

BECOMING A POPULAR MUSIC ARTIST IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Introduction

Producing popular music has changed in the past decade. Traditionally, record labels have been the gatekeepers over popular music. They determine which aspiring artists have the potential to sell great amounts of music, and make contractual offers to promising artists accordingly. As major record labels have large budgets and close relationships with media outlets, signing a major deal with a record company has been the ideal way – and usually the only way – for an artist to succeed. Labels make it possible for artists to promote and produce quality music and video products, which traditionally has been costly.

However, the proliferation of digital music at the end of the 20th century turned the American music business on its head. From the demand side, the emergence of free music file-sharing websites reduced consumers' incentive for buying CDs in the late 1990s. Consequently, as record companies were losing money, so were artists. The recording industry's first attempt at combating their losses was by suing file-sharing sites like Napster. After successfully shutting down Napster, more sites, including legal ones like iTunes, popped up. Consumers are still not buying albums like they had years before.

Within the past five years however, the digital age has permitted artists to more easily create music and promote their careers. For a couple hundred dollars, artists can download quality recording and editing software to their laptops. Additionally, the emergence of social networking communities has allowed artists to distribute music and communicate directly with fans across geographical boundaries. MySpace was one of the initial sites where artists could promote themselves on their profile pages. Instead of seeking recording contracts, nowadays more and more artists are using the likes of Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to promote their brand. While in the past, artists who were not signed to a major record labels were never heard

of, the digital age has created an outlet in which any aspiring artist has direct access to millions of potential fans.

As social networks continue to grow, this paper looks at the current marketing tactics to promote popular music in the digital age. It examines how artists have integrated traditional and digital tactics as they market their music. This paper first examines the theoretical nature of music as product, and explores the factors that influence a song's ability to spread across mass audiences. We will then review the history of marketing tactics that have been used to promote music. Analyzing the findings from in-depth interviews of three individuals who've worked in the music industry, we will explore how the digital age has shaped today's music marketing strategies. We will analyze the success of rapper Wiz Khalifa, who's used social networking to garner recent popularity. Lastly, the paper will draw from what we've learned in order to propose standard guidelines that new artists should consider when promoting their music in the future.

Music as a Product

Music is an "unusual" product (Lacher & Mizerski, 1994). Many goods regularly shift and slide, up and down supply-demand curves, acquiring their value based on the tangible benefits they potentially yield for their purchasers. When purchasing a car, for example, an individual might narrow his options by evaluating car speed, handling, or gas efficiency; all of which are measurable. Most music consumers rely on their individual preferences and evaluate a song's musical qualities when deciding what music to listen to or purchase. However, because of music's aesthetic nature, it is difficult to quantify and grasp the intrinsic variables within music that shape these preferences. While some people might be able to identify favorable musical features such as up-tempo beats or spiritual song lyrics, music consists of so many artistic and technical nuances that most people do not easily recognize. Instead, individuals develop their

opinions about songs following exposure; at which point it is difficult to predict consumer appreciation (1994). Unfortunately, consumer listening-experience is only one of many factors that affect individuals' appreciation for different types of music. As their success and livelihood is based on the public's reception of songs and albums, this uncertainty about people's music interests poses music artists' with quite a challenge.

Producing music for mass audiences is complicated as individuals within a public often value music differently. For example, some people may enjoy listening to music throughout multiple points of their day, while others may only listen to music at social gatherings on the weekend. Regardless of song-type or marketing strategy, it would be difficult to get a person who has low desire to consume music to adopt a new song. Furthermore, people vary in how they integrate music into their lives. Some people only desire to consume music if the particular music is conducive to dancing, while others may prefer to sit down and listen to music in their headphones (Holbrook, 1982). This could cause adoption complications amongst either group of people when confronting songs with qualities that are more conducive to one behavior rather than the other (i.e. dancing v. stationery listening).

Another complication with song adoption is that music affects people differently. A significant factor in people's decision to reject or adopt new songs is related to the response it triggers (Lacher & Mizerski, 1994). While one individual might find a new love ballad touching, another person may find the same song overdramatic, and choose to reject it.

Lastly, various external forces can have a profound effect on consumer's attitudes about song adoption. Interpersonal interactions, for example, often make or break a person's opinion about a new song (Lacher, 1989). For example, a person who's never heard Elvis Presley's music before might be prone to liking a particular Presley song if someone whom the consumer

admires introduces him to the song while stating, “This is Presley’s best song.” According to reactance theory (Brehm, 1966), this plug could also have the exact opposite effect. There are also studies that suggest an individual’s perception that a song is popular may, in turn, result in that person adopting the new song (Salganik and Watts, 2008). Moreover, instances in which the message in a song or the song creator’s background conflict with the values of the consumer’s social system often hinder song adoption (Garofalo, 1994).

Because of music’s subjective nature in terms of individual preference, it’s difficult to predict a song’s potential for adoption. Little is known about the effects various musical notes and arrangements have on people’s general feeling about a song. Nonetheless, many researchers have attempted to assess the technical qualities of popular music, searching for commonality (Dhanaraj and Logan, 2005). Some studies suggest that songs that stimulate sensory responses within individuals tend to resonate with mass audiences (Pucely, Mizerski, and Perrew, 1988). However, one must still consider why some songs incorporating popular musical features diffuse more successfully than others.

Marketing strategists (by either record company or artist) also play a key role in song adoption since they [the marketing strategies?] serve as intermediaries between artists and their audiences. They employ tactics (that are often effective) to influence people’s attitudes and decisions about music. Through price setting, advertisements, distribution strategies, message framing, and other methods, marketing strategists are always looking for efficient and persuasive ways to spread music innovations (Tybout & Artz, 1994).

Nonetheless, the relationship between audience, music, and marketer in the process of music diffusion poses an ongoing conundrum for the music industry. Bent on widespread acceptance, artists or their handler (if on a record label) must continually readjust their finger

pointing when the artist's music is rejected by the masses. Do they blame the artist for not making good music; poor promotion strategies; or just chalk it up as a result of the unpredictability of consumer preferences?

Diffusion Theory and Music

Diffusion is the process by which a new innovation is communicated through certain channels, to members of a social system, within a given time (Rogers, 1994). An innovation is characterized as an idea, technology, or technique that members of a social system are confronting for the first time; while adoption refers to whether or not they subscribe to an innovation, and routinely make use of it. In this paper, new music is considered an innovation; where listening or purchasing the music would constitute its adoption. Whether or not people confronting an innovation will adopt it, however, is contingent on the nature of the innovation, how the news about the innovation is communicated through time, and the social structure of the people confronting the new innovation (1994).

When deciding to adopt or reject an innovation individuals consider several factors. An individual must determine whether the innovation is better than the ideas it supersedes, whether the innovation is compatible with the social structure and norms of the individual's society, and how complex it is to understand or put the idea into practice (Rogers, 1994). In the case of a new song, a person might evaluate the song's originality in comparison to previously heard songs. An individual may also consider whether other members of his social system have favorable attitudes toward the song or artist in question. Often, in addition, the message advocated in a song must mesh with the values of the potential consumer's social values in order for adoption to occur. How well the listener is able to understand the song's message would also affect this process.

Essential to diffusion is the process by which a person or a group possessing knowledge about an innovation, through a particular channel, communicates this information to another group of people who are unfamiliar with the innovation (Rogers, 1994). For example, a disc jockey is a communicator who uses the radio station as a channel to introduce people to new music. However, people may learn also about music through interpersonal interactions such as borrowing a friend's iPod or chatting on Twitter. The nature of each facet—from the communicator, to the receiver, to the channel used to spread an innovation—is crucial to whether or not the innovation will be adopted.

Time is an element of diffusion that is measured by the innovation-decision process or the time from when a person first gains knowledge of an innovation to the moment when he decides to reject or adopt the idea (Rogers, 1994). This stage is followed by the person's implementation of the innovation, or in the case of this paper, when a person decides to purchase or acquire ownership of a new song. The final stage of the innovation-decision process is when the person seeks to reinforce the innovation-decision.

Diffusion theory is particularly sensitive to how an innovation spreads within a group of interrelated people linked by a common goal; also known as a social system (Rogers, 1994). Such groups may include students at a university, people living on a reservation, people on a social network or parents in a community. As these units work toward achieving a common goal, they inherently establish social structures, norms, and roles that in turn affect diffusion. Within a given structure, hierarchy may exist, where certain individuals are more or less likely to communicate with one another based on their role, which in some cases could either strengthen or impede diffusion (Rogers, 1994). In addition, within a social structure, certain individuals play a key role in diffusion. Often referred to as opinion leaders, these people are members of a social

structure who have the ability to influence a large number of members within the system (1994). Opinion leaders tend to earn their status by being deeply rooted in the social norms, easily accessible to others, innovative, and maintaining a somewhat higher social class within the social system (1994).

After an innovation is either adopted or rejected within a social structure, the consequences of the decision are analyzed (Rogers, 1994). The consequences are classified as desirable or undesirable, direct or indirect, and anticipated or unanticipated.

Marketing Music

Communicators as well as the channel used to communicate innovations are an integral part of diffusion (Rogers, 1994). One commonly used and considered the most rapid and effective channel to spread information about innovations is through mass media outlets such as television, radio, and Internet (1994). While mass media communications is most efficient in informing publics about innovations, consumers are more heavily influenced by interpersonal communications when considering adopting an innovation (1994). Nonetheless, as the initial conveyor of an innovation, how much control do marketers have over the impression consumers receive about a new product? Are there effective tactics that marketers employ when promoting an innovation that creates favorable attitudes towards a specific innovation?

First, we must review the history of the music industry, and how music has been marketed until recently. We'll find that as it is true today with the emergence of digital media, technological advances have shaped how music is physically obtained, who's responsible for marketing it, and how it becomes popular.

History of the Music Business and Promotion

The initial groundwork for music to be sold for-profit came about in 1450, when Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press (Garofalo, 1999). Prior to the printing press, recorded music consisted of hand-copied versions of religious chants. But, as more countries throughout Europe developed their own printing presses, coupled with an emerging culture of secularism, a market for popular music developed. Credited as the Father of Music Publishing, Italian printer Ottaviano dei Petrucci published the first collection of 96 songs in 1501 using Gutenberg's movable type (1999). As it was now easier to print and share mass copies of sheet music, traveling merchants helped to circulate popular songs throughout Europe (1999). However, until the end of the 18th century, due to limited copyright protection for printed music, composers received little profit from their music (1999). Garofalo suggests that eventually composers would see more profits as the market for pianos grew, which was the result of "the establishment of the instrument as a cultural status symbol throughout Europe" (p.320). By 1886, multiple nations across Europe had agreed to recognize international copyright laws regarding music (1999).

Meanwhile, the American music industry was in its infancy. Considering it to be more refined than popular American music, early music publishers in the U.S. primarily sold classical music from Europe. However, the extension of copyright protections for international music in 1891 forced American publishers to search locally for a new source of revenue (Sanjek, 1983). Gradually, numerous music publishers across the country relocated to New York City, and developed a popular music manufacturing hub known as the Tin Pan Alley.

Still, at the turn of the century, with the rise of piano sales and the advent of the pianola (self-playing piano) and the phonograph, the sheet music industry was thriving (Sanjek, 1983). As numerous Americans had learned to play piano as children, the government estimated the

sheet music industry was worth \$5 million in 1909 (1983). Employing strategic marketing tactics for the first time in the music industry's short history, the new music publishers of Tin Pan Alley were determined to fulfill and create more demand for printed music.

Early Song Plugging

One of the first music marketing strategies came from Jay Witmark of the M. Witmark & Sons music publishing company who pioneered the tactic of giving out free copies of music to popular performers, also known as "song plugging" (Sanjek, 1983). His targets included bandleaders and Vaudeville performers (1983). This approach was so successful that it became the standard promotional strategy for music publishers in Tin Pan Alley (1983). Publishers first employed "songpluggers" whose job was to distribute cheaply-produced copies of a new song to live performers across the country (1983). If the song was well received, publishers would mass produce a larger quantity of the music sheet, adorned with a photograph of the performer who agreed to promote the song (1983). They often spent up to \$500, to have an advertisement that featured the performer's portrait, placed in popular magazines, along with a quote expressing the performer's excitement about the new song (1983). If demand for the song continued to prosper, publishers ordered another large bulk of sheet music to be printed; and sent songpluggers out to book as many live performances of the song as was possible until demand subsided (1983). This was how music was promoted up until the emergence of radio and the increased popularity of records.

The Rise of Recorded Music

Thomas Edison did not initially foresee music recording as the primary function of the phonograph cylinder, which he invented in 1877. Instead, he perceived it as a tool for storing written content; or as an aid to stenographers and the blind (Garofalo, 1999). Phonograph

salesmen first exploited the device's music recording capability during public demonstrations in which "instrumentalists from the audience were invited to make live recordings on the spot" (p.323). By 1889, the manager at a phonograph company, Louis Glass, had debuted the jukebox, and now for a nickel Americans could visit parlors and saloons to hear recorded music (1999). Around the same time, Emile Berliner had perfected the gramophone that featured a disc-style recording device; which gradually became the standard format for prerecorded music (1999). In 1909, the U.S. manufactured 27 million cylinders and discs, and the record business was worth \$12 million (1999).

In 1919, George Stoddard's *Mary* became the first record to enjoy popular success (Sanjek, 1983). In the following year, Paul Whitman's double-sided recording of *Whispering* and *The Japanese Sandman* sold 2 million records (1983). By 1929, half of American homes owned a record player, and 150 million records were sold that year (Huygens, Van Den Bosch, Volberda & Baden-Fuller, 2001). However, from early on it was evident that records had become more popular than sheet music. For example, popular songwriter George Irving's *Say it with Music* sold 1 million records in 1922, but the sheet copies only sold 375,000 (Sanjek, 1983). Following a printer's strike which raised the cost of production, by the end of the decade, even the most popular songs sold as many as 200,000 copies (1983).

Radio Exploitation

Nonetheless, the economic devastation caused by the Great Depression coupled with the rise of radio led to dwindling sales for both records and sheet music. By 1933, the record business' worth fell to a dismal \$5.6 million (Sanjek, 1983), and by 1935 record sales had fallen to from 150 million records in 1929 to 25 million (Huygens et al, 2001). One significant contributor to the music industry's turmoil was the rapid expansion of radio stations across the

country. Within 1922 alone, the number of radio stations in the U.S. grew from 28 to 570 (Sanjek, 1983). Furthermore, as radio stations dedicated a large portion of programming hours to playing live music, Americans had gravitated to the new medium as their primary source for new music.

From early on, music publishers attempted to capitalize on the radio's promotional potential. Prior to the advent of the radio, music firms relied on billboards and newspapers to promote music (Huygens et al, 2001). Soliciting on-air musicians to perform their new songs, publishers began exploiting the radio's "extensive broadcasting networks and nation-wide coverage" (2001). In the late 1930s, Decca Records realized it could revive profits if it focused on promoting fewer songs, while manufacturing more copies of each (Huygens et al, 2001). Decca also introduced the concept of creating its own roster of artists to perform its songs. Eventually, the rest of Tin Pan Alley caught on to the strategy and updated its music marketing approach.

In choosing which song to push, publishers were still concerned about potential customers who played instruments. For that reason, they strayed from songs with complicated melodies and lyrics, citing that such songs may be challenging for common instrumentalists to play (Sanjek, 1983). Therefore, if the A&R, (which came about in the 1930s) didn't believe a song would sell sheet music, he labeled it "not commercial," and proceeded to promote another song (1983).

In a 10 to 15-week-long promotion campaign, copies of a new song were sent to 200 popular bands around the country (Sanjek, 1983). Then for a month, "songpluggers" booked on-air radio performances for the artist. If the song received positive reaction within the two-month time frame, publishers made one last effort (called "drive week") to book as many live and radio

performances as possible before public interest fell (1983). It was common for record companies to offer radio bandleaders money, jewelry, and even women, in exchange for performing their song on-air and at live performances (1983). According to Sanjek (1983) “the business depended on hit songs, and because air play made songs hits, the pursuit of plugs and performances on radio became paramount.”

Heading into the 1940s, radio and record companies had established a partnership that led to the music industry’s resurgence. While record companies provided radio stations with cheap programming, labels enjoyed inexpensive promotion for their records. From 1938 to 1940, record sales doubled to 100 million units (Huygens et al, 2001). By 1943 Capital Records had reshaped music promotion when it began producing records specifically for radio stations to play on-air (Sanjek, 1983). The American Federation of Musicians (AFM) was strongly opposed to radio stations playing prerecorded music, fearing that it would eliminate the demand for live musicians (1983). However, the Supreme Court ruled in 1940 that copyright laws only prohibited radio stations from selling music, and that once a station purchased a record, it could play it as often as it wished (1983). Music publishers took heed and sent songpluggers from station to station, handing out complimentary records.

Payola

Songplugging, now known as payola, remained a primary music marketing tool up until 2005 since “listening to the radio [was] the main way consumers obtain[ed] information about new songs and artists (Peitz & Walbroeck, 2005, p. 361).” As Seagraves (1994) puts it, “A song that fails to get airplay can’t compensate by running ads in magazines or on billboards. A song that fails to get airplay, fails (p. x).” Therefore, record labels invest considerable amounts of

money to have records appear in radio rotations (Rossman, Chiu & Mol, 2007). The average radio station adds five new songs to its playlist each week, making radio “an ideal field for exploring diffusion” (p. 205).

In 2004, the New York Office of the Attorney General (OAG) found evidence showing that the four major record companies (EMI, Sony, Universal, and Warner Brothers) and two major radio companies (Entercom and CBS) “had systematically engaged in payola” (p. 204). The OAG found a Sony invoice given to KHTS-FM, indicating that Sony had donated a \$3,325 plasma screen television to the radio station in exchange for the disc jockey’s inclusion of the song “Shut Up,” by Kelly Osbourne, “Pandemonium” by B2K, and “This is Me...Then” by Jennifer Lopez (p. 204). According to Slichter (2004), while using a \$700,000 budget to promote the 1998 song “Closing Time” by the band Semisonic, MCA allocated half of its funding towards payola (as cited in Rossum et al, 2007).

Major Label Market Power

Up until the 2000s, signing a major record deal was the best (if not only) way for artists to diffuse their music.

Record companies provide the necessary initial capital as well as the marketing know-how to create, market, and distribute music on a large scale.

They have the expertise in creating superior sound quality and packaging, have key relationships with press, radio stations and music TV channels as well as with retail stores (Graham, Burnes, Lewis & Langer, 2004, p. 1093).

They shoulder the burden of managing “advertising costs, retail store positioning fees, listening posts in record stores, radio promotions, press and public relations for the artist,

television appearances and travel, publicity, and internet marketing, promotions and contests (Peitz & Waelbroeck, 2005, p. 362).”

Ehrenberg (2000) argues, however, that such efforts cannot create demand for a product; instead, advertising serves as “intermediaries” to assessing the best way to satisfy consumers preexisting needs. Acknowledging, however, that consumers often try new products based on convincing advertisements, he claims the true test to adoption is if consumers will continue to use the product (2000). That is, advertising is only persuasive up until people have encountered an innovation; then people’s future decisions of whether or not to adopt an innovation is based on the person’s level of satisfaction with the product; not persuasive advertising (2000). “Anything else would be bad marketing—spending millions to convince people to buy something just because someone can produce it (p. 40).”

Moreover, 85 percent of all recorded music released by major record companies never recuperates its costs (Peitz & Waelbroeck, 2005). In 2004, major and independent labels collectively released 38,857 albums, and only 670 (1.7%) albums sold over 100,000 units (2005). Further perpetuating this decline in the past decade has been the emergence of digital music formats and online person-to-person (P2P) file-sharing.

Record Companies Decline

Digital music first became popular on the college scene when students on the Internet began converting music from CDs into MP3 files (Lam & Tan, 2001). As early as 1997 websites like MP3.com feature free music files from independent artists its websites. The new format quickly caught on, mainly because it didn’t come with security features, it maintained high

fidelity sound, and took up little space on CDs (2005). By 1999, the first large P2P website, Napster, was thriving. At its peak, Napster had some 80 million registered users (Lam & Tan, 2001). Now, anyone with Internet access could quickly exchange new music without paying anything. Consequently, MP3s caused CD sales to fall by 12 percent from 2000-2001 (Peitz & Waelbroeck, 2005). Threatened by the website's popularity, the recording industry filed a successful lawsuit against Napster, citing the company for violating copyright laws. Despite Napster's demise in 2002, music piracy continued to flourish, as more file-sharing sites emerged online. In 2004, the global music piracy industry was worth \$4.8 billion (Graham et al, 2004).

If consumers can download for free, if pirates can copy CDs and sell them on the street, the day of the major labels is effectively over because they cannot recover the costs of developing and promoting artists and recording their music. However, this need not be the case for the artists themselves (Graham et al, 2004, p. 1100)."

New Opportunities in the Digital Age

In recent years, the Internet has created alternative distribution and promotion outlets for aspiring artists. Through social networking sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, artists can share unlimited amounts of information with mass populations within minutes. Both pop sensations Soulja Boy Tell 'Em and Justin Bieber's careers, for example, resulted from the viral spreading of YouTube music videos they'd created. Furthermore, through its interconnectivity, the Internet has eliminated economic and geographical obstacles that once challenged aspiring artists' ability to be heard by the public.

The role of traditional intermediaries, e.g. physical retailers, is diminishing and the Internet has become the dominant infrastructure in the music industry for conducting business electronically. Communication and coordination in the music

industry will no longer be hierarchical and dyadic, as everybody can communicate with everybody (Graham et al, 2004, p. 1099).”

Research Objective

The purpose of this paper is to explore how artists promote their music and their brand within the digital age. We’d like to identify which traditional and digital strategies are most effective at spreading new music and increasing overall awareness about new artists. Our goal is to extract the most essential tactics so that we may inform artists who’re just entering the music business. This paper also seeks insight into what the future holds for music promotion.

Methodology

Part 1: Since our research here is primarily exploratory in nature, we thought in-depth interviews would be most appropriate as they often uncover previously unknown nuances and phenomena. Thus, we undertook interviews with three experts who work in different realms of the music business, but all began their careers during the early stages of the digital age. The first interview, which was conducted February 9th, was with Joe Sigmund of Bullitt Bookings, an agent for international electronic DJs. The second interview took place Feb. 17 with Nick Krill, singer from indie punk rock group Spinto Band. The last interview was March 9th with Tom McLeod, former owner of the now defunct Heavy Syndication record label.

Each interviewee was asked a short set of questions designed to guide the even-flow of conversation. Additional follow-up questions were asked based on the interviewees’ responses. Each conversation was recorded.

Part 2: The key tactics that were identified from the in-depth interviews were gathered and used as measuring tools in a case study on rapper Wiz Khalifa’s rise to fame. This paper examines Khalifa’s touring and social media strategies.

Heavy Syndication: Tom McLeod

In 2004 Tom McLeod founded Heavy Syndication records, a rap label comprised of artists living in the Washington, D.C., area. Up until 2008, Heavy Syndication invested in recording and promoting the careers of four local rappers. Believing that a polished-sounding product would set his artists apart from others, the label spent \$25,000 dollars on music production alone. McLeod's ultimate goal was to land major record deals for his artists. In addition to releasing local mixtapes, he scoured the city booking performances at local clubs and college campuses for his artists. He recalls how after four years, major record labels were no longer interested in developing artists. Instead, they only wanted to sign artists who already had a well-established fanbase. Unable to adjust to the changing market, McLeod dissolved his record label in 2008. McLeod recalls why the label failed:

You think it's easy. You think, "even if I'm just out there on the corner talking to someone, someone will buy my stuff." There is just no one buying CDs anymore. [It] really isn't a viable option anymore. We kind of came in right at that middle of the road point where it just started for real, where no one was buying anything anymore.

At the same time we had this hyped up idea that we [were] putting out better quality. And because [it was] better quality, people [were] going to recognize that, and [were] going to respect it, and [were] going to want to support local artists. But that's not really true either.

It's almost like the pitch is all that matters in this case. If you're dealing with artists or musicians or anyone, they're being forced to no longer just be people that make music. They're salesmen trying to pitch their own stuff and sell their own product. And a better salesman on the corner trying to sell his "crappily" produced 5-track songs that he made in his basement might get more album sales because [it has] nothing to do with the music, in

that scenario, and everything to do with the person talking to that person and [if] they make a connection in that moment.

So we were attempting to make money in the old market economy which was album sales, trying to do shows, trying to tour, and there was this complete and total lack of venues to play at. That's the first thing. There's been a massive collapse, especially in hip hop, where there's nowhere to perform; because no one really wants to go and hear a non-signed hip hop artist. It's not even non-signed: a non-hyped "buzzy" hip hop artist. Everyone wants to hear [someone they've] heard on the radio, who their friends told them was cool, or who someone else is saying is awesome. It just becomes your friends [who] come out and support [your shows] because [wrote something] on your Facebook.

And venues only care [about making] their bar cap that night. And the majority of the time they can't on hip hop shows. And it's almost not worth the risk because they have to pay for security and body guards and all kinds of other stuff that you wouldn't have to deal with if you were doing a nice, light classical, either indie or folk band. Something [where] people [will] come out just to explore the music.

Whereas with hip hop, people do not come out just to hear new fresh hip hop. I think there was a time when that was there. But that really just isn't there anymore. I can say personally that I can't remember the last time when I was like "oh man, there's a show with guys rapping tonight that I've never heard of. Let me go out and hear that." It just doesn't even make sense when you speak it out loud.

I think we thought that there might have still been a piece of that left. And we were just wildly incorrect.

Spinto Band: Nick Krill

Nick Krill is a vocalist for indie rock group, Spinto Band. The band saw its first success in 2006 when it released its debut album “Nice and Nicely Done” nationally, through Bar None Records. The buzz around the album resulted in offers from major record companies, and the group’s first major tour overseas. Krill said that their success in 2006 came about after a record producer heard their demo, and liked it so much that he wanted to distribute it throughout the U.S.

Prior to 2006, Krill recalls the group’s early promotional tactics. Forming in the late 90s, while he was in eighth grade, Krill and his friends often created 30-second video advertisements to air during the morning announcements at his school. While these funny skits generated attention at school, Krill claims Internet websites like MP3.com and theymustbegiants.com gave the band its first bit of exposure outside of its hometown in Delaware. In addition to burning and distributing CD copies of their first two albums, Spinto Band sold music on MP3.com during its infancy.

Bullitt Bookings: Joe Sigmund

A fan of electronic music, Joe Sigmund recounts how prior to the digital age, the electronic music movement was “centered around” record stores. Musicians hung around record stores waiting for the newest vinyls to arrive, and fans loitered nearby hoping to meet these electronic musicians. However, Sigmund notes that electronica followers were the first to adapt to the digital age. As early as 2000, British electronic artist Dave Clarke released *Before I was so Rudely Interrupted*, one of the first digital-only album releases.

Since 2007, Sigmund's been an agent at Bullitt Bookings, an agency that books international venues for electronic DJs. With just five agents, Bullitt Bookings currently represents 30 DJs, including famed actor Idris Elba. Today, Sigmund's primary role is to work with club promoters to book shows for his clients and to negotiate how his DJs are represented on promotional materials. Additionally, he also helps his clients cultivate and nurture their fanbases.

Findings

All three interviewees suggested that the most effective way to promote music and artist-brand in the digital age is by extensive and strategic touring; by earning coverage in music blogs; and by connecting with fans through social media.

Performing/Touring

According to Krill, the best way to build a fanbase is to constantly perform shows. He believes that while digital communication and marketing are helpful in attracting potential fans, the only sure way to convert them into actual fans is through that special interaction that occurs between performer and audience member during a concert. If people have a good time, he suggests, they're likely to attend future shows, purchase music, and tell their friends. Krill explains:

Say you're not even a band that has a record contract...if you're touring and you're playing to a significant audience and [selling out] all your dates and you're selling albums out of the back of your car, but you're selling a lot of them...Those are two great things that kind of motivate someone to want to work with you. Whether it is a record company or a manager or someone who wants to sync your music to a commercial. Just having a solid fanbase.

Breaking Internationally

McLeod mentioned that nowadays many new artists have decided to tour overseas first, building an international presence, and leveraging that popularity to integrate back into the American music market. According to Krill, Spinto Band employed a similar tactic in 2006, when they went on tour in the United Kingdom.

Billing Order

According to Joe Sigmund, the most important aspect when booking venues is the billing order on promotional materials. Where an artist's name appears on a flyer determines how fans and future promoters perceive the artist. Similar to product placement, Sigmund contends that placing one artist beneath another signifies that the above artist is more well-known and plays better shows than the artist below. Illustrating his point, Sigmund says he recently pulled Nic Fanciulli (Bullitt Bookings DJ) out of the 2011 Ultramusic Week Festival in Miami because the promoter would not place Fanciulli's name above one particular artist.

“It would have been more detrimental to his career to play at the party and get exposure while billed underneath another artist than to skip the show all together,” Sigmund says.

Opening for Larger Artists

Krill, however, highlights the strategic benefits of opening shows for more well-known artists. Following the release of Spinto Band's upcoming album, Krill thinks his group should travel as support band for a larger band. Nick carefully notes that when choosing a group to open for, artists should look for one that's “musically compatible” and that “[plays] bigger rooms”

“The gamble is that you get some of this band's fans,” he says.

Blogs

According to Krill Spinto Band's growing popularity in 2006 came about after a friend of the band sent the groups music to another friend. Coincidentally, this friend owned a popular blog, and started writing positive reviews about the band. Krill recalls how the band benefitted from the initial hype around blogs when they emerged:

It was like a weird time where people were interested in [reading blogs].

Blogs were a new exciting thing. It was like an immediacy of sharing music and also just hearing that advice from other people rather than from you know, ["I'm reading this in Rolling stone"] or "I'm reading this in the newspaper." It felt more like "a friend of mine is running this blog and they just suggested this." Or "A friend of mine just put this song up on their profile it's so cool." Maybe it had more of a grassroots feel than other forms of media at that point.

Because music blogs have so many loyal music fans, according to Krill, today, artists would benefit greatly from landing exclusive features on blog sites. After posting a positive review, music blogs can make an artist's music widely accessible to its followers by simply posting a link.

According to Tom McLeod, music blogs are an important promotional tool for rap artists, since live venues for local hip hop no longer exist, as he suggested earlier. "It's the only place where people will listen to you," he says. However, McLeod, who owns a music blog, says it's difficult for up-and-coming artists' to stand out because "there's at least 10,000 other people doing the exact same thing as you." He estimates his site receives 30 new song entries a day. Rounding an average song to three minutes, he says there's no way he can spend an hour and a half reviewing new music everyday. "It's easier to just post a Lil' Wayne song and get 6,000

downloads,” he says. In contrast, McLeod estimates that lesser-known artists typically receive between 100 and 200 downloads.

Social Media

Sigmund contends that artists must stay active on social media networks in order to feed fans desire for access. “How many people wouldn’t want to have Jay-Z’s mobile number, just to text him,” he asks. He describes how a Bullitt Bookings staff member wished DJ Carlo Lio a happy birthday on Lio’s Twitter account, and that only three people responded. Yet, once Lio responded, “boom, the feed blew up. Then everyone wrote back.”

He also likens the demand to access artists through social media to the demand for gossip magazines. Fans want to know as much about their favorite artist as possible, Sigmund claim. They “stratify how good of fans they are” based on their knowledge about an artists. Sigmund offers a hypothetical example:

Sixteen year old girls [care] about what Justin Bieber’s favorite flavor of milkshake is. And those people who are going to Justin Bieber concerts, they know that he loves strawberry milkshakes more than anything. And the girl next to her might not [know that] and that means she is more of a fan than [the girl who doesn’t know].

Sigmund further concludes that as fans compete with one another to be an artist’s “number one fan,” they indirectly promote that artist’s brand.

Spinto Band’s Social Media Strategy

Krill says of Spinto Band’s “do it yourself” social media strategy:

We’re all pretty [much] computer nerdy dudes. So there’s plenty of people already loving to post things on the blog and twitter. So it doesn’t take much coordination. Maybe we

need to be more coordinated, so that it's not like a bird shot of messages. So, that it's more focused.

Attempting to centralize their messages, the band recently combined its blog, Twitter feed, and website all to one page. If a fan misses a message sent out one network, they may still receive it when accessing another.

Using the upcoming South by Southwest music festival as an example, Krill describes how the group would typically promote a show using social media. Two weeks before the show, the group would post a humorous YouTube video on their music blog and Twitter feed. During those two weeks, they post short blogs about each upcoming performance meanwhile, giving fans time to circulate the video they posted. One week before the show, they'd send mass email reminders up the approaching concert date. Once the festival began, they'd tweet more frequently, reminding fans to attend the concert hours before it begins.

Wiz Khalifa's Rise within the Digital Age

Wiz Khalifa is an American rapper who recently found popular success using a grassroots marketing campaign. Honing in on teenagers and young adults between 15-25 years old, Khalifa strongly celebrates marijuana usage within his music and persona. As marijuana usage is a familiar topic among teens and young adults of all races, Khalifa widens his audience, rock-n-roll style, by creating odes to rebellious behavior. Staying in-step with his audience, Khalifa is heavily active on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, where he routinely announces or posts footage of himself while he's smoking throughout the day. Some of his most popular mixtapes feature marijuana-inspired themes such as "Burn After you Roll," "Paper Planes," along with his upcoming album "Rolling Papers." Furthermore, in 2010 he performed at local universities across country on a tour entitled "The Waken Baken" Tour.

Within the past two years, Khalifa's defied traditional marketing strategy used by aspiring artists, which entails signing with a major record company and relying on its monetary influence and widespread connections with media outlets to gain fame. Instead, signed to an independent label since 2009, Khalifa has built up a large fan base through extensive touring, producing numerous mixtapes, and by using social networks to develop his brand.

Khalifa, a Pittsburg-native, was discovered by Rostrum records in 2006, after releasing his first mixtape, *Prince of the City: Welcome to Pistolvania*, while still a senior in high school (Cordor, 2011). He produced a few singles that became popular on local radio, but didn't gain much national attention until he released his first album, *Show and Prove*, which led to a deal with Warner Bros. recording company. While signed to Warner, Khalifa reached Billboard's top 20 with his hit "Say Yeah". However, unable to agree on a debut album release date, Khalifa and Warner Bros. parted ways in 2009 (2011).

Around the time when Khalifa returned to independent label where he began his career, social networks like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube had begun to blossom. Within little over a year, Khalifa used these online communities to catapult his career. He went from playing for audiences as small as 400 people at the beginning of 2010, to performing at the NFL's nationally-televised AFC Conference Championship game in 2011.

Khalifa's most successful effort to date and what fueled his overnight celebrity came on April 14, 2010, when he released a free mixtape entitled *Kush and Orange Juice* through his Twitter account. Before its release however, Khalifa tweeted the hashtag #kushandorangejuice. Within hours, the hashtag became the number 1 trending topic on Twitter and on Google's hot search trends, and remained a trending topic on Twitter for several days (Vozick-Levinson, 2010).

In an interview with music and entertainment magazine Vibe.com (Yuscavage, 2010), Khalifa described, in great detail, his strategic release of *Kush and Orange Juice* through Twitter. Three nights before posting the mixtape, he tweeted one of his popular catch phrases, “Taylor Gang or Die,” as a way to gauge his popularity on Twitter. Citing that the phrase quickly became a trending topic on Twitter, he was confident in the mixtape’s potential to spread throughout the network (2010). According to Khalifa:

A lot of artists try to get things to trend just for the fact of doing it and having that happen. I feel like when it happens, it's supposed to be organic... You got to use your powers [on Twitter] wisely. You got to build up your powers (Yuscavage, 2010).

Khalifa, who currently has over 1,300,000 followers on Twitter, believes *Kush and Orange Juice* wouldn’t have been as successful if he’d released it a year ago, when he only had 5,000 followers (Yuscavage, 2010). “I think for my career, *Kush & Orange Juice* was definitely a big thing... Twitter helped, and the Internet...not even the tape, but the hype and the buzz around it, it kind of grew bigger than itself” Khalifa said (Paine, 2011).

Khalifa is heavily active on his Twitter account. Apart from tweets about his smoking habits, he keeps fans engaged with his everyday life. Khalifa tweets before and after he his performances, as well as while he’s attending award ceremonies. He also uses Twitter to bridge gaps between content he’s posted on other interactive website like YouTube and Facebook. For instance, he’s currently in the third season of a YouTube video series entitled *Day to Day*, which features footage of him as he travels, performs, and visits recording studios around the country. Hours before he posts the newest video installment on YouTube, Khalifa sends a reminder to his followers via Twitter.

With 5 million “likes” on his Facebook page, Khalifa primarily uses the site as a music distribution location. His personal page features applications where fans can stream individual songs from his past mixtapes . For the past several months, he’s used his personal page to advertise and sell his upcoming album, *Rolling Papers*. Months before its release in late March, fans could pre-order the album, which was offered in the form of various bundles that included additional memorabilia such as t-shirts, hats, and jackets.

Khalifa’s recent popularity is also a result of his extensive touring strategy. In fall 2010, he went on a 50-city tour of North America. He was careful in choosing rappers Yelawolf and Big K.R.I.T. to open his shows. While neither Yelawolf nor Big K.R.I.T. have had quite as much success as Khalifa, they both have a fan base that’s similar to Khalifa’s, and have fans all over the continent. Headlining such a concert, with artists who were already somewhat popular, Khalifa benefitted from the appearance of being a star among stars. Additionally, Khalifa had a chance to win over fans from either artist. After performing at 63 venues, Khalifa’s tour sold 90,000 tickets.

According Khalifa’s agent Peter Schwartz, Khalifa’s touring strategy in 2010 was to perform at a large number of small-capacity venues (400-1,000 seats) that he could easily sell-out (Waddell, 2011). His agent then used his ability to sell out venues as a bargaining chip to book more shows. As he became more popular throughout the year from his mixtapes and social networking, he gradually began performing at larger venues. By 2011, Khalifa had performed at 130 shows (2011). “We want to sell out, we’re building demand, and then plan it to take to the next size for 2012,” Schwartz said. “We book it the way you’d book a rock band: develop it up, do multiple tours, take those step” (2011).

Determined to maintain a strong brand, Khalifa turned down offers from two major hip hop stars in 2010, refusing to sign a deal on Rick Ross' Maybach Music Group and turning down an opportunity to tour with platinum recording artist Drake. Khalifa said of his decline on Drake's invitation:

No disrespect to [Drake] or anybody else who might [want to] see me do some more collaborative things, but to keep [building] and keep my brand as strong as what it is, [I've got to] keep [focusing] on what it is. This is my first tour that I got [coming] up, the Waken Baken tour, [I've got to] at least kick that off and make that what it is so we can do ten more...I'm real happy for Drake and real proud of Drake. I was [looking] on the Internet and that [he] made \$10 million this year. So maybe when I make \$10 million then we can tour (Langhorne, 2010).

After performing at the MTVU Woodie Awards this last month, Khalifa continues to find new ways to stay in touch with his target audience. In early April, he will headline the Campus Consciousness Tour, which is run by a student-lead environmentalist organization.

In addition to having a number one Billboard single, "Black and Yellow", in 2011, he's been featured on the cover of an array of popular magazines including XXL and Rolling Stone. Off to a good start in 2011, the rest of the year looks promising for Wiz Khalifa.

Discussion/Recommendations

Khalifa is living proof of the drastic change the American music business has undergone in the past century. Publishers once controlled all music creation, ownership, and promotion. A songplugger faced the same competition to stand out among the muddle of other songpluggers,

just as many artists do today. The digital age has gradually decentralized the music industry allowing more people to contribute to the music market. Moreover, today's music business appears to be headed in the direction of early Tin Pan Alley, with numerous song publishers, all competing for the public's attention.

As the artist has gained more market power within the last decade, they still face the challenge to be heard still remains. Before the digital age, artist's first needed to impress record company executives in order to gain access to the public; whereas now, they have access but must compete with millions of other artists who have access to the same promotional outlets.

Our in-depth interviews and case study on Wiz Khalifa indicate that touring, social media activity and music blogs are crucial to thriving in the digital age. A few things to consider when addressing each strategy:

Touring

- Most important in the beginning
- Gives fans direct access to your music
- Builds fanbase
- Has a more lasting and convincing affect
- Spreads your name
- Opening for larger artists gives you access to more fans
- Opening for a larger artists, however may comprise your brand
- Do not perform under or open for a less successful artist

Music Blogs

- Like the media, you want to establish go relationships with them
- They have access to loyal music fans
- Fans are influenced by music blogs
- Seek exclusive features or album releases through a popular music blog
- You cannot control what and if a music blog writes about you
- It's difficult for lesser known artists to stand out on music blogs
- You're not the only artist using music blogs

Social Media

- Gives fans access
- Accessibility is a must in the digital age
- Be creative

- Be active
- Be consistent in message
- Know the strengths of each outlet (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) and use them to compliment each other
- Exercise good timing

The largest take away from this paper is that artists in today's age face to major obstacles: each other and consumer's fickleness. As mentioned earlier, there is no clear, proven method to spreading music. Artists must determine how to stand out in the digital crowd. They must also figure out how to overcome consumer's innate preferences and susceptibility to external influences. Exercising the tactics above are only aids to success, not guarantors. An artist's best option is to remain creative and to think strategically.

Moreover, as we've seen in history, innovations continue to shape how music shared and promoted. Innovations shape how we communicate. Therefore, successful artists are those who quickly take advantage of outlets that connect people to one another now and the future.

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