

Beyond Beats & Rhymes

An analysis of how to succeed in rap careers.

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Abstract

Today hip-hop is one of the most influential genres in music. Especially among global youths who consider it their favorite genre. With hip-hop becoming increasingly popular, one can expect many rappers to seek careers in the hip-hop industry. What, then, can we say about career prospects for aspiring rappers? While many studies exist that analyze music careers (such as Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Klein et al., 2017), analysis of hip-hop careers remains limited. Existing studies typically focus on messages in rappers' lyrics (for example, Vito, 2019) or on describing local scenes (for instance, Reitsamer & Prokop, 2018). Not enough is said, however, about how rappers can lead successful careers. Therefore, this thesis aims to answer the following research question: *How can rappers develop and manage a successful career in hip-hop?* This research question is answered by conducting a thematic analysis of career experiences as communicated by industry experts. Including, but not limited to, successful rappers. Since accessing these industry experts in person is unfeasible, this research uses YouTube videos of interviews with hip-hop experts instead.

The findings of this study identify three core themes among the experiences shared by industry experts that help describe how rappers can manage and develop successful careers in hip-hop. The first theme covers entrepreneurial orientation. It describes entrepreneurial attributes that rappers can use in their career management to establish themselves professionally in the industry. It is especially relevant at the start of rappers' careers when entrepreneurial orientation is needed to overcome a lack of access to industry resources. The second theme, then, entails how rappers can leverage industry resources once they have gained access to them. It emphasizes the value of collaborating with other (preferably established) artists and forming strategic partnerships with companies in the industry. This being done with comprehension of financial and contract literacy within the hip-hop and music industries. Such literacy maximizes the benefits rappers can reap from partnerships. The final theme delineates the use of strategy in rappers' artistic orientation. With emphasis on balancing audience-oriented content with artistic uniqueness. This will contribute to sustaining a marketable and profitable career. The study concludes with nuances related to the roles that entrepreneurship and major labels play in rap careers.

Keywords

Rap careers, hip-hop, entrepreneurship, collaboration, strategy

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Preface

This thesis represents the result of combining my creative passion for hip-hop with my academic development. Initially, my intention when I joined the Media and Creative Industries program was to benchmark the music industry so I could eventually build a career in it. Little did I know that I would become inspired and motivated to develop my academic skills as well. Although there is room for improvement, I am proud of the progress I have made as a researcher. I am confident that the analytical competences I have practiced throughout this program will bear their fruits in the future. In the meantime, I hope to capture my progress thus far with this thesis. It was not easy, but the lessons learnt throughout this research are worth it.

Furthermore, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge with deep gratitude the contributions of Dr. Erik Hitters as my supervisor. His intrigued and motivated discussions around this research with me have been indispensable sources of inspiration. This, combined with his positive outlook to my efforts and sympathy for my struggles throughout the research process, allowed me to have confidence at moments when I needed it most. I have certainly learnt a lot from Dr. Hitters in the field of music research. His guidance, constructive feedback, and conversations have helped me expand my expertise in this field and in research generally. Thank you.

Aside from the academic purpose behind this thesis, it has been my intention to create something practical as well. I am not a seasoned expert myself as to give the worthiest advice to aspiring rappers in the hip-hop industry. However, I have done my best to capture and communicate what those with greater industry expertise than me, and admirable acclaim, think about succeeding in rap. I hope this thesis brings some valuable insights and practical guidelines to aspiring rappers, such as myself and my best friend Hector. I kept rappers like us in mind as I worked on this project.

1. Introduction

The creative industries have been shown to provide tough employment conditions for creative workers. Creative workers seem to experience less job certainty and more self-exploitation than in other industries (Hennekam & Bennett, 2016; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Tarassi, 2018). This type of unfavorable work has also been the subject of criticism in the music industry. Here, major record labels have become notorious for the type of contracts they offer to artists. This is especially true in the case of hip-hop, where many artists rap and talk about their grievances with major labels (Vito, 2019; Reitsamer & Prokop, 2018). Yet, despite attracting significant attention from academia, hip-hop research has often been focused on its messages and effects on society (Berard & Meeker, 2019). Much less has been studied regarding the development of hip-hop careers. Fortunately, there are some studies that have laid down the groundwork for this topic. However, these studies often rely on analyzing lyrics of artists to identify their musical and industry approach (Oware, 2014; Vito, 2019), or they focus on ethnographic observations in specific hip-hop markets or scenes (Balaji, 2012; Haijen, 2016; Reitsamer & Prokop, 2018; Speers, 2016; Tienes, 2017). In doing so they provide valuable insights that help describe hip-hop careers, but they remain limited in their ability to capture important nuances that may not become apparent by looking at lyrics or just a few scenes. Different career dynamics are also observed between scenes in existing studies, further hinting at the need to expand our research in this topic to capture a more exhaustive picture of hip-hop career paths.

Furthermore, the findings in existing literature may be limited in their ability to consider recent developments in the music industry such as the importance of digital marketing, or streaming playlists (Sun, 2019). Additionally, while literature seems to conclude that musicians cannot get far in their careers without major label support, there are examples of independent artists that have achieved commercial success without major labels (Klein et al, 2017). These examples are nevertheless scarcely represented in hip-hop research. Whereas in practice, the popularity of independents such as Dom Kennedy, Chance the Rapper, and Russ, among others, increases. Hence, to enrich our current understanding of career trajectories in hip-hop, it is necessary to look at more diverse sources of data that elaborate on up-to-date career management practices in hip-hop. With this in mind, I aim to answer the following research question: *How can rappers develop and manage a successful career in hip-hop?* It is especially interesting to look at the path to economic sustainability and to add nuance to the current conclusions that indicate an inevitable need for corporate support. Instead, it is beneficial to also examine, in the contemporary hip-hop industry, what does corporate support entail? How do rappers succeed while being independent?

Answering these questions not only helps close a gap in hip-hop literature, but it can also provide career-supporting insights to rappers. With hip-hop now being the most-listened-to music genre among global youths (The International Federation of the Phonographic Industry [IFPI], 2020), it is not hard to imagine that it has been attracting an increasing number of aspirational artists to its industry. Nevertheless, as hip-hop is part of the music and creative industries at large, rappers are likely subjected to the same difficulties musicians and creatives are subjected to in their careers. The findings of this study could serve as guidelines that can help rappers overcome these difficulties. This would be an important contribution to these artists who help create and sustain one of the most important cultural movements of today. With music sales rising consistently since its lowest point of \$14 billion in 2014 up to \$21.6 billion in 2020 (IFPI, 2021), it is only fair that rappers who contribute to this prosperity can also know how to benefit from it.

This study uses a qualitative method to answer the research question. It consists of a thematic analysis of rap career experiences as communicated by successful rappers and relevant industry experts. Specifically, the thematic analysis looks at how they discuss development and management of successful rap careers. These industry experts are not accessed directly, but rather indirectly. That is, their experiences are analyzed by collecting secondary data from publicly available videos on YouTube containing interviews with the experts. This reflects the discourse of the protagonists who have directly experienced having to establish a successful career in the rap music industry. Relevant YouTube videos were sampled based on predefined criteria, transcribed, and then thematically coded during analysis. The coding follows both Herzog's et al. (2019) and Boeije's (2010) guidelines for identifying themes in textual data. The themes were then combined, in light of existing theory, into core thematic concepts that theoretically answer the research question.

The rest of this report presents the research conducted for this thesis according to the following structure. Chapter 2 delineates the theoretical framework which describes the relevant concepts that were used to analyze rap careers and their success. Then, chapter 3 provides an in-depth explanation of the method used to answer the research question. The overall research design, including data collection and analysis, is described and justified. The chapter concludes with an account of the reliability and validity of the research method. Next, chapter 4 outlines the results of this study according to the themes and subthemes derived from the analysis. Chapter 5, then, follows with a conclusion of how these results answer the research question. It also explains the theoretical and practical implications of the findings and ends with a reflection on the limitations of the research. Finally, appendices are provided at the end of this report to further illustrate certain elements of the research process.

2. Theoretical framework

In this chapter I lay down the theoretical framework that is used during analysis to help answer the research question. First, I introduce the typical career characteristics within creative industries. Given that rappers belong to a creative industry, these characteristics are useful input to analyze their careers. Then, I expand on how entrepreneurship takes place within creative industries. This I do mainly because entrepreneurship has become a prominent aspect related to success in creative careers. Thus, to study success in rap careers, one ought to consider entrepreneurial elements. Next, I dive into the typical characteristics of music careers. This is important because it is not enough to only consider generic characteristics of creative careers, the nuances within the different industry fields also impact the careers of creatives in them. For this same reason, I finalize the theoretical framework by looking at what can be used from existing hip-hop literature to identify relevant rap career aspects during analysis. Ultimately, the theoretical framework contributed input for the identification of themes in the analysis process, which is described in chapter 3.

2.1 Creative careers

2.1.1 Characteristics of a creative career

To analyze how rap careers can be managed for success, it is useful to first understand what the characteristics of creative careers are. This is because rappers are part of the creative industries. These industries include professionals such as artists, producers, designers, and performers catering to cultural markets. The creative labor force, however, is not restricted to professionals explicitly involved in the production and supply of cultural goods. It also includes a wider spectrum of disciplines such as marketing, IT, architecture, and scientific research among others (Bridgstock et al., 2015; Chang & Chen, 2020; Werthes et al., 2018). Ever since economies became post-industrialized, there has been an increasing attention from scholars and policy makers given to the role of creatives in the economy. Creative labor is shown to be an important contributor to the economy in terms of growth, employment, and innovation among other things (Chang & Chen, 2020; Purnomo, 2019; Werthes et al., 2018). Yet, the conditions which creatives themselves must endure for the sake of employment have also been the target of criticism among scholars (for example Comunian et al., 2010; Hennekam & Bennett, 2016; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010).

Nevertheless, more nuances have been added to these narratives in recent years. Among these nuances is the distinction that not all creative careers are treated equally in the labor market. Creatives in the fields of marketing, architecture, or IT enjoy better employment than artists and performers, for

example (Bridgstock et al., 2015). The latter have been found to be subjected to precarious work conditions such as underpayment and low job security. Hence, they typically work multiple jobs with low economic benefit which can put their well-being at risk (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Janssen, 2001; Werthes et al., 2018). These career conditions are relevant to consider when studying rap careers because they are also common in the music industry (Tarassi, 2018). How these conditions manifest specifically within the context of the music and hip-hop industries is something I will elaborate on in sections 2.2 and 2.3.

Coming back to creative careers more broadly, it is further useful to note that their implied precarious labor conditions may be overemphasized. For example, although self-employment and short-term contracts indeed allocate high risks on creative professionals, some studies find that creatives in these conditions can be satisfied with their careers. They can still derive fulfillment and satisfaction in the creative freedom and self-sufficiency they obtain from their careers (Hermes et al., 2017; Zboralska, 2017). This resonates with the coexisting bohemian and entrepreneurial motivations that have been attributed to music students and their career approach (Schediwy et al., 2018). They have reasons to believe that this bohemian-entrepreneurial approach may influence job opportunities and perhaps even success. Professional success in the creative industries today, including the hip-hop industry, may very well depend on being able to cope with or even enjoy risk and uncertainty. It is, thus, useful to consider how this characteristic is manifested in rap careers and their success. Especially when considering that entrepreneurship is becoming within these fields.

2.1.2 Entrepreneurship in the creative industries

Broadly speaking, the creative entrepreneur is someone who produces innovative cultural goods and services while also leveraging entrepreneurial principles to manage this commercially (Chang & Chen, 2020). But creative professionals have also been depicted as being resistant to business logics or entrepreneurship. Those who become entrepreneurs in the creative industries are said to do so out of necessity (Werthes et al., 2018). Creative work practices are also considered to entail tension between creative values and business values, which consequently makes identity formation a central element of creative entrepreneurship (Bhansing et al., 2020). Depending on how identity is constructed, creative entrepreneurs can overcome the obstacles that this tension brings to their careers. For example, Werthes et al. (2018) show that when engaged in communication with other entrepreneurs and in self-reflection about their professional identity, creatives evolve their entrepreneurial identities in a way that leverages both artistic values and economic needs. Thus, on the one hand scholars find that creatives are forced into entrepreneurship and as discussed earlier, may therefore experience

unfavorable exploitation. On the other hand, studies also show creatives can find synergy between entrepreneurship and their careers. It is then interesting to pay attention to the contexts within which entrepreneurship either disfavors or benefits artists. Or in the case of this research, rappers.

Existing literature already provides some hints to the above inquiry. For instance, some of the core reasons creative industries provide disadvantageous work conditions entail the oversupply of labor, products and services, and a lack of institutional support to offset the negative consequences that emerge from this saturation (Chang & Chen, 2020; Werthes et al., 2018). This also explains why many artists become entrepreneurs. They perceive entrepreneurship as the only way in which they can practice their creative inclinations professionally. Entrepreneurship does indeed help artists in this context, because it entails the process of identifying and exploiting economic opportunities (Bhansing et al., 2020; Chang & Chen, 2020; Purnomo, 2019). For artists this means identifying and exploiting opportunities to monetize their creativity. With all this in mind, entrepreneurship is seen as essential for contemporary artist careers (Bridgstock, 2013). Despite that, it is not enough to succeed given the risk of unprofitable self-exploitation (Werthes et al., 2018). Thus, for this study it is useful to further consider what career aspects, next to entrepreneurship, contribute to successful creative careers. These could be useful for analyzing similar patterns in terms of rap careers.

Moreover, with the above in mind, it is also helpful to clarify what is meant with success. One way to do this is by distinguishing between objective and subjective (entrepreneurial) success. Objective success can be examined in two ways. One can examine it financially by looking at profits, but one can also look at nonfinancial performance indicators such as productivity (Purnomo, 2019). Subjective success on the other hand can be assessed by looking at aspects such as career achievement, social reputation, or financial satisfaction (Chang & Chen, 2020). Nevertheless, these indicators only describe the presence of objective and subjective success. Therefore, we must also ask what contributes to their attainment – or lack thereof.

According to Purnomo (2019) achieving objective success can be influenced by three aspects. The first aspect is artistic orientation which includes intrinsic drive, symbolization, authenticity, coordinated resources, and the need for aesthetics. The second aspect is entrepreneurial orientation which includes innovativeness, proactiveness, competitive aggressiveness, risk taking, and autonomy. The third aspect is financial literacy which refers to knowledge and application of financial concepts. Subjective success is also influenced by three aspects, as explained by Chang and Chen (2020). The first is entrepreneurial creativity which refers to cognitive processes that integrate skills, knowledge, and logic to produce solutions. The second is opportunity recognition, particularly in the context of

identifying gaps between the market supply and consumers' needs. The third is resource availability in the form of access to financing, political incentives, and institutional support.

Similarly, when referring to attributes found in successful designers and artists, Bridgstock (2011; 2013) extends the importance of entrepreneurship to career self-management, social networking, finding or creating a niche, and transdisciplinarity. The last one referring to the possession of skills from different disciplines, such as being a musician and a lawyer. Additionally, while Bridgstock refers to social networking in the sense of building relations with other professionals that can complement one's skills, Horst et al. (2020) show the importance of building relations with audiences and customers on social media platforms. This can particularly help creative entrepreneurs test and iterate their business strategies as well as co-create their brand together with their followers.

The characteristics and factors influencing creative career success as discussed above can be used as guidance to identify factors influencing success in rap careers. However, these attributes cannot be expected to manifest themselves equally across creative fields. Hence, it is necessary to further assess successful career characteristics within the context of music and hip-hop industries.

2.2 Music careers

So far, I have discussed elements of creative careers that contribute to answering the research question. Yet, music careers are arguably different from other creative professions. A singer and a designer, for example, are likely subjected to different professional circumstances. Moreover, changes in technology and culture, among other things, are likely transforming each creative field in their own way. Therefore, insights from creative careers are valuable, but more nuance is needed to strengthen the analysis of rap careers. Some of this nuance can come from existing literature on music careers. One important nuance to consider is how business is practiced in the music industry. Mainly because of the crucial role of entrepreneurship for artists, as discussed earlier, and given that different industry dynamics can be expected across creative fields.

Generally, the music industry entails the creation, management, and selling of music. Where music is sold as recordings, performances, or IP rights (Parsons, 2020; Tolmie, 2020; Williamson & Cloonan, 2007). The way in which these activities are carried out has transformed due to technological advancements and the digitalization of music (Bourreau, 2005; Peitz & Waelbroeck, 2005). For music artists, this transformation has made DIY (do-it-yourself) production and distribution of music cheaper and more accessible which has further stimulated entrepreneurship among musicians (Walzer, 2017). Although scholars initially thought this would empower artists, many have become critical. Perhaps the

most notable criticism points to the saturation of music supply. It undermines the financial stability of independent musicians by making it more difficult to stand out, reach new audiences, and build fanbases (Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Tarassi, 2018). Additionally, despite having cheaper access to production and distribution tools, the large amount of time needed to benefit from this can be problematic (Pras et al., 2013).

Aside from the increased difficulty in being able to benefit from DIY production and distribution, it is also harder to gain record label support. While leveraging DIY advancements to their favor, record labels increasingly expect artists to be entrepreneurial and build fanbases on their own (Haynes & Marshall, 2018). This also means that many musicians are forced to take on functions that used to be the responsibility of record labels (Nordgård, 2017). Thus, to be able to make a living in the music industry, artists find themselves investing in self-development to gain the entrepreneurial skills needed (Coulson, 2012). Some are even shown to work for low or no pay to get a chance to network and advance their careers (Tarassi, 2018). While others take on multiple jobs, sometimes outside of music, to sustain themselves financially (Schediwy et al., 2018, 2019). Needless to say, musicians too experience self-exploitation.

Still, there is evidence that young musicians are starting to embrace entrepreneurship. For example, Schediwy et al. (2018) identify three career identity approaches among music students and find that all of them include elements of entrepreneurship. Nonetheless, as is the case with other creatives, entrepreneurial activities alone do not guarantee a successful music career (Coulson, 2012). As mentioned earlier, it is hard to stand out in a saturated market. For this, artists require large marketing investments to gain significant market share (Haynes & Marshall, 2018), although they often lack the necessary capital. To overcome this, many artists compromise their artistic autonomy in exchange for corporate support to achieve financial stability (Klein et al., 2017; Tarassi, 2018). One study for example shows that while professional attitudes and social support (from family, friends, and peers) were important in the careers of pop musicians, their perceived success relied most heavily on the professional networks they built with record companies among others (Zwaan et al., 2010). Being able to network with other musicians is also highly appreciated. This benefits them not only with job opportunities, but also with opportunities to learn from and support each other (Coulson, 2012).

Finally, with the increasing importance of marketability and reliance on corporate support, some claim that the boundaries between independent and mainstream careers are blurring (Tarassi, 2018). Yet, others posit that these views ignore nuances such as differences in career opportunities between genres. For instance, Miller (2018) explains how a career in heavy metal is more vulnerable than one in

Folk. Like an orchestra, heavy metal musicians need to have high instrumental proficiency, rehearse a lot, and rely on playing with a band. This not only leads to a demanding career, but musicians are also vulnerable to the commitment and proficiency of their band. By contrast, in Folk music performers are not expected to exhibit instrumental complexity and can play simpler chord progressions at different skill levels. This also affects how success is evaluated in music careers. For some artists or genres, success can be based on fame and commercial gains (Klein et al., 2017). In other cases, mainstream commercial success is undesired (Tarassi, 2018). Instead, success may rely more on reputation within a musician's (sub)genre. These contrasts are also present within hip-hop as I will discuss in the next subsection. It is then interesting to analyze how rappers maneuver around different conventions and how that impacts their success.

All in all, there are complex dynamics taking place in music careers. From the need to become entrepreneurial to the expectations set by the industry and how that affects support and success. Self-development is key but so is access to capital, which seems to be accessible mostly via record labels and corporate sponsorships. Yet, with continuous development in both cultural practice and technology, new ways of supporting one's music career can be expected to emerge. Some musicians are already doing that by leveraging crowdfunding or openly sharing career tips with each other (Walzer, 2017). As I will explore in more detail below, industry dynamics are also changing within hip-hop.

2.3 Hip-hop and rap careers

Soon after the civil rights movement, hip-hop emerged in the early 1970's as an outlet for young African Americans and Latinos in the USA coping with inequality and social decay (Prier & Beachum, 2008). Expressing this social decay, many songs included violence or emphasized sexual and misogynistic messages. As this became increasingly entertaining for suburban youths, record labels seized the opportunity and commercialized it as *gangsta rap* (Petchauer, 2009). Today hip-hop is the most popular music genre among global youths (The International Federation of the Phonographic Industry [IFPI], 2020). While a *conscious* subgenre remains true to its socially critical origins, mainstream hip-hop is often characterized by the materialism, violence, and misogyny popularized with *gansta rap*. Some scholars argue that materialism in particular has become mainstream given its desirability among working-class youths (Petchauer, 2009). Conscious rappers, however, criticize and blame major labels for the promotion of materialism and anti-social messages in hip-hop (Vito, 2019). Perhaps with good reasons as major labels dominate production and distribution in the industry (Balaji, 2012).

The tension between mainstream and conscious (underground) hip-hop plays an important role in how rappers build their careers. Existing literature indicates that rappers start their careers as underground independents hoping to generate enough buzz to get noticed by a record label (Tienes, 2017). Since the underground aims to stay true to original hip-hop, rappers in this subgenre need to validate their credibility and authenticity which makes these acts more marketable (Balaji, 2012). Major labels leverage this by scouting validated talent from the underground or encourage their signed artists to mimic it (Vito, 2019). Hence, in an attempt to attract support from major labels, rappers have started to combine underground and mainstream elements in their music (Oware, 2014). This is a remarkable development as underground conventions traditionally oppose the mainstream. This research can, thus, further investigate whether these practices are indeed found in the trajectories of successful rap careers.

Furthermore, gaining support from major labels may also depend on the region rappers are located in. One study looking at Austrian rappers, for instance, found that they have had to launch their own labels, finance their own tours, and rely on underground networks because major labels have little interest in the Austrian hip-hop market (Reitsemer & Prokop, 2018). Even in American regions where major labels are less invested, some rappers find themselves having to build their own businesses to professionalize their careers (Lee, 2009; Tienes, 2017). This resembles patterns seen in music careers more broadly, where DIY practices and entrepreneurship are becoming inevitable. Additionally, when it comes to hip-hop, entrepreneurship may rely on being mainstream. For example, Dutch and British rappers are shown to have to compromise their artistic autonomy by adopting commercial orientations in their music in hopes of benefitting from a more economically viable mainstream market (Haijen, 2016; Speers, 2016). Therefore, rappers too are pressured to take on multiple roles, to self-exploit, and to commercialize their music so they can have a chance to earn a living from it. Nevertheless, it is not necessarily clear how effectively this leads to success. This research can address this issue by identifying success factors and comparing them to the approaches discussed above. There is evidence of exceptions to these market-oriented approaches. Including successful independent rappers who remain critical of mainstream commercialization. However, they have often benefitted from deals with major labels in the past and continue to rely on these labels' marketing and distribution channels (Vito, 2019).

Despite the similarities with the typical musical career, the need for entrepreneurship may be stronger for rappers. Especially for younger acts and those in regional markets with less interest from major labels. Existing studies seem to suggest that aspiring rappers who want to be successful need entrepreneurship to attract major label support or to overcome the lack thereof. Similarly, rappers that

are successful seem to be those who are or were signed by major labels. Yet, these cases do not capture a full picture of the career success possibilities in hip-hop. Especially when considering more recent cases of rappers such as Chance the Rapper, Russ, Dom Kennedy, or Tobe Nwigwe. These are rappers who have achieved financial success, some even mainstream success, independently. Of course, they have likely relied on corporate support as well, but their approach to major labels seems different.

Finally, as the music industry undergoes continuous change in its dynamics and more and more artists become savvy in their ability to leverage digitalization, it is reasonable to expect new developments in how they establish their careers. In hip-hop we see rival subgenre conventions being mixed for the sake of economic viability. While some leverage entrepreneurship to accelerate their path to a major deal, others might be leveraging it to maximize their independence. Perhaps the former is a somewhat outdated development, while the latter is the future of hip-hop. By using the existing insights from theory, this research can help shed more light on how industry dynamics have continued to develop and how they impact rappers' careers. Ultimately, it will contribute to what this literature has not sufficiently clarified yet, a more concrete answer to which strategies rappers employ to build successful careers in the hip-hop industry.

2.4 In short,

It seems like entrepreneurship and self-exploitation are central elements of creative careers. With the former being disliked by some and embraced by others. In the music industry, entrepreneurship and the use of DIY tools, which were initially expected to empower artists, are shown to work against them by saturating the market. This, combined with a lack of resources and institutional support, further diminishes the chances of career success. Still, entrepreneurship is being embraced by younger musicians as the right approach to lead successful careers. However, on its own, it is not enough for succeeding.

For now, musicians and rappers are shown to be primarily interested in improving their odds of career success by attracting major label support. This seems to be counter-intuitive, considering that it emphasizes self-exploitation and, in hip-hop, undesired compromise of authenticity. Meanwhile, other elements that would be needed for a successful career in rap are understudied. Hence, it is useful to investigate what rappers can do to succeed beyond relying on major labels. This study achieves this by using what is already shown to contribute to the success of creative professionals in existing literature, and by identifying the nuances that apply to hip-hop specifically.

3. Methodology

This chapter explains the methodology used in this study to answer the research question. I first describe and justify the research design in section 3.1 by explaining why a qualitative method is generally suitable for this study. I also clarify why a thematic analysis of YouTube videos is the appropriate qualitative tool to use in this research. Subsequently, in section 3.2 I elaborate on how data collection was implemented. Here I explain the sampling procedure, including the selection criteria used to sample YouTube videos, and what the final sample looks like. Next, in subsection 3.3 I extensively describe each step of the thematic analysis. This includes detailed accounts of the open, axial, and selective coding that was carried out. Particular attention is given to the decision making in each step to enhance transparency. Finally, this chapter ends with a reflection on the methodology in terms of reliability and validity. The methodology as described in this chapter clarifies how the results in chapter 4 were derived.

3.1 Research design

The aim of this study is to expand our current understanding of how rappers can develop and manage successful careers in the hip-hop industry. This has been achieved by implementing a qualitative analysis of how industry experts themselves discuss rap careers and the different aspects that contribute to their success. There are three reasons why a qualitative approach was used. The first is that experiences are communicated by language. Although language can be analyzed quantitatively, a qualitative approach is deemed to facilitate a more in-depth exploration of communicated experiences (Brennen, 2017). Secondly, as mentioned in the theoretical framework, success in creative careers can be approached both objectively and subjectively. While objective success can be measured financially, subjective success is influenced by social constructions, instead. Hence, qualitative analysis is needed to understand the implications these social constructions have (Brennen, 2017), in this case for rap careers. Finally, qualitative analysis helps distinguish which aspects of communicated experiences are useful to answer the research question by systematically reducing the amount of data while facilitating the identification of insights (Schreier, 2013).

The qualitative method of choice for this study was thematic analysis. As a tool, thematic analysis provides a flexible coding approach to identify and categorize relevant data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is especially useful for this research because it allows one to segment and categorize data both inductively and deductively (Herzog et al., 2019). Thus, relevant data was identified, and insights were derived from it based on concepts from existing literature as well as emerging patterns in the data itself.

This method was implemented by following the guidelines from Herzog et al. (2019) on how to use Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis for media and creative industries' research. Additionally, Boeije's (2010) open, axial, and selective coding approach was used to structure the codes and themes resulting from analysis. The implementation of this thematic coding approach is discussed in more detail in the analysis subsection below.

Furthermore, data was collected from publicly available YouTube videos of interviews and panel discussions with experts. The main reason for this relates to the fact that it is difficult to get access to industry experts when doing research (Kvale, 2007). In this study this is true because it centers on professional rappers and hip-hop industry experts. Especially successful rappers are likely to have some level of celebrity, which makes them all the harder to reach. This access barrier can be breached indirectly by using videos from YouTube. Specifically, videos containing interviews discussing rap careers with rappers at different stages of success and interviews with other industry experts.

Moreover, the use of secondary data sources such as industry press publications is a common method in (American) media communications studies (for example, Havens & Lotz, 2017; Perren, 2016; Wayne, 2021). Public industry press materials help overcome the access barrier to industry experts by providing insights into their work processes and industry dynamics (Wayne, 2021). Especially the study of interviews and statements by media professionals can reveal industry discourses and conceptual suggestions for theory (Caldwell, 2008). Additionally, this study includes interviews with experts varying in their specific rap career backgrounds. This helps expand the limited scope of analysis in existing studies related to rappers and their careers. These studies typically focus on the lyrics of established rappers with ongoing or previous ties to major labels. While other studies look at rap careers in a narrow context. For example, some studies look at rappers' experience in a specific local scene and their attempts to professionalize their career therein. This research instead expands the scope of data by looking at experiences of successful rappers working with and without major labels, as well as non-rapper industry experts.

3.2 Data collection

YouTube's search engine was used to access potentially relevant videos. This was done by employing search keywords such as 'rap careers', 'professional rap', 'successful hip-hop career', etc. The search results and subsequent suggestions from YouTube's algorithm were used for data collection. Furthermore, selection criteria were used to choose the most relevant videos for this research. This was done to implement a purposive sampling strategy which is suitable for studies interested in views from

specific individuals (Babbie, 2014). In this case the specific individuals of interest are hip-hop industry experts.

Three criteria were used during sampling. The first criterion was to select videos on YouTube that include hip-hop or music industry experts discussing rap careers. Relevant experts are professionals that are or have been involved in rap careers, such as artists' managers or rappers themselves. Whether this criterion was met was assessed based on video titles, channels, and content. The second criterion was to select YouTube videos published from 2017 onwards. Recent videos include discussions around up to date industry developments that impact rap careers. This is especially important considering the impact technology (which advances quickly) has in the music industry (Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Walzer, 2017). It is also important given that the way in which rappers navigate independence and record deals appears to be changing (Tienes, 2017; Vito, 2019). The final criterion was to collect data from experts representing a variety of roles and experiences in the industry. With this variation in expert backgrounds the data provides exposure to new insights not discussed (in depth or at all) in existing rap literature.

3.2.1 Sample

There were 37 videos added to a list of candidates based on how the title or publisher matched the selection criteria. Around 5 to 10 minutes of each video were watched to ensure the content was also matching the selection criteria. Consequently, four of the videos on the list were removed because they were interviews that took place several years before 2017 and were being reuploaded. Then, one video at a time was sampled from the list for analysis, the variation criterion was considered with each new video sampled. For example, if a currently sampled video was of an interview with a famous major label rapper, the next video was sampled based on it being an interview with an independent rapper or an artist manager. This process was repeated until data saturation was reached. In other words, until new data no longer contributed to developing theoretical insights (Froschauer & Lueger, 2009). Saturation was assessed as part of the analysis phase which is elaborated on in the next subsection. Additionally, the thesis supervisor was given an overview of the sample and its contents, and his feedback was considered when determining saturation.

The sampling procedure described above resulted in a total of 9 videos being sampled. Seven videos included interviews with rappers. At the time of the interviews three of the rappers were signed to major labels and the other four were independent. Out of these seven videos, two of them also included other industry experts. Namely, hip-hop radio personalities and a music marketing and distribution business owner. Out of the two videos that did not include rappers, one was of an interview with a major label executive, and the other with the manager of an independent rapper. The duration of

all videos ranged between 4 and 141 minutes. With the 9 videos combined, a total of 7 hours and 35.33 minutes of content was sampled. Table 1 provides an overview of the sampled videos and a brief description of their content.

Table 1

Sample overview showing the videos' details together with brief descriptions of their content.

No.	Video title	Publication date	Duration (minutes)	Brief description
1	How Chance the Rapper's Manager, Pat Corcoran, Reimagined the Music Business Blueprint	October 2017	46:53	Interview with Pat Corcoran discussing his management of Chance the Rapper and their independent success.
2	Financial Advice for Artists with Earn Your Leisure, Tobe Nwigwe and JP Morgan Chase	July 2020	37:43	Panel discussion including Tobe Nwigwe sharing his music entrepreneurship experience
3	How Pusha-T Went from The Clipse to Head of G.O.O.D. Music Blueprint	October 2017	28:32	Interview with Pusha-T discussing his hip-hop career and success.
4	Steve Stoute And NLE Choppa Talk United Masters, Artist Ownership, Business Diversity + More	March 2019	53:42	Interview with Steve Stoute and NLE Choppa discussing their strategic partnership and rap careers.
5	Rap Radar: Drake	December 2019	140:58	Interview with Drake discussing his career success.
6	Major Label's Marketing Techniques Used to Break Artists Chat with Virgin EMI Senior Marketer	November 2019	54:32	Interview with Liberty Wilson discussing her experience as senior marketer in major labels.
7	Steve Stoute and Russ discuss Independence at #SelectCon	July 2020	63:50	Interview with Russ discussing his independent rap career success.
8	Future Sheds Light on How Record Labels Really Work & The Importance of Owning Your Masters	January 2019	4:07	Interview with Future discussing his rap experience and financial advice on record deals.
9	Da Baby on His Rise To Success, Going Broke To Pursue Rap, ATL Altercation & More The Come Up EP.1	March 2019	24:54	Interview with DaBaby discussing his rise to fame and career development.

The videos in table 1 are also numbered so that they can be referred to according to their number when discussing the results in chapter 4. In addition to the table above, a more detailed sample overview is provided with descriptions of the videos and their relevance to the research question in Appendix A.

An important thing to note about the sample is that the interview with the major label executive did not discuss rap careers specifically. The interview was centered on marketing for development artists instead. It goes in depth on how to approach marketing as an artist (regardless of genre). While the other videos acknowledge the importance of marketing for rappers, they do not discuss how to approach it in detail. The major label executive also contributes to diversifying the sources of information, as most views shared on major labels came from artists and their managers (who dislike major labels).

Another important remark about the sample is that it mostly includes US-based experts. Only two videos include non-US experts, one is with the major label executive and her interviewers who were all British, and the other with the famous rapper Drake who is Canadian. Their discussions, however, were based on international market experiences. The main reason why most sampled videos are American is because so were the relevant search results and suggestions provided by YouTube during the data collection process. Still, the sample does expand upon the scope of existing literature as it includes experts with varying roles discussing career elements applicable within a global hip-hop market.

3.3 Analysis

As mentioned earlier the analysis was guided by Herzog's et al. (2019) suggested use of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. The first phase entails transcribing the videos into text. This was done by copying the transcripts made available on the YouTube platform for each video and pasting them in a word document. YouTube's transcripts are generally autogenerated by AI which leads to mistakes such as missing words. These mistakes were identified and corrected by listening to videos' audios while reading the transcripts. This process of correcting the transcript was also used to familiarize myself with the data. Throughout this step, I sought to identify which core topics were being discussed as the interview progressed. For each topic I noted preliminary insights that could contribute to answering the research question.

As a result, the final transcript of each interview is divided in parts. Each part is marked with two timestamps indicating when the topic of discussion starts and ends. They also have a heading describing the topics in a way that indicates relevance to the research question. These headings serve as preliminary insights that emphasized what is worth paying attention to in the subsequent phases of the analysis. These transcripts can be found in the separate appendix submitted with this thesis. Phases 2, 3, 4, and 5 of thematic analysis focus on segmenting the transcripts' data, labeling relevant text fragment for the research question, identifying themes among labels and then conceptual patterns. These five phases were executed using Boeije's (2010) open, axial, and selective coding which essentially captures

the same process, and its terminology helps clarify the output of each phase. The software Atlas.ti was also used to facilitate the coding procedure digitally. This made it easier to track and group codes into themes during analysis. The following subsections elaborate on this coding procedure.

3.3.1 Open coding

During the second phase of the analysis, I identified which fragments of the transcripts are relevant to the research question. Each relevant fragment received a label which was primarily descriptive of the main insight captured by the fragment. These labels represent open codes. The open codes were later used to analyze patterns in the data during axial coding. Aside from the topic describing headings throughout each transcript, the process of open coding was influenced by three other factors. The first factor relates to personal assumptions made when deciding what was relevant to the research question. These assumptions were based on my personal biases as a rapper and my exploration of the industry. The most prevalent assumption was that having connections with famous rappers contributes to a successful rap career. Hence, data fragments discussing such connection were given open codes.

Nevertheless, these assumptions were tested against the second influencing factor. Namely, patterns emerging from the data itself. So, for example, collaborations with famous artists were a repeating topic in how (successful) rap career trajectories were described in multiple interviews. Although it was not always explicitly said that this was important for success, these fragments became relevant beyond my personal bias. Finally, emerging patterns not only entailed repeated topics, but also nuances between open codes. For instance, while open codes in one transcript described how record deals can impact a rap career, new open codes were created in other transcripts describing how independent corporate partnerships can impact a rap career. This process of identifying data patterns and nuances of these pattern across transcripts was the most influential factor in this step. Furthermore, the observations of patterns and assumptions made during open coding (and during the rest of the analysis) were noted down in a memo. The notes were used to keep track of identified patterns and preliminary insights. Excerpts showing examples of notetaking in the memo are included in appendix B. The full memo is also available upon request if needed for transparency.

The final factor influencing coding was the theoretical framework discussed in chapter 2. A clear example of this was coding transcript fragments that discussed how financial management can impact economic success in a rap career. This was influenced by findings in creative entrepreneurship relating financial literacy with success (Purnomo, 2019). Another eminent example of theoretical influence during open coding occurred whenever family and peer support was discussed in the data. This type of

support is also linked to perceived success in an existing study (Zwaan et al., 2010). Just as with data-emerging patterns and personal assumptions, I kept notes of when coding was theory-driven. This helped me pay attention to whether the concept would be resonated in subsequent data. In total, 375 open codes were created by the end of the analysis. However, this figure increased and decreased during some of the iteration steps explained below.

3.3.2 Axial coding

Axial coding took place during the third phase of the analysis in which the goal is to search for themes. To do this I followed Herzog's et al. (2019) recommendation to first define what does and what does not count as a theme. According to the authors, a theme ought to capture the nature of a recurrent experience, and this must be extracted based on the researcher's interpretations. Inspired by this, I noted down in my memo the following criterion to identify themes in the data: *What is a theme? A group of codes that independently or in relation to the theoretical framework capture aspects/experiences that influence a rapper's career development & success.* Moreover, I also made use of Boeije's (2010) approach toward axial coding. She emphasizes the identification of abstract categories found in how open codes relate to each other. Based on this, open codes within a similar category were grouped into one axial code. Where relevant, subcategories were also created. Finally, I made sure to follow Herzog's et al. (2019) suggestion that labeling the themes (axial codes) ought to reflect the researcher's interpretation of the data.

The axial coding process started after the first three transcripts had been open coded. These initial open codes were arranged chronologically and then analyzed to identify themes. There are three reasons why I initiated axial coding in this manner. Firstly, I initially had the assumption that it would be overwhelming to analyze themes from hundreds of open codes by the time all transcripts had been open coded. However, this eventually proved to not be an issue. Since Atlas.ti shows a maximum of 25 codes at a time, I could focus on analyzing themes per 25 codes at a time as well. Secondly, arranging the codes chronologically provided an extra level of structure. More specifically, it was easier to see relations between open codes from a same transcript and its respective topics. Mainly because open codes that stemmed from a similar topic appeared close to each other in the chronologically arranged list.

In this way, I grouped together open codes into axial codes that captured a preliminary theme that could help answer the research question. The themes were interpreted both in a data-driven and theory-driven way. For the latter, I created an overview of the concepts from the theoretical framework which I kept in sight while coding. This overview is shown in appendix C. This interpretation-based

contribution to answering the research question was also incorporated in how the axial codes were labeled. After a preliminary theme group was created, I checked whether the following open codes could fit in that group. Or, if they added nuance in such a way that the preliminary theme could be iterated. When this was not possible, I moved on to find new relations with other open codes. In some cases, an open code seemed relevant to the research question but difficult to relate with the remaining open codes visible on the screen. In those case I would add them to a residual group which I would review at the end of this coding phase to see if they could fit in groups created afterwards. Open codes for which it was not fully clear how helpful they were in answering the research were also allocated in the residual group.

After all open codes from the first three transcripts were grouped into preliminary themes, I moved on to another round of open coding and then axial coding of three transcripts. This also had the benefit that I could consider preliminary themes found in previous rounds of axial coding when open coding subsequent transcripts. Once all transcripts had been included in open and axial coding, I began executing the fourth phase of analysis. Namely, reviewing and iterating the preliminary themes. As suggested by Herzog et al. (2019), this step entailed rearranging open codes across themes to improve how well they describe a common theme. Consequently, some axial codes were relabeled to reflect these changes, whereas others were deleted as they no longer contained open codes with a meaningful relation. Subthemes were also created for axial codes whose open codes could be grouped to capture nuances of a more general theme. I took notes of my thought process and considerations when making rearrangements. Whenever possible I noted down how axial codes could potentially be grouped into selective codes. After reviewing and iterating the axial codes, I moved on the next phase.

3.3.3 Selective coding

Selective coding represents the final phase of this analysis. In this phase the goal was to scrutinize how the axial codes could be merged into a few concepts that ultimately answer the research question. This step was more heavily driven by theory than the previous ones. Here I extensively reflected upon which concepts from the theoretical framework were captured the most across the axial codes. The main reason for this is that many open and axial codes emerged naturally from the data while also being relatable to the theoretical framework. They emerged from the data in that they were repeated topics across transcripts. But these topics, such as the influence of corporate partnerships in music careers, are also found in existing studies. Hence, by making these connections to the theoretical framework more explicit in the selective coding phase, I was able to produce more theoretically relevant results. As a visual aid in this approach, I created a code map. At the top of the code map, I wrote down

the theoretical concepts that were most clearly captured by the axial codes. Beneath the theoretical concepts I connected the axial codes using sticky notes. This code map is illustrated in appendix D.

Although the axial codes had already been reviewed extensively in the previous phase, making them explicitly related to a core theoretical concept required further iterations. This time with the aim to rearrange and rename themes in a way that better described the core concept they were connected to. This also led to several axial codes becoming subthemes that capture nuances within either an existing or a new axial code that connected them with the theoretical concept. For instances, the axial codes *leverage family support* and *developing a business team* were combined to represent nuances within the subtheme *independent career management*. This subtheme in turn became part of a new axial code *nurturing a business approach* which connects several other subthemes with the core concept (or selective code) labeled *entrepreneurial orientation*. This process was highly reflexive and underwent many iterations.

While the whole coding process derived inspiration from different studies in the theoretical framework, the selective codes are primarily influenced by the papers from Purnomo (2019), Chang and Chen (2020), and Bridgstock (2011;2013). These studies primarily discuss different factors that can be associated with success among creative professionals and creative entrepreneurs. In this selective coding the concepts of entrepreneurial and artistic orientation as well as industry networking and financial literacy were highly influential. Not only did they fit well with the data, but they also resonate with findings in the rest of the theoretical framework when it comes to defining career trajectories for musicians and rappers. The following chapters will elaborate more on the results of this analysis and their links with existing studies.

3.4 Reliability and validity

Reliability, as originally intended in quantitative research, should be ensured by making one's research replicable so that other independent researchers may attempt to reproduce the same results. However, in qualitative research this is difficult to do considering that the researcher's own subjective interpretations of the data are integral to the research process (Brennen, 2017). In this study for example, experts could not be asked directly to explain what contributes to success in rap careers. Instead, my own theoretical knowledge and industry experience was leveraged to identify meaningful contributions to the research question in the data.

Nevertheless, there are two ways in which reliability can be accounted for within qualitative research. The first is to use standard methods to prepare the data, and the second is to compare analysis of the same data by several researchers (Silverman, 2011). This study adheres to the first

approach by following established guidelines throughout data collection and analysis. The guidelines contributing to reliability during data collection include using sampling criteria, and tracking data saturation. During analysis, reliability is further ensured by using the systematic steps suggested for thematic analysis by Herzog et al. (2019) in combination with Boeije's (2010) coding guidelines.

Adhering to the second reliability approach was unfortunately beyond the scope of this study. Although the progression of analysis was discussed regularly with the thesis supervisor, there was no other dedicated researcher available to independently repeat the analysis for comparison. Still, by providing extensive detail of my research procedure, together with an overview of the sample and transcripts, I do facilitate the possibility to test my research if necessary.

When it comes to improving validity in qualitative research, Silverman (2011) recommends 2 methods. These include analytical induction by using constant comparative and deviant case analyses, and comprehensive data treatment using appropriate tabulations. Analytical induction was used when identifying emerging patterns in the data. These patterns, according to Silverman, ought to be tested by using the constant comparative method and deviant case analysis. In this study, the constant comparative and deviant case methods were used by creating preliminary themes as transcription and analysis progressed. The preliminary themes were then validated or iterated by inspecting similarities and difference in how new codes related to them.

Comprehensive data treatment, on the other hand, was not used in this study. Although it is a useful way to validate the significance of findings by counting how often themes appeared in the data, I do not think this was explicitly needed. Mainly because the aim of this study was to explore meaningful themes that help answer the research question, but not to generalize them.

4. Results

The analysis described in the previous chapter resulted in three core themes, which provide an answer to the research question. The first is entrepreneurial orientation. This theme describes how rappers in the sample used entrepreneurial attributes in their career management to establish themselves in the industry and to develop income sources. This is especially related to independent and emerging rappers, but it is also applied among established and signed rappers. The second theme centers on the leveraging of industry resources. It describes the importance of industry collaborations, financial literacy, and business partnerships. All resources that the data shows rappers use to advance their professional position in the industry and to better exploit income sources. The final theme is artistic orientation, and it refers to how rappers in the data are strategic in their creative craft. This particularly entails a combination of creative uniqueness and market orientation to benefit their chances of leading sustainably successful careers. Together these themes clarify key career management practices used to help rappers succeed in hip-hop. They also provide support and nuances in relation to existing theory which I will discuss further in chapter 5.

4.1 Entrepreneurial orientation

One of the most prevalent topics in the data was independence. Rappers in the sample increasingly try to take more ownership of their music to ensure a more economically beneficial career for themselves. In doing so they exhibit a strong sense of entrepreneurship. They resonate what Purnomo (2019) calls entrepreneurial orientation which he finds is an essential professional attribute for the success of creative entrepreneurs. Thus, the first core theme that emerged from the data while also clearly relating to literature, is entrepreneurial orientation. However, this theme is not limited to including only the career patterns of independent rappers. The data reveals that artists who have succeeded with major labels are entrepreneurially oriented too. Moreover, within the core theme of entrepreneurial orientation, there are four subthemes found in this study. These relate to professional attributes that include being resourceful, nurturing a business approach, strategic marketing, and self-supporting attitudes. The subsections that follow explain these subthemes in more detail.

4.1.1 Being resourceful

The first subtheme entails the art of being resourceful, which, according to successful rappers in the sample, is an important attribute to have when developing a professional rap career. Especially in the early stages of the career when access to resources such as capital and equipment can be quite limited. Despite said limitations, rappers in the sample were motivated to figure out how to make the

best out of the resources they did have. They expressed an understanding of the usefulness of the technology that is available to them already, such as their smartphones and social media. These rappers do not hesitate to use DIY practices to their advantage. They also invest in equipment and in developing the necessary industry skills for them to be able to produce, release and earn money from music. What is more, to make sure that they reap benefits from their resources and investments, they work hard. Harder than most, in their humble opinion.

When it comes to investing in their careers, they not only invest in music production, but also in promoting it. Branding, as I will explain later, is crucial for rappers' career development. In today's era this often includes making videos for their music. Unfortunately, professional music videos can cost a lot of money. At least too much for the budget of an emerging artist. So, as a sign of their entrepreneurial orientation, rappers in this study mentioned shooting and some even editing their own videos. This further shows resourcefulness in that it implies they had to access video editing software and learn how to use it. Take Russ for example, who explains how he overcame not having access to professional video shoots:

I'll tell you what we did between 2011 and 2014 me and Bugus we got a Canon 60D camera, we recorded every studio session because we knew we were going to be legends. . . I set the camera on a tripod, and I stood in front of it in the unfinished basement studio that we were recording and I fucking pressed record. Did a bunch of different takes, bootlegged final cut pro [editing software] like I torrented this shit I didn't buy it. . . I edited this shit myself and put it out (video 7).

DIY does not necessarily mean rappers have to execute these functions themselves. Other rappers in the sample were more willing and able to pay for professional video shoots and studio time to record music when starting their careers. In this sense, they practice DIY by self-investing in either acquiring or hiring resources. The point is, that entrepreneurially oriented rappers arrange production, distribution, and promotion themselves, without record label support.

One thing that was consistent among all rappers in the sample was their inclination to credit hard work ethic for the successes in their careers. For instance, Russ is a big advocate of releasing one song every week. He claims it builds momentum and credits that to his success. Drake (video 5), one of the most successful rappers today, claims to have been inspired by the work ethic of his mentor Lil Wayne and other rap stars. Now he sees himself as working relentlessly as well. Hard work, though, implies more than making music. It goes hand in hand with the other activities mentioned above. For

example, when asked about his work outside the studio, the rising rapper DaBaby responds: ‘growing outside the studio, that's almost more important than the music. . . [if] you aint got no work ethic to go with it . . . [then] you're a waste of time’ (video 9). The next subsection elaborates more on the necessary work outside the studio.

4.1.2 Nurture a business approach

The second subtheme is based on how successful rappers nurture a business approach in their careers. Although some rappers in the sample remained open to eventually sign with a label, others saw their resourcefulness as reason for staying independent. They figured that if they can acquire or hire resources to launch their music, they can do the same to manage other aspects of their career. Therefore, their entrepreneurial orientation and resourcefulness has led them to nurture a business approach toward their rap careers. This is done by hiring a manager and building a team to help manage the business roles a record label would usually take care of. There is no better example of this than that of Chance the Rapper (video 1). Chance gained attention releasing his music for free on the streaming platform Soundcloud, as well as organizing his own shows with help from his father and manager. The manager, Pat Corcoran, was an amateur himself. Both him and Chance figured things out together and set up a team to manage marketing, merchandise, touring, and more. Everyone was inexperienced and learnt as they helped. A similar story is told by Tobe Nwigwe (video 2), who after trying to do everything himself, started to work with family and friends to support him. None of them with any experience in the industry.

These two cases are very interesting considering that Coulson (2012) finds that corporate support was more important than family and peer support for the perceived success of musicians in her study. Whereas this study shows the cases of rappers who have come a long way (Chance, for example, is the first rapper to win a Grammy without signing to a record label) thanks to the support of their family and peers. Perhaps the difference is that the support from these rappers’ families and peers is given in the form of work, and not in an emotional nature. Nevertheless, corporate support has definitely been a key factor in the success of these rappers too, but this will be discussed later in section 4.2.

The rappers in this study not only focus on their music, but they also learn how they can generate revenue from it. They understand the value of touring and merchandise as sources of income, for example. Some industry experts even claim these are primary sources of income above music. Steve Stoute, a renowned veteran in doing branding for rappers in the industry, for example, stated that: ‘music is the loss leader and the business is um tickets, experiences right, and merch’ (video 4). He even

claims merchandise in music will soon rival that of sports. That does not mean rappers are not prioritizing income from music. Especially the rappers that favor independence are adamant about owning their music masters (copyrights), so they can get paid as much as possible for their music for as long as it is played. One could say that touring and merchandise are short-term revenue sources, but music copyrights are what ensure long-term income sustainability. More so if the rapper achieves critical acclaim. Russ, for instance, who fully owns most of his catalogue, explains how streaming has provided him with significant and consistent income throughout the covid-19 pandemic.

A business approach is not only present among independent rappers, though. The major label artists in this sample have all launched their own labels and signed new rappers after becoming successful themselves. This is a trend that was discussed by several rappers in the sample, and one which has been highly beneficial for them as I will explain later in section 4.2. Furthermore, one artist in the sample, namely Drake (video 5), has even launched his own tv production company. This goes to show that despite not being independent, artists can be entrepreneurial by reinvesting the income they earn from their record deals in new business ventures. It is worth to mention, though, that Drake represents an exceptional case. As he is one of the most successful rappers of this decade, he has a lot of money to invest in such ventures. Moreover, while many other rappers do receive millions from their record deals, experts such as Steve Stoute (videos 4) commonly remark that they do not necessarily profit. That money is usually a loan they need to pay back.

4.1.3 Strategic marketing

The third subtheme covers the use of marketing. This, as mentioned earlier, is one activity that entrepreneurially oriented rappers adopt in their business approach. This is necessary to promote their brand and music, which contributes to their ability to sell music, tickets, merchandise, etc. Marketing is also shown to be one of the major reasons why musicians end up relying on record labels for success (Haynes & Marshall, 2018), with the same happening within the hip-hop genre (Vito, 2019). Regardless of this, independent rappers in this study seemed to be quite effective at leveraging marketing on their own. Some managed to make their song popular by advertising it on YouTube, others together with their teams, invested in more traditional marketing. That is, they printed and distributed posters and stickers on the streets to promote their brands and their shows. They gave away CDs with their music for free. They wore their own branded merchandise in public, and more. The point was to maximize their visibility online and offline, or as the rapper DaBaby puts it: 'most importantly, you gotta stay in people's face' (video 9).

For the most part, these are the same activities major labels will offer an artist to support them with marketing. Liberty Wilson (video 6), who is the head of marketing at Universal Music, also emphasized how they focus on creating visibility for artists by sharing a lot of content on all social media. There were also some unique aspects that she mentioned which the independent rappers in the sample did not touch upon. One aspect was the use of non-music content as part of an artist's branding. This is a valuable strategy because non-music content helps artists stand out from the vast number of other artists sharing music on the internet. Whereas rappers in the sample focused more on the importance of consistently releasing music to build awareness and keep audiences engaged.

Another important aspect in which major labels can add marketing value is in optimizing the performance of digital marketing efforts. As Liberty puts it, there are different ways in which an artist can target audiences, and it matters. For example, she explained that artists benefit from distinguishing between marketing for brand awareness versus marketing to reach existing fans. When working with developing artists, she focuses on awareness first. In other words, the marketing strategy is to expose the artists to as broad an audience as possible. On the other hand, it is not clear how knowledgeable independent rappers in this sample are when it comes to these digital marketing strategies. Nonetheless, considering that NLE Choppa (video 4) managed to get 15 million views on a song on his own, and that the independent Tobe Nwigwe's (video 2) music was reposted by several celebrities on social media, rappers in the sample also hinted being able to handle online marketing independently.

There is one aspect in which major labels do have an advantage over independent rappers when it comes to marketing. That is, they can give an artist access to radio, which continues to be important for accessing large mainstream audiences. Russ (video 7) for example claims that he signed a 6-month deal with Columbia, despite being independently successful, for the sole purpose of getting access to radio. This strategy does have its limitations, as Russ learned, major labels can still get rejected by radio stations. Radio aside, rappers can still get marketing support from corporations, but it does not have to be major labels. If they wish to remain independent, they can find marketing services elsewhere, as I will discuss in section 4.2. Alternatively, they can do what Chance the Rapper (video 1) did, and simply hire peers to develop these skills and execute these activities inhouse.

4.1.4 Self-supporting attitudes

The fourth subtheme describes the self-supporting attitudes rappers use to further benefit their careers. Every single rapper in the data expressed attitudes related to self-confidence, ambition, willingness to expose their music, and perhaps most importantly, persistence. Self-confidence does not mean that the rappers thought they had the best music, quite the contrary some of them openly

admitted to feeling insecure about their music. Self-confidence had more to do with believing in their ability to figure things out. To make it happen as professional rappers. To deliver something of quality to others. This connects to the aspect of exposing oneself as an artist to the world. One thing is for sure, you will never know if you succeed if you do not first expose yourself and your art to the world. That in itself requires self-confidence.

Ambition was another aspect that surely plays a role in the success of rappers. One can probably only get as far as one aims to get. Rappers in the sample were constantly aiming for higher goals. Independent and major label artists alike. This goes hand in hand with work ethic as well. The higher the rappers aim, the more they are willing to do to achieve it. The more it requires self-confidence too, one cannot aim for higher goals without having a sense of belief in oneself to achieve it. Moreover, it also helps to set helpful goals. By this I mean to look at what has helped other rappers succeed and aim for something similar. For example, when Russ decided it was time to take his career to the next level, he was comparing himself with rappers that were more successful than him. In doing that he realized that these rappers often had two things he did not have. That is, a major label deal and airplay on radio stations. Therefore, he signed the (temporary) record deal with Columbia mentioned earlier. Despite of the fact that the radio play he got during the deal was not so much, the extra exposure boosted streams on all his music, not just the one album he released with the label. Consequently, he started making more money than before while also learning a lesson about the limitations of a label (they cannot guarantee placings in all radio stations).

Finally, there is persistence. Together with a willingness to expose oneself, I think persistence is the most important attitude to have. While exposing yourself gives you chance to find out if you will succeed, persistence avoids giving up which is one way to ensure failure. It is hard to succeed in hip-hop, and in music in general, given that the market is saturated (Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Tarassi, 2018). Therefore, it is not hard to imagine how persistence combined with the other attitudes discussed above can become essential assets in rappers' career. Pusha T (video 3), for instance, was let go by his label after releasing his first mixtape. When asked if he felt discouraged or if he doubted being able to have a career in rap he replied: 'man at that time it was just get back in the studio, keep creating' (video 3). By doing that he created his debut album *Lord Willin'* which became a hit and rekindled his career. Similarly, Russ had put 11 projects out over the span of three years and amassed nothing more than 1000 followers on Twitter. He calls it 'pathetic' (video 7) while reflecting on the experience. But he continued making more music, more than he was making before. Today he is one of the most successful independent rappers in the industry.

4.2 Leverage industry resources

The second core theme that emerged from the data covers how rappers leverage industry resources to advance their careers. Resource availability is shown to be an influential factor in the success of creative professionals, particularly creative entrepreneurs (Chang & Chen, 2020). In this study, the key resources which contributed significantly to the careers of rappers fit within three subthemes. These are music and show collaborations, financial and contract literacy, and strategic business partnerships. The leveraging of music collaborations as well as business partnerships resembles the way industry networking is used for success in creative careers (Bridgstock, 2011; 2013). In the case of rappers, the two most important network resources consist of music collaborations with other artists, and strategic business partnerships with companies and labels. Within these partnerships, financial and contract literacy become crucial in determining how rappers benefit from them. This shows that financial literacy plays an important role for the success of rappers, as it does for creative entrepreneurs (Purnomo, 2019). In the following subsections I will elaborate on how rappers use these resources to advance their careers.

4.2.1 Music & show collaborations

The first subtheme, music and show collaborations, entails three types of collaborations rappers used to benefit their careers. The first is by collaborating with their peer musicians. Particularly at the development stages of their careers. This provides them with the ability to benefit from the creativity of their peers. Be it in writing verses together or being able to use instrumental beats from their peers to rap on. The latter helps a lot for emerging artists as buying beats from other producers can be expensive and difficult to afford depending on their financial situation. Rappers can also benefit from the success of their peers. For example, Pusha-T (video 3), an established rapper in the sample, got his first record deal thanks to his friends (Pharrell Williams and Chad Hugo) who became successful producers and got access to major labels.

The second and perhaps most helpful way in which aspiring rappers can leverage music collaborations is by working with famous rappers. When Chance the Rapper started touring, for instance, he did so as a sideline act for Childish Gambino who was already famous by then. Aside from boosting the emerging rapper's brand by being associated with a famous artist, he also got access to a wide audience which is the fanbase of the famous artist. Moreover, when it comes to performing, it is an exceptional opportunity to watch and learn how famous artists handle performances. The rapper can also immediately practice what they are learning in front of a crowd. As Drake puts it: 'a big thing that

changed my music too was understanding the performance element, so to watch what records work on tour for Wayne or to start doing my own shows' (video 5).

Another way to collaborate creatively is to either hire a ghostwriter or to ghostwrite for other, preferably famous, artists. This topic, however, is highly controversial in rap. Mainly because rappers who do not write their own lyrics are looked down upon, as a rapper's lyrical skill is usually part of what attracts fans. Alternatively, rappers can collaborate by writing and performing verses themselves for album releases of famous artists. But this requires the rapper's songs and lyrics being noticed by a famous artist first, and then being invited to contribute to the album. Despite it seeming like an unlikely scenario. At least three of the rappers in this sample have advanced their careers in this way.

The final way in which music collaborations can benefit a rapper's career is doing cross genre collaborations. Drake, who is the most successful rapper in this sample, attributes a lot of his success to his willingness to explore with different genres. He has worked with R&B and Afro-Beats artists creating some of his most successful hits.

4.2.2 Financial and contract literacy

The second subtheme, financial and contract literacy, is leveraged as a resource when it comes to working with or for record labels. Financial literacy can make a difference in whether rappers end up creating wealth or putting themselves in immense debt throughout a record deal. Luckily, to avoid the latter, there are ways in which rappers can manage their income and set up contracts to maximize their financial benefits. Future, a successful rapper who now has launched his own label specifically to help younger rappers reap more financial benefits from their careers, stated the following in an interview:

when you fill up these stands and you sell it [concert] out, that sell out you get a bonus, but that sell out you might get a bonus but your bonus ain't going to you. Your bonus has been going to somebody else the whole time when that bonus could have bought a house that you didn't have to go to your show money to buy the house. So, you start moving that money around and start maneuvering like wait a minute that bonus money could be them cars that bonus money could be them jewelry... (video 8)

Just like the bonus, there are many income sources within record deals that rappers can benefit from. The important thing is understanding what these income sources are. These can be royalties from different streaming platforms such as Spotify, Soundcloud, and YouTube among others. Future particularly emphasized residuals as a key income source for ensuring long-term financial stability. These

are paid to music copyright owners whenever a song is played on TV, or when the song is sampled to produce a new song, for example.

Just like Future did, other rappers in the sample emphasized the importance of maximizing the percentage they get from their income sources. Especially through ownership of their music. In doing so, they can ensure financial sustainability. More specifically, they will not need to rely on constantly making and performing music to pay their bills. Residual income and streaming royalties can become a form of long-term passive income. This is also the main reason why many rappers are choosing to stay independent. That is, so they can control the ownership of these income streams and distribute it to others themselves. Instead of having a label control it and distribute it to them.

4.2.3 Strategic business partnerships

The third subtheme, strategic business partnerships, was one of the most essential factors influencing the careers of each rapper in this study. These partnerships are both with record labels as well as with other companies that provide services like that of a label but allow the artist to remain independent. The most important service that rappers relied on was distribution. The reason for this is that artists cannot upload music directly on all streaming platforms. They must do this either through a record label or another company offering distribution services (Galuzska, 2015). There are exceptions though. For instance, when releasing his third mixtape named *Coloring Book*, Chance the Rapper and his manager were able to approach the major streaming platform to negotiate an exclusive release deal. At the end, they managed to make a deal with Apple Music.

Meanwhile, Steve Stoute (video 4) has launched his company *United Masters* to offer distribution, marketing, brand endorsement mediation, and synchronization services to rappers. These are all central to the economic stability of rap careers. Distribution and marketing help rappers reach audiences and build fanbases, while brand endorsement or synchronization deals can help rappers expand their sources of income. In the past, rappers mainly relied on record labels to facilitate these business activities, but today they can more easily partner with other companies independently. United Masters, for example, facilitates these business activities for rappers while taking only 10% ownership of their copyright. This is much less than the majority ownership record labels typically take. Additionally, rappers can even opt to keep 100% ownership of their music and only pay a service fee for distribution. This fee-based distribution service is offered by other companies as well, such as Distrokid and TuneCore among others.

Nevertheless, record labels can still be of great value to rappers. In this sample, there was one particular type of record label from which signed rappers benefitted significantly. These are record

labels owned by an already successful rapper. Drake (video 5), for example, was signed by Lil Wayne in 2009 under Wayne's label *Young Money Entertainment*. Back then Lil Wayne was already one of the most influential artists in the industry. In his interview with Rap Radar, Drake repeatedly reflects with gratefulness on how much he was able to learn from Lil Wayne during tours and studio sessions.

Next to having access to mentorship, there is one other essential advantage when being signed to another artist. Namely, creative freedom. While a traditional record label might be more interested in branding and profits, rappers signed to another artist are given support to prioritize their creativity within the label. Pusha-T (video 3), for example, recalls during his interview with Complex how after signing with Kanye West he was told by Kanye to ask for whatever he needed for the contract and then just go create with him in the studio. Pusha-T, now working as the head of Kanye's label, later explained why he thinks other rappers would want to sign to the label:

You want to sign to G.O.O.D Music because of the artistic freedom. We don't hold you back at all in any capacity. The mere notion of signing to G.O.O.D Music and being able to work in the group of creatives that is in our fold is second to none, it's a creative amusement-park, period (video 3).

This seems to suggest that rapper-owned labels can provide more value to aspiring rappers than a typical major label does. While major labels are criticized by experts in the sample for mostly providing funding which puts rappers in debt, rapper-owned labels contribute to their artistic development which adds value beyond funding. This may also play an important role in a rappers' ability to achieve long-term success. Especially when considering that both Drake and Pusha-T who signed to labels owned by successful rappers, have enjoyed long successful careers.

4.3 Artistic orientation

For creative professionals, artistic orientation captures their intrinsic drive, how they manage authenticity and aesthetic needs, as well as how they innovate artistically (Purnomo, 2019). Similarly, the third main theme encompasses how rappers in this study showed that they could leverage their artistic orientations strategically to benefit their careers. Two subthemes describe how this was done. The first has to do with creating music that is both appealing to audience and allows rappers to stand out artistically. The second is about how shows can be organized to improve audience entertainment. In the following I will explain these subthemes in more detail.

4.3.1 Strategic composition & standing out

The first subtheme relates to one thing rappers in the sample were quite convinced of when it comes to succeeding as a rapper. The music needs to be good. Or, in the words of Drake, you must make a 'wavy song' (video 5). It is true that marketing requires rappers to produce a lot of content, but by no means should quantity supersede quality. Rappers in the sample had several criteria for this. One criterion was that the music needs to be of this time, this era. This point is meaningful because in hip-hop there has long been conservative rappers, typically the underground ones. Although Vito (2019) finds that they are becoming more willing to incorporate commercial trends in their music, traditionally they have been loyal to the old-school Boom-Bap hip-hop of the 90's. This combined with lyrical and critical social commentary. The industry today is on a different spectrum though. According to Steve Stoute (video 7), young people listen to hip-hop to find the type of moods they used to get in other genres. They listen for sadness, for hype and fun, for love, etc. Hip-hop is the new pop, you could say. Thus, according to the examined industry experts, rappers need to overcome the genre's evolution.

A second criterion is that the music ought to be unique and authentic. Pusha-T, for example, prides on being recognized by his style and the type of beats he raps on. As he puts it: 'you either love a Pusha-T song or you hate it but you you know it's a Pusha-T song. Some people don't even choose those beats to rap over' (video 3). Uniqueness and authenticity are essential not only because of their centrality in hip-hop culture (Vito, 2019), they also help rappers stand out. Standing out is highly important given that there has not been so much music available in the history of humanity as there is today, thanks to the internet. Hence, artists who are like everyone else might have a hard time building a fanbase. Without a fanbase, the chances of artists advancing their careers and getting paid for their music are slim. For example, Liberty Wilson (video 6), in confirmation of studies such as that of Haynes and Marshall (2018), mentions that record labels very much prefer if artists have built a fanbase and a brand on their own prior to offering them record deals. Meanwhile, independent rappers likely rely more heavily on standing out as they do not have access to major label resources to access audiences.

A third criterium, is to make songs catchy. According to Drake, who Billboard ranks as the artist with the most top hits in the past decade, you need a catchy hook and a melody to keep listeners engaged. Additionally, he says that the hook and melody need to be laid down on a beat that 'slaps' (video 5). Unfortunately, he does not clarify what exactly is a beat that slaps. Perhaps one might find out by assessing the beats used in his songs. On the other hand, for songwriting, Russ points out that there are certain words that sound good on a beat, and that good rappers know how to find and use those words. Furthermore, another aspect that has helped Drake create hit songs is his usage of different

genres in his music. Going beyond the boundaries of hip-hop. He also encourages rappers to get inspired by other artists while working on music. Many hip-hop fans, however, will question the authenticity of rappers that do this. This has been the case with Drake, but he has nevertheless become widely successful. Perhaps authenticity is not too important, at least not for making hits for a mainstream audience.

A fourth criterion is consistency. Aside from leveraging consistent content release as discussed in section 4.1, rappers in the sample also emphasized the value of generating consistent creative quality in their music. The way in which the rappers reflected upon this indicates that consistent quality and creativity makes rappers' music reliable. For example, according to Pusha-T (video 3), creative consistency is necessary for sustaining success in a rap career. It helps others know what to expect from a rapper's music. This not only contributes to standing out and building a fanbase, but it also attracts strategic support. Rappers in the sample took pride in knowing that other industry players were willing to work with them because they believed in the quality of the rappers' catalogues. The rappers were also more enthusiastic about collaborating with other rappers who consistently showed good rapping skills. Consistency in quality and uniqueness can also attract support from influential figures which can help advance rappers' career. Take Tobe Nwigwe (video 2), for example. He consistently released music once a week for three months while incorporating sounds from his Nigerian roots and political activism in his music. Soon after, his music was reposted on social media by celebrities like Beyonce, Michelle Obama, Dave Chapelle, and many more. This has greatly benefitted his career. As Steve Stoute who is Tobe's business partner says when reflecting on this development, now Tobe is 'getting paid' (video 7).

Another way in which rappers can be strategic in their music making is by writing songs oriented toward their audiences. Drake (video 5) explains how he makes sure to include lyrics that solidify his relations with the different cities he has performed at in the US and with his home city Toronto. Pusha-T's (video 3) first hit was a song in which he used slang from his drug dealing experiences in his lyrics. The song was musically catchy, but the lyrics resonated with many ghetto communities, which were the main audience back in his days. Both examples emphasize that to succeed, these rappers created bonds with their audiences and exploited the audiences' cultural preferences in their music. Furthermore, they treat audiences and fans as a customer because fans are the ones that will stream their music and buy their tickets. That is not to say that there is no room to explore their personal creativity. After all, this is seen as necessary to stand out artistically. But when it comes down to releasing a music project, successful rappers in this study balance out creativity with audience tastes.

Finally, all rappers in the sample acknowledge that rappers will benefit from being concise. Russ claims that when analyzing how users listened to music on Soundcloud, he realized they would stop listening to an album after the second song. People simply are not so committed. That is why he advocates releasing one song every week instead. Drake also says that with time he has learnt to make his albums more concise. Picking candidate songs that communicate his vision, others that satisfy fans, and the ones that show an improvement over his previous work. He aims to meet these goals with a limited number of songs. That being said, his last album contained 25 songs, which is much more than what other rappers release. But there is a catch, it is a double album. Half of the album is catered to his lyrical hip-hop loving audience, and the other half is catered to his R&B loving audience. While the other rappers did not talk about this as much, it remains highly relevant. This is because the two rappers that did, Russ and Drake, are well known for their catalogues and the financial success that they have generated from their catalogues.

4.3.2 Strategic show arrangement

The second subtheme related to artist orientation has to do with show performances. This subtheme centers on how rappers in the sample ensure their show performances are entertaining. This is important to considering given that live performances are a key income source for rappers, and musicians in general (Parsons, 2020; Tolmie, 2020). There were two main aspects discussed by rappers and industry experts in the sample regarding how rappers can strategize their shows. The first was already hinted in section 4.2, that is studying and learning from other successful performers. Steve Stoute (video 4), for example, gives praise to Travis Scott because 'when you go to his show and you look at it, you could tell that he unapologetically studied Kanye'. Similarly, Drake partly credits his success to his learning experiences from touring with Lil Wayne. While Chance the Rapper and his manager (video 1) not only learnt from bigger artists, but they also sought to surpass their touring accomplishments. Based on their career reflections, these efforts surely contributed to their critical acclaim and career advancement.

The second aspect that was highlighted in this sample was entertainment. From the way rappers in the sample describe their experiences, it is clear that it is not enough to simply perform songs live, audiences also want to be entertained. According to the industry experts, there are different ways to give an entertaining show. One strategy has to do with how the setlist (songs that will be performed) is ordered. Drake in particular explained that he performs his latest hits toward the end of the show. Additionally, to make things more interesting, he leverages the element of surprise. By this he meant briefly starting to rap his latest hit and then randomly switching to another song, to build up expectation

until he surprises the audience with the song later. Another element of surprise is to perform freestyles. This means rapping lyrics on a random beat, or improvising lyrics on the spot.

For young audiences, the most important thing is being energetic. Pat Corcoran, the manager of Chance the Rapper, noted how Chance 'turned up every night' while touring and that 'that was what the audience wanted' (video 1). By turned up he means that Chance got wild and energetic. Similarly, DaBaby (video 9) was complimented by his interviewer for giving wild performances. To which DaBaby replied that it was his job to make the audience happy. Thus, signaling that that was his way of meeting his audience's entertainment needs. Some industry experts suggested investing in other entertainment resources. One example of this is to hire a live band to back up the rapper with music. This is entertaining because usually rappers have a DJ playing electronic beats, whereas a live band can stand out and allow for more musical creative play. Finally, Drake also remarks the value of having an intimate moment to connect with the audience. This is perhaps a clever way to secure loyalty of the fans or even gain new fans if the rapper is not the headline artist in that show.

One thing to consider is that the audience rappers perform for matters a lot. Drake shared his experience performing in a show where he was substituting another artist who could not attend. Regardless of Drake's fame and show strategies, the fans were not happy to see him on stage. He had to cut the performance short. Other than that, when performing for their fans or at least an audience that likes their musical style, the strategies mentioned above have helped rappers in the sample stand out as performers.

4.4 In short,

The results identify three main themes that contribute to succeeding as a rapper professionally. The first aspect is entrepreneurial orientation. This has to do with the resourcefulness, business approach, strategic marketing, and self-supporting attitudes rappers employ. Each of these entrepreneurially oriented elements have different levels of significance depending on which career phase rappers find themselves in. Early on, in the development phase, being resourceful and strategic with marketing is highly important. Resourcefulness is captured by self-developing or hiring skills and resources independently, while making the most out of them. Strategic marketing has to do with brand awareness. Especially at the early stages of their careers, rappers in the sample maximized visibility of their brand using social media and traditional marketing. Marketing experts also recommend retargeting new fans after building brand awareness to stimulate their engagement and music consumption.

Furthermore, rappers in this study, especially independents, nurtured a business approach in their careers by developing and managing skills and resources. This includes hiring a team, which may

consist of friends or professionals, and having them help the rappers organize the revenue sources they need for making a living from their music. They also nurture a business approach by investing their income and working toward ownership of assets, such as music copyrights or new business ventures created from previously generated income and success. All of this requires self-supporting attitudes. Successful rappers in this study exhibit confidence to expose their music and believe they can figure out how to make money from it from the start of their careers. They are ambitious to not shy away from opportunities that will advance their careers. Above all, they persist despite setbacks in their careers. In the music and hip-hop industries, it is tough to succeed, persistence to keep creating, getting better, and figuring the business of it out is seen as necessary.

The second theme covering career practices that contribute to success in rap is leveraging industry resources. This amplifies the benefits of entrepreneurial orientation. For the rappers in the sample, entrepreneurial orientation attracted interest from other industry players for collaboration. They then leveraged this to advance their careers further. These collaborations can start out with peers, with whom rappers collaborate to help each other grow and to benefit from each other's success. But the most strategic collaborations are done with famous artists. These provide access to learning experiences, broader audiences, and income opportunities. Another way in which industry resources are leveraged is by establishing strategic business partnerships. Rappers in this study benefitted from partnerships with companies that facilitate services such as music distribution and marketing. Perhaps one of the most strategic partnerships is the one rappers made by signing a record deal with an already successful rapper. Aside from providing the typical record label services, this type of partnership provides creative freedom and mentorship.

The final aspect that contributed to the success of rappers in this study is artistic orientation. Without it, all the above elements cannot be taken advantage of. Ultimately, rappers create and exploit rap art. The way this rap art is created and exploited is approached strategically by successful rappers. They cater to market trends, attempt to make their music relatable, while simultaneously standing out artistically. Similarly, the data shows that rappers benefit from strategizing how they perform. Shows are a key income source in the music industry. Hence, rappers in the sample aim to develop a talent for it. More specifically, they develop strategies to make their shows entertaining for their audiences.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to answer the research question: *how can rappers develop and manage a successful career in hip-hop?* The results of this study show that the industry discourse revolves around three main aspects which can support rappers' careers and professional roles. According to industry experts, these aspects are entrepreneurial orientation, leveraging industry resources, and artistic orientation. Entrepreneurial orientation is important because it drives rappers to acquire, hire, and organize the resources they need to establish themselves professionally in the industry. It also drives them to manage these resources independently. This is especially important at the start of their careers when external professional support is hard to access. Once rappers manage to set foot in the industry, they will benefit from building networks with other players in the industry. These networks are valuable resources rappers can leverage to further advance their career development, and to grow their audience reach and income opportunities. Additionally, since networking also entails business negotiations, rappers need to control and optimize the economic sustainability they get from these negotiations by leveraging financial and contract literacy within the context of the music industry. Finally, to further sustain a successful career, rappers must be strategic in their music orientation. It is particularly important to balance creative uniqueness, which helps rappers stand out artistically, with audience-orientation, which helps rappers adapt to and exploit market needs.

Specific attention was given in the analysis to the possible differences between independents and rappers signed to record labels. The career experiences examined in this research clearly show that entrepreneurial orientation, leveraging industry resources, and artistic orientation are important for success in both independent and signed trajectories. How rappers manage entrepreneurial and artistic orientations will influence their ability to access audiences and develop fanbases. This is necessary for rappers to be able to generate income from live performances, music streams, merchandise sales, and more. By achieving this, rappers prove that their music is marketable and profitable. This sets them up to either continue growing their career independently or with support from record labels. Either way, they benefit from strategically managing their entrepreneurial and artistic orientations. Similarly, leveraging industry resources is indispensable regardless of whether rappers are independent or signed. In both cases, music collaborations, strategic business partnerships, and industry literacy are essential for advancing a rap career and creating long-term financial sustainability.

5.1 Theoretical implications

Existing literature often shows that labor conditions in creative industries can be precarious. This is because creatives often find themselves undergoing self-exploitation and job or financial

uncertainty among other things (for example, Hennekam & Bennett, 2016; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Janssen, 2001). Self-exploitation together with artists' high reliance on record labels, because of market saturation, has been particularly criticized in the music industry (Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Nordgård, 2017; Tarassi, 2018). Such career aspects, especially the reliance on record labels, have also been resonated in rap careers (for instance Oware, 2014; Tienes, 2017; Vito, 2019). A common consequence of these career aspects has been that music artists and other creatives find themselves forced to become entrepreneurs just to be able to work in their industries (Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Speers, 2016; Werthes et al., 2018). Interestingly, the findings in this study provide support as well as challenging nuances to the existing theoretical understandings mentioned thus far.

One way in which this study supports existing literature is evident in how entrepreneurial orientation contributes to successful rap careers. It shows that becoming an entrepreneur is indeed something that creatives do to improve their career prospects. Entrepreneurially oriented rappers who self-develop and execute industry skills including DIY production and branding while also working on music, without being paid, can indeed experience self-exploitation. Since this is all part of rappers' attempt to establish themselves in the industry, it shows that there is little choice other than adopting these entrepreneurial practices to be able to work as hip-hop creatives. This is what would be expected based on existing theory.

On the other hand, there are two important nuances that can be emphasized based on rappers' entrepreneurial orientation. The first has to do with the aspect of self-exploitation. This study shows that entrepreneurial orientation can also drive rappers (and perhaps other musicians) to outsource production, branding, and other activities in cost-efficient ways. Although it is true that record labels expect rappers to use DIY for producing and building fanbases prior to offering them deals (Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Nordgård, 2017), this does not have to necessarily lead to rappers' continuous self-exploitation. As a matter of fact, if it is possible to leverage peer and family support to execute the extra work activities, rappers and musicians can mitigate self-exploitation from the start.

The second nuance is that creatives are not necessarily forced to become entrepreneurs. Instead, the independent rappers in this study showed that they were driven by the business of hip-hop as much as by the art. They actively sought to be entrepreneurs to circumvent record deals and control their careers and income. This resonates with previous studies showing that creative entrepreneurs readily accept risky career conditions for the sake of having autonomy (Hermes et al. 2017), and to overcome problematic structures in their industries (Zboralska et al., 2017). Perhaps the latter reinforces the concept of being forced. In the sense that, if you must circumvent (problematic) record deals

through entrepreneurship, then you are forced into it. However, this study shows that rappers did not feel forced to circumvent record deals, they wanted to do so simply out of ambition. That same ambition also leads them to embrace major label partnerships later in their careers when they have stronger negotiation leverage. So, while I disagree with Speers (2016) in that rappers are mainly forced to become entrepreneurs, I do agree with her that rappers in this case are not victims, but rather 'astute businessmen' (p. 68). Like what Schediwy et al. (2018) find among young music student, rappers hold career identities that embrace art as much as business. They want to be artist-entrepreneurs even when they do not have to. Because it benefits their chances to lead profitable careers.

Furthermore, the above also challenges the existing literature which suggests that rappers make their music more commercially oriented to attract major label support (Oware, 2014; Tienes, 2017; Vito, 2019). This study shows that although rappers can be strategic in their artistic orientation, by for example making their music audience-oriented, this is done to advance their careers with or without major label support. Major labels are one of many industry resources rappers can leverage. Today rappers can access the services record labels traditionally offered from other companies while staying independent. Especially younger entrepreneurially oriented rappers are combining strategic music creation with non-label business partnerships to stay independent.

That is not to say that record label partnerships are no longer advantageous for rappers. As this study shows, they can help amplify a rapper's success, but that does not mean they are needed to achieve success in the first place. This further leads to another important nuance that this study contributes to existing hip-hop literature. Namely, the fact that some record labels may be more beneficial than others. More specifically, record labels owned by successful rappers potentially add more creative autonomy and mentorship value to a developing rapper than a typical major label could. Perhaps signing a record deal with an established rap star optimizes new rappers' ability to leverage the other entrepreneurial and artistic orientation elements that contribute to (long-term) success.

The trend toward independence, and the advantages of signing to labels owned by successful rappers might also imply that existing power structures are starting to change in the hip-hop industry. Whereas major labels are shown to retain their position as the most powerful industry players thanks to their large ownership of catalogues (Galuzska, 2015), they might not be able to boast as much ownership within hip-hop in the future. Labels founded by both new and legacy rappers will likely own more music overtime, hence increasing the negotiation power they have when dealing with distribution platforms and major labels who currently dominate the industry (Galuzska, 2015; Nordgård, 2017).

This study also provides support to some of the conclusions found in existing hip-hop literature. Namely, the fact that the distinguishing line between independent and mainstream rappers is blurring (Oware, 2014; Vito, 2019). In the past, independents have typically made socially conscious music and major label rappers made commercial entertaining music. What is more, independents were always critical against mainstream rappers and major labels because of this (Vito, 2019). But, as evidenced in this study, catering to market tastes and entertainment has become important for successful rap careers among both independent and signed rappers. Similarly, Haijen (2016) finds that Dutch independent rappers become commercially oriented in their music-making to improve the financial stability of their careers. Thus, although traditional underground rap still exists, it does not necessarily represent independent rap. For independents are indeed willing to embrace market-orientation to build successful careers.

Finally, the results of this study provide practical examples of how existing theoretical concepts related to success in creative careers apply to rappers. Concepts such as entrepreneurial orientation, artistic orientation, and financial literacy (Purnomo, 2019); industry networking and transdisciplinarity (Bridgstock, 2011; 2013); resource availability (Chang & Chen, 2020); and social, as well as corporate, support (Zwaan et al., 2010) all contribute to success in rap careers. It is valuable to show that these concepts can indeed be leveraged to succeed in the music and creative industries which are otherwise typically found to host precarious careers (Comunian et al., 2010; Hennekam & Bennett, 2016; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010).

5.2 Practical implications

With the widespread adoption of DIY practices, some studies have pointed out that instead of being empowered, artists have rather struggled to stand out due to the music saturation caused by easily accessible DIY tools (Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Tarassi, 2018). Others, such as Pras et al. (2013), further suggest that DIY practices require too much time which further hinders the feasibility of artists benefitting from DIY resources. This study agrees with these existing findings, but it also shows that rappers have found ways to overcome these drawbacks. Standing out can be achieved by creating a lot of (music and non-music) content, while being strategic in both its creation and its marketing. The time effort can also be overcome by setting up a team to carry out time consuming tasks. This does not need to be an expensive endeavor either. Artists can start out with inexperienced (hence, unexpensive) support from peers, family, or other amateurs.

By leveraging entrepreneurial and artistic orientations together with industry networks and literacy, rappers can potentially improve their positioning in the market and within record deal negotiations. The latter, though, will be more likely when leveraging these career aspects becomes more typical among rappers. Otherwise, the saturated supply of rappers might keep record labels at a more powerful negotiation position. Nevertheless, if rappers do sign a record deal, there are two things they can use to their benefit. The first is to gain independent success first, and then leverage it to negotiate better deals. The second is to sign to a label owned by a successful rapper. This provides access to all the major label resources plus mentorship and creative freedom.

5.3 Reflection

The conclusions from this research need to be interpreted with some limitations in mind. Three important limitations relate to sample bias. The first bias is created by the fact that the sample focuses on successful rap careers. On hindsight, when analyzing success cases, it is easy to say that the career patterns found must lead to success. But that is not necessarily always true. Considering Babbie's (2014) social research guidelines, four aspects are missing to proof that the patterns found in this study lead to success. The first is a quantitative analysis of the presence of such patterns among a larger sample to find the generalizability of the results. The second aspect would be a qualitative study analyzing career patterns or themes among failed rappers. The third aspect would be to then analyze the generalizability of the career patterns found among failed rap careers. Then finally, if the patterns found for both successful and failed rappers are generalizable, they can be compared to one another. If the presence of these success patterns is stronger in success cases, and weaker or absent in failed cases, then one can be more confident that they lead to success. Of course, this research being qualitative in nature was meant to identify and describe themes that help explain how rappers can develop successful careers. These themes, however, are not meant to be generalizable. Instead, they can be a first step for other studies to follow up on as delineated above.

The second bias-related limitation has to do with YouTube's algorithm. By using my personal YouTube account when searching for videos to sample, my search results were probably influenced by my historic preferences and behavior on YouTube. Perhaps this could be avoided in a future study by creating a completely new account solely for the purpose of sampling. On the other hand, the selection criteria used for sampling in this research mitigates the effects of such bias. Even if YouTube's search results were influenced by my own data, the selected videos remain highly relevant for the research question. Still, it would be interesting to see if repeating the study with a new account would lead to a different sample and different findings.

The third bias to consider when interpreting the results is that the sample consists primarily of rappers and industry experts based in the US. There are reasons to believe that the findings of this study are influenced by this bias. Specifically, when looking at how rappers approach becoming entrepreneurs. As mentioned earlier, Speers (2016) finds that British rappers in her study became entrepreneurs out of necessity, not out of preference. Similarly, Reitsemmer and Prokop (2018) find Austrian rappers being forced to launch independent labels given the lack of major label support. Whereas rappers in this study chose to be independent out of preference. Currently, it is not clear if this difference can be explained by the location in which the rappers live. To clarify this, future studies can investigate whether rappers', and perhaps other musicians', approach toward entrepreneurship differs across regions. This would expand our understanding of how artists approach entrepreneurship, which is an increasingly important aspect of their careers.

Despite the potential influence that bias might have had on the findings of this research, it is important to remember that the aim of a qualitative study is not to mitigate bias because it does not seek to generalize results (Babbie, 2014). The aim is rather to explore experiences in depth. Nonetheless, here too does this study have a limitation. Namely, the fact that all the data is secondary, and no personal interviews were conducted. Hence, there was no way to probe the experts for more in-depth insights. Still, collecting data from secondary resources is a useful way to capture how experts communicate their work experience (Caldwell, 2008). It is especially useful in this case where famous artists are being researched. The chances of me studying their work experiences through personal interviews are near to impossible at this moment. That being said, if it is possible, existing literature would benefit from a future study in which successful rappers and industry experts are interviewed in person.

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Sample

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Appendix A: Sample overview & relevance

Appendix A1

Sample overview showing video details and their contents' relevance to the research

No.	Video title	Publication date	Duration (minutes)	Research relevance
1	How Chance The Rapper's Manager, Pat Corcoran, Reimagined the Music Business Blueprint	October 2017	46:53	This is an interview carried out by Complex (a pop culture magazine) as part of their Blueprint series on YouTube. The interviewee is Pat Corcoran, the then manager of Chance the Rapper which is the first artists to ever win a Grammy without being signed to a label. In the interview they discuss Pat's background and then how him and Chance developed Chance's independent music career.
2	Financial Advice for Artists with Earn Your Leisure, Tobe Nwigwe and JP Morgan Chase	July 2020	37:43	This video consists of a panel hosted by United Masters, an independent distribution and branding company for artists predominantly in the hip-hop industry. The panel is hosted by two entrepreneurs from Earn Your Leisure (podcast) who interview Tobe Nwigwe, an independent rapper, and Sekou Kaalund, a banker from JP Morgan Chase. The panel centers on discussing the role of entrepreneurship and financial literacy among African Americans (as are all panel members), where Tobe Nwigwe shares his experience as a hip-hop entrepreneur.
3	How Pusha-T Went From The Clipse to Head of G.O.O.D. Music Blueprint	October 2017	28:32	In another Blueprint interview, Complex magazine now interviews Pusha-T. Pusha-T is a rapper and the president of the G.O.O.D. Music record label, which was founded by the iconic Kanye West. Here they discuss Pusha's entry and development in the hip-hop industry. They focus on his experience with record labels and how he ended up working with Kanye West both as a signed artist and as president of Kanye's label.

Appendix A1 (continued)

No.	Video title	Publication date	Duration (minutes)	Research relevance
4	Steve Stoute And NLE Choppa Talk United Masters, Artist Ownership, Business Diversity + More	March 2019	53:42	This is an interview held at the Breakfast Club radio program, which is prominent in the American hip-hop scene. Here they interview Steve Stoute, the founder of United Masters (mentioned in video 2), and NLE Choppa, the then rising rapper who had entered into a distribution and branding deal with Steve's company. The interview discusses the disadvantages of major label deals and the advantages of being remaining independent among other topics centered on the hip-hop industry.
5	Rap Radar: Drake	December 2019	140:58	In the past decade Drake has become one of the most successful rappers in the world. In this video he is interviewed by Rap Radar Podcast. During the lengthy interview they discuss Drake's rise in hip-hop, work ethic, critical acclaim, musical development, and general experiences with other artists among many other topics.
6	Major Label's Marketing Techniques Used To Break Artists Chat With Virgin EMI Senior Marketer	November 2019	54:32	This video entails an interview with Liberty Wilson whose role then was Senior Marketing at the Virgin EMI record label. The interview is hosted by Burstimo, a music digital marketing company. This video, however, does not focus on the hip-hop industry. Instead, it sheds light on relatively recent marketing practices relevant for any artist in the music industry. I selected this video as it complements the other videos who are often critical of labels and do discuss their benefits more directly or in depth. Whereas the literature on hip-hop careers (and music careers in general) often emphasize the crucial role major labels play when it comes to marketing for artists.

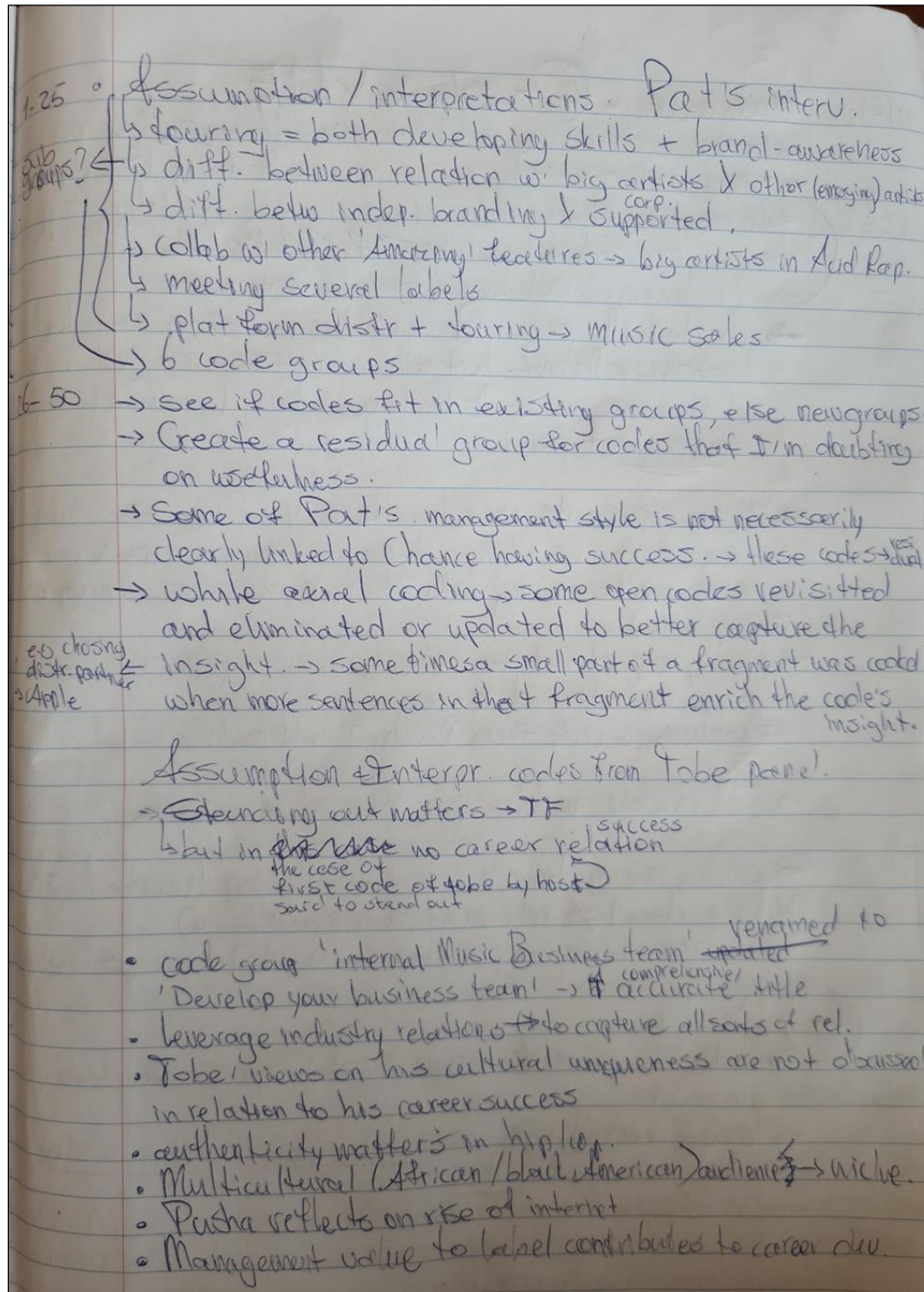
Appendix A1 (continued)

No.	Video title	Publication date	Duration (minutes)	Research relevance
7	Steve Stoute and Russ discuss Independence at #SelectCon	July 2020	63:50	As part of United Masters' online conference 'SelectCon' Steve Stoute interviews Russ, a rising star in commercial hip-hop. Russ is an interesting case because he has boasted independence throughout his career and continuously criticizes major label deals and their signed artists. Yet, Russ signed a deal with Columbia from January 2020 until June that same year. During this deal he released an album which performed strongly. In this interview he discusses his career path, how he leveraged his brief record deal to boost his commercial success, and then goes back to criticizing major labels together with Steve.
8	Future Sheds Light On How Record Labels Really Work & The Importance Of Owning Your Masters	January 2019	4:07	Future is a highly successful rapper in the Trap subgenre of hip-hop. This video is a short excerpt of his interview at the radio station Hot 107.9. Here he specifically provides the nuances of what rappers need to consider when signing a record deal. He specifically clarifies what is important for a rapper's financial sustainability.
9	Da Baby On His Rise To Success, Going Broke To Pursue Rap, ATL Altercation & More The Come Up EP.1	March 2019	24:54	DaBaby is a recently emerging star in hip-hop, who hit mainstream fame in 2019. Here he is interviewed by a YouTuber named Ashia Skye. In the interview he discusses his career path. They particularly talk about his entrepreneurial, marketing, and performance approaches which contribute to his success thus far.

Appendix B: Example memo notes

Appendix B1

Excerpt showing notes of assumptions, interpretations, ideas and decisions during axial coding



Appendix B2

Excerpt showing notes of reflection, revision and iterations during selective coding

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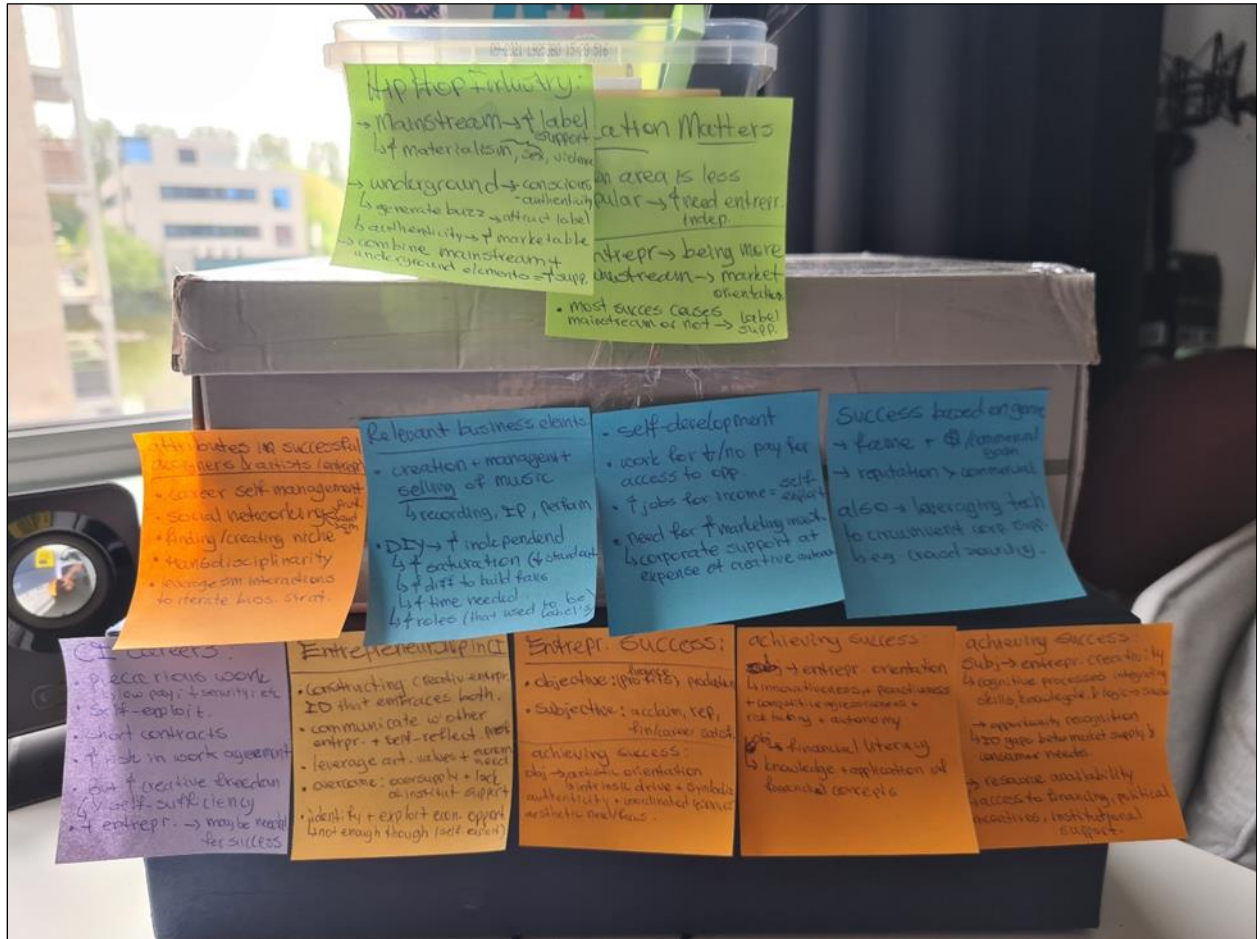
- Refine criteria for Entr. Orient.
 - ↳ Furnomo (2019) → Entr. Orientation differs from Entrepreneurship
 - ↳ Entr. Or → processes of how new ventures are undertaken
 - ↳ entrepreneurship → content of what decisions/ventures are undertaken.
- include Being Resourceful in Entr. Orient.
 - ↳ subthemes → Hardwork ethic + Self-dev. skills + invest in ^{Prod +} career (especially when unsigned)
 - ↳ self-supp. max. benefits of lim. resources + attitude (?)
- Financial literacy → Perhaps selective on its own
 - ↳ together with industry/contract literacy
 - ↳ diff with what Pat & CR were doing is that they show how they closed their gap in Industry literacy = entr. orient.
 - ↳ this could focus on an application → managing income
 - ↳ setting up proper contract + investing in career.
- Or part of Broader Selective 'leverage Resources' 20/4
 - ↳ including financial literacy/income management (especially signed), investing in career (unsigned)
 - ↳ ^{set up proper} record deals + Artist Collaborations
 - ↳ Business/strategic partnerships
- Identify & Exploit Consumption Trend + Adapt to Distr. Trend
 - ↳ Merge into axial = 'Analyze & Exploit Market Trends'
 - ↳ Subtheme of 'Nurture Business Approach'
- Audience Oriented Content
 - ↳ deliver vision concisely (op.c.) about album writing → Maybe this axial in general fits as subtheme of strategic album (?)
 - ↳ although album composition is also a lot abt intrinsic creativity
 - ↳ op. code → make relatable videos → is more a defense of why ME Chopper seems unauthentic → bc dance moves + typical Memphis. → not really rel. to R&B
 - ↳ Residual
 - ↳ op. code → putting content out for fans → more abt putting content out = worth it
 - ↳ move to 'Create & Release a lot'
 - ↳ op. code → refine project → move to 'strategically compose album'

Selective

Appendix C: Overview of theoretical framework concepts

Appendix C1

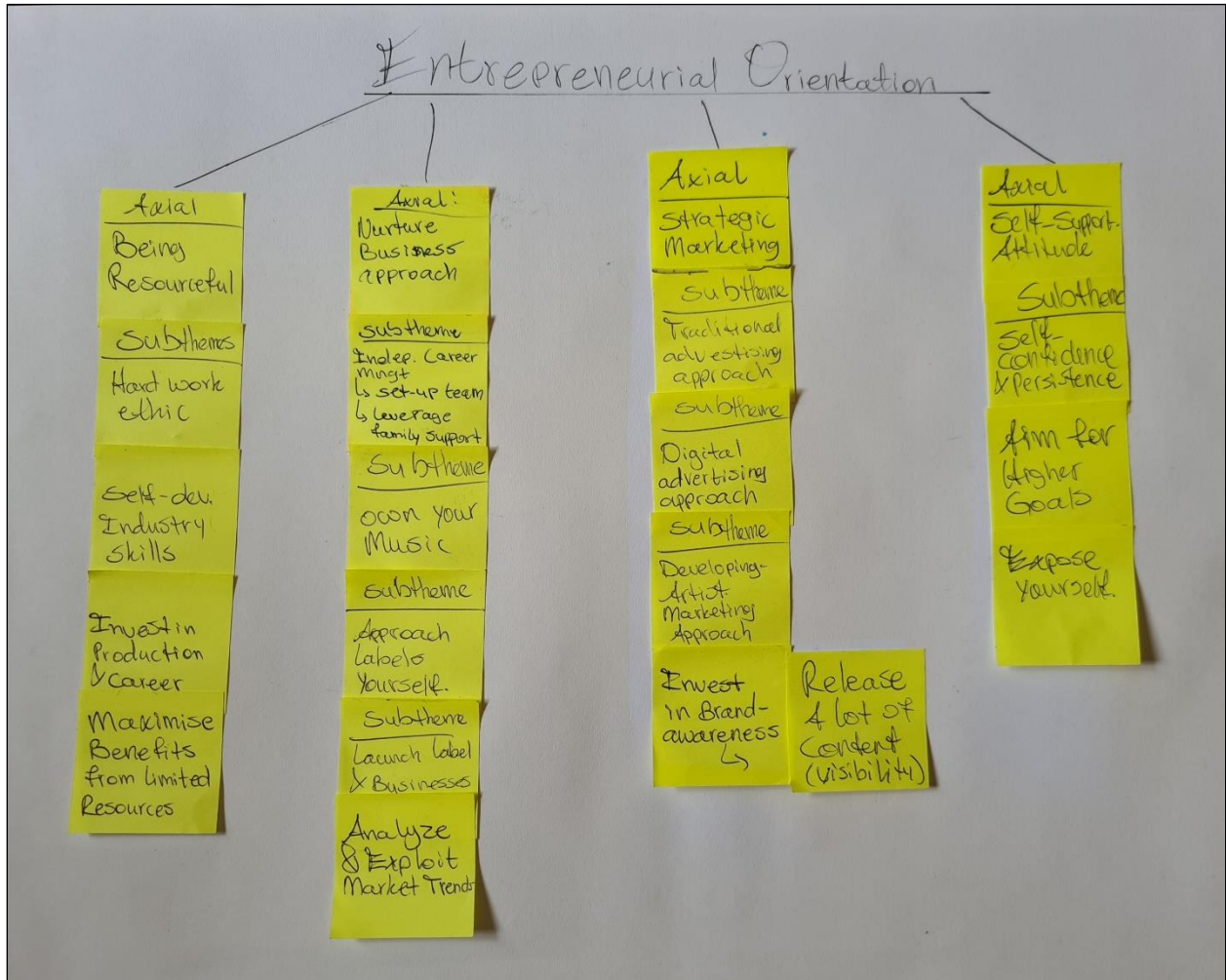
Overview of the sticky notes containing concepts that helped inform the analysis



Appendix D: Code maps

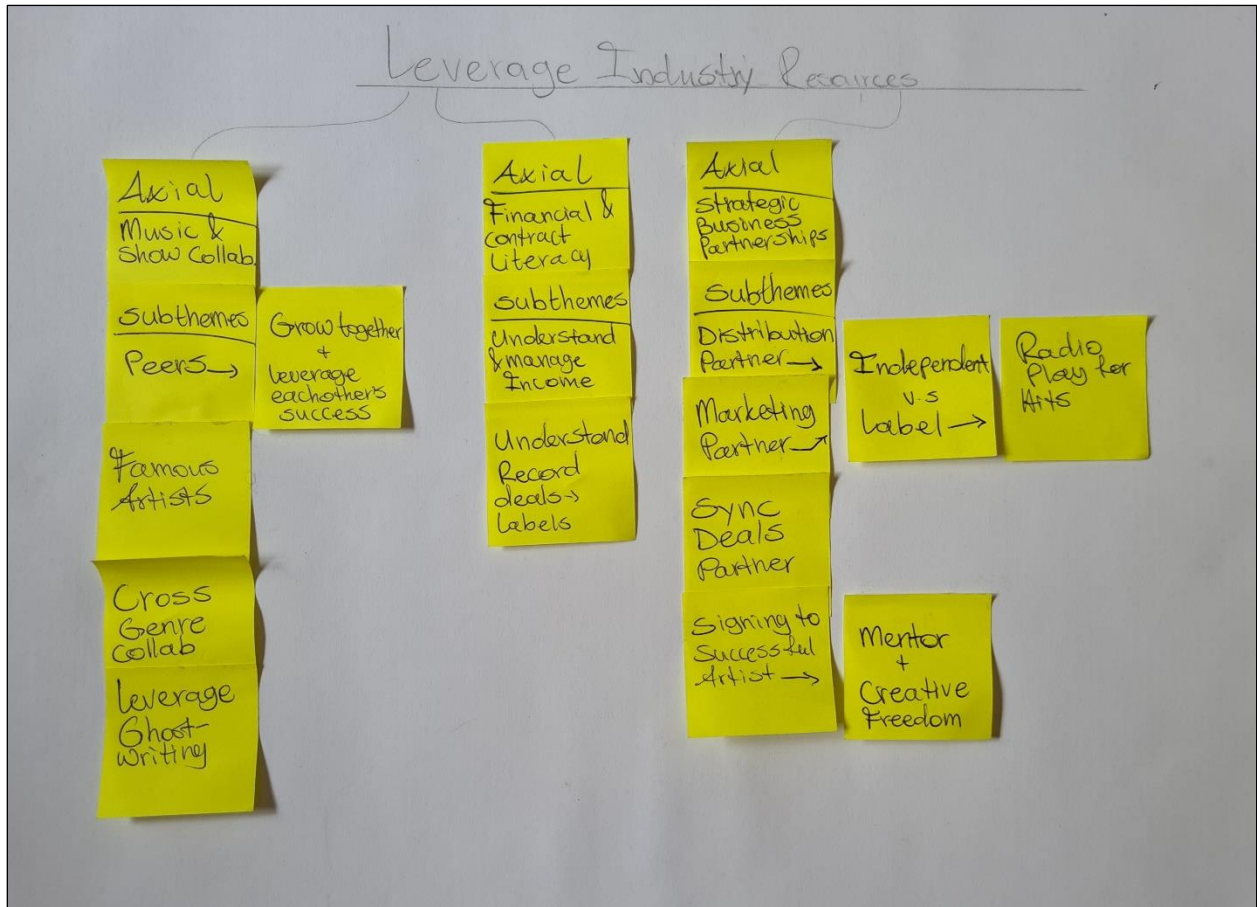
Appendix D1

Code map illustrating the 'entrepreneurial orientation' core theme and its subthemes



Appendix D2

Code map illustrating the 'leverage industry resource' core theme and its subthemes



Appendix D3

Code map illustrating the 'artistic orientation' core theme and its subthemes

