

**The Perceived Identities and Strategies of M-pop
in the Journey of Internationalization**

Seeing M-pop as a digital media entrepreneurship practice

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the emerging M-pop practice from the perspective of digital media entrepreneurship. By investigating the perception that music professionals have of M-pop music and its international ambition, this thesis inductively identifies the entrepreneurial identity and the strategic management aspect of M-pop practice in the process of internationalization. A qualitative research method was used. This thesis conducted 11 semi-structured in-depth interviews with music professionals of both Chinese and non-Chinese nationalities and performed a thematic content analysis of the textual interview data collected. In short, it is found out that M-pop is still at a very emerging premature stage. M-pop and its spearhead-Lay Zhang, possess entrepreneurial spirits of attempting to innovate a novel music style and venture into the international market. Entering the international market is not easy for Chinese musicians. The money-oriented domestic industry environment as well as the imbalanced cultural flow between the West and China have imposed non-significant barriers. Meanwhile, digital technologies, a curious international audience, as well as the rising soft power of China are opening up the potential for M-pop to succeed internationally. Furthermore, while the drastic media transformation lowers the barriers to entry for music lovers, it creates a market- and profit-driven mentality that significantly hinder the development of domestic Chinese musicians. Strategically, if M-pop musicians want to succeed in the international market, they must learn how to balance commercial and artistic tensions, prepare for money, teams, and publicity, and cultivate the right mentality.

Keywords: Media Entrepreneurship, Strategic choices, Chinese, M-pop, Lay Zhang

PREFACE

By interviewing music industry professionals from diverse backgrounds, this thesis contributes to bridging the knowledge gap between academics and industry, as well as the cultural gap between the west and east. At the completion of this thesis, I am grateful to each and every one of you who has helped me along this journey.

To begin, I want to express my gratitude to all of my interviewees for your valuable time and unreserved sharing of your insights and opinions. Without you, I would not be able to complete my research. Thank you for educating me on the matters that you are passionate about, I really learned a lot. Each one of you has enriched my understanding professionally by directing me to see the world from different perspectives and inspired me personally with your unique life experiences. It was truly a pleasant journey for doing the interviews with all of you.

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To my friends in China and the Netherlands who have supported me emotionally and practically, especially during my crucial stage of thesis writing, thank you for being there for me.

Last, but certainly not least, I am and will always be grateful to my parents for their support and for granting me the freedom throughout my upbringing to explore the world on my own terms. Also a big thank you to my family members who care about me with every step I take in my life.

It was a very stressful yet extremely rewarding process of thesis writing. The completion of this thesis also marks the end of this unusual academic year during which the world is undergoing an unprecedented pandemic. As one of the most unusual classes ever in history, I am also using this thesis to mark this unforgettable experience. As human beings, we are so small and fragile, yet bridging understanding and knowledge is our eternal task as a means of contributing to humanity as a whole.

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	2
PREFACE	3
1 Introduction	8
1.1 The subject of the thesis	8
1.2 Social relevance	8
1.3 Scientific relevance	9
1.4 Theoretical gap and research question	10
1.5 Chapter outline	11
2 Theoretical framework	13
2.1 Media entrepreneur(ship) and innovative M-pop genre	13
2.1.1 Entrepreneurship and media entrepreneurship.	13
2.1.2 Identity and motivation, and the international ambition of M-pop	15
2.1.3 Dual motivation of media entrepreneurship: creative aspiration vs. commercial gain	16
2.2 Strategic brand management	18
2.2.1 Being strategic	18
2.2.2 Brand management	18

M-pop: Perceived Entrepreneurial Identities and Strategies	5
2.2.3 Challenges of internationalization	19
2.3 Digital media entrepreneurship	21
2.3.1 Combination of entrepreneurship, strategy in a digitized context	21
2.3.2 Open innovation and platformization	22
3 Methodology	24
3.1 Research design: choice of method	24
3.2 Data collection: in-depth interview	26
3.2.1 Operationalization.	26
3.2.2 Sampling methods	27
3.3 Data analyzation: thematic analysis	28
3.4 Credibility of qualitative research	29
3.5 Ethics and current challenges	30
4 Result	33
4.1 M-pop: an emerging music type in the becoming	33
4.1.1 M-pop and its entrepreneurial founder.	33
4.1.2 M-pop's identity is taking shape	35
4.1.3 Fusion style: innovative enough?	36
4.1.4 M-pop motivation: international ambition	38
4.2 International opportunities and challenges	40

M-pop: Perceived Entrepreneurial Identities and Strategies	6
4.2.1 Factors that hinder international success.	41
4.2.1.1 Unhealthy domestic market environment	41
4.2.1.2 The imbalance of cultural flow	43
4.2.1.3 Difficulties from international audience side	46
4.2.1.4 Difficulties from Chinese musicians' side	47
4.2.2 Factors that support the international success	48
4.2.2.1 Digitization opens up way to exposure	48
4.2.2.2 The audience: western audience are curious	50
4.2.2.3 Soft power and overseas market potential	50
4.3 Strategic media management	51
4.3.1 Strategic choices	51
4.3.2 Digitization influences the Chinese music industry	53
4.3.2.1 Media environment & transformation.	53
4.3.2.2 Commercial oriented environment kills artistic creativity and value	54
4.3.2.3 The dilemma of Douyin dominance	56
4.3.3 Inspiration of future strategic choices	57
4.3.3.1 Strategies 1: balance the commercial and artistic	57
4.3.3.2 Strategy 2: Money, team and marketing	58
4.3.3.3 Strategy 3: setting the right mentality and be authentic	61

M-pop: Perceived Entrepreneurial Identities and Strategies	7
5 Conclusion and discussion	63
5.1 Summary	63
5.2 Discussion	64
Proposition 1	65
Proposition 2	65
Proposition 3	65
Proposition 4	65
5.3 Limitation & future research direction	66
5.4 Social implication	67
References	68
Appendix	78
Appendix A: Complete list of Interview participants	78
Appendix B: Interview topic list	79
Appendix C: Interview consent form	81
Appendix D: Coding tree	87

1 Introduction

1.1 The subject of the thesis

With the release of this album *Namanana* in 2018, Chinese pop singer Lay Zhang coined the term *M-pop*. Lay focuses the emphasis on his cultural roots and exhibits his attempt at conceiving and exercising what he terms "M-pop" in the summer of 2020, with the publication of his latest double LP "Lit"(Herman, 2020). Summarizing from what Lay has explained in various interviews, M-pop, aka Mix-Mandarin-Pop, is a music genre that blends modern music style such as Hiphop, Urban, Trap, R&B and EDM with traditional Chinese music and cultural elements in terms of instrumentation, local dialect, motifs, legends and concepts, using Madarin as the main singing langue while adding one or more foreign languages in its formation (Herman, 2020; LSB, 2020; Singh, 2020). It's also worth noting that Lay's goal with this blended sort of music genre is to "bring China to the world"(Herman, 2020). With the development of this emerging genre spearheaded by one singer, M-pop starts to show a sign of evolution. On September 10th, 2020, Economic Press China, a first-tier Chinese publishing house, announced that they will partner with Lay Zhang on a textbook proposal on M-pop, as well as inviting artists, music enthusiasts, and music teachers who are interested in M-pop to collaborate (Economic Press China, 2020). However, as of the date of this study, there is no relevant information available when searching for "M-pop" alone in popular search engines such as Google and YouTube, or scholarly search engines such as Google scholar. Only when the terms "M-pop" + "Lay Zhang" are combined will certain articles from the music and entertainment industries appear. That is to say, M-pop is still a relatively unknown musical format.

1.2 Social relevance

Media entrepreneurship is not only a topic of scholarly interest for academics; it is also relevant for practitioners (Achtenhagen,2008). This study generates several propositions that can serve as a guide for future empirical research on media entrepreneurship in relation to the Chinese music scene. Simultaneously, the study's findings provide practical counsel for aspiring M-pop musicians and other regional artists with an international aspiration.

In academia, this study is helpful for western scholars who are interested in China but unable to obtain critical information from within; it is equally significant for Chinese researchers who lack access to an international perspective outside of China. Due to the language barrier, the difference in social systems, internet censorship, and a lack of scholarly communication between the west and China's cultural and creative industries, an information gap exists, posing an impediment to doing such study. This paper exploits the unique opportunity to perform such research from both sides, overcoming the aforementioned obstacles.

This study is beneficial for M-pop artists in terms of understanding how their music is perceived by a knowledgeable audience; by knowledgeable, it means that the interview participants have sufficient knowledge of music as well as cross-cultural, abandoned industry, and academic experience who are able to share insight with their expertise. Apart from M-pop artists, this study is relevant for any regional artists with an international ambition to seek inspiration for strategic choices that will elevate their influence to a new level, as the international challenge of cross-cultural communication and strategic media management in the digital era are prevalent topics from which other artists can draw inspiration.

1.3 Scientific relevance

In terms of theoretical relevance, M-pop as a context has not attracted attention from academia. However, it is a great and novel context in which to explore how cultural and creative entrepreneurs develop, how they manage strategically and how they develop their brands. As such, certain theories in media and cultural disciplines can help to decode the phenomenon. M-pop can be seen as an entrepreneurial development in the field of modern Chinese media, and as such of media management and media entrepreneurship more generally. Media entrepreneurship can be (narrowly) defined as entrepreneurship taking place in the media industry (Horst & Hitters, 2020, p. 28). In this case, might even be defined more broadly as “digital media entrepreneurship”, as the development of M-pop is further enabled by digital media technologies in particular, media platforms, enabling networking, sharing of ideas and cross-linking (Horst & Hitters, 2020). This is seen in that M-pop is a genre Lay is spearheading with the “aim of bringing Chinese culture to global – primarily western – music listeners” (Herman, 2020).

Media entrepreneurship is an emerging field that sheds light on entrepreneurial phenomena related to the media industries and media technologies (Achtenhagen, 2017; Horst & Hitters, 2020; Horst & Murschetz, 2019; Will et al., 2016). From current research we know that entrepreneurs are developing new business models in the established media industry scope (Evens et al., 2018; Naldi & Picard, 2012). This includes new news platforms or formats of reaching audiences (Price Schultz & Jones, 2017), questions of driving innovation through collaboration and alliances (Mütterlein & Kunz, 2017), as well as corporate media entrepreneurship, in which large established players invest in new ventures (Hasenpusch & Baumann, 2017). Other forms and formats of media entrepreneurship aim to disrupt existing industry practices and boundaries, and create new ways of producing content and reaching audiences, emancipating from established rules (Zboralska, 2017). In fact, this spectrum may go even further, if we consider activities and new practices on and around social media platforms (Arbatani et al., 2019), individual, freelance-like personal development and self-branding as bloggers and influencers (Brydges & Sjöholm, 2018), or essentially digital forms of media entrepreneurship more broadly (Horst & Hitters, 2020). This may include a greater appreciation on how digital media platforms enable new forms of entrepreneurship (Kraus et al., 2019; Nambisan, 2018; Nambisan et al., 2018; Shen et al., 2018), and guide individual entrepreneurs in their development (Horst et al., 2019).

1.4 Theoretical gap and research question

Despite this plethora of studies, however, we currently know very little about far Eastern forms of media entrepreneurship. This is seen in calls for a greater variety of media venturing and contexts (Achtenhagen, 2017; Lowe, 2016; Picard & Lowe, 2016). In particular, we know very little about how Chinese entrepreneurs try to reach more international audiences and develop themselves as media entrepreneurs. Chinese researchers also call for the effort of investigating novel topics and bridging the academic research with the in-industry insight in order to reach a deeper understanding of the music industry (Wang, 2020). For ambitious creative professionals, such as Lay Zhang, who would like to break the geographical boundaries and embrace the international audience, identity development and brand strategic management

during brand internationalization are core issues to tackle. By brand internationalization, we mean the extension of promoting a successful national or regional brand to another country, region or to the world to cater to different needs of target customers to reach international recognition, make social connections, and promote the brand's name (Shen, 2013). At the same time, this development challenges the way these artists feel about themselves and who they are, in other words, their entrepreneurial identity (Horst et al., 2019).

As we know very little about Chinese media entrepreneurs generally, to address this scientific gap, this paper focuses on the perception of M-pop identity and its international challenges during the time when the media environment is undergoing a drastic transformation. Hereby, the following research question is developed:

R.Q.: How do music professionals perceive the entrepreneurial identity and strategic choices of M-pop music as a media entrepreneurship practice in the process of internationalization?

In this research question, three key concepts are identified, which are identity, internationalization and strategic management. To better tackle the the research question stated above, three sub questions are developed revolved around the concepts as follows:

1. How do music professionals view M-pop music and the social reality it is situated in?
2. How do music professionals view the international environment and challenges for M-pop music to achieve its international ambition?
3. How could the inspiration be drawn from M-pop musicians to make strategic choices of being a media entrepreneur?

1.5 Chapter outline

To answer the research question, a qualitative research method is adopted, which are 11 semi-structured in-depth interviews with music professionals of both Chinese and non-Chinese nationalities and a thematic content analysis on the textual interview data collected.

Continuing with this introduction, chapter 2 will cover pertinent theories on entrepreneurial identity, cultural flow, and strategic media management in order to create the theoretical framework. Chapter 3 elaborates on the research design and discusses the conduct of

the interviews and the theme analysis. Chapter 4 describes the key findings from the interview data analysis, taking into account the theoretical framework discussed in the preceding chapter. Finally, chapter 5 synthesizes this research, critically remark on its limitations, and discuss future potential in the subject.

2 Theoretical framework

As a coherent framework, theory seeks to characterize, comprehend, and explain various facets of social existence (Boeije, 2010). By referencing pertinent literature, this chapter establishes a theoretical framework for examining the M-pop phenomena through the lens of strategic media entrepreneurship. This framework covers the definition of entrepreneurship, strategic management in the media industry, and the concept of digital media entrepreneurship in order to represent the increasingly digitized social reality in which M-pop and its musicians exist.

2.1 Media entrepreneur(ship) and innovative M-pop genre

2.1.1 Entrepreneurship and media entrepreneurship.

As its origin, Schumpeter (Swedberg, 1991) describes entrepreneurship as a drive force for economic growth by innovatively producing novel products, advancing technologies, and exploring new markets. While there is no commonly acknowledged definition of entrepreneurship, scholars consistently refer to Schumpeter's explanation, which identifies innovation and financial gain as important reasons underpinning entrepreneurial actions (Sindik & Graybeal, 2017; Vallaster & Kraus, 2011). Entrepreneurs, consequently, are “people who seek to generate value, through the creation or expansion of economic activity, by identifying and exploiting new products, processes or markets” (Blundel et al., 2017, p.2). Nowadays, with the development in academics, entrepreneurship is no longer a solely economic term, and it has expanded from an economic and business domain to sociological and cultural industries research (Scott, 2012).

Media entrepreneurship encompasses for-profit and non-profit media firms, in contrast to the classic definition of entrepreneurship, which is only for-profit (Hoag, 2008). In comparison to other industries, media entrepreneurship is distinguished by its independent content business with a well-defined revenue model (Compaine & Hoag, 2012) and a high level of digitalization and non-materialization at the consuming end (Witt et al., 2016). To better define media entrepreneurship, Khajeheian (2013) collects existing definitions from reviewing literature and

examines with academics in the field of media management and entrepreneurship to refine the concept as following: “Individual or small firms which use their own or others’ resources to create value by extracting opportunities via offering a service or product consisting of any innovation in each of product/service characteristics, process, distribution channel or place, or different innovative usage, to the media market, or any other market in which media is its main channel of interaction”(p.128).

Broadly, the media industries are defined as “the industries that mainly produce and sell information and entertainment products and services”(Hang, 2016). Specifically, in line with this framework, Hoag (2008) outline the range of media which includes “traditional publishing (newspapers, periodicals, or books), traditional electronic media (broadcasting, broadband, cable, or satellite), music industry, motion pictures, video gaming, recorded music, advertising, and adaptations of the Internet for any of these media”(p. 75). In this sense, M-pop music as a music type is distributed through physical albums as well as digital online music platforms is well positioned in the scope of media in media entrepreneurship.

The scope of the media entrepreneurship study is quite comprehensive, encompassing both macro- and micro-level studies, as well as quantitative (e.g., assessing the start-up rates of the media business in the United States) and qualitative research (e.g. investigating the motives of being entrepreneurially active and the barriers of entry of entrepreneurship by interviewing media entrepreneurs) (Achtenhagen,2017; Compaine and Hoag ,2012; Hoag ,2008). It is noticed that some scholars have also used the term “cultural entrepreneurs” or “cultural entrepreneurship” to refer to musicians (Ellmeier, 2003; Leadbeater & Oakley, 1999; Scott, 2012;) to characterize the commercial conduct of those engaged in the production of cultural products—music. Due to the music industry's strong ties to the cultural and media industries, this thesis will see the terms as interchangeable. And, because the term "cultural entrepreneur(ship)" has the same creative and commercial connotations as "media entrepreneur(ship)", this thesis will avoid making a nuanced distinction between the two and will instead use the term "media entrepreneur(ship)" unless specific literature specifies otherwise for the purpose of consistency in developing the framework in digital strategic media entrepreneurship.

Scholars have been depicting the characteristics of cultural entrepreneurs. Ellmeier (2003, p. 26) characterises the cultural entrepreneur as “on average. . .[a] multi-skilled, flexible person, psychologically resilient, independent, single, unattached to a particular location who jumps at whatever opportunity there is to be had in the field of art, music, or the media”. Scott (2012) studies the music producers as cultural entrepreneurs using Bourdieu’s framework of alternative capitals. Scott (2012) summarizes the distinctive characteristics of creative labor (i.e. insecure employment, low wages, identity investment, etc.) and concludes that there are three elements that underpin the term "cultural entrepreneur" as a subjectivity. Firstly, cultural entrepreneurs create "cultural products such as songs, recordings, videos, and performances that require nuanced understandings of contemporary cultural forms"; secondly, cultural entrepreneurs “produce an identity and social trajectory as a new taste maker”; and thirdly cultural entrepreneurs are motivated to find novel ways to mobilize resources without relying heavily on economic growth (Scott, 2012, p. 243). Scott (2012, p242) examines the cultural entrepreneur via the lens of the enterprising self - "one who pursues artistic interests while balancing the imperative of reproducing labor power". Being cultural entrepreneurs requires the skills of mobilizing one’s economic, cultural, social capital, symbolic capitals (i.e. “generated through radio airplay, online sales and chart positions, and media exposure”) (Scott, 2012).

2.1.2 Identity and motivation, and the international ambition of M-pop

Identity is critical for understanding an entrepreneur's motivation, much more so in an organizational context where individuals are ingrained as social beings.(Brown, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvensson, 2003; Alvensson et al., 2008). In terms of motivation, media entrepreneurs are not or not only driven by “an extrinsic profit motivation”(Hoag ,2008, p.75), rather they are more driven by “intrinsic rewards”(Hoag ,2008, p.75) of “adding value to society”(Kao, Kao, & Kao, 2002, p. 41). Horst et al. (2019) explore the development of entrepreneurial identities in the media field by conducting qualitative interviews and identify three entrepreneurial identity types, namely “solution-driven”, “purpose-driven” and “lifestyle-driven” identity. Specifically, the purpose-driven identity consists of value-based and creativity-

focused motives (Horst et al., 2019). Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) state that “identity work refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (p. 1165). They also stress the importance of identity in activities like decision-making, meaning-making, and motivation-finding during the entrepreneurial process (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Identity is not only formed by individual practitioners themselves, but also shaped by the interaction with and the perception of “others”. Brouwers (2017) conceptualizes the concept of *understanding-with* embedded in failure and its guiding function to media entrepreneurs like entrepreneurial journalists. In particular, Brouwers (2017) is inspired by the idea of Haraway’s (2016) *becoming-with* and constructs the concept of *understanding-with* to further conclude that “we are never becoming, or understanding, in isolation, but always becoming- or understanding-*with*”. For instance, Brouwers (2017, p. 218) describes that entrepreneurial journalism is in the process of becoming-with process as it is always connected with “other actors, actants, pasts, and/or futures”.

As a media product that has missionary attempts of “changing the world” with the artistic endeavor (Picard, 2005), M-pop practice is driven by a purpose. The slogan “bring China to the world” exemplifies the entrepreneurial spirit, its passion for success, and its desire to transform ideas into reality. The process of internationalizing M-pop music and winning the hearts of an international audience becomes key to this entrepreneurial approach in this ambition.

Internationalization is the process of extending a region's geographical boundaries, which entails difficulties and complexity in operation due to the existence of separate social, political, cultural, and legal systems (Hitt et al., 1997).

2.1.3 Dual motivation of media entrepreneurship: creative aspiration vs. commercial gain

The debate over the conflict or synergy between artistic and commercial identities has never stopped in the cultural and creative industries. (Schediwy et al., 2018). In Bourdieu’s sense, the cultural production for the field such as “media, music, journalism, fine art, literature” has been constructed into two poles in relation to the class and power relation, which are autonomous pole of “art for arts sake” and the heteronomous pole structured in accordance with

the “economic logics” (e.g. “best sellers, sell-out performances, prestigious awards, and the star phenomenon”) (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 38, as cited in Scott, 2012). On the one hand, there is a view advocating that the stress of the commercial elements of musicians’ career endangers their artistic capability and harm the intrinsic artistic motivations (Coulson, 2012; Frey & Jegen, 2001); on the other hand, there is also a view suggesting that artistic identities can be well integrated with the business-related identities and proven to be beneficial as being an entrepreneur in artistic world (Beckman, 2005; Bridgstock, 2013; Eikhof & Haunschild, 2006). Negus and Pickering (2004) argue that artistic and commercial thought are inextricably linked in creative cultures. Wilson & Stokes (2005) have conducted empirical research on the British music industry through interviews with cultural entrepreneurs, finance providers, and industry experts in order to address the cognitive dissonance (i.e. creative independence vs. collaboration with business stakeholders) that cultural entrepreneurs face when managing their businesses. Wilson & Stokes (2005) separate creativity (i.e. the essentially individual act of generating new ideas) and innovation (i.e. the socially heavy process of successfully implementing new ideas) in order to better understand the management activities which nurture success. Specifically, in the music world, Schediwy et al., (2018) survey 146 young music students in the Netherlands and find out that young musicians rather well synergize their career identities with bohemian identities than experiencing the two imperatives in tension. For media enterprises, they “are not thoroughbred commercial entities, but must also comply with public interest and artistic and creative imperatives” (Küng, 2007: 24, cited in Achtenhagen, 2008). Achtenhagen (2008) also addresses the dual motivation of media entrepreneurship by stating: “some media ventures are torn between aiming to make a profit and the world a better place to live in—by addressing and aiming to reduce a social problem or by providing artistic and cultural value, entertainment or intellectual stimulation”. Thus, from their very inception media start-ups need to balance different, sometimes conflicting, interests and demands.

In general, as a cultural and media product, M-pop is tasked by its birthplace with the objective of reaching a wider international audience. To accomplish this purpose, certain commercial and marketing methods must be implemented, ensuring that M-pop music is not only made artistically, but also entrepreneurially. Artistic entrepreneurs have a different set of ideals

than typical entrepreneurs, as the former are more concerned with cultural creativity, whereas the latter are motivated by profit and capitalist concepts (Werthes et al., 2018). This tension within the identity debate is worth examining when observing the M-pop phenomenon, as it has both an artistic goal of inventing a new style of music that incorporates elements of Chinese traditional music and blends them with modern music styles and an entrepreneurial goal of breaking into the international market and gaining recognition. It will be fascinating to see how they balance bohemian and entrepreneurial characteristics in creating M-pop music while also catering to an international audience and considering larger markets.

2.2 Strategic brand management

2.2.1 Being strategic

In media management studies, strategic management has been the widely used conceptual framework (Mierzejewska, 2011), and in particular the strategic management of media entrepreneurs is a growing topic of discussion. Strategic management is “locally situated, context-dependent activity” (Horst & Murschetz, 2019; Jarzabkowski, 2003; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Strategic media management emphasizes on the marketing and branding aspects of a media product (Baumann, 2015; Chan-Olmsted, 2011; Krebs & Siegert, 2015; Horst & Murschetz, 2019; Roll, Emes, & Horst, 2017; Roll & Horst, 2017; Siegert, Förster, Chan-Olmsted, & Ots, 2015; von Rimscha, 2015). Strategic entrepreneurship refers to behaviors that aim at opportunity as well as advantage seeking which leads to a better result in business performance (Horst & Murschetz, 2019). Individual musicians, as founders of their own music businesses, are continually on the lookout for such opportunities to fulfill their musical ambitions and commercial success. For instance, some effective strategic media management methods include managing “cross-media content distribution to achieve economies of scale, leveraging, or repurposing” (Vukanovic, 2009, cited in Horst & Murschetz, 2019).

2.2.2 Brand management

One of the most significant strategic advancements for entrepreneurs is the process of brand development and internationalization of their business operations. In terms of brand

management, media companies frequently use it to develop a long-term relationship with their audience.(Ots, 2008), in which brand authenticity and brand personality are crucial dimensions in managing a brand. In terms of brand authenticity, concluded by Vallaster & Kraus (2011), brand authenticity is for a brand to be “continuity(i.e. genuine evolution from origin until now), coherency of action and communication (i.e. do what you say/do as you say), self-congruency (i.e. staying true to spirit, character and/or convictions in the presence of pressure), and coherency across all channels and touch points”. Vallaster & Kraus (2011) research the interaction between the branding practices for small enterprises and “perceived brand authenticity” and find out that “as long as outside and internal perception of brand values is congruent the brand is perceived as authentic”(p.373). The three variables that considerably impact how customers perceive the brand is authentic are “company size, increasing presence/availability as well as ownership structures” (Vallaster & Kraus, 2011). Comparably, brand personality also draws attention and is important in media branding. Aaker (1997) describes brand personality as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand”. Matteo et al.(2013) outlined five dimensions of brand personality, namely “sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness”. In news media enterprises, the news anchors and their personalities tend to be associated with the enterprise and hence being used by media companies to establish their brand personality (Chan-Olmsted & Cha, 2007). Hall et al. (2009) use a cultural economy perspective to highlight the important role of “iconic individuals” and “brand leaders”, as these key personnels are seen as a great asset for company reputation, brand image and increase the level of professional service, hence they influence the practice of internationalization for these sectors.

2.2.3 Challenges of internationalization

To accomplish the goal of internationalization, the concept of globalization of cultural and creative sectors teaches important lessons. Additionally, as an entrepreneurial practice, it is necessary to be cognizant of the reality that entrepreneurship is inextricably linked to uncertainty, risk, and entry barriers. (Acs & Audretsch, 2003; Compaine & Hoag, 2012; Rentería, 2007). Numerous impediments may arise during the process of internationalization of

the creative industry, including insufficient human capital with the necessary skills and knowledge to deal with the international market; insufficient infrastructure for technologies; complex challenges associated with foreign market entry; and inability to engage with other creative professionals in the international network. (Wresti, 2015).

A successful internationalization process necessitates strategic decisions by businesses, such as the method of entry into a foreign market. (Mowla et al., 2014). In terms of barriers to entry, Hoag & Complain (2012) investigate the factors that either support or hinder the media entrepreneurs from entering media markets. The supporting factors are numerous, in particular, “the technological innovation and so-called *big media* ” are the two major supporting pillars being identified in the study. However, interestingly, most of the media entrepreneurs themselves could not manage to identify the barriers to entry (such as in financial, regulatory, structural, or technological aspect)(Hoag & Complain, 2012).

The Chinese scholar Wang (2019) discusses the barriers to cross-cultural communication that Chinese pop music encounters, as well as the underlying reasons. Wang asserts that the Chinese pop songs that have charted on Billboard are regularly written in a European-American style rather than a Chinese style. Due to the absence of a definitive Chinese identity, these pieces of music struggle to be unique and stand out on the international market (Wang, 2019). Additionally, Wang (2019) criticizes the pervasive plagiarism in China's pop music business and points out that this lack of originality is Chinese musicians' Achilles heel. He asserts that "no matter how flawless a piece of music is, it cannot represent China on the global stage" and will only serve to cement the infamous reputation of China as a "copycat" (Wang, 2019). Additionally, Wang (2019) notes that maladaptation abroad can be detrimental to an artist's reputation. Incidents such as Christ Wu's supporters assisting him in dominating the iTunes sales rankings in the United States with enormous purchases ultimately backfired in the United States, with Wu's fans being referred to as "Chinese bots" (Wang, 2019). This maladaptation resulted from the two countries' disparate fan cultures. Fans in China and east Asian society are willing to pay for their favorite idols in order to obtain favorable statistics, however in western culture, where individualism is emphasized, fans place a higher premium on the singers' individual

ability (Wang, 2019). As a result, the method by which supporters attempt to improve their idol's statistics in order to increase their popularity does not work in the western market.

Additionally, intellectuals highlighted the importance of global cultural interchange. Mitkus (2016) claims that internationalization's global participation in creative industries demonstrates a country division. The industrialized world participates more actively in global markets for the creative industry than the developing world (UNCTD, 2008; Mitkus, 2016). Wang (2019) asserts that European-American culture has unquestionably long been at the pinnacle of world culture and has dominated global cultural interchange. Nonetheless, European-American countries have not had sufficient exposure to the Chinese language. When it comes to spreading Chinese culture internationally, linguistic constraints cannot be overlooked. As a colonial legacy, the language and cultural background enable European-American culture to spread swiftly and be accepted in other countries (Wang, 2019). With the global cultural market dominated by European-American culture, it is difficult for Chinese culture to be exported. Additionally, (Chinese music/culture) has been suppressed not only by European-American culture, but also by the audiences assimilated by European-American cultures (Wang, 2019).

Overall, for a new musical genre to be popular on a worldwide scale, it must be well-liked by a global audience. Thus, M-pop professionals, including singers, composers, and marketing workers, must garner attention, establish connections, and appeal to their target consumers. To meet these artistic, strategic, and communicative demands, it is critical for these M-pop artists (media entrepreneurs) to educate themselves about the barriers and challenges, to identify the obstacles musicians and related professionals face, and to investigate strategies for overcoming those obstacles during the international process.

2.3 Digital media entrepreneurship

2.3.1 Combination of entrepreneurship, strategy in a digitized context

The preceding two sections discussed entrepreneurship (in particular, media entrepreneurship) and strategic management (in particular, strategic media management) to help understand how M-pop as an emerging music genre is an innovative practice whose motivation of improving cultural conversation must be realized through strategic brand and organizational

management. Now, this section makes use of the rapidly changing media environment made possible by digital technologies to place M-pop more firmly within the subject of media entrepreneurship practice.

Digital media entrepreneurship, as a strategic practice of entrepreneurs and an interdisciplinary phenomenon, illustrates how entrepreneurs leverage a variety of opportunities to transform innovative ideas into practical activities through the use of digital media to accomplish organizational goals. (Horst & Hitters, 2020; Horst & Murschetz, 2019). Entrepreneurship in the media field is becoming increasingly digitized. Recognizing this trend, Horst & Hitters (2020) construct this new theoretical concept of digital media entrepreneurship to describe the erosion of traditional industry boundaries as different industries, sectors and contexts are brought together and entwined because of digital technologies. Recent decades have witnessed the digital transformation which stimulates “rising demand for internet-based media”, which consequently lead to change in business model, organizational structures, products, automation of process (e.g. in the music industry) (Daidj, 2018).

It is widely recognized that managing digital media technologies has become an indispensable part of successfully managing any business and brand in this digital era (Ots et al., 2015; Rohn, 2018, as cited in Horst & Murschetz, 2019). For entrepreneurs and start-ups, digital media technologies are also becoming increasingly vital (Archer & Harrigan, 2016; Nambisan, 2018; Shen et al., 2018; van Nuenen, 2015). For instance, using digital media enables the practice of entrepreneurship to engage more participation and reduce barriers (Nambisan, 2018). Furthermore, digital media technologies have altered the way entrepreneurs interact and do business. The article discusses how media may be used to its greatest potential by entrepreneurs (Horst & Hitters, 2020). Internally (i.e., management and creative professionals within enterprises) and externally (i.e., clients and other stakeholders outside enterprises), digital media technologies enable creative entrepreneurs to communicate ideas with team members, establish a brand identity with audiences, and develop connections with audiences (Horst & Hitters, 2020).

2.3.2 Open innovation and platformization

Nambisan et al. (2018) identify two emerging phenomena that are shaping the media entrepreneurial activities, which are open innovation (i.e. “a shift toward more open and

distributed models of innovation”) and platformization (i.e. “the increasing importance of digital platforms as a venue for value creation and capture”). Open innovation is built on the belief that in an increasingly connected world, collaboration across diverse stakeholders such as businesses, individuals, and academia will provide greater results than independent exploration (Chesbrough, 2003; Nambisan et al., 2018). It is openness and shared knowledge that revitalize enterprise creativity. Open innovation is frequently associated with business strategies and business processes in the corporate setting (Gruber et al., 2013; Nambisan et al., 2018). As for the application of platformization, Fischer & Reuber (2011) study how entrepreneurs interact using social media platforms such as Twitter to facilitate social interaction.

These two trends create plenty of opportunities for media entrepreneurs to launch new ventures or innovate existing ones. Numerous studies have also examined the usage of social media in relation to business model innovation, concluding that social media has a significant positive impact on overall strategic accomplishments (Horst & Hitters, 2020). Brydges & Sjöholm (2018), for example, discovered that digital technologies such as social media enable the emergence of a variety of unique entrepreneurial activities such as fashion blogging.

Overall, to gain a more complete image of the formation and development of M-pop, it is necessary to investigate the media component, as media helps us to think, reflect, express, or portray information and knowledge about a social phenomenon (Lindgren, 2017; Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Thus, it would be beneficial to learn about the types of strategic media management methods that have been employed in this digitized environment and how they contribute to internationalization of M-pop.

3 Methodology

This chapter discusses the research design and how it was implemented. This chapter first illustrates why the qualitative approach chosen is appropriate for the study topic mentioned in the introduction. The data collection process is then discussed in detail, which is utilizing semi-structured in-depth interviews. The data analysis section subsequently outlined the process of doing thematic analysis. Later, this chapter ends with discussing the credibility as well as reflecting research ethics and the process of conducting research during Covid-19 pandemic.

3.1 Research design: choice of method

Qualitative analysis frequently addresses the "how" and "why" issues in order to get a thorough grasp of the aforementioned research question, with the goal of identifying patterns and latent meaning that humans might not perceive otherwise. According to Silvenman (2014), "qualitative research involves verbal description of real-life situations" (p.26). This qualitative study, in particular, collects data through in-depth interviews and analyzes it using a thematic analysis method.

This study employs qualitative in-depth interviews in a semi-structured manner, as this is the most effective method for addressing the research topic of how musicians perceive M-pop, by delving into the musicians' attitudes, beliefs, feelings, motives, and multifaceted perspective (Babbie, 2016; Baxter & Babbie, 2003; Johnson, 2011). Using in-depth interviews, the deep understanding - "understandings beyond common sense explanations for and other understanding so some cultural form, activity, event, place, or artifact" - is expected to be reached (Johnson, 2011). In order to reach this deep understanding, the insight should be given by "the real-life members of or participants" of the event (Johnson, 2011, p5). By interviewing people who are in the music scene, I can subject myself to reach a deep level of understanding of the M-pop phenomenon similar to the music professionals. Additionally, the study seeks to develop profound understandings that exceed common sense explanations for and "other understandings of some cultural form, activity, event, place, or artifact" and discover what is generally hidden from ordinary perception or contemplation, or to penetrate to more introspective understandings of the experience's essence (Johnson, 2011, p5). Using semi-structured format, more flexibility

is created to cater to the discovery of each individual participant's personal experience yet with the principal guideline of a topic list to "be assertive enough to return the interview to its anticipated course" (Johnson, 2011).

The original direction of this study was to explore the motivation, entrepreneurial identity of the M-pop entrepreneurs themselves, therefore interviewing musicians who identify themselves as M-pop artists would be ideal. I came to realize that as M-pop music is such a new thing and spearheaded by this one singer only at this stage, it is nowhere to find specific musicians who identify themselves as M-pop artists yet at this early stage of the development. Additionally, the book publisher and Lay Zhang's team are understandably reluctant to divulge their internal information or to react to the study request. As a result, a new perspective is required to continue the investigation. Therefore, a new angle is required to proceed the study. I then began recruiting music professionals who have either studied or worked in the music industry, particularly the Chinese pop sector, in order to know their perspectives on M-pop's identity and international challenges.

Surprisingly, this creative approach yields fruitful results which will be discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis. Because of the nature of these interviewees, as they have adequate knowledge about music itself or music industry as a business, yet remain somewhat distant from M-pop itself, they could share very knowledgeable yet objective or even critical views on M-pop phenomenon. Presumably, if the research were to interview M-pop musicians directly, it is likely that more socially desired or branding and marketing-related information would be obtained. Theoretically, in Hoag & Complain's (2012) study of barriers to entry of the new media market, entrepreneurs interviewed could not identify the barriers in their entrepreneurial process as they would say "I couldn't call them barriers just because I was doing something I was passionate for" (Hoag & Complain, 2012). Whether it is a reluctance to tell or an inability to see the barrier, this research opens a window for my thesis to investigate the barriers of entry from the perspective of music professionals who are in the music industry so that they can provide knowledgeable and reliable assessments of M-pop while remaining sufficiently distant from M-pop to avoid providing socially desirable answers.

Also, the work of Brouwers' (2017) conceptualization of "becoming- and understanding-with" in understanding the identity of media entrepreneurs enlightened my research of how to conduct a research when this phenomenon is in a premature stage of development when the artists do not yet recognize M-pop and let alone to define themselves as an M-pop artist. Media entrepreneurs' identities are shaped by counting with "other actors, actants, pasts, and/or futures" (Brouwers, 2017, p. 218). Seeing M-pop as entrepreneurial activity in the creative industry in its way of becoming (i.e. forming its shape as a music genre) is also interconnected with how it is being seen by its audience and the musicians peers, the international people which it tries to appeal to with what it claims to be and what it is perceived as, and with its ultimate goal to reach. Therefore, investigating how knowledgeable individuals in the industry view it would be a very valuable and innovative approach to tackle difficulties and the phenomenon.

Following data collected from the in-depth interview, thematic content analysis is applied. The detailed steps will be illustrated in the later section. By examining the patterns and cooccurrences from the data materials, we can identify deeper relations and underlying meaning between themes, and consequently decode the cultural meaning and practices of M-pop phenomenon (Schreier, 2013). As a scientific method, thematic analysis is used for "identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns(themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79).

3.2 Data collection: in-depth interview

3.2.1 Operationalization.

The full launch of the interview started at the end of April and lasted until the end of May. In total, 11 interviews were conducted in either Chinese or English language, using video meeting software Zoom. The interview meetings were all recorded with the consent from the participants. The interviews in general lasted about 1 hour with an exception of a very informative participant, with whom I conducted two sessions of total length about 3 hours.

Among the 11 participants, nine of the eleven respondents have extensive experience living in a country other than their birth country, implying an international perspective in their response to the international/cross-cultural discussion, as Bourdieu suggests that one's habitus (as a collection of cognitive schemas acquired through socialization in family and school) is

conditioned by one's - class, ethnic, racial, and religious - identity. In particular, out of these 11 participants, 4 are non-Chinese westerners of four western nationalities (i.e. NL, BE, U.S. UK/NL); and 7 are Chinese nationals with most of them having extensive life experience of living abroad, implying familiarity with the Chinese music consumption environment as well as an international perspective. 9 out of the 11 are musicians themselves. 4(R2)(R3)(R8)(R10), in particular, have substantial business experience in the music industry as music producer, label founder, music business manager, or artist management (see Appendix A). Specifically, (R3) and (R8) have extensive experience working inside the Chinese pop music industry both commercially and artistically. (R9) has theoretical and scholarly contacts with the music industry through the lens of communication and sociology. This range and depth of knowledge and experience indicate that each person was qualified to participate in such a conversation. From both the authentic Chinese and western perspectives, I believe that the data collected from these participants will be able to provide insights into both the sender and receiver in the process of M-pop's internationalization. The specific stages are as follows.

Derived from the theoretical framework, a topic(see Appendix B) list is generated by operationalizing the concepts in the research question. By identifying the concepts, interview topics are generated around the concept of 1) identity, 2) international challenges, and 3)strategic media management. A probe- several links of Lay Zhang's music MV on YouTube(link), is sent before each interview meeting to the participants in order to give them a feeling of M-pop music. Informed consent form (see Appendix C) is also sent and signed before the meeting or researcher asks for permission on record at the beginning of the interviews to confirm. During the interview, the researcher first establishes rapport by thanking the participants for the time and introducing her research project. At the end of each interview, participants were asked to refer to other potential candidates (Babbie, 2016).

3.2.2 Sampling methods

The sample is selected through non-probability sampling, through a combination of convenient sampling and snowball sampling, to enable the selection of a precise and targeted sample from a population (Babbie, 2016; Etikan et al., 2016). Convenience sampling selects

respondents entirely on the basis of their proximity to the researcher, allowing for convenient access. When considering interviewees based on personal relationships, ease of accessibility and willingness to participate were critical factors in the selection of individuals for interviews (Etikan et al., 2016). Purposive sampling is a technique for obtaining information-rich samples (Etikan et al., 2016). This technique includes identifying participants who are knowledgeable or experienced with the subject of the research. It also involves identifying people who are willing and available to engage; and able to communicate experiences and ideas (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The research started with approaching the personal contacts who meet the criteria of 1) works or worked in the music industry or 2) have extensive music education, and 3) have international background(optional). This study includes music professionals from both Chinese and non-Chinese backgrounds, yet the majority have an international perspective as a result of living abroad for an extended period of time (more than a year), as a means of exploring this international perspective of this emerging cultural phenomenon. At the end of each interview, participants were asked to refer to other potential candidates (Babbie, 2016). All my 11 interviews are conducted through this combination of sampling methods. What is also worth mentioning is that I have also purposefully contacted music critics or journalists who have written articles on M-pop, the book publisher that recruits musicians to write a textbook about M-pop, as well as Lay Zhang and his team. However, this additional purposive contact appears to be less effective than convenient sampling where the research has direct or indirect contact with. Still, some of the information from the aforementioned parties can be accessed through for instance, the articles written by that journalist or the interviews on Lay Zhang.

3.3 Data analyzation: thematic analysis

Thematic analysis consisting of the process of open coding, axial coding and selective coding in order to identify the common themes (Boeije, 2010). The data set used to find the “repeated patterns of meaning” are the 11 interview transcripts(Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.86). The coding process, following Boeije (2010)’s instruction in his book *Analysis in qualitative research*, consists of three stages, namely open coding (i.e. from raw data to codes), axel coding (i.e. from codes to grouped themes) and selective coding(i.e. from themes to core

concepts). This study adopts a combination of concept-driven and data-driven ways and lean more on the data-driven approach, where the themes and sub-categories are derived from the transcripts as a result of “subsumption and progressive summarizing” when the three main categories have been identified after conceptualization of the research question and building the theoretical framework (Schreier, 2013, p. 9).

To prepare the data, all interviews audio files are transcribed first using the transcription platforms (i.e. iflyrec.com & otter.ai) and then the researcher manually edit the scripts for noticeable errors. Then the transcripts are exported from the transcription website and imported into Atlas.ti for thematic analysis using a coding scheme. To protect the privacy, all participants are anonymized and relevant demographic information is given to indicate the social, cultural and speciality background to situate their opinions

In practice, to start the coding process with open coding, the researcher read the transcripts line by line, transcript by transcript to identify fragments that are relevant to the research and think of a code (i.e. a label that summarizes this textual fragment) for each fragment. Secondly, to "determine which elements in the research are the dominant ones and which are the less important ones", constant comparisons are being made so that to merge or optimize codes to better describe the meaning of the fragments (Boeije, 2010, p. 109). By looking at the similarities and differences, main themes and sub-themes are identified, which is used to construct a “coding tree”. At the same time continuous comparisons are made among codes and themes in order to enrich the scheme. Thirdly, with the coding tree (see Appendix D), the researcher reflects on the relationship between dominant themes and identifies the possible key theoretical concepts in relation, with the theoretical framework reviewed in chapter 2, in order to perform the meaning making process.

3.4 Credibility of qualitative research

When conducting qualitative research, certain rules and procedures must be followed to ensure the study's credibility. To begin, qualitative analysis is guided by three principles: continual comparison, analytic induction, and theoretical sensitivity (Boeije, 2010). The data collection and analysis processes are likely to be closely linked, as discoveries from each new

cycle of data collection must be compared to prior ones, compared to the best-fitting theoretical framework already investigated, and finally interpreted to yield original findings (Boeije, 2010). During the data collection phase and before each interview, I always adapt the interview questions based on the new information gathered from the prior session. When I am analyzing the data, I examine the repeated terms or concepts that arise and construct more precise codes to better characterize the selected information.

Besides principles, there are four criteria that are key to ensure sound research, which are credibility, reliability, validity, and generalizability. Firstly, credibility refers to “careful scholarship, commitment to rigorous argument, attending to the links between claims and evidence” (Seale, 2004, p. 409-410, cited in Silverman, 2011, p. 359). Second, credibility is enhanced by reliability and validity. It is critical to make the research method as well as the theoretical background transparent in order to boost trustworthiness (Silverman, 2011). This can be accomplished by a thorough description of sampling, a well-chosen topic list, critical reflection on the researcher's role, defined data processing methods, and a precise theoretical perspective. In the previous section, I have discussed in detail how data is collected and analyzed in an academic manner. Numerous strategies can be employed to promote validity, including analytical induction, continual comparison, deviant-case analysis, complete data treatment, and suitable tabulation (Silverman, 2011). Fourthly, this study also offers the possibility of applying the findings in a similar media context to realize its generalizability. (Silverman, 2011). By investigating how M-pop is in the process of making its way to an international audience, musicians, artists, and more regional CCI (cultural creative industries) professionals can learn from the struggles of experience from this study so that their brand internationalization process could be a bit smoother.

3.5 Ethics and current challenges

While in-depth interviewing has numerous benefits and is the suitable method for this study, it also implies significant risks and dangers, as well as some distinctive ethical concerns (Johnson, 2011). As Johnson (2011) states, the primary ethical obligation for researchers is to tell the truth; yet it is also crucial to protect the research informants from any difficulties that may

arise as a result of the information they disclosed. In order to protect the privacy of research participants, I have provided an informed consent form and sent prior to the interview to ensure that my participants are fully aware of the research's overall scope. More importantly, I protect my participants' privacy to the fullest extent possible by not reporting identifiable personal information and anonymizing data using pseudonyms, as well as by anonymously labeling interview audio and transcripts, as well as electronic files generated by data analysis software, using a code number for each research participant.

As a researcher, I have the moral obligation to stay as objective as possible in analysing and reporting the data, however, as it might be inevitable that the interpretation is somewhat influenced by what Alfred Schutz (1967) called "stock of knowledge". In order to tell the truth of the phenomenon as objectively as possible, throughout the interview, I am cognizant that I will not probe too far into my personal opinion in order to influence the participants' thinking. Throughout the data analysis process, I only use my background as a Chinese and familiarity with the music scene to stir the curiosity and motivation of conducting the research and to cross reference with my own experience. I base my conclusions and results on primary interview data directly derived from the interviewee and secondary data gleaned from desk research.

According to Johnson (2011), the researcher's objective and rationale for performing the research are important in the discussion over how to conduct qualitative research. My motivation for this research is twofold. Primarily, as a Chinese expatriate, it is somewhat frustrating that hardly anyone I encounter from a western cultural background understands any of the Chinese music I enjoy. It makes me wonder why Chinese musicians, especially those who are talented, do not reach out to the international audience. Then Lay Zhang's M-pop caught my attention, as he repeatedly stressed his desire to connect China with the rest of the world. More importantly, with the recent announcement of an M-pop music textbook project, M-pop appears to be gaining momentum and expanding beyond a one-man show or a premature idea. Secondly, during this Covid-19 pandemic, the misunderstanding and hostility toward Chinese and Asian-looking people in the western societies motivated me to contribute to the act of facilitating cross-cultural communication and understanding. Hopefully, my research will lead to a greater knowledge of both sides and help close the gap of misunderstanding and miscommunication.

This study is being conducted in the midst of a global pandemic. All 11 interviews were conducted via online meeting software Zoom, due to the Dutch pandemic regulations of minimizing physical contact and the geographical distance between myself and my interviewees in other countries. Conducting in-depth interviews using a digital method has its pros and cons. Although the interaction dynamics between interviewer and interviewees is altered and social cues are undermined compared to face-to-face communication, this digital meeting method does allow for a greater choice of interview participants regardless of geographical location.

4 Result

This chapter will discuss the overarching themes derived from the data analysis in three sections. The first theme investigates M-pop as a form of media entrepreneurship, focusing on the genre's fusion style and international ambitions. Theme 2 examines the chances and obstacles that M-pop faces while attempting to enter into the international market. The third topic is devoted to strategic management, and it is believed that it will serve as a blueprint for future M-pop artists.

4.1 M-pop: an emerging music type in the becoming

This section will address how music industry professionals regard M-pop as an entrepreneurial endeavor, as well as the media entrepreneur —Lay, the pop musician who created the phrase and is committed to its promotion. Following that, we'll look at how music critics assess M-pop's fusion style and international goals. Finally, using artists' perceptions of M-pop as a guide, we will study the management components of M-brand pop in order to acquire a better understanding of this strategic entrepreneurial strategy.

4.1.1 M-pop and its entrepreneurial founder.

M-pop, as a new musical style, was coined by a solo artist who is also a purpose-driven entrepreneur and is inviting additional musicians to join the passion and mission (Economic Press China, 2020). While the musician has millions of followers on both domestic Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo and international platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, it is debatable whether the music style he pioneered is widely recognized, particularly among music professionals. Chinese and non-Chinese audiences definitely have varying degrees of familiarity with his act and the M-pop music he produces.

“I think for Lay, as a top tier artist in China, to be able to think about all this (the M-pop and international ambition) suggests that he is viewing the industry from the perspective of a grand world level. I think he is a person with a strong sense of responsibility.

And this is the quality of being an excellent artist, a musician. I think his mentality and act are very worthy of respect”. (R8)

According to musicians who are familiar with Lay Zhang, he is a popular idol, a celebrity with a large following, but who lacks representative song work (R4)(R8) (R3). Personally, he portrays himself as optimistic, upright, and responsible, as well as a pop star with a lofty goal and objective (Picard, 2005). Additionally, (R4) believes Lay is honest in his efforts, yet he appears to be a protected idol at the end of the day. Seeing what he has demonstrated on a variety show devoted to roasting. (R4) elucidates,

“I think he looks like an idol that has been protected so well. The only voice he can hear is from his fans and the feedback from his company. He might really don’t know what other people think of him”. (R4)

This raises questions about Lay's entrepreneurial disposition as well as the direction of M-pop’s development.

“I think it is more like that his team wants to explore the international market and the international market remains a virgin land for Chinese musicians. Then it becomes that (he/they) aiming at the bigger market profit while being seen as the trend leader for the domestic chinese musicians.” (R8)

(R8) believes that M-pop’s ambition of exploring the international market is a prudent marketing plan. It is hard to tell whether this M-pop initiative is the artist’s own idea, or it is more the company’s marketing strategy. It is also not clear whether this M-pop will be a one’man show in the end or will it develop and involve more artistand become a real phenomenon and realize its international ambition.

4.1.2 M-pop's identity is taking shape

To gain a better understanding of this media entrepreneurial practice, music experts clarify what M-pop is or is not (i.e. is it Chinese, is it western, is it K-pop, it is not Europe, it has no Arab or Indian elements). M-pop is a developing musical style that may or may not evolve into a well-established and well-recognized genre as defined by musicians. However, the road to M-pop is full of uncertainty. Doubts are raised concerning M-pop's concept being confused with C-pop and the genre is not yet being established.

M-pop remains a hazy idea that confuses audiences with C-pop (i.e. Chinese pop music), as the Chinese music industry uses the term C-pop to refer to all pop music produced in the Chinese-speaking scene, which is also a term that some foreign musicians are familiar with. When discussing Chinese popular music in English, the interviewers and participants discovered a particularly perplexing area of conceptual differentiation between "C-pop", "Mandopop", and "M-pop".

The misconception between C-pop and M-pop is widespread among music industry experts contacted. To understand C-pop, Liu & Mason (2010) conclude, "C-Pop broadly refers to popular music made by artists from the Greater China region and/or sung in a Chinese language". Further, through conversation with (R3) who has substantial experience working in China's pop music industry, we came to the conclusion that M-pop and C-pop are not synonymous; rather, M-pop should be considered a subtype of C-pop. C-pop is a broad term that refers to the broader pop music scene in China, whereas M-pop is considerably more specific which refers to the type of music that currently Lay Zhang is spearheading. C-pop is mostly represented by iconic singers, such as Jay Chou and David Tao, and places a greater emphasis on singing with soft and smooth rhythm and singing style, whereas M-pop music is more visual and dance-oriented.

The uncertainty of M-pop also stems from its inability to differentiate oneself and be recognized. According to the industry insider, M-pop is currently unable to distinguish itself.

"You see, although we are talking about M-pop and whether or not it can become popular at the world scale. But in order to discuss the possibility, the prerequisite has to be that

M-pop is a (recognized) music genre. However, M-pop is not a music genre (yet). [...] If you ask me what is rock music, what is K-pop, what is folk music, what is EDM, we can all well define these music genres. What differs M-pop is that nobody can really talk about what M-pop really is because the current self-definition is not clear or distinguished enough”. (R3)

M-pop seems not to be able to be recognized as other well-established music genres for it is lacking distinctive features. However, based on Lay's description of his M-pop music (in the introduction), music professionals readily recognize the fusion elements and international aspirations in M-pop,

“I see a lot of fusion from China and very big western music genres.[...]I do see a big wanting to bring China into the world. Yeah. Yeah, especially video.” (R10)

Musicians(R4) (R6) also believe that fusion is an effective format for incorporating Chinese music and cultural components into popular music, thereby realizing M-international pop's aspiration.

4.1.3 Fusion style: innovative enough?

One of M-pop's features is its emphasis on fusion style. As novel as the term M-pop may be, it is debatable if it is sufficiently innovative. As described in the introduction, M-pop is relatively unknown at the moment. Google and YouTube will not show the right content and the interviewees were also unaware of the concept prior to participating in the interview. According to some musicians, the term is not novel, as numerous C-pop performers have already attempted to incorporate Chinese components into their music creation, whether through cultural symbols, traditional instruments, or language mixing.

“I think the method is okay, however it is not something new in my opinion. It is because maybe Chinese musicians (not limited to China-born) are working in this direction, using

the Chinese elements. [...] Chinese musicians use traditional Chinese instruments like Zither. [...] Chinese philosophy and thoughts, Chinese mythology, stories, and cultures [...] I think he is indeed quite like the kind of R&B style that singers like David Tao have made". (R4)

C-pop artists such as Leehom Wang, JJ Lin, David Tao, Will Pan, and Jay Chou have all experimented with this fusion concept, whether through the use of traditional Chinese music tonality, the combination of Chinese and English rap lyrics, the use of Chinese traditional music instruments and cultural motifs, and so on. Additionally, these are the top-tier pop singers from China's golden age of the album era.

The fusion style of M-pop is the outcome of a variety of musical influences. Musicians detect a tremendous influence from the west, particularly the United States, as well as from South Korea. American influence is manifested through the use of autotune to flatten the voice, excessive commercialization, and overproduction. According to musicians(R11) (R10), excessive production and commercialization are common traits of the M-pop, K-pop, and American music scenes.

"the majority of stuff that comes out of [...] the US, it's so perfect that I can't relate to it. [...] the voice is so flattened and auto tuned and like all of that stuff. [...] I guess just the style of music, the way of producing the voice, like the production on the track. It was just like Hollywood. If you like it, it's very much like Uber commercial."(R11)

Notably, when we refer to the "west" in general, we frequently refer to the United States and Europe. In the instance of M-pop, musician(R11) notes that there is an aesthetic distinction between European and American tastes in music, although a very broad one. What my interviews revealed is that European culture appreciates more personal expression, a human touch, and music that has a "soul"; whereas American culture, and other cultures greatly influenced by American culture, such as K-pop, are more prone to have the final result be "perfect" rather than imperfect.

Owing to the South Korean influence, musicians link M-pop with Korean boy-band culture. Without the language differences, international audiences might confuse M-pop with K-pop music.

“If I heard it in a DiDi(Chinese Uber), yeah, obviously, I would think it's Chinese because I'm hearing it in China. But if I was hearing it somewhere else outside the country, and I didn't know any Mandarin.[...] I guess it could be, you know, like some of the hip hop scene that's happening in Korea right now.[...] So unless you have the context clues to say, Oh, this is, a Chinese musician other than the language, obviously, I don't think you'd be able to tell”(R2)”

Interestingly, artists also discover that M-pop is stylistically distinct from the K-pop they are familiar with, as M-pop is significantly heavier and more melodic than K-pop.

“But the style, obviously, stylistically, it is incredibly different to the k-pop that.[...] to me K- pop is much more like poppy. It's very high energy. It's very cute. Like it's very sort of teenagers, very light, I don't know, but very light hearted, very smiley, everyone's like cute and the world is good and that's like nice. [...] But with this M-thing, I didn't get the happiness, but I had that this genre was much less pop, much less like happy pop like it was much darker. It was much more like you said, more like electronic, more edm more like almost like rock, rock-ish music. That's why when I watched it, I didn't really think of K-pop, because to me K-pop, the defining thing is happy happy happy. This didn't have that.”(R11)

4.1.4 M-pop motivation: international ambition

One of the fundamental values of M-pop is that the musician Lay Zhang aims to use this fusion music to, as he puts it, "bring China to the world". Musicians acknowledge that it is a noble objective, and that the Chinese should be encouraged to express their national and ethnic cultural traditions.

"Why can't he be encouraged, recognized and supported for having this idea? He gave me a feeling that he has a strong desire to promote his culture, although I don't know if he can do it. But I can feel that he wants to stand by his cultural identity and advocate cultural exchange. I think it's good to have this willingness." (R4)

Additionally, by bringing China out, he invites the outside in, stimulating cross-cultural communication. Not only does he want to share the Chinese music to the world, but also wants every culture to learn from each other, as Lay Zhang says "music goes beyond languages...[I] start the path not just for Chinese artists to follow, but for everybody to share their music and culture on the world stage, so we all can learn and appreciate"(LSB, 2020).

It's a broad slogan, and it's unclear whether he meant to introduce China to the world in order to improve the country's image through cultural diplomacy, or whether he simply wanted to introduce Chinese music to the world. Whether it's the music or the Chinese culture, musicians believe that the goal is still a long way ahead. This slogan can be inspiring for westerners to be open to other cultures, however the risk of westerners repel to the slogan is also present.

"The 'bring China into the world' slogan, because I really understand it, but it's also, from a western point of view, I can also believe it's quite intimidating.[...] Imagine if you're very conservative or very private, or if you really live in your small village with the values that are there, I think it can be intimidating that the world is coming really a closeby. [...]suddenly China is not so far, it's very close, it's on the radio, it's here, every half of the products that we use are fabricated in China. So China is very present in our western society. For some that might feel really open, free, global and enriching for others. I think it can also feel threatening to their own values or their own upbringing and traditions."(R10)

As (R10) states, it is intimidating and pretentious for westerners; (R7) states that the dominant capitalist west has a negative sentiment towards socialist China; and (R11) states that Europeans have an anti-nationalism sentiment. If Lay Zhang aspires to introduce Chinese music to the rest

of the world, the music itself must be representational in order for the artist to make that claim. In fact, the opinion of how music professionals perceive the Chineseness of M-pop music vary a lot. (R10)(R11) (R4)(R1) (R8) think his music is in fact quite western despite the fact that they identify some Chinese elements in the music, whereas (R6) think the Chinese element is rather the core compared to the western elements used.

So, what does it mean to be Chinese music? Certain types of music are recognized as Chinese when it employs Chinese instruments, the pentatonic scale, folk music styles, or Chinese cultural components. However, traditional or folk music receives less attention in contemporary China than heavily westernized popular music. Historically, the Chinese contemporary has been heavily being influenced by the west since the 1920's (Liu, 2015). Some other Chinese pop stars have attempted to revitalize authentic Chinese music in the same way that Lay Zhang does by incorporating the Chinese characteristics stated above into their pop music productions. Good examples are Vava's My new swag, Jay Chou's Blue and white porcelain, etc. As M-pop is still taking shape(R7), and (R3) believes that true M-pop, or even C-pop, should focus on the distinctive, irreplaceable, and unforgettable music of China's own origins rather than on what is current in the west, particularly the United States and South Korea.

Overall, we learn that Lay, as a pop singer seeking to innovate, establish a new genre, and engage with a broader audience, possesses an entrepreneurial mentality. Additionally, Lay is motivated as a musician by the desire to speak for his cultural origins and to improve cultural understanding on a greater scale. This purpose-driven identity and intrinsic motive of "adding value to society" define his entrepreneurial persona and those of following M-pop musicians. (Horst et al., 2019; Kao, Kao, & Kao, 2002, p. 41).

4.2 International opportunities and challenges

Hoag & Complain's (2012) study on media American entrepreneurs found that technical innovation and dominant media are the primary enabling variables for new entry in media markets, while no significant impeding factors were identified. This section will explain how

music professionals interpret these two category aspects in relation to M-pop music's media entrepreneurship journey.

4.2.1 Factors that hinder international success.

4.2.1.1 *Unhealthy domestic market environment*

(R3)(R7)(R8) believe that the unhealthy market is the primary reason M-pop will fail to prosper worldwide, at least in the short term. They argue that because the local music market is mostly profit-driven currently, it is unlikely to develop outstanding music, and as a result, music produced under market pressure is not internationally competitive in the artistic sense.

“In the short run, I think it is impossible (for M-pop to be internationally successful). Because our country, in terms of music, is being dominated and played by the capital. So people just only want to make something to earn money. Then for things like the trendy stuff, or M-pop music can only wait until the artists have made enough money so that they have some leverage to negotiate with the capitalist power and say that this is the music they truly want to make. By then if the capitalist power of your team thinks that you can still make money by making this type of music, they will then support you. For now, these artists need to consider the commercial return because they need to survive first”.(R7)

(R7) believes that if music is not easily commercialized, the stuff that musicians actually desire will not be supported by capital resources. The emphasis on the domestic market environment is a recurring subject, particularly in conversations with experienced music producers who spent years working in the Chinese pop music industry. This unhealthy domestic market parallels the issues identified by Wang & Wu (2008) during their research on the development of China's popular music industry, namely the chaotic market (which produces low-quality or "garbage" music products), excessive marketing (which obscures the music content), and the desire for overnight success (which leads to a unidirectional music creation or even music plagiarism).

More critically, (R3) think that it is not possible for Chinese pop music to be internationally successful in the next 10 years. (R3) analyzes six categorical factors using his ten years of experience in the Chinese pop music industry. To begin, (R3) believes that Chinese technicians are world-class in terms of recording and composition; but, due to a shortage of equipment such as mixing consoles and avant-garde mixing concepts, Chinese producers frequently fly to the United States for song mixing and mastering. Second, from a social standpoint, the fundamental logic of online music distribution platforms is to fast commercialize music products. To accomplish this, the platform uses artificial intelligence to determine which music is popular and has a greater probability of spreading across listeners, and then provides sources for this type of music that is easier to monetize. As a result, catchy simple songs use more resources and leave little or no room for true musical expression. Thirdly, the music industry's regulation is insufficiently protective of artists, as oligarchic platforms wield disproportionate bargaining power. Fourthly, (R3) discusses the surroundings of atheism from a religious perspective. Without spiritual support, humans are more likely to worship money or worldly possessions in order to maintain the drive to survive.

“Why can rubbish songs like ‘trading your love’ become popular in China? It is because people don’t hold value to it. What is everyone pursuing nowadays? People look to materialize love, to materialize and commercialize everything.”(R3)

Financial considerations are the fifth factor. Making music and arts is expensive in China, given the country's low per capita income. Additionally, it is difficult, if not impossible, for musicians to earn a living solely from their music, yet they are required to spend a fortune on equipment and software that are not readily available in China due to the country's immature music industry chain, such as the audio interface, cubase, or logic. The final factor mentioned by (R3) is the historical context. Historically, when the world began communicating and exchanging musical products, whether in Europe, the United States, Korea, or Japan, Chinese performers and music were absent from the map. This is also because, between the mid- and late-twentieth centuries, mainland China concentrated all its national force on economic and political action, giving little

attention to the artistic sphere, let alone international participation. In general, for the reasons stated previously, (R3) is pessimistic about the development of M-pop music, as the whole climate is not conducive to cultivating high-value musical compositions, at least in the medium term.

4.2.1.2 *The imbalance of cultural flow*

Music professionals recognize the imbalanced cultural flow between China and west. In general, Chinese artists are not very known internationally yet Chinese audiences are constantly keeping up with the rising pop stars in the west, especially from the U.S. (R1) observes that,

"Many of us nowadays like to listen to these foreign singers, but I have never heard of anyone who likes Chinese singers or knows a lot of Chinese singers except for one person[...] but in China, for example, if you mention someone like Adele or Justin Bieber, everyone knows them. So I think it's unfair. [...] They have exported a lot, whereas our export is rather insignificant if we look at pop music. But in fact, it is the same with traditional folk music." (R1)

The reasons are numerous, musicians identified. Historically, the United States and the United Kingdom have dominated media and cultural creation, including the popular music scene (R9). Additionally, as a result of the colonial heritage, English became the global language, and countries and individuals who speak English had increased geopolitical influence (R2). The disparity is also reflected in the standard at which foreign artists compete. For example, billboard, as a platform for worldwide musicians to compete, has a majority of its audience made up of young Americans, making it difficult for musicians from other nations to get into the chart (Wang, 2019).

Another intriguing point raised by music experts is the west's orientalist and arrogant worldview.

“The element that they(westerners) like about Chinese music is the kind of Sa DingDing’s music. [...] the feeling of nature, wild. And the good image they have about China is being beautiful, being wild, the not civilized feeling. ”(R7)

It appears (R7) that the west has a certain image of the east, and the music the west enjoys is likely to reflect their vision of the east's uncivilized, natural, and wild beauty. The arrogance reflects in the fact of how little the west knows or is willing to know about China, whereas for China it has been keeping up with the west and receiving all the technological, commercial, cultural influence from the west out of the culture export(R7). As (R7) mentions, because the west is not so interested in China or has learned from what China has done, China can gradually and quietly catch up to the west's development, and over the last decades, China has been extremely hungry for knowledge, development, and essentially keeping up with whatever development the west has been experiencing.

“I think it may even be common sense that white people have a strong sense of superiority in their own culture. Then it is up to others to accept their things.[...] This is why convincing them that China is doing a good job of self-development is not simple. Only westerners who have visited China and witnessed the country's progress in person will have a fundamentally different opinion about China and Asian people than those who have never visited. They will never learn how to respect a rising country and its unique manner of doing things unless they are confronted with it.”(R7)

This information divide between west and China results from how the western society gets direct contact with Chinese culture in their daily life. The local Chinatown or Chinese community in the western society is the venue where western can experience “China” from home. Little that they know that these places no longer reflect contemporary China and Chinese culture in China anymore.

“How the older generation of Chinese immigrants understand China and Chinese culture is frozen from the moment they left China. Therefore, the westerners who got the impression of the Chinese culture from this old generation of immigrants are very much out-dated, if not completely different from the contemporary Chinese culture. Although the new immigrants are also increasing, yet the speed of increase is rather slow to alter the impression that was established in the western’s eyes.”(R7)

As Chinese immigrants, their lifestyles and tastes are stuck in time from the years before to their arrival. As these immigrants are the initial point of contact for the local westerns in the countries to which they migrate, the westerns perpetuate the image of China and Chinese music from decades ago. Which is to suggest that it has fallen behind the times in terms of Chinese music during the last two decades. The Chinatowns you encounter abroad are not contemporary in contemporary China. However, it conveys an inaccurate or out-of-date idea of how China is, what Chinese culture is, and how China is developing right now.

Political preference is inextricably tied to concerns of a country's image, which has an effect on the likeability of music from specific regions or countries. (R7) claimed that the west is inherently hostile to socialist China due to opposing political beliefs. Additionally, China and the United States are going through a difficult moment, as tensions are growing as a result of the recent Trade War. As a result of the political tensions between the two nations, a negative emotion toward anything linked with that nation develops and affects the cultural products such as M-pop.

“So people have a bad nation-image of this specific country, whether or not that's deserved, right, doesn't matter what country it's from, they're gonna be less likely to listen to a musician from that country, right? Because they're gonna associate it with the thing that they think is bad in their mind. That goes back to the soft power thing, right. So like, if you can get a musician out there that everyone really likes, suddenly, the country-image is gonna be better, it's gonna be easier for you to exert political influence on the massive world stage, right?” (R2)

With Europe's anti-nationalist sentiments and China's unique position as a growing power from the east with a socialist government, the country's image poses a significant barrier to the cultural products of China being accepted by a western audience.

“It really triggers something. Because especially now at the minute nationalism is very negative in Europe [...] like all the very aggressive or it's generally sort of has a negative aspect.[...] And let alone, generally, westerners don't trust China anyway. Because of the news headlines. Then I feel like that doesn't help when the music has that kind of weird vibes to it[...] I watched it and it actually made me uncomfortable.”(R11)

(R11) stated that China has a "difficult relationship with its image," as he believes the country exerts a great deal of control over what the outside world sees. Often what is shown from China's official voice to the west is very much “sugar coated”. And the nationalist sentiment expression in fact would inevitably put western audiences off.

4.2.1.3 Difficulties from international audience side

Music professionals, especially the western ones, identify the difficulties that they encountered accessing to Chinese pop music in general. As (R11) experienced, the biggest difficulty is

“Be able to find it. The only way I can find it is because[...] I'm privileged in the way that I have Chinese friends, but like nearly everybody I know someone who never speaks to Chinese people. So I'm lucky. And even then, they're not super into commercial music or folk music. They're more classical musicians.” (R11)

According to (R11), being highly reliant on friends' recommendations and later on Spotify's recommendation algorithm based on listening history limits the range of music. This passive-selective style of access to Chinese music for non-Chinese audiences does not provide a

comprehensive view of the country's music scenes. As a result, it creates difficulties for M-pop songs to reach a global audience.

Apart from the problems associated with limited access to Chinese music, the obstacles associated with language hurdles and a dearth of well-established channels connecting western audiences to Chinese music are also recognized.

“In English I can't find it. If I go on and type “Chinese songs”, then it's just impossible to find it. It's literally just like, where? I have to put a lot of effort into finding new Chinese songs.[...] There isn't a website I can go to. [...] It would be cool if there was a YouTube channel that did [...] 30 seconds from like 20 songs that you can listen to and there's links below. There's like pathways into finding it. Like there's visibility there and it's like in English.” (R11)

(R11) observes that he has been discouraged from searching for Chinese music due to the absence of well-established English sites for browsing Chinese music. Language barriers also contribute to the inaccessibility of a media platform. In theory, if cultural content is available online, people should have simple access to it. However, without knowing the Chinese language in order to search for the appropriate information creates a barrier for non-Chinese speaking listeners. However, it's worth noting that once the music is discovered, both Chinese and western music professionals report that language limitations become less of a hindrance, as the non-Chinese speakers could just enjoy the groove or the rhythm of the music without understanding the lyrics(R2) (R1).

4.2.1.4 Difficulties from Chinese musicians' side

Interviewees identify the reason why Chinese musicians do not attempt to expand their careers internationally is primarily due to the big domestic market in China. Apart from that, the barriers to entry and the scarcity of specialists with international perspectives are other impediments. (R2) well summarized as follows,

“like 1.4 billion people in China, right? And so like, why would you fight in a different language to try to find fans overseas, when you have someone who speaks your own language here, right? [...] There's a massive domestic market that is easier to navigate for someone whose primary language is [...] Mandarin, right? [...] So to move outside of the Chinese sphere, you would have to be quite well supported [...] And a lot of people never make it worldwide. So, you know, I think those are some of the reasons why Chinese musicians are focused domestically mainly, it's easier for them to find success. You know, because the rest of the music world elsewhere, it's so English dominated”. (R2)

4.2.2 Factors that support the international success

Apart from the impediments, there are also noticeable supportive factors that contribute to the international success that M-pop music aspires to.

4.2.2.1 Digitization opens up way to exposure

As discussed in Chapter 2, brand management is for media enterprises to strategically develop a long lasting relationship with their audience (Matteo et al., 2013; Ots, 2008; Vallaster & Kraus, 2011). In the digitized context, it is also crucial to explore how media entrepreneurs exploit various opportunities to transform innovative ideas into practical actions by utilizing digital media to accomplish goals (Horst & Hitters, 2020; Horst & Murschetz, 2019).

Nowadays, musicians are frequently, if not always, recognized as a result of their appearances on digital platforms, whether for music or other promotional purposes. Interviewees have a better understanding of Lay Zhang through the medium of online television shows. Apart from the two in the pop industry, the majority of Chinese music professionals are familiar with Lay Zhang due to his appearances on television or online variety shows such as "Street Dance of China", "Roast", and "Go Fighting!" As for his songs, people either haven't heard them or have encountered one or two as a result of his song "Lit" being adapted and performed by celebrities on the recent hit talent program "Sisters Who Brave Winds and Waves". The fact that people are familiar with Lay Zhang through media formats other than listening to his songs on music-exclusive platforms demonstrates that music publicity is contingent on media channels and that the pan-entertainment trend has dominated the music industry in recent years. This digital

transition results in improved media management methods that enable media entrepreneurs to better reach their audience and make their name recognized, which aligns with Ots' assertion about the necessity of brand management (2008).

Making effective use of the rapid advancement of digital technologies to enhance stage performance and MV production is also critical. Another digital element that M-pop emphasizes is its high level of music video production. Musicians laud Lay's stage presence and the high caliber of his music video. They believe that M-pop has a high production quality(R2)(R4), a film-like quality(R9), easily accessible bilingual subtitles(R9), a strong sense of rhythm(R6), a rich Chinese element(R5), and a cool personal image of the singer (R4). After listening to the probe songs and music videos, music professionals determine that his stage style is forceful, diverse, wild, with incredible momentum, and has a significant Chinese style or Chinoise influence.

“I think this thing looks pretty good now, and it gives me the feeling that it’s quite complete. [...] It’s not that difficult to be accepted, for example, it has English lyrics in it. I think it won’t give foreigners a feeling that they don’t understand it at all. [...] This format of music is quite impactful [...] And dance, this kind of rhythm. [...] If it's just music, I think it’s a bit difficult, but by adding such various forms of expression it (M-pop) will give people a visual impact and bring out quite some charm.” (R6)

With the change of medium of music, pop music has been shifted from focusing on “listening”(e.g. through recorders, cassettes or CD) to a combination of “listening” and “watching”(e.g. music video)(Luo, 2006). As a result, the topic of how to convey the punchy visuals to the audience becomes critical for pop music experts to consider. And, with the advent of the digital era, music is obliged to capture consumers' attention not only through its sound but also through its visual presentation. The visual-heavy stage appearance, as well as the highly-produced music video, contribute to the music's appeal. However, musicians also discuss issues such as overproduction and the risk of losing its soul when artists place too much emphasis on technical aspects (R11) (R10); not being touching and catchy enough (R4); trying too hard

(R11); having very direct lyrics and losing the beauty of Chinese subtlety (R11); and having very direct lyrics and losing the beauty of Chinese subtlety (R11) (R7). Overall, it is recognizable that digitization opens more possibilities for the M-pop and M-pop artists to reach their audiences.

4.2.2.2 The audience: western audience are curious

The audience is critical in brand management. The mentality and the age group influence the audiences' preference towards certain new music. (R2) thinks it is a matter of identifying a niche audience, which also serves as inspiration for the artist when making strategic audienceship choices. (R10) believes that the success of M-pop music depends on the artist's overall package, including his "stage characteristics and personality," as well as the target demographics. And (R11) identifies,

“I think it's like the same people that like K-pop would also like this type of music because you have to sort of be open enough to listen to music in a different language and a language that you don't understand.”(R11)

Based on the international studying and living experience, especially the interaction with westerners throughout the years living abroad, musicians think that it should not be hard for M-pop to win international success as these musicians think that westerner audience are quite curious and interested in Chinese culture, if not aiming for deeper understanding. Music professionals(R2)(R10)(R11) point out that the **potential audience** of M-pop is perceived to have the following characteristics: 1)culturally open people, 2)same people that listen to K-pop , 3)people interested in Asia. Audiences are, nowadays, no longer a passive receiver; rather, they participate in the production and reconstruction through interaction and negotiation with popular music professionals (Luo, 2006; Ren, 2012).

4.2.2.3 Soft power and overseas market potential

Apart from the two major supporting factors mentioned above, musician(R2) also recognize the rising soft power of China will benefit the musicians of this regino, as he puts it,

“And so China as a rising power, assuming they're able to continue along their path, and are able to exert more soft power and more influence for the Mandarin speaking world, more people to use Mandarin more people use the renminbi, you know, they're going to see more and more success if they're able to do that.” (R2)

Additionally, (R9) recognize that the overseas Chinese may serve as the primary audiences for the exported Chinese cultural products. As the considerable amount of Chinese diaspora in the world, M-pop in fact enjoys a big market potential. (R9) elaborates,

“And a huge advantage for China is that when you make or produce music in China, you always have this big domestic market of potential fans. When you're singing in Dutch in the Netherlands, you're making music for the Dutch audience in the Netherlands [...]a relatively small market. Whereas in China, you have this big domestic market. And then on top of that, you can have this international market. So Chinese(language) has a huge advantage there. And then there's also the Chinese diaspora base, different places across the world. I think that's also a huge asset to the Chinese music industry.” (R9)

4.3 Strategic media management

This section examines how musicians see the strategic choices made by M-pop singers to make their music more accessible to an international audience. Then we explore the digitized media landscape in which M-pop is situated in. Thirdly, inspirations are drawn for future strategic decisions aiming at capturing a worldwide audience.

4.3.1 Strategic choices

The musicians notice the following strategic choices using music elements that international audiences are familiar with to introduce new material as well as mingling English words to increase familiarity and using EDM-style music to reduce reliance on the lyrics to overcome the language barrier. It is also to be alert when M-pop attempts to please everyone and it might fail to please any in the end.

To begin, musicians notice that in Lay's music he purposefully uses certain aspects to appeal to an international audience in order to foster connection and, hypothetically, to incorporate new Chinese characteristics into the mix for a smoother acceptance level.

“The use of some Japanese elements, (the western audience think) oh, it is Japanese element, I am fond of Japanese elements, so I am going to listen to his song. Then some of his other beats are quite like the beats that black Americans are in favor of. Therefore, using these beats elements, his music also pleases some black audience. [...] then some EDM elements, for instance like the beats that DJ like to use, I think the western audience in general are more easily able to accept this type of thing.”(R7)

(R7) feels that Lay's songs take a pathway of first pleasing people of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, making them believe the song is fun with music elements that appeal to them, and then incorporating some unfamiliar Chinese elements. As a result, listeners feel the song is cool and want to listen, and unconsciously accept M-pop as a genre.

What is more, the strategic choices are also being made by mingling English words into the Mandarin songs and using more EDM style to focus more on the beats, the rhythm and experiences and less on lyrics.

“I guess that's also quite common in EDM to do that.[...] Yeah, I think maybe EMD the emphasis is more on the music and the experience, less on the Lyrics. ”(R9)

It is perceived as a smart move to use the most universal language that people know to connect different cultures, and then make your music can be accepted by more people globally. However, there is a risk of catering to everyone and losing everything, as (R11) explains below,

“ To me I kind of get the impression that he is trying to do all of it, and not doing any of it. It's trying to be commercial. They have the dancing, they have the smile, they have the very K-pop, American side. They have the Chinese side, they have the dragon, they have

martial arts, they have the people at the beginning. It's like none of it is done, or sort of genuinely enough for me to think oh this is actually good. Honestly, they're trying to get Chinese people to watch, they're trying to get American people to watch it, but they're like, once again, they're trying too hard.”(R11)

4.3.2 Digitization influences the Chinese music industry

4.3.2.1 Media environment & transformation.

The music industry has seen a dramatic transformation as a result of the advancement of media technologies. When discussing the media evolution of China's popular music industry, three different stages stand out: 1) the album period, 2) the TV talent show era, and 3) the digital entertainment platform era (R3). Traditionally, music was created by record companies and sold in the form of actual cassettes, CDs, or albums in order to compensate the musicians who worked on the song. Since the mid-2000's, as the internet, personal computers, and mobile phones became more ubiquitous, consumers' music consumption habits shifted away from purchasing physical albums and toward freely streaming music online. When customers began downloading music for free from a variety of internet sources, the traditional record industry took a significant hit, as copyright rules and regulation lagged behind the rapid development of online technologies. As a result, the record company's profit took a plunge, and they were forced to look for ways to decrease expenses and replace revenue lost due to the media change. Indeed, the demise of the conventional record industry coincides with the explosion of television talent shows during this period of transformation. On talent shows, record companies select and sign potential vocalists without investing sufficient time and money in training and positioning the performers prior to and following their debut (R3). This cost-effective method is gradually gaining traction in the music market. Due to the companies' primary objective of profit, they view these young artists-in-training as tools and are unconcerned about their artistic careers.

Later in the mid-2010's, with the rise of Douyin-style short video-sharing social media, they became dominant in the media market, serving as the primary channels for artists and music production companies to release their works, as well as the first point of contact for consumers looking for entertainment content.

“To make music in China you have to first let your music be known by the public, then it has to rely on big platforms. [...] Platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou, these short video entertainment platforms. I am working in this industry, and I know that basically almost all the companies, no matter it is artist agent company, or album production company, their ways of doing marketing are always based on intensive and explosive promotion, as it is the most effective way of reaching as many audiences as possible.”(R3)

With the primary objective of these platforms being to drive site traffic, the MCN influencer economy is developed in order to capitalize on the business opportunity to earn quick money. Using big data research, (R3) revealed how those low-quality popular songs are produced in the present music market climate based on the "quick monetization" mentality.

On the one hand, platforms like Douyin have made it easier for singer want tobes to showcase their talent; on the other hand, driven by the profit model generated by high web traffic, songwriters on Douyin tend to create more catchy songs that the market enjoys, with common characteristics such as brainwashing, easy to sing along, undifferentiable, pure entrainment rather than art, and a fast consumer goods style.

4.3.2.2 Commercial oriented environment kills artistic creativity and value

(R3) illustrates that the Chinese music industry's profit model is considerably different from the western approach. Due to 1) inadequate copyright protection, 2) the oligarchy market climate (in which massive media platforms like them have a say), and 3) the music consumer's refusal to pay for music, it is difficult- if not impossible- for Chinese musicians to support themselves primarily on their music. As a result, a commercially oriented music composition environment is created in order to generate web traffic and revenue. I will summarize my reasoning in the chat with (R3):

Because consumers are unwilling to pay, platform companies are unable to recoup their substantial investment in acquiring copyright/ownership exclusivity. Because platform firms acquire ownership of the song, musicians can only survive on copyright revenues, which are generally minimal (determined by the oligarchy platform companies). However, unless musicians sell the exclusive rights to platform businesses, they will not have sufficient exposure for their music to be heard. As a result of the artists' insufficient earnings, some musicians are unable to survive in this market and therefore must exit. Then, a large number of music professionals who stay in the market begin to follow market trends toward low-cost music production and catchy online popular music, rather than high-quality music, in order to maximize their financial returns. — a synopsis of the conversation with (R3)

With a decline in the presence of a high-quality music production environment, the likelihood of producing a decent song decreases. That is, as music becomes increasingly commercialized (e.g. Douyin-dominated entertainment), artistic expression is abandoned and traded for easy cash. As a result, less decent music has been produced in recent years, let alone exported overseas.

“I believe that the contemporary popular music industry is becoming more market-oriented as a result of commercialization. The music industry's businesses are founded on rationalization as pure businessmen. If you create music based on marketed ideas, the creative environment for music becomes extremely negligent and sloppy [...] then plagiarism becomes widespread, as the primary objective is to earn money.” (R8)

The high monetary value appears to be impeding artistic expression for the majority of Chinese musicians. Chinese scholars define pop music as music intended for a broad audience, containing commercial elements, and distinct from high art (Ma, 2009). Combining art and commerce, popular music possesses both artistic and market or economic worth; it is, in fact, the strong commercial features that facilitated the establishment of the popular music industry (consisting of production, circulation, consumption and distribution elements) (Wang & Wu, 2008).

However, as the commercial aspect of the industry becomes more important as a result of digital technologies, industry insiders believe that the sector is in a critical situation.

4.3.2.3 *The dilemma of Douyin dominance*

Douyin's hegemonic position in the media sector creates an agonizing predicament. Indeed, the Douyin offers everyone an equal opportunity to express themselves to the public; at the same time, by lowering the entry barrier to music-making, a great number of people with diverse backgrounds and goals (mainly financial) swarm in, crowding out genuine musicians.

“Because of the current technology, you don’t even need to know how to play piano or guitar, you can just press a button to play a chord and then make a song. [...] The entry barriers become so low and this situation makes it very hard for people who really want to produce real music, because for people who really loves music, they take longer time to finish composing a song whereas (for people who just want to make quick money out of catchy songs) they might only need one night to write something that will receive high click through rate on Douyin platform.” (R4)

Songmakers who create catchy Douyin songs typically generate significantly more online traffic and hence revenue than those who create music as an extension of their artistic calling and expression.

“I do feel them- these musicians who make music out of pure self and artistic expression are the ones who are not popular in the public's eye. Musicians also have to make a living, they also have to eat, they need to make money. So if they only make music purely for its own sake, they will not receive enough (financial) support to make the music they really enjoy. On the contrary, the catchy Douyin songs that have no other pursuit but to please you as an audience are the ones that are earning the most. So I think that the music industry nowadays in China is very ill, because it is driven by the capital.” (R7)

According to (R3) (R8) (R7), the music market in China at the moment is extremely unhealthy due to being primarily, if not entirely, money-driven. To cater to the Douyin market (attention-seeking economy), low-quality songs are produced in large quantities due to their low cost and great financial return. In this highly marketed industry environment, musicians are less likely to pursue good music for artistic expression.

In summary, the changing media landscape, which is dominated by platform entertainment, has resulted in musicians adjusting their music production tactics, since they are more driven by the market to create more catchy and simple songs in order to earn quick money. As a result, the music created in this manner mimics fast fashion, which is defined by "trend replication, rapid production, low quality, and competitive pricing" (Stanton, n.d.). The status quo of Chinese music industry current situation is in an unhealthy environment (quick money oriented, Douyin low quality music dominant), which makes Chinese pop music less competitive internationally. Unfortunately, low quality catchy music is gnawing-away the market attention, resources and channels of truly artistic music products. Although the low quality music was not referred to as M-pop, as the music professionals comment that the production quality of both music and MV are of very high quality. However, for M-pop artists, being aware of the domestic pop music industry in general is as important as being able to notice the pitfalls in the international market, as both are the social reality they are in.

4.3.3 Inspiration of future strategic choices

It is critical to make strategic choices in order to overcome obstacles on both an international and domestic level as discussed above. This section examines tactics in three dimensions, namely 1) balancing commercial and artistic goals, 2) investing in worldwide know-how crew and public relations work, and 3) cultivating the correct mentality, in the intention of inspiring M-pop musicians to overcome obstacles.

4.3.3.1 Strategies 1: balance the commercial and artistic

For media entrepreneurs, balancing business profitability and artistic expression is a typical dilemma. For the majority of popular singers in China, it's difficult to create music exclusively for artistic expression when the market prefers more catchy, simple, and enjoyable

songs on Douyin (R4). That is, if artists are solely concerned with honing their artistic understanding and abilities, they will be unable to earn a living and exist. In this circumstance, some artists may opt to cooperate with commercially savvy and talented producers, leaving the financial part to them. As (R8) reveals,

"Because of the current music environment, it's not okay to only be talented in making music. [...] The most important thing being in the music industry circle is really about your emotional intelligence(interpersonal skills). For instance, you made a song - though art should be priceless - if you want to sell it for 50k, 70k, 80k or 100k (rmb), how do you negotiate? Being able to negotiate is one skill, then another important aspect is self-marketing, to market yourself. And this is reflected everywhere in your daily life, for instance, your social media posts on Weibo or other platforms will eventually directly influence how much you ask for your song. [...] Besides, being a creative artist, you have to also know the social culture, drinking culture in China, you have to do what the locals do. All these will increase your chance of being discovered as a musician." (R8)

The dispositions, interpersonal abilities, and social know-how of an individual constitute what Bourdieu (1997, p. 47) referred to as cultural and social capital. According to (R8), having those capitals increases the musician's chances of success. However, if the artist does not choose to or is unable to manage the commercial aspect, collaboration is also advantageous.

4.3.3.2 Strategy 2: Money, team and marketing

When an artist becomes regionally successful, (R2)(R9) think that he/she is like a big fish in the small pond where everyone knows him/her, and when he/she go outside, and he/she now becomes a small fish again in a big pond where,

“you have to be meeting the right people, you have to be making the right type of music, you have to have the right type of fan base, it just gets more complicated as it gets larger.” (R2)

Money is necessary to hire the right people to establish the international team and to handle publicity (R11). There are two approaches to foreign market entry, namely the financial and the sustainable approaches, which (R10) shares from her significant expertise managing music businesses, marketing, and organizing concerts for international singers.

“To actually enter a foreign market is... I believe there's two ways. There's the money way. There is the sustainable long term way. [...] The money way is the universal way, just pay a lot of money, make up, Sorry for my language, a fucking great clip and music and billboards and just buy your way into everything and make sure you're visible, you're there. And then you'll have an instant market. With the commercial a teenager is 13 years old, just buy everything you show them. [...] But if you want to have a sustainable market, you need to anchor your way into a new market. You need to have solid places where you can take a rest, you have to know this venue, that person, this guy, he knows, he likes this, she likes that. And be able to really tailor to the market instead of pushing your product into the market”. (R10)

According to (R10), the decision of which approach of these two to adopt depends on the genre. For example, niche or intellectual music is more likely to choose a sustainable strategy, whereas mainstream pop music frequently employs both tactics. If artists rely solely on money, they may achieve fame for a little amount of time in the spotlight as a result of the attention that money purchased, but they will ultimately fail to establish a durable and stable fan base.

“I really believe that the money way is putting something in the center, making sure everybody has seen it. The other way is putting something on the side, and slowly giving time to grow and to have an impact.[...] If you want to change something, you should start on the side if you want to change the jungle. Don't put the red monkey in the middle of the jungle, people will shoot it. If you put it on the side of the jungle and have it create a small habitat where you can find the home and make babies and make a bigger quantity

for itself. At a certain point of time, you will be safe because it will be big enough. And it will have enough impact and then it can take over the whole jungle.” (R10)

International success requires recruiting internationally minded teams, since M-pop artists must deal with fans from many linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

“When you want to be a name on the international stage, you have to have a team around you. So, you have to have a manager, you have to have a PR person and you have to have all these different people that are working with you. And if you're a Chinese musician that's working in English in the international realm, you have to have someone that speaks English and Chinese and knows what they're doing. Right? It's hard enough just to find someone who knows what they're doing. ”(R2)

Moreover, this team should contain the following characteristics: competence in the local language, cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, and a personal connection to the local market. Finding someone who knows what they're doing is not an easy task, according to (R2).

Also, it is “All about **marketing**”!

“Look at K-pop and look how popular that's been. And I'm like, why is there any reason that the M-pop would be any different? I think it's just all about marketing!” (R11)

Marketing is a broad subject in and of itself, but it is critical in the commercial world, and particularly in commercial pop music.

“If there's a good enough team doing publicity, I think that selling it is like 80 % of the battle. [...] because people will sort of listen to anything, you know what I mean? Like, look at Gangnam style, like people will listen to anything if it's popular, if it's on their TV, if it's easily accessible, they'll do it.[...]And if people see it and they see it enough, then they're gonna click on it.” (R11)

Several more targeted marketing strategies for M-pop singers include the following: 1) consider market-specific approaches: Europe, for example, is distinct from the United States, as the aesthetic distinction outlined in the previous chapter demonstrated (R10) (R11); 2) Identify the appropriate audience, whether it is youngsters or a globally aware audience(R10)(R11); 3) for long-term development, including the establishment of a local community and an international fan base (R10); and 4) Be distinct, recognized, and distinguishable from other genres/styles, as M-pop may be mistaken for K-pop and is not memorable enough(R4) (R7)(R8).

4.3.3.3 Strategy 3: setting the right mentality and be authentic

Being successful internationally not only means to make strategic choices in a practical manner such as working on the marketing stunts, sometimes it is more about the intangible aspects.

“And I think if this artist can really live up to his message and act on his own message of bringing China to the world and bringing the world to China and opening up this conversation.[...] I think then he will have success in the western world. It's a mentality thing. It's not an artistic thing[...] I think that's where his success will lie. If he can also bring [...] a humanistic message of bringing China to the world and really making sure that people feel what he's about. Then he will get a sustainable audience in the western world.”(R10)

Having the right mindset and continually considering the values you bring and the dialogue you initiate. Additionally, it is critical to demonstrate the actual and genuine personality rather than just the stage character, as the audience wants to see an artist's entire package and find his or her songs relatable. When creating artistic items, it is vital to maintain authenticity (R10)(R11).

“I can see that it has definitely potential. Definitely, but it will also depend on his character and personality on stage. [...] how can he also own his message and act on his

message, because that's an important thing in the western world as well. And then there will be a place for him. Sure.” (R10)

For creative professionals to stand out from the crowd, having a strong individuality is a crucial criterion of success (Florida, 2002; Wilson & Stokes, 2005). It's also worth noting that you should develop and cultivate your own irreplaceable culture, which may be forgotten, as well as deal with culturally sensitive issues, regarding aesthetic difference or political preferences aspects discussed in previous section.

5 Conclusion and discussion

5.1 Summary

The aim of this study is to investigate how M-pop's entrepreneurial identity has been perceived by music professionals especially during the process of internationalization and digital media transformation. From analysing the research data, it becomes clear that M-pop is still at an emerging stage. It is recognizable that the M-pop initiator or entrepreneur initiator has an innovative spirit of innovating the music genre and venturing into the international markets where the majority of Chinese local musicians lack motivation or capacity to do so. Yet M-pop is still a fuzzy concept or a genre that has not been recognized or distinguished by music professionals who are also audiences. Using the contemporary online medium as well as technologies developed, Lay Zhang and his M-pop music manage to increase its fame among domestic Chinese audiences and attract attention from the international audiences with the remarkable MV production.

We have also come to realize that exploring the international market is by no means an easy process. Domestically, the unhealthy music industry in China is found out to have harmed the creation of artistic expression. Internationally, the imbalanced cultural flow between west and east, caused by complex colonial influence and its subsequent power dynamics, has set invisible barriers to entry for M-pop music and its non-English speaking musicians. In real life, western audiences find it difficult to have access to Chinese music. They rely heavily on recommendations from their Chinese friends or the Spotify recommendation algorithm if they have previously listened to Chinese music. Furthermore, the absence of suitable media platforms in international audiences' mother tongue, such as a YouTube channel devoted to an English-language introduction to Chinese music, discourages individuals from making extra effort to discover new music to listen to. Chinese singers are well established in their local market and are resistant to shift because the Chinese market is big enough and reaching out to the unknown foreign market means too many hurdles to deal with. However, chances have arisen for M-pop musicians. Lay's song, as an example of M-pop music, has a high production value, as the musicians recognize. The western world's public is interested in Chinese culture, if not interested in a deeper comprehension. Additionally, the Chinese diaspora worldwide represents a potential

market. As China's influence grows, more individuals want to learn the language, making it simpler for non-Chinese speakers to pick up the language and popular Chinese music such as M-pop.

Being strategic in decision-making and the risk-taking process is crucial for artists who want to expand their creative businesses. In the digitized world, creative business is often embedded in the media environment. That is especially true in the case of M-pop. Going through the digital transformation, the music industry has shifted and become a platform and entertainment industry environment, which is perceived by music insiders as extremely unhealthy. On the one hand, media platforms like Douyin lower the barriers to entry for new entrants looking to break into the music business, but it is also a fact that high value music is being squeezed out of resources and attention. This taught M-pop musicians that it is necessary to find a balance between the commercial and artistic aspects of music production, to avoid being swayed by a profit-driven, low-cost product model while earning enough to support themselves and remain in the industry. Additionally, in order to break into the international market, music professionals recognize the need of having money, a team, and marketing strategies in place. This manner, M-pop musicians can assure that their music is at the very least eligible to win an entrance ticket to the match - and is heard on a global scale. Finally, as a form of media entrepreneurship, M-pop is not just a business skill or an aesthetic trade; it is also about remaining true to oneself and cultivating the right mentality in order to initiate the dialogue of cross-cultural communication despite the obstacles that lie ahead.

5.2 Discussion

This thesis contributes to current media entrepreneurship research in two ways: it broadens the geographical reach of media entrepreneurship beyond the western world, and it examines the industrial implications of music. Methodologically, it is innovative in addressing the research problem when there is a lack of identified professionals for an emerging phenomenon - in this case, the M-pop niche. This research contributes from both the Chinese and international perspectives, assessing this ongoing emerging phenomenon from both the initiator

and receiver's ends and attempting to bridge knowledge between industry and academic and cultural gaps between west and east. To further the discussion, four propositions are derived.

Proposition 1

On the one hand, the artist can easily access a large number of audiences using the Mandarin language, which is a significant advantage over artists from the Netherlands or other regions where the language is spoken by a smaller number of people. However, the large domestic market limits the artist's vision, causing them to be content with a large enough market size rather than seeking out the international market to expand their influence. Plus, the unfamiliar international industry environment, language barriers, and a lack of the right people to handle the international parts, also cause Chinese artists to expand their international vision.

Proposition 2

The advancement of media technologies, combined with the high pressure to achieve financial success, has resulted in a highly profit-driven industry environment in the music domain. Under these circumstances, music professionals put more effort and attention on commercial success rather than on artistic pursuit, which makes it difficult for Chinese music to go international with a decreased quality of music.

Proposition 3

The M-pop musicians have a media-entrepreneur mindset, and they appear to be aiming for an artistic purpose as well as monetary success. The imbalance in cultural flow left by the colonial power structure and the orientalist mentality of how the west imagines the east is the problem it attempts to rectify. The innovative approach is to use fusion music with popular international music elements to make the music more recognizable for foreign audiences to accept, while piggybacking the somewhat unfamiliar cultural form into this manufactured product to alleviate the discomfort of total unfamiliarity.

Proposition 4

The findings revealed that M-pop musicians face several levels of tension (domestic money-oriented industrial environment, lack of international media channels, and cultural proximity), all of which are obstacles they must overcome. And possible suggestions include: as media entrepreneurs, musicians must balance artistic pursuits with commercial success in order

to survive in the larger industry environment; additionally, they must be internationally oriented and familiarize themselves with various mindsets and cultural nuances, narratives, and be able to show their true colors in order to thrive.

5.3 Limitation & future research direction

As the research is exploratory in nature, there are a few limitations. Empirically, not being able to locate the artists who identify themselves as M-pop artists in this early stage undermine the validity of identity discussion. Therefore, we do not know what exactly those M-pop artists think about themselves apart from this one spearheading persons narrative, which makes the research scale not comprehensive enough. This study employs a second and/or third person perspective, looking at the media entrepreneurship of M-pop phenomenon (i.e. producing music to meet both commercial and artistic aspiration and social ambition). Notably, it is difficult to forecast the scope of M-pop music, whether it will mature into a full-fledged genre or fade away as a solo artist venture. At the very least, this work attempts to portray the phenomenon from the earliest stages of its evolution. And it will take time to see how M-pop evolves.

Second, informants' personal bias is a result of their life experiences, the people they meet, and their own preferences, all of which are inescapable while conducting qualitative research. As a result, if this research is conducted with a different group of informants, I anticipate that the findings will vary to some degree. However, I would argue that the individuals recruited this time are extremely diverse who have been exposed to a variety of cultures, and possess an adequate musical education or industrial background to discuss and present an accountable yet personal interpretation of M-pop's difficulties and challenges. Even though the informants are extremely informative on this subject, given the highly subjective nature of qualitative study, it is debatable to what extent the study result shall be generalized. Additionally, the majority of the recruited participants report that the M-pop song is not really the type of music they listen to. This influences the perception of M-pop as well. Therefore, future studies should also consider including members of a target audience, such as those who already listen to K-pop and teenagers, to learn their perspective. Notwithstanding, the broad music professional

and educational background provides a credible opinion on music evaluation based on a wealth of life experiences, cross-cultural living experiences and understanding, and years in the music industry, which the target audience of M-pop does not possess due to their age and music experiences.

Based on the limitation discussed, I would suggest future research to be conducted as the scale of M-pop develops, at which point a large enough number of artists that identify as M-pop artists can be subjected to learn the first person narrative perspective. Additionally, future research could also include the audienceship that is more of the target audience group of M-pop to provide relevant review.

5.4 Social implication

This study also sheds some light on its social significance and policy implications. According to music professionals(R7)(R11), the Chinese official forces are 1) not doing enough, compared with how the South Korean government supports K-pop; and 2) not doing it properly, as the cultural format being promoted abroad is perceived more as sugar-coating which repels the international audiences. The official forces of China should make a greater effort in improving the country's nation-image to make it easier for its artists to receive less resistance internationally; artistic success, in turn, would also facilitate a better country's image. Individual success is, therefore, interdependent on the country's soft power.

The fact that musicians repeatedly report negative news headlines on China they encounter in western society is something worth reflecting on for communication science scholars and industry professionals. This social environment is definitely not helping in erasing the misunderstanding between two cultures. Perhaps the western media press can look beyond the political agenda of reporting negative press on a country and seek opportunities to open more space for art and creative communication.

I would like to end my thesis with a cosmopolitan view: one day, hopefully, no single culture will ever feel the need to introduce themselves to the world - out of fear of rejection- because the world will have already acknowledged and embraced them.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Complete list of Interview participants

Date of interview	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Nationality and affiliated culture*	Music-related background	Speciality
2021-04-27	R1	Female	22	Chinese/Dutch	Soprano / Zitherist/ music student	Classical singing/Chinese folk music
2021-04-29	R2	Male	30	American/Chinese	Music producer/Founder of a music production company	House music/Trombone
2021-04-29	R3	Male	34	Chinese/Dutch	Sound engineer/Music producer/Independent musician	Music production & marketing/ Artist management/10ys industry experience
2021-05-03	R4	Female	32	Chinese/Dutch	Pianist/ Musician educator	Piano teaching/ Music education
2021-05-04	R5	Female	23	Chinese/British	Pianist/Music student	Piano performance/Classical music
2021-05-04	R6	Female	28	Chinese/Dutch	Zitherist	Chinese traditional orchestra/Pop music
2021-05-11	R7	Male	30	Chinese/Dutch	Piano/Erhu/ Lead vocalist	Rock/Folk/Pop/EDM
2021-05-11	R8	Male	29	Chinese	Composer/ Music producer/ Music business manager	Insider of Chinese Pop music industry Specialized in pop culture and music industry in particular
2021-05-18	R9	Male	36	Dutch	Communication professor Musicologist/ Music business manager	Music Pedagogy/Publishing/Publicity/Licensing
2021-05-26	R10	Female	36	Belgian/Dutch	Musician/ Composer/Singer	Classical music/Crossover/Folk
2021-05-27	R11	Male	27	Dutch/British		

Note: *affiliated culture indicate the second culture that the interviewee has extensive interaction with through studying or working in the respective countries

Appendix B: Interview topic list

Interview Topic List:

【Probe】 Sample Music (note: sent before each interview)

- Lit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4qVhOaRBSY> (Official MV)
- Joker: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELB7nQCvNQI&list=RDELB7nQCvNQI&index=1> (Live)
- Grandma: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtGQ0XgsXIU> (MV)
- Changsha City: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ToxC3CrcPT8> (Fan-made)
- Sheep: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kthhAjR4CBs> (Alan Walker Re-lift)

【Establishing rapport】

- [Appreciation] First of all, thank you so much for taking your time talking to me!
- [Consent] Before we start, just to confirm with you again that you have agreed that the interview is going to be recorded and used for university research, right?
- [Explain the research] Shortly to explain myself and my thesis project, my name is Xinyu, I am a master's student at Erasmus university Rotterdam, studying media and business. For this thesis I am going to interview about 10 to 15 people from different backgrounds but have music-related experience, to understand how people, especially the music professionals like you, think of M-pop and its goal of "reaching the international audiences". It's completely normal that you haven't heard or know of the music. This field is very much empty also because it is still an emerging phenomenon, so your contribution will be highly appreciated.

【Introduction】

- So first of all, can you do a brief introduction of yourself? Name/age/nationality, and especially the music related study and work experiences?
- What kind of music do you normally listen to or work with? Why do you like this type of music?
- How much do you know about Chinese pop music?
- Did you know the concept of "M-pop" before I told you? Do you know Lay Zhang?
 - If no, briefly explain:
 - If you search on Google or YouTube "M-pop", it won't be the music that we will be talking about today. So, the concept of "M-pop" is not very much known.
 - To explain, M-pop, aka Mix-Mandarin-Pop, is a music type that spearheaded by this Chinese artist/pop singer- Lay Zhang, who blends modern music style such as Hiphop, Urban, Trap, R&B and EDM with traditional Chinese music and cultural elements in terms of instrumentation, local dialect, motifs, legends and concepts, using Madarin as the main singing langue while adding one or more foreign languages in its formation. Equally importantly is that this artist wishes to use this type of music to "Bring China to the world".
 - In short, fusion and its international ambitions are the two crucial things about this M-pop music we will be discussing today.

【M-pop identity】

- After watching the MV, what is your take on this type of music? What do you like/dislike? Why?
- What was your impression of M-pop music? What does it represent?
- Will you be able to tell this is a Chinese music?
- Do you think his music is Chinese enough? Would it be able to represent China or Chinese culture?

How do you view the talent show for producing boy-band girls-band? How do you view its link with M-pop music?

- How do you view the emergence of the entertainment/media platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishuo? Its influence on the Chinese pop music?
- What do you think of K-pop?

【International agenda】

- The artist said that his aim is to “bring china to the world”, what do you think of this slogan?
- Based on your experience, do you think that the international audience will like M-pop this type of music? Why?
 - How do you think that the international audience will understand Chinese music, e.g. M-pop? And more in general, the Chinese pop music?
- Who do you think would like this type of music? Who would be the target audience?
- Do you think it is hard for Chinese music to go internationally? Why?
- How do you view Chinese cultural products on the international market? Does it receive adequate recognition? Why?
- If you want to hear more Chinese music, what will stop you from accessing the music?

【Strategic management】

- How do you view China’s cultural product export? Does it do a good job or not? why?
- How can M-pop artists be internationally successful according to your view?
- What kind of team is needed to be successful internationally in your knowledge?
- What are the criteria/ elements needed to be internationally successful?
- And what do you think about the fact that K-pop managed to penetrate the international market as a regional cultural product? What can we learn from it?
- Was there any example that you can think of doing a good job in bringing regional products into an international success?
- In comparison, what do you think that M-pop should do to achieve its international ambition? Any suggestions?

【Ending】

- Thank you so much for sharing with me your understanding of this topic. This is all that I wanted to ask. Do you think that there is anything interesting or relevant that we haven’t covered?
- Or do you have any questions for me regarding this interview and my research?
- Do you know 1 or 2 music professionals who might be interested in sharing their thoughts on this topic? that you can put me in contact with? If so, that would be great.
- Thank you so much for your time. Wish you a great day ahead!

Appendix C: Interview consent form

[both in English and Chinese]

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Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant,

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you agree, it is important that you understand what your participation involves. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and provide your signature at the end of this form.

Project Title

Perceptions of the music genre/cultural phenomenon “M-pop” from China & its international agenda

Name of Principal Investigators

Xinyu Li (Master’s student in Media & Business Studies)

Name of Organization

Erasmus University Rotterdam (NL)

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to provide an in-depth exploration of how people view the M-pop music in China and the agenda of the winning international audience.

Procedures

Participants will take part in interviews lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Questions will focus primarily on M-pop music & its goal. A sample question might include: *What do you think of M-pop music and how do you think it is going to win international audience?*

Potential and Anticipated Risks and Discomforts

There are no obvious physical or economic risks associated with participating in this study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Participation is voluntary and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time.

Potential Benefits

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By participation in this study you may develop a clearer understanding of your views on contemporary Chinese pop music and in relation to the globalization. In addition, you will be contributing to scientific knowledge and a more thorough understanding of the identity of contemporary Chinese cultural product and the exploration of its pathway to an international stage.

Sharing the Results

This study is a partial requirement for fulfilling a degree at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. After conclusion of the study, research findings can be provided to participants. If desired, the participant should make this request known to the researcher.

Audio/video recording

By signing this form, you consent to the interview being audio and/or video recorded and it shall only be used for the purpose of this research.

Data Use

By signing this form, you consent to the anonymized data being used for analysis and publication in the final research product.

Confidentiality

Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent. No personally identifiable information will be reported in the final (or any) research product. Moreover, only trained research staff, i.e. the researcher stated previously who is conducting this study and the supervisors of this research, will have access to your responses. Within these restrictions, the results of this study will be made available to you upon request.

As indicated above, this research project involves creating recordings of interviews with you. Transcribed segments from the audio recordings may be used in published forms (e.g., the final research paper). In the case of publication, pseudonyms will be used. All data, including tapes, transcripts (hardcopy and digital formats), and electronic files from data analysis software, will be labelled anonymously using a code number for each research participant.

Compensation

Participation in this research does not include monetary compensation.

Right to Withdraw and Questions

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you

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decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.

Statement of Consent

Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree that you will participate in this research study.

If you have questions or concerns, please contact the primary investigator at:
xinyuli@student.eur.nl.

If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.

Signature and Date

Signature of Participant

Name

_____/_____/_____
Year Month Day

Thank you for your time and patience!

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知情同意书

敬启者：

您将被邀请参加一项学术研究。在您决定是否参加这项研究之前，请仔细阅读以下内容，以帮助您了解该项研究的目的和内容。阅读后，请在同意书最后签字。

项目研究名称

关于中国流行乐“M-pop”概念和其国际化目标的看法和理解

主要研究者

李欣雨（媒体&商业专业 硕士研究生）

学术机构

鹿特丹伊拉斯姆斯大学（荷兰）

研究目的

本项目希望通过采访不同背景的音乐相关人士，来了解人们对于中国当代流行音乐“M-pop”这一概念和对于其国际化目标的看法和理解。

研究过程

受访者将会进行一个大约 45-60 分钟的深度采访。采访问题主要为“M-pop”和其目标相关问题，比如：*你怎么看待 M-pop 这种音乐类型以及你对于其想要走向国际市场的目标怎么看？*

参与研究可能的风险和不适

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参与这项研究并不会有任何物理或经济上的风险。你可以拒绝回答任何你不想回答的问题。参与过程全程自愿，且您可在研究过程中的任何时间退出本研究。

参与研究可能的受益

通过参加此项研究，您可能会对中国流行音乐的传播和其国际化的挑战有更清晰的了解。除此之外，您也将帮助学术知识体系的构建和人们对于中国文化产品的身份认同的理解和其国际化之路的探索。

研究成果的分享

这项研究是研究员最终获得鹿特丹伊拉斯姆斯大学学位的一部分。在研究完成时，研究发现可以提供给研究参与者。若需要，请研究参与者告知研究员。

语音/视频记录

通过签署此同意书，您知情且同意采访内容将通过语音或视频形式被记录，且内容仅会被用于此项研究目的。

数据使用

通过签署此同意书，您知情且同意采访内容将会被进行匿名处理，以用于研究分析和在最终的学术研究中呈现。

保密处理

您的个人信息将会被最大程度上进行保密处理。任何您的个人信息都不会被纳入任何公开发行的报告中。除此之外，只有专业受训的学术人员可以查阅您的研究资料，例如，前文提及的此次研究的研究员和此次研究的导师等人。鉴于此，若您需要了解这项研究的最终成果，请告知研究员。

正如已提及，此次研究采访会被录音/录像。部分的访谈逐字稿可能会以公开形式被使用（例如，最终的研究论文报告）。您的信息会被使用化名代指出现在任何公开相关的报告中。所有的数

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据，包括录音/录像，采访逐字稿（纸质或电子版），和数据分析软件的电子文档，每一个受访者均只以代码而非姓名的匿名形式出现。

报酬

参与此次研究不涉及任何经济报酬。

终止参与及问题

此项研究完全自愿。受访者可自行决定参加与否。受访者在采访进行期间亦可随时中止回答。若您决定不再继续参与此项研究或中途退出，这都不会影响您的任何权益。

同意声明

在下方输入您的姓名，即表示您至少已满 18 岁；您已经阅读过或者由他人读给您听过此同意书，您的问题已经得到了满意的回答而且您自愿同意参与本次调查研究。

若您对于本研究有任何疑问或顾虑，请通过邮件联系此次研究的研究员：

xinyuli@student.eur.nl.

若您同意参与此项研究，请在以下部分签字。

签名和日期

_____ / _____ / _____
受访者姓名 签名 年 月 日

感谢您的时间和耐心！

Appendix D: Coding tree*Table: Coding tree of perceived M-pop identity and its internationalization*

Theme	Sub-theme	Codes	Notes/subcodes (optional)
Theme 1: Identity	Knowability of M-pop and the artist	<p>M-pop: Not at all</p> <p>M-pop: Know the people, not the music, esp not M-pop</p> <p>M-pop: Yes, know it a bit</p> <p>M-pop: Google & youtube search not there</p> <p>Artist: Popular idol, but without representative song work</p> <p>Artist: Positive, responsive idol with big vision & mission</p> <p>Artist: Lay's Personal style</p> <p>Artist: Sincere about what he does, a protected idol</p>	
	Evaluation of music itself	<p>Genre in taking shape, fuzzy concept</p> <p>Might just be a placebo effect the artist create</p> <p>Recognize the fusion: mix of genres</p>	

Strong American influence: Flattened voice/autotune

Strong American influence: Uber commercial

Strong American influence: More American, not Europe

Strong American influence: Cultural affiliation to the U.S.

Foreign influence: Korean influence- korean boyband culture

Foreign influence: Korean influence- sounds similar to K-pop

Foreign influence: Overproduction & commercialized

Foreign influence: M-pop much heavier than K-pop

Foreign influence: Japanese influence

Foreign influence: More mainstream west influence

Foreign influence: Hip-hop influence

Fusion: Not a new thing

Positive feedback: cool+ fun music

Positive feedback: high production quality

Positive feedback: Make chinese style/culture more acceptable

Negative feedback: Over-production/over perfect- like a computer, losing the soul

Negative feedback: computational, losing the soul

Negative feedback: Not touching: lyrics & melody

Negative feedback: Melody/Tune is not catchy enough

Negative feedback: Trying too hard

Slogan: Good intention

Slogan: For westerner: Intimidating & pretentious for westerners

Slogan: For westerner: Inspiring & elaborate

Slogan: For China: bring china out & bring foreign in

Slogan: Big goal & long way to go

Slogan: 1) culturally not be adored 2) system east vs. west:

MV: Good MV, good sense of rhythm

MV: Bilingual subtitle

MV: High production quality/Heavily produced

Lyrics & language: Direct lyrics, lack of implicit chinese beauty

M-pop's

Chinese identity China enough? : Okay, Recognize music from China:

China enough? - No, So western

(Reason) Historical reason why Chinese pop music is very western

China enough? - Lyrics play a big role in recognizing China

China enough?- Quite China: Chinese elements are the core

Contested M-pop Identity (of being chinese music): Fuzzy identity- questionable: who do you really represent?

Chinese music identity: What should be real M-pop or C-pop: chinese own struff

Chinese music identity: Chinese style identifier: using
chinese instrument + pentatonic scale + folk music style +
chinese cultural elements

Chinese music identity: Chinese traditional/folk music is not
popular

Chinese music identity: Examples of Chinese-enough
singer/artist:

*Impression of

K-pop

Commercialized/commodity

Over production: “So-perfect”, (no flaw/soul), synthesized,
fabricated

K-pop starts to have soul after gotten its position

K-pop international audience: younger generation &
cosmopolitan

* Audience:

Who the

(International)A

udience are

Culturally open people

Same people that listen to K-pop

People interested in Asia

*What does the

M-pop

phenomenon

say?

Manifestation of cultural flow: multi-direction

Related to cultural diplomacy

Theme

2:

Interna

tional International

challenges acceptance/success International acceptance: Has potential, depends on the total package

International acceptance: possible, more internationally oriented artists

International success? Not in the short run (Chinese music in general)

International acceptance: Limited success

International acceptance: Not difficult → as westerns are interested

International acceptance: could be → use the popular elements

International acceptance: not difficult → quite complete

International acceptance: difficult: less possible to accept for the M-pop right now

Popularity among international friends: not so much

International success: very difficult ⇒ reasons: 1) musicians: dont know why they started 2) Fans: brainless 3)public opinion

International acceptance: Music success possible, to expand to culture- difficult (Argument)

International acceptance: Only curious, don't understand the language, cultural connotation

International acceptance: Already better than his Chinese musical peers

International acceptance: Not success in the next 10 years + 6 Reasons

Reasons 1: technical reason

Reason 2: Social factors

Reason 3: political/legislation reasons

Reason 4: Religion reason

Reason 5: Economy factors

Reason 6: Historical reason

Imbalanced cultural flow

Imbalance overview: Chinese artists are not known internationally ⇒ Chinese influence is much smaller than how the west influence China

Western can get into China: west- expansionary

Reason: Historical legacy of U.S. & U.K.

Reason: Chinese govt not promoting enough

China not to the west: China's folk music stays in china, not spread to west

Chinese immigrants abroad, stay at the age that they came abroad, very out-dated

Reason: Language accessibility/ barrier (See the m-pop barrier)

Reason: cultural proximity problem (Cultural barriers)

Reason: Aesthetic difference → direct western culture vs. implicit chinese culture

Reason: West- Arrogance mentality

Reason: Orientalist ideology- to fulfill the imagination of the east

Politics influence the cultural preferences: International political environment influences the music preferences:

Reason: system wise - west against east

Result: why China can catch up quietly

Cultures
differences
related

All culture should be present

See the individual, “You are not your country’s problem”

Fans economy (specific) power → backlash/backfired, west dont like, fan culture differences

Lay is not using controversial cultural element

Risk of fulfilling west imagination of east (orientalism)

Culture export is difficult: Cultural cultural diplomacy not supported in china

China's culture export: (receiver end) → no good
connotation/impression + only superficial level in the west

China's culture export: from sender's end: awaking/ in the
process + build culture confidence from inside out, then
export it

China's cultural product's international promotion: Not good

Difficulties for
westerner:

Unable to
access to
Chinese
music/Accessin
g Chinese
music abroad is
hard

Rely on Spotify recommendation

Not in academic discussion

Not so much in music festival

Language barrier

*Music related incompatible aspect

Not genuine

Overproduction → relate to
robotic, without soul

People can relate to

Anti- Nationalism sentiment in
the west(i.e.: Europe)

Political factors: Country image related issue

Propaganda/nationalism/brainwash trigger backfire

China has difficult relationship with its image → controlling impression

Only showing good side, distrustful → related to controlling impression

Generally, Westerners don't trust China

Trying too hard and backfired

Nationalism conundrum → doubt authenticity of artists, backfired

Doubt about artists' authenticity

Superficial

Nation image influence music preference

Not really a barrier → publicity matters, multicultural

nowadays, ppl are open to it

Not a barrier → just to get the feeling

Language barrier or not?

Is a barrier
English singing- losing language nuance/losing artistic identity:
English singing- commercially more success
Real challenge: universal but remain unique identity

Difficulties & opportunities for Chinese artists: don't have their eyes on market outside of China

Lack of Chinese artists who have international perspective

Reasons: Lots of barriers to reach out

Reason: China market big enough

Advantage to stir international success

Big market of chinese speaking ppl in the world
Advantage of rising soft power of china
Advantage: Company provides him platform

Theme

3:

Strategic

management

choices made

(by Now)

Clever marketing strategy

Cater to international audience using their elements and bring his own stuff

Mingle English & choose EDM

Risk of "cater to all, but lose all"

Chinese music

industry &

Media

environment

Definition: c-pop vs. m-pop

Chinese music industry category:

Chinese music industry current situation: ⇒ Unhealthy media environment: quick money oriented, low quality, if no high quality, of course not export to international stage

*Chinese music industry development:

Need music that's catchy for eyes & ears

Generation/time has changed

Low entry barrier recent years with the technology advancement: music platform” douyin + music production: apps

The profit model is different west

Profit model: copyright protection is not established yet

Consumers are not used to pay for music

Domestically: ppl busy making a living (money-oriented), no time to think or do things according to hobbies along

Very commercialised, losing artistic side ⇒ making quick money

Less good music recently years, let alone to export internationally

Fact: Douyin dominates

Douyin characteristics for music: Time-consuming &

Brainwashing:

Douyin songs: quite similar, not differentiable, easy to sing along

Douyin: pure entertainment, not so much for high quality music

Douyin: fast consumer goods

Provide platform for musicians → good

Make the entry level low so that low quality also get in → dilemma

Unhealthy music industry in China: ⇒ Douyin for musicians: determine what type of music they make to

make money (commercial oriented, less likely to produce good quality music)

Unhealthy music market/industry: fans determine what to be popular to cultivate the content

Result: Quick money, hard to cultivate artist & environment

Relation: Media change music production: → easy melody, just simple hit song → (my)like fast fashion

Strategic management: need to balance other factors to be successful, given artists are struggled bc of the commercially oriented market environment

Strategy: artist follow someone to handle the business side so that to make money

Strategic
choices
inspiration
(Future
strategy) →
How to
succeed/what
can be done?

Need the money → team → marketing

Need a team → internationally oriented: language, skill,
know local culture, culture sensitive → international
publicity/exposure

All about marketing/publicity

Count on personal network

Money way of entering

Sustainable way of entering

Money way vs. Sustainable way of entering foreign market

Market specific approach (not m-pop specific):

Rather a Mentality/humanistic challenge than a artistic thing

To do: Provide values and open up conversations:

To do: Choose the right audience: Teenagers/ Globally minded audience

To do: Be authentic & Genuine → show the total package, not only sugar coating →thing is that its not intentions sugar coating

To do: Make music relatable → relate to cultural proximity

To do: Make music more recognizable/distinguish itself from other genres/styles

To do: Innovate traditional music forms

To do: Subtlety to counter the bad connotation of nationalism

To do: Create a local community + fanbase & Being different:

To do: Start with sth west knows

To do: Ask more artists to participant

Expectation of M-pop: To counter the stereotypical understanding of China (Westerner)
Give depth of cultural elements
Talk to international audience in a genuine way/authentic
