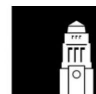

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# 24. Popular Music, Streaming, and Promotional Media: Enduring and Emerging Industrial Logics

Leslie M. Meier

**The production and consumption of popular music has changed significantly in the digital era, affecting the revenue strategies of the music industries. Focusing on two recent phenomena – streaming music and artist-brand deals – this chapter discusses how these developments encourage an uneven distribution of career opportunities and rewards in the music industries, and elaborates on how the increasingly promotional role of media content means that music is becoming subordinated to marketing.**

## Introduction

In the digital era, how we learn about and access music has undergone extensive changes, as the dominance of physical albums has been challenged by the rise of new music products and services. Music assumes digital forms (as download, stream, and service), promotional forms (as music licenced to advertisers, branded content, and endorsements), and traditional forms (as CDs, records, compositions, and live performances). While the abundance of music available may make the contemporary music industries appear open and democratic, in order to understand the power relations that govern these industries, we must examine how revenues are generated and profits accrue.

In this chapter, I will focus on two phenomena that, despite in some ways widening access for recording artists, nevertheless encourage an uneven distribution of career opportunities and rewards: streaming, and promotional agreements between artists and brands. In order to delineate changes spurred by both internet-enabled distribution and the expanding influence of promotional media (advertising, marketing, and branding) over the music industries, I will draw on the 'cultural industries' approach to critical political economy as I develop an analysis that builds on trade press and specialist music industry sources.

## From selling music to promoting brands

Today, popular music routinely features in and, hence, serves the function of *promotional media*. This term signals something distinct from *music promotion*, which Devon Powers defines as 'the cumulative effect of efforts intended to increase the awareness, presence, longevity, and sale of popular music among the listening public' (Powers, 2013, p. 315). Popular music's use as a tool for lending cultural legitimacy and appeal to brands unrelated to music as such has

emerged as a new convention and essential revenue stream under contemporary business models (see Meier, 2017). Though such practices may generate marketing exposure for recording artists, they are not primarily about music promotion. Instead, popular music serves as an instrument for selling goods and services and, even if implicitly, endorsing consumerist values.

The increasingly tight relationship between music and brands is an outgrowth of changing business thinking about how to market and monetize music amid declining record sales and growing consumption of cheap, if not free, digital music. As internet-enabled services prised open major label control over music's distribution, increased competition for traditional revenue sources motivated myriad recording artists and their labels to pursue new business opportunities, including partnering with brands. Licencing music for use in advertising (see Klein, 2009; Taylor, 2012), television, video games, and so on, and various branding, endorsement, and sponsorship arrangements emerged as standard means of generating revenue and marketing exposure, with record companies treating artists as brands that can drive revenues well beyond just singles, albums, and concerts (Meier, 2017). In fact, '[a] record company may have as many as 200 long-term brand partnerships active on behalf of their artists at any point in time' (IFPI, 2016, p.14). Some independent artists cashed in on opportunities to work with brands, even receiving six-figure offers to licence music to advertisers (Klein, 2009, p. 72).

However, as deals between artists and brands became the new 'normal' in the music industries, the payout from music licencing and other promotional agreements to non-star artists dropped dramatically (Meier, 2017, pp. 112-119). Moreover, contractual agreements called '360 deals' – so named for the way they encompass the various forms of income generated by an artist beyond record sales – have enabled record companies to share in the host of revenue streams now tied to artists, be they stars or lesser known artists (*Ibid.*, pp. 74-77; Stahl & Meier, 2012; Marshall, 2013a). Justin Bieber's 360 deal with Universal's Def Jam (Halperin, 2011) means that Universal has various business interests in him, which helps explain why the release of his album *Purpose* reportedly built on the efforts of roughly 1,500 marketing experts (IFPI, 2016, p. 12).

This promotional and commercial view of the recording artist informs how new markets, most recently streaming, are positioned by record companies. Streaming continues to grow in popularity, with Nielsen reporting 133.9 billion on-demand streams in the first quarter of 2017, an increase from 99.1 billion during the same period a year earlier (Christman, 2017). Streaming is just one piece in broader strategies premised on aggregating multiple revenue streams, however (Meier, 2017, pp. 62-68). In order to evaluate the depth of change and the implications of the shift toward artist-brand deals and streaming, we must first understand the music industries' distinctive character as cultural industries.

## Music industries as cultural industries: Enduring continuities

Building on the work of Nicholas Garnham (1990), Bernard Miège (1989), Bill Ryan (1991), and others, David Hesmondhalgh (2013) explains how the cultural industries (film, music, broadcasting, and so forth) share a set of common distinctive features. The cultural industries involve considerable *risk*, as it is very difficult to predict audience taste, and entail *high*

*production costs* relative to reproduction costs (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, pp. 27-29). The cost of recording an album can be quite expensive, whereas the cost of pressing and shipping those albums is small by comparison, meaning that profits escalate dramatically once production costs are recouped. Cultural commodities are *semi-public goods*, as they are not destroyed after use, and *commerce* and *creativity* exist in tension, as commercial pressures constrain creativity, yet creativity remains essential to the production of new cultural commodities (*Ibid.*, pp. 28-30).

In response to the risky nature of investments in cultural production, media companies rely on *large catalogues* and *hits* to compensate for commercial failures and generate profits, and promote *stars* and *genres* as marketing categories to lend order to the cultural marketplace (*Ibid.*, pp. 30-32). There is also a strong tendency toward *concentration* and *integration*; the largest companies dominate markets for cultural commodities, and reinforce their might by acquiring or merging with competitors and companies that present strategic advantages, such as enhanced cross-promotional opportunities (*Ibid.*, pp. 30-31). This dynamic is evidenced by the shrinking of the Big Six major record labels to only three (Universal Music Group, Sony Music, and Warner Music Group), and is underscored by the fact that these companies are owned by multinational conglomerates (Vivendi, Sony, and Access Industries, respectively). Companies create 'artificial' scarcity through defending copyrights and managing release schedules, and exercise tight control over distribution and marketing vis-à-vis the considerable autonomy granted to creators (*Ibid.*, pp. 31-33). While a record company will devise the marketing plan, it typically will leave writing music to recording artists (though marketing departments may weigh in on what constitutes a commercially viable sound).

How can these distinctive features and business responses help us understand the contemporary music industries? Four developments are worth highlighting. First, risk has been intensified due to the popularization of (authorized and unauthorized) downloading and streaming, and the attendant decline in album sales. To mitigate this risk, music companies continue to rely on large catalogues (albeit with trimmed rosters), hits, and stars, and also capitalize on new products and services. While recorded music revenues decreased between 2000 and 2016, music publishing revenues grew modestly, branding and sponsorship revenues more than doubled, and merchandising revenues more than tripled (Mulligan, 2017c). Furthermore, music industry expert Mark Mulligan's (2017d) figures suggest that streaming led to growth of US$900 million in recorded music revenue in 2016, accounting for 33 per cent of major label revenue – a number that leapt to 42 per cent in the first quarter of 2017. Significantly, live music reportedly generated 43 per cent of global music revenues in 2016, surpassing the 38 per cent of revenues generated by recorded music – a marked shift from 2000, when 53 per cent of revenue was generated by recorded music and 33 per cent by live music (Mulligan, 2017c). In order to ensure a generous return while managing risk, music companies are offering artists contract terms that 'range from now-standard 360 contracts and joint ventures to new types of licencing arrangements' (Karp, 2017).

The tendency for industry analysts and reporters to cite streaming figures in aggregate, without providing a more detailed breakdown regarding smaller record labels and recording artists, provides only a partial picture of what these developments mean and for whom. Many streaming services employ a pro-rata model when dividing up revenues, under which 'the distribution of revenues [is] based on how many streams a rights-holder's songs constitute from

the total number of streams played via the platform' – an approach that benefits rights-holders that receive a high volume of streams (Nordgård, 2016, pp. 182-183). Even 'user-centric' models, under which revenues are distributed in accordance with individual users' listening profiles, have not proven to correct the economic bias toward major labels and stars (*Ibid.*, pp. 183-184). Overall, given low per-stream payouts, individual streams only become substantial revenue generators when accumulated on a massive scale.

Many of the most streamed artists are signed to major record labels, or are star artists signed to independent labels that work with the majors for distribution (e.g. Taylor Swift). For example, in the United States, the top-10 streamed songs in the first quarter of 2017 were all by artists with connections to major labels (Christman, 2017), with 60 per cent of those artists affiliated with Universal – a company that generated 44 per cent of major label streaming revenue in the first quarter of 2017 (Mulligan, 2017b). Characterized by major music company representatives as a 'hit-economy on steroids' (quoted in Nordgård, 2016, p. 182), the streaming economy rewards superstars, with a select few achieving cumulative streams in the billions and corresponding payouts in the millions. As Des Freedman observes of the online media economy more broadly, 'there remains […] not simply a pattern of monopolistic (and sometimes oligopolistic) markets but an incentive for companies to produce "blockbusters" and an apparent willingness on the part of audiences to consume them' (Freedman, 2016, p. 109).

Contrast this with the case of unsigned and lesser known artists. Paul Resnikoff (2016) of *Digital Music News* was given access to the Spotify royalty statements of an unsigned artist who had achieved over a million streams – an impressive feat that nevertheless only yielded revenues estimated at US$4,955.90. Even in this successful case, little money remains to be divided between bandmates, managers, and so on. For artists signed to record deals, partnering companies would take a cut of such revenues as well (Mulligan, 2017c; Passman, 2015, p. 152).

Exposure to artists via streaming may encourage listeners to attend live performances, with such services serving a promotional function with parallels to radio. Despite gains overall, however, live music remains a source of risk. Impressive revenues in aggregate obscure costs and income for individual artists. Citing the cost of crew, food, accommodation, equipment, and commissions, entertainment attorney Donald Passman (*Ibid.*, p. 404) suggests weekly costs of US$10,000 for a four-person band headlining larger clubs. According to Mulligan (2017c), 'On average, around just 29% of live music revenue makes it back to the artist (after agents, costs etc are factored in) while many artists don't make any money on live until they've reached a certain level of scale. And that's before considering that the top 1% of live artists (many of whom are aging heritage acts) account for 68% of all live revenue.'

The high-risk, high-reward music industries remain highly concentrated, albeit with some new entrants in new markets. Next to the three major labels, the market shares of all independent record companies together add up to less than one third of the total market for recorded music, and the market for streaming services is likewise concentrated. What is distinctive about the streaming sector is that, at the time of writing, '[a]ll the key streaming services are either losing money or are part of a bigger company (which absorbs the losses)' (Mulligan, 2017e). Spotify reportedly lost US$601 million in 2016, despite the fact that the number of users rose to 50 million paid subscribers and 140 million users overall – losses resulting from deals and royalties committed to rights owners (Turner & Shaw, 2017). This dynamic underscores the value now placed on the user base and its connection to projected

growth, which complicates valuations of companies limited to revenue generation and profitability. Users and user data function as additional currencies (see Meier & Manzerolle, forthcoming), with services commanding massive user bases wielding considerable corporate power. This helps explain how Spotify's 2018 direct listing on the New York Stock Exchange managed to yield a staggering valuation of roughly US$26 billion (Spangler, 2018).

In the contemporary music industries, integration remains a response to risk, which has been coupled with diversification into the promotional industries (advertising, branding, and marketing). It should be noted that digitalization has encouraged vertical *disintegration* insofar as major record companies have less control over the distribution of music – an area now largely dominated by information technology (IT) companies (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, pp. 203-204). However, we have seen horizontal integration within the music industries (e.g. label mergers) and multisector integration, with companies from outside the traditional music business entering into music sectors, and major music companies extending their reach beyond the music industries proper. For example, digital retailer and cloud computing giant Amazon, which owns a music streaming service, has extended its interests into the ticketing sector and unveiled a concert series that will be exclusive to Amazon Prime members (Mulligan, 2017a), underscoring the close links between the music and IT industries (see Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2018). Concert promoter Live Nation, which merged with ticketing monopolist Ticketmaster in 2010, purchased a majority share of branding agency GreenLight, enabling that agency to tap into 'a staggering amount of data' (Waddell, 2016). And Sony Music launched its own advertising agency – Arcade Creative Group – in 2008 (Billboard, 2017; Taylor, 2012, p. 225).

The second key development relates to production costs. Despite savings created by digitalization, production costs remain high relative to reproduction costs. The professional studio production still sought by many recording artists remains a 'significant' expense, and 'marketing costs constitute a growing share of the budget as it becomes increasingly difficult to reach and build an audience' (Nordgård, 2016, pp.178-179; see also Marshall, 2013b, pp.582-583). In fact, I suggest that under the 'artist-brand' paradigm, which positions recorded music as just one revenue stream among many, marketing costs ought to be understood *as* production costs: investing in recording artists not only entails developing talent and recording albums, but also managing brand reputation and celebrity-building (see Marshall, 2013b). After all, as Graeme Turner points out, '[a]s the asset appreciates – as the celebrity's fame spreads – so does its earning capacity' (Turner, 2014, p. 37). Today, major record companies reportedly spend more on marketing and promotion for emerging artists – US$200,000-700,000 – than they do for all other activities (compare with US$150,000-500,000 for recording and US$50,000-150,000 for tour support) (IFPI, 2016, p. 6). According to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), with streaming it can take 'about a third longer, compared to physical and download formats, for a company to recoup its investment in an artist. Consequently, record companies are now funding and supporting sustained marketing campaigns for a longer period of time' (*Ibid.*, p. 11). In this context, IFPI (2017) research suggests that 70 per cent of unsigned artists in the United Kingdom would like to sign a record deal.

Third, the semi-public goods status of recorded music has been amplified. At the most obvious level, amid abundantly accessible digital music, it is apparent that music companies' mechanisms for maintaining artificial scarcity have been wrested open by internet-enabled

distribution, despite the continuation of strong copyright regimes. Streaming service experiments with exclusive artist deals and releases of varying durations (e.g. Tidal with Kanye West, Apple Music with Chance the Rapper, Amazon Music with Garth Brooks) (Billboard, 2017) can be interpreted as attempts to restore a type of artificial scarcity. More significantly, we do see a persistence of economies based on scarcity elsewhere: a select set of stars continue to receive a disproportionate share of revenue, audience attention, and interest from brands and streaming services that are seeking promotional deals. As observed by Jonathan Sterne, 'The worldwide proliferation of MP3 files announces the end of the artificial scarcity of recorded music, but it does not guarantee a more just or democratic organization of music. It simply reopens the organization of music – and the infrastructure that supports it – as a social question' (Sterne, 2012, p. 188). The music industries' organization around the production of celebrity marks an intensification of past approaches.

Fourth, the complex relationship between creativity and commerce remains a site of tension. However, in an era marked by escalating marketing influence and close relationships between artists and brands, we are seeing explicitly commercial and promotional considerations shape the creative process in direct ways, as the below section will demonstrate. In an age of branded content, a media environment is taking shape whose raison d'etre is selling.

**Music industries as promotional industries: Emerging logics**

While the cultural industries share important features, distinctive logics govern particular cultural industries. The music industries, which comprise recording, music publishing, live performance, and now streaming industries, are particularly complex. Miège's influential theorization of the cultural industries identified three key models or logics: the 'logic of the *publishing* of cultural commodities' (e.g. albums, books, and films); the '*flow* logic' (e.g. radio and television); and the 'logic of the *written press*' (Miège, 1989, p. 12; emphasis in original). Most relevant to an examination of the contemporary music industries, which are being shaped by both streaming and 'artist-brand' based business models, are the publishing and flow logics.

Historically, the recording industry abided by a publishing logic, as cultural commodities were sold to end consumers, hits and catalogues were used to mitigate risk and generate profits, and recording artists were remunerated through royalties and fees, not salaries – a system that disproportionately favoured stars (*Ibid.*, pp. 12, 136-137). Radio, which played an important supporting role by encouraging record sales, was governed by a flow logic characterized by: broadcasters providing a continual flow of planned programs (*Ibid*., p. 138), and, in the case of commercial models, '"creat[ing] an audience", because the financing is entirely assured by means of advertising' (*Ibid.*, p. 12). Potentially productive for understanding the music industries in the streaming age is Jean-Guy Lacroix and Gaëtan Tremblay's 'club logic', which they introduced to conceptualize subscription-based systems such as cable television, which involve financing via 'subscriptions, additional payment for specialized services or pay-per-view, and in many cases, […] advertising or sponsor revenues' (Lacroix & Tremblay, 1997, p. 64). More recently, Amanda D. Lotz (2017) developed a subscriber model to examine internet-distributed television services such as Netflix, for which advertising plays little role and a logic of curation has displaced that of scheduled programming.

Across the contemporary music industries, we see the coexistence of multiple logics. Fee-based music streaming services could potentially abide by Lotz's subscriber model, under which 'a user pay[s] a fee for access to a collection of cultural goods' that are curated by the service (*Ibid.*, p. 39). However, the significance Lotz places on internet-distributed television's disruption to established linear programming conventions highlights important differences between the television and music industries. While the non-linear experience of much streaming may be distinct from radio, it does not mark a break from listening practices tied to physical albums; audiences have long been able to choose what they want to listen to and when – at least of those albums in their personal libraries. Also, some of the most popular streaming services maintain ties with advertising (e.g. Spotify offers advertising-funded and subscription fee-based systems and Google's YouTube relies on advertising), suggesting that lessons might be learned from the flow model, but the 'problem of product obsolescence' characteristic of radio (immediately after a programme airs, there is need for another) (Miège, 1989, p. 138) does not apply, as entire catalogues are available on demand. Given that some services combine funding methods, perhaps the 'club logic' fits in some cases.

However, one model cannot capture the complex dynamics of the music industries. After all, the embrace of new businesses has not meant the abandonment of traditional revenue streams. Album sales may be on a severe decline, for instance, but it would be premature to strike this still sizeable revenue stream from the balance sheets altogether, meaning the publishing logic is still in force. We can use different models to grapple with specific music industries/sectors and cases.

Overarching power dynamics can be identified, however, which relate to the widespread licencing of music for use by third parties – be it by advertisers and brands or streaming services. This trend heightens the importance of business-to-business (B2B), as distinct from business-to-consumer (B2C), facets of music-related economies. As Garnham famously argued, '*It is cultural distribution, not cultural production, that is the key locus of power and profit*' (Garnham, 1990, pp. 161-162; emphasis in original) – a claim only strengthened by the influence now exercised by streaming services. Furthermore, the mode of finance and, hence, power of the financier produces dependencies and biases toward certain types of content, which are viewed as more commercially viable than others.

As we have seen, the music industries are now reliant on considerable financing from brands, advertisers, and marketers. Jonathan Hardy links 'enhance[d] advertiser influence on (non-advertising) media content' to 'the media entity's dependence on advertising finance', 'corporate level partnerships with marketers and marketing agencies', and 'user support/acceptance of advertising integration', among other factors (Hardy, 2017, p. 24). Given many streaming services' dependence on advertising, record companies' close partnerships with brands and branding firms (and even in-house ventures), and increasing acceptance of a dissolving boundary between advertising and popular music among listeners and recording artists, we see conditions that reinforce marketer power. Interestingly, Miège observed that, despite the centrality of advertisers to the flow logic, 'except in a few rare cases, sponsors stay away from the conception or planning of audiovisual programs, and remain satisfied with promoting their image' (Miège, 1989, p.140). As the below examples illustrate, we are now seeing brands intervene in the creative output.

No longer exclusively interested in simply licencing tracks by recording artists for use in advertisements, branding firms now produce content themselves. Like many similar firms today, GreenLight (mentioned above), a specialist in branded content, sees itself as a content producer, as reflected in company president Dominic Sandifer's statement: 'I think in the best situations we live in a co-creative society now between brands and artists' (quoted in Waddell, 2016). Playing to Live Nation's strengths in putting on spectacular performances, GreenLight arranged a 'collaboration' between Lady Gaga, Intel, and the Grammys, distributing content across digital and social media, and producing a Grammy performance in which Lady Gaga morphed into David Bowie using Intel technology (Waddell, 2016). Branded content of this sort seeks to erase the distinction between media and marketing, entertaining while it promotes (although Intel's role in the performance was advertised through a television commercial).

A promotional 'demo' video for *Over Here* by Rae Sremmurd provides another example. The video is 'Powered by Doritos', and while the branding is subtle (the video primarily features the group performing), as it closes, a handful of tortilla chips and a small Doritos logo appear (Oster, 2016). The point of branded content is to make brand messaging inviting and not something audiences wish to evade or block; excessive branding and egregious product placement are often avoided to prevent upstaging the artist and, hence, the entertainment value of the content.

In keeping with a purportedly 'co-creative' style, Canadian singer, songwriter, and producer The Weeknd signed up as 'creative collaborator and ambassador' for Puma, enabling Puma to combine the brand's 'sport-inspired designs and The Weeknd's street-motivated aesthetics' (press release in Chan, 2016). The Weeknd also 'curated' a fashion line for H&M (H&M, 2017).[1]

We are also seeing star artists being used to promote the adoption of new modes of media delivery. As Turner observes, celebrities serve a key function 'as a *branding* mechanism for media products that has assisted their fluent translation across media formats and systems of delivery' (Turner, 2014, p. 36; emphasis in original). Taylor Swift, who signed a multiyear deal with AT&T that grants the telecommunications company exclusive video content in return, performed at an AT&T/DirecTV-sponsored pre-Super Bowl program designed to support the launch of its content app (Billboard, 2017). Here we see a music celebrity used in efforts to drive up subscriptions to a television streaming service.

**Conclusion**

This chapter underscores important continuities stemming from the distinctive economics of the cultural industries, but also striking developments during a period of dramatic change. The music industries still economically hinge on hits and stars, with the fragmentation of revenues and increased competition arguably rendering the star system even more central today, producing considerable constraints for new artists. Major label artists with cadres of marketers at their disposal can generate streams in the billions and also garner lucrative branding

[1] Note that the Weeknd later severed ties with H&M in response to the company's troubling release of a hooded sweatshirt and corresponding 'promotional image of a black child dressed in a hoodie reading "coolest monkey in the jungle"' (Beaumont-Thomas, 2018).

partnerships. Indeed, the two phenomena I have examined – streaming and artist-brand deals – are deepening previous power asymmetries. Moreover, music is being remodelled in the image of promotional media, as it is being used to push products, lend cool cachet to brands, and deliver persuasive messages.

This increasingly promotional role of media content speaks to wider changes across the cultural industries, which have led Hardy to suggest that '[m]edia and marketing integration is arguably the next phase of convergence, following that of mass media, telecommunications, and computing' (Hardy, 2017, p. 21). The character of branded content and related practices is not best understood as the blurring of music and marketing, I suggest, but instead as the subordination of the former to the latter. For those who desire diverse music and artists, the shifts discussed are troubling, because marketer and brand-based modes of finance bring with them biases toward artists and content perceived as promotionally amenable and, hence, commercially viable. Important music that does not conform to the promotional paradigm may not be deemed a worthwhile investment.

**Further reading**

- Case: Examples of changes in the music industries brought about by digitalization and the expansion of music streaming services – Johansson (p. 309)
- Context: Five current issues and trends relating to the creative and cultural industries as a result of digitalization and the rise of the global communication giants – Miège (p. 73)
- Contrast: How platforms such as Spotify facilitate and profit from new forms of consumption without creating or producing content – Bilton (p. 99)

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