

SOUND SELLERS  
HOW MUSICIANS THINK ABOUT, DEFINE, AND MANAGE THE SELLING OF THEIR  
SOUND

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By

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research explores how musicians think about, define, and manage the selling of their sound. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis and semi-structured interviews with 10 musicians across different music genres, this study examines how musicians adapt their sound to navigate gatekeepers and by what process this occurs. The findings suggest that musicians take a fluid and nuanced approach to defining, creating, and selling their sound to an array of gatekeepers identified in this study. That is, musicians move fluidly between defining, creating, and selling their sound with each process influencing the others. Additionally, artists have the following three goals in mind when crafting and selling their sound to gatekeepers: uniqueness, popularity, and enjoyment. Each artist has their own unique blend of sound goals which they adapt as needed. This study offers several theoretical insights, including a particularly important one regarding the tensions experienced by musicians in managing the relationships between creativity and commerce. Contrary to the prevailing view regarding the challenges they face in managing that relationship, a major finding of this thesis is that musicians move with ease between the creative and commercial sides of the industry and sometimes occupy both simultaneously.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2018, Patterson and Larsen called for a “sonic turn in consumer research.” That is, a disruption in the traditional methods of studying consumers through the “reorientation and reworking of cultural understandings by using the sonic as a point of departure and access” (Patterson and Larsen 2018, 2). In their delivery of sound as a fresh analytical lens, Patterson and Larsen (2018, 2) challenge marketing researchers to go beyond framing sound as a “consumption object in and of itself, as a motivating force in consumption environments, or as a background against which we conduct our consumption.” While sound in marketing research covers an array of concepts as listed above by Patterson and Larsen (2018), the producers of our consumption soundscapes, specifically musicians, are missing from marketing literature. The lack of the musician’s perspective from marketing research presents a unique opportunity. As Hesmondalgh and Pratt (2005, 10) suggest, “we simply need to know more about the cultural industries and how they operate, and what people do and think about during the creation...of their products.” Given that music is socially organized (e.g., genre and public reception) and socially organizing (Patterson and Larsen 2018), gaining the perspectives of musicians who play a critical role in shaping the ubiquitous sounds of our consumption routines may offer a unique lens with which to view consumer culture. As Patterson and Larsen (2018, 4) suggest, “the turn to the sonic represents an acknowledgement of the increasing importance of sound as a site for analysis, aesthetic engagement and theoretical development.” This study taps into the intentions and experiences of musicians as they create and sell their sound, specifically music, to the music industry, marketers, and ultimately, consumers.

To highlight the contributions made by musicians to the modern consumption landscape, imagine watching a Nike commercial, shopping in an Aritzia store, or dining at a restaurant without background music specifically designed to enhance your experience. Music can be consumed in more than the obvious contexts of our daily lives. For example, music has been found to provide pleasurable escape for runners who use it to shape their running experiences (Kerrigan, Larsen, Hanratty, and Korta 2014). Sound in marketing research is intrinsically tied to the presence of cultural products made by musicians while simultaneously omitting their perspective from the discourse. Although much popular music has been analyzed from various disciplines including sociology, cultural studies and psychology, the significance of popular music has received less attention from consumer researchers (Shankar 2000). Marketing research has most often examined music as a persuasive advertising element and a consumption object, but research involving musicians and music producers is scarce within the literature.

Underlying the general omission of musicians from sound in marketing literature is the longstanding false dichotomy between creativity and commerce in which musicians and the commercial side of the music industry are directly opposed and thus, disconnected from each other (Negus 1995). In reality, the commercialization of music merges creativity with commerce to create cooperation and tension between the two more so than opposition or a binary relationship (Negus 1995). Krueger (2019, 7) describes the music industry as a superstar or “winner takes all” market “with a small number of players who attract most of the fanfare and earn most of the money.” Compared to other entertainment industries, the music industry is small. Music spending in North America is nearly three times less than on professional sports and global music spending in 2017 was \$50 billion, representing only 6% of world GDP (Krueger 2019). The high stakes for musicians and industry gatekeepers in a superstar market

amplifies their reliance on one another to advance the industry and achieve individual success. That is, to produce and distribute music that receives positive consumer response. To do this, the creative and commercial sectors of the music industry maintain a balancing act between music that is both creative and commercially successful (Negus 1995). The current study will explore the intersection and cooperation of creativity and commerce in the music industry, as well as the tensions between them as experienced by musicians. The purpose of this study is to begin filling a gap in marketing scholarship toward a deeper understanding of the creative process via the explanations of musicians who are both sound producers and sellers. This research poses the following question:

*How do musicians think about, define, and manage the selling of their sound? That is, how do musicians adapt their sound to navigate gatekeepers and by what process does this occur?*

The following chapter will cover literature on sound in marketing, cultural gatekeeping within the music industry, the power dynamics of the music industry and how musicians function within it. Initially, the extant marketing literature on sound which includes the following topics: (a) phonetic sounds of brand names; (b) the value and characteristics of music in advertising; (c) brand placement in songs; (d) music consumer groups; and (e) technological advances influencing music consumption will be discussed. Next, the function and different faces of music industry gatekeeping will be explained. Finally, the current climate of the music industry will be discussed in the context of how various factors are tied to musicians and ultimately, the sound of popular music. These factors include: (a) the tension between creativity and commerce in the music industry; (b) bandwagon effects (Krueger 2019) of music consumption; (c) the subsequent “winner takes all” nature of the music market; and (d) the entrepreneurial spirit of a musicians.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Sound in Marketing

Sound transports the mind, provokes emotion, and communicates referential meaning to listeners (Herget, Schramm, and Breves 2018). The mere sound of a brand's name conveys meaning that is then transferred to the brand by consumers (Yorkston and Menon 2004). For example, people prefer brand names with vowel sounds that are congruent with product attributes (Lowrey and Shrum 2007) and names that have phonetic repetition (e.g., Coca-Cola, Hubba Bubba, and Kit Kat) (Argo, Popa, and Smith 2010).

In advertisements, music has been shown to have simultaneous cognitive and affective influence on listeners (Galan 2009) which may help viewers form audiovisual images that affect their brand perceptions (Hung 2001) and cue cultural context (Hung 2000). As Hecker (1984, 7) points out, "music, when used appropriately, is the catalyst of advertising. It augments pictures and colours words, and often adds a form of energy available through no other source." To reduce the ambiguity of what is and is not appropriate, researchers have explored and defined several factors that can either facilitate or hinder the positive effects of music in advertising. These are congruency between a brand's message and song's meaning, song placement in the ad, lyrical content, song likability, and evoking nostalgia and will be discussed next.

Congruency is said to influence music's ability to communicate brand messages to consumers (Macinnis and Park 1991). As such, there have been numerous studies on the relationship between message congruency and how it influences level of cognition (Lavack, Thakor, and Bottausci 2008), cultural meaning transfer (Hung 2001), affect (Macinnis and Park 1991), and persuasion (Lalwani, Lwin and Ling 2009). Macinnis and Park (1991, 3) define congruency or "fit" as "consumers' subjective perceptions of the music's relevance or

appropriateness to the central ad message.” Herget et al. (2018) demonstrate that songs in commercials speak to the brand’s narrative, product, and/or target group with very few songs matching all three of these categories at once. Still, advertisers see music in their ads as more than just congruency aids.

Lyrical music taps into the emotional bonding processes of consumers, such as evoking emotions, identifying with the main character, and storytelling (Anisimova, Müllern, and Plachkova 2014). The use of older songs in ads can evoke nostalgia-related emotions which produce positive affect even when the products being advertised are unrelated to the nostalgic memory (Chou and Lien 2010; 2014). Placement of music is shown to influence the type of ad message (e.g., affect-based vs. cognitive-based) (Alpert and Alpert 1991) and influence information recall, purchase likelihood, and attitude to the brand (Brooker and Wheatley 1994). Music characteristics such as tempo and style (Galan 2009) and pitch (Lowe and Haws 2017) can influence consumer perceptions of the ad, brand, and/or products. However, music likeability has stronger carry-over effects to the ad than a song’s tempo or style (Galan 2009). Lantos and Craton (2012) suggest that listening situation, musical stimulus, listener characteristics, and advertising process strategy (e.g., central vs. peripheral and affective vs. cognitive) can positively or negatively impact consumer attitude to advertising music.

Marketing research explores the role music plays in reaching consumers not only through ads, but also through music as a medium. Product and brand placement in popular music is shown to be effective when the placement is prominent and congruent (Delattre and Colovic 2009; Ferguson and Burkhalter 2015) and consumers like the song (Delattre and Colovic 2009). For example, Ferguson and Burkhalter (2015) found Gucci to be more congruent with hip hop identity compared to less congruent brands (e.g., Abercrombie and Fitch or Brook’s Brothers)

and thus, produced the most favourable brand attitudes from consumers when placed more prominently in the song (e.g., in the chorus).

Music has been studied as a consumption object. There are characteristics that make songs more marketable and widely consumed than others. Songs with repetitive lyrics are easier for listeners to process and are thus more broadly and quickly adopted in the marketplace (Nunes, Ordanini, and Valseia 2015). The digitalization of music consumption has shifted popular demand for bundled music (e.g., full albums) to reflect the increased production and marketing of single releases (Elberse 2010). The rising popularity of single releases contributes to a change in the determinants of an artist's popularity from live performances to recorded music (Papies and van Heerde 2017). Still, artists make a large proportion of their income from touring and live performances (Krueger 2019).

Music consumers (e.g., teenagers) have been studied for their role as trendsetters of popular music. Teenagers are largely responsible for the success of new product launches in fashion, technology, and music (Parry 2004). Peak music discovery and consumption has been found to take place around the age of 24 and tapers off near the age of 28 as our lives become too busy to seek out new music (Deezer 2018). As a result, for most of us, the music we discover and come to like in our teenage years and into our mid-twenties has a lasting effect on our music tastes as we mature (Music Ally 2018). This makes the youth market incredibly valuable to the music industry in the short and long-term. As such, it is crucial for the music industry to understand the youth market, which is now global, diverse, and instantly accessed, in order to better segment and serve it in the moment and as it matures. This is a difficult feat as young people can be fickle about the artists and music they prefer which makes their music tastes hard to predict (Nuttall 2008). However, there are defining motivators behind the music consumption

of this powerful market. Young people use music as a coping mechanism (Willis 1990), a sense of identity (Lewis 1992), to fulfil social needs (Nuttall 2008), and to satisfy emotional and developmental needs (Arnett 1995; Rubin 1994). Family type (e.g. intact or single parent households) is said to influence the purpose music consumption plays in an adolescent's life, such as a means of bonding or separating, as well as music taste (Nuttall 2008; Nuttall and Tinson 2008). Teenagers are in search of new music and artists that are "cool" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Nuttall 2008). That is, they want music that is enjoyable to listen to over and over again, influential, popular in one's subculture, and able to transfer positive qualities to the listener, namely a sense of freedom and autonomy (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Nuttall 2008).

Given the long list of factors influencing the popularity of a song and/or artist amongst young listeners and often times the overall popularity of that song and/or artist (Nuttall 2008), the music industry goes to great lengths to scout and sell coolness back to teenagers. In their pursuit of cool, the music industry replicates and reproduces subcultural sounds, images, and identities until they are no longer considered cool by their target market of American teenagers (Dretzin and Goodman 2001). It is unclear how or if independent artists intentionally construct a "cool" sound and/or brand identity or if this is more of an organic process. For musicians who belong to the youth market, achieving a cool sound and persona may lend itself more to the latter initially. Additionally, the virtually simultaneous feedback social media-savvy artists are privy to online may help them tap into and adapt their sound to upcoming trends. For example, artists are able to test new music on social media platforms, such as Instagram which provides musicians and bands free access to insights, such as changes in comments, likes, shares and follower counts from specific posts.

How we consume music is drastically impacted by technological change. As Krueger (2019) suggests, disruption caused by technological advances occurs first in music (e.g., the gramophone, phonograph, 7-inch single, commercial radio, and compact discs to on-demand streaming). The popularity of digital streaming saved the music industry from longstanding financial decline. After a steady drop in U.S. music revenues from \$14.6 billion in 1999 to \$6.7 billion in 2015 caused by illegal file sharing and piracy online, recorded music revenues rebounded with the advent of streaming in 2016 (Krueger 2019). Since its inception, streaming has revolutionized the way music is consumed and distributed (Krueger 2019). Streaming platforms provide an unprecedented assortment of sounds and musical identities to those in search of new music, including industry gatekeepers, musicians, and consumers, by allowing independent musicians the opportunity to upload their music without a record label. Economic incentives of streaming, such as Spotify's 30-second minimum for a stream to qualify as a play and thus generate streaming royalties for producers, "are directly affecting the way songs are written, composed, and performed" (Krueger 2019, 5). Songs are arranged and produced to hook listeners for at least 30 seconds. For example, songs featuring multiple artists with the most popular artist appearing first in the song have become increasingly prominent in popular music (Krueger 2019). Additionally, some hit-making songwriters have moved away from using traditional verse-chorus pop music form by placing the "hook" or chorus at the beginning of the song (Krueger 2019; Seabrook 2015). The digital age has also provided artists with access to music producers, traditionally reserved for signed artists, those who could play and produce music at a professional level, or knew someone personally who could. Online platform BeatStars provides a worldwide marketplace for music producers to buy and sell DIY instrumental productions. BeatStars has paid out over \$50 million to its producers since it launched in 2008



(Eggertsen 2019) and facilitated the online collaboration between Dutch producer YoungKio and American rapper Lil Nas X – a collaboration which materialized as 2019’s record-breaking Billboard hit “Old Town Road” (Harding and Sloan 2019).

Social media platforms, such as YouTube, Soundcloud, Tik Tok, and Instagram give artists a direct link to their fans, providing an alternative means for attracting the music industry’s traditional intermediaries, such as record labels, entertainment corporations, and brick and mortar distributors (Ogden, Ogden, and Long 2011; Scott 2012; Walzer, 2017). As a result of the rising online connectedness between artists and consumers (De Roeper 2008), consumers are increasingly influential to the industry’s large-scale marketing strategies (Ogden et al. 2011). Even independent or up-and-coming artists are able create brands, engage with fans, and amass large followings by using co-creational marketing tactics online, such as viral marketing campaigns and user-generated content (Gamble and Gilmore 2013). Such alternative means allow artists to break into the music industry, not work outside of it. Unsigned up-and-coming artists can use self-made popularity and brand potential to leverage record deals and create bidding wars between labels vying for a contract with the artist (Haack 2017). Despite the thinning of a fourth wall between musicians and their audience, cultural gatekeepers continue to play an influential role as intermediaries in the production of music and selling of sound (Balaji 2012). This is largely due to the fact that it is difficult for artists to make a living without being accepted by the music industry’s gatekeepers (Balaji 2012; Eckhardt and Bradshaw 2014).

Marketing literature has shown that the use of sound and music in advertising has important implications for marketers. The literature names several factors that influence the outcomes of paring sound and song with branding and advertising. Not only have the effects of music in advertising been studied, but music has been shown to be an effective advertising

channel for brands via brand product placement in songs. On the other end, a vein of marketing research focuses on music consumers and consumption. The literature has shown that teenage music consumers are powerful trendsetters when it comes to shaping the sound of popular music and thus, represent a lucrative consumer group for the music industry. Additionally, the introduction of new technologies ushered in by the internet, namely digital streaming, have been shown to be responsible for changing music consumption patterns. These changes present opportunities and challenges for the music industry. The current state of sound in marketing literature focuses on the marketer and/or the music consumer, however the producer of this music is not present in the research. Given this gap in the literature, it is necessary to explore research outside of marketing to better understand the nuances of the music industry and musicians. First, we turn to the literature on cultural gatekeeping to better frame how musicians and their music reach marketers and consumers in the first place.

## **2.2 Cultural Gatekeepers**

Cultural gatekeepers channel cultural production by managing and promoting certain sounds, images, words, and commodities to the public (Gibson 2003). They function in the following three ways: as selectors who curate which artists and sounds are allowed through the illusive gates of the music industry; as producers who use sophisticated technology to create polished and competitive entertainment packages; and as tastemakers who promote certain artists to the public and consecrate them with awards (Foster, Borgatti, and Jones 2011). These intermediaries diffuse emerging cultural categories (e.g., music genres) and products (e.g., artists and songs) into dominant culture (Foster et al. 2011; McCracken 1986). Gatekeepers feel a sense of responsibility to (a) the artist's desire for self-expression and creativity, (b) investors (e.g.,

record labels) who operate to maximize profits and sign new talent, and (c) an audience in search of entertainment (De Roeper 2008).

Just as there are many types of businesses that cohabit today's music industry (e.g., advertising, online streaming platforms, television and film, etc.), there are different levels of gatekeeping with varying levels of power. Music industry gatekeepers include art directors, publishers, TV programmers, record labels, advertisers, promoters, and publicists (De Roeper 2008) with each rung of gatekeeping opening new doors for artists, or closing them. One often thinks of gatekeepers as large corporations, such as the "big three" record labels (i.e., Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment Group, and Warner Music Group) (McDonald 2019) and producers. However, there are many publicly unsung gatekeepers working behind the scenes of the music industry. A small group of music producers and songwriters lay claim to what Seabrook (2015) refers to as the *Song Machine* or the ability to churn out instant pop hits. This is gatekeeping as only a select few artists are given access to these career-making hit songs. Deeply rooted institutions, such as Billboard act as music industry gatekeepers. Information about the popularity and success of music provided by Billboard charts is used to justify decision making about individuals, organizations, and music genres (Anand and Peterson 2000). Streaming platforms, such as Spotify, are the music industry's more recent gatekeepers. For example, "being added to [Spotify's] Today's Top Hits, a list with 18.5 million followers during the sample period, raises streams by almost 20 million and is worth between \$116,000 and \$163,000. Not surprisingly, labels vie to have their songs included on playlists to promote their artists" (Krueger 2019, 193). Radio programmers continue to perform gatekeeping activities as radio play or getting a song listed in rotation is still important for breaking a song or artist into the mainstream and measuring popularity (Anand and Peterson 2000). Gatekeeper strategies are

influenced by the social context in which they reside (Foster et al. 2011). For example, local gatekeepers such as strip club DJs, radio hosts, and street teams mediate between the corporations that produce and distribute rappers and a wider consumer market, commodifying and building the regional credibility of rap artists prior to the artist's global distribution (Balaji 2012).

Artists themselves can serve as gatekeepers. Artists act as talent scouts or Artist and Repertoire (A&R) (Coleman 2019), using their social and professional networks to discover and develop new talent for the labels they own or are a part of (Solomon, White, and Dahl 2013). Artist "co-signing" is another form of gatekeeping wherein a commercially successful artist endorses a less successful artist (Fleischer 2016). Canadian artist Drake co-signed The Weeknd, an artist whose introduction to mainstream music and popularity is largely due to Drake's seal of approval on Twitter and a musical collaboration between the two artists (Iandoli 2016). The artist co-sign can function outside of publicly endorsing new artists. For example, hip hop mogul Jay-Z contractually signed popstar Rihanna to her first record deal with Def Jam Records while he served as president of the label (Nostro 2014). The musician gatekeeper is not a new phenomenon. For example, music industry legends Quincy Jones and Clarence Avant amassed a high-ranking of gatekeeper status throughout their careers dating back to the 1950's (Avant et al. 2019; Jones and Hicks 2018). These examples show that the role of gatekeeping is fluid and not always fixed to a binary of creatives versus commerce (e.g., the artist is also an A&R, marketer, record label executive, etc.).

Music industry gatekeepers exist to control an intrinsically uncertain industry. The music industry has endured turbulent change since the dawn of the internet (Bockstedt, Kauffman, and Riggins 2006; Krueger 2019; Ogden et al. 2011). Social media provides anyone with a computer

and a Wi-Fi connection access to a digital stage with potentially global reach, thereby increasing the supply of artists for record labels to sift through (Aguilar 2015; Haack 2017). It is difficult to predict how the public will receive what the music industry is selling because, according to Frith (1981, 101) “the use value of cultural goods (the reason why people buy them) depends on aesthetic preferences.” Even the most experienced executives within A&R divisions at record labels have difficulty selecting tomorrow’s superstars (Krueger 2019). To make the process of marketing artists and their music less complex, record labels separate them by genre and consequently, race, class, ethnicity, and age (Lena and Peterson 2008). This limits the range of music available to the public and makes sound easier to manage and market (Garofalo 1987). Accordingly, when market concentration is high and power is centralized to a few large record labels, overall artist and genre diversity is hampered; in times of decentralized power, a more diverse assortment of artists and music exists (Dowd 2004).

The centralized power and dominance over popular culture by few entertainment companies presents the issue of hegemony. In practice, hegemony is “achieved when ideas, values, and beliefs which are favourable to the dominant culture come to be seen as ‘normal’” (Garofalo 1987, 89). Hegemonic forces (e.g., cultural gatekeepers) co-opt countercultural meanings into the dominant culture thereby reducing the struggle of said meaning and making it more controllable and therefore, more predictable (Garofalo 1987; Hesmondalgh 1998). In popular music, record labels co-opt meaning into manageable parcels of commercial sound, pricing, and similar sounding and looking artists (Garafalo 1987). The repackaging and commercialization of hip hop, a cultural resistance movement by marginalized communities in the 1970’s Bronx, as gangsta rap in the 1990’s is one example of hegemonic co-optation (Kitwana 2005). Although there are many more instances, including the appropriation of punk

(Garofalo 1987), rave (Farber 2002), and strip club (Hunter 2011) counter and subcultures by the music industry.

By connecting up-and-coming artists to the public, music industry gatekeepers heavily influence an artist's access to mainstream success. The literature names the many layers of gatekeeping, including record labels, radio programmers, digital streaming platforms, and artists themselves. Gatekeeping exists to protect the music industry's status quo which ultimately influences the sound of popular music by rejecting artists and music that veer too far from the status-quo. The literature on gatekeeping informs the purpose cultural gatekeepers serve in the music industry, yet is silent on the artists themselves. We must look more broadly at cultural production to understand the dynamics between musicians and the commercial system upheld by gatekeepers.

### **2.3 Musicians**

The commercialization of music merges artistic expression with market forces which inspires longstanding academic interest and varying discourses surrounding the power dynamics between artists, consumers, and the commercial system (Negus 1995). Some discourses cite a power imbalance between participants in the music industry and a dominance of one party over the other. These arguments include: (a) the commercial system, which includes record labels, agents, and publishers, holds a concentrated amount of power over the production of music with which it exploits musicians through the commercialization of their artistic output and lays claim to the ownership of leisure (Chapple 1977); (b) that corporate control of music production is irrelevant because creative possibilities are realized in the act of consumption and the commercial system cannot control what will be popular, it can only attempt to (Fiske 1992; Hebdige 1979). Under this view, popular culture is produced and decided by consumers. Thus,

while record labels control the means of popular music production (Stratton 1982), market forces permit consumers to shape the sound of popular music through their consumption choices, as seen in the taste-making youth market; and (c) musicians and the commercial system are in perpetual flux due to the music industry's forced merger of two incompatible ideologies: capitalism and art (Stratton 1982). As a result, members of the commercial system, such as music critics and A&R, employ mystifying tactics to mask this incompatibility and uphold the industry, such as using vague and arbitrary evaluations of 'good' and 'bad' music (Stratton 1982). One way the music industry has made tangible such evaluations is through the Billboard charts (Anand and Peterson 2000). These arguments insinuate that there is a dichotomous or "us versus them" relationship between consumers and producers in the music industry. However, there are many facets of co-operation between artists, the commercial system, and consumers that allow the music industry to exist. It is a friction between these parties, not a dichotomy, that cause the music industry to evolve and adapt to a turbulent and unpredictable environment (Negus 1995).

Negus (1995) suggests that there is perpetual tension in the music industry over what *is* creative and what *is to be* commercial. That is, there is no one formula to ensure creativity and commercial success that stands the test of changing market tastes. On one end, musicians have the urge to create, communicate, challenge social values, and tell stories (De Roeper 2008). They describe their attraction to music "as if it were a religious calling; they simply can't imagine spending their lives doing something else" (Krueger 2019, 52). In many cases, money is a safety net and not the primary motivator for most musicians (Krueger 2019). Baxandall (1985, 48) suggests that artists seek "approval, intellectual nurture and later, reassurance, provocation and irritation of stimulating kinds, the articulation of ideas, vernacular visual skills, friendship, and – very important indeed – a history of one's activity and heredity" and money which acts "both as

a token of some of these and a means to continue performance” (Banxandall 1985, 48). On the other end, the commercial system makes high-risk investments in the aspirations of up-and-coming artists or new signees. This risk makes it tempting for major labels to recycle past successes and reproduce “safe” artists and sounds which ultimately hinders artistic innovation (Bradshaw and Scott 2018; Garofalo 1987). However, the commercial system does adapt its sound to changing market tastes in order to deliver value to music consumers and suppliers (Negus 1995). Without adapting, there would be no change in the sound of popular music which is historically not the case. The tension over creativity and commercial success is shared between artists and gatekeepers. It can be seen at play in the balancing act between a sound or artist that attracts a large audience, while still offering a unique package; one that is different from the rest, but not *too* different for music listeners.

Baxandall’s (1985) “*troc*” describes how producers and consumers in cultural goods markets make free choices that interact on each other and move art forward; any action from one side has consequences on the other. At the edge of *troc*’s outer borders lies the line at which music producers are free to create without offending or confusing the audience; beyond those edges, artists reject the status-quo and if they’re lucky, make a big enough impact to move the sound of popular music forward (Bradshaw and Scott 2018). As veteran music producer for acts such as Jonny Cash, The Beastie Boys, and Lady Gaga and Def Jam Records co-founder Rick Rubin (Neville et al. 2019) states, “if everyone likes [your music], you’re doing something wrong. That’s the issue. If everyone likes it, it’s probably kinda mediocre...The best art divides the audience. You want your music to be someone’s favourite music and to be the example for someone else of what they hate.” As Rubin’s advice suggests, playing it too safe or falling into the trap of trying to pleasing everyone can be detrimental to an artist’s success as more daring



artists come along and influence popular sound toward a new status-quo. Musicians and the commercial system work together to sell a sound that is both creative and commercial as the average consumer's tolerance for what is too creative or too commercial evolves. Every once in a while, a visionary artist appears and upsets the balance between creativity and commerce successfully. Specifically, *this study will explore how musicians work with the commercial system to cope with the tension between creativity and commerce inherent within it. It asks "what is sound? How is it defined from an artist's standpoint? And how do musicians negotiate their search for a career in sound?"*

While music consumption plays an imperative role in deciding the sound of popular music, music tastes do not develop independently across individuals. Bandwagon effects (Krueger 2019, 87) describe how we have a tendency to like what our peers like, thus making "music that is popular in our networks more appealing to us." Salganik, Dodds, and Watts (2006) demonstrate the importance of social influence to our music tastes and how social influence increases the gap between the most and least popular songs. This effect underlies Krueger's (2019) power law distribution of popularity which graphically demonstrates that the most popular songs and artists are multiples of the next-most-popular item, and so on and so forth. The music industry's highly skewed distribution of popularity, facilitated by bandwagon effects, creates a small number of superstar musicians and record labels who come to dominate the market and influence the sound of aspiring superstars (Krueger 2019).

The music industry functions as a superstar market (Krueger 2019). Within the industry there are very few highly successful musicians at the top and many below them achieving mediocre or fleeting success. There are two characteristics of superstar markets: scale and non-substitutable qualities. Marshall (1930) identified that superstar markets have access to scale

which is facilitated by technology, such as the telegraph which granted 19<sup>th</sup> century entrepreneurs access to global markets. Most recently, the internet, digital streaming, and social media have drastically increased the size of the market that musicians are able to capture and sell their sound to (Krueger 2019). Without access to scale, up-and-coming musicians could not become superstars. Complimenting scale, superstars must also have non-substitutable qualities (Rosen 1981). That is, the top performers must have a sound and style that is unique, with distinct features. Otherwise, superstar artists would not be able to differentiate themselves from other artists (Krueger 2019). Artists need both scale and uniqueness to become superstars, but they also need luck. As Krueger (2019, 108) suggests, “a streak of good luck – along with a prodigious talent and effort – is essential for someone to reach the top of the ladder and achieve superstar status.” Being in the right place at the right time with the right sound can skyrocket a lesser-known artist to superstar status. Take recording artist Melissa Jefferson, known professionally as Lizzo, for example. In 2018, the multi-talented singer, rapper, songwriter, and flutist had been releasing music professionally since 2013 to modest public response. Her big break did not occur until 2019, when a series of promotional tactics, including a viral campaign on the social media platform Tik Tok and placement in the Netflix original film “Someone Great,” launched her song “Truth Hurts” to the top of the Billboard charts (Butler 2019; Jones 2019). On these events and the value of luck to her career, Lizzo tells Nelson (2019, 9) that she “had everything else: the hard work, the good music, touring — but then there’s that extra-special magic that nobody really knows what it is that can really change your life.” While luck plays a big role in the breakthrough success of musicians, having a knack for business and marketing is also helpful.

Reaching an audience of scale with one's unique style and sound requires entrepreneurial activities. Schumpeter (2011 [1911]) describes entrepreneurialism as pursuing new ways of doing things by creating new goods, new methods of production, opening new markets, finding new sources of materials or bringing about a new organization of an industry. According to Haynes and Marshall (2018, 467) musicians routinely perform the following entrepreneurial tasks: “networking and developing contact books; strategizing about future revenue generation; securing funding for projects; organizing major undertakings such as tours in other continents; chasing down promoters and booking agents; negotiating with lawyers and publishers; contacting press agents to promote material; promoting events; [and] selling things.” The digital era intensifies the need for musicians to be entrepreneurial in order to be successful. As discussed earlier, the internet and digital media provide new opportunities for musicians to gain attention from cultural gatekeepers and consumers. This is a complicated task due to an over-saturated music market and the cost of employing press agents and funding major media campaigns (Haynes and Marshall 2018; Krueger 2019). Thus, DIY musicians rely on social capital (e.g., social networks) and cultural capital (e.g., unique characteristics) to generate “buzz” around their music and build a career in the music industry (Scott 2012). For example, recording artist Amala Zandile Dlamini, known professionally as Doja cat, used a song and video she produced in her bedroom to create buzz via Youtube. In one year, the attention-grabbing music video for “Mooo!” has garnered nearly 51 million views on Youtube and has helped Doja gain the attention of gatekeepers and new listeners (Corry 2018). This barter and exchange of alternative sources of capital lends to the classification of musicians as cultural entrepreneurs (Scott 2012). Despite routinely practicing what Schumpeter (2011 [1911]) would classify as entrepreneurial activity, some musicians are hesitant to apply the term to themselves given a fear

of being perceived as profit-seekers or phony creatives instead of true artists (Haynes and Marshall's 2018). This resistance further demonstrates that musicians experience a tension between the commercial and creative aspects of pursuing a career in the music industry. On the other hand, there is reason to believe that this tension is easing as the majority of musicians struggle to make a living from their art alone (Eckhardt and Bradshaw 2014; Krueger 2019).

Musicians and the commercial system are intrinsically connected (Negus 1995). The two have more in common than is publicly imagined, including the unpredictable and often bifurcated public reception of cultural texts regardless of the producer's intention (Bradshaw and Scott 2018). The creative intention of hit-making songwriters has become increasingly profit-driven and calculated. Seabrook (2015) traces the evolution of modern pop music highlighting the formulaic tendency of today's hit songs to include frequent melodic and rhythmic "hooks" that leave listeners wanting more; akin to junk food. The influence of this modern technique molds audience expectations and tastes (Seabrook 2015) thereby making public reception more predictable and less risky for music producers and sellers. Eckhardt and Bradshaw (2014) suggest that the relationship between advertising and music is warming due to the collapse of the traditional music industry and artists' need for alternative revenue opportunities to record sales and touring, such as the exposure garnered from song placements in ads. Some musicians no longer see partnerships with big corporations as "selling out," but rather a way of making a living. The rise of product and brand placement in music (Ferguson and Burkhalter 2015) supports this notion. Along with a combination of other factors, musicians use their sound to reach gatekeepers and achieve scale, measured largely by digital streams and ticket sales (Krueger 2019). Thus, it seems inevitable that musicians pursuing superstardom or even a viable

career in the music industry will be faced with adapting their sound to the tastes of cultural gatekeepers and consumers.

This study seeks to uncover how musicians adapt their sound to negotiate with gatekeepers and by what process. Based on the literature addressing sound in marketing, cultural gatekeepers, the music industry, and musicians, this study will explore the following research question: *how do musicians think about, define, and manage the selling of their sound?* This study will reorient and shed light upon cultural understandings of sound from the musicians' perspective.

## CHAPTER 3: METHOD

This study employed the qualitative method of interpretative phenomenology analysis (IPA). The theoretical position of IPA is to explore the personal lived experience of participants through their interpretation of that personal experience (Smith 2004).

Unlike traditional phenomenology, IPA allows the researcher to go beyond the lived experience of participants by using their own experience to inform inductive analysis (Smith 2004). As Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009, 80) state, “the end result is always an account of how the analyst thinks the participant is thinking.” My experience as a professional musician enriched my analysis of the data by providing context for interpretation where needed.

According to Husserl (cited by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009, 13), IPA allows us to investigate “our taken-for-granted ways of living in the familiar, everyday world of objects.” Musicians translate their personal experience and the market’s demand into music, a familiar world object, that is evaluated by cultural gatekeepers and enjoyed, if not taken-for-granted by consumers. Musicians offer an intrinsic understanding of both the elusive creative experience and the business practice of selling their sound to gatekeepers. The artist’s understanding of these experiences is the central focus of this study. In the following section, the methodological approach for developing a novel understanding of musicians’ creative and business processes is discussed.

### **3.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

#### ***3.1.1 Research Outcomes***

This study’s aims fall in line with the following focus commonly set by IPA researchers: exploring people’s experiences and understandings of specific phenomena (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). This study seeks to provide an in-depth account of the creative and business

processes of musicians through the perspectives of musicians. IPA's idiographic, inductive, and interrogative nature (Smith 2004) are well-suited to the purpose of this study which is:

*To explore how musicians think about, define, and manage the selling of their sound.*

IPA's idiographic sensibility promotes a detailed, nuanced analysis of lived experience while offering an inductive and flexible research process (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). Rather than describing lived experience through a predefined theoretical lens, IPA is concerned with recounting a person's lived experience in his or her own terms (Bevan 2014; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). These characteristics allow musicians' own perceptions and understandings of selling sound to shine through in the research.

## **3.2 Participants and Interview Format**

### ***3.2.1 Participants***

The participants were 10 Canadian musicians ranging from 20 to 39 years of age who were purposively selected to have recent experience creating music professionally whether as solo artists or as part of a musical collective. The participant pool was homogenous in the sense of topic knowledge (e.g., thinking about, defining, and managing the selling of one's personal sound) but represented a variety of music genres. These included: neo-soul, alternative rock, island rock, hip hop, opera, multi-genre, heavy metal, country, electro-pop, and punk rock. To protect confidentiality, all names of people, places, organizations, and musical acts have been removed from quotes used in this document. Quotes from interviews are labeled using pseudonyms.

Participants occupied a wide range of musical roles. The participant pool included singers, rappers, DJs, bassists, guitarists, pianists, producers, and songwriters. Participants were from multiple different provinces in Canada, including Saskatchewan, Manitoba, British

Columbia, and Ontario. While the majority of participants were living in urban centres, one was from a rural community. To maintain confidentiality, specific details of participant location are not reported here, but a table of generalized participant demographics has been included (table 3.1).

Table 3.1 – *Participant Demographics*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender/Age</b>	<b>Genre</b>	<b>Time as Prof. Musician (years)</b>	<b>Role</b>
Rapahel	Male/24	Neo-soul	6	Bassist/songwriter
Mac	Male/32	Indie/Alt. Rock	15	Multiple
Phil	Male/42	Island rock	20	Singer/songwriter/guitarist
Kamaal	Male/29	Hip hop	10	Rapper
Flora	Female/26	Opera/classical	7	Vocalist
Mick	Male/29	Soul/funk/hip hop	13	DJ
Rubin	Male/34	Metal	20	Bassist/songwriter
Orville	Male/20	Country	5	Singer/Songwriter
Grace	Female/32	Electro-pop	17	Singer/songwriter
Joey	Male/39	Punk-rock	20	Singer/guitarist/bass

Career status varied between participants. Within the participant pool, there were musicians who were at the early stages of their careers, who were signed to record labels, who were coming back to the business after a hiatus, and some who had been working in the industry for decades. Where information about a participant’s career status is pertinent to the analysis of this study, it is included.

### **3.2.2 Selection and Recruitment.**

Participants were recruited through my own personal contacts and snowball sampling. Initial contact was made by phone or email. It was explained to potential participants that the study was recruiting musicians who had professional experience in the music industry across music genres. If a person met these criteria and expressed interest in being interviewed, they were sent a detailed recruitment letter (Appendix A) and consent form (Appendix B). To ensure



that each participant represented a different music genre, once a musician from a specific genre had been interviewed, musicians who performed that genre were no longer recruited. Each interview participant received a \$50 music store gift card honorarium in recognition of their time.

### ***3.2.3 Interview Format***

Semi-structured in-depth interviews with 10 individual musicians were conducted. In these interviews, participants were asked to describe their sound and relationships with consumers and gatekeepers. Interviews were conducted in person or over the telephone and lasted approximately one hour. A flexible but structured interview guide was used (Appendix C). The guide was reviewed after each interview and questions were adjusted as needed. The following paragraphs expand upon the interview format, approach, and questions asked.

Bevan's (2009) phenomenological approach was used to develop the interview structure and shape the questions asked. Bevan's (2009) approach calls for interview questions that address the following three domains: contextualization, apprehending the phenomenon, and clarifying the phenomenon. To begin the interview, participants were asked questions that aimed to elicit their lifeworld in natural attitude (Husserl 1970). That is, initial questions aimed to contextualize the interview by evoking the artist's consciousness of their lifeworld, including the objects, such as their sound, and experiences, such as navigating consumers and gatekeepers, within it (Bevan 2009). Some prompting questions were used to steer the interview toward the context of selling sound. For example, artists were asked if they felt a need to sell their sound. Follow-up questions were open-ended, such as "how do you do this?" or "when do you do this?" The intention of this mix of prompts and open-ended question was to set the context and then allow the artist's point-of-view to guide the rest interview. Participants also told us their age,

location, career history, and other details. This information was helpful in understanding certain contexts unique to specific artists.

To apprehend the phenomenon, Bevan (2009) suggests asking a mix of descriptive and structural questions to get both a broad and narrow picture of the phenomenon. Participants were asked to recall their experiences with consumers and gatekeepers. These questions directed the focus to specific experiences that pertained to the research scope. Questions included, “when do you try and gain acceptance from gatekeepers/consumers?” and “when do you try to go around gatekeepers/consumers?” Participants also were asked to recall, if they could, specific examples of times they tried to gain acceptance from or go around consumers and gatekeepers. Participants described their different strategies for navigating the commercial system and its multitude of players, including: consumers, digital streaming platforms, radio, social media, record labels, and promoters. To illuminate each participant’s unique narrative, structural follow-up questions were used to unpack their interpretation of the selling of sound.

Imaginative variation was used throughout the interview process to clarify the phenomenon (Bevan 2009) of sound selling. Specifically, imaginative variation served to clarify the interaction between an artist, their creative process, and gatekeepers. This involved varying elements of the participant’s experience during the interview to investigate and gain a deeper understanding of their creative and business processes. For example, some participants were asked if their creative process would change if gatekeepers did not exist or if they did not feel a need to sell their sound. These types of make-believe scenarios offered a clearer picture of how and why artists sell their sound. Variation questions were generated from and during the interview rather than predetermining these questions beforehand to avoid a biased interview format.

### 3.3 Coding and Analysis

Interview sessions were audio recorded then transcribed producing over 100 pages of text for analysis. As per Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), data analysis involves disassembling whole interviews into a set of parts to ultimately put them back together in another new whole. This process was informed by the following collection of IPA strategies by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009, 79):

- The close, line-by-line analysis of the experiential claims, concerns, and understandings of each participant.
- The identification of emergent patterns (i.e. themes) within this experiential material, emphasizing both convergence and divergence, commonality and nuance, usually first for single cases, and then subsequently across multiple cases.
- The development of a ‘dialogue’ between the researchers, their coded data, and their psychological knowledge, about what it might mean for participants to have these concerns, in this context, leading in turn to the development of a more interpretative account.
- The development of a structure, frame or gestalt which illustrates the relationships between themes.
- The organization of all of this material in a format which allows for analyzed data to be traced right through the process, from initial comments on the transcript, through initial clustering and thematic development, into the final structure of themes.
- The use of supervision, collaboration, or audit to help test and develop the coherence and plausibility of the interpretation.

- The development of a full narrative, evidenced by a detailed commentary on data extracts, which takes the reader through this interpretation, usually theme-by-theme, and is often supported by some form of visual guide (a simple structure, diagram or table).
- Reflection on one's own perception, conceptions and processes.

### ***3.3.1 Line-by-Line Analysis***

As per Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), the first step of data analysis involved immersion in the original data. This involved reading and re-reading the first interview transcript while making note of the most striking observations. The next phase included line-by-line analysis of the first transcript, making more thorough and exploratory comments as the text became more familiar. As suggested by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), comments were made on the language participants used to frame experience, potential themes, and questions for future interviews. This process produced a collection of convergent and divergent themes which were expanded as the process was repeated for the remaining interview transcripts.

### ***3.3.2 Emergent Themes***

Alongside line-by-line analysis, a Word document was used to record and compile emergent patterns as each transcript was analyzed. This served to keep the analysis organized and focused as comments for each transcript grew in number. It also facilitated an iterative approach making it easier to refine or expand categories in the document based on new discoveries. The original coding document contained headings related to the research question, such as: "defining sound;" "selling sound;" and "gatekeepers." Line-by-line analysis served to clarify the essence of what participant narratives and capture emergent themes in the data. As new themes began to emerge throughout the analysis, they were added to the coding document. Each heading contained several subheadings with relevant quotes from the participant(s). This

process aided in building a strong foundation for the next stage of analysis: building themes across interviews.

Once each transcript had been individually analyzed and a list of emergent themes with supporting quotes had been constructed, I was tasked with transforming over 50 pages of coded data into a compelling narrative of how musicians sell their sound. This required constructing themes across interviews. The initial coding document contained basic connections between interviews as it had been updated after each interview was analyzed; however there were deeper connections to be made. This involved refining, expanding, and collapsing themes to paint a clearer picture of the participants' individual and collective experience. As per Smith, Larkin, and Flowers (2009), themes were connected across interviews using the following three techniques:

1. *Abstraction* was used in the analysis to pair similar emergent themes together into overarching themes. This served to streamline the data by removing duplicate themes and provided a foundation of super-ordinate themes, which were further teased out in later steps. For example, passages in which participants described their sound as unique were listed under the super-ordinate theme of “uniqueness” and then further sorted by the strategies artists use to achieve uniqueness.
2. *Contextualization* of initial themes involved examining the context or narrative elements shared between themes and grouping interview passages accordingly. Through abstraction, uniqueness was initially listed under how artists “define sound.” However, many participants spoke about uniqueness in the context of the creative process, specifically referring to achieving uniqueness as one of their sonic goals. The classification of uniqueness as a sonic goal spawned the super-ordinate classification of

“goal of sound” containing “uniqueness,” “popularity,” and “enjoyment” as subthemes. Contextualization was a significant step in the analysis given the prevalence of context-related themes in the data (e.g., the differences between creating sound in individual and collaborative contexts).

3. *Subsumption*, the method in which an emergent theme takes on the role of a super-ordinate theme and brings together a series of clearly-related other themes, produced new layers of interpretation of the data. In an earlier iteration of the coding document, there were several fluidity-related themes (e.g., fluidity of music taste, genre and creative purpose) scattered throughout. Using *subsumption*, these themes were consolidated, creating two overarching fluidity-related themes: “fluidity of the creative process” and “fluidity of sound goals.” This method served to produce an organization of super-ordinate themes and subthemes which closely resembled the final framework.

### ***3.3.3 Framework Development***

As analysis reached completion, a flow diagram was created to illustrate the relationships between emergent themes. This diagram helped to tease out any unclear relationships and illuminate side issue concepts that were removed. More importantly, it served as visual representation of the gestalt that had emerged from the analytical process. The final diagram showed the following two super-ordinate themes: “defining sound” and “goal of sound.” In the following section, these themes are presented in detail and evidenced by direct quotes from participants throughout.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The following diagram visually summarizes this study's findings, including how artists define and craft their sound, their overarching sound goals, and the gatekeepers that grant artists access to popularity.

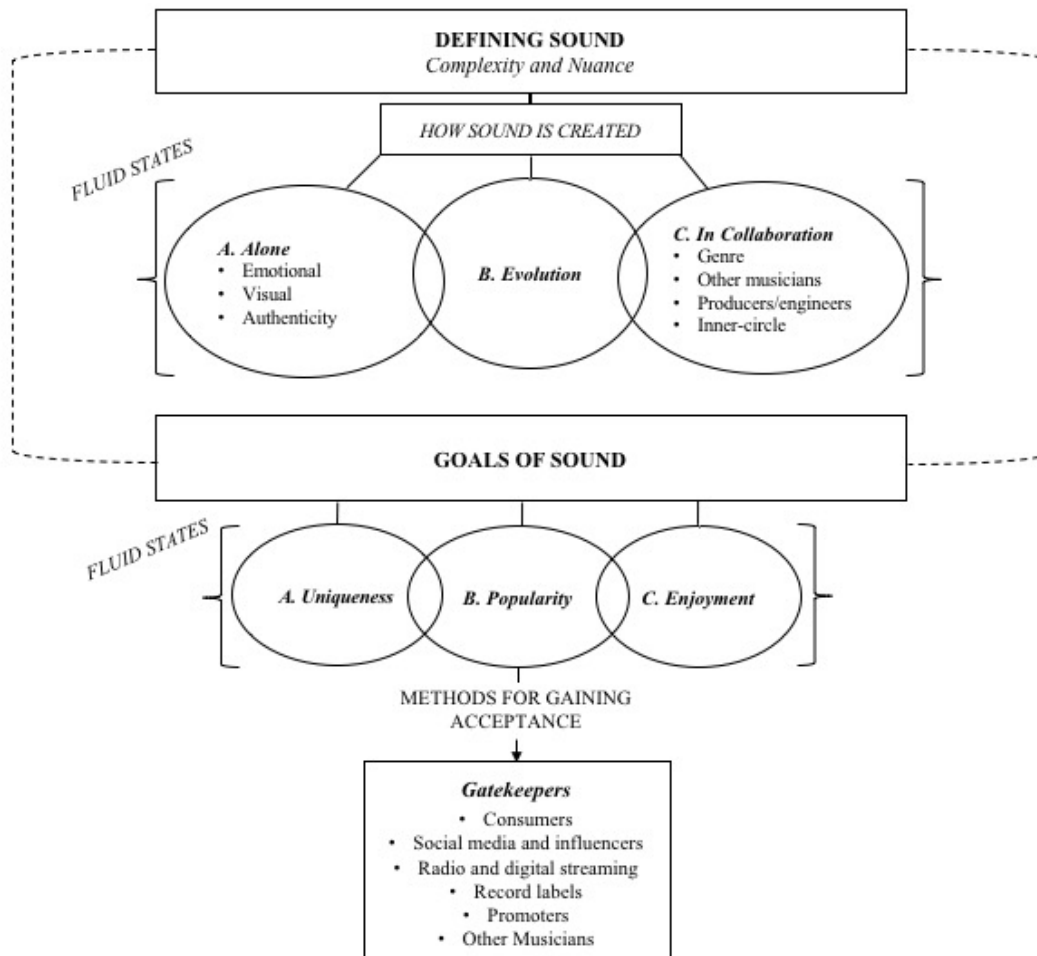


Figure 4.1 – Framework of Musicians Defining Sound and Goals of Sound

### 4a. Defining Sound

Artists describe their sound with complexity and depth. An artist's affection and care for what they do is palpable when they talk about their music. They use a colourful spectrum of words to paint how it sounds. As Grace and Kamaal explain:

Currently, I have been making dance music, like I said, disco-inspired/80's inspired kind of stuff. Kind of rock, pop, indie, disco, dance, electro, synth, It's kind of a mash-up of various genres. Electro-pop is kind of the easiest more concise way of [explaining] where I'm currently at. (Grace)

I've been listening to a lot of South African house and afro-electronic lately and lots of afro beat. I have this one song... there's a bit of dancehall elements in the song and then that's mixed with some boom-bap hip hop, but then the chorus is very melodic, but I'm singing with an African kinda Patois melody. I love that fusion of sound. (Kamaal)

Artists think about their sound in a way that is incredibly nuanced. An artist's sound develops over time with small subtle changes that may be undetectable to the listener's ear. Yet, the artist knows exactly where these changes have occurred and how to articulate the resulting sound. As Phil explains:

It started off more of just kind of like a reggae rock like a funky reggae rock thing... which is still what it is at its core, but it's so much more, too. I mean our guitarist has almost a jazz background, too, and blues, right? And our drummer is into electronic music and he's a DJ as well so he incorporates a lot of cool electronica type sounds into the album, just making it really modern and just kinda making it fat-sounding.

The way an artist describes their sound is incredibly specific to them, even while comparing themselves to other artists. Raphael describes his sound compared to another artist as follows:

Right now in terms of playing, I would say the biggest influence is a bass player called Jacko Pectorious. I was playing at an open mic and this guy came up to me and said "you sound like Jacko" and I'm like "who's Jacko? Is he local?" So, I wrote him down in my phone and I took a listen and it sounded like me playing but 15 years in the future of me just consistently playing bass for ten hours. This guy is so good. He does a lot of the same chops. I guess I do a lot of the same chops as he does.

Artists discuss their individual sound in rich detail and colour that is layered with unique nuances. This nuanced way of thinking carries over into how artists think about the creative process.



#### ***4a.1 How Sound is Created***

**4a.1.1 Alone.** Artists create their nuanced and individual sound in two primary ways: (a) by themselves and (b) in collaboration. The context in which an artist writes music influences their creative process. Creating alone does not necessarily mean that the artist is physically by themselves, but that they are approaching song writing from an entirely personal place. In this context, an artist uses emotions, visual imagination, and authenticity to guide the creative process. As Raphael explains:

A big influence on music is the way I process and deal with emotions and trying to explain that is like trying to explain colour to a blind person. It's no way I could describe that. It's just very emotional and emotionally-driven.

Artists also use emotions specific to the music to guide their process, imagining how they want the song to make them feel. As Mac explains:

I have an affinity to making catchy, pop-y, hook-y music because that's how I kind of unintentionally gauge how much I am really into another artist's music.... Can I play this? Do I want to play this on repeat?

Raphael and Mac's statements illustrate how their song writing process is augmented when they tap into their emotions toward music both as the creator and as the listener.

Visual imagination also fuels the song writing process. Songwriters visualize the imaginary world their sound lives within during the creative process. On this, Mac:

When I was writing, I remember seeing a Rolling Stones video that came out in the 90's or something when they were at this sleaze ball lounge and they're in this smoky strip club and the music's really creepy. I remember it feeling like the song had that same vibe as the room that they were in. I could see my song fitting over that video of these old guys sitting in this like weird strip club for a while.

Creating music independently produces a more personal sound; one filled with an artist's own emotional expression and visual imagination. As Mac states:

I guess the most personal [sound] would be the solo music that I write and record myself.

Introspective song writing and production helps artists create a more authentic sound. That is, being sincere, honest and true to oneself (Shippers, 2006). By drawing from their own unique experiences during the creative process, artists produce authenticity in their music. Having an authentic sound is important to artists and music listeners. On this, Grace remarked:

I'm trying to find comfort in the idea that people gravitate to authenticity and people gravitate to you and your art when they feel it's real and when you are being real.

While authenticity is valued by artists and listeners, it can be challenging for artists to be true to themselves at all times. For example, sometimes it feels easier to put on a façade instead of being authentic at the cost of alienating oneself from the public. As Grace explains:

I think it's a process and I think it takes time, and I think it takes self-awareness to understand that you're not always going to be on and it's not always going to be great and it's not always going to feel natural.

When making music independently, artists employ emotional expression and visual imagination to produce authenticity in their sound. However, artists cannot just create sound by themselves; the nature of the industry requires them to collaborate.

**4a.1.2 In collaboration.** In addition to making music individually, artists collaborate during the creative process. They open up their sound to an array of influences such as: music genre, other musicians, producers, engineers, and their inner circle. On the broadest level of collaboration, artists collaborate with established music genres. As Raphael explains:

Right now [my sound is] a neo-soul kind of neo-jazz sound.

Artists cater their sound to reflect a specific genre to make their sound more marketable. As Orville states:

Genre is definitely something that's used on the marketing side and that's really the only reason it exists.

So that the content is easier to market to the public.

Genre isn't always singular in the sounds of artists. In fact, most of the participants indicated that they perform more than one genre. In some cases, artists stated that they intentionally

differentiate the sound of certain projects to fit into specific music genres. The result is a collection of different sounds for each genre the artist performs. In Mac's words:

I have all these different bands and aliases and outlets for all the different main areas of music that I write. So, from dance music to grunge rock to surf music to new wave music. You know, whatever it is... even like small doses of comedy.

Genre is an industry construct that artists use to market their sound not only to the public, but to potential collaborators. Categorizing different projects by genre is likely to make it easier for artists to match their sound to that of future collaborators.

A key form of collaboration is when artists work with other artists during the creative process. This varies on a spectrum of how direct the influence of other musicians is on the artist's sound. For example, channeling one's musical heroes during the song writing process is an indirect influence, while working with musicians in the recording studio is direct. Indirectly, an artist's sound is the collaborative effort of the artist with the artists they grew up listening to.

As Raphael explains:

I grew up listening to neo-soul music. My mom used to listen to neo-soul music: D'Angelo, Erykah Badu, pretty much all The Soulquarians, all the R&B like Brandy, Ashanti, Aliyah... all that stuff. So I've always had a deep love for urban music... Artists like The Soulquarians, D'Angelo, Erykah Badu, Roy Hargrove are a huge influence.

While under the influence of other musicians, it is not the artist's intention to be a copycat.

Instead, artists take the influence and use it to motivate their creative process. On this, Kamaal and Mick:

I think DJ'ing made me into a better writer cuz now I'll hear things and go 'man that's cool. How can I do that but do it for me?' Not copy, but how can I use this influence to actually influence what I'm about to write? (Kamaal)

Listening to other DJ's is another good way to broaden my taste. The people that I would really like to listen to... I'll kinda hear what those people are playing and then the goal outta that is to find new music that I like and then can work it into my style and not just rip off how they're doing it. It's easy for any DJ to just play the same playlist. Part of the creative part and the whole fun of it and the whole point of it is putting your own twist on it. (Mick)

While an artist's musical influences show how artists draw inspiration from other musicians unilaterally, artists also collaborate with each other collectively. By collaborating this way, each artist involved plays a direct role in shaping the sound. The final result is layered with different musical influences and industry experiences of collaborators colliding and forming new sounds during the creative process. On this, Phil:

The current guitar player... He's in his early 20's and just full of energy and positivity and just really gung-ho cuz this is all he's wanted to do is just be in a band, ya know? He's not jaded yet, ya know? He's bright-eyed which I love because it's a nice boost of energy into the band and it just freshened things up. He's been doing such a great job of incorporating his own style of play which is almost a John Mayer style of guitar, but still sticking within the sound of the band and emulating as best as he can...He's been able to meld all those things together into a new album. It's great cuz it still sounds like us but it also adds something new as well.

Producers and sound engineers play an influential role in the creative process. Digital platforms have made producer-artist collaboration quite disconnected and anonymous; producers upload their instrumental arrangements to large online databases for artists to pick from (Eggertsen 2019). However, the artist-producer duo can be much more interactive and dynamic. As Kamaal explains:

I work with different producers and the way I work with producers is they're always hands on. So, if they're not in [my city] which sometimes they're not, I'll Facetime them and we'll go through the song bar-by-bar until we come up with an idea. So their vision's always involved as well. It's not just my ideas, you know what I mean?

Sound engineers also help to shape the sound of the artists they work with. Artists who wish to achieve a professional-sounding recording may work with a sound engineer to mix and master their recordings. Sound engineering is a complex and nuanced task that in some cases, can be more important to the sound than the song writing. According to Rubin:

I think if it sonically sounds better and it's not a well-written song, but it sounds better than a well-written song that is not sonically as pleasing, the production will win out in the end.

Sometimes a sound engineer's influence goes beyond overseeing sound quality. On this, Kamaal:

I work with an engineer too and he's a musician. He's been an engineer for so many years, so he also understands sound and melody and stuff like that so sometimes he's just like 'I think it should be like this' and I'll be like 'gah, I think you're right, I'm just gonna have to tell so and so that we gotta change it' and it's usually the right call.

External funders can influence an artist's song writing process and sound. Some artists collaborate with organizations to write original music or perform for the organization's audience. This type of collaboration can require the artist to mold their sound to the client's guidelines. As Orville explains:

There are certain themes that I need to make sure that I hit within the song so that it's relevant to the charity and their campaign.

Another participant, Mick, alters the style of music he plays depending on the venue that hires him. As Mick states:

It's still a job technically, so I have to be able to meet certain gig requirements to fit that sound cuz I'm not gonna play 70's rock at a top 40 bar all night. So, you have to still be able to make it work.

An artist's inner circle can also influence their sound. Artists may seek out the opinions of those they respect before they release a song or project. The feedback an artist's inner circle provides may lead to changes in the music. As Grace explains:

It's good to get your friends feedback and not be afraid to share the song with a couple of people or a handful of people, even if you're not friends with them... or someone you just respect. If you want some honest feedback, I think it's helpful to. I haven't done this as much as I would like to and I want to do it more, but yeah just kind of like 'hey this is my unreleased song, what do you think? Do you have any feedback, or constructive criticism? I think that's a good thing too.

An artist's sound is defined in complex detail by the artist and is shaped by their creative process. During the creative process, artists craft their sound in two ways: individually, and in collaboration. When creating individually, an artist's emotions, visual imagination, and authenticity are influential to their sound. In collaboration, artists open up their sound to outside influences, such as: music genre, other musicians, producers, engineers, and their inner-circle. An artist's sound and creative setting are not static states, rather both are continuously evolving and flowing.

#### **4a.2 Evolution**

An artist's creative process and sound evolve over time. Time can produce physical changes that influence an artist's sound. For opera singer Flora, the transformation of her voice as she gets older and her ability to adapt to these changes are important to her evolution as an artist. As Flora explains:

My voice is going to continue to change for my whole life, but specifically I'm looking to get my full voice, as they kinda talk about it, when I'm probably in my mid-30's based on my voice type. So some of it is just a waiting game and making sure that I'm learning how to do things really well, but the goal is for it to continue to change and to get bigger and as I said, to make the things that are special about my voice continue to come out and to possibly do it even more so.

Sonic evolution also occurs as an artist grows emotionally. Maturity can influence how flexible or co-operative an artist is when working with others. This influences their creative decisions and thus, their sound. On this, Rubin:

I've tried to let go of the locked-in-a-box theory aspect and tried to be open to what sounds good. Maybe just throw in a weird chord and if it doesn't make sense, try to just flow with it. I've always tried to make things make sense theory-wise. I wouldn't call it OCD, but it's just a comfort thing, you know? So yeah, definitely changed, definitely try to just go with the flow of what sounds good, but I'm a lot more open-minded to outside influence. If I'm co-writing with people or co-producing, I'm a lot more laid back than I used to be for sure.

Like many of us, artists' interests and music taste change over the course of their lives. As an artist's taste changes, so does their sound. From funk to reggae and cover bands to surf rock, participants commonly cited genre when describing how their sound has evolved over their careers. As Grace and Mac explain:

I think just from growing as a person. Our style and our tastes just naturally evolve. I think the more we learn and the more we are exposed to different sounds and different people and different life experiences...

I think that my music taste and sound has evolved just due to growing as a human and maturing I guess I would say. (Grace)

I guess at different phases where certain types of music really resonate with me... I'll kinda chew through that until something different comes at me where I'm like 'oh, now I like this new genre' or 'now I'm listening to this old music that I've never heard before and this old genre is really interesting to me. (Mac)

Sometimes the evolution of an artist's sound can be attributed to changing trends in music. In this sense, popular music influences artists' tastes and creative choices. As Phil states:

Our sound is just becoming more modern.

Experience causes an artist's sound to evolve. As artists become more experienced and skillful musicians, they gain more freedom in their creative process. According to Flora:

As technique improves, my artistic capacity improves as well and I have access to more colours and I can make bigger choices, different choices because I can actually do different things.

The more experience an artist has, the more they feel prepared to step out of their comfort zone and try new things. This triggers sonic evolution. As Kamaal states:

With the group just cuz we've been doing it longer than I've been doing it with my solo music, I feel like we've all just become better performers and rappers...I think we focus now more on our raps and how to structure our songs to get the most bang. When we were younger we were just kinda writing standard 4x4 bars and now it's like 'how can we play with this section? How can we make this bridge really cool? How can we make every piece to the song as cool as possible?'

An artist's career goals drive their creative decisions. Thus, as their goals change, their sound evolves. On this, Mac:

If you're looking at my music career, my goals shifted over the years which affected that a lot. When I was 16, my goals were to play the drums in a band that wrote some of their songs and played some covers and got gigs at bars. It didn't even really matter if anyone showed up. You're not gonna write the next world-shattering hit record with that mentality in this day and age. Then over time it became... 'I just wanna play drums to a high level.' That affected the bands that I was playing in, adding to the sound because I grew up mainly just playing drums and it wasn't till' later on that I started other instruments and singing. Once I started actually singing and writing songs, the sound was different and in a marketing sense, I guess it was just growing into... like now I would consider myself a songwriter where I'm writing and crafting and recording and generally doing 90% of what you hear on the finished product of the song and then performing it with a band or writing with people.

Trying new instruments is intertwined with the evolution of an artist's goals and sound. In some situations, artists have a specific sound-related goal that requires them to learn new instruments.

In Orville's words:

[We were] looking for a different sound and a different experience so we started working with auxiliary instruments and percussion and what not.

Orville's sonic evolution was intentional. In contrast, instrument proficiency can coincidentally influence the genres an artist discovers and pursues. According to Raphael:

We went from the indie stuff to implementing more real instruments into my sound. Then I bought a bass. Okay, yeah, this is what I wanna do. I wanna make music for my bass. So, that's when I started the neo-soul stuff. I can definitely make some music for my bass, but also make that into something I can explore



creatively and feel fulfilled in. Which is the neo-soul angle. That's why I started it. I picked up the bass because nobody else had the proficiency to. They were beginner guitar players.

Many participants were comfortable with their sound evolving and in some cases, they were in the process of plotting their next sonic shift. As Grace states:

[My sound] is going to continue to evolve. I definitely want to incorporate elements from my background which is Ethiopian and I'm kind of looking into exploring and getting in touch with my roots and incorporating different instrumentation and sounds and elements from traditional Ethiopian music. That's kind of on my future goals list.

Evolution is part of the creative process for musicians. Mac articulates his awareness of this. He states:

I guess that's the evolution of sound that they talk about, but that's what I find interesting about it. I think if I was just making music that sounded the same as the last stuff I did, I'd feel like that was... I wouldn't get that excited about it.

Creativity and evolution go hand-in-hand. When an artist ceases to evolve, their creativity can dwindle and vice versa. As Joey, a participant who has recently been less active as a musician states:

I don't think I'm very flexible at all. I think I want to be, but I just don't have the time or the yearning to learn to be a better musician. I would say I'm pretty good at what I can do and I just sort of stick with that if duty calls... I don't listen to any punk-rock right now at all by choice and I haven't been inspired by any current musicians or anything.

Thus, when sonic evolution stops, so does creativity.

#### **4a.3 Fluidity of the Creative Process**

An artist's sound reflects a blend of situations that transform ideas into songs and songs into albums. What we hear as an audience is the result of personal and external influences coming together in harmony. While there are two possible contexts for how an artist's sound is crafted (e.g., alone or in collaboration), these sides are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they are

fluid states. That is, sometimes artists create alone, sometimes they create with others, and sometimes they do both. As Orville states:

It's more a personal thing. The way my brain works... the creative side of things. Because I'm a fan of multiple different genres and sounds. I enjoy creating in the different spaces rather than tying myself to just one.

The fluidity of the creative process is not random; sometimes it is dictated by the purpose of the musical project. As Mac states, he strives to keep his music authentic, but:

[That depends] on which project it is [because] they all kinda have their own constraints that they exist within.

Artists strive for authenticity within constraints, but authenticity is not purely individual or strictly bound to personal sound. Depending on the end goal, artists are able adjust how personal or how collaborative they are within the creative process. On writing a song for an external funder, Orville states:

I do still let the creative process happen on its own, but there can be times where I need to fit the marketing in there before hand.

Orville is describing how he moves his personal process in a more collaborative direction. On the other side, artists who are used to collaborative song writing can flow to a more personal creative space if need be. For example, Kamaal describes the fluidity of his creative process since becoming a solo artist:

I'm still trying to be in the moment and I still feel like a new artist with this project. This is the first time I have ever been a solo artist, so it's very different to create on your own. It's still obviously a collaborative project; I still work with other artists, but I call the shots and it's my own thing. For me, it's kind of taking more time to figure it out, but it's also like rolling with it, but also trying to be intentional. I think I'm just scratching the surface when it comes to where the sound is going, but I do have a bit of a vision in my mind and in my heart about it but I don't know exactly what it is going to sound like.

Trust can also influence how flexible an artist is within the creative process. If an artist trusts their collaborators, they are more likely to compromise the personal components of their process.

On this, Rubin:

I'll give everything a shot for the most part. Unless it's completely out there and I think it's way off the end-goal, but I'm always open to anything. I think it depends on who I'm writing with. If it's someone new, I'll probably stick to my guns a little more. If it's someone I respect and I know they have an end in sight, then I'll cater to their needs in that respect.

Changes in an artist's personality, capabilities, career goals, and the experience of physical growth cause an artist's sound to evolve over time. Sonic evolution is tied to an artist's creative ambitions and thus, the advancement of their career. Just as an artist's sound is not static, their creative process continuously flows between independent and collaborative settings. The fluidity of the creative process is not random, rather it is influenced by trust and the musical project's purpose or goals. Similarly, an artist's sound goals influence their creative process and how they define their sound.

#### **4b. Goal of Sound**

Artists have three overarching goals in mind while creating their sound: uniqueness, popularity, and enjoyment. This section discusses the goal of uniqueness and how artists achieve this in their music; the goal of popularity and how artists navigate industry gatekeepers to gain popularity; and finally, the goal of enjoyment and the role joy plays in artists' careers.

##### ***4b.1 Uniqueness***

Having a unique sound is important to artists. As Flora explains:

The goal is to have a sound that's uniquely mine. All the things that make my voice unique, I want to make it more of those things.

Artists harness the qualities that make their sound uniquely theirs for several reasons. For some artists, having a unique sound is a personal preference. As Mac states:

I always like trying the things that people have either abandoned or haven't tried or haven't been tried enough or I just like exploring things that are unique.

Having a unique sound also makes artists stand out amongst their peers. According to Mac:

It's way easier to stand out making something authentic than it is trying to stand out trying to replicate something that one time would have been authentic to somebody else.

Artists strive toward uniqueness to become industry trailblazers in order to gain a competitive edge over their peers. As Phil explains:

I think if you're in any band, you always wanna be the band that sort of is the pioneer of your own sound and have other people copy you instead of the other way around.

Having a unique sound that stands out in the industry can afford artists important career opportunities. According to Flora:

In terms of wanting someone to choose you over someone else that they're hiring, you wanna sound specifically like yourself and you don't necessarily want to sound like someone else because then why would they choose you over that other person?

Some artists strive toward uniqueness in order to attract a specific demographic of niche music listeners. As Mac illustrates:

There's a good chunk of [consumers] that just wanna hear something new and it almost doesn't even matter what it is or how it's made or what it means. If it's something they've never heard before that kinda does it for them.

Artists actively pursue uniqueness. Experimentation is one way artists produce a unique sound.

As Mac suggests:

Trying to do things even the wrong way sometimes to see what you can learn from it. Find those things that maybe popular society or the idea of a popular method might not have found yet... might not be commonly using.

Sometimes accidents produce pleasantly surprising results. According to Raphael:

If I wanna do something I'm gonna. I'll either end up doing it or I'll fail spectacularly to the point where I'd be like 'oh, that's kinda cool.

Artists experiment with musical elements to make their sound more unique. On his sonic experimentation, Mick describes:

Changing the structure of a song or using parts of what would be on a 12-inch single and piecing them together differently. Things that can add somewhat of an element of surprise to both me and the dancefloor.

Blending genres in unexpected ways is another strategy for achieving uniqueness. As

Mac states:

I'm trying to put the tones and the genres and the styles of sound and the combination of all my influences together in a way that I think is unique and that it stands out in some way.

Genre blending occurs outside of alternative music genres, pop artists also participate in genre fluidity. According to Grace:

Given that the sound I'm in is rooted in pop music, that allows for a lot of experimentation, a lot of flexibility. It can be pop music with incorporating different elements and having different inspirations. I definitely think it's flexible given that it's pop.

In Grace's words, genre-fluid has become a "trendy descriptor these days." As more and more artists turn to genre fluidity to differentiate their sound, some artists are focusing on a purer more distilled sound to stand out. On this, Kamaal:

There's always a quintessential song that's not really intersectional. It's just straight up rock or rap. I remember listening to that TV on the Radio album back in the day and there's this song 'Wolf Like Me' and that track just stood out from all the other songs.

For some artists, creating a unique sound is a natural process. As Orville states:

It just kind of happens naturally that this becomes my sound because this is kinda the general sonic feel that happens when I create my songs.

Trusting your sound enough to let it flow naturally requires confidence. As Raphael explains:

I just don't care about people's opinions enough regarding my music cuz I know that my music's good. I come at it with a level of confidence... what I put out, what I know people are gonna like.

Artists gain confidence through practice and experience. According to Mac:

Being proficient at your instrument is really one of the best ways to really sell your sound. Sounding exceptional over other folks.

When artists do not trust themselves or lack confidence, achieving uniqueness can be a difficult process. Self-doubt can limit artists when it comes to experimenting with their sound and accepting the qualities that make their sound unique. To Grace, self-doubt is:

That little voice in your head... [it] is like 'that's f\*cking stupid', or [judges] you, and you're like 'but this is me and this what I care about...' [It is] self-limiting or self-centring you to what potentially could happen or some potential reaction.

Sometimes artists feel insecure even when they are successful. According to Phil:

Good things start happening... you feel like you don't deserve it.

For the most part, insecurity is something artists try and work through. As Grace states:

Reactions will exist. It shouldn't stop us from doing what we generally feel or care or want to do. I think that's an ongoing process that we a lot of us have to work through.

Friends and family can be important to re-building an artist's self-confidence. As Phil explains:

Sometimes I have to have friends tell me, 'you know what? You deserve this, so don't feel like you don't because you're working for it.

Personal preference and career growth are the two overarching reasons artists strive toward uniqueness. Artists achieve a unique sound by experimenting with the creative process and musical elements, such as, song structure and genre. Uniqueness can also be achieved by allowing one's sound come together naturally, rather than forcing uniqueness. This requires a certain level of confidence charged by experience and practice, and is hindered by self-doubt and insecurity.

## ***4b.2 Popularity***

In addition to being unique, artists want their sound to be popular. There is a myriad of layers when it comes to how artists think about and achieve popularity each linked to a gatekeeper. On their path to popularity, artists encounter an array of gatekeepers, such as: consumers, social media, record labels, agents, radio, and digital streaming platforms. These gatekeepers ultimately decide whether or not an artist can ascend into the mainstream. The following section discusses how artists achieve popularity by navigating through different types of gatekeepers, including consumers, social media, radio and digital streaming platforms, record labels, promoters, and other musicians.

**4b.2.1 Consumers.** Fundamentally, artists need consumers to listen to their music for it to be popular. Thus, to gain popularity, artists must gain acceptance from music consumers. Consumers are often the first gatekeeper artists need to gain acceptance from. Artists seek acceptance from consumers so that they can afford to keep making music. Thus, some level of popularity is required just to keep the artist's career afloat. The required sales needed to support an artist's music career depends on the scale at which an artist is creating and putting out music. According to Mac:

[It] scales [depending] on what you're trying to do and what you're comfortable with putting into it and your ambitions. If you want to keep doing it, there's just the basic mathematic that somewhere you have to pay for that... To simply keep creating music, you need to be putting enough money into it to cover equipment costs even if it is cheaper than it used to be and even if you're doing it at home on your own. Even if it's down to just basic costs of paying to have it posted online on Spotify or something, like a digital distributor. Even if it's just that \$25 a year or \$60 a year.

The amount of time an artist can afford to dedicate to their music is an important issue. Ideally, artists would be able to focus on their music careers without having to work other jobs.

Consumers allow artists to do this. On this, Mac:

It would be nice to have the music be able to pay for itself at least and be able to pay you enough for your time that you put into it so that you're not having to spend your time working at other places to have the money to put into it...There's always a goal to sell music because then you can dedicate more time to it and you can also simply just create more and you hope it has a snowball effect at some point.

Consumers can grant artists entry into the upper echelons of the music industry and other gatekeepers. As Kamaal explains:

If you're selling out a show and you're an artist that's just doing it themselves, then the power that your consumers are giving you, that's gonna allow you to gain the attention, if you're even interested at the point, of these labels and these gatekeepers.

A large audience can also give artists opportunities peripheral to the industry. As Orville states:

Gaining more fans is going to gain you more attention from the industry and collaboration opportunities with other companies that are even outside the music industry.

Consumers play a major role in how artists navigate the music industry. Many artists see consumers as the most important gatekeeper. As Orville explains:

There isn't really many times that I try to go around consumers because at the end of the day, I guess going back to the gatekeeper thing, they really are the gatekeeper at the end of the day because there isn't going to be any success without them buying into it at some point.

Other types of consumers exist beyond an artist's immediate audience of music listeners and concert-goers. As Orville and Flora state, they see corporate funders as their consumers:

You are creating a product and a brand that is open to collaboration opportunities and so you always wanna keep in mind the opportunity of partnering with companies or in my case, a non-profit because if they're a company that happens to find your website or your music and looks into you a bit more and goes his brand



aligns with our branding maybe there's another opportunity for partnership. You're kinda selling your product...Not even directly to the consumer, but also to collaboration opportunities. (Orville)

So [the opera company]'s biggest priority is to convince donors that something's worthwhile. So it's this very funny thing that it's your job to look good for opera companies so that they can sell you to a donor and the consumer the actual person that is listening to the music doesn't actually factor into the equation at all. In fact, is sometimes not even thought of. (Flora)

**4b.2.1.1 Reaching an Audience.** Artists need to reach some level of popularity in order to maintain and grow their careers, but how do they reach their audience and gain new fans? Once a musical project is complete, there are a number of ways artists get their sound into the ears of consumers. Artists use conventional methods of music promotion, such as live performances and radio play, to sell their sound to consumers. Joey and Orville explain:

When you're in your primordial stages as a band, you probably suck pretty bad. So you want audiences and you have to draw people out at some point. So whether it's getting friends and family out to start and then going from there and then getting a word of mouth when you just play lots. The key is just to play as much as you can. That way you can get a word of mouth going. (Joey)

At a very fundamental level as an independent artist, you're a glorified salesman in a way. So yeah, you're always trying to sell it in a way that you're gonna talk it up, you're gonna have sales pitches eventually like if you're doing a radio interview, talking about your latest single. When you're talking about it, your main objective is to get somebody listening to go and look it up on Spotify or something and go 'that sounds like something I want to listen to.' (Orville)

Artists use touring as a means of not only reaching the fans that buy tickets to their shows, but also to make new fans along the way. As Kamaal states:

For me you know, on trips... if I meet someone cool, I want them to hear my music.

Social media is a popular tool for artists to reach and grow their audience. For a reasonable fee, artists can reach listeners across the world. As Grace describes:

No one can deny that social media has had a positive effect on audience reach and exposure for artists.

Artists also use social media to flaunt their success to certain followers. As Flora explains:

Having to be like 'oh I'm singing here just so you know, this very fancy place has decided to fly me here so that I can sing for them.' That's a very important part of showing other people that you're doing things so that they'll hire you.

Social media also allows artists to reach their audience on a more personal level and garner loyal fans. As Orville explains:

Social media's a big one... I run my own social media accounts. One reason is fan connection. It's a lot easier to convince someone to buy something from you when they feel a connection. It's all about the connection with the fan because the better the connection, the more loyal they're gonna be and the more they're gonna want to support you.

Not everyone runs their own social media accounts. Reaching consumers effectively can become overwhelming for some artists. As Rubin states:

I'm bad at [selling my sound]. I'm an introvert by nature these days, so I'll let someone else do it...  
Someone who likes to work the room.

As artists become more popular or wish to take their careers to the next level, they often choose to build a team of managers, agents, and publicists to help them become popular with consumers.

As Rubin and Grace explain:

You have to have management, and you have to have smart people on your team that are gonna get you out there, make sure everything looks good. Right above the artist is management. I think good management is key these days cuz they are the ones who make all the contacts and sort of can get the favours pulled here and there. I think it's too much work for the artist to do it. At least if you wanna do it properly. Managers work in tandem with agents who try to get them tours. That's the agent's job. Beyond that, I've seen it work without a record label and I think it's leaning heavily in that favour these days. (Rubin)

I think having a publicist is really helpful and really important when you're releasing music, because you can release music but if nobody's hearing it or if you already have a smaller circle if you're just kind of emerging as an artist... It's hard to gain traction or it's hard to get a lot of listeners or feedback from it.

(Grace)

Some artists work with a record label that supplies them with an in-house team. On this,

Raphael:

I stress out a lot about back end stuff and I don't know how to reach out to distributors and get things signed on to websites that will help my artists get paid on time and properly and without me having to do it and e-transfer 20 people. Also they have artists for video and images and stuff that I can use at any time. If I have a release and need a cover art for this, they'll get right on that. So a lot of it's like back end stuff and I really just wanna focus on the music itself cuz I want the music to be the best that it can be without me having to worry about everything else.

For Raphael, the scale his music has reached makes it difficult for him to do it alone. As he explains:

That's why I work with a label and I would suggest artists don't work with a label unless you can't do it for yourself cuz then... In the long-run I'm making less money than I would if I was independent. Even at a fraction of the success that I'm at, I'd probably still be making more money if I wasn't with a label, cuz the label takes such a large cut of everything.

Raphael's statement reflects a perspective shared between most of the participants: record labels are not necessarily bad, but artists would rather be successful on their own than sign a record deal that compromises their artistic integrity. However, artists are open to working with labels that offer them a fair deal that suits their creative vision and helps them reach their audience. As Raphael explains:

I've hired [my record label] and I made this very apparent when I signed with them, that they're servicing me and I'm not working for them... You work for me and it's gonna be profitable for the both of us or I work alone and it's, you know... But that's the important thing about music, I don't wanna be screwed over. I've always been really careful with that, especially with signing with labels. It's been a rocky road sometimes, but these guys treat me well and they're not holding me back from doing anything that I want. I can make a polka album and they'd still be behind it which is cool.

Not every artist has access to their own team or a record label's. These support systems require a certain level of cash flow or popularity with consumers. Unless the artist can afford to hire a team with sources of income outside of music, they must gain acceptance from consumers to pay their team or gain acceptance from a record label.

**4b.2.1.2 Finding their Audience.** Once an artist has attained a certain level of exposure, they need to find out who their audience is. This knowledge helps artists better serve their listeners and increases their odds of gaining acceptance from consumers. As Kamaal explains:

If you're an artist who wants to live off making music, you should always be conscious of who's consuming your music and how they're consuming it. So, knowing your data, know your metrics, knowing how many people are listening to your music... Those are tangible things about your music that you can refer to. So, those are important.

Artist can keep tabs on who their consumers are, where they are from, and how they are listening via the analytics provided by online streaming platforms. As Grace and Kamaal explain:

First of all, you have to find your market, and I think it's helpful to have analytics, whether it's social media analytics or Google or Spotify or Apple Music... Every now and then I'll check it out and see who's listening to my music [and] in what country. (Grace)

I focus on who's listening to it. I'm always interested in my metrics on Spotify. You can check who's listening to it and where you're getting most of your streams and Soundcloud is good for that too. So, just [being] up on all that data. (Kamaal)

Once an artist knows who their audience is, they can connect and foster relationships with their listeners. As Grace states:

It's important to reach out to the people who actually care, and that's how you find out the people who care is [by] looking at your analytics and seeing what your demographic and audience is.... I guess it's finding those people and trying to connect with them.

**4b.2.1.3 Defining Sound for Consumers.** A key component of gaining popularity is making sure consumers understand the artist and their sound. This gives their sound a persona that consumers can latch on to. As Mick explains:

You need some sort of definition to your style, otherwise some people might just not know what you do. They need some sort of idea to even want to be interested... 'This is me and this is what I do and this is how I do it.'

Artists have different ways of communicating their sound to consumers. Artists use parameters set by the music industry, such as genre. As Orville explains:

Genre is definitely something that's used on the marketing side and that's really the only reason it exists... So that the content is easier to market to the public.

Choosing the right band or artist name is another way artists communicate their sound to consumers. As Phil recalls:

I knew that if I was gonna take it really seriously, I needed a better name. Not better, but a name that was a lot more suiting to the music, I suppose.

Visual cues also play a role in how artists package their sound for consumers. As Phil explains:

With a great image and branding and really good music, put that in a package and selling that to people makes it a little bit easier so they can latch onto it and have great visuals and merchandise, the band looking good, everything looks cohesive and making sense with your sound and music and putting your face to the name.

Artists also seek out credible sources to describe and review their sound for the public. Artists share these so-called write-ups with their audience. As Flora explains:

It's really, really frequent to see on someone's bio or on their website or something like that a quote from a newspaper or some other press being like 'described as having a clear and brilliant tone' or like 'her silvery soprano' or like you know that sort of thing... That is definitely selling sound.

Storytelling helps artists define their sound for consumers. By doing so, artists attach a relatable emotional layer to their music. On the art of storytelling, Orville states:

I'll use my latest single as an example. It's a story about the girl in the song is leaving to follow her dreams whatever that may be and instead of being heartbroken or mad or upset the man in the song is saying go follow your dreams and do your thing. I know that eventually when you make it you're going to come back and we'll be together anyways. It's kind of a 'if you love them, let them go' type theme. Other people that hear the song get a different interpretation of it so it's different for everybody.

Orville uses that story to promote his song. As he explains:

When I'm in an interview talking about the song, I have a little pitch that I've almost rehearsed that it's just really easy to rattle off, telling that story. It's not a traditional country song with heartbreak or even a traditional love song.

This is Orville's way of showing his audience what his sound is all about. He is an eclectic country artist pulling from modern music styles and his flip on the classic country love story communicates that to listeners. Having a cause that an audience can relate to is another way artists translate their sound to potential fans. As Joey states:

If there is a message or philosophy to your music, you can emphasize that in your live show which may help you grow an audience and get an emotional attachment to music and your sound.

**4b.2.1.4 *Appealing to a Mass Audience.*** Once an artist finds and connects with their audience, they may want to create a larger appetite for their music. Appealing to a mass audience involves creating a sound that is culturally relevant. As Joey points out:

Is there an appetite for what you're doing? You could be the best tubular bell player in the world but nobody's listening to it. It's impressive and you're talented but nobody cares.

Coming up with music that has mass appeal involves trying to gain acceptance from consumers during the creative process. As Grace describes:

When I write music, I definitely write with the intention of other people liking it. Obviously, it would be kind of foolish not to in the industry that we are [in].

Appealing to popular culture outside of the artist's own is another way artists seek out superstardom. As Phil explains:

There's a lot of worldly influences on this record because of what we've been doing the last couple years and it's just kind of a natural thing that happened and I think that's really has a lot to do with what might expand our fan base because the music is naturally expanding. It's got a more worldwide sound to it and so I think it could appeal to more people.

Popular music is popular because it makes people feel something they want to feel again.

Popular music can transcend the artist. As Rubin describes:

You hear something and before even knowing the colour of their skin you go 'I like it... I don't think that's [consumers] accepting you. I think that's you getting stuck in their heads without their permission.

Artists striving to appeal to the masses are strategic about their sound. They understand what it takes to make a popular song: to, as Mick suggests:

Make sure everybody's having a good time.

On making feel-good music, Grace:

When I create I want to make a song that I want to listen to again and again and again... I do think about whether other people are going to like it. I just want to feel it, if I feel it, then I hope I feel like that because I have a good ear and I have experience, I just feel that I have a good idea of what will resonate with other people to a certain extent.

To make it out of the up-and-coming cache of musicians, artists need to deliver a certain level professionalism and dedication to their craft. As Joey explains:

Can you sing on key? Then there's a lot of ancillary of being good. Are you on time? Are you reliable? Are you fit and sound to be a performer and take on the grueling work that you want to have ahead of you? There's a lot of good that is not just can I bring 1,000 people to a show? Yeah. Can you entertain them all consistently?

Artists seeking to go mainstream also need their sound to be on par with the quality of mainstream acts to remain popular with consumers. This level of quality can be achieved using a home studio. As Rubin points out:

You don't need a million-dollar studio to get quality sounds anymore. You can buy a home set-up for under three grand and put out Grammy-winning records. It's been done. It's been proven. That being said, with the recording side of things.

New more affordable recording technology makes creating a mainstream sound more accessible while simultaneously increasing the competition for artists. Thus, there is a lot of pressure on artists to make their records sound as close-to-perfect as possible. On this, Phil:

We've done everything in our power to make it sound the best we can make it sound. As far as it be our sound and sonically as good as anything else out there. Which is really important, you know, cuz in this day and age, anyone can record music out there and put music out and you can record a song and put music out in the same day, right? You wanna stand out that much more by having your song sound like the biggest artists in the world, right? Quality-wise.

Once artists have done everything in their power to reach their audience, translate their sound for consumers, and create a sound with mass-appeal, the rest is up to luck. As Raphael recalls:

I worked hard, but I feel like there are people who deserve it more than I do, but I can't change the way the world works. It just happens to me for some reason...That's what it attributes to my success and you can't explain luck. You can't force luck either.

Artists cannot predict what song will mark their big break with consumers. Popularity of a song can come down to chance. As Grace explains:

Sometimes you're like 'I don't f\*cking know if this is good.' We all have that. You just got to put it out to the world and see what happens. I've heard a lot of people talking about other projects or their own projects, 'oh we thought this song was going to be a huge hit, and then it ended up being this other song that we didn't think was that great. It ended up being the song that broke us or the song that people loved, or the song that went on to sell.' It's funny, we can have these intuitions or these gut feelings about certain songs but when it comes down to it you have no idea it's so unpredictable.



Consumers are one of the most important gatekeepers; for an artist to become popular, it is essential that consumers stream their music, attend their concerts, and follow them on social media. Artists use a multitude of strategies to: (a) reach consumers; (b) find their audience; (c) help consumers understand their sound; and (d) appeal to a mass audience. Sometimes artists hire a small team or sign recording contracts to make gaining the acceptance of consumers more manageable. While social media and affordable at-home studio equipment have made it easier for artists to build their popularity independently and have more control over their careers, luck plays an important role in how artists achieve mass popularity.

**4b.2.2 Social Media.** Big social media players, such as algorithms on YouTube and Instagram, and influencers on many platforms have simultaneously transformed how artists get popular and become an industry gatekeeper. In Mac's words:

You could kind of go around gatekeepers in the sense that you can feed your fan base through social media, but social media has an algorithm anyway, so it's kinda the same.

As Mac suggests, social media uses algorithms that propel certain artists to the top of users' feeds. In addition to these algorithms, social media influencers have the power to expose certain artists to their followers. On this, Kamaal and Rubin:

It's up to the kids and it's up to the people that are discerning listeners and people that pay attention to culture to decide what should get pushed through and what should get paid attention to... There's kids on the internet who have garnered such an audience by being cool kids in big cities and now have their own YouTube interviews. That's insane. (Kamaal)

Who are the gatekeepers? I guess the term these days would be influencers... If you get a tweet or an Instagram shout out from someone with a good amount of clout, then you're in the right category. (Rubin)

As Rubin suggests, gatekeeper influencers have a certain amount of clout. In Raphael's words:

Clout is success, especially in the music scene. Success and popularity, that's what clout would be.

A-list influencers have a large following with which they can share an artist's music and boost the artist's popularity. As Rubin explains:

I don't mean self-called influencers. I'm talkin' people who actually are... What's the metric these days? Is it Instagram followers? Twitter followers? It's strange because people love metrics. You need a metric to define how big someone is. Their net worth, their followers, etc., and I think, what is it? Spotify plays and Instagram followers?

By sharing an artist's music with their followers, the influencer gatekeeper creates a ripple effect.

According to Rubin:

Someone tweets something or follows you on Instagram and they go 'I'm following you because of this person.

The same can happen when an artist shares the same space as an influencer. In both instances, an influencer's clout is transferred to the artist. As Raphael and Phil recall:

A lot of it is bandwagon... You'll have beauty gurus that used to love my music on YouTube. There's this one make-up artist... All of her friends started using my music and then all of the people that were fans of them eventually started using their music. I still get e-mails every day and they're like "hey, I'm just started out on Youtube can I use your music for my videos?" (Raphael)

This year we got some huge press from something that happened... The whole cast of *Riverdale* showed up at our show and it was funny cuz they were all on the dancefloor and dancing right in front of me and I asked him after the set 'do you wanna play?' So he came up and played with us for a while and then one of his cast mates filmed it and then they put that video on Instagram and it just blew up like crazy and then next thing you know we have TMZ calling and all these media outlets... So, yeah it's been amazing and so we just kind of with that momentum just went into the studio with excitement to make music and here we are with a new album ready to go. (Phil)

Social media has become so useful to artists that some believe it has surpassed traditional gatekeepers, such as record labels, in power. On this, Rubin:

In terms of a label, you don't need em' anymore if you market yourself properly cuz the internet's there. Mind you, I'm not saying if you go that route it's incorrect, people sign record deals and have massive

teams working behind them and it works in their favour, but it's also been proven more and more that you don't need it.

According to Kamaal and Rubin, social media has more influence than record labels:

Lots of artists have been kept out of the top tier for so long and then there's been situations where they are just selling records. Kids for some reason gravitate towards this artist's sound, so sometimes there's cases where labels refuse to pay an artist attention or an artist doesn't traditionally match what a pop singer should look like, but then if they're the ones selling records and the kids wanna hear them, labels can't really 'gate keep' at that point. It's all about the influencers and the influence in the marketplace outweighs sometimes actual dollars labels are willing to put into their artists cuz you can't pay for cool. (Kamaal) Influencers will do you way more wonders than any label can ever do. So I think that's fading real fast. If you sign a record deal these days, I think it's real strange. Unless it's heavily in your favour. Like, lawyer speak 'in your favour.' (Rubin)

Gaining acceptance from influencers boils down to luck. For an influencer to share an artist's music with their followers, they have to like what they hear and it has to be cool. As Rubin explains:

It has to be cool. If they like it, they like it. If it's uncool and they listen to it 10 times a day, they'll never post about it.

Artists cannot predict what will seem cool to an influencer, nor do they try and create their sound around influencer tastes. In order to earn an influencer's co-sign, they rely on luck. On this, Raphael states:

Honestly, and no artist is gonna admit this, but luck has one of the largest roles in somebody's success. You can have the best music in the world. There's so many artists I've discovered that have like no fan bases and they're not making any money off their music and they're still putting out music because that's what they love to do and it's so good, but they're not lucky enough to get placements or have influencers share their music.

**4b.2.3 Radio and Digital Streaming.** Getting radio play is one of the ways artists share their music with listeners and gain popularity. Radio programmers are the gatekeepers of radio. They decide which artists to play and which not to play on their stations. As Orville explains:

On a distribution side... there's radio...there are the program directors who decide what is played on the station. So, they're a gatekeeper of what gets played on radio.

While participants indicated that radio programmers are still relevant gatekeepers, digital streaming was a much more prevalent topic among participants. On why this might be, Phil explains:

The best of the best only get played on the radio, right? That's not the case anymore. Spotify is radio pretty much for anybody. It's the best way to find music and hear new music and it's pretty much free, right?

Streaming platforms, such as Spotify, use an algorithm to promote certain artists. As Mac explains:

The gatekeepers right now are actually the computer algorithms themselves, like in Spotify's streaming services. It's just kinda you versus the algorithm out there and lots of people I think find that, you know, cuz it's a playlists industry at the moment as far as independent musicians and smaller musicians and young musicians and musicians who don't necessarily live in major huge centres.

Impressing the algorithm and playlist editors can be incredibly beneficial for an artist's popularity. As Mac states:

Getting through [the algorithm] ... might not give you very much money, but that opens the doors to being able to actually go play shows and tour and etcetera...

Making it on streaming services' editorial playlists can give artists major exposure given the current nature of music discovery. As Raphael states:

People are lazy. I don't wanna seek out individual jazz artists so I just click a playlist that's already made from the company, like Spotify playlists... They are the people that are ultimately gonna decide if we get playlist placements and that reaches more people.

Gaining the attention of radio gatekeepers can be largely due to an artist's success on digital platforms. As Phil describes:

I see people getting played on the radio now, artists I've never heard of off how many Spotify plays they've been getting.

Gaining acceptance from streaming algorithms and editors is confusing to artists. There is a veil of mystery when it comes to why the algorithm plucks some artists from obscurity and not others. This makes it hard for artists to develop a strategy for gaining acceptance. As Mac describes:

Sometimes it feels like you don't have any real control over it because it's just, as they tell us, a completely saturated market... Whenever I talk about the algorithm, I feel like there's that scene in Toy Story where the claw is picking up that one alien toy and they're all like 'yeah, the chosen one!' That's how it feels.

To increase their chances of gaining acceptance from radio and digital streaming gatekeepers, artists may try to adjust their sound to be more like music that is already gaining acceptance. As Orville states:

[We] try and sculpt the sound and change it and modernize it a little bit to compete in today's radio market.

No matter how strategic or talented an artist is, there is almost always some element of luck at play when an artist's music gets picked up by a streaming gatekeeper. On this, Rubin and Raphael:

It's really nuanced. If it's something that could be easily figured out, everyone would do it. It's not like there's a manual of how to get into everyone's Spotify list. It's very nuanced. It's image, it's likeability. It's everything. It's a lot. Even if you have all that you don't necessarily win at the end of the day. Some people just get lucky. (Rubin)

Luck's a big part of it. Yeah I don't think there's a black and white answer for that... You can literally go from being just nobody essentially to having a bunch of fans instantly if you get lucky or you know somebody or if your music's just that good. (Raphael)

**4b.2.4 Labels.** Record labels can make an artist's journey from mediocrity to popularity a lot smoother for the artist. This is because labels have a wealth of influence and contacts in the music industry with which they promote their artists. As Phil explains:

You don't have information for music supervisors just out there on the internet, ya know? People that usually have that information are publishers... and they're not going to give you that information unless you're signed to them, right?

As Phil suggests, labels remove the need for signed artists to network in order to build connections in the music industry. Labels handle many of the marketing tasks unsigned artists must perform independently, such as radio play, placement in commercials and movies, and getting songs on popular streaming playlists. On this, Orville and Raphael:

[Radio programmers] are also influenced by the record labels and the corporations that they work for because there's influence from that higher level on who they need to play because if there's a big campaign from one of the major labels for one of their artists, they're going to make a deal with the radio parent companies to get some more play for their artists and influence that process. (Orville)

[Labels] have contacts. To the point that they're pitching it to other companies to get on commercial placements and get it into movies and stuff, ya know? You need to know executives. You can't release your first project on Spotify and expect to get a big Spotify placement unless you pitch it to a playlist. I don't do that myself. The label handles that for me. (Raphael)

From networking with promoters to running their own marketing campaigns, independent artists go to great lengths to achieve popularity in the music industry. While participants have indicated that the days of up-and-coming artists pining after a record deal are fading, having a label to take care of the business-side of an artist's day-to-day responsibilities is what some artists need. As Raphael states:

I can't make contacts cuz I'm not a business person, I'm just an artist... So, they're doing their work there and they're taking their fee which is fine... It's kind of the standard in the music industry now, you're

either connected to a label and that's how you make connections or everybody wants you and that's how you make connections.

Artists who seek the former adopt a variety of strategies to gain acceptance from a record label's A&R and executives.

To gain the attention of record label gatekeepers, artists need to prove that they would benefit the label financially. In contrast to the currency of cool for social media influencers, record labels are attracted to artists that will make them money. As Kamaal states:

Lots of the big labels don't care about if an artist is cool. That's not good enough. They wanna know that they're gonna make their investment back.

Artists do a lot of their own brand development which used to be done by labels. On this shift, Orville and Grace:

It went from finding anybody... like 'oh we think they're talented, they're marketable we're gonna make them into an exportable product' to looking on websites like Vine and YouTube for popular cover artists or even original artists. Just people who are finding success already and then they're taking that success and expanding on it. (Orville)

Back in the day there used to be a lot more artist development, and artist development still happens now, and A&R still exists, but now people are just trying to be less risky, they want to watch an artist grow and evolve and make their own success and then work with them and enhance it, kind of help them tip over the edge. I've witnessed that a lot with artists. You do your own kind of hustle, you prove that people like what you're doing and you have something worth engaging with I guess and then I think that's how it happens a lot now. (Grace)

Artists prove their worth to labels by building popularity labels can quantify. Labels measure an artist's popularity using metrics such as, streaming numbers and ticket sales. As Kamaal and Phil explain:

It's more of what have you done, right? It's like more numbers. How many streams do they have? How many tickets are they selling at shows? How many followers do they have online? That's what they care

about the most. And of course, you have to have a great songs and be great live. But aside from those two things, you could have a great song and be great live, but not have all those other things numbers-wise that they're looking for and then get passed over. (Kamaal)

[Record labels] are making decisions based off what kids are listening to in LA and what's getting the most play and interest. It doesn't mean that they even like the music that they're signing. It's just based off of numbers. (Phil)

Gaining acceptance from labels with self-made popularity is the result of a domino effect. As

Phil explains:

You get more exposure, more fans, more listeners, more followers. Then you're building your audience, then you play your shows, and more and more people come to your shows, then I think those gatekeepers are like 'oh, something is happening here. I need to keep tabs on this or be a part of this.'

Along with already having a large fan base, artists need to prove to labels that they have the whole package. As Phil states:

It's all about how to make yourself look appealing to them so that they would want to allow you in... take you in and give you an opportunity... You have to make yourself almost undeniably great. Everything from your image, branding, sound, live show, and availability.

Artists communicate their worth to labels by using similar artists who are already successful as points of reference for their own sound. This adds a halo of security and familiarity over the artist. As Orville explains:

I definitely use comparisons to other current artists that are a little more well-known as examples because it's an easy comparison for them because they're not so much looking from a creative standpoint. They're just looking from a business standpoint. So, if you say that my sound is similar to Brett Kissel's... Brett Kissel is making them money, so that's a good thing to them, like 'oh, we can market him to the same people or similar people. We know what to do with this, we know how to deal with it.' So that's definitely a way I describe myself to industry people.



In contrast to strategically building a resume of accomplishments to gain the attention of record labels, some artists believe that being talented will naturally attract attention from record labels. As Mick states:

I think naturally if you're just doing what you're doing and you're good at it, someone's gonna notice.

In contrast, Joey states:

If they're not knocking, then you're probably not as good as you think you are.

On adopting a more laidback approach to attracting label attention, Grace explains:

I firmly believe, and this is something that has been told to me and that I've experienced over the years, is that the people will come to you. You don't have to be banging on those gatekeepers' doors and trying to prove yourself, just do what you're doing, and people will be watching you and recognizing those things and come to you. Not saying you can't reach out to other people, but you want to work with the people who want to work with you not the people you are begging to work with, you know?

Artists try and increase their odds of attracting label gatekeepers by being in the right place at the right time, such as performing at industry events. As Orville explains:

There's always industry showcases that you're playing at different events...Awards conferences like the Canadian Country Music Awards where the main goal is to play within that industry and get exposure in front of those power players like the research guides from the labels or the managers or whatever. A lot of time they're gonna be at those events and you wanna play at those events and play in a way that you're going to catch their attention and try and get in that circle.

**4b.2.5 Promoters.** To gain exposure via live performances, artists typically have to go through promoters. Touring and playing live are important channels for gaining exposure, popularity, and getting paid. On promoter gatekeepers, Phil and Rubin:

I'd say promoters are still [gatekeepers] because [playing] live is so important... If you want a career in music, you can't just sit at home and collect royalty checks anymore. So, I think promotion companies are a bit of a gatekeeper because to be at a really high level of touring is gonna almost always have to go through them...They're a gatekeeper because they can pick and choose who gets to tour with a band. (Phil)

On the gigging or playing side of it, there's the promoters and also the labels have a hand in that too. Kinda controlling who plays where at a certain level. Who's opening for what artist on tours and it all has to make sense on a business standpoint. (Rubin)

Without a record label's support, independent artists have to find ways to impress promoters on their own. Artists become their own agents. In Flora's words:

[This requires] being able to identify what kind of projects you'd be good for.

Being considered among artists who are being pitched by a record label requires constant networking on the behalf unsigned artists. As Phil points out:

The only way they'll pick you is if you know somebody, right? In this industry it's all who you know. So, that's why it comes down to you have to know somebody. Know somebody that knows somebody.

Without connections, it becomes a lot harder for artists to get on other artist's tours and get in front of larger audiences. As Mick states:

A boundary would be if you don't know as many people or if you aren't friends with certain people in a local industry then maybe that hinders you from getting more work.

On making industry connections, Orville, Flora, and Kamaal explain:

There's different kinda things and networking opportunities that you have to navigate to get into that world and those lists essentially is what it is. You get on the lists of certain booking agents and these people and this guy knows your name and that opens up opportunities. (Orville)

I am travelling soon and I just told the person who works at the opera company that I'm travelling there and asked them for coffee ostensibly in a friendly way, but really because I just want to remind them that I exist and that they should hire me. Or the head of a symphony orchestra that I sang for once was in New York and I knew that he was in New York and I asked if I could take him for a drink. That's the kind of thing you're always trying to remind people that you're there but also sell them. (Flora)

Yeah it's now really up to the artist and how the artist builds their connections and how they use those connections. Because we're living in such a globalized world and because everyone's so much closer to each other, social media kinda bridges those gaps so I can hit up someone from Russia. I can hit up

someone from Tokyo, you know? I can book my own tour in Tokyo, go there, play the show and while I'm there I can connect. (Kamaal)

There is a hierarchy when it comes to who gets booked to play certain concerts. An artist's reputation and experience can dictate which shows they are eligible to play. As Mick states:

Some of the gigs I would have taken 8-9 years ago, I would never do them again. They're definitely what you would consider paying your dues if you will.

In order to build a reputation and gain experience, artists rely on promoters giving them a chance. As Joey suggests:

What do you do if you suck and you wanna play? That gatekeeper promoter is maybe going to give you an opportunity or maybe not.

Big opportunities can be few and far between, so artists need to be available when one presents itself. As Phil states:

You have to be all-in, full-time, let's go, ya know? Because the last thing you wanna do is be given an opportunity and be like 'oh, I got a day job, I can't go on tour with that band.

Scarcity of opportunities creates extra pressure for artists to perform well. On this, Flora:

You have to be on your best behaviour all the time and show up and do well because if you give someone a bad impression or something like that, that can be the end of things for you with that one person and there aren't very many opportunities and that is extremely stressful.

**4b.2.6 Other Musicians.** Other musicians can be gatekeepers to the music industry. The musician gatekeeper functions on varying degrees and in several contexts. On a micro level, musicians can influence the reputations of their peers and uphold norms in their social networks.

On this, Flora:

The social network of opera is so important that partly it's just how people talk about people and so you end up being a gatekeeper in that let's say someone who's working at a symphony asks me what I think of

a person. That lets me be a gatekeeper in a moment. Also, we subject other singers sometimes to the gatekeeping that we've experienced.

Some musicians have the power to offer or withhold career-building opportunities to other musicians. This occurs commonly in the live performance sector of the music industry. Local gatekeepers exist within pen-mic and 'jamming' communities where new musicians gain experience playing in front of an audience. Other musicians can decide whether or not the newcomer gets to perform and thus, gain experience. As Raphael explains:

There are people that I jam with that... unless you play a fast four blues section or blues scale, you can't even step on stage. Unless you can rip, [then] you can step on stage. Like, that's gatekeeping. That's total gatekeeping. I hate it. I don't like it.

Whether or not an artist gets booked to play a concert is sometimes in the hands of another musician. As Flora states:

Musicians are sometimes the people who are sometimes doing the producing or hiring." Artists can bypass a tour's booking agent and go through the headlining artist. As Orville states, "in a lot of situations you can talk with the headlining artist directly.

On a macro level, certain musicians are gatekeepers because they help shape what is considered popular. As Flora suggests:

There's been a shift with regards to the fact that people are starting to realize that singers have as much license over shaping opera as directors.

Artists who create and dictate popular music are a hybrid of the influencer and musician gatekeeper. Rubin explains the power of the influencer/musician gatekeeper using rap mogul, Drake, as an example:

Opening for a bigger band than you, that's a level of gatekeeping and then influencers allowing you to show off your stuff to their crowd. Like it's funny I was talking about Drake and all his tours, if you look at everyone who's opened for him once upon a time, they're all massive now. All but like one or two, but they're all huge.

Artists use a variety of methods to gain acceptance from other musicians. Talent and willingness to learn can open the doors guarded by other musicians. As Raphael recalls:

It's mostly been just at jams. I don't know any blues structures, but if you teach me, I'll play it and I'll play it the best I can. That's my way of navigating around. I don't know any music theory. I have no idea about music theory at all. So when people tell me to play the first, I'm like... I think this is it and usually it is because you pick up patterns... A blues guy being like 'we're gonna play a fast four or a 2-5-1.' I don't know what that is... just tell me what the root notes are and I'm good.

Artists also rely on networking to gain acceptance from musician gatekeepers. Building connections with other musicians can give artists opportunities, such as being the opening act for popular artists. As Orville explains:

If there is a band or known artist that maybe I have a connection with because I met them at an event and we stayed in touch and we've become friends, I can use my contacts with the artist directly to try and help me land that show... They would be able to tell the people that work for them which at the end of the day the managers and agents and everybody work for the artist, then you have a little different way of getting in and kinda bypassing the traditional channels.

Artists use social media to network with musician gatekeepers. Artists can share their music and communicate with musicians with influence from all over the world. As Mick recalls:

I was doing these DJ edits is I was sending them to other DJ's and I was doing it quite regularly. The edits started turning to more complicated things and they started getting passed around a lot and that's with some internet work as well that got my name around into people's computers and start seeing things being shared online. So that was the content I was generating to allow me book more stuff and kinda make some noise online. So I mean there's so many ways you could go about it. You could do one silly thing on Youtube or Twitter and that could be the start of something.

The more experience an artist has, the easier it is for them to gain access to the spaces protected by other musicians. As Kamaal explains:

[Gaining experience is] all based on time. You need to have the time in order to build enough I guess build enough of a career or build enough credit for yourself.

When an artist garners enough experience or clout, they themselves become gatekeepers. As

Raphael explains:

I've always had this clout for lack of a better word. So, I've never been treated poorly [by other musicians].

Raphael now performs the same gatekeeping he encountered while getting his start at open mics.

In Raphael's words:

I mean, for my band, you can't get in unless you can, ya know, rip a jazz solo or unless you're Steve Fischer.

As with many of the different gatekeepers, artists rely on a healthy dose of luck to gain acceptance from musician gatekeepers. As Raphael recalls:

I entered a Tegan and Sara remix contest and ended up winning, so I'm on one of their albums and I'm also on their Wikipedia page. Which is cool because it's the only thing of me on Wikipedia so far.

To achieve popularity, artists must navigate an array of gatekeepers. These include: consumers, social media influencers and platforms, radio and digital streaming, record labels, promoters, and other musicians. To traverse and grow within the industry, artists employ various strategies specific to each gatekeeper type as outlined in the section above. Thus far, the goals of uniqueness and popularity and the methods artists use to achieve each goal have been explored. Next, the goal of joy in music-making will be discussed.

### ***4b.3 Enjoyment***

Artists make music because they enjoy doing it. Enjoyment lives within their creative process; it is intrinsic to the music. As Grace states:

I write music that I like first, you know? I'm not going to ever put anything out that I don't love... that I don't like listening to.

The joy artists get from performing live, writing a new song, or making an album takes precedence over fame and fortune. As Raphael explains:

I don't put things out because I wanna get a lot of people... a lot of plays, you know? I put things out because I want to and if I like a product and I put it out and I'm happy with it, I'm happy with it... I don't wanna be rich. I don't care about that kinda stuff. It's fun and I'm having fun with it.

As Mac points out, the joy of creating can feel like an artist's true reward for making music:

I get paid in the enjoyment of the experience of making the music at this point in my career. So, If I'm not enjoying it and I'm not loving what we've created and it's not doing anything for me at the time, then I'm not paying myself. Ya know? Even if I am making money off of it. They're kinda two separate entities.

The opportunities that stem from making music, such as friendships and traveling, bring artists joy. On this, Joey and Phil:

But I mean, as far as getting together with your buddies and having a few beers or whatever and killing two hours and feeling good about playing music and then maybe getting to entertain some people somewhere along the road is all we're really looking for right now. (Joey)

I love seeing the world and felt pretty cooped up here, not having done that in a while. Part of the reason why I started my own project is to be able to do that and a product of that is in the song writing. So, we toured Europe last year, which is the first time I'd ever done it. I've played a couple festivals there in my younger days, but I haven't actually toured there. So just to be playing places like Italy, Germany, and Austria... I've always dreamed of doing that and to finally be doing it, it was super inspiring, cuz I found while I was there I was writing. I couldn't help it. (Phil)

The joy artists get from making music compensates for the less desirable aspects of their job. In Phil's words:

If I'm doing what I actually enjoy doing, I can manage and I can book shows... I just don't enjoy it. I don't like doing those jobs.

Artists may have music that is never released, but that functions purely as a joy project. On his many side projects, Mac:

No one would be able to follow that. That's just kind of what keeps me happy and feels like a maximum output for me, at least.

Music-related joy keeps artists motivated to keep perusing their dreams. For artists, the joy that stems from creating is more certain than becoming rich or famous. Thus, if an artist's only goal for making music is to become famous, they may quickly lose interest because fame can be unattainable or fleeting. So, artists focus on enjoying the creative process. As Mick advises:

[Fame] is not really the right reason to be in it cuz it'll fade out... If that's the real reason you're in it, it'll probably fade out your motivation a lot quicker than if you just genuinely like to do it .

Focusing on enjoyment over fame is also a means of self-preservation for artists. As Phil explains:

I think for me having done all those things already and been in that competitive music industry for years, I'm just at the point where I just wanna make music that I love and that I think people are gonna like and just really believe in it and not really care if it gets on the radio or if it does this or if it does that. It's like, I'm gonna make music and see the world – that's it. That's all I wanna do. And when you have those goals in mind, it feels like we're already doing it. When you think about it that way, then we're already successful. That's what success is to me... It takes a lot of pressure off of having to achieve this or get that award or sell, get this many streams. It's like, nope. Don't care! It's just about making music and making people happy and doing it as many places as possible.

Artists strive toward enjoyment in their careers because they believe joy is the true reward of making music. Not only is the creative process itself intrinsically enjoyable, but it produces enjoyable opportunities, such as camaraderie and travel. Prioritizing enjoyment motivates artists to keep pursuing their careers despite the unattainable and fleeting nature of fame. In the following section, the fluidity of uniqueness, popularity, and enjoyment throughout an artist's career is discussed.



#### ***4b.4 Fluidity of Sound Goals***

Uniqueness, popularity, and enjoyment are not mutually exclusive goals for artists; the future an artist envisions for their sound is a recipe that consists of varying parts uniqueness, popularity, and joy. For example, Phil and Rubin reveal their own distinct blends of uniqueness and popularity:

Some bands can be really great that play cool sounding music live. Like there's a vibe to it and what not. I like to have that, but also take it a step further and have songs that people can relate to and feel and hopefully love, cuz that's what can really drive things forward. (Phil)

When you're writing something that you want to be original, you do have to go with the grain every now and then. Make your choruses catchy, make something that can be an ear worm. That's something I brought into metal writing which is its own thing. In terms of what is pop at the moment which is neo-soul, R&B, and rap and stuff, you do have to have that mind when creating something at least if financial stability is the end goal. Yeah, you have to keep it in mind. You have to play ball. (Rubin)

Blending the three goals of uniqueness, popularity, and enjoyment is important to artists. As

Kamaal explains:

I think you always try... It's always important for [gatekeepers] to know you exist but at the same time it comes down to what you believe in.

How an artist blends these three goals is unique to the artist. Flora and Grace explain their different methods of blending their goals:

I would say one of the biggest ways I [gain acceptance from gatekeepers] is thinking of the repertoire that they might wanna hear and trying to balance something that they are familiar with, but that possibly makes you seem unique that they maybe haven't heard 100 times. (Flora)

Making something meaningful and something that you enjoy or you care about should be number one, and secondly get it out there and hopefully other people will like it too. Find that balance of being authentic, enjoying your craft, and doing what you love and then also trying to promote it in the most authentic way and getting it out there. (Grace)

Harmonizing uniqueness, popularity, and enjoyment can be an artist's way of protecting their quality of life. Constantly trying to achieve popularity can be hard on an artist's mental health.

As Joey explains:

To really work and sell yourself and try and hustle your music and get people to shows, get people just to listen to it... It's very fatiguing.

Focusing on what makes an artist unique and prioritizing those elements is one way of coping with popularity-related stressors, such as hustle culture. On this, Grace:

It's important to find that balance and to understand that getting out there and being successful shouldn't be the only goal you have... It's like finding that balance of believing in yourself and sticking up for yourself and pushing, or getting your music or name out there. And also just being authentic and working on what means the most to you which is obviously the art.

An artist's prioritization of uniqueness, popularity, and joy in their process is fluid. An artist's sound goals flow between uniqueness, popularity, and enjoyment while adapting to their environment. Timing influences the flow of an artist's sound goals. For example, the mix of uniqueness, popularity, and joy can depend on which stage the artist is in the creative process. Many participants mentioned keeping the early stages of song writing free from gatekeeper influence to preserve the joy of the creative process. That is, participants avoid catering their music to fit into mold of what other popular music sounds like in order to impress gatekeepers, such as consumers. However, once the music is complete, artists find ways to market their sound to gatekeepers. On this, Mac, Grace, and Orville:

I go around [gatekeepers] while I'm creating the music, but then when I am at a place where I'm taking what I've made and trying to market it, then I am looking for their acceptance at that point in process.

(Mac)

It takes time and I think that just where I'm at right now is the development of the project versus getting it out there in the industry. I think I'm on the cusp of that... of I guess, reaching out to those said-gatekeepers.

(Grace)

After I have the product which is the song, putting together the marketing campaign on such a large or small scale is thinking of these details: I always think of 'yeah okay this song to me is...' (Orville)

Being flexible in terms of uniqueness and popularity gives artists more financial opportunities.

Sometimes artists dampen the elements that make their sound unique to meet the requirements of a job. For example, Mick keeps his music taste open and not too niche to secure jobs. In Mick's words:

There's always limits in terms of my taste and searching for gigs and stuff. I mean that's the benefit of having a broad appreciation for music is that you can... put all those different styles together or to keep yourself employed and moving.

Similarly, artists flow from uniqueness to popularity to meet their financial goals. On this, Mac:

If I was looking at things from a purely financial standpoint, I would probably stop doing my solo stuff and focus entirely on doing DJ events and DJ'ing and making dance music cuz then I probably could have a shot at making an entire income off of it or close to, but that's not really what I want to do and that's not really the music I'm creating, you know? I guess that's not the purpose of it all either. Like the purpose for me playing and creating music and writing songs is to be able to keep doing it but also to maintain.

An artist's mix of sound goals can be thought of as a recipe that is specific to the individual; each artist has their own blend of uniqueness, popularity, and enjoyment that they adjust as needed. Prioritization of goals is fluid and influenced by timing in the creative process (e.g., focusing on uniqueness and joy during the initial stages of song writing) and financial stability (e.g., seeking popularity to pay the bills).

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study used in-depth interviews with musicians across different music genres to find out *how artists think about, define, and manage the selling of their sound*. In this section, the key findings, their theoretical implications, limitations, and directions for future research will be discussed.

### 5.1 Key Findings

Artists think about and define their sound with complexity and nuance in a way that is unique to the individual artist. How an artist crafts their sound is also rich with layers of complexity and nuance. When making music, artists flow between two primary settings: they create independently and in collaboration. When artists create independently, their music is infused with their own emotions, visual imagination, and authenticity. In collaboration, an artist's external collaborators such as, genre, other musicians, producers, engineers, funders, and inner-circle contributors, influence their sound. Each creative context lends itself to unique sonic results that evolve over time. An artist's fluid movement between independent and collaborative creativity is one half of understanding artists and their sound; additionally, an artist's sound goals guide their sonic vision.

Artists have three overarching sound goals: uniqueness, popularity, and enjoyment. Various motivating forces and approaches for achieving each goal exist. Artists strive toward uniqueness for two main reasons: out of personal preference and to stand out from their peers. In the pursuit of uniqueness, artists use strategies such as experimentation and blending genres during the creative process. Artists also want, if not need, their sound to be popular. At the bare minimum, artists must sell enough of their music to break-even on production costs and support their creative and business ambitions. Artists navigate the commercial system by gaining

acceptance from gatekeepers who can grant them access to popularity. The following gatekeepers exist in the music industry: consumers, social media and influencers, radio and digital streaming platforms, record labels, promoters, and other musicians. Artists adopt a plethora of strategies to gain acceptance from these gatekeepers, such as: connecting with fans on social media, networking with promoters, and elevating the quality of their sound to compete with bigger artists. Finally, artists enjoy making music. Being a professional musician allows artists to travel, make new friends, and do what they love. This joy motivates artists to keep pursuing their music careers in the face of uncertainty when it comes to fame and popularity. While each sound goal is distinct, there is no universal goal structure; rather, each artist has their own fluid blend of sound goals that they adapt as needed. For example, an artist may shift focus from uniqueness to popularity as the creative process nears completion and they move toward marketing the project.

## **5.2 Theoretical Implications**

The relationship between artists and the commercial system is often focused on the differences and conflicts between creativity and commerce in the music industry. However, the present research answers Patterson and Larsen's (2018) call for more research in sound and finds that creativity and commerce are actually fluid states. That is, the way artists create and market their sound flows between these two ends of the continuum, not in tension or conflict. The flow between creativity and commerce can be seen in the flexibility of an artist's sound goals. Artists create their own changeable blend of goals, prioritizing uniqueness, popularity, and enjoyment as needed. To adapt their goals, artists move fluidly between their roles as sound creators and marketers. As a result, creative and commercial practices intersect. Instead of being in tension, an artist's creative and business practices are reminiscent of Baxandall's (1985) *troc* wherein

producers and consumers make free choices that interact on each other and move art forward. Artists continuously make independent creative and commercial decisions which cause sound to evolve. For example, an artist may draw on personal influences (e.g., their emotions) to write a song and use commercially-defined genres to define their sound in the process of making it more marketable to the public. In contrast to Negus' (1995) position, this study suggests that artists do not think about their sound in terms of how creative or how commercial it will be. Rather, artists understand that public reception of their music is unpredictable and thus, focus on creating an authentic sound while using various methods to market their sound to gatekeepers. Sometimes, in general they are more market-drivers than market-driven.

This study contributes by demonstrating the fluidity of the artist-gatekeeper relationship and defining the multitude of methods artists use when navigating gatekeepers and the commercial system in the digital age. Gatekeeping literature suggests that music industry gatekeepers function to promote certain artists to the public and filter out others (Gibson 2003). This argument perpetuates the false dichotomy between creativity and commerce in the music industry and implies that a majority of artists are on the losing end of their relationship with gatekeepers. Conversely, the current research shows that gatekeepers are useful to artists; they help artists achieve their goals. Gatekeepers not only help artists gain access to larger fan bases; the most important gatekeepers *are* the fan base. The findings suggest that gatekeepers can be part of an artist's community (e.g., local musicians and friends in gatekeeper roles). Considering the assistance gatekeepers offer artists and the interconnectedness between artists and gatekeepers, artists are open to working with gatekeepers. Artists take a fluid approach toward their relationships with gatekeepers; sometimes they go around gatekeepers (e.g., choosing to be

unsigned and work independent of record labels) and sometimes they try to gain acceptance from gatekeepers (e.g., networking with promoters to gain access to a larger audience).

A final contribution of this study is that it is the first to empirically show that musicians take a fluid stance to their goals and strategies to fit the criteria for a superstar market. According to Krueger (2019), superstar markets and the music industry possess the following three criteria: scale, uniqueness, and luck. The current research confirms that these elements are required for working in the music industry as a professional musician. Superstar market characteristics can be observed in the sound goals of artists as well as artists' methods for navigating gatekeepers. This study demonstrates how artists strive toward a sound that is both unique, honing in on the non-substitutable qualities of their sound, and popular, using various methods and platforms to achieve scale and appeal to a mass audience. Luck also plays a role in how artists become successful. For many artists, being in the right place at the right time is necessary for encountering major career opportunities.

### **5.3 Limitations and Future Research**

The findings are limited by the small number of musicians interviewed, heterogeneous representation of music genres, and the qualitative nature of this study. The absence of superstar musicians and musicians residing outside of Canada are also limitations. Additionally, given the exploratory and theoretical aims of this study, there are few managerial implications. However, this study does suggest that musicians can work collaboratively with gatekeepers in a superstar market and thus, both sides should seek this collaboration. This study has shown that the relationship between musicians and the industry is changing over time, thus the findings of this study are limited to this time period.

In terms of future research arising from this study, experimental research is not recommended given the newness of research in sound; there are still many corners of sound in marketing to explore using qualitative methods. For example, different music markets could influence how musicians think about and manage the selling of their sound. Future research should speak to musicians in other parts of the world to understand the influence culture has on the creative and business practices of artists. Alternatively, future research could focus on a single music genre as there may be important nuances within specific music communities that were missed in this study given its broad genre scope. For example, interviewing musicians from genres such as opera or classical that do not follow the same commercial structure as conventionally popular styles (e.g., pop and hip hop) could provide a richer understanding of sound in marketing. Even within this study, different musicians had a diverse way of moving between the three sound goals.

The primary aim of this study was to understand sound from the musician's perspective. Given the intersection of creativity and commerce put forth by this study, future research should examine sound through the lens of other voices in the music industry. Literature on music industry gatekeepers has addressed the purpose of gatekeepers (Foster, Borgatti, and Jones 2011; McCracken 1986) and the relationship between gatekeepers, musicians, and the public (De Roeper 2008), but it has yet to explore the relationship gatekeepers have with sound. The next steps of marketing research on music production and marketing should centre on understanding this relationship given the important role gatekeepers play in both processes. Future research should consider asking gatekeepers, such as record labels, editors at streaming platforms, social media influencers, promoters, and/or consumers how they "sell" sound to their audiences and who their gatekeepers are.



Specifically, future research should explore the relationship consumers have with sound given the irreplaceable role consumers have as gatekeepers. Such research should aim to garner a better understanding of the relationship consumers have with sound. It should explore how consumers define sound and if this is different from the way musicians and industry professionals do. Future research may also consider how consumers are aware of gatekeepers to their sound consumption, how they think sound is sold to them, and if they consider themselves to be gatekeepers. For example, previous research (Shankar, Elliott, and Fitchett, 2009) used consumers' record collections to see how music consumption shapes identity. Future research might consider looking at music consumption through sound. This could involve interviewing participants about how they think about and manage their music collections (e.g., digital playlists or record collections) in terms of sound (e.g., genre, mood, tempo).

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Music is ubiquitous in our consumer culture, yet the voices of artists who craft our consumption soundscapes have been absent from marketing literature until now. The present research answers Patterson and Larsen's (2018) call for the sonic turn in consumer research by going beyond studying sound as a consumption object and exploring the perspectives of sound producers and sellers. This study suggests that a great deal of nuanced decisions and evolution occur between the conception of a musical thought and the point at which consumers hear the final product. To produce and sell their sound to the public, artists move flexibly between various creative contexts, adapt their sound goals (e.g., uniqueness, popularity, and enjoyment) as needed, and flow to and from creating and marketing their sound. Artists access popularity through gatekeepers by using a multitude of strategies to gain their acceptance. This study contributes the idea that the relationship between creativity and commerce in the music industry is fluid, not in tension as previous literature suggests. Furthermore, artists and gatekeepers are not in opposition; rather, artists see gatekeepers as useful to their careers and have developed methods for gaining their support. The present research is the first to empirically show that artists take a fluid approach to their goals and strategies to fit the criteria for a superstar market. That is, artists must have access to scale, be unique, and have a stroke of luck to join the highest echelon of artists. Given the elusiveness of superstardom, artists take fame in stride and relish the joy of creating and sharing their music with the public.

*“I make the music to pay myself with the fulfillment of making it exactly how I want and then I support being able to do that financially through marketing and selling my music.” (Mac)*

## Appendix A. Recruitment Poster

**Department of Management and Marketing**  
**University of Saskatchewan**



**PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR**  
**RESEARCH IN *MUSIC MARKETING***

I am a graduate student in Marketing at the Edwards School of Business. For my Master's thesis, I am looking for volunteers to take part in a study about how musicians think about the selling of their sound.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to some questions about the process by which you produce and sell your sound. Your answers will remain confidential.

Your participation would involve *one interview*, in either Saskatoon or via Skype, each of which is approximately 60 minutes.

In appreciation for your time, you will receive  
*a record store gift card valued at \$50.*

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study,

please contact:

*Ariel Sanders*

*ats158@mail.usask.ca*

**This study has been reviewed by, and received approval  
through, the Research Ethics Office, University of Saskatchewan.**



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## Appendix B. Consent Form



### *Participant Consent Form*

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**You are invited to participate in a research study entitled: Sound Sellers: Exploring the Sonic Brand Identities of Musicians**

**Researcher:**

Ariel Sanders, Graduate Student, Department of Management & Marketing, University of Saskatchewan, Phone: 306-966-8440, Email: [ariel.sanders@usask.ca](mailto:ariel.sanders@usask.ca)

**Supervisor:**

Dr. Barbara Phillips, Professor, Department of Management and Marketing, University of Saskatchewan, Phone: 306-966-8440, Email: [bphillips@edwards.usask.ca](mailto:bphillips@edwards.usask.ca)

**Purpose and Objective of the Research:**

This research explores how musicians think about, manage, and define the selling of their sound.

**Procedures:**

As a participant, you will be asked to:

- Participate in an interview, which will be recorded if you agree.
- Participants will answer questions about how they adapt their sound to navigate gatekeepers and by what process this occurs.
- The entire study will take approximately one hour to complete.
- Participants may request that the recorder be turned off at any time.
- Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role.
- Participants who wish to receive the results of this study may follow up with the researchers to obtain a copy of final results.

**Potential Risks:**

- There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research

**Potential Benefits:**

- By agreeing to be a part of this study you will contribute to a greater understanding the role of musicians in the production and selling of sound; however, this is not a guaranteed outcome of this study.

### **Compensation:**

- Participants will be compensated with a music store gift card worth \$50 to compensate you for your time.

### **Confidentiality:**

- The findings may be presented at a conference or published in a journal article; however, your identity will be kept confidential. Although we may report direct quotations from your interview, you will be given a pseudonym, and all identifying information will be removed from our report so that your responses remain confidential.
- The written transcriptions will be stored on a password-protected computer; only the supervisor and researchers will have access to your answers. Consent forms will be stored separately in a locked storage facility. These files will be deleted five years post publication.

### **Right to Withdraw:**

- Your participation is voluntary and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort.
- Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on your position or how you will be treated.
- Should you wish to withdraw, all responses up until that point, whether they are taped or transcribed, will be destroyed and not included in the data. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until **January 1, 2020**. After this point, it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

### **Follow up:**

- Participants who wish to receive the results of this study may follow up with the researchers to obtain a copy of final results.

### **Questions or Concerns:**

- Contact the researcher(s) using the information at the top of page 1;
- This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office [ethics.office@usask.ca](mailto:ethics.office@usask.ca) (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

### **Consent**

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to

participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Name of Participant*                      \_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature*                                      \_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Researcher's Signature*                      \_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***

**Oral Consent**

I read and explained this Consent Form to the participant before receiving the participant's consent, and the participant had knowledge of its contents and appeared to understand it.

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Name of Participant*                      \_\_\_\_\_  
*Researcher's Signature*                      \_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***

## APPENDIX C. Interview Guide

1. Tell me about yourself.
  - a. Age, occupation, family status.
2. How do you define your sound, as a musician?
  - a. Musical style
  - b. Genre/subgenre.
3. How do you explain your sound to others?
4. Has your sound changed over time? How? Why?
  - a. Crossing over from music as a hobby to profession.
5. How flexible is your sound?
  - a. How attached are you to your current sound?
6. Who influences your sound?
  - a. Former or current artists.
  - b. Other forms of art.
7. Who are the gatekeepers (e.g., protectors, guards, monitors) in your field?
8. How do you explain your sound to gatekeepers?
9. Do you feel a need to sell your sound? To whom? How do you do that?
10. When do you try to gain acceptance by the gatekeepers in your field and when do you try to go around them (if you do)?
11. Can you give me an example of the last time you tried to gain acceptance or go around?
  - a. Try to get examples for both.
12. When do you try to gain acceptance from consumers and when do you try to go around them (if you do)?

13. Can you give me an example of the last time you tried to gain acceptance or go around?

a. Try to get examples for both.

14. What projects are you currently working on?

a. Touring? Writing? Collaborations? Anything outside of music?

15. Is there anything else you would like to talk about that I haven't mentioned?



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