but how it is done "*is nearly unrecognizable from just a decade ago*" (Miller 2019: 7). A thorough exploration of this uncertain business environment is critical in identifying strategic directions for the growing the independent sector moving forward. The autoethnographic process revealed a multitude of complex decision-making processes and workflows that may be evident when releasing an album in the DMI. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a detailed discussion of them all. Instead, this paper offers exploratory research into planning strategies for independent musicians in this new digital marketing environment. It

highlights new product development approaches and digital marketing techniques for building an online presence in the DMI.

2 Research background and scope

The research fields of this project are situated within the Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (CCI) classification of music and the performing arts and marketing and advertising, two different sectors within the creative industries (Cultural Ministers Council 2008). This research positions the creative practice of an independent musician as straddling these two disciplines. Independent musicians are focusing not only on song-writing and music production but also the development of professional marketing strategies. They do this to ensure the creative works they produce, can (hopefully) achieve a commercial return on investment and some form of career advancement. Blanning (2008) and Scott (2012) consider these independent musicians to be cultural entrepreneurs with a 'do-it-yourself' ethos; they create and perform their own music and "*self-manage the construction of a music industry career*" (Scott 2012: 238). However, more needs to be explored in terms of practical marketing strategies that will help independent musicians build and maintain sustainable careers. As stated earlier, independent musicians need marketing to be successful. Marketing includes the activities undertaken to create and exchange products and value with others (Kotler 2012). Music marketing, therefore, is defined as:

Those activities related to the development and creation of music products involving song-writing, recording, performing and branding music works; promoting, distributing and exchanging these works; to satisfy the needs for entertainment, identity and social-cultural connection and meaning (np).

The context of music marketing has changed with the digitization of the music industry. Wikstrom (2014) points out that the digital age of music has changed the music listening experience from "*playing music to playing with music*", highlighting the role of social media (Wikstrom

2014: 20). Miller (2019) points out that traditional PR methods have been replaced with innovative digital marketing initiatives powered by data analytics to extract insights. Music has always been a powerful expression of identity and self-expression. The evolution of digital media communications in a fragmented media landscape has seen the breaking down of cultural boundaries and the emergence of an international music market. While this autoethnography presents an Australian perspective, and may have more applicability for English speaking music markets like the US and the UK, the essential concepts in the models are still useful from an international perspective. Nuances in the digital music ecosystems in emerging markets such as India, Africa, and China should be considered for future research and I acknowledge research limitations in this regard. The following section presents the research methodology and rationale that will underpin the findings.

3 Methodology

This paper positions the creative practice of a self-managed, Australian independent singer-songwriter in the context of the DMI and the rapid technological and socio-cultural changes affecting it. Autoethnography is used to highlight a micro perspective on these industry transformations and guide the discussion. It explores key issues from a practice-based perspective that "*situates creative practice as both a driver and outcome of the research process*" (Hamilton & Jaaniste 2009: 1). It is an approach to research and writing seeking to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis et al. 2010). Autoethnography is a research method widely used in the study of human creativity (Pace 2012), and is an established methodology for arts and social science research especially in the analysis of complex creative and psychological processes (Reed-Danahay 1997; Ellis & Bochner 2000; Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2010; Chang 2008; Atkinson 2006; Anderson 2006). This methodology was selected specifically to take advantage of the unique analytical perspective I held. A twenty-five-year career as an independent musician and

over fifteen years of lecturing in the field of entertainment and digital marketing has provided much of the preliminary research into the topic. The practice-based approach in this study places me as a participant observer within the context of the international independent music community but also as a marketing educator in the DMI. Participant-observation techniques enabled me to become immersed in the community of study at a deeper level in order to gain a better perspective on what the members may be seeing. Participant-observation extends beyond naturalistic observation because the observer is a 'player' in the action (Barrett & Bolt 2010).

The grounded theory technique of comparative analysis was used to integrate a full literature review as the issues emerged, enabling the project to be reflective and informative and to offer greater explanatory power than methodologies based on a single discipline (Cheng et al. 2014; Strauss & Corbin 1994; Birks & Mills 2010; Goulding 2002). The salient attributes of grounded theory were used to code and categorize data collected through audio diaries, written memo's, email mining and through concurrent data collection during practice-based processes. Using constant comparative analysis, themes were categorised and further developed with the relevant literature (Birks & Mills 2010; Musgrave 2019).

The research builds upon and updates research findings discussed in my previous work which was an exegesis incorporating the development of key creative artefacts including a ten-track album and the planning process of associated branded marketing materials (Murphy 2015). This paper, therefore, uses the autoethnographic method to identify the key practical issues facing independent musicians writing, producing and releasing songs in the DMI and integrates these findings with a multi-disciplinary discussion of relevant literature with an emphasis on marketing principles.

There is some agreement amongst a range of authors that the processes of production and marketing of a creative project in the DMI can be understood effectively through multiple lenses and levels of observation (Anderton, Dubber & James 2012; Cheng et al. 2014; Collins 2010;

Glaser 1978). Anderton et al. (2012) suggest multidisciplinary approaches may offer new insights because they bring together a range of different academic disciplines that have the potential to reveal more nuanced and integrated insights about the different sectors of, and issues within, the broader music industries (Anderton et al. 2012: 21). This approach is also reflected in the work of Burnard (2012) and Williamson and Cloonan (2007) who recognized the need to approach studying the creative industries with more of a pluralistic perspective. The next section presents a discussion of key findings.

4 Key opportunities and challenges for independent musicians

This section discusses key findings in contemporary independent music marketing practice. The study identified the essential components to becoming market-ready in the digital age in section (4.1). Secondly, the necessity for marketing planning is highlighted by the importance of digital marketing research (4.2) and the application of a new product development (NPD) model for the DMI (4.3). Finally, an exploration of key digital marketing techniques as they relate to building an online presence in the DMI are introduced raising areas for future research (4.4).

4.1 Becoming market ready in the DMI

As stated in the introduction, most independent musicians will never be signed to a record label however for many independent musicians getting signed is an important goal. According to the IFPI (2012), the majority of artists still aspire to be signed by a record company. The most cited factors for wanting to be signed included promotional support (76 percent), tour support (46 percent) and payment of an advance (35 percent) (IFPI 2015: 1). The majority of independent musicians seek support for the necessary marketing, administration and management processes required to develop a career in the music industries. There are limitations of DIY career models because of time management and /or finan-

cial issues (Evans et al. 2013: 71). Music intermediaries take on different roles in the industry in order to fulfil some of these limitations in the skills and resources of independent musicians and to add value in the marketing channel and ultimately for end consumers (Pride et al. 2017). These intermediaries include traditional players such as record labels, music publishers, management companies, booking agents, recording studios, as well as digital players such as streaming services, online PR companies, website content management companies, email marketing systems and so on.

Many of these intermediaries and music companies in the DMI however are unwilling to invest resources in raw talent that has not yet been recorded or had some level of public success or proven track record. This is considered too risky in the face of an uncertain marketing environment. The DMI no longer supports the traditional business model of music companies developing an artist from the ground up (Donnelly 2014). Rather they have an expectation that independent musicians are already able to demonstrate some indicators of success or market readiness. Market readiness is a commonly known business term which is an assessment if a product, in this case, an independent musician and their recorded music offerings, is ready for commercialisation. Building upon previous research by Evans et al. (2013) into what constitutes the most important markers of success for independent artists and based on the data and experiences derived from the autoethnography, this study presents a market readiness model for the DMI in figure 1.

Firstly, an independent musician must have good songs and production. This relates to the disciplines of songwriting and music production. In the traditional music industry model, music production was only really accessible to those signed with recording deals at record labels (Hracs 2012, Miller 2019). This has changed in the DMI and advancements in technology have empowered musicians to be able to record at home studio's using digital audio work stations (DAWS) and release these songs internationally. It should be stated that access to technology does not necessarily result in quality recordings. High-level skills of producing, engineering, mixing and mastering are still required to compete effec-

tively. Additionally, another challenge is in the development of quality songs and having some sort of mechanism to maintain objectivity when developing a repertoire for the market. Traditionally this was handled by the Artists and Repertoire function of the label (A & R) but the challenge for independent musicians in the DMI is to develop a team around them that mirrors this function and assists in the songwriting and production processes. This could include feedback from other songwriters in the community, professional guidance in production and technical aspects of a mix and preferences on single selection for album releases. This is discussed in more detail in strategies for new product development in section 4.3.



Figure 1: The independent musician – market-readiness model for the digital music industries

These songs need to be supported by a strong artist brand image. This should be genre-driven and needs to be self-assured and 'stand out from the crowd'. A striking professional photo, compelling and interesting artist narrative that is well written, and quality music is a good foundation not only for media exposure but also useful in developing a social media identity and presence (Gilks 2016). Again, what has changed in the DMI is the lowering of the barriers to entry to access user-friendly digital intermediaries such as Canva (for graphic design), professional photo editing tools and digital services like Fiverr (an online marketplace for freelance services), both enabling low-cost branding support services. In terms of narrative, a biography and media release were the prime story-telling tools but in the DMI the story and artist image should be extended into social media.

Social proof is measured in numbers, interactions, and streaming popularity (Meier 2017; Baker 2018; Barnhart 2018; Stewart 2018; Armit & Oliver 2019). Miller (2019) states that A & R teams used to review demo recordings physically sent in and they would scout live environments to source new talent. Now they sift "*through the enormous trove of new music and data online to find the right partner*" (Miller: 2019: 11). Current tier one social media platforms are generally ranked in terms of monthly active users and for independent musicians, the focus in terms of popularity is: Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Tumblr, TikTok, Twitter, LinkedIn, Reddit, Snapchat, Pinterest (Lua 2019). These of course change over time, but the DMI requires that independent musicians have active artist profiles on the top three or four and some measure of social proof on these profiles. The quality of interaction and engagement for social proof is key to support the numbers because the illegal activity of buying 'fake' followers has become an issue in the DMI (Keller 2018). Increasingly, streaming platforms like Spotify and Apple Music are also becoming more 'social' through public play-listing and the sharing functionality of music listening behaviour and preferences on social platforms. Streaming numbers here also provide important social proof. This social proof serves as an indicator of popularity, legitimacy and overall influence in the market (Baym 2013a).

Industry 'proof' or recognition is also an important driver indicating market readiness. It can accelerate the market recognition of an independent musician. These industry players are also influenced by perceived social proof. Media outlets can preference coverage to independent musicians with more social proof because it demonstrates existing market interest. Industry proof validates the market readiness of an independent musician from important influencers and opinion leaders in the music business such as music reviewers, taste-makers, booking agents and music festivals. In addition, recognised music competitions and respected institutions such as government organisations may also support the early stages of independent musician development via government grants (Evans et al. 2013). Again, like social proof, industry proof from these various intermediaries reinforces the legitimacy of the artist.

One of the most powerful promotional tools for recorded songs is the live performance representation, which can be captured and shared digitally or in a physical environment. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the evolution of the live music industry market. However, the opportunity exists for an independent musician to take advantage of digital video making technology and editing software to produce a live representation that can be shared digitally. Most smartphones have these capabilities. This enables audiences and potential music business partners alike to get a feel for the live act without actually going to a show. It is also important as consumers are looking to the expressive function of the artist to derive symbolic utility and further express self-identity (Miquel-Romero & Montoro-Pons 2017).

A digital presence consisting of a professional artist website, social media presence and music distribution platform provides industry professionals and consumers with multiple avenues and channels to connect with independent musicians. A professional website is an important marker for market presence especially for media outlets seeking content for publication. It also serves as a key distribution point for music and merchandise. Augmented with distribution through music aggregation services like Tunecore and CD Baby this establishes a foundation for an

online presence for independent musicians. Finally, a business structure for independent musicians is mandatory to manage necessary transactions but also for the administrative organisation.

All of these markers require a significant investment of time, resources and skills across a range of disciplines. Independent musicians looking to surround themselves with a professional music industry team, a record company, or even to develop a career on their own terms, need to fulfil most of the above requirements with little financial support and in many cases limited skills and training (Evans et al. 2013; Hesmondhalgh & Meier 2015; Morrow 2018; Throsby et al. 2010). Becoming market-ready in the DMI requires the independent musician to create a business structure similar to a record label. The responsibility for the independent musician striving to be commercially successful with a limited budget, therefore, requires them to shift seamlessly between the role of a creative artist, musician, recording engineer, A & R manager, producer, record label, web designer, photographer, music video producer, graphic artist, artist manager, accountant, and marketer to name a few. Further research is needed into skills development required to support independent musician market readiness.

4.2 The role of digital market research for strategy development

Market research lies at the heart of the marketing concept which is a philosophy suggesting music business success relies on understanding consumers and their needs and wants. It is a central consideration when planning and implementing marketing strategies (Pride et al. 2017; Kotler et al. 2017; Allen et al. 2016). Market research is a process of collating information for decision making. It provides information to identify and define marketing opportunities. Price Waterhouse Coopers (2019) highlight that music companies are increasingly turning to digital data-analysis as a way of developing targeted marketing campaigns. They are also beginning to see ways in which fan data can be used to drive tailored promotions to better engage consumers. Getting this analysis right will have positive repercussions for recorded music revenue.

Independent artists are starting to value this use of data to guide strategy. An early pioneer of this approach was Trent Reznor. As an independent artist, co-managing the band Nine Inch Nails he gave away a copy of his album *Ghosts (I-IV)* but in order to get the album, consumers were asked to complete a large survey that was later used to develop a detailed fan database. Additionally, he used internet data aggregation and a collation service to map where downloads were occurring and then set up a tour based on this data (Masnick 2009). These days streaming platforms such as Spotify offer very sophisticated analytics to independent artists that can similarly be used to plan music tours and social media analytics tools can be used to guide social media posting activities and digital advertising to leverage popular markets (Prey 2019). Other key analytical tools identified in the research were:

- the importance of the Facebook pixel to measure the success of paid sponsored posts/advertising on Facebook (Mchenry 2019);
- Google analytics and search console to monitor web traffic and improve and optimise website design and content for search (Chaffey & Smith 2017), and;
- social media insight and analytics tools to enable independent musicians to evaluate and improve the content presented to fans to elicit more engagement (Barnhart 2018).

Digital song review platforms like Reverbnation 'Crowd Review' can also be useful for determining which songs to select as singles based on ratings (Reverbnation 2019).

Categorization and an ethnographic analysis of the genres not only from a musical perspective but from a marketing perspective is also an important preliminary research task. An artist exploring career opportunities in the commercial pop market, for example, will need to adopt different strategies in terms of brand image, record production and promotion to that of a country or rock artist. From a digital perspective,

the following decisions are significantly affected by the identification of genre for an artist:

- Choosing the right producer, studio, songs and musicians to help position the artist in the genre and relevant playlist categories on streaming services.
- Targeting appropriate online publicity and review sources such as music blogs for editorial and reviews as well as radio.
- Distribution – including the right meta-tags (digital identifiers) to identify the music in a digital context and receive compensation from performance and communication rights.
- Online advertising – for relevant ad-word campaigns that are based on genre keywords for search marketing campaigns and also to assist in targeting in social media advertising for more relevant messaging.
- Search engine optimisation strategies for the artist website. Genre keywords may need to be used in developing the metatags and content to increase search engine visibility for the artist.

In any business, to be commercially successful requires a sound understanding of the marketplace you intend to operate in. Even more so with an industry undergoing such rapid transformations. Developing sound market research techniques and understanding the role of these insights and analytics to fine-tune not only music production approaches but also artist branding, promotion, and music distribution, increases the likelihood of success in the DMI. These digital market research techniques are an essential component of the marketing process that guides the new product development process now discussed.

4.3 New product development for the DMI

The new product development (NPD) model is a framework from marketing literature laying out a process for developing and introducing new products to the market (Cooper 1983). Originally developed for the industrial product manufacturing sector, the NPD model also provides planning insights for independent musicians operating in a business environment of extreme uncertainty. Caves (2000) highlights the risk inherent in creative art production: "*there is great uncertainty about how consumers will value a newly produced creative product*" (Caves 2000: 2) and the "*risk associated with any given creative product is high*" (Caves 2000: 3). It is synchronous to contemporary research by Morrow (2018) who discusses the lean start-up method (LSM) as a business approach reducing risk in the arts sector, which has its origins in entrepreneurial and management literature. The NPD model has had some applications in arts management (Brown & Eisenhardt 1995; Moorman & Miner 1998; Kerrigan, O'Reilly, vom Lehn 2009; Ripley 2015) but limited applications in the DMI. In terms of applying the NPD model to the arts, Crealey (2003) points out "*while it is clear that existing models are not perfectly suited to the arts, the stages or key issues that they embody do have relevance for new arts products*" (Crealey 2003: 26). This model has been adapted and depicted in Figure 2 as a key outcome of the research. Part of the relevance of the NPD model is the idea that with careful planning and consideration music business owners can reduce the risk of investing in new music products that may fail and develop a more strategic approach to releasing music successfully in the DMI.

The NPD model is useful for an independent musician releasing music in the DMI because it embraces a strategic approach that considers both artistic and marketing processes and the nexus of these. This is also supported in the work of Bilton & Leary (2002) who highlight creative processes should not be considered separate from management and marketing processes. The NPD model in figure 2 represents a complex set of interrelationships and psychological processes and highlights new integrated approaches in music marketing. This model speaks to the necessity for strategic marketing considerations throughout the pre-

production and production processes as opposed to being an after-thought later on.

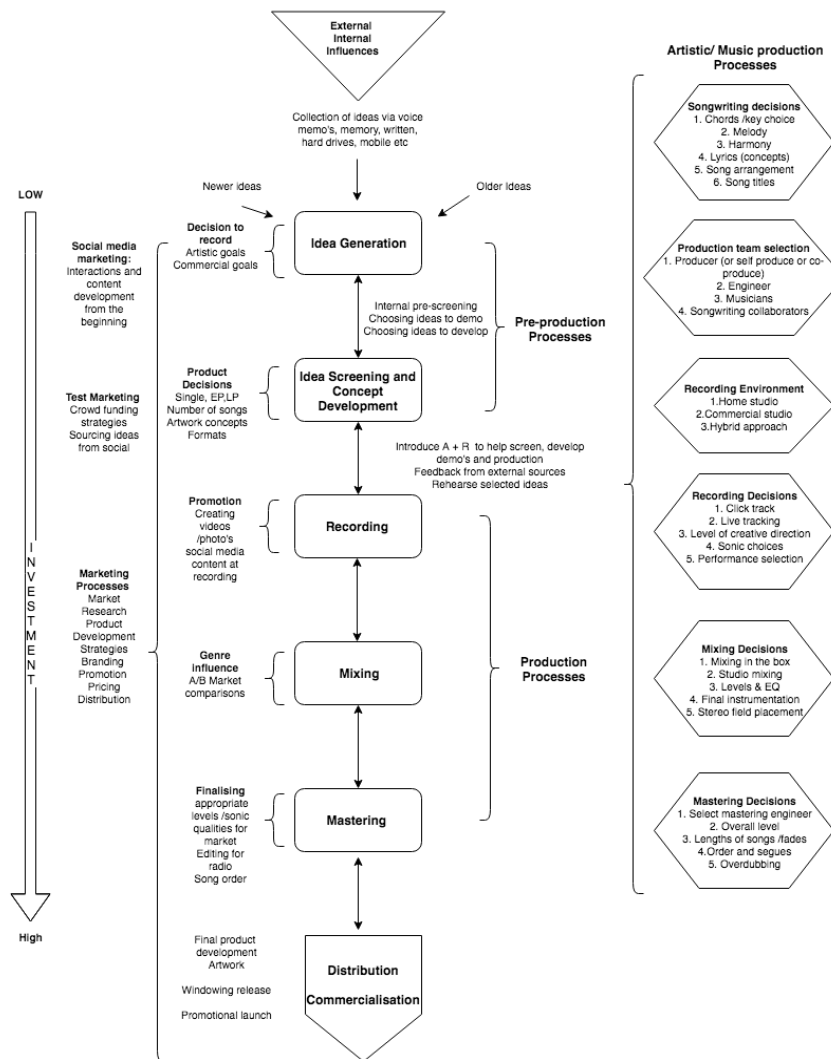


Figure 2: The adapted NPD model for independent music marketing

Many independent artists allocate most of their budget on the music product and only have limited funds available for its promotion. There are a lot of management and marketing tasks to be performed beyond the music creation phase that for many artists can be seen as a necessary evil (Caves 2000). Section 4.1 highlighted the need for social proof and a professional online presence in the DMI. This requires time, skills and financial investment. *"Promotion should be the largest part of the indie artist budget and yet it is the most overlooked"* (Dwinell 2014). Hesmondhalgh (2007) points out cultural industry production focuses on the stages of creation, production, and marketing but rather than being a factory production line, these stages often overlap. Traditional marketing approaches in the past have relied on producing an album and then developing a marketing strategy once finished (Ogden et al. 2011). This traditional marketing approach is now being superseded. The digitalisation of the music industries is requiring more modern approaches that see the marketing process begin even before the creative work has begun (Padgett and Rolston 2013). Kotler, Kartajaya, Hooi (2017), share this view of involving the consumer early on in the NPD process and highlights co-creation in the ideation stages can *"improve the success rate of new product development"* (Kotler et al. 2017: 50). This can involve asking fans for song idea input, collaborations with fans on song topics, sounds, lyrics and so on. Internationally recognised independent musician Imogen Heap was an early pioneer of this approach. She asked fans to submit sound-bites, and add words to a 'word cloud' to inspire lyrics and within a week pieced together a song using her fans' uploaded sounds, words and *"created a corresponding video that drew from submitted animation /film projects"* (Lipshutz 2011).

Consumers are now seeking more intimate connections with independent musicians, especially in social media. Connections not only focused on the utility of music but also in the inspiration and sharing of the artist's journey and identity, where they derive social and cultural meanings (Stewart 2018; Gilks 2016). Baym (2013b) also investigated these new interactive relationships between fans and artists and point out it resembles more of a community that provides social utility that aug-

ments the satisfaction derived from the music and in some cases, is regarded even more important. Miquel-Romero & Montoro-Pons (2017) also echo this suggesting that the expressive functionality of music can take precedence over any other consideration. Therefore, there is an opportunity for independent musicians to generate awareness and demand for their music during both the pre-production and production phases of the NPD model (Morrow 2018; Barnhart 2018; Baym 2013b; Moisió and Rökman 2011; Salo, Lankinen, Mantymäki 2013). It should be noted however that interactive approaches usually work better after an independent musician has already released some music and has some existing market awareness. Stewart (2018) makes the point that the music often introduces the artist to the audience and once the fan is in the know about the act the *"research indicates the focus switches towards meditated engagement with the artist's persona"* (Stewart 2018: 74).

The marketing processes arrow begins in this first stage and it is important to locate the product development within the market place such as the genre, potential playlist or radio station and country, as this may affect songwriting approaches and approaches to music production in the following stages. Section 4.1 also discussed the importance of this from a marketing perspective in terms of branding, tagging and search engine optimisation. Indeed, it is proposed prior planning acknowledging the whole process of marketing (from product development to distribution and promotion) helps independent musicians focus their limited time, energy and resources to gain not only higher quality music products, but also increase the quality of the associated branded promotional materials useful for preliminary promotional efforts. An example of this may be the artist releases video and/or images in the writing phase, stimulating initial interest, and then use behind the scenes videos/photos of the recording process to post on social media platforms before the production is even released. This creates 'buzz' and in turn increases the chances to gain recognition and build social proof in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Furthermore, a well-planned production phase could also result in footage for music videos, photos for

publicity, behind the scenes interviews and the development of a narrative for the song or album important for content marketing purposes (Gilks 2016).

These marketing considerations may also impact on all the individual production choices outlined on the right-hand side of figure 2. For example, songwriting choices may be affected by social media interaction, a recording studio may be selected because it offers good filming locations, production members may be selected because of their artist personas and so on. Investment also starts increasing as concepts are developed, and the budget is then applied to production and marketing processes as the project moves closer to commercialisation and the money required to launch it internationally. Independent musician budgets, therefore, should consider product and promotion costs at the pre-production, production, and distribution and phases of the NPD model. According to the IFPI (2019) record companies invest just over a quarter of industry revenues (26 percent) back into promotion. An independent musician should also look to invest at least a quarter of the total investment into the promotion of the final work. Even more considering the limited established industry networks they may have in place as opposed to the major labels.

Another benefit of engaging with marketing processes at the pre-production phase is to take advantage of crowdfunding opportunities. Crowd-funding is a form of collective financing (or micro-patronage) and it allows consumers to effectively 'sponsor' artists at the pre-production phase. Crowdfunding can give artists greater control over their project (Allen et al. 2016). An independent musician with a large, engaged social media network of fans can obtain financial support by pre-selling an album to their network or offering other incentives, in some cases only based on a concept or demo recording (Armit & Oliver 2019; Scherer & Winter 2015).

According to the NPD model, idea generation refers to the systematic search for new product ideas (Kotler 2012) which for an independent musician may be influenced by external factors such as the social, political and cultural environment, friends and peers, as well as music

influences. Idea generation may also come from new or old song ideas and various digital recording archives. Following from this is a screening process of which song(s) to pursue for concept development. The value an independent musician puts on some songs over others may be different from what the end consumer values and what the market considers commercial (Caves 2000). If the creative process is considered a separate to the marketing process there is a risk this may be prioritised over potential commercial gains (Fillis 2006; Hirschman 1983). Levitt (1960) first introduced this idea of marketing myopia, which focuses on the needs of the company over the needs of the consumers. For independent musicians, this presents a real challenge because of the intrinsic satisfaction gained from 'consuming' their own creative output. Hirschman (1983) raises this issue of the artist being the primary consumer, and Fillis (2006) suggests the value artists gain in creating the work may outweigh the financial returns gained from a third party or at least affect the motivation to pursue these gains. So, despite the significant opportunities in the DMI, many independent artists find it difficult to allocate the necessary time and resources to the branding and promotion tasks because of a lack of motivation, skills, and passion for this area of practice. One of the key challenges for independent artists is not getting preoccupied in artistic processes focusing on songwriting and recording only. Although essential for potential success, the DMI demands attention beyond the songwriting and music production processes and into branding and promotion especially in social media.

Idea screening, concept development and even production can also be improved if independent musicians organize a team around them to mimic the A & R function of record labels as discussed in section 4.1. In the DMI, there are a number of services assisting this function. My own A & R activities included sharing works in progress with a team of friends, musicians and songwriters using tools like Google drive and Dropbox and even email and SMS. Streaming service SoundCloud has a privacy setting enabling sharing and feedback from industry connections. Mobile apps such as audio recording functions on smartphones enable quick recording and sharing capabilities and lyric note-taking

ability. The evolution of home studios and affordable digital audio workstation (DAW) technologies discussed earlier has significantly helped the processes in this stage (Zager 2012; Reynolds 2014; Fountoukidis 2015). Kotler (2012) draws the distinction between ideas and concepts stating: "*a product idea is an idea for a possible product that the company can see itself offering to the market, whereas a product concept is a detailed version of the idea*" (Kotler 2012: 262). Ideas for musical works need to be refined and developed because they will be judged by the listener and a low level of production may impact upon how the idea is interpreted. The quality of these new DAW technologies may even result in the utilisation of tracks in the final production and release.

The timing of distribution and its associated promotion also needs mentioning. It is important to realise a music release will only be 'new' for a short while. New releases can end up on top of the 'in-box' of marketing intermediaries or as a 'new release' for new music streaming playlists. Exclusives with music blogs or YouTube channels are also leveraged to extract more attention. Currency is important. When a date of release is established, the most intense roll out of promotional activities should be conducted at this time (Chertkow 2012; Allen et al. 2016). Releasing just a single song off an EP or album allows this to be the 'new' thing and can allow the independent musician to have multiple waves of publicity for the release. It is especially good for radio promotion (terrestrial or digital) as there is no guessing for music programmers on what song to play. The single-by-single approach to marketing versus album releases is an area worthy of further investigation and is an emergent theme in the literature (Woodworth 2012). Windowing is the concept of releasing content in different distribution channels in a phased schedule (Oszajca 2015). Usually, this involves having music and specialty merchandising 'bundles' first available exclusively to a mailing list. It could also involve streaming exclusives in blogs or other music services. In this phase, the streaming of songs should only be limited and not on the major services (Chertkow 2012). This pre-release window may only last 2-4 weeks. It may also be available for digital download services like Bandcamp and iTunes (in the past). Apple (2019) has now officially an-

nounced the closure of iTunes downloads highlighting the aforementioned transition of the ownership product format to the access model via streaming (Bakare 2019). The last 'window' sees the full release available on all major streaming services and in all retail outlets. This helps maximize physical sale revenues and merchandising bundles minimizing possible negative sales effects of streaming (Parc & Kawashima 2018).

With distribution comes the most concentrated promotional phase, acknowledging that promotional opportunities also begin at the early stages of the NPD process. A full discussion of digital promotion in the DMI is beyond the scope of this paper but an important topic for future research. I acknowledge research into the DMI is limited in its integration of the theories and concepts of commercial digital marketing practice. The next section introduces some key aspects of building an online presence for the DMI highlighting areas of future research.

4.4 Building an online presence in the DMI

As discussed in section 4.1, an online presence with a compelling visual identity, written narrative and interactive social media presence is an important indicator for market readiness. Essentially, there are three important aspects to this process. Firstly, setting up an artist website and the social media accounts, optimised with appropriate images, headers, descriptions, and contacts. Secondly developing and posting consistent, engaging content that supports the artist's brand image and narrative. Finally engaging digital marketing techniques to drive traffic to the website and relevant social media platforms.

The key opportunities include using content management systems (CMS) to efficiently manage website content (Chaffey & Smith 2017), an email marketing system (EMS) to manage mailing lists (Mchenry 2019; Oszajca 2015; Vaynuerchuk 2018), a social media presence on leading platforms (Baker 2018; Allen et al. 2016) and budget allocated to paid media campaigns including search strategies via Adwords and paid social media campaigns on the leading platforms. More recently Spotify has

also introduced advertising options for independent artists via intermediaries such as CD-Baby.

Vaynerchuk (2018) a leading international thought leader in social media strongly advocates the use of paid social media campaigns on Facebook, and Instagram to generate awareness, traffic and conversions. Strauss (2014) discusses the strategy of either appearing high on a search engine results page 'organically' or using ads on search engine sites to generate click-throughs (Strauss 2014: 474). Signing up for a Google Adwords account allows an artist to research popular key word searches and monitor trends in what words people use when searching for music. To gain a high rank on the search engine results page organically the independent musician may try and optimise for relevant genre key-words, such as in the case of my own release, 'Folk-rock and Australia'. The unique spelling of my artist name for example allowed a ranking at the top of an organic search for the artist 'Cheynne Murphy'. This search engine optimisation strategy can influence the independent musician's artist name choice.

Digital marketing tools need to be designed to support the conversion of passive engagement into action and interaction as measured by conversions. Conversion focuses on the proportion of web visitors who actually take an action on a website, email or in social media and is important in establishing an online presence (Strauss and Frost 2014; Mchenry 2019; Baker 2018). The key conversion elements in the native environments of each social media platform are things like: views, followers, likes, comments, mentions, and subscribers. This fosters communication and closeness between artist and fan and enables notifications of content activities and uploads to be more visible to the fans. Conversion on a website may include a mailing list signup or song play and email conversion occurs when a reader clicks on a hyperlink in the communication as an action. Conversion prompts are important in website design and also social media marketing (Baker 2018; Chaffey & Smith 2017; Mchenry 2019). Another key traffic building source is digital publicity which includes earning editorial in digital websites, participating in discussion forums around the music genre (leaving music link ex-

amples), collaborations with other artists, and getting interviewed on podcasts, blogs or video interviews. This draws on traditional methods of gaining music publicity but in a digital environment (Allen et al. 2016). Further research into these digital marketing techniques is necessary for important skills development not only for the independent musician but for educators and practitioners in the creative industries more broadly.

5 Conclusions

This paper explored key challenges and opportunities facing an independent musician in the digital music industries (DMI). Limitations with the method of autoethnography should be acknowledged. Despite its growing popularity as a research method to provide insights into human creativity (Musgrave 2019; Pace 2012; Williams 2018), a critique of this method is that it relies on personal experience rather than empirical scientific data (Anderson 2006; Méndez 2013). An effort has been made to integrate and explore emerging themes with the engagement of relevant literature and examples. However key findings could be tested in the future with the collection of more case study data, in-depth interviews and broader industry perspectives from lead users to further contextualize the findings and evolve the conceptual models.

While the opportunities to release and promote independent music in the DMI are significant, this study establishes that the widely touted DIY approach does not really exist. Instead, the establishment of complex artistic and marketing partnerships with various intermediaries is necessary to compete in the oversupplied music industries. Traditional intermediaries such as radio are still important players in the marketing of recorded music in the DMI. The power structure of the industry has shifted however, more into the hands of consumers with the increasing importance of social proof and consumer-driven streaming playlists. Independent musicians are now accessing sophisticated recording and production technologies that were previously inaccessible in the traditional industry. Digital streaming services are becoming more aligned with the independent sector and the dominance of the major labels

driving airplay and owning presence in media outlets has weakened somewhat, providing opportunities for independents to gain more visibility in both traditional and non-traditional media. The gatekeepers of old have less influence in the DMI. The playing field has levelled considerably however in terms of scalability, industry expertise and global presence, the major labels still reign (Miller 2019).

From this research, it is clear that a multi-disciplinary skill set is required by independent musicians that not only focuses on musicianship, songwriting, and production but also a sophisticated understanding of the information technology, business management and digital marketing principles that drive the DMI. One of the key challenges for independent artists is not getting preoccupied in artistic processes focusing on songwriting and recording only. Although essential for potential success, the DMI demands attention beyond the songwriting and music production processes and into branding and promotion, especially in digital marketing and social media. An independent musician can reduce the level of commercial risk by embedding commercial considerations within the creative development of musical works. This has implications for educators in contemporary music practice. A lack of formal training or skills in marketing can create serious limitations for independent musicians who may not have the budget to outsource these skills to intermediaries. Despite the new opportunities presented by the digital age, the music business remains inherently risky. For an independent musician wanting commercial success in the DMI, it requires the ability to develop necessary technological skills to save money by producing music in home studio environments but also to develop and manage sophisticated digital marketing tools, such as content and email management systems, social media profiles and analytics, search marketing methods, and complex digital advertising techniques.

This practice-based research project demonstrated that commercialising creative musical works is a demanding occupation, requiring long hours and significant monetary investments for an uncertain financial return. For many independent musicians, it can prove to be overwhelming. Issues of self-confidence, lack of sufficient time and funds,

lack of motivation and also necessary marketing and business skills can combine to undermine the likely success of an independent music release. However, those who embrace their creative prowess, their online presence, and independent music marketing practice, and can transcend any conflicts between artistic and marketing processes, will be more empowered to gain a competitive advantage in the new digital music industries.

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