



How can independent music artists use digital marketing strategies to influence their success in the industry?

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Abstract: For independent musicians, the modern music industry presents numerous challenges - including limited resources, intense competition, and a lack of recognition. To overcome these obstacles and achieve success, such artists need to implement effective marketing techniques that enable them to engage with their intended audience, develop a devoted fan base, and generate income. However, because every independent musician has a unique genre, style, personality, and goals, they require a personalised marketing strategy. This research paper provides insight into a variety of digital marketing techniques - including social media, email marketing, and streaming platforms amongst others - that independent musicians can use and further evaluates them in the context of their effectiveness for Indian independent music artists by conducting a case study on one of the most successful Indian indie artists i.e. Prateek Kuhad.

Key Words: *Music, Independent music artists, Marketing, Digital marketing strategies*

Introduction

Imagine the most tedious, uninteresting advertisement you have ever seen, whether it be a huge plain, dull picture on a billboard, or a long video where there is a man, aimlessly talking about a product on Youtube. Would you have stayed to watch the video? Would you have paid attention to the billboard? Chances are you didn't and that's not your fault. It's because of poor marketing. Now imagine an advertisement being done differently, one where it is eye-catching, attention-grabbing, innovative, and out of the ordinary. The response to this advertisement would surely be positive and thus attract customers which could potentially result in sales. This is an example of the *power of marketing*.

The music industry like many other industries relies heavily on marketing, this is because it brings awareness to listeners about new songs, albums, EP releases etc. Take a popular artist from today such as Charlie Puth, a four-time Grammy nominee. His “big break” song “See You Again” with Wiz Khalifa (which won multiple awards) only became popular since it was on the track list of the movie “Furious 7” (Caramanica, 2018). This then gave Charlie Puth the required exposure, gaining him fans, followers, a record label etc. Before acquiring a record label Charlie Puth would be called an *independent music artist*

What is an independent music artist? We will get back to that. First, we will in brief look into what is a record label and what it does. A *record label* is a company that manufactures, distributes, and promotes music recordings and videos. It performs tasks like finding and developing new artists, managing contracts, and enforcing copyrights. A record label may sign artists to exclusive deals and own the rights to their recordings (Davie, 2020). Now to get back to the previous question. An independent music artist is a musician that isn’t signed to a record label. This would mean that all the functions of a record label would be on the independent music artist’s shoulders. Tasks such as recording, manufacturing, distributing and the point this research paper covers marketing. (Laura, 2022)

Independent music artists can often find it difficult to market their music by themselves - having to have to stand out, independent artists need to be innovative and think out of the box (Ekimov, 2021). Digital media (like Instagram) is a great marketing tool that can help achieve this. Therefore. this research paper aims to answer the question “***How can independent music artists use digital marketing strategies to influence their success in the industry?***”

This paper argues that independent music artists should invest in digital marketing strategies as these can be incredibly beneficial for them and their careers.

Marketing for independent music artists

Steuart Henderson Britt, (who was a professor of Marketing at the School of Commerce and Professor of Advertising at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University) once said “*Doing business without advertising is like winking at a girl in the dark*” (Pasqualone, 2014). You know what you are doing, but nobody else does which no matter how odd it may sound is quite true and is applicable in all business industries in which marketing is involved. Say for example “Mr X” is an upcoming artist who has produced a new song, which could potentially be a multi-award-winning song. If the right steps of marketing aren’t taken, nobody would know about its existence and this would ultimately lead to a song/artist that failed to reach its potential. This once again reiterates the importance of marketing in the music industry.

The main objectives of marketing in the music industry can be better understood through the Diffusion of Innovations theory according to which a new idea or innovation, in this context, the music artist's brand and music, would spread through a five-stage social system consisting of knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation (Halton, 2021). At the very beginning of a music artist's career, it is expected that not many would know of them, their music and their brand. Therefore, through the use of targeted marketing strategies, the music artist can achieve one of the most crucial steps i.e. the creation of 'knowledge' about the aforementioned and essentially work on establishing themselves in the industry (Ekimov, 2021). It is also vital for music artists to consistently work on enhancing the brand image that they create for themselves as the manner in which they are marketed to the audiences can play a big role in 'persuading' potential fans of their value and uniqueness (Nevue, 2020) and consequently help them to 'decide' to become listeners. Once a music artist has started to gain a fanbase, the role of marketing does not stop there. Instead, marketing must be used to consistently promote the songs, albums and EP releases of the artists so they are 'implemented' by the audiences. Moreover, the final stage of 'confirmation' is also attained through constant marketing which is successful at fostering loyalty and advocacy amongst the fan base. Interestingly, one of the features in music marketing that is not that common in other marketing industries is that it enables the fanbase to make an emotional connection with the artist - whether it be on a song track where the music consists of various licks, harmonies, solos, etc that conveys that emotion or whether it be an interview of the artist that goes in deep about the story of the song (or of the artist themselves) (Jimdo, 2022). The point is, the 'connection' between listener and performer can be formed and provide even further confirmation of the artist, their music and their brand.

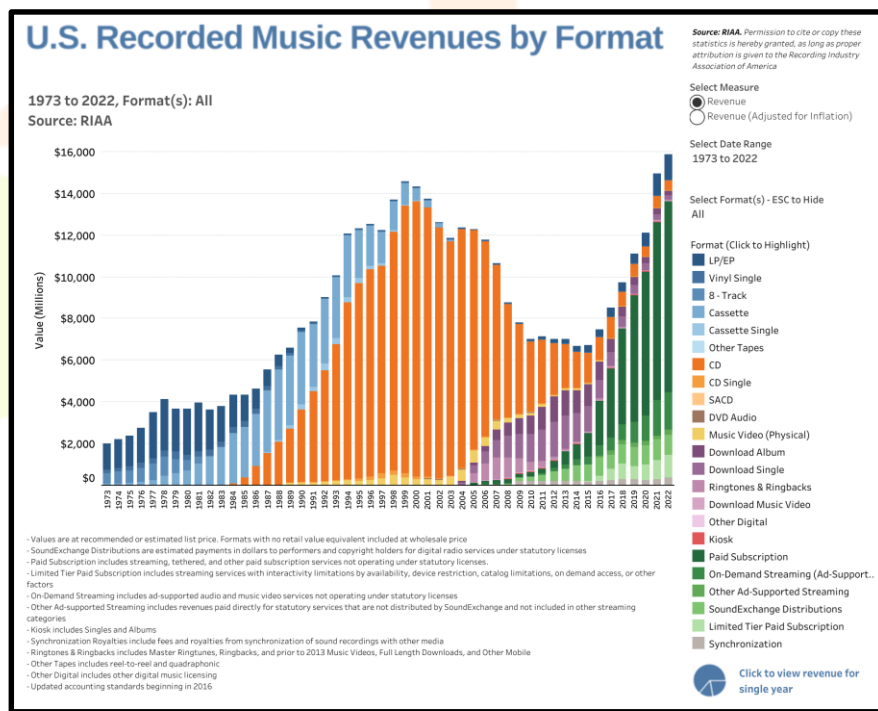
So now that the purpose and objectives of music marketing have been analysed, we will look into its significance to independent music artists. While it may seem that being an independent artist would have multiple pros such as freedom in deciding what music to write/produce, having complete control over finances and decision-making in marketing, unfortunately, there are certain drawbacks with the most prominent being an increased workload and access to limited resources stemming from the lack of presence of a record label who would otherwise help the artist with marketing, recording, distributing, etc. Other drawbacks include burnout and a limited number of connections in the industry. All the aforementioned suggests an increased importance of marketing for music artists as well as a need for them to be more innovative in their marketing strategy i.e. ensuring that they are consistently marketing themselves in a manner that helps them stand out from the competition with the use of the limited resources, including minimal budgets, that may be available to them (The Inspirational Edit, 2023).

Evolution of independent music artist marketing into the digital space

What are the strategies that independent music artists can take advantage of, in the digital space, to market their music? To answer that first, we must look into how it all started. Music is an active part of cultures around the world and has been this way long before it was made into an industry. It was around the mid-1800 when

musicians at that time began to market their music on a wide scale by using sheet music and songbooks to sell to customers so that people could play the music at home with their instruments. Songs would become popular if it was performed on tours by the artists. Thus began the initial stages of the music industry (and its marketing). Then in 1877, Thomas Edison's invention of the phonograph (record player) changed the way that people would listen to music, allowing them to listen to the music played by the artist without having to listen to it live or play it. It also affected performers being allowed to market their music differently. This also caused a challenge to the performer, because of a lack of information on how to make records. Thus came the rise of music record labels. Record labels had such an impact that all performers had to be signed to one if they wanted to have a career in the music industry. The first few record labels were Columbia and Victor. In time radio and vinyl records were also developed and thus led to another marketing strategy which record labels and artists could use for promotion and distribution. It was around the 1980s that CDs and cassettes were invented leading to another way to distribute an artist's music (James, 2023). Record labels had extreme importance in the music industry. That is until the 2000s.

The transition to digital marketing began in the early 2000s (when the internet started to boom). With mobile phones becoming popular, streaming services such as Napster started to form which soon led to streaming services of today such as Spotify, and Apple Music which have a wider reach than all the traditional strategies. Social Media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok also were formed which resulted in a whole world of possibilities. Thus, the dynamic of record labels started to change (Fountain, 2021).



(RIAA, 2022)

So now that the 'evolution of music marketing' has been explained we will take a closer look into the digital marketing strategies that an independent music artist would use.

Social media

The Media Richness Theory by Daft and Lengel (1986) proposes that different communication channels are likely to vary in their ability to convey information effectively. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Youtube and so forth allow independent music artists to share their music, videos, photos, stories, and updates of their career as well as day-to-day life with their fans and potential fans. They can also interact with them directly, receive feedback, and create a sense of community (Keith, 2022). This highlights the myriad of opportunities that social media platforms provide to artists to create a more immersive and interactive experience which ultimately allows them to create a connection with fans.

Email marketing

Email marketing is a way of sending personalised and relevant messages to subscribers who have opted in to receive them. Independent music artists can use email marketing to inform their fans about their latest releases, upcoming shows, merchandise, and exclusive offers. Email marketing has the potential of increasing fan loyalty and retention to a very great extent (Keith, 2022). For instance, the Reciprocity Principle suggests that individuals commonly feel compelled to reciprocate when someone does something beneficial for them (Budiu, 2014). In this context, if a music artist sends personalised content or exclusive insights via emails, the target audience benefits from a sense of special treatment which they are then likely to reciprocate with a greater level of loyalty.

Website

A website is a central hub where independent music artists can showcase their music, biography, portfolio, tour details, contact information, and links to their social media and streaming platforms. A website can also help independent music artists to sell their music and merchandise directly to their fans, collect email addresses, and track analytics. On the whole, a website can help in developing a brand image for the artist (Dittomusic, 2019). Moreover, it has been noted that whilst the relevance of an artist on social media platforms may fluctuate as a result of changing algorithms, a website provides a much more stable and permanent forum for a consistent digital platform - further highlighting the importance of this as a marketing tool.

Streaming platforms

Streaming platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, Soundcloud and YouTube Music allow independent music artists to distribute their music to a global audience with much ease. This removes the hassle of producing CDs, vinyl records, etc. as was traditionally required. Furthermore, streaming platforms can also help independent music artists to gain exposure, recognition, and popularity through playlists, algorithms, recommendations, and charts (Keith, 2022). For instance, Spotify is deeply engaged with training their algorithms to analyse user listening behaviour and consequently curating and providing them with personalised playlists including Discover

Weekly or Release Radar (Marius, 2021). Such playlists have great potential for independent artists as their songs may be included in them and allow exposure to a relevant audience.

Online advertising

Online advertising is a way of paying to display ads on websites, apps, social media platforms, search engines, or streaming platforms that are relevant to the target audience. Independent music artists can strategically use online advertising to increase their visibility. For instance, the mere exposure effect implies that people are likely to develop a preference for things that they are repeatedly exposed to (Cherry, 2023). Online advertising is a tool that can be used to consistently showcase a music artist to potential fans across several digital platforms. The repeated exposure allows audiences to become more familiar with the name and music of the artist attracting new audiences and generating more conversions.

Case study of Indian independent music artists using digital marketing

In late 2020, Prateek Kuhad became the first Indian music artist to be signed by Elektra Records - an American record label. This was only possible because of the immense success that Kuhad witnessed as an independent artist in the previous years. He became popular with the release of his song “cold/mess” (released on July 13th 2018) which was written, produced and performed by himself. It quickly became a hit, topping the iTunes India all-genre album chart. He gained such popularity from listeners that it was even included in Former U.S. President Barrack Obama's list of favourite music (Savage, 2020). Prateek’s popularity only kept increasing after releasing more singles, EPs and albums. He also held several concerts in which thousands of fans attended to witness the performance. He has also been featured on the cover of several magazines such as Rolling Stones India (February 2020 issue) among others. But before his rise to fame, Prateek Kuhad was just an artist who made music. So how did he gain popularity?

After completing his higher studies Prateek began to pursue music, which in time led to his first EP Raat Raazi (2012). By uploading his music on **digital platforms** such as **YouTube**, he slowly started to gain listeners - though not as many as after his hit release “cold/mess” it was good enough for a first. He then produced and released an album and other singles, continuing to promote them on **YouTube**, before his hit song “cold/mess”. The number of listeners, and fans he acquired increased over time. He was also active on other social media platforms such as **Instagram**, in which he would upload short reels of his music and would also post about his personal life, giving listeners ‘a window’ to see who Prateek Kuhad is. He would also upload **behind-the-scenes videos**, and share updates about upcoming concerts, and music to allow his fans to feel more involved. Moreover, Kuhad would give listeners the chance to receive albums early through an **email** subscription service (which was used for the release of “cold/mess”). (Sood, 2018) Furthermore, the music videos which were used for his songs also played a big role. For example, the music video for his song Kasoor involves several of his fans reacting to

questions. His other **music videos** tell a short emotional story which captivates the viewer's attention, making them want to return to watch the video. Other than the aforementioned, he also uses music streaming services such as **Spotify** to allow fans to listen to his music. Above all, his style of music is different from that which is normally listened to by the Indian audience which is another unique selling point for Prateek (Savage, 2020).

As clearly shown by the example of Prateek Kuhad, and even witnessed in the examples of other artists such as 'When Chai Met Toast' and 'Parekh and Singh', Indian independent artists can be successful in the music industry if the right steps are taken i.e. if corrective use of digital marketing strategies is made.

Evaluation of digital marketing for Indian independent music artists

So based on this case study, we can see digital marketing's impact and importance. By using various and effective strategies of digital marketing, an independent artist can acquire a following of fans and listeners over time to possibly become a multi-award-winning artist. However, the Indian market does have some drawbacks such as the inaccessibility to the TikTok application due to its ban by the Indian government. TikTok, although fairly new, has gained a lot of users, reaching 1 billion users in 2022 (BBC, 2022). The ability to access such a global platform has had evident benefits for artists of all kinds, particularly musicians. For instance, Charlie Puth's (renowned artist mentioned in the intro) newest album 'CHARLIE' was mainly marketed on TikTok, with him showing small clips of how he would be producing the tracks. Songs such as 'Light Switch', 'I Don't Think That I Like Her' and most that feature on the album had been marketed/shared on TikTok. This created the necessary "hype" over the album, getting a lot of listeners instantaneously. Thus, because of the ban, Indian independent artists lose out on a significant marketing opportunity.

Moving past TikTok, digital marketing in the Indian market is very accessible and easy to use. With independent artists often having very high workloads (since it has to be done by themselves) digital marketing can help make one aspect of their career easier (when compared to traditional methods) which could help them from burnout. However, digital marketing can also put pressure on artists in the constant effort to build a brand image which gets them the followers required. Even beyond this, artists have to continuously adhere to their created brand image to meet fans' expectations. If not done so, the artist can receive backlash from fans, media, press, etc., which may negatively impact the reputation and brand image the artist has worked on. In simple terms, the artist has to be authentic in the brand image they try to set, and not deceive themselves or their fans.

Apart from these points, digital marketing in the Indian music industry plays a pivotal role, that can take unknown, upcoming artists to great heights.

Conclusion

Marketing in general plays a crucial role in all industries since it is a way that consumers can be informed about products in the market. With advancements in technology (such as the internet), (digital) marketing now has a wider reach and is more easily accessible to others. In light of the aforementioned, this research paper aimed to explore how digital marketing strategies can influence the success of independent music artists.

Marketing in the music industry is vital as it can be used to establish an artist, create their brand image, promote the music they produce and establish/ maintain a fanbase. Usually in the music industry, an artist is signed to a record label which carries out many important functions which include marketing. Those not signed to a record label are called independent artists, which means that all tasks would have to be done by the artist. Independent music artists may use various digital marketing strategies such as the use of social media applications (such as Instagram, Facebook, etc), streaming platforms for the distribution of their music (Spotify, etc,) online advertising, content (such as behind the scenes videos, music videos, etc), etc, which all have a wide reach to consumers (internationally as well). Independent artists however have to be more creative and innovative when they market their music in order to gain listeners. This was seen in the case study of Prateek Kuhad - an independent music artist from India.

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