

The Impact of Technology on Music Star's Cultural Influence

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Abstract

This research paper addressed how technology has changed cultural relationships consumers have with music. The music industry's business model has undergone substantial change over the last decade, and understanding artists' cultural influence is critical in reevaluating their position in society. After a literature review tracking influence through the decades since the vinyl era, the author conducted a survey to determine how college students interact with music artists on Twitter and how they consume music. The results demonstrated high social connectivity of users to artists through Twitter and high levels of consumption of an individual artist's music through streaming services like Spotify. These findings suggest that modern media give music artists influence over a greater number of people.

I. Introduction

Few industries have gone through as much fundamental change as the music business. Technology has altered the structure of the industry, and the role of the artist has shifted as a result. From vinyl records to music streaming, the way society consumes music has changed from generation to generation. The ease of access that modern forms of music consumption provides individuals has also dramatically changed the perception of the iconic celebrity. No longer do powerful record labels have complete marketing control over a musical artist's image. Through contemporary consumption patterns, a teenage electronic DJ can reach hundreds of millions of listeners with digital media; and an unknown band can reach celebrity heights of popularity with a viral YouTube video. By analyzing history, we can now understand the enormous impact that past icons in the music industry have had on culture at the time. Elvis Presley created a youth movement and gave an entire generation its own identity. The influence of the Beatles was so large that it created social movements and political discourse. But the massive marketing efforts that went into the creation of these icons cannot be ignored. It was with great precision and careful execution that the image of these cultural entities became so powerful that they transcended entertainment and became a form of relation for entire social groups. Through a literature review of influential trends and a direct survey, this project examined if the power, influence, and cultural perception of music forces hold true in the current music industry.

II. Background

Two specific dynamics in the contemporary music industry have changed how society perceives

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musical influence in culture: the means of music consumption and the presentation of the artist to the public. These factors have been revolutionized through technology. In past decades, the album concept in music consumption generated hype, creating an event around the release of music. A new vinyl record was a cherished prize for the music fan. But the digital revolution has repeatedly changed this type of consumption. First, mass piracy and digital downloading affected not only sales of an album, but the album itself. While full-length albums were sold in their entirety, new forms of consumption allow the user to cherry-pick individual tracks from an album. Another drastic change arrived with the digital revolution in the newest form of consumption: music streaming. Any artist has the ability to immediately send his or her music through a popular medium, reaching an enormous user base. While this enables more music discovery, whether it boosts or diminishes the influence of that music and its creator needs to be determined.

Similarly, the presentation of the artist has changed greatly with technology. In previous decades, the record label and savvy marketers could control the portrayed image of a music celebrity to mass audiences. Through social media, the freedom of interaction between music artists and their fans has never been greater. The content creator and the content recipient are able to communicate with incredible ease and timeliness. But only a short time ago, music stars were held to a different standard. Passionate listeners perceived music stars in a near divine way. It was more than a form of entertainment; it was a catalyst of political change and cultural identity for large social groups. An integral component of self-identity was the music that individuals dedicated their preference and often loyalty to. (Frith and Simon 429). Treating a music star as a deity was in large part due to a near untouchable sense of connectivity. The media at the time could not provide the direct access that can be seen in our modern culture, thus causing a sense of untouchable allure and heightened celebrity worship. This immediate, personal disconnection from fans gave record labels and music industry executives the ability to build a desired image to market to these consumers, as the messages released to the public could be carefully crafted (Driver 64). However, Twitter and other forms of social media hinder music industry executives who act as gatekeepers between the artist's messages and the public. The music star has now become integrated with the culture, stripping the star of the former godliness and adding a more human element to the star's celebrity status. Through these new forms of interaction, it becomes clear that the relationships between artists and fans have changed.

III. Consumption Trends

In this section, the author first examined how music adopted different forms, such as tangible albums, downloadable bits of data, and evaporable audio streaming.

Physical Products

The popular medium for music consumption is a fascinating topic to research because it changes from decade to decade, with each new form having significant impact on both listeners and the music industry. The full album concept was first brought to consumerism through vinyl records and later CDs, and required the listener to commit to an entire collection of tracks. Records became a social commodity which people sought after, much in the way tech products capture the public interest today. The desire to obtain an album as a concrete product was instrumental in creating intrinsic value, shaping culture through a consumer's own desires. Consumerism became paired with the physical record, leading to a Marxian idea of social use value and an enhanced psychological association. The physical product of vinyl records fulfilled humans' desire for tangible ownership (Firth and Goodwin 429). A comparison can be made for today's cultural obsession with smartphones. While the apps and the functional abilities of the phone are our intended use of smartphones, we also desire to possess the phone itself.

The association of value with the physical element of the record led to a more fixated listening experience and more devotion to the product itself. Therefore, the psychological draw to the physical album creates a strengthened internal relationship with the music being heard once engaging with the product. Listeners became more engulfed in an artist and the music because of the attachment to the product they purchased.

Digital Downloading

As digital technology developed, the manner in which consumers listened to music changed. The first

major threat to the album concept came in the form of digital downloading and widespread piracy issues. In 2005, at the height of the digital downloading era, French collegiate students were examined to determine the effect that digital consumption had on CD purchasing (Bounie, Bourreau, and Waelbroeck 3). The ease in downloading shrank the number of users who would pay for music. Through empirical research and surveys, a study conducted at the University of Pennsylvania (Rob and Waldfogel 60) found that – at the most conservative estimate – users who engaged in downloading were 10-20% less likely to buy an album. This study, which was conducted at the forefront of the digital downloading movement, became the harbinger of the large financial loss that record labels endured. This new phenomenon was expedited by the enormously ineffective ways that a journal article (Huang 48) examined the record labels had been preventing mass piracy.

The ease in downloading also led to a “sampling effect” with more users experiencing more music. However, the study on French collegiate students showed that users began to seek online communities to share and discuss music, shedding light on the digital culture being created.

Since record labels controlled music celebrities, the collapse of the existing business model significantly stripped music artists of power and resources.

Regarding the relationship that fans began to develop with digital consumption, research has found fascinating aspects of consumerism in the digital era that echoed the changing sentiment consumers began to develop (Bahanovich and Collopy 17-20). For example, a survey of 14- to 24-year-olds in the United Kingdom gave insight into the consumption preferences of an Internet-savvy generation. While it found that streaming methods of listening to music were becoming increasingly popular, 89% of respondents stated ownership of music was still important to them. This finding drew parallels to a source of utility, or satisfaction from ownership, which is attributed to the physical copies of music. Although sales of the physical product sharply declined through digital consumption, building a personal library of music is still influential in the psychological relationship that consumers have with music. Although the traditional album concept deteriorates with streaming and MP3 downloading, which allows the user to choose specific tracks, developing a personal catalog of music to claim a sense of ownership remains relevant.

Streaming

Finally, a more in-depth study on the uses and practices of streaming must be examined, as it is the fastest growing form of consumption in our contemporary music climate. Spotify, one of the most popular forms of music streaming, was studied to discover the consumption patterns users showed with the service (Zhang et al. 3). Among other findings, two compelling consumption patterns were found: time spent using Spotify in one session and the total number of sessions throughout a day. Users had a more continuous listening experience when utilizing Spotify through a desktop, but significantly more sessions on the mobile app. Understanding this in the context of today’s society gives a firm understanding of the consumption patterns and the role of music in daily life. The large number of total sessions throughout the day provides evidence that as people are on the move and operating mobile devices, they are continuously engaged with music. Furthermore, a more fixated listening experience occurs when the consumer is engaged in a stationary location through the desktop application.

These two factors help build a theoretical basis to determine the influence of music in contemporary culture. It would appear that while the relationship between listener and medium is not as strong as the era of physical records, the time spent listening to music is greater than ever before due to constant access. With this extensive research into the ways music consumption has changed and affected the industry, a person can shift their focus to the past and contemporary marketing, as well as image, of the music star for their cultural influence.

IV. Marketing

Music has always been an introspective experience that resides internally, yet provides the external opportunity to demonstrate that attachment at events like concerts. While the music itself is the primary form of the relationship, the creator becomes the bodily symbol of the art they are creating. It is with this association that music artists have become the divine cultural icons who have served so many fans as a facilitator of culture, affecting everything from fashion to political beliefs.

The Star System

The same consumer desires that led to a social attachment to the physical recording of an album also drove the fans to worship those who create the commodity. The surge in recorded music gave life to the grand ideas of advertisers and marketers for the stars, initiated from the very beginnings of the youth culture. Elvis Presley was modeled along the popularity of Marlon Brando and James Dean. And with his success came a further influx of new artists designed to have the same image, ensuring an already established consumer base (Frith and Goodwin 432). Mass consumer habits, which revolve around these stars creating powerful modes of influence through popular music, led the fans to a sense of unity and “a guarantee of community in a world where it is lost” (Frith and Goodwin 436). Through identification with the music star and the music's messages, collections of fans created this sense of a mass audience.

Perhaps no single collection of musician embodied the star system as successfully as the Beatles. Manager Brian Epstein crafted every aspect of their image with incredible detail, including their iconic, boyish haircuts, which first grabbed attention from media upon their arrival in the United States. He sculpted their onstage presence, requiring that they bow after performing and cease smoking and other crude actions while in the public view (Driver 43-45). These actions were meant to mold the Beatles into entities that could be perceived as cultural stars, rather than just artists, giving them the type of coverage to transcend their music alone. The crafted image was skillful enough to land performances on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and other broadcasts, which in turn led to the phenomenon of the band's success.

Impact of MTV

Wide consumer demands for music as a commodity undoubtedly elevated the music star's aura to incredible heights. But another medium was perhaps an equally important factor to this image creation: the birth of MTV. While the potential impact of television implemented within the music industry was first noted with the success of the Beatles on programs like *The Ed Sullivan Show*, this full channel dedicated to entertainment convergence created a marketing strategy that engulfed music artists for a lengthy time.

In the 1980s, MTV became an entertainment staple for a majority of young music fans, whose magnet attraction to these artists gave them significant cultural influence. This sentiment grew so quickly that this new entertainment medium came to affect the entire industry. In one example, A Flock of Seagulls, a band with limited success in its home country of England, came to the United States in the form of a single, titled “I Ran.” While record executives believed it would have minimal impact as a hit single, an interesting music video on MTV led the song to enormous success and eventually broke the top 10 in music charts (McGarth 85-87). Record labels immediately realized the impact MTV had on music charts and addressed their promotional efforts accordingly. This also allowed the music star to transcend a single auditory medium and reach a pinnacle of influence through a variety of consumer trends. No longer was an artist limited to an auditory sense of power; the visual effect of videos gave fans a new method of idolizing the content creator (Ogden 124). Furthermore, adapting visual content to its messages could revitalize the energetic and sexual demeanor of music culture, which had consistently characterized the youth movements of the past. While music in an auditory consumption medium had successfully charged youthful fans with a freely expressed sexually drive, adding a visual element to such latching messages added additional power.

Similarly, the leverage MTV gave music through a cable network produced the first format of a recognizable playlist throughout the country. Forming a national music playlist by broadcasting the same videos to the same areas across the United States revolutionized the previous regional personality for music preference (Jones 85). MTV viewers in Nebraska were exposed to the same music as viewers in New York. Boosting fandom to an increasingly large audience in this manner maximized the reach of influence for an artist and contributed to a further installment of iconic figures with the potential to become recognizable to a nation with a single popular video.

Social Media Era

As MTV shifted its strategy to fewer music videos and more traditional television, the influence of the medium on a song's success shrank as well. And while new media, such as YouTube, preserve the ability to disseminate music videos, the “nationwide playlist” aspect was no longer relevant. But with the rise of the social media era comes a new medium that has interesting effects for the star system and new possibilities for interaction between content creators and recipients. While the past media we have examined lifted music

stars to heights the ordinary fan presumably could not reach or interact with, social media has positively affected the connectivity between artist and listener. A continuously increasing number of people can tweet at a music star through a single click on a mobile device, providing a means of accessibility that has never before been achievable (Marwick and Boyd 140). "Part of the appeal is . . . the direct access to a famous person, particularly 'insider' information, first-person pictures, and opinionated statements" (142). The direct communication a fan has with the artist and media content they choose to share on social media is more impactful than media such as gossip magazines because it perceivably comes straight from the celebrity. Because of this freedom, a manager with even the savviest marketing prowess cannot control an artist's image in the same way we have examined in the past. With just one regrettable tweet, a music star can sabotage this crafted image instantaneously. This continuous, omnipresent connectivity forces a more authentic, yet often less cultivated, image portrayed to the public.

Although this constant availability for interaction has in many ways provided a less divine aspect to celebrity worship, it also creates a permanent surveillance (Marshall 39). While the overall perception of the music star may not be in as high regard as the pinnacle of the star system, the attention given to the star has never been greater. Rather than just following an artist for the music they produce, daily aspects of life are now a quintessential element followers enjoy and sometimes expect from celebrities through social media. In fact, this ability to stay updated on seemingly ordinary occurrences in an artist's life is a driving factor for its popularity among Millennials. Past studies have shown that following entertainment icons is by far the biggest catalyst driving the contemporary youthful generation to Twitter, amplifying the sense of constant surveillance for music stars (Hargittai and Litt 828). Therefore, the content an artist produces is now more than just music. Fans following artists seek pictures, videos, and tweets of information on their daily lives.

V. Methods

By analyzing how users interact with music stars and how they consume artists' music, we can find the total influence of music celebrities in modern culture. A survey was conducted with college students to understand artists' current influence with four questions.

Question 1: Do you follow any famous music artists on Twitter?

This question was asked to understand to what degree music celebrities could impact collegiate students. People who follow music stars on Twitter did so intentionally, giving an indication that the celebrity has at least some role in the consumer's life. Simply reading tweets from music stars on a timeline can begin to plant the roots for a level of influence, as the messages released by an artist are constantly on display.

Question 2: Have you ever tweeted at or retweeted a music artist on Twitter?

Tweeting at or retweeting a celebrity further reflects a music celebrity's level of impact. While reading a tweet from a celebrity is entertaining, making the conscious decision to interact with an artist on social media is a strong display of a heightened level of influence. At the same time, tweeting and retweeting can create a trickle down effect. For example, if person P follows artist A, person P's followers will be exposed to person P's interaction with artist A through the former's timeline, even though person P's followers may not directly follow the artist.

Question 3: What is your preferred way to listen to music (iTunes downloads, Spotify, Soundcloud, Pandora, etc.)?

As mentioned earlier, the album concept has suffered due to digitalized downloading and streaming. While past findings gave insight that building a personal music library was still important to listeners because of the desire to have some form of music ownership, we can now test how steadfast that sentiment currently is by comparing it to the usage level of streaming platforms, which do not provide a form of ownership.

Question 4: Do you usually listen to the same artist for more than 20 minutes in one sitting?

While the album as one entire entity may be less desired, this does not necessarily mean the influence of the artist would be lessened. Through building a personal digital library or streaming, consumers have access to large quantities of music from the same artist. In fact, services like Spotify can give the listener access to every song some artists have every created. Therefore, the time spent engaging with an artist's discography is a much better indicator of his or her influence level on a consumer.

According to The Official UK Charts Company, a collection of music can officially be labeled as an album should it reach at least 25 minutes in time. Upon modernized practices of consumption, 25 minutes of listening to one artist's discography would therefore result in a comparable level of engagement. To account for shorter-playing products like EPs (extended play) and to simplify the survey question, the time length was unified into one measurement of 20 minutes.

The survey was emailed to 151 Elon University students of different demographics. They were randomly selected from various email lists and class rosters to ensure a well-balanced, eclectic mix of Elon students.

VI. Results

Among 151 students sent the survey, 64 (42%) responded. Among the respondents, 46 (72%) answered that they do follow famous music artists on Twitter. Of these students who choose to follow the distributed messages of celebrities on social media, 33 stated that they had tweeted at or retweeted a celebrity in the past.

Regarding their preferred form of music consumption, Spotify was chosen by 27 respondents (42%), followed by iTunes with 14 respondents; Soundcloud with 8 users; Pandora, 8; 8tracks, 3; YouTube, 3; and Rdio, 1. Spotify, Soundcloud, Pandora, and 8tracks all involve similar streaming models. All except Soundcloud contain free ad-supported versions, in addition to premium services available. However, it should be noted that at this writing, Soundcloud is in the process of adapting the same business model.

Spotify, Rdio, and Soundcloud each offer the ability to journey across the channel, seeking whatever song the user desires. Soundcloud has been more popular among lesser known artists and DJs for its social media-type format that allows quick uploading and efficient access. Pandora and 8tracks are more suited to playlist-oriented abilities. Pandora uses a massive quantity of artists and songs, then pairs them with an internal algorithm to determine their identity and allow users to create "radio" stations of styles similar to an initial selected song or artist. 8tracks allows users to customize and upload their own playlists, giving other users the ability to share and discover them. Finally, YouTube is not solely a music provider, but does have a large catalog of songs and music videos on its website.

Among the 64 respondents, 42 (66%) indicated that they do usually listen to one musician for more than 20 minutes, the approximated minimum album length.

There were interesting metrics resulting from these respondents. Twenty-five answered "yes" to all four questions. Eight respondents answered "yes" to both questions regarding social media. Furthermore, 17 respondents answered "no" to both social media questions, but *did* usually listen to an artist for more than 20 minutes.

VII. Analysis

The 25 of the 64 respondents (39%) who stated they follow music stars on Twitter, have retweeted or tweeted at celebrities in the past, and usually listen to one specific artist for more than 20 minutes, can be listed as "high influence" user. The music star clearly plays a large role in their lives and has a strong level of influence in their social media interaction and personal listening habits. Consciously interacting with a music star on Twitter hints at respondents' psychological relationship and their followers' indirect relationship with the star through the social trickle down effect. While the allure to the commodity of a physical album is still not present, the time spent within the music is still a character of contemporary fan culture.

The eight respondents (13%) who answered "yes" to questions 1 and 2 on Twitter, but spent less than 20 minutes on each artist, can be defined as "high social influence" user. This category suggests a lack of dedication or interest in a single star's music. Although this would cripple an artist's ability to influence in the past, the draw of Millennials to follow music stars and other entertainment Twitter accounts opens new possibilities for future intensive interaction.

In addition, 17 of the respondents (27%) did not follow or interact with music stars on Twitter, but did often spend more than 20 minutes listening to a single discography, placing them in the category of "high mu-

sical influence” user. Despite having access to so many different artists with simply the click of a button, these users still dedicate their time to particular artists when consuming music. But despite a high musical influence, they choose not to interact with the same artists socially on Twitter, which evidences that a more classical relationship to the artist is still present. The preferred music platforms of these respondents were divided among Spotify (6 users), iTunes (3 users), Soundcloud (3 users) and others.

Spotify was the overwhelming favorite platform for the entire pool of respondents. Three users for iTunes suggests that the concept of owning music is not as relevant as past studies indicated.

VIII. Conclusion

These results show that the yearning for ownership established in the vinyl era is now extinct, with streaming services becoming the most popular forms of consumption among college students. Furthermore, the high level of direct interaction through Twitter with music artists suggests that the past perceived divine, “untouchable” state and epic aura around music stars have diminished significantly from their apex.

The previously mentioned study on Spotify users showed listeners engaging in large number of sessions while on mobile devices, and long durations while at a desktop. This allows listeners more time than ever before to consume music. While active and moving throughout the day, users are constantly opening the music app, showing they are constantly engaging in new listening sessions, wherever they may be. When they are stationary, they use the streaming service for long durations of time, showing that they always have a steady access to music. The survey results showed that the vast majority of respondents used some form of streaming service. Applying these two findings, it can be concluded that modern college students are engaged with music more often than ever before because of the total time streaming services allow student users to listen to any of the millions of songs on the app, which have never before been available.

Following the logic of a sharp increase in overall time spent consuming music as indicated in the Spotify study, paired with high rates of interaction between fans and music stars, an understanding of modern influence begins to form. Current marketing and media have humanized the stars to a greater degree than ever before, but the rise in overall consumption of music consumers sustain usually by listening to the equivalency of an artist’s album in one session has created new forms of influence. Therefore, the iconic image of the star is not as relevant as before, but the influence is greater than ever before due to the high rates of social engagement now available, combined with a large base of listeners still consuming an artist’s music for the equivalency of an album length. Social media and the lack of interest in album ownership may take power from the music star. But fans today are heavily invested in the actions of the star and constantly engaged with music. Likewise, the star is now embedded in the culture he or she helps shape through direct contact with followers. Although more human, the influence of the music star has only grown because there are more channels for influence, and the time a listener spends engaged in an artist’s work has not wavered despite the option to listen to any song by any artist on a streaming service with ease.

The music industry, facing a collapsing business model, has searched for a more efficient approach without much success since the rise of the MP3 era (McLeod 522). While royalties from streaming services seem to be at the forefront of the industry’s present struggle, it may be advantageous for both sides to focus on new forms of income by taking advantage of intense relationships between artists and their followers.

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