

The Commodification of Music in the Age of Curated Experience

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## **Abstract**

In a modern culture wherein the primary mode of consumption of music is through streaming platforms, information technology conglomerates continue to dominate modes of consumption of popular music, and thus, gain broader and more powerful control over the commodification and distribution of music. Historically, critiques of the entertainment industry and cultural commodification began with the Frankfurt School scholars Theodore Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Max Horkheimer, among others. Such arguments criticized the standardization of songs and the formulaic processes that began to take shape as record labels and music business entities vied for commercial success. Today, the ubiquitous presence of the Internet and refined algorithmic analysis have sparked a resurgence of these arguments in the context of the datafication of society, the technological trend in which many aspects of life are turned into valuable consumer data to be sold and profited from. This thesis explores the ramifications of such influence in commercial music, from its production to its promotion, through the lens of technological developments that affect artist integrity and creative independence. To examine this fundamental tension today, the career and influence of UK band The 1975 will be analyzed using the theories originally proposed by the Frankfurt school as an example of the difficulties in cultivating a massive loyal following while remaining decidedly independent from corporate influence.

**Key Terms:** digitalization, music industry, popular music, streaming, critical theory, technology

## Introduction

Digital consumption has increasingly become the primary form of listening to music as information technology companies continue to dominate modes of distribution of popular music. Though recorded music began to be packaged and sold in the 1940s, the formation of the recorded music industry quickly expanded to support artist careers from songwriting to live performances. However, as social and technological change led to widespread distribution of music through illegal file sharing in the 2000s, major labels shifted to encompass more of an artist's business, from activities to other art forms and revenue streams through what is now commonly known as a 360 deal (Negus, 2019a). The profitability of an artist's career now extends beyond the music performed. Within this structure, everything from brand partnerships and merchandise sales to touring are all up for negotiation for major corporations to recoup their investments in an artist's success.

The increasing involvement of the information technology and data industry in music contributes to the tensions that already exist between music companies and artists, raising questions of artistic integrity and fair compensation in the midst. Just as social critic Theodor Adorno referred to cultural production as an unsavory assembly line, artists frown upon the idea of the creative work being referred to as a product (Negus, 2019a). In a cultural climate that increasingly prioritizes and values authenticity and vulnerability in artistic expression, critiques addressing the valuation of music and the implications of wielding ad-serving content platforms as the main hubs for access to vast catalogs of music have resurfaced. Much of the drive for continuous exploitation of records previously depended on the industry's constant need to keep the lights on in pressing plants, inventory management systems, and shipping businesses. While

the costly infrastructure of the supplementary arms that previously maintained and upheld much of the music industry has since shifted to digital platforms of distribution, the same pace of rapid creation and dissemination that marks free market capitalism and the culture of the technology industry persists. Mass marketing tools and streaming platforms provide optimized menus to choose from in order to satisfy our emotional needs while the culture industry, defined by the Frankfurt School to be the commercial marketing of culture, continues to gain power over individual expression in an era marked by self-determination and postmodernity.

Access to information exploded with the advent of ubiquitous online connection, and as a result, the overwhelming nature of engaging everything at once has burgeoned into a cultural moment marked by distrust, false truths, intense bricolage, humor, and broad skepticism. One of the most enticing powers ushered in by prevalent Internet use is the ability to disguise true identities, explore different personas, or play with reinventions of self. Art curator and writer Gene McHugh describes the wide availability of methods to symbolically posture yourself in an amorphous environment like the Internet as a “place to escape reality and play make-believe” (Kholeif, 2014, p. 31). With these tools, artists remove many of the constraints that formerly held them to specific genres and limited their ability to curate their own audiences. Today, the endless possibilities to construct new identities with each album cycle give artists new opportunities to stay relevant in an ever-changing culture. Social media platforms can provide a way for artists to communicate immediacy and closeness, yet their offerings may hurt the artist despite being financially profitable by compromising integrity and independence. Platforms built upon mass approval favor popularity and suggest to users how to best play to the likes of others. The informality and immediacy of social media belies the performative nature of maintaining an impression that is sincere and genuine, while seemingly spontaneous and casual. Consequently,

“to the extent that authenticity is not a being but a doing – to convincingly perform sincerity – authenticity is always up for negotiation” (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2018, p. 172). Some artists have traditionally held a certain distance from widely sharing their private lives with the world, the details of which, when exposed, were often spun into eye-catching headlines for gossip blogs or sold as highly dramatized fodder for celebrity news outlets. Instead, they have decided to focus on their albums to serve as windows into their creative interpretations of the world and their human experience. Choosing to project their authenticity through their music focuses the attention of their audiences on the art they create, rather than the noise they generate online.

However, social media has been harnessed to launch new artists. Building buzz can often come in the form of staging fake drama, posting selfies, or spreading rumors. When the buzz becomes newsworthy or influential enough, it can lead to new business opportunities. In fact, some artists come from social media backgrounds, wherein their influence as micro-celebrities has created an audience to which music, amongst other streams of user-generated content, is now sold. As users establish themselves as a brand, they assume the position of a micro-celebrity, wherein they “follow along the reciprocal logic of creating attention on the part of [themselves] and [receive] immediate acknowledgement from audiences in the form of subscriptions, followings, and comments” and eventually monetary transactions (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2018, p. 169). This constantly evolving nature and blurring between music and other forms of media content complicates the process of communicating genuine artistic expression. In a postmodernist society, wherein authenticity is questioned and subjective truths favored, determining the parameters of what defines a music artist from a content creator becomes unclear.

Within this framework, popular music that seeks mass appeal continues to grow in terms of quantity and availability. Each day, thousands of songs are uploaded to streaming platforms as content platform subscriptions soars. As a result of technological innovation, music has become easier to produce and distribute. Artists can readily access production software from a laptop and upload their finished products through tools requiring merely an internet connection. Such ease and access undermine the gatekeepers that previously controlled much of the what the broader public audience consumed and found to be enjoyable. In 2012, just a handful of companies (Universal, Warner, Sony, and EMI) sold over 80 percent of music in the U.S. and over 70 percent worldwide (Moore, 2012). This meant that a small handful of individuals presiding over the major players in the business of the recording industry wielded immense cultural power. These gatekeepers controlled what music was produced and marketed to consumers to be enjoyed. In effect, they dictated the curation of taste and consequently, the assessment of a song's value. Music industry researcher Keith Negus described this era as one "driven by high-volume sales of 'sound carriers' (LPs, cassettes, and CDs)," and supported by "a few star artists [who] accounted for most income [while] the majority of musicians achieved neither critical acclaim nor commercial reward." (Negus, 2019a, p. 368). While digital technologies have certainly democratized this process and allowed a more diverse pool of artists moderate amounts of success, the ubiquity of songs and availability of promotional tools creates an immense amount of noise each artist must cut through to engage their audiences.

While negative critiques of free-market capitalism and critical analyses of the darker side of a globalized music industry have not made significant headlines outside of circles of academia and musicology, the more recent phenomena of viral marketing and brand partnerships have led to questions about the power of commercialized music. Ironically, brands have often sought to

tap into the ethos behind artistic rebellion and creative freedom as values they seek to align their company and products with, albeit through nonobtrusive methods. The subtle attempt to gesture toward and even capitalize on the nonconformist attitude music often reflects, demonstrates that “audiences remain frustrated with crude capitalist approaches to cultural production” (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2015, p. 9). Launched in 2012, the Budweiser Made in America music festival effectively disguised a big beer-sponsored brand promotion event as a fun environment to tap into a cultural zeitgeist of increasingly popular music festivals of the 2010s and position its product among the music that sought to unify a diverse crowd. Curator and headlining artist Jay-Z described the event as a “way to come together cause the lines and the titles can never keep us apart” (Blanco, 2018). Though the beer was not the main driver of ticket sales, Budweiser’s involvement allowed them to sell their product in an environment that appealed to the aesthetic values and music appreciation of its target audience.

Additionally, streaming algorithms have become more attuned to listening habits as music begins to be marketed as an affective experience rather than individual taste. The increasing emphasis on the utilitarian value of music as a mood booster flips the narrative of fans entering an artist’s creative environment. Instead of reflecting personal taste or identity, the music has become subservient to the emotional needs of the listener. This process illuminates the decreasing artistic value of music amidst “the broader app and content economy,” wherein the use of songs as data “begins to gain importance within ‘data capitalism’” (Negus, 2019a, p. 378). While the conceptualization of a music listener as a collection of behavior patterns and demographic data may seem overly reductive, the possibilities this data affords key industry players in making informed decisions about music production and marketing are broad. Consequently, the ideas surrounding culture industry studies have seen a resurgence in the last

decade. In a surveillance culture wherein every interaction is converted into data points to optimize digital experiences, the integrity and aesthetic value of music begins to depreciate. As every interaction related to a song is recorded, the “discourse about music is more valuable to these services than the music itself” (Morris & Powers, 2015, p. 117). Granted, popular music, by definition, has rarely if ever been just a form of artistic expression. In a commoditized digital culture, however, it has become an increasingly effective marketing tool to capture listener behavior and create feedback loops to further optimize the listening experience for the benefit of the service provider over the decontextualized artist. The tension between artistic expression and commercial success has been a central conflict since the genesis of the music industry. However, the technological affordances of the modern landscape present new challenges to be considered.

This thesis will explore through a critical theory perspective the ramifications of unregulated technology and media conglomerate power on the individual listener, the music listening experience today, and on popular music artists themselves. To outline the context for these arguments, a historical overview of the Frankfurt School and some of its most prominent scholars, Theodore Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Max Horkheimer, will be given, as well as some of their principal critiques of popular mass culture. The effects of standardization, pseudo-individualism, and regressive listening will be revisited within the context of the modern music landscape and in conjunction with recent technological developments such as experiential marketing, streaming, and the continued commodification of cultural products. A case study of the band The 1975, which embodies and critiques many of these ideologies within and beyond their music, will be used to apply these theories and sociological critiques. The band, and specifically front man Matty Healy, will be assessed in their efficacy of subverting mass produced and mass marketed music while still maintaining a large audience. Additionally, their

efficacy in transcending their position as musical artists and ability to effect real change in politics, economics, and worldview will be discussed, as well as the extent to which their cultural impact contributes to a cultural environment outside of their immediate fan base.

## **Background**

By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, upon the advent of recording technologies, music became its own industry in the world of entertainment. Cutting songs to vinyl discs or transcribing melodies to sheet music provided a discrete unit of sale to be exchanged for profit with mass populations. In doing so, popularity and valuation of music could be measured by units sold, thus creating a competitive environment for music to be appreciated and celebrated in addition to being performed. Record labels formed in order to procure talent, develop great songs and artists, and exploit creative assets to maximize their ability to repeat the cycle of continuously looking for the next big thing. Gramophones and, later, personal record players brought recorded music into the privacy of individual homes. Radio provided a network of communications platforms and encouraged collective listening wherein one song could be disseminated across multiple regions of the nation at the same time. As music has continued to shift between spaces of varying degrees of sociality, from stadium speakers to headphones, it has grown in cultural influence, from providing soundtracks to movies and advertisements and narrating personal stories to now becoming a sonic background for almost every waking moment in modern reality.

Within this landscape, streaming technologies and social media consistently provide endless feeds of sonic and visual content, creating new forms of monetization and providing artists with a broad range of tools to interact with audiences and maintain relationships that elicit loyalty and drive purchases. Such interactions can also lead to micro-celebrity status, wherein

fans of the artist focus more holistically on the person behind the persona than just the music. While artists have previously used their influence to promote products through brand sponsorships and advertising partnerships, today they are able to launch new product lines focused specifically on themselves. When Rihanna released a visual biography documenting her career, it provided unprecedented access into behind-the-scenes moments with fans (Leopold, 2019). She explained that “sharing [her] memories and [her] life, some of which they’ve been there for” allowed for them to enjoy a shared experience, one that some fans have seen “evolve before their eyes.” (Wally, 2019). This process has become part of the norm in the continued commodification of cultural products in the digital age, wherein an artist’s music, interaction, outfits, breakfast and ideas, are all sold to its audiences. For artists with audiences made up of heavily invested fans, creating products that provide greater connection to artists are rewarding for both parties. Other examples of this include Bank’s book filled with hand drawn sketches and poems she released a couple weeks after her most recent album (Banks, 2019). The aesthetic of her artistry focuses heavily on emotional lyricism. Intertwined with teasers of new music were photos of poetry and sketches leading up to the weeks of its release. These examples parallel the artists’ careers and serve as windows into their personal lives through creative outlets that resonate with the artist themselves.

Others, however, have taken a more direct approach to commoditization; entire companies have since sprung up to effectively monetize any sort of cultural moment. Merchandise experience company Fanjoy explicitly serves to create shirts, hoodies, phone cases, mugs, and other general merchandise paraphernalia branded with influential slogans and logos (Fanjoy, 2020). Such intense exploitation of self for profit shifts many of the driving factors for what and how music is created that previously eluded datafication. As technology continues to

influence the creation and distribution of music, the breakneck pace of rapid innovation that characterizes the technology industry alters and often truncates the more fluid and organic creative process some artists generally seek to take. With the potential to go viral with every song, tweet, or Instagram post, and thus amass extreme popularity and profits in a short amount of time, the artist title can be applied more liberally than before. If it can generate streams, plays, views, or downloads, the financial rewards reaped from a music product seem to justify the term.

## **Culture Industry Studies and the History of Commodification**

The rise of streaming technologies, the latest disruptor in the progression of technologies that have changed music consumption patterns, has not incited entirely new critiques of the power of the cultural industry, but rather, brought forth a resurgence of many of the arguments formed at the beginning of the twentieth century as recorded music began to enter into popular mainstream culture. Some of the premier culture industry critics of this era included Theodore Adorno and Walter Benjamin. Their competing perspectives about the power of popular culture and the rise of the culture industries have resurfaced as the tensions between commercial viability and artistic expression have become more polarized. The ability to hold both in tension has dwindled, and the negative effects of free market capitalism in music have begun to plague modern society in a way that can no longer be ignored.

While technology has allowed artists to diversify their revenue streams and strike out independently from major labels, the weakened hold of traditional industry gatekeepers has watered down distinctions between art and sound. Gimmicky reinterpretations of songs that were popular in a previous generation can be reinvented into a dance hit. Massive corporate influence can dictate the dissemination of a product to meet the emotional needs of their casual listeners,

exploiting artistic creativity for commodities and driving value. While artists can continue to use social media channels for artistic expression, technology that optimizes successes and seeks to engineer hit songs to top charts reinforces a business model that fundamentally focuses on success in terms of profit and can potentially disregard creativity for the sake of financial gain.

An example of this includes the prevalence of the “millennial whoop,” a term described as the increasing use of a melodic pattern, often in pop music, where a melody alternates between the fifth and third notes of a major scale, typically starting on the fifth. Many of the songs that contain this pattern released within the last decade secured spots on radio charts and contributed to the consistent loss of diversity in the combination of notes in pop songs (Epstein, 2016). Referring to the popularity of swing music in early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, Adorno argued that a similar process of standardization led to a culture pacified by its commodities, while Benjamin praised the abilities of technology in bringing together producer and participant (Moore, 2019). While an overwhelming amount of songs were then being churned out, at least there were more people creating them, though they may have sounded similar. Adorno claimed that music essentially presented an “illusion of longed-for sociality as cover and lure to induce the consumption of nonmusical goods,” citing the communal and unifying nature of music to be the primary means by which customers are baited (Morris, 2013, p. 13). By comparison, the millennial whoop era of music defined a period of the late 2000s and early 2010s marked by hedonistic escapism and fun. Though neither Adorno or Benjamin would experience, and therefore critique, the sample-based, at times formulaic pop music that runs rampant in Top 40 music charts today, both understood the central conflict between the opportunities afforded by the digitalization of music as well as the consequences of economic concentration in business, and could easily have predicted its intensification with the influx of the technology sector. With

the tools available today due to technological innovation, fans can more easily reproduce the music that their favorite artists create through their own renditions and remixes; some even go on to launch their own music careers, regardless if the products of their creative labor are regarded as art or merely social media content.

## **Critical Theory Perspectives on Music**

The transition from high regard of works of art to mere content was first critiqued by Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their essay on the culture industry and mass enlightenment as deception. As works of art became more accessible to the masses, they lamented the removal of the “last barrier to their debasement as cultural assets” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2001, p. 68). With such “unbound proximity” to consumers, the value of music lowers significantly and the music itself becomes “reduced to mere adjuncts,” serving its listeners in pacifying, elevating, or steadying mood and emotion (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2001, p. 68). Music has become a utility in which its use-value supersedes its exchange value.

## **Individualism, Popularity, and Artistic Integrity**

Of the many stances Theodore Adorno took on popular culture, three in particular seem even more evident in music today: standardization, pseudo-individualization, and regressive listening. Sociologist and writer Ryan Moore defines standardization today as the manner in which “capitalist imperatives to minimize costs of production and eliminate risk” have created a plethora of similar sounding songs with interchangeable, almost indifferntiable parts (Moore, 2012). While Adorno’s original critique of popular music focused on the rise of popular jazz and swing music and called for a return to an appreciation of more elite and prestigiously regarded

serious music, this same critique can be applied to the monotonous four-chord progressions upon which most music has been recorded and released within the last decade. From his perspective, in an age where music had become corrupted by commercial success, Adorno claimed artists were less able to take a convincing stand against the authority and power of capitalist agendas and create expressive art that offers distinct, often rebellious or countercultural perspectives of the dominant cultural narrative (Adorno, 2001). Evidence of this phenomenon can be seen in the vast majority of chart-topping hits with mass appeal, driven by a similar beat and melodic pattern of their predecessors, evoking nostalgia from older audiences while offering a novel, yet readily digestible form of content. Sold to consumers as the next big thing, an exclusive commodity with social value, popular music preys upon an individual's need to differentiate and express themselves through association with the new and buzzworthy, though each person is consuming exactly the same thing. Adorno describes this process as such:

The sacrifice of individuality, which accommodates itself to the regularity of the successful, the doing of what everybody does, follows from the basic fact that in broad areas the same thing is offered to everybody by the standardized production of consumption goods. But the commercial necessity of connecting this identity leads to the manipulation of taste and the official culture's pretense of individualism which necessarily increases in proportion to the liquidation of the individual (Adorno, 2001, p. 40).

This pretense of individualism has grown in its prevalence today. This disguise of blatant monotonous standardization is packaged instead under the guise of free choice and cultivation of individual taste, a process Adorno calls pseudo-individualization. In his essays on popular music, Adorno defines this subtle distinction as a "halo of free choice or open market on the basis of standardization," where an illusion of freedom to choose masks the extensive amount of optimization that has gone into effectively engineering a song to be well-received (Adorno, 1941). Today, this concept continues to paint the façade that the music industry's "star

performers have become successful on the basis of their own merits” and “consumers have freely chosen to enjoy the songs that have been marketed to them,” when in fact algorithms and behavioral data have pre-determined much of the discovery process of music today (Moore, 2012). Additionally, individual listeners have since been liquidated into homogenous audiences with predicted behavior patterns, shopping habits, ideological leanings, and aesthetic appreciations. It has become an identifier; music no longer suffices in its offering as entertainment. Instead, “enjoyment is giving way to being there and being in the know, connoisseurship by enhanced prestige” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947, p. 65). However, as popular music begins to mimic itself and the industry that supports it rewards chart topping successes, homogenization continues under the guise of individualism, wherein catchy songs with repeated phrases, such as the millennial whoop, proliferate.

Adorno coined the term “regressive listening” to describe the reversion to these simplistic sounds—these infantile patterns, easy chord progressions and repetitive melodies drilled over and over through radio, headphones, and speakers day in and day out—and the resulting loss of “capacity for conscious perception of music” (Adorno, 1991, p. 46). In this way, he describes how music has become a secondary process that provides background noise to other daily activities, and consequently does not afford listeners the opportunity to closely listen or focus on the music itself. The familiarity of a well-known chord progression and unfamiliarity of the tone of the vocals sparks enough interest to continue listening but doesn’t jar the listener enough to disengage, but instead, allows the listener to float steadily along to the rhythm they have been programmed to accept. Adorno referred to this as “fetishization” wherein the manufacturing of taste tends to also reproduce regressive listening. Engineering songs to be easy enough to listen to so as to not provoke a skip to the next song elevates ear worms and infantile melodies that

lean heavily upon repetition to hardwire a sound into its listeners' minds. Listeners are attracted to this kind of music, believing its sway has to do something with the familiarity that cannot quite be pinned down, and yet its elusiveness makes it all the more enticing. Whether the song can be described as good or bad is no longer as relevant as whether a song is catchy enough to be talked about. This loss of critical analysis, the fact that song isn't actually communicating anything meaningful, is what Adorno laments. Each interaction, like, and comment surrounding the song generates money through the buying and selling of attention on an ad-supported content platform. As this never-ending discourse circulates online, artists must rise above the clamor to create enough impact to get people to pay attention. Such tensions will be examined within the context of The 1975's rise to fame further on.

## **Reproducibility and Consolidation**

Benjamin, on the other side of the debate, proposed that technological reproducibility would be the means by which creativity would continue to flourish. The attenuated feedback loop wherein music and discussion of music exist in the same place feeds into Benjamin's hope for "reproducible media [to] close the distance from its audience and thereby facilitate a kind of critical scrutiny that is unthinkable when art is the revered object of ritual" (Moore, 2012, p. 77). He maintained an argument that a more participatory culture would remove individuals from the absorbed, contemplative state that Adorno so highly prized and instead broaden music and other reproducible media's perceived accessibility. In doing so, Benjamin proposed that the creativity that seemed to have previously been reserved for the artistic elite would then be made known to others and thus, inspire a greater diversity in art. Sociologist Ryan Moore explains Benjamin's view:

Sampling fulfills Benjamin's prophesy that technological reproducibility would enable montage – the practice in which cultural fragments are appropriated, juxtaposed, and

reassembled in ways that create new meanings – to be extended beyond the modernists avant-garde into mass media and mass culture (Moore, 2012, p. 82).

Social media offers a platform wherein both Benjamin's utopian view of bricolage and Adorno's campaign for nonconformity and originality contend with one another. Within these platforms, creative freedom and user generated content abound in the form of mashups, remixes, memes, and parodies. However, said platforms are owned by a dwindling number of companies with growing power, such as Google, Facebook, and Apple, a phenomenon Adorno would likely cite as an example of the continued commodification of relations in the culture industry. Fans of musicians may have the leisure of commenting, critiquing, and creating their own art, but their work, or labor, is made possible by these companies who provide technologies that prey upon online behavioral data generated from interaction and use. The domination of these companies in also becoming some of the only channels by which to advertise, promote, or even host music amongst other creative content has rendered almost all artists without alternatives to submit to the same forces. Music is now consumed on the same platforms that selfies, makeup tutorials, event recaps, cartoons, and history documentaries all live, and competes for the dwindling attention span of its viewers or listeners.

Few artists have been able to refuse such offers. But for those who have, like Taylor Swift, commercial successes has been strong enough to weather any financial hit from restricting accessibility to their art. In the case of Swift's refusal to place her music on streaming services in 2014, she insisted that artists should decide the valuation of their own work:

“Music is art, and art is important and rare. Important, rare things are valuable. Valuable things should be paid for. Music should not be free, and my prediction is that individual artists and their labels will someday decide what an album's price point is. I hope they don't underestimate themselves or undervalue their art” (Swift, 2014).

As a multiplatinum Grammy award winning international pop artist, Swift sits atop an incredibly successful career and wields a level of power not many artists have access to. Other

artists, though in agreement with Swift's assertions, have less of a responsibility to act as a role model to aspiring artists and the future of the music industry at large. Swift prides herself on encouraging her audience to follow her leadership in demonstrating determination, grace, and business acuity, all while creating incredibly popular art.

Others have a much less noble cause, and approach streaming with a different perspective. Manager of The 1975, Jamie Osborne, asserts that a platform like Spotify serves primarily as a discovery tool for his clients in that the platform presents a new mode of consuming music while still offering a form of value (Ellis-Petersen, 2014). To use streaming platforms as a discovery tool, however, suggests there is more content and value to be extracted from an artist beyond the music itself. Though The 1975 did not take any firm stances against streaming platforms, their visual narrative and highly engaged fanbase demonstrates the dedication to the artist despite the music they create. Swift's insistence on valuation of an album is more so about reclaiming the valuation of music "based on the amount of heart and soul an artist has bled into a body of work, and the financial value that artists (and their labels) place on their music when it goes out into the marketplace" than it is about usurping control from technology companies (Swift, 2014). Viewing her work as art requires it subverts and resists dilution into streamable content. While her music does not necessarily wrestle with political and social commentary to the same degree that Adorno insisted serious music must, her stance seems to reverberate his through her insistence that music should be taken seriously and not casually repurposed and stripped of nuance and context, as Benjamin asserts technological reproducibility allows for.

## **Technological Advancements and Informatization**

Since their onset, media technologies have always invited cultural critiques about their use and lamentations for traditional ways of interacting with art and other cultural experiences. With streaming, the most recent disruption in music, power has shifted away from the music industry entirely with an overreliance on technology companies to provide subscription model services and hubs for content and curation. In doing so, the fragmentation of albums into purchasable songs fades into a continuous flow of a utility of sound. While Spotify and Apple Music have become prominent tools at the helm of selling digital music, their positions as commodity producers significantly changes their approach to business, as well as how they view their core consumers. As streaming services began to amass licenses to distribute music on their respective platforms, their core business model pivoted. Music researchers Jeremy Wade Morris and Devon Powers have described this shift as one moving into “the business of promotion, curation, user experience and analytics” as human attention becomes the new commodity to be sold (Morris & Powers, 2015, p. 108). With the most prominent platform conducting its core business by amassing more subscribers, the economic incentives of selling music changes, as it is no longer the music being sold, but rather the subscription itself.

Previously, radio revolutionized the music industry by providing a means for broad coordinated distribution of songs over airwaves. With streaming, the data points collected per user have increased greatly, providing valuable insights to advertisers, as well as artists, who are also looking to better reach their target audiences. Multiple avenues of extracting profit from the process of music consumption have driven content platforms to keep users engaged by whatever means possible, utilizing music as a form of engaging attention, from which behavioral data is recorded from each user. The lack of awareness of the thousands upon thousands of songs released every week showcases the decreased valuation of the music itself as a culmination of

artist expression and effort, and instead highlights the need for artists to continue to communicate with their audiences beyond the music they release as their songs get placed in mood playlists, workout videos, and advertising campaigns.

In fact, the obliteration of price tags on discrete units of songs and albums has left a gap between the aesthetic and monetary value of music. A general consensus still exists in which most affirm music to inherently be a form of artistic expression, and while most music today can be accessed through a single monthly payment for access to a streaming platform, individuals particularly engaged by an artist or album seek to contribute more funds towards what they deem valuable. This gap has led to what music historian and researcher Rasmus Fleischer calls a “postdigital” tactic, in which tangible music product markets such as CDs, cassette tapes, vinyl, and exclusive limited edition music packages are sold, a phenomenon that has seen growth in recent years (Fleischer, 2017, p. 152). The purchase intent of these individuals points toward the capitalist propensity to “commodify the void created by the lost materiality of music” (Fleischer, 2017, p. 152). The resurgence of these products, such as vinyl and cassettes, satisfy the need to personally own a copy of the art that fans connect with. To lay claim to and identify a piece of work and assign a monetary value to it demonstrates its cultural and personal value to a person. Examples of this are seen in the expansion of artist merchandise lines, at times not directly tied to album cycles.

For boyband Brockhampton, an unorthodox collective that includes its producers, photographer, graphic designer, and manager in its rotating list of members, their creative output extends beyond just making music. In addition to the three albums they have released, Brockhampton has also seen success with “12 music videos, a 22-minute film, a two-and-a-half-hour documentary on the process of making those albums, and a television series on Viceland

called *American Boyband*” (Sowunmi, 2020). Cultivating themselves as a brand has allowed them to create merchandise lines that consistently sell out, “providing fans raised in the streaming age with a physical totem to show their loyalty” (Sowunmi, 2020). The heavy involvement of their creative team of photographers and designers within the group is becoming less of an anomaly amidst the growth of independent artists to facilitate the growth from music-making artists into an aspirational and influential cross-marketed brands.

## **Personalization and Streaming**

Nevertheless, the shift of the listener experience from engaging and buying into artistic expression to a tool that can “personalize and optimize everyday activities like studying, exercising or partying” fundamentally changes how music competes with other services (Fleisher, 2017, p. 159). Within this dynamic, artists become service providers to consumers seeking emotional gratification. While users have begun to feel a psychological ownership towards streaming technologies themselves, such as by explaining they enjoy listening to “my Spotify,” which insinuates the platform itself has a signature sound, it denotes the increased value placed on the service it provides and not the appreciation of the songs, or content, itself (Danckwerts & Kenning, 2019). Though streaming platforms have increased the number of subscribers globally, the amount of consumption each listener contributes to does not actually affect these streaming platforms financially, as their subscription model only requires a purchase of access, with or without intent to listen. The offerings of each streaming platform allow for personalization that allows users to customize not only what particular songs they listen to, but also helps curate their entire listening experience based on a variety of psychological factors that act to placate, excite, or emotionally medicate our moods and energy levels. In doing so, the

underlying assumption is that musicians are subservient to their audiences, creating songs to fill a void instead of starting the conversations that they want to have with their fans.

Additionally, the fundamental drivers of information technology companies differ in such a way as to not benefit individual artists themselves as Google and Spotify look to accrue massive amounts of cultural content to feed a “profit-oriented, advertising-financed moneymaking machine that turns users and their data into a commodity” to be sold back to digital marketers (Moore, 2012). This reductionistic tendency towards music serving as a functional marketing tool undermines the aesthetic appreciation of an art form as it is increasingly associated with consumable goods and other products of the ever-expanding commodified offerings of cultural capitalism. In Spotify’s 2018 Millennial Marketing Report, segmentations of listeners and their activity levels and use cases were laid out in a manner that allowed advertisers to target specific sets of people in the right moments so as to seamlessly integrate their messaging with the music already being consumed. The granularity of details differentiates the capabilities of streaming platforms from traditional radio formats in their ability to define cross-platform integrations, potential product recommendations typically unaffiliated with music, as well as the specific type of device used to listen to Spotify (YPulse, 2018). Furthermore, the vast amounts of data analytics generated from user listening activity that artists see can then inform the music they create, forming a feedback loop reminiscent of the constantly updating culture of mobile app development.

The information artists receive about their listeners can have more sway than the great musicians that originally inspired the artists to create music in the first place. Instead of drawing inspiration from great songwriting or instrumentation that was prevalent in music remixing, artists can now create songs in a way to optimize their performance in terms of engagement on

various content platforms. Writer Liz Pelly describes the sound of “muted, mid-tempo, melancholy pop” as one that has “practically become synonymous with the platform.” The introduction of the term “Spotify-core,” she says, has also been a descriptor for “music that sounds tailored to streaming (Pelly, 2018). Or perhaps more specifically, to data-driven systems of mood-enhancing background music” (Pelly, 2018). Taking inspiration from granular elements of music, such as tempo or melodic pattern seems to highlight the extent to which music is treated like a product tweaked to perfection for the listener’s consumption, akin to how a car is modified with special trim packages for a customer’s driving preference.

In the case of music, however, the sheer pleasure and enjoyment of listening to a song ignores the many other revenue streams that record labels, technology companies, and artists have since tapped into. A single now has the potential to be put forth in a sync deal, where its use is licensed for placements in advertisements, movies, and commercials and can reach millions of newfound listeners. Newer forms of social media have proven effective in launching songs that otherwise were not receiving radio play or garnering streams through more traditional formats. A catchy dance, emulated by thousands of users, can launch a song to popularity, although at times in an incredibly decontextualized way, and thus tempt record label executives to hunt for similar sounding talent to funnel into a viral marketing campaign. Implicit within this tactic, however, is the assumption that music can function as a marketing tool and something that feels good, feeding into the arguments Adorno made that popular music encourages infantilized listening that lacks any sort of critical engagement.

## **Music as Content for Marketing Tools**

The trends of rapid innovation and entrepreneurship celebrated in the information technology world have bled into processes of music production and consumption, further undermining the qualitative and aesthetic value of music as it is diluted amongst mass-marketed songs. To even refer to music as art now seems like a highbrow and overly serious take on a background soundtrack. Sociologist David Hesmondhalgh emphasizes that while music has not become “entirely subservient to capital, [it ties] to disturbing aspects of modernity such as forced obsolescence and waste” (Hesmondhalgh, 2018, p. 1567). The divided attention paid to music listening continues to weaken its power and when heard in a “rather distracted way” it holds less sway as a “cultural and emotional force” (Hesmondhalgh, 2018, p. 1568). Thus, the distinction between music and other media formats has blurred as music becomes one of many tools at the disposal of digital marketers to sell audiences on cultural products. In fact, the quick creation and distribution of music coupled with faster rounds of feedback reflect the nature of the app economy, in which features are developed to “gather, process, and report data over networks” to then further approve upon (Negus, 2019b, p. 39).

An iterative process in the creation of music, however, fundamentally undermines the notion that the final products are ultimately a form of artistic expression. While music is significantly influenced by fan input and reception, to model the approach to music production after that of app development would contradict the very nature of art. In discussing the very motivations for investment in the conventions of music, sociologists Nick Crossley and Wendy Botero outline the following:

The effect of music derives from the listener’s ability to ‘tune-in’ and ‘learn to hear’ its conventions, in which seeking and finding patterns to make sense of what they hear create pleasure in an embodied, visceral manner...The embodied, emotional effect this produces is only possible because of the conventions which are shared between composer and audience – from the expectations which are rooted in habitual familiarity with the conventions of a musical style. Since pleasure derives both from tuning into convention

and from deviation from convention and the manipulation of expectation, this creates an internal dynamism within music worlds, over and above any positional stances, with innovation itself an internal good within many music worlds. (Crossley & Botero, 2015, p. 11-12)

Music often thrives in the very “celebration of rebellion,” and the fundamental goal of technology to provide frictionless solutions contradicts artistic expression (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2019, p. 11). The spirit of freedom and resistance against the mundane and mainstream is an ethos that, ironically, brands seek to capitalize on. However, the corporate manner of subtly gesturing toward such notions “underlines the fact that audiences remain frustrated with crude capitalist approaches to cultural production” (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2019, p. 11). With songwriting and music production, the implementation of a similar development process to that of technology applications would likely have to be disguised in a manner similar to the way mass-marketed music is received. While marketed as a way to negotiate taste and social value, mainstream music seeks to be appealing to everyone and is measured by chart performance, which ultimately insinuates collective approval and homogenization of taste.

## **Decontextualization and Casual Listening**

The definition of music itself has shifted to that of ‘content,’ suggesting “a generic type of information that simply appears for the benefit of ‘users’ ...detached from its authorship and its making and towards its constituents” (Negus, 2019a, p. 371). While the purpose of creative expression is often for the collective benefit of those who experience it, to limit music to a revenue generating machine elevates curators of the content above the artists themselves in an environment in which “the playlist becomes more culturally and commercially important” (Negus, 2019a, p. 371). Decontextualization, the habit of consuming music without any regard for who the artist is or why the song was written, and casual listening succeeds in spaces that prioritize the listener experience and the soundtracking of moments over and above engaging

with music in such a way as to find meaning and understanding through the unique way artists seek to drive social commentary. Thus, focus shifts away from the music alone to the artist creating it.

In online environments, songs are shared and exchanged as cultural products associated with personal brands. Listening to a specific song or following a certain artist reflects specific personality traits about yourself or communicates aspirational qualities listeners seek to align with. Artists themselves become entities that promote certain ideologies and aesthetics based on the messaging they choose to circulate.

## **Case Study: The 1975, Postmodernism, and Authenticity**

In the case of The 1975, many of their fans are passionate about caring for climate action, equal and fair treatment of individuals who are unlike them, and are predominantly progressive in their viewpoints, analogous to the lead singer's own. Each of their songs, album covers, social media posts, and comments add to this interpretation. Audiences seek to make sense of this narrative by “absorbing the messages” and “adding their own creative interpretations,” a process further complicated when the brand becomes a dynamic person (Lieb, 2018, p. 18). In an interview describing the history of the visual aesthetic of the band, front man Matty Healy stated that he sought to create visual imagery that was iconic and derivative of his influences (Daly, 2019).

An example of this was demonstrated with the release of The 1975's music video for “Girls,” from their debut album *The 1975*. This video was the first to be set in color after a series of black and white videos that set the stage for the band's moody aesthetic. Discourse began to circulate online, speculating that the creative freedom of the band was being hampered by the

influence of their new record label. Instead, the band chose to play off this notion and make a tongue-in-cheek video that played to the antiquated clichés of industry executives’ iron fists. Their consistent subversion of the expected and relentless dedication to their art, while simultaneously engaging in and making light of the nature of the ubiquity of online relationships and music industry norms becomes a part of their intrinsic indie attitude. In an interview with Digital Spy, Matty Healy explains “twinned with our love of ‘80s pop, its innocence, grandiosity and conceptual ideas in music videos—we wanted to make a video about a record label’s attempt at enforced conformity” (Corner, 2013). In doing so, The 1975 reinforced its individualism by communicating their knack for making light of the nuances of the cultural forces within the infrastructure of the music industry, while cementing their unrelenting stance on remaining fiercely independent and loyal to their own creative genius. Numerous fans have since decorated their rooms with neon “GIRLS GIRLS GIRLS” signs as seen in the music video, engaged in online discourse affirming their distaste for corporately manufactured bland pop music, and, more importantly, applauding The 1975 for their music as well as their refusal to remain content with fun, mind-numbing meaningless noise. Instead, creative reinterpretations of their music and graphics have continued to inspire fans to systematically engage with The 1975 across various touchpoints.

A series of climate change rallies had thousands of fans show up for issues larger than that of the band, though their motivations may have been sparked by The 1975’s own activism. The band recruited the voice of activist Greta Thunberg, who rose to international fame after skipping school to call for change outside the Swedish parliament, to record a monologue for the title track of their upcoming album, *Notes on a Conditional Form* (Spanos, 2019). Though the band has never recorded features with other artists, a tactic they have criticized as “a shameless

grab for chart positions,” Thunberg’s involvement subverts the traditional purpose of features to “combine star power to sweep up maximum streams and radio playlisting” and effectively weaponizes the devotion and mimicry of their audience (Snapes, 2019). By incorporating the song into performances at large music festivals, The 1975 elevates its platform to be a champion of social change, disseminating Thunberg’s voice over crowds much larger than could be reached with a megaphone on a street corner.

Additionally, the band has used its knowledge of the new digital landscape as a marketplace to source new talent and creative collaboration, echoing Benjamin’s argument about the benefits of mass culture. The enlistment of fans in the “TOOTIMETOOTIMETOOTIME” video has positioned a select number of people to the level of micro-influencers in association with the band, discretely extending the influence of the band through social media without bombastic ad campaigns and radio announcements, preferring instead to weave itself in among the discourse in group chats and Twitter replies that create a sense of community within a fragmented digital landscape. The same tensions that first surfaced in the Adorno-Benjamin debate are crystallized throughout The 1975’s career. Fans, in their deconstruction of The 1975’s original album and the black and white concepts of its creative direction, began creating on Tumblr new edits and versions of The 1975 related images with hues of pink. When the band saw this, they incorporated such stylistic elements into the aesthetic for the second album, reinforcing the power of their fans influence on the band, and affirming their position as a sort of invisible collective collaborator, a relationship Benjamin predicted would occur with the democratization of the means of production, such as graphic design software or digital audio workstations, available to both artists and fans. Ironically, this reciprocal feedback loop further cements the dedication and loyalty between fan and artist, and in effect creates the kind of

pacified audience Adorno vehemently resisted. From a different perspective, however, the band and its audience collectively seem to maintain an aesthetic of authenticity not dictated by capitalist forces.

From their genesis, The 1975's music seemed to critique the industry in which it was situated, using its albums as a sort of extended artistic statement about the central tension of art versus consumerism. When they first generated buzz in the UK with the release of their debut album in 2013, they were met with heavy criticism for their magnanimous efforts to put forth a cool personage with flippant rocker attitudes. However, as their catalog and fanbase expanded, so did their style of music, encompassing a wide variety of genres, sociological critiques, and political activism. Interviews and profiles with front man Matty Healy increased in length as he would prattle on about the state of the world, the mediation of all human relationships through the Internet, and a desperate need for authenticity in a culture overrun by false humility and fake happiness. The most recent album *A Brief Inquiry into Online Relationships* assesses the state of Internet-mediated culture today and the crippling anxiety that comes with having to constantly negotiate a sense of identity with a world embattled with comparison and individualism. *New York Times* writer Joe Coscarelli describes the music and the blend of styles this way:

Mr. Healy may have finally lived up to his declarations. Indulgent, occasionally ridiculous and often gorgeous, the album crams together Auto-Tuned vocals, catchy guitar licks, programmed drums, flashes of R&B and neo-soul, acoustic tear-jerkers, schlocky '80s power ballads, ornate instrumental interludes, post-Drake tropical house, multiple background choirs and computerized spoken word into a cogent, 58-minute musing on addiction, fame and technology.

The bombastic clash of ideas reflects the environment we consume music in. It demonstrates the efforts for modern music to have mass appeal, while incorporating the breadth of diversity of sonic influence in most young people's playlists today. With the reflections of popular songs and iconic melodies from recent history, Adorno's arguments of standardization

proposed a century earlier reappear. The blistering rate that The 1975 flies through each of these genres and sounds, however, demonstrates the pseudo-individualization aspect that Adorno also emphasized. Many of the songs have recognizable inspiration from classic rock to SoundCloud rap, yet the nostalgic familiarity is repackaged in a manner that reflects the patterns of erratic online behavior that most of The 1975's fans demonstrate in communicating their love for the band. Initially, the band's creative marketing schemes, such as embedding tour posters in the source code of their website, were seen as pretentious and bewildering, but having gained a massive cult following without much traditional radio play, they seem to have balanced the sought after goal of high creative independence, yet with an incredibly large and dedicated global fanbase.

## **Experiential Marketing and Creative Independence**

Other examples of this phenomenon of subverting mainstream channels of publicity and still maintaining a devoted audience of fans are found in the ability of many artists nowadays to sell out stadiums despite never having commercial radio success. A shift from having the most followers to the most dedicated followers indicates the higher valuation of loyalty and purchase potential of each audience member. When releasing his album *Pretty Girls Like Trap Music*, rapper 2 Chainz was able to leverage a core message that resonated with his fanbase while expanding his reach to a larger audience and creating a pop up nail bar launched in collaboration with Spotify that featured custom nail designs for five of the songs on his album (Cho, 2017). He created a "tribe" by using the album title as an "indirect call to action that any girl who wants to be in the in crowd would jump on," posting to Instagram using the #prettygirlsliketrapmusic hashtag (Kennedy, 2017). While unorthodox in terms of music marketing, it points to the growth of experiential marketing and the desire for fans to connect with music in a more tangible way

with the music they consume. This seems counterintuitive when Spotify applauds itself for having removed physical barriers of access to music. The selling and purchasing of discrete musical units has been swapped to favor the creation of aspirational multi-sensory events and activations. While the direct sell of products is now disguised through seamless alignment with an artist's brand message, it is nonetheless promoted by the same company attempting to "commodify the void [they created through] the lost materiality of music" (Fleischer 2015, p. 152).

While the aesthetic of independent music has historically been appealing in its categorical resistance of corporate influence and rebellion against the sleepy drone of mass-marketed music, for artists to truly flourish and be allowed such creative freedom requires a certain degree of success and profitability to continue financing magnanimous endeavors. Additionally, a sophisticated understanding of branding and marketing by the artist or its management, as well as the capacity and desire to wield such information, seems to be crucial to sustain such efforts. Because there are very few quantifiable standards by which a potential hit song can be judged, record executives often fall to the side of radio-friendliness to determine profitability. Nevertheless, being overlooked for so long adds to the underdog artist narrative The 1975 has fought to build, and now with a platform to speak up about the social commentary riddled throughout their songs, they have effectively shifted their cultural position from that of mere music makers to change effectors.

Enlisting the help of Greta Thunberg in one of their recent singles for their title track allowed them to globally distribute a climate reform call to action through the channels they have built in communicating with their fans. Their efforts to use their platform to educate and signpost to societal ideals demonstrates their ability to use influence beyond the means of strictly adhering

to an art for art's sake agenda. The multifaceted nature of being an artist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century creates a platform of microcelebrity to promote anything from makeup products to hotel suites, and has launched many brand partnership agencies in the wake of capitalizing on potentially lucrative audiences. Having already bought in to lifestyle and belief system of their idols, fans of artists like The 1975 are susceptible to massive corporate influence should an artist choose to let it reach their audiences. Wielding such power requires a responsibility and level of integrity to resist condoning sheer consumerism and profiteering, given that the most dedicated of fans invest an impressive amount of trust and finances into these musicians.

## **Conclusion**

Given the nature of the music industry's integration within a broader ecosystem of technology, it is difficult to maintain the critical theory position that Adorno took of superiority in valuing serious over popular music when much of its appreciation is dictated by more than just the song. Navigating between Benjamin and Adorno's arguments demonstrates a need to engage both the affordances of technological reproducibility as well as their potential to dilute creative integrity. The platforms we use to engage with artists and consume music today are fully integrated with the advertising, marketing, and design worlds in ways that have laid a foundation for new opportunities and innovative artistic expression. However, the influence of streaming and digitalization has also impacted the sound of music, presenting opportunities to follow formulaic algorithms or confront standardization in a new way.

As The 1975 has demonstrated in the trajectory of its career, success can be found in challenging the status quo while still abiding by industry standards of promotion and distribution. While they are signed to a record label that distributes and promotes their music, much of the

creative control is still in their power, allowing them to, at times, cross industry boundaries to facilitate their creative process. Hiring coding experts to use machine learning and neural networks for a music video or enlisting the help of climate change activists to encourage political involvement present two cases of an artist leveraging their cultural influence and power across multiple domains that at times point towards ideals beyond the realm of music and mere enjoyment. Fundamental to this shift from focusing singularly on the music product is the rising value of an artist's personal brand, encapsulating more than just the songs they put out. The meticulous care dedicated to creating a visually engaging live show that fits cohesively with the album rollout for a tour can no longer be overlooked when fans arrive at concerts ready to capture moments on phones that are later posted online the same night for social recognition.

Critical to the future of music is an understanding of the forces at play in the broader landscape of the music industries and its affiliates, as well as how a data-driven culture affects personal creative processes. Just as technology columnists write about the general population's need to decompress and step away from the tools used almost ubiquitously in daily life, artists must also learn how to negotiate with their reality. With digital consumption making up the primary form of discovery and listening to music at a fixed cost of subscription to a service provider, the financial value of a musical recording has dropped incredibly low. Thus, creative strategies for leveraging an artist's value with diversified revenue streams is all but necessary in the modern music industry. Technological reproducibility, as Benjamin predicted, has enabled more collaboration and reinterpretation of art that was previously reserved for those who could afford to participate, and has led to an increasing number of independent artists launching music careers. All vying for commercial success, many of these artists fall prey to Adorno's definitions of standardized music, optimizing the sound of their music to climb charts and resonate with the

largest audience possible. These arguments flank either side of the conflict central to the artist development narrative. Holding the two in tension often requires some meta-analysis and critique, as The 1975 have demonstrated, acknowledging the absurdities that often come with such blatant conflicts of interest, while capitalizing on stories driven primarily by molding listener perception and developing a community of invested listeners.

Social media and streaming platforms churn out content at a rate that is impossible for a single person to keep up to date with. While they have established a new baseline for music discovery and engagement, it is the artists' prerogative to establish how they will negotiate their personal brands through and beyond these services, seeing them as tools to be manipulated for their benefit and pushing the bounds of their creativity through the constraints and affordances they offer. While the race to become a heavily decorated globally renowned superstar remains at the zenith of musical accomplishment, success can now be defined by a variety of metrics, some of which do not sacrifice, but in fact highlight, artistic ingenuity. To focus too heavily on financial prosperity shifts the purposes of music creation, whereas continuing to have political and social impact insists upon focusing on the art itself and resisting the overly analytical reduction to data points and best practices. Ultimately, what will elevate artists above the noise is their ability to continue to tell compelling narratives that subvert the clamor to follow trends and instead reinforce the unique individuality of the artist and music.

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## **Author Biography**

Rachel Lai grew up in Houston, TX with an infatuation with music and an insatiable curiosity for how things worked. While still in high school, she began supporting artists by working with the Warner Bros. Records fan engagement team to build online communities. Her diverse interests have led her to pursue a double major, and she graduates this spring from the University of Texas at Austin with a degree in Neuroscience and Advertising, as well as an independently constructed minor in Integrative Music Branding. Aside from her studies, she works as an artist management intern and occasionally tours the country as a concert photographer. Upon graduation, she plans to move to Los Angeles to continue her pursuit in a career in the music industry as a creative strategist.