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MUSIC INDUSTRY MILESTONES FOR SUCCESS IN CAREER TRAJECTORY OF EARLY-STAGE HIP-HOP ARTISTS

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## 1. Introduction

The music industry is a dynamic and evolving field where success is often perceived as unpredictable and elusive. This unpredictability stems in part from the social influence that shapes inequality in cultural markets (Salganik et al., 2006, p. 855), as well as the challenges in forecasting consumer preferences, particularly in the age of digital platforms (Park et al., 2022, p. 13). While mainstream success is frequently associated with viral moments, for instance rapid entry through large accumulated visibility in numbers through trending content on platforms like TikTok. On the other hand, label support can provide access to financial resources, industry connections and access to reputable media outlets - offering exposure that is often challenging for artists to attain independently (Marshall, 2013, p.315). There is a growing interest in identifying systematic patterns that can explain how emerging artists gain early recognition. By examining these patterns, researchers and practitioners can better understand the pathways to visibility and influence in today's music landscape.

This thesis focuses on Hip-hop and R&B artists, two genres that not only dominate popular music but also reflect broader social, cultural, and political discourses. These genres have historically served as platforms for marginalized voices, offering a means of self-expression, resistance, and community formation. Hip-hop and R&B differ significantly from other genres in their industry dynamics and cultural origins. While pop or rock musicians may benefit from more traditional and institutionalized pathways to success, Hip-hop and R&B artists often rely on grassroots support, independent production, and self-promotion (Harkness, 2011, p.253). This suggests that their careers tend to emerge from community-based movements and digital spaces rather than formal industry pipelines.

Hip-hop in particular emerged from urban, working-class environments and has grown into a global movement that challenges norms around race, class, and cultural legitimacy. As research shows, it is often deeply intertwined with artists' lived experiences and broader social issues, such as mental health, racial identity, and economic inequality (Pecqueux, 2022; Kreisovich & Smith, 2021, p. 289). These elements create a distinct career landscape where artistic authenticity, community validation, and direct fan engagement can be just as important as institutional support. Understanding how artists navigate this space, reach early career milestones, and manage industry relationships is crucial for addressing the structural barriers they face. In addition to its cultural significance, Hip-hop and R&B also play a substantial role in the creative economy. They contribute to shaping global music trends, influencing fashion and language, and offering economic opportunities in underrepresented communities. However, despite their importance, there remains a research gap when it comes to studying the early career trajectories of emerging artists in these genres. Much of

the existing literature focuses either on established artists or on broad industry transformations, leaving the initial phases of artist development relatively underexplored.

This study aims to fill this gap by offering a qualitative, empirical investigation into the career-building strategies and milestones of emerging Hip-hop and R&B artists. By combining insights from artist interviews and perspectives from music industry professionals, this research seeks to illuminate the early-stage dynamics that shape recognition and long-term success. It also explores the impact of digital platforms, social media engagement, and professional gatekeeping in these trajectories. In doing so, the study contributes to academic discussions in creative industry studies, cultural sociology, and music media studies, and offers practical insights for emerging musicians and industry practitioners alike.

The central research question guiding this thesis is:

**What are the milestones and strategies in early career trajectories for Hip-hop and R&B artists, and how do industry professionals contribute to their recognition?**

To address this main question, the study will explore the following sub-questions:

- What career milestones are most significant in the early stages of a Hip-hop or R&B artist's career?
- What strategies do emerging artists use to build their fanbase and gain recognition?
- What channels are most effective for reaching career milestones and sustaining engagement?
- What is the role of industry professionals as gatekeepers in shaping Hip-hop and R&B artists' careers?

Through these questions, the research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the factors that contribute to early career success in two of the most influential contemporary music genres.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This research draws from a multidisciplinary set of theoretical frameworks within sociology, cultural studies, and media studies to investigate early career trajectories of Hip-hop and R&B artists. These theoretical approaches are used to critically examine how artists navigate the music industry, digital platforms, and cultural fields to achieve career success. The theoretical framework integrates the following perspectives:

### 2.1. Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital provides a foundation for analyzing how artists mobilize various resources to gain symbolic and economic capital within the music industry. Bourdieu distinguishes between three forms of cultural capital: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized.

- **Embodied Cultural Capital** refers to internalized skills, styles, and dispositions such as lyrical mastery, performance charisma, and authenticity—qualities that are often integral to a hip-hop artist's credibility and fan loyalty.
- **Objectified Cultural Capital** includes tangible artistic outputs like high-quality music videos, albums, merchandise, or fashion style, which serve as proof of artistic investment and legitimacy.
- **Institutionalized Cultural Capital** involves recognition by established bodies or entities— e.g., collaborations with well-known artists, features in influential media outlets, or awards—that enhance an artist's status and visibility.

Using Bourdieu's framework enables a critical view of how artists convert cultural capital into economic success and how legitimacy is shaped by both internal competencies and external recognition.

Additionally, a highly significant application of Bourdieu's theory is exemplified by Vigerland and Borg (2018), in their investigation of how actors navigate relationships and their economic position in the art market using cultural capital (p.170). The authors suggest that cultural capital is not merely an independent resource, but rather a tool that individuals utilize, protect and convert, depending on their position (p.179). Their findings provide relevant implications to the present study. Specifically, individuals in artistic sectors may purposefully sacrifice financial rewards to cultivate cultural recognition and establish authenticity. Trading economic capital for cultural capital can potentially foster greater prestige or return over time (p.180). For instance, in the art market, a capital conversion example would be choosing to in a low-paying art gallery with high prestige instead of a higher paying commercial one with lower prestige. This is similarly reflected in

music careers, where artists may strategically prioritize lower-pay independent labels with prestige or reject high-pay mainstream events in order to sustain genre authenticity and maintain their position in subculture. In sum, contextualizing cultural capital in the art market facilitates more ample understanding of the trade-off between financial incentives with cultural capital, valuing long-term rewards and establish brand-specific alignment.

Previous research reveals that merely half of the artists listed on the Top 100 ranking are supported by established figures (Janosov et al., 2020, p.2). Authors demonstrate that mentor support aids in the accumulation of cultural capital, significant recognition and establishment in the industry requires additional institutional support. This dynamic reflects Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, that sustains mentorship serves as a channel for enforcing values and practices in the music field. There is substantially limited upward advancement, ultimately depicting a constrained structure – where established actors maintain dominance and new players are faced with challenges in the process of cultural capital conversion. Furthermore, authors distinguish that merely artists in the positions of the top twenty to remain 'stable over time' and the top ten are given special accreditation (p.2). Conceptually explained as a 'lock-in' effect, describing that artists that have already gained recognition are more likely to sustain success over time. This rigidity reflects Bourdieu's notion of the field's doxa, where dominant agents set the standards, making it difficult for newcomers to redefine success or challenge existing hierarchies.

Ultimately, Janosov et al.'s findings illustrate how mentorship facilitates the reproduction of cultural capital within the electronic music field, while emphasizing the structural barriers that restrict the transformation of this capital into higher symbolic status, reinforcing existing power dynamics as described by Bourdieu.

*2.2. Gatekeeping Theory*

Gatekeeping theory (Shoemaker & Vos, 2019) provides insight into how access to resources, visibility, and opportunities is controlled by specific actors or mechanisms in the music industry. Traditionally, A&R managers, producers, booking agents, and radio programmers acted as primary gatekeepers who filtered and amplified talent based on commercial or aesthetic criteria.

In the digital era, the role of gatekeeping has been partially redistributed across algorithmic systems and social media communities. Nowadays, media platforms are similarly more influential in determining which artists are recognized and their career life span (Szymkowiak et al., 2020., pp. 79-80).  However, additional research suggests that in the digitalized era, gatekeeping is becoming more dispersed. Traditional gatekeepers increasingly share their role with algorithms and online communities. While platforms such as Tik Tok or Instagram have opened more space for artists to

grow beyond the traditional gatekeeping trajectory, the role of professionals remains significant (Bonini & Gandini, 2019,p.8).

Drawing from previous literature on gatekeeping mechanisms informs the investigation of how traditional and digital gatekeeping mechanisms influence early-career trajectories. By examining how artists and industry experts make sense of and navigate these mechanisms in an increasingly digitalized context, as well as the significant factors involved in career development.

Furthermore, Ng and Gamble (2024) examine the strategies utilized by independent hip-hop producers to navigate the digital music landscape, giving emphasis to the role of streaming platforms and social media in shaping their career trajectory (p.5). The findings reveal that these emerging digital platforms act as modern gatekeepers, influencing which artists achieve recognition and advance in their career. Consequently, these individuals often adjust their promotional strategy or creative content to meet algorithmic demands and curator preferences (p.13).

This aligns with Shoemaker and Vos's (2019) gatekeeping theory, which posits that gatekeeping is a multifaceted process involving various actors and forces that influence information flow. In the context of digital music, platforms like Spotify and TikTok serve as gatekeepers by determining which content reaches audiences through algorithmic curation and playlist placements. Ng and Gamble's findings underscore the evolving nature of gatekeeping, where digital platforms hold significant power over cultural production and dissemination.

*2.3. The Science of Success and Career Milestones*

Everts et al. (2022) examine the role of "milestones"—such as signing a first record deal, performing at a major venue, or achieving a notable number of streams—in mapping music careers. These insights will be used to frame how both strategic actions and external factors contribute to an artist's early breakthroughs. Conversely, research from Janosov et al. (2020) provide an empirical framework that considers both talent and randomness (luck) as key factors in early artistic recognition. They emphasize that success is not solely meritocratic; network effects and unpredictable events significantly shape outcomes. Notably, their research highlights that hip-hop artists may have unique advantages in bypassing conventional success trajectories due to the genre's grassroots nature.

Furthermore, previous research from Neff, Wissinger and Zukin (2005) presents a sociological approach on the precarity of creative labour. By introducing the concept of 'entrepreneurial labour' to illustrate the strain elicited on cultural creators to constantly invest, commit and navigate financial risk in order to accumulate symbolic rewards. While artists may

pursue milestones through strategic practices, the opportunity of achieving long-term success is often limited to a small share – as the proportion of creators that gain rewards is limited (pp.329-330)

In sum, these theoretical approaches present a complex anatomy of career progression, that refer to the interplay of strategic practices with industry dynamics, network influences and institutional inequalities – ultimately, providing an important foundation to inform the investigation of the key strategies hip-hop and r&b artists implement to navigate and pursue defining career milestones.

### 2.4. Hip-Hop as a Cultural and Academic Field

The particular research focus attributed to the Hip-hop genre lies in its distinctive cultural origins, industry dynamics and unconventional production practice.  Contrary to genres with more institutionally-centered career trajectories, Hip-hop is not just a musical genre but also a socio-political and cultural movement rooted in identity, resistance, and community expression (Harris et al., 2022). Understanding hip-hop as an academic field means acknowledging its historic grassroots origins and how these origins continue to influence career strategies and legitimacy. Riesch (2005) shows how hip-hop artists often build their careers through community support and cultural authenticity rather than mainstream validation. This theoretical stance is vital in understanding how hip-hop artists reconcile artistic integrity with industry expectations. It also provides a lens for examining how authenticity and credibility are constructed within this specific field.

Additionally, Harkness (2011) contributes with evidence on labour practices in hip-hop by coining the concept of 'rapitalism' to exemplify the fusion of creative devotion and entrepreneurial drive, an essential attribute to remain in the field (p.261). Findings demonstrate how artists are required to engage in self-promotion and regular networking, often lacking institutional support or financial stability. The investigation surfaced the genres disapproval of mainstream trajectories – such as avoiding mass market strategies to gain success (p.253). This provides additional evidence of the genre as grounded in authenticity, autonomy and gravitates toward symbolic capital co-creation.

In overview, previous literature on the Hip-Hop field contribute with an understanding of Hip-Hop as a cultural genre rooted in its grassroots devoted to sub-culture position and a demanding professional field shaped by increasing entrepreneurial demands.

### 2.5. Social Media and Relational Labor

The emergence of social media platforms has transformed the ways in which artists interact with fans, construct their public persona, and build professional networks. Baym's (2018) work on relational labour recognizes that artists need to carry out interactive labour to create intimacy with fans in order to blur the boundaries between professional and personal identities (pp. 72-73). For hip-hop artists, who frequently build careers on storytelling and authenticity, social media offers a space

to create these, give access to behind the scenes footage and engage with fans on a personal level. Social media is not merely a promotional tool; it is a workspace where artists must balance authenticity and performance.

The requirement for continuous visibility reflects/ aligns with research from Abidin (2018) on visibility labour, demonstrating that maintaining online success requires consistent and persistent audience interaction and algorithm-centered content production (p.120). In the digital age, artists are often required to maintain actively constant presence across digital platforms, not solely for establishing relevance but also for generating cultural capital in the digitalized infrastructure. Although this form of labour is not as overtly acknowledged in music careers, it serves as a relevant component for understanding how recognition is attained, at an in-depth level.

This study explores how emerging artists use social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok to build engagement, develop personal branding, and secure performance or sponsorship opportunities. Attention will also be given to the psychological and reputational risks involved in maintaining a public persona. This study investigates how artists leverage social media to reach early milestones, such as rising streaming and record selling numbers or securing sponsorship deals. It will also investigate the possible risks and consequences of relying on social media, as the blurring of boundaries with personal life possibly links success to reputation rather than musical talent.

*2.6. Platform Economy and Digital Labor*

Finally, Platform Economy Theories are beneficial for examining the role of digital platforms in renegotiating fan interaction and trajectories of success. Srnicek (2017) presents the concept of platform capitalism, a substantial framework that can be applied to the investigation of how digital platforms reconstruct economic practice by centralizing control and extracting value from engagement. The author demonstrates that the role of platforms is not solely intermediary and have developed as an infrastructure that control the systems they facilitate, including the owning of data and influencing user behaviour for profit (p.48). Based on this theoretical lens, digital platforms such as Youtube or Spotify are more than just channels that host content – they operate as gatekeepers through algorithmic curation that determine which artists gain recognition or financial compensation. This dynamic reinforces a structure in which the top tier artists and dominant platforms concentrate the most exposure potential and revenue, while the majority of early-stage artists rely on unpredictable algorithmic curation and face highly demanding and unstable labour conditions (pp. 72-73).

Furthermore, other scholars provide an alternative theoretical approach to demonstrate how the rise of digital platforms have democratized access to music production and distribution in creative careers. A notable contribution from Terranova (2000) on the concept of free labour providing a substantial theoretical approach that can be applied to analyze the changing dynamics. The author demonstrates that digital platform structures highly rely on underpaid labour of creators

to produce content, sustain engagement and grow platforms without reliable compensation (p.33). This perspective illustrates how early-stage artists, particularly in the Hip-hop genre – where the strategies are rooted in community support – are progressively required to utilize digital platforms to build visibility and connect to audiences in an authentic way. In overview, this framework can be applied in the investigation of the role digital platforms hold in extracting value from cultural labour – and to what extent they serve as a strategy for artists in gaining recognition.

Drawing from literature on platform capitalism, Leyshon and Watson (2025) supplement with a more focused analysis by investigating how digital platforms have transformed the economic and labour dynamics in the music industry. Through algorithmic curation and datafication, platforms like Spotify and YouTube do not only function as distributors that facilitate access to audiences but also shape artists strategic practice, revenue and exposure. The restructuring of creative labour influences how artists attain visibility, remain relevant and accumulate financial rewards. Consequently, gaining recognition in the industry depends on the unpredictable selection of algorithm systems, requiring artists to maintain constant digital presence and integrate performance metrics into their career strategy. (pp.138-142).

Complementing these findings, Hesmondhalgh (2019) contributes with a critique of platform economy – while dominant platforms in the industry such as Youtube or Spotify appear to allow artists to bypass traditional record labels to some extent and promise increased artistic autonomy – they rather reproduce existing industry inequalities (pp.17-19) by imposing algorithmic constraints, monetization challenges and demand constant content production. Consequently, benefiting already recognized artists which introduces an implication that for early-stage hip-hop artists means that gaining exposure is often not determined by merit or fan-base engagement, but rather mediated by platform logic and industry interests. This theoretical lens emphasizes that the assumption of increased autonomy and accessibility in the digital age often overlooks the highly demanding conditions rewarded with insufficient compensation as exemplified by the author stressing the highly exploitative nature of creative digital labour (p.23).

In addition, Schieb-Bienfait and Emin (2023) contribute to industry-focused analysis in their case study of musicians in a creative city. The conclusions reveal how platform labour corresponds with localized cultural policies. Although digital can increase opportunities and provide a wider reach potential, they simultaneously introduce demands for branding, constant presence and adapting to platform logic. This tension is composed by the overarching economic and structural conditions that accommodates the environment of the creative work. Thus, often creating a conflicting experience for artists, where the labour required to build their career includes resilience to instability and absence of consistent opportunities (pp.144-147).

Grounded on evidence from these scholars, theoretical evidence demonstrates that the rise of digital platforms does not only shape artistic labour practices but also introduce new demands that artists need to navigate when building their strategy.

In sum, this framework provides a foundation to the examinination of how emerging hip-hop and R&B artists balance independence and sustainability, and how platform visibility interacts with industry structures to shape career outcomes.

3. **Method**

This research has employed a qualitative methodology. Specifically, integrating expert interviews with thematic analysis to explore the career milestones of early stage Hip-hop and R&B artists. The methodological focus on qualitative inquiry  aligns with the research aim of generating in-depth understanding and exploring distinct insights that may not be predicted by quantitative approaches and previous theoretical frameworks. By directly engaging in ample discourse with individuals who posses relevant experience in the music industry, the study captures nuanced perspectives and facilitates the discovery of emerging patterns and meanings in career development. Qualitative research methodology is particularly suitable for the current research investigation due to its strength in addressing complex phenomena whose interpretation varies depending on context. In the present context of music careers, where the route to success is non-linear and individualized, the research approach allows for the exploration of elaborate subjective experiences.

The interpretive nature of qualitative methods further supports the study's focus on the music industry, where meanings and experiences are often shaped by cultural, social, and institutional dynamics (Herzog et al., 2019, p.386). Additionally, another highly valuable tool included in this method are sensitizing concepts, which provide a flexible analytical guide to data collection and analysis without restricting conclusions to a fixed theoretical framework (Bowen, 2020, p.2). The concepts extracted as a central focus to the current study—such as *career milestones*, *gatekeeping*, and *effective channels*—offer a preliminary lens through which the data is approached, while also leaving room for the emergence of new meanings and categories during the analysis. A key strength facilitated by this method lies in its association with  purposive sampling techniques as which allow the researcher to assess and reach a particular population to base on the distinctly defined criteria of interest to research (Etikan et al., 2016, p.2). This methodology is particularly useful when studying niche populations such as emerging artists.

3.1. Sampling & Data Collection

Participant selection was conducted using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Purposive sampling ensures that participants meet predefined criteria relevant to the research focus—namely, emerging artists who have achieved early career milestones and industry professionals actively involved in talent development. Snowball sampling complements this approach by leveraging existing networks, allowing participants to refer others who share similar levels of experience or insight. This is particularly valuable in the creative industries, where informal, interpersonal networks significantly influence access to opportunities and career progression (Noy, 2008, p.461).

The initial participants have been identified through the researcher's personal and professional networks, including connections made via the contacts within the academic institution. The use of the convenience sampling approach was particularly relevant given the explorative aim of the research and allowed for access to rich and diverse expert participants in the industry within a limited time frame. The final sample used comprises two distinct groups, namely five emerging Hip-hop and R&B artists that proactively create and release music on a consistent basis, carried out live performances and are actively involved in the music industry – both live and digitally. The sample of five emerging artists included two artists with a record deal, two independent and one artist in close collaboration with a record label without a contract agreement. The second participant group includes 4 industry professionals that are employed in a recording label with considerable experience in the industry and that are in frequent proximity with the artists they represent. This sample group includes 2 managers of independent labels – based in Amsterdam and Barcelona, one A&R representative of a major label and one specialized promoting professional. Recruitment was carried out through direct outreach via social media, professional events, and industry forums. To maintain heterogeneity within the sample, participants are selected to represent a range of roles and affiliations, including both independent and major label professionals, as well as artists at different stages of early career development. The snowball method was implemented strategically: in order to complete the sample, each participant was asked to recommend a peer or contact in a different market who meets the study criteria, thus diversifying the sample and reducing the likelihood of selection bias.

Data collection included primary data gathered through semi-structured expert interviews, which allow participants to reflect on their experiences, strategies, and perceptions of career progression in the contemporary music industry. This format balances structure with flexibility, ensuring key topics are addressed while allowing participants to elaborate on points of personal significance. Expert interviews are particularly effective for eliciting detailed, field-specific knowledge that may not be accessible through other means (Meuser & Nagel, 2009, p.31). Topics covered in the interview guide include definitions of success, influential career moments, promotional tactics, and barriers faced during the early career phase.

The data collection process commenced after the first interview meeting was scheduled and the initial participant confirmed. Firstly, the final artist sample group was preliminary defined, including early-stage Hip-Hop or R&B artists with differences in characteristics, to ensure diversity in backgrounds. This group served as an initial entry point to the industry professional sample group through a snowballing approach. The final sample group of artists included one signed hip-hop artist and other four independent with valuable experience and live acts. The first participants were approached through a formal social media message that included the scope of the study and brief

information about discussion points. Given the early-stage career stage, artists responded in a timely manner and several participants expressed enthusiasm about participation.

The first interview was carried out with a signed hip-hop artist within the researcher's professional network and was conducted through video call due to participant's temporary relocation. This first participants provided referral to an industry professional with a founding role in an Amsterdam-based independent label. The first interview conducted for the industry expert group was conducted in-person through the researcher's travel to the record label's headquarters by train. The second industry professional participant and graduate of the present institution was reached out to via email, guided by the supervisor's academic network. The four remaining artist interviews were carried out within 6 working days, either by in-person meeting or scheduled video-call (via the Zoom platform). Completing the industry professional sample was deemed challenging, as time availability was highly limited in the relevant roles. The completion of the interviews for the sample group was distributed across 4 weeks, due to the adaptation to diverse industry schedules. In total, nine interviews were collected over a period of 6 to 7 weeks, using the semi-structured format outlined in the interview guide.

3.2. Operationalization

For analytical consistency, key constructs were operationalized based on both prior literature and emergent themes from the data. These constructs include *career milestones*, *strategies for success*, and *effective channels*.

- **Career milestones** are defined as notable achievements that signify progress in an artist's career. These may include releasing a debut project, collaborating with established artists, signing with a reputable label, or experiencing significant fanbase growth. This definition is informed by Arakelyan et al. (2018), who emphasize the importance of landmark events such as major label signings and performances at high-profile venues (pp. 14–16).
- **Strategies for success** refer to the specific actions and decisions artists undertake to advance their careers. These include leveraging social media platforms, engaging in targeted promotional activities, cultivating professional networks, and utilizing digital distribution tools. Kamara (2018) provides a framework for understanding how independent artists utilize marketing and technology to create revenue opportunities and visibility in a saturated market (p. 21).
- **Effective channels** encompass the platforms and mediums that facilitate artist visibility and fan engagement. This includes digital streaming services, social media networks, and traditional media outlets. Research by Cunningham and Craig (2019) illustrates how

platforms like YouTube can strengthen the artist-audience relationship and expand an artist's reach in a competitive landscape (p. 30).

These operationalized concepts inform the coding and analysis stages, ensuring that the thematic interpretation remains grounded in both empirical data and theoretical precedent.

3.3. Analysis

Once coding is complete, comparative analysis is conducted to examine similarities and differences between the two participant groups—artists and industry professionals. This comparative lens helps to contextualize individual perspectives within broader industry trends and dynamics, shedding light on the diverse pathways to early career success (Herzog et al., 2019, p.396).

To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, a triangulation strategy is implemented. This involves cross-referencing interview data with secondary sources, such as social media analytics, industry publications, and press materials. Triangulation strengthens the robustness of the study by confirming key themes through multiple data points and reducing the influence of individual bias or anecdotal evidence. In order to generate conclusions from the qualitative data collected from nine expert interviews, the analysis was carried out using a qualitative content analysis approach. facilitated by the Atlas.ti software. Drawing from principles of grounded theory, with a particular emphasis on open and axial coding analytical process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. X) , facilitating the identification of conceptual themes emerging directly from the interview data. Overall, this methodological approach is suitable because it allows for theory to surface inductively from in-depth contextualized data, as well as its alignment with the aims of the present study. The chosen software further aid in the systematic organization and coding of the transcribed interviews.

The first step of the process included the careful transcription process of manually translating the audio-recorded interviews into text, attentively reviewing to ensure precision and immersion in the data. After verification, the coding process commenced with open coding. The transcript text was read attentively, and initial codes were attributed inductively to quotes exemplifying them. These initial codes aimed to capture recurring insights across the myriad of participant insights gathered. During this stage, proximity to the data was maintained in order to create codes that closely reflect participants dialect and experience. Each transcript was coded line-by-line in this way to ensure completeness. The general focus was on identifying valuable perspectives without association with pre-determined theoretical approaches.

Following the first phase of coding, axial coding was conducted to organize and refine the data in emerging ways by distinguishing the connections between the previous open codes. The categories were created and grouped based on similar conditions and consequences, contextual elements,

strategies and terminology. This process was beneficial in structuring the recurring patterns found from participant insights into conceptual groupings and facilitated the further deepening of the interpretive analysis process. Thus, the clustering of codes into categories allowed the formation of a basis for broader emerging themes.

In order to ensure a transparent analysis and facilitate a precise methodological process, an analytical strategy integrating inductive insights with deductive reasoning described by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) was adopted. The framework illustrates how combining inductive and deductive analysis can be used to enrich the depth of qualitative research. This methodological model serves as a valuable tool for analytic clarity, allowing for the integration of data-driven themes with established theoretical concepts. Drawing from the principles of the hybrid process of interpretation of raw data from previous research, the interview data was revised and reflected upon, using memo writing and continuous comparison as tools to support the development of vigorous thematic constructs.

As demonstrated by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), maintaining rigor in qualitative analysis involves clearly outlining each stage of the analytical process. Thus, the systematic method utilized began with attributing initial codes to the exact wording that participants used to describe their experience, subsequently grouping and linking the open codes into broader conceptual patterns, to finally be developed into core themes. This structured multi-step process provided clarity in interpretive analysis while ensuring substantial themes were strongly based on the data.

The resulting **overarching themes** are the outcome of this iterative, data-centered, and reflexive process. They encapsulate the diversity of perspectives shared by interviewees while offering a structured narrative through which to interpret the findings. These themes are presented and discussed in detail in the following chapter.

The analysis final phase of **thematic development**, in which axial codes and core categories were synthesized into a set of overarching themes. These themes were not merely summaries but were interpretive constructs that captured the complexity and significance of the findings in relation to the research questions. Special care was taken to ensure that the

In sum, this analytical process was designed to move from granular, participant-specific codes to more abstract, cross-cutting themes, while maintaining fidelity to the data and transparency in interpretation. By using a grounded theory-informed approach, supported by Atlas.ti and reinforced through memo-writing and constant comparison, the analysis aimed to generate meaningful and credible insights that reflect the lived realities and expert knowledge of the participants.

## 4. Results

In the analysis process, data from nine semi-structured interviews conducted with early-stage hip-hop artists (n=5) and music industry professionals (n=4) in the region of western Europe was investigated in order to explore how significant career milestones, strategies for success and effective recognition pathways in early-stage careers in the music industry. An additional element was to further deepen the understanding of the role industry actors play in shaping success trajectories. The thorough coding, clustering and development of insights to themes using a hybrid thematic analysis approach drawn from the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and the inductive-deductive model (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) permitted the emergence of data-driven insights and conceptually grounded interpretation in the theoretical frameworks such as the theory of cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and the gatekeeping theory (Shoemaker & Vos, 2019 ), supplemented by additional previous literature on career trajectories in creative industries.

### 4.1. Career Milestones

### 4.1.1. Signing with a Major Label: strategic tool or structural risk

A recurring theme across that was present for both artist and industry professionals was the decline of traditional gatekeepers – such as major labels, radio and talent scouts. Participants expressed that digital tools and streaming platforms in combination with social media have reinvented the route to visibility, allowing artists to bypass conventional obstacles and have more autonomy over their careers. Industry professionals did not claim the role of the label has dissolved entirely, but rather that they are no longer the sole route to visibility and legitimacy. Ruben, an independent label manager noted:

" Now that everything is digital, everyone with a laptop can actually make music. For better or worse, but that's the reality of it. I don't think the labels are as important or as necessary as they were." (manager, male, 32)

This viewpoint was reflected by artists, who consider digital tools as empowering, although accompanied by increased personal responsibility and added managerial effort. The artist Simeon described the development of the industry as 'for better or worst' and stating:

"they have a much higher return on investment when an artist is already big, because then they know that a song is gonna work, like guaranteed. And when they sign a small artist, then it's really like

building something up together. So then I like to work with smaller labels as well, because they can do more stuff like locally." (signed hip-hop artist, male, 27)

However, the increasing autonomy is not free from added challenges. Multiple artists identified the emotional and practical difficulties of independently managing their careers. The third artist (Lucien) described self-management as a 'blessing and a curse', having to manage everything from music production, booking and contract negotiations. This challenge mirrors the research by Janosov et al. (2020) that identifies the non-linear nature of creative career development, where actors must simultaneously adapt and promote their brand identity across multiple channels. Despite this, the label's role still appears to carry significant importance. Aniola, an independent artist pointed out:

"Even though people say you can make it as an independent artist, I think being signed does give you some legitimacy." (independent r&b artist, female, 25)

While a representative from a larger label pointed out:

"Major labels have a lot of money, and so they can do large investments in artists." (large label representative, female, 38)

The contradiction reflected in arguments framing quality resources as a beneficial trade-off for limited autonomy illustrates how - gatekeeping in the industry has transformed as increasingly more diffuse rather than obsolete. While access through large institutional support is no longer the primary path to gaining success, it still provides a form of cultural establishment and access to quality resources through financial means, particularly in mainstream channels.

The pursuit of signing with a major label revealed mixed and rather conflicting responses. Although some participants recognized it as a traditional milestone associated with success through added opportunities and quality of resources, others questioned this assumption, by viewing label deals as opportunistic and highly restrictive. Masay, an r&b artist and conservatory graduate expressed their reluctance:

*"*I've been really taking my time with music… Personally, I want to remain unsigned for as long as I can. I see signing—especially with major labels—as kind of selling out your soul. I wouldn't necessarily own my music anymore." (independent r&b artist, male, 25)

Among both artist and industry professional sample groups, the concept of signing with a major record label surfaced as a complex and challenged milestone. While artists frequently discussed the concern between visibility and autonomy, industry professionals provided an internalized view into the mechanisms of strategic benefits and symbolic restraints of record deals in the current deconcentrated music industry. An often-reoccurring motif in the industries responses was the shift in the label's role and significance. Specifically, the label's role is no longer based on its reputational status or size (major vs. independent), but rather on its capacity to serve as a professional support system. As depicted by industry professional Maria, a big label representative:

*"Yo*u need to have a team, whether it's structured as a label or differently. It doesn't make a difference so much these days if you're signed to a major or indie... When you sign a record deal, you contract the best professional team you can get for you." (large label representative, female,38)

This stance closely ties to the artist's accounts that emphasized adaptability and trust over brand name and status. Artists, particularly those in the early stage of their career, exhibited a higher preference for smaller labels with local roots, arguing that they are able to offer more tailored attention and community-based networking, as reflected by Simeon, a signed hip-hop artist:

"I love to work with my friends who have a record label based in Amsterdam...they really promote locally and set up events and writers' camps. That feels more trustworthy than another big corporation." (signed hip-hop artist, male,27)

Furthermore, while cultural legitimacy still appears to remain connected to being signed by a record label, both groups recognize that active investment and ensured security is not guaranteed. As stated by Hermon, a promoting specialist:

"Just signing doesn't mean they're going to do everything for you. Labels make a calculation… If you're not bringing popularity, they won't invest that much. It makes sense from a business point of view." (promoter, male, 30)

Similarly, emerging artists also sustained this conditional support, expressing concern for the industry prioritizing already renowned artists, suggesting resources are not equally distributed reflected in Lucien's dialogue, an independent hip-hop artist:

*"If a label is super big, there's also a big chance they won't give you the energy…they pull strings for the bigger artists." (independent hip-hop artist, male,26)*

Additionally, when artists considered the idea of eventually pursuing to get signed, their discourse framed it rather as a compromise – a route that serves as a useful tool for its infrastructure, rather than as a symbol of success. It was commonly indicated that early career artists are more inclined to distribution deals rather than contractual obligations that stem from signing a deal with a major label.

### 4.1.2. The value of financial incentives: barrier or driving force

Regarding the topic of financial rewards – the importance in launching, sustaining early-stage careers and the link between artists' financial stability and their creative decisions, insights by industry professionals support the importance of financial resources in career growth and development. Major labels were often referred to as banks, for their ability to provide capital in advance with the expected return on investment. Joan, an independent label founder said:

*"A major label gives you what is called an advance…they basically give you money to record your next album. But that comes with strings attached. They want you to work with a certain type of people or release in a certain way." (independent label founder, male, 40)*

This analogy of financial support as bearing a transactional attribute/component was resonated by artists. Most were surely aware of the consequences of being financially dependent and associated this with losing touch with their artistic identity. As illustrated by Manuel, an independent r&b artist:

*"Signing with major labels feels like selling your soul… I wouldn't necessarily own my music anymore." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 25)*

In contrast, however, experts underlined how financial stability can serve as fuel for unlocking creative potential. Ruben, an independent label manager, argues:

*"Financial stability allows artists to make creative decisions from a place of peace… not from a place of stress or worry. That's when you get the most expression." (independent label manager, male, 32)*

Overall, these perspectives directly reflect the concept of capital conversion drawn from the theoretical framework. Drawing from Bourdieu's theory that sustains that different forms of capital, such as cultural or symbolic, can be transformed into economic capital, however, only after an actor has established credibility and recognition within their specific field (Bourdieu, 1986, p.253). Simeon, signed hip-hop artist, noted:

"The financial rewards of me producing a big song for a UK artist, that really motivated me to make more music and to push my music, to release and promote it." (signed hip-hop artist, male, 27)

Interestingly, Maria, a big label representative suggests that early investments normally come after artists have demonstrated their potential through individual funding activity:

*"If you're an artist, at the starting point, you don't have a career yet. You can't expect to have financial rewards. When you invest in building that career, whatever you as an artist consider as being a career, the financial rewards will come to you. I don't believe that an artist will have a better career path if right at the beginning they're getting a signing fee or an advance. That will come to them." (representative, female, 38)*

The early phase before label affiliation reflects a non-linear and individualized nature of career development, where artists are often required to adopt an entrepreneurial role before any major institutional assistance is guaranteed.

Addressing the matter of the interplay between financial stability and artist's creative decisions, the interview findings revealed that being financially secure plays a central role in shaping creative decisions of early-stage hip-hop artists. While accounts of the 'starving artist' narrative were addressed, participants focused on the ways in which material conditions such as a stable income security can enable or constrain artistic expression. The emerging findings intersect with Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital conversion that demonstrates the necessity of economic resources in the accumulation of cultural capital such as career success, in the present context.

An additional recurring theme encountered in both artists and industry professionals was the dual nature of financial uncertainty. Although having limited resources can ignite creative improvisation, resourcefulness and resilience, it frequently causes stress and limitation, compromising the durable development of artistic capital and fan-base building – some central components of achieving success. Ruben, independent label founder expert stated:

"Financial stability for artists is key... then you are free, and you can make creative decisions without limits. Your decisions aren't made from a place of stress or worry. They're made from a place of peace. That's where you get the most expression." (manager, male, 32)

Ruben's regard about financial stability aligns with the critique of the romanticizing of creative struggle (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p. 35). Specifically, as opposed to eliciting innovation, distressing

labour conditions drive artists to make safe decisions in order to avoid the risk of failure, possibly even forcing them to withdraw from their creative goals altogether. Simeon, a signed hip-hop artist, supported this harsh reality by expressing the turmoil they experienced in the process:

*"My financial situation was so tight that I had to get a second job... I was working so much to pay the bills that it was putting so much pressure on me and it was taking away all of my creative juice."*

Similarly, the hip-hop artist Lucien, echoed this when describing the material cost required when making music at any level:

*"Making music and releasing it, especially constantly, is very expensive... even if you're independent or on a label. A lot of us have part-time jobs just so we can still create." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 26)*

Both insights reveal that creative freedom is contingent on financial resources. This reveals an overlap with the work from Terranova (2000) illustrating a central contradiction/strain in digital creative labour, where creators are expected to produce consistently even under conditions of insufficient compensation.

While some participants recognize the potential of being financially restrained in creating grounds for inspiration, the majority depicted it as a temporary or constrained form of creating. Masay, independent hip-hop artist offered an insight about the barriers and benefits of scarcity:

*"Being poor can help you write better because you have struggles... but also, when you're financially limited, you can't buy all the gear and the speakers—you've got to figure it out. That can make some good stuff too." (independent r&b artist, male, 25)*

Maria, a representative of a bigger label supplemented this in a concrete representation of the relationship:

*"It's like thinking when you're hungry—not so much. But that hunger can also drive solutions... you find out something about yourself. Financial stability and creative decisions, they go both ways."*

On the other hand, Joan, the founder of an indie label, emphasized how commercial appeal influences creative decisions:

*"If you want to make money, you have to make something commercially appealing... that leads to more conservative music."*

This observation reflects a key gate-keeping mechanism in the industry that the lack of financial resources can not only influence whether music gets produced, but also determine which kinds music is considered valuable and deserving of further support (Shoemaker & Vos, 2019).

This is exemplified in the experience outlined by Masay, an r&b artist, on the added labour that financial scarcity inflicts on emerging musicians:

*""I walked two days through Rotterdam to find a place for a video clip... If I had money, I could've just focused on the concept, not the logistics. Money gives you time. And time is good for your art."*
*(independent r&b artist, male, 25)*

Aniola, another independent r&b artist, similarly added that revenue does not need to come from artistic content itself, but is mandatory to sustaining artistic practice and creation:

*"If you're not financially stable long-term, it's gonna become a problem. You still have bills to pay. You can make music, but in order to* keep *making it, that's the issue."*

In line with work by Bourdieu (1986) proving that cultural production requires a solid foundation of financial resources, which is required for the entry into cultural markets. In the absence of this foundation, the accumulation of cultural capital, which is necessary for recognition and long-term career life span, can become unfeasible. This dynamic is supported by research on creative labour in the Hip-Hop genre where artists are continuously required to devote creativity and calculated strategy in order to survive in the field (Harkness, 2011, p.253). Hermon, a promoting specialist argues in support:

*"Some people are most hungry when they're broke... and maybe then they make what people want to hear. But when you're financially stable, you can let that go and make more pure work. But that depends on the person."*

Ultimately, a dominant theme that prevailed in both industry and artist narratives, is that financial stability can offer both security and opportunity to artists in the early stage of their career. Overall, serving as a tool for protection against exhaustion while enabling consistent creative risk. This explains the argument made by Janosov (2020) that recognition in creative industries is not solely

based on talent, but rather on institutional conditions that permit talent to be seen, shared and sustained over time.

### 4.1.3. Reputation in recognition

Another dominant theme found regarding the concept of career milestones was the strategic significance of reputation. Frequently perceived as symbolic capital that introduces economic success. Both participant groups described it as crucial for recognition in an increasingly saturated industry. For artists, establishing a strong reputation is not determined or indicated by high metrics, but rather by exhibiting authenticity and coherent artistic brand identity

Reputation holds a substantial role in artists career trajectory, representing a symbolic resource, as well as a potential gatekeeping mechanism in the creative industries. Once again, from the perspective of Bourdieu (1986), reputation can be viewed as a distinct form of symbolic capital that indicates artist value and quality within a specific field. In the hip-hop and R&B genres in particular, the formation of reputation emerges from immersion in grassroots networks and community validation (Harris et al., 2022). This theme emerged during the investigation of how artists and professionals define reputation, the strategies to shape it and its relation to measurable audience engagement metrics.

First of all, both participant groups described diverse understandings of what reputation comprises. A conflict between personal character, authentic identity and industry status was revealed, although this could be attributed to different interpretations of the meaning given to the term 'reputation'. For some, reputation appeared to be synonymous with brand or status, closely tied to one's presence in the music industry. Maria, a big label representative outlined a distinction between personal reputation as an indicator of character and professional credibility – prioritizing real connection over misconceptions based on accumulated judgements:

"I don't believe in the reputation. When I mentioned the value of reputation, I meant in the music industry. Not what they did in their personal life... It's about the human chemistry." (large label representative, female, 35)

Other perspectives constituted reputation as an artist's authentic persona, in alignment with Shoemaker & Vos's (2019) concept of gatekeeping as content being filtered in terms of its alignment with significant cultural values. For example, Ruben, an independent label founder associated reputation with being integrally yourself:

"Reputation or brand image are different words for the same thing... If this person is an authentic person—that's very much their brand." (independent label manager, male, 32)

Another industry expert in a similar position, Joan also noted, in agreement:

*"By reputation I mean the musical kind of status... I like artists to be real, to have something real to express, lyrics that are socially conscious." (independent label founder, male, 40)*

Collectively, independent artists viewed reputation as based in local recognition and collaborative endeavors which is described by Harris et al., (2022) as 'grassroots legitimacy'. Lucien, an independent hip-hop artist noted:

"I feel like in Lille, the fact that I've been present at events made people know about me. That definitely affects reputation." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 26)

Aniola, an independent r&b artist, reflected this when sharing her personal experience:

"When I was actively pursuing music and I was living in Geneva in Switzerland because it's a smaller town and everybody knows each other I know that, there people knew that I was making music and they knew who I was but still on a very small scale" (independent r&b artist, female,26)

The localized conception of reputation that often operates independently of national or digital exposure, supports research by Riesch (2005) on hip-hop as a community-driven culture where organic interactions are more valuable than abstract metrics. As well as in line with previous literature on artistic recognition (Janosov, 2020) which have demonstrated that network positioned, and peer supported emerging artists enable sustained success more than measurable performance indicators alone.

Findings show that reputation has not always been strategic effort, some participants considered it to be a product of live practice and organic authenticity. Maria, a big label representative indicated a lasting positive reputation stems from being transparent and genuine rather than fabricating a favourable brand:

"Show your weakness. Show your vulnerability. Show your strong points. Show you... That's not a strategy. It's a way of being." (large label representative, female, 35)

However, several other industry experts viewed reputation-building as an active process – including both aesthetic labour (Terranova, 2000 and consistent networking (Shoemaker & Vos, 2019). For Joan, an independent label founder, reputation was upheld through the building of a skilled support system and trusted team:

"You have to work with good mixing engineers... PR, promotion, marketing... a good label that will help you with that." (independent label founder, male, 40)

Lucien, an independent hip-hop artist, reflects the importance of quality infrastructure:

"Having a team... bookers, PR people... that's a milestone that's going to affect your reputation." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 26)

In alignment with Hesmondhalgh (2019) analysis of creative industries labour. Ruben, an independent label manager and founder described reputation as the outcome of a sustained, honest approach consistent presence in the industry:

"You do that for a very long time without being afraid to make mistakes... because that's you and it's authentic." (independent label manager, male, 32)

Similarly, two artist perspectives emphasized the value of collaborative visibility and live performances as key to establishing perceived artistic quality and reputation. Ruben, an independent label founder pointed to the value of content:

"Collaborations... if I'm actually interested in what the artist is making, it's a way to maintain a reputation." ." (independent label manager, male, 32)

While Masay, an independent r&b artist, shared his most valued attributes – proactive delivery:

"Sold out shows. Cool collaborations. Sold out shows and good music. That's what matters." (independent r&b artist, male, 25)


**Reputation and metrics**

A recurring pattern across interviews was regarding the importance/power of the symbolic capital offered by reputation and the measurable engagement metrics as performance indicators. While most acknowledged that metrics such as streams, followers and likes have an important role, many others expressed doubt about their long-term value and reliability. Two industry experts stated:

"When you do things to attract the metrics, I think you lose yourself as an artist... it's fake." (large label representative, female, 35)

"You can have a lot of monthly listeners... but maybe they're because you were in a paid playlist. The followers are because you are attractive." (independent label manager, male,32)

In contradiction, the other half viewed metrics as an important commercial tool that supported, however do not predict or replace reputation.

"If the audience sees you around big stars... that gives you status and makes them engaged." (promoter, male,30)

"It helps the status or the reputation of the artist. It's something that you can use to sell the product, basically, and to engage more people. So I would say that it's something important from a commercial position." (independent label founder, male,40)

Lucien, an independent hip-hop artist expressed a balanced view:

"If you have a good reputation without all these metrics, you have way more chances of being a long-term artist." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 26)

This distinction reflect work by Janosov (2020) suggesting that being centered in a network and having peer support can have a stronger influence than raw metrics in facilitating sustained success.

For instance, Simeon, a signed artist participant, added that both of these appear to be necessary in today's landscape:

"I think it's important to have both, to do both... social media presence and a nice reputation in real life." (signed hip-hop artist, male,27)

All in all, across participants, reputation emerged as a multifaceted construct, that includes elements of identity, status as well as relational capital. Its development and sustainment involve more than digital metrics to indicate performance and artistic quality. the insights gathered suggest that long-term and consistent investment in exhibiting authenticity, collaboration and visibility within both peer and audience networks is key in building a strong community around the artist in order to generate success that lasts and is legitimized and trusted. From Bourdieu's theoretical

perspective, reputation functions as cultural capital that can be converted and used as amour to access opportunities, gain recognition and knowledge of navigating the industry's formal and informal gatekeepers.

On the other hand, Terranova (2000) emphasizes, this form of capital often comes off as a trade-off on extensive emotional and social labour, in turn impacting independent artists who are required to maintain their visibility in the absence of institutional security. As these findings suggest, reputation appear to be both an asset and an important career asset that takes hard work to build and maintain, while balancing the many elements that influence it without intention.

## 4.2. Strategies for success

The second central topic of investigation was strategies for success, which addressed the practical approaches that facilitate advancement in artist's career trajectory including - the role of social in self-promotion and the value of live performances in career growth. The investigation aimed to explore the value given to social media and live performances in career development by artists and industry professionals and the degree to which these strategies are endorsed in the field, as well as determining the types of venues or events considered as pivotal career milestones that contribute to establishing credibility and long-term success. In overview, findings show that social media is considered highly relevant for sustained visibility, audience engagement and career growth – with additional challenges emerging from increased demand and saturation. Whereas live performances were identified as a crucial practice for legitimacy and exposure to meaningful audience connection – festival appearances and established venues were identified as key milestones, however interview results show that performance milestones significantly vary with individual goals and audience count being less influential than engagement.

### 4.2.1. The scope of social media

The findings generated from the interview data strongly sustain the value of digital promotion, with differentiating levels of enthusiasm and engagement. For industry experts, the centrality of social media as a promotion tool was emphasized. One promoting specialist industry participant stated social media accounts for three quarters of marketing efforts, referring to its cost-efficient and accessible/direct reach:

"...the most effective and cost-efficient way to promote your product, promote yourself, show your values, to be connected with the audience." (promoter, male, 30)

This perspective is supported by artists, who describe social media consistent and reliable promotional platform in contrast to the occasional opportunity of live performances. This suggests that early-stage artists benefit from social media as a medium to communicate their craft without relying on the process of securing a live act:

"It is your CV, actually... if you have good pictures and you look really cool on your Instagram, people are more likely to go to your show." (independent r&b artist, male, 25)

"It's important. Because social media is something you can do all the time. But shows like local shows, for example, are fair and far between." (independent hip-hop artist, male,26)

Alternatively, some industry professionals advise for caution. Maria, a big label representative considers social media does not entirely reflect content quality but rather the delivery in live performance.

"You are visible through your acts, through your music and through the shows that you do on stage. Not the pretty photo on social media." (large label representative, female, 35)

While Joan, an independent label founder, emphasizes that it is not a central measure of credibility when assessing an artist's potential:

*"...social media is important, not essential. It's not like you have to do it and that's it, you know, but it definitely helps a lot, of course. When I sign artists, I don't care at all if they are on social media or if they have social media presence or not. I care about the music." (independent label founder, male, 40)*

These outcomes support previous evidence from Kamara (2018) that independent artists utilize social media promotion not as the central means for success, but rather as a resource for generating revenue and maintaining their careers. Similarly, Terranova's (2000) concept of free labour that explains how artists are required to consistently deliver unpaid content to remain visible.

The majority of participants recognize social media's role in career development and gatekeeping within the industry. One hip-hop artist participant illustrated this by sharing their experience with a sound engineer evaluating artists based on their social media profile before agreeing to collaborate on a project:

""Instagram is definitely a portfolio... I cannot stress this enough." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 26)

Additionally, two other artists emphasized that social media is an effective tool for networking, facilitates a global exposure, and increases opportunities for collaboration. Simeon, a signed hip-hop artist emphasized the personal value given to social media:

"…it's really important to have this online social media to keep you connected with people all over the world. And it's helped me get a lot of new followers. It's also helped me to get my beats out there to artists. And I'm grateful that I use it as a tool to connect." (signed hip-hop artist, male, 27)

Manuel, an independent hip-hop artist, similarly pointed to its impact for global discovery:

"…everything's so global now. And that's how a lot of the new artists have gotten big with just being discovered on TikTok and Instagram." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 26)

These insights are in line with the theory of relational labour positing that artists need to manage their identity and audience interaction through digital platforms (Baym, 2018, p.22)

Nevertheless, one label manager countered this by stating he does not prioritize social media presence as an indicator when signing an artist:

"I don't care at all if they are on social media... I care about the music." (independent label founder, male, 40)

Although experts claim that artistic quality is the most valuable component in career development, being digitally visible is highly important for expansion and long-term progress particularly further on in the development process.

Findings revealed a myriad of strategies regarding how artists approach branding and how professionals advise them to do so. A large proportion of emerging artists strategically curate their content to match their artist identity and musical themes to maintain authenticity without exposing their personal life. As noted in statements such as:

"I think brand identity... reflects in my videos and cover arts... a lot of trees and nature videos." - Simeon, signed hip-hop artist

"I try to represent who I am as an artist... through the styling and everything." – Aniola, independent r&b artist

This narrative is portrayed in professionals disregard of inconsistent branding:

"Her songs were alternative pop... but when you were opening her Instagram... is she the same person?" (large label representative, female, 35)

The concept of relational labour (Baym, 2018, p.77) is particularly relevant in this context, as emerging artists navigate the balance between authentic expression and curated presentation. Two artists encountered difficulties in posting regularly, suggesting that maintaining a digital persona can be time-consuming and strategically challenging.

"to be honest, like, um, I don't like to market myself too much…when you're like an emerging artist at the beginning, you have to send DMS to people and sometimes it can feel like trying to convince people to see your value as an artist." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 26)

"I don't think I've ever been at a point where I've dedicated all of my content on social media to like promoting my music…I also like posting the pictures I take…so for me it's very restricting to only post about my music because it's just like it's a part of me but it's not everything you know." (independent r&b artist, female, 26)

Other artists contributed with the important strategies they prefer to utilize in social media promotion, particularly short-form formats, behind-the-scenes content and live sessions to maintain active engagement without over commercializing their digital presence.

In summary, these findings suggest that while social media has become/emerged as a pivotal strategic instrument in the increasingly digitalized music industry. However, determining the actual value of it is indicated by strategic practice, consistency in content themes that align with the artists brand and values.

### 4.2.2. The value of live performances: necessary for growth

The second sub-topic included in the investigation of strategies for success was the value attributed to live performances by artists and professionals. This segment of the research aimed to explore how performing live contributes to an artist's career growth, identify which events are perceived defining milestones in gaining recognition and grasp how artists live acts are used to assess

long-term performance potential. The inquiry surfaced live performances as a key point of discussion in relation to career development, professional credibility and fan-base engagement. Although variability in musical styles and position in the early career stage emerged, participants widely agreed that performing live is more than a task, but an indicator of what makes an artist in the public domain. The three central themes that emerged include – live shows as the ultimate indicator of artistic identity, the highly individualized nature of live act milestones and the role of live acts in allowing artist to foster lasting connection with their audience.

Across responses, live performances were clearly articulated as central to an artist's demonstrating legitimacy and to their long-term growth. Maria, a big label representative described it by 'business card as an artist' and even stating it is 200% important – suggesting it is necessary to being recognized as an established artist. She articulated that even if an artist delivers high-quality recorded music, the incapacity to meet the same standards in person diminishes the chance of succeeding:

*"You can be a superstar on TikTok but if you can't keep people engaged for one and a half hours on stage, it's not happening"* (large label representative, female, 35)

This view indicates that legitimacy is embodied and collectively shared.  Joan, another independent label founder strongly supported this perspective, with Joan positioning live acts as an 'essential' sign of artistic legitimacy. He argued that even in the increasingly digitalized industry, artists must establish credibility beyond the passive exposure provided by streaming platforms and social media. He describes live shows as a medium where artistic quality is put to the test and made visible, calling it 'fundamental' regardless of genre:

"...a real artist, in my opinion, is someone who can play and who can actually perform on stage. It doesn't matter if they sing hip-hop, if they are singers, if they are instrumentalists, it doesn't matter… when I'm looking for artists and when we are signing artists, we are looking for people who usually perform, who can play that music." (independent label founder, male, 40)

Ruben, a manager emphasizes its emotional strength to 'solidify' the relationship with fan-bases beyond the distant proximity of social media:

*"...doing shows and touring is how you create. I think with social media you can like go broad and attract a lot of people, superficially. But if you have shows you can connect with the audience on a deeper level so you can really solidify their fandom of you."*  (independent label manager, male, 35)

For a Simeon, a. signed hip-hop artist, performing live is not only developmental but transformational, as noted in his speech as 'a whole different cup of tea', as it allows artists to become musically adaptable.

*"Contributes a lot to growth. I think it's one of the best ways to reach new people. To reach new people, new followers, new fans. And to connect with the people that like your music. That's such a great way to do that. So it impacts your artist development a lot."*

In Aniola's words, an independent r&b artist, live acts allow people to access a physical showcase of who you really are as an artist - which consequently aids to the formation of a lasting brand identity:

"People need to see who you are as an artist on stage because it's it's very important also in your brand identity." (independent r&b artist, female, 26)

Manuel, an independent hip-hop artist supports this by sharing it has made his music feel tangible:

"I think it's one of the most important things for me. Well, the first time I performed my last album, I knew the music was there. But performing it live kind of made the songs actually feel real." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 25)

All of these perspectives resonate with the notion of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, p.245) illustrating the key significance of physical presence in establishing prestige. In this context, an artist's physical attributes such as, movement and voice represent evidence of their artistic value.

**Milestones for recognition**

The second theme highlighted how live shows act as pivotal career markers and how specific live acts are often attributed to personal or professional milestones. Multiple participants stated venues that are widely considered to carry symbolic value, namely, Melkweg or Paradiso. When artists mentioned these venues, they were presented as either aspirational or a defining moment in their career. For example, Simeon, a signed hip-hop artist, expressed fulfillment about performing at the Melkweg on Liberation Day, describing the moment as 'something I'd tell my grandkids about'. This suggests the significance artists place on the opportunity to perform at a well-known venue, especially during a highly attended public holiday.

"I performed there three times, which is really cool. And that's kind of like a thing because people, especially people in Amsterdam, praise these venues." (signed hip-hop artist, male, 27)

On the other hand, industry experts emphasized how live performance milestones are highly relative to the personal and professional goals of artists themselves. Ruben, label manager argued that an intimate performance in a smaller space could be as impactful as performing to a crowd of thousands. He stressed the importance of prioritizing meaningful engagement over audience numbers:

*"Even doing an initimate performance in a room somewhere is also fantastic…Just doing it and being out there and talking to people while you perform your music Is a great way to connect. The number is a milestone but also the engagement in the shows. I think milestones are really for the artist to decide based on what is their vision is." (independent label manager, male, 32)*

Other industry experts echoed this in various ways. Maria, a big label representative, strongly suggested how individualized performing is:

"Depending on the artist. I think each artist, and there were not so much in front, so I think each artist settles their own milestones in their lives, depending on where they are…" (large label representative, female, 35)

Both an independent label manager and an independent artist describe in the same way that first shows and headline shows are a key milestone, regardless of scale. This indicates that internal validation overrides external prestige:

"At beginner level, obviously, your first performance." (independent, hip-hop artist, male, 26)

"Their first show, for sure."   (independent label manager, male, 32)

For other participants, external validation through venues and festival attendance is highly crucial. Joan, an independent label founder regards performing in well-known venues or being booked in populated seasons are key indicators of artistic credibility. "a big festival and things like that, also those are milestones. These are ways for people to know you… if you do a good show and the people like it, it's great exposure to a large, to a very large audience." -Joan, independent label founder

Hermon, a promoting specialist echoed the relative view of live show milestones:

"I think every time that you sell out a bigger venue than you did before, then that's a milestone." (promoter, male, 30)

This fluctuation in meaning reflects previous literature by Vigerland & Borg (2020) discussing capital conversion in the art world, where cultural achievements, such as performing at a renowned local venue, can be used to accumulate social or economic resources (p.228). Thus,

achieving to get booked to perform a live act at such venues allows artists to gain proof of recognition needed to launch future opportunities – ultimately contributing to progressing in their career trajectory. Additionally, the interview data also reveals how access to notable performance opportunities is often controlled by those who manage entry into venues and organize event line-ups. This dynamic related to previous literature on the live music scene (Gallan,2012, p.240) demonstrating that the landscape serves as a platform that facilitates artistic exposure and as a filtering instrument. Referring back to expert insights that illustrate using live performances as informal assessments to determine an artist's legitimacy prior to further booking or collaboration opportunities.

Beyond the effective attribute of career-building and increasing recognition, interview findings revealed a common themed of live performances unlocking a unique form of connection with the audience. Ruben, an independent label founder, emphasized how delivering music in live format serves as a tool to 'solidify fandom' by giving the audience a tangible experience that is highly personal and emotional:

"…there could only be five people, but then these people hang around afterwards. Just doing it and being out there and talking to people while you perform your music Is a great way to connect." (independent label manager, male, 32)

As stated, he considers shows with very few people to be impactful, especially for allowing an intimate rapport to be built with the early supporters. In this way, organic growth can develop based on intimate personal connection.

This view was similarly found in the artists' perspective about live performances ability to form deeper connections with fans. Aniola, independent r&b artist, shared that for her generation live acts personify artists and strengthen brand identity. This further indicates the value of transcending curated online content into real and embodied delivery. Performances can also transform passive listeners an actively engaged fanbase, by witnessing the physical presence of the artist behind the music.

"If you don't want your career to only be social media based… at some point people need to see who you are as an artist on stage because it's it's very important also in your brand identity." (independent r&b artist, female, 26)

For one independent hip-hop artist, live acts amplify the breadth of his recorded music. He stated that presenting his album on stage brought it to life and made the songs 'actually feel real'.
This narrative of universality/integrality, where production is finalized during performance, serves as evidence of the powerful role live music plays in how artists relate to their own work.

Furthermore, two artists referenced, in a similar way, the impact of opening acts or performance collaboration with more recognized artists. Specifically, even when the audience did not show up to see them in particular, the context allowed them to attract a new crowd and gain an additional number of fans:

"…Even though people didn't come for you, they came for the main artists, they're still there in the room listening to you and watching you perform. Some people are going to appreciate you and follow you after that." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 26)

"…if it's out of your genre and you're performing there then hopefully people are open to like listening to you and if you were invited to perform there then there is an audience for you" (, independent r&b artist, female, 26)

Thus, results suggest live shows not merely being artistic performances, but rather an environment providing audience conversion and expansion, with the tangible portrayal of artistic identity that delivers a lasting emotional experience to the audience.


In summary, the findings extracted from the interview data on the subtopic aiming to investigate the value of live performances reveal that they remain central to how artists in the early-stage experience and develop their career. Ultimately, the function of live acts as an indicator of skill and a personal achievement used as a catalyst for growth.  Showcasing music in a tangible delivery introduces a crucial attribute that is not accessible through streams and social media content in digital platforms. The shared experiences interact with broader structural patterns, such as access to prestigious venues and audience expectations, which may also influence visibility and span of an artist's trajectory. Thus, even in the current increasingly digitalized landscape – stage presence remains as vital evidence of craft.


### 4.2.3. Full-time career commitment


In the analysis of the sensitizing concept Strategies for success, the value of full-time commitment to the music career surfaced. This participant discourse reflected the research investigation regarding the - perceived necessity of artists full-time commitment in achieving success, challenges faced when entering the career full-time, the personal or financial sacrifices artists made in the process and the role of professionals in supporting artists when navigating between their personal and professional role. The findings gathered from nearly almost every participant account, revealed a strong agreement that committing full-time to a career in the music industry – isn't only important, it is non-negotiable. Additional recurring themes reflected diverse

strategies and obstacles, particularly in relation to social status, financial stability and emotional strain of commitment.

Firstly, a consistent view expressed among participants was the highly necessary aspect of being able to commit to a career in music, especially for gaining success. Maria, a big label representative, clearly stated the full-time commitment to be 'not necessary, it's mandatory' and stressing that the artist needs to take full accountability of their brand, content and career trajectory:

"You need to give your 150% because it's your career, not their career... It's a full-time job." Similarly, Joan stated: "You cannot just be like, I'm just going to do two hours a day... If you want to be successful, you have to work full-time on that, of course."   (large label representative, female, 35)

She considers the idea of a conventional career non-existent and possibly detrimental for artists to have if they aspire to be successful. Additional reference to emotional and strategic dimensions framed artists as having full control over their creative output and brand image emphasizing that being in control means being available at all times, creatively and professionally. This insight mirrors previous research on the importance of identity work in cultural labour, demonstrating that artists are responsible for more than just content production, they need to constantly manage construction and performance of their public persona (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011, p. 32).

Other participants framed the necessity of commitment as part of an ample identity transformation, from someone who creates music as a committed hobby to someone who fully represents the role of a professional artists. Masay, an R&B artist and lead of a conservatory band, commented:

"At some point, I was like, okay, if I'm going to make this work, I need to fully treat this like a job. No excuses." (independent r&b artist, male, 25)

Simeon, a signed hip-hop artist, shared a similar experience, outlining the enterprising nature of commitment:

"You've got to be everywhere. You need to constantly show up—to gigs, online, in people's minds. That's not something you do casually." (signed hip-hop artist, male, 27)

All of these perspectives strongly highlight the importance and advantages of fully committing to the career. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the possible disadvantages, or even barriers in the process of committing to take the decision. For example, other participants recognized the

psychological labour required for the highest level of dedication. Lucien, an independent artist, described it as a form of continuous discipline and responsibility:

"There's no one telling you to clock in. But you have to act like someone is. That's the only way you keep pushing forward." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 26)

The findings presented showcase a common experience among the early-stage artists: the shift in approaching music as a committed hobby to accepting it fully as a professional identity. The transformation is not limited to simply dedicating more time to endeavors for the music career, but rather about embracing realignment of self-perception and responsibilities – evident in participants statements about heightened levels of discipline, responsibility and presence – expressed as 'constantly show up' to 'a full-time job' and having 'no excuses' in order to 'make it work'. These insights closely align with previous literature from Everts (2022) analyzing career development in the music industry, where musicians are actively required to create and sustain their professional position. According to the author, achieving success in the music industry landscape largely depends on how competently artists can reach symbolic milestones and accumulate reputation that meet industry and audience expectations. In order to cultivate this, artists need to strategically balance live performances, engagement and persona management (Everts, 2022, p.6) – issues that are mirrored in participants frequent referral to showing up consistently.

Similarly, industry experts accentuated this by contributing with a more reflective insight. An independent label founder, Ruben, verbalized the emotional cost that comes along when relying on art as the main and only source of financial sustenance. From his perspective, when your income depends on how well your music performs, it can implicitly affect an artist's creative direction. He describes this tension by noting that artists are likely to make decisions without following their creative intuition, but for meeting commercial appeal to generate necessary funds to sustain livelihood.

"…a possible challenge is you if your art is how you make a living there is a danger of a lot of pressure that it can create. Because your art has to do well , your music needs to stream well so that might sometimes cause you to make decisions based on what you think would do well instead of making free artistic decisions." (independent label manager, male, 32)

Another perspective that provided an ample view of this challenge, was offered by a promoting specialist. He recognized both of the implications of not committing to the career as the main source of income and conveyed a contradiction – although having an alternative vocation can decrease

artistic drive, during the initial career stage it is necessary to have a reliable source of income parallel to the music career to fund for initial career launch.

"…a side job can decrease your creativity, that will be like an obstacle to create freely. On the other side, you do need money to invest. So, at the start, if you don't have income from a side job and you don't have income from your career, then it will also not work. So, I think that's a big challenge, to have the right balance." (promoter, male, 30)

Nevertheless, the same expert followed with an important distinction that was supported by a big label representative. Specifically, regarding full-time commitment being indicative of a successful artist:

"The ones who go far are not necessarily the most talented. They're the most consistent. They treat it like a full-time gig from day one." (promoter, male, 30)

"You see it clearly. The ones who really make it—they are the ones who take it as seriously as any corporate job. More seriously, even." (big label representative, female, 35)

Even artists themselves widely affirmed this ideal, findings show a subtle tension. For some, the standard of full-time commitment conflicted with reality - increasing internal pressure and inadequacy – shown by the statement made by an independent r&b artist describing her experience:

"I know I should be doing more, committing more hours. But I also need time to breathe. Sometimes I feel like I'm failing just for needing rest." (independent r&b artist, female, 26)

Thus, providing additional support for the emotional labour required by artists in order to sustain full-time commitment, particularly when it may accompany changes in self-worth and self-perceived legitimacy as an artist.

On the other side of the spectrum, an industry professional holding a founding position presented a more objective perspective. Joan argued that full-time commitment is not only attributed to producing music on a regular basis, but also necessary for managing the entrepreneurial side of a career in the music industry – emailing, networking and pitching your work to prospective buyers. He indicated how difficult it is for artists without financial support or pre-existing connections in the industry, stating that while few expectations exist, most artists that have gained success either had money, connections or both to start with. In the absence of a favourable environment the artist was lucky enough to be in, the route to recognition and success is definitively steeper.

"there are artists that come from money or that come from families that are already very well connected. So when you are part of that, you are lucky, you know, because you can already... You can dedicate your life to that, right? But if you come from like a poor neighborhood or you don't have money and so on, things get very challenging, you know? It's one out of 10,000. here are thousands of rappers, and there were thousands of rappers when Kanye came out, and for a number of reasons, he became very successful. But there are many of them that will never be as successful. I know, there are exceptions but it's not common. Connections is the best you can have. Connections and money. If you have connections and money, you're good. You'll be fine." (independent label founder, male, 40)

This accurately reflects the 'assumptions' postulated in the theoretical framework. Drawing from Janosov (2000) including 'luck' or randomness as a defining factor in the early-career stage recognition. As Joan points to chance as a component of career progression, such as pre-existing financial status or even nepotism, when he mentioned Beyonce, a very successful artist, as having support from her highly connected parents.

In summary, full-time commitment is generally perceived, throughout participants perspectives, as a standard requirement for achieving success in the music industry. However, integrated within this ideal are complex dynamics of identity formation, self-management, and structural pressure. Interview narratives incorporate romanticism of cultural labour with its highly instable nature. Overall, the ambition of full-commitment serves both as a motivating force and a source of strain – a tension that artists must continuously balance and negotiate throughout their career trajectory.

**Barriers to full-time pursuit**

While the necessity of full-time commitment clearly evident, participants also frequently expressed the challenges faced in the process of taking the decision to do so, mainly in regard to maintaining a high level of dedication despite the conflict encountered between their personal and professional roles. Many artists, particularly those in the early stages of their careers, encountered having to negotiate  between creative aspirations and practical responsibilities, such as earning a living

An industry expert framed this as a matter of strategic compromise:

"I know many artists who want to go full-time, but they still have to live. They have families, rents to pay. So they work day jobs and do music at night. It's not ideal, but it's necessary sometimes." (promoter, male, 30)

This mirrors an over-arching structural reality in which the demand for entrepreneurial behaviour is frequently detached from the conditions required to support it. Drawing from previous literature by Udo (2025) highlighting that early-stage music artists engage in a continuous process of strategy making which includes balancing artistic development with the need for financial and logistical sustainability becomes central (p. 17). In the present study, this task was often framed to involve considerable compromise, re-evaluation of priorities and negotiation of how they approach artistic roles.

Aniola, an independent R&B artist, verbalized the emotional strain caused by balancing multiple roles:

"I feel guilty when I spend time away from music, but I also need that time to recharge. I'm not a robot. But the industry makes you feel like resting is failure." (independent r&b artist, female, 26)

Once again, in line with Udo's remark that artists are required to reasses both internal and external expectations based on productivity and success. Thus, it appears that an artist's identity is not just shaped by output, but also by their capability to navigate opposing demands over time (Udo, 2025, p. 18).

An industry professional echoed this sentiment by highlighting how the myth of the "always-on" artist clashes with lived experience:

"There's this idea that if you're not working on your music 24/7, you're not serious. But that's just not realistic for everyone. Especially if you don't come from money." (independent label founder male, 40)

Lucien, an independent artist, shared a genuine sentiment from his inner world that underscored the tension between artistic integrity and personal wellbeing:

"Sometimes I go weeks without creating, and I feel like a fraud. But then I remember—I'm also a person. Not just an artist." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 26)

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These perspectives reflect the need for managing boundaries between the professional and personal identity is related to how artists engage with and perform within their music category and expectations. Ramesh et al. (2024) depict how genre classification in the digital era is increasingly automated and data-centered, yet still depends on artists complying to the patterns that algorithms and audiences easily categorize (pp. 2–3). Ultimately, an artist's identity ends up being influenced by ranking systems that reward similarity and genre consistency. The presence of this unpredictable external influence on their career, additional pressure on artists emerges to maintain a stable persona – mediating their personal lives with the uncertain outcomes generated by algorithms.

Despite the conflicts, artists also spoke about strategies they employed to navigate the duality of demands of personal life and vocational ambition. Masay, r&b artist and conservatory graduate, provided his more practical approach:

"I block out two hours a day for music, no matter what. It's not full-time, but it's consistent. And it keeps me moving without burning out." (independent r&b artist, male, 25)

This example of a voluntary structure illustrates an adaptive strategy, that shows how artists develop personal routines to closer approach full-time engagement while in parallel to competing life pressures. Ruben, an independent label owner, emphasized this pattern by arguing that long-term sustainability requires flexible pacing:

"The ones who last are not necessarily the ones who go all in from day one. It's the ones who learn how to manage themselves over time—creatively and emotionally."

**Sacrifices involved in commitment**

Finally, the third theme that surfaced was in regard to the degree of personal and financial sacrifice involved in the decision to commit full-time to a career in music. Participants described not only the absence of stable income but also broader impacts on their lifestyles, relationships, and psychological well-being.

Ruben, an independent label founder who also produces and manages talent, reflected on how financial pressure can influence artistic decision-making:

"…a possible challenge is if your art is how you make a living, there is a danger of a lot of pressure that it can create. Because your art has to do well, your music needs to stream well… you might

make decisions based on what you think would do well instead of making free artistic decisions."
(independent label manager, male, 32)

This insight reflects research on the implications of digital media for creative labour. Hesmondhalgh (2019) demonstrates that, although digital platforms appear to offer increasing autonomy and visibility for artists, they mutually demand heigh levels of self-promotion, digital visibility management, and continuous engagement (p. 112). Ultimately, in the given context, artists are responsible for far more than content creation, they must actively manage their public persona in line with audience expectations and algorithmic systems.

Simeon, a signed hip-hop artist, shared his experience with the personal cost of financial instability:

"I've slept on couches. I've had months with no income. But I kept pushing because I believe in the bigger picture. Still, it's hard. No one really talks about that." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 27)

This depicts a romanticized portrayal of artist's struggle that often conceals the harsh financial reality of cultural labour. While determination and resilience are praised, it is usually only feasible for those backed by a source of economic security. Joan conveyed this structural inequality:

"If you have money or connections, you can afford to commit without worrying. If you don't, you need to hustle twice as hard. It's not a fair game." (independent label founder, male, 40)

Lucien added that sacrifices also extended into his personal relationships:

"I lost a long-term relationship because I was too focused on the music. I was touring, recording, networking. I didn't have time for anything else." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 26)

These narratives illustrate how full-time commitment often requires a deal of sacrifice,  such as failed relationships and emotional fatigue. Participants were realistically aware that pursuing a career in the music industry meant deferring other life aspirations, such as stability, relationships, even health at times.

However, despite these costs, many still framed the choice as ultimately worthwhile. Aniola explained:

"It's hard, yes. But for me, the idea of not doing this—of not trying—feels worse than the struggle. *I'd rather be broke and happy than secure and regretful." (independent r&b artist, female, 26)*

This experience reflects the intrinsically motivated nature and identity driven pursuit of artistic careers. For many, the emotional payoff and sense of purpose outweigh the tangible costs, at least in the short term. As Riesch (2005) states, the culture in hip-hop stands for authenticity and sub-culture validation over commercial establishment. This reflects a standpoint where a creative labour is supported by personal identity rather than material compensation. Yet, supporting this mindset contributes to supporting a system where sacrifice is normalized, as opposed to challenged.

## 4.3. Effective Channels

The third central topic of research involved the investigation of the channels considered as most effective by early-stage artists and industry experts to gain exposure in the music career. The findings are grouped into three investigation aims – the use of Youtube, collaboration with streaming platforms and the current relevance of traditional media. The results gathered from the interviews surfaced a nuanced view, including common themes such as the importance of audience demographics, industry trends and tailoring to platform-specific format.

### 4.3.1. Use of Youtube: challenges limit potential

In today's increasingly digitalized music eco-system, YouTube persists as one of the most accessible and adaptable digital platforms for artists to distribute and promote their work. For independent and emerging hip-hop and r&b artists, YouTube creates a space to host content while permitting organic reach through its recommendation system and global access to visual narratives. Despite this strength, the platform also raises various challenges regarding – visibility, production quality and unpredictability. In overview, results show acknowledgement of the value of the platform supporting he use of it, however considerable strategic obstacles are encountered in gaining considerable exposure.

**Instrument for opportunity and challenge**

Across the interview discussions, artists expressed a combination of optimism and frustration in their experience with Youtube. Simeon, a signed hip-hop artist, described the platform as

foundational to the beginning of his artistic journey and elaborated on the durability and potential of reach:

"For me, everything started with YouTube... Back when I didn't even rap, I just produced music. So back then, it was great.
A video that you posted months ago can just randomly appear on someone's page... all you need is a good title and a good thumbnail." (signed hip-hop artist, male, 27)

Currently, the artist uses Youtube primarily for sharing beats while underlining the importance of frequency in posting:

"I'm releasing a beat like maybe every single day now on YouTube, and it's going very good."
(signed hip-hop artist, male, 27)


Lucien, an independent hip-hop artist, considers Youtube as a valuable archive, but not a central component in the early-stage promotion strategy:

"Nowadays I feel like... especially at our level, it's not the most necessary thing... you need a solid base of listeners to begin with." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 26)

For the others, the obstacle does not relate to the platform's potential, but rather to its demands. Although the feature of long-form content is preferred by most artists, ensuring exposure requires a consistent strategy and uniqueness. Aniola, an independent r&b artist, articulated the challenges of consistency and differentiation:

"There's a lot of content on YouTube... if there's nothing in your content that really differentiates you, it's hard to find your niche." (independent r&b artist, female, 26)

Manuel, an independent hip-hop artist, emphasized a preference for longer content but questioned its current reach compared to other platforms:

"I would love for YouTube to be the most important because I really like long-form content... but the algorithm isn't as potent as TikTok or Instagram." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 25)

**Strategic evolution**

In the industry side of the spectrum, Youtube remains to hold relevance, yet its role has surely evolved with the emergence of innovations in social media. Industry experts widely agreed that YouTube's impact depends on the target audience and content type.
Maria, a big label representative, recognized that Youtube is no longer the primary discovery tool:

"People are not using YouTube to discover. They're using social media… there are a lot of fans coming from TikTok, Instagram, who gather on YouTube to see you, to see the content."
(large label representative, female, 35)

Joan, independent label founder, emphasized the importance and disadvantages of advertising in shaping engagement, proposed a tool to increase engagement – which he questioned the depth of while notably mentioning how saturation contributes to the challenge of standing out:

"If you actually invest a lot in Google Ads, you could actually reach a very large audience… But people may not remember who you are. They're just listening to a playlist or background music. …the industry is saturated. There are many people doing many things. That happens and so, they're all in these playlists and in YouTube lists and so on. And people just play that as, you know, background music. So, you may actually have millions of streams, but they are not listening really to you. " (independent label founder, male, 40)

Ruben, an industry professional in a similar role, appreciated the platforms archival attribute offering content longevity, while recognizing the challenge of capturing attention in audience's increasingly shorter attention span:

"A music video can be discovered ten years from now… it keeps its value. It's not like short form content that is only there for a day or two…. With all the short attention span issues people have, it needs to be clear in the title and thumbnail and in the first seconds of the video what people are going to watch. They need to get Interested in watching it, that's all. There needs to be a good story there."
(independent label manager, male, 32)

Finally, Hermon, a promoting specialist, considers YouTube's strength to be its capacity for complex artistic expression:

"You can show your visual brand with more depth than on TikTok… music videos really show your artistic vision." (promoter, male, 30)

These findings reflect broader theoretical approaches in digital labour and platform capitalism. Cunningham and Craig (2019) coined the 'platformed cultural production' (p.45) that determines practices on platforms like Youtube - where algorithms, audience and monetization interact, and strategic content optimization.  When Simeon and Aniola emphasized the importance of regular uploads and data strategy (e.g., a good title), they exemplify the creators need to adopt platform logic to remain visible in a highly competitive environment – this dynamic provides strong support for the evidence by Dijck et al. (2018) that require creators to 'play the algorithm' in order to stay relevant (p.119).

In overview, these perspectives collectively provide evidence for YouTube's sustained relevance in a changing and dynamic landscape. Artists and professionals similarly recognize the value and potential of long-form content in showcasing brand identity, while recognizing that its effectiveness strongly relies on strategic consistency, saliency and aligning with the target audience digital activity.

### 4.3.2. Streaming: defective and unavoidable

While perspectives regarding the use of Youtube depict it an open and user-centered channel, participants expressed more skepticism when describing their relationship with streaming services such as Spotify or Apple Music. The central research aims concerning this topic matter include the importance of streaming platforms in strategy, perspectives on visibility and financial rewards and strategies used to increase presence.

Streaming platforms surfaced as a primary pillar in the for all the interviewed experts. While it was universally agreed that streaming is a necessary component for music distribution and exposure, significant concerns emerged regarding financial rewards, gatekeeping and algorithm-based visibility. In overview, findings demonstrate the ambiguous position streaming platforms hold in the music landscape – characterized as both paramount and considerably defective.

Streaming platforms have become inevitable in the release and promotion strategies for early-stage artists. For most, they serve as the primary medium to reach new audiences and manage engagement. Aniola, an independent r&b artist shared:

"Streaming... I think right now they're at the center of any artist's development and of their strategy, because it's what we use to release our music. It gives you the opportunity... to reach a bigger number of people." (independent r&b artist, female, 26)

In a similar manner, independent hip-hop artist, Manuel, noted:

"As far as career development, I think it's very important because everybody listens to music there. If you don't put it on streaming, it's just not going to reach many people." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 25)

From a professional standpoint, collaboration with streaming services is more structural, and rather more formal. Maria, big label representative, shared the internal dynamic:

"We are in very close connections with them. We are their partners. These streaming platforms would not be alive without labels or production houses." (big label representative, female, 35)

Thus, results show streaming platforms to have an important role in the career trajectory of artist. Nevertheless, criticism toward these were often encountered. One of concerns that frequently emerged was the insignificant financial return from streaming services, especially for independent artists. Overall, the culture of streaming was viewed as exploitative. Joan, independent label founder remarked:

"Spotify pays extremely little... You have to get hundreds of thousands of streams to make some money. "It only benefits Spotify... Not the artists, not the independent labels." (independent label founder, male, 40)

While Simeon, a signed hip-hop artist exemplified the reality of earnings generated from streaming:

"I think we get paid very little as an artist. And as a producer, we get even less… It's very common to only get 5% or even less of the royalties from streaming." (signed hip-hop artist, male, 27)

Further substantiated by independent r&b artist Masay:

"For 20k streams, I get like 10 euros. Maybe less. It costs a lot of money to produce a song… and you get no money from streams." (independent r&b artist, male,25)

And by the independent hip-hop artist Lucien, illustrating the structural dynamic:

"You already need to pay to have your music accessed on streaming platforms… and then you're paid the lowest amount per stream. Real independent artists are not having a fair share of the pot." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 26)

Beyond the strong financial limitations offered, many artists and industry professionals addressed the gatekeeping inequality of platform algorithms and playlist curating. Ruben, independent label founder pointed out how, often quality independent artist's music gets omitted while already visible artists are amplified:

"It's kind of similar to what the radio used to be like, where it's very gatekept. There's people with power and connections and they decide what gets streamed."(independent label manager, male, 32)

Simeon exposed the untransparent nature of visibility:

"Playlists and their algorithm... that does a lot for your streams. But I also really hate the algorithm. It's very hard to know how it works." (signed hip-hop artist, male, 27)

While Lucien expressed frustration toward the entire system as being biased to its core:

"Algorithmic playlists are going to push these people... not someone that only has 50 to 100 listeners per month. It's not in their interest to shed light on them."(independent hip-hop artist, male, 26)

Aniola validated this view through her own experience:

"Most of my streaming revenue comes from songs that got playlisted… but if you're not playlisted, the reach is minimal." (independent r&b artist, female, 26)

Furthermore, a persistent challenge brought on by streaming platforms, are the psychological complications of performance metrics. Participants outlined the strain created by publicly visible streaming metrics and the continuous hustle to improve digital reach. Maria, a big label representative, noticed how this can act as a demotivating force:

"It's frustrating… you see how many streams that song did, and it's like you're in school, you're getting a grade for your work. Some artists... get super demotivated if their album didn't do numbers." (big label representative, female, 35)

Likewise, Manuel, an independent artist, frames his interaction with the platform as frustrating and puzzling:

"I have no idea how the Spotify algorithm works. I've tried messaging these big playlist owners… but it's hard to even know which ones are real." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 25)

Finally, a notable finding that emerged was the misalignment between high streaming performance and active audience engagement. Many participants argued that having large streaming metrics are not a reliable indicator of a presence – as they fail to reflect the tangible evidence of support such as live show attendance or fan-base connection. Ultimately, real-life performance is perceived as a more valid indicator of an artist's presence than digital metrics. Ruben, an independent label founder, endorses this in his view:

"If your music has a lot of streams because it's in a playlist, you don't actually know if these people like your song or not. They're probably not coming to your show or buying your merchandise." (independent label manager, male, 32)

The finding deducted from this perspective, indicates that streaming platforms deliver passive listeners, rather than devoted fans – reducing its long-term value unless used to complement more trusted strategies.

In overview, the findings regarding the willingness to collaborate with streaming platforms evidentiate the ambiguous role that streaming plays in shaping the career trajectories of early-stage hip-hop artists. Although serving as an indispensable tool for distribution and reaching listeners, they mutually induce new forms of gatekeeping and profit from content while providing insufficient compensation. This aligns with literature on platform capitalism. Hesmondhalgh (2021) demonstrates that the streaming system reinforces pre-existing cultural inequalities in the digital realm by capitalizing on creative labour without providing fair returns to creators (p.89). Additionally, van Dijck et al., (2018) evidence the power imbalance between platforms and their users, where artists are increasingly reduced to performance metric data within an infrastructure that has profit as its main goal and decentralizes creator autonomy.

### 4.3.3. Traditional Channels

In the progressively digital-centered landscape, traditional media platforms – such as, radio, TV and press, remain relevant on the symbolic and strategic level. This encompasses the focus on traditional media supporting the investigation of the sensitizing concept effective channels. Significant themes that emerging from interview discourse included the impact of traditional media in on artist's legitimacy, accessibility to presence and the changing role of the channel in comparison to digital channels.

Findings generally show complex framing of traditional channels role in today's music industry and in shaping artist's career trajectory. In overview, the array perspectives recognize it as a legitimizing instrument with limited accessibility, particularly suitable for popular genres, more advanced career stages and mainstream culture. Presence on traditional mediums continues to be related to credibility and prestige, although the audience count on these is increasingly lower.

**Symbolic value and credibility**

A common theme that surfaced across participants insights was that traditional channels provide a form of legitimacy that can hardly be attained through digital media presence alone. Participants perceived visibility in press coverage or radio appearance as a badge of approval, as demonstrated trough the account made by the industry expert Joan, independent label founder:

"It's still important to get that coverage in press or radio, because it says something about your work. It's like a kind of validation…For some partners, especially in the live sector or funding bodies, seeing that an artist got played on the radio or featured in an established outlet still counts."(independent label founder, male, 40)

Similarly, Maria, a big label representative, noted in support:

"We still do press runs. Traditional media gives you credibility, especially when you're working with an emerging artist trying to be taken seriously by bigger industry players." (big label representative, female, 35)

These industry remarks point to outlined in the theoretical framework. The concept coined in Bourdieu (1986) of institutionalized cultural capital, demonstrating that recognition accredited by established institutions – such as leading media outlets or top-tier collaborations – strengthen an artist's status within the industry (p.248).

**Limited Access**

While the prestige accredited to traditional media was evident throughout participant discourse, traditional channels were characterized as exclusive and criticized for limited accessibility for emerging players in the industry. Many participants from the independent route echoed this limitation - voicing that access / appearance is often reserved for artists with pre-existing industry connections or formerly accomplished status. Ruben, an independent label founder exemplifies this in his dialogue:

"Getting into traditional media is still very gatekept. Like, to get on national radio or in certain magazines, you need to have someone pushing for you or already be part of a known label. It's not something you just send your song to and get featured."

While Lucien, an independent artist, shared a similar experience:

"It feels like there's a filter, like unless you already have buzz or co-signs, you're not getting on radio. It's not really open to just anyone with good music." (independent hip-hop artist, male, 26)

These findings provide evidence in confirmation of the gatekeeping theoretical framework outlined by Shoemaker and Vos (2019), that constitutes media institutions exert selective control over what content appears in the public domain – commonly favouring artists that align with the dominant commercial culture expectations (p.149).

An additional key theme that was extracted from the array of insights prevailed from the accounts regarding the relevance of traditional media varying with genre and target demographic fit. For instance - pop and older audience segments continue to hold a dominant role. Conversely, for younger audiences with high media-literacy, traditional media appears to be decentralized. Aniola, an independent r&b artist provides support for this, when she noted:

"I don't really aim for radio or TV. My audience is online. They're on Instagram, TikTok, YouTube. So I focus there. I think traditional media still matters more for genres like adult contemporary or maybe jazz or more mainstream pop." (independent r&b artist, female, 26)

Masay, a conservatory graduate and independent artist, expressed a similar view:

"I don't think my fans really check for magazines or radio. But I do think it helps for reputation — like, if you can say you were on this big station or featured in that article, it looks good." (independent r&b artist, male,25)

These experiences connect with previous research from Bonini and Gandini (2019) analyzing media ecosystems, that demonstrates the influence of factors such as – platform affordances, demographics and cultural segments that shape audience engagement, substantiating that the effectiveness of a media channel varies based on age and alignment with cultural context (p.68). Additionally, distinctions support the findings of Szymkowiak et al. (2020) reflecting that audience engagement in media is context-dependent and differs by digital literacy, age and individualized algorithm exposure (p.6).

**Facing digitalization: declining impact**

Several participants agreed that traditional media still offers credibility to artist's, which can benefit steady advancement their career trajectory – practical capability to gain followers and increase fan base count in traditional media is significantly limited compared to the tools provided by digital media. Simeon, a signed hip-hop artist, shared his observation of about this:

"I've been played on the radio before and it's cool, but it didn't really move the needle. Like, it doesn't convert into actual fans like TikTok or playlists can." (signed hip-hop artist, male, 27)

Hermon, a specialist in live promoting, noted in a similar way:

"I used to think getting on national radio would change everything, but now it's more like a nice-to-have, not a need-to-have. A good Spotify placement or viral moment on socials can do much more." (promoter, male, 30)

These findings depict the academic insights used as a foundation for the topic list regarding the persistent role of traditional media in fostering artistic visibility. Cain (2011) underscores the impact that conventional channels, such as radio, press and TV - continue to have in establishing credibility, specifically within distinct demographics and industry segments (p.75). Ultimately, aspiring artists are now required to navigate presence across both digital and traditional platforms – leveraging streaming for visibility and pursue appearance in radio for cultural validation.

In summary, the results gathered from the interview discussions reveal that traditional media continue to play an important role in artist legitimacy, yet its significance has changed in shaping emerging artist's career trajectory. It's symbolic value attribute and credibility support is unquestionable, yet - the limited access to establish presence is a central concern alongside the limited engagement return that are short of the dynamic instantaneous interaction provided by digital platforms. In overview, results present transformation in how early-stage artists navigate visibility in their media presence.

5.Conclusion

In the investigation regarding the key milestones and strategies of early-career Hip-hop and R&B artists career trajectories, valuable insights emerged from the expert interviews with early-stage hip-hop and r&b artists and industry professionals. The sum of the perspectives allowed for important conclusions to be developed about the intersection of complex dynamics that shape the career trajectories of early-stage artists. Across the three primary sensitizing concepts utilized for the investigation – career milestones, strategies for success and effective channels – a key conclusion surfaced: the accumulation and conversion of cultural capital are the foundation of artistic development. Symbolic recognition from gatekeepers or tangible demonstration of performing live, each milestone and strategic decision reflects to creating and leveraging cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), providing additional support evidence for previous research by Vigerland and Borg (2018), which illustrates capital conversion as a central practice in the art industry. The findings gathered demonstrate that careers in music are part of the art market as they require extensive and similar challenges in creative labour – facing similar barriers such as gatekeeping, early-stage restricted access and the conversion of financial capital for cultural capital – arising as the most valuable tool in growing a career in the creative sector and achieving recognition.

Digitalization presents increased opportunity and unlocks more accessible routes to recognition – at surface level. When examining with closer inquiry, analysis demonstrates that the rise of social media and streaming services introduce challenges that threaten the presumed opportunities. While having great potential for offering high visibility in terms of instant reach, the degree of valuable engagement is revealed as scarce and misleading for indicating artistic quality and loyal fan-base engagement. Performance indicators may generate significant streaming numbers, but rarely do these indicate true presence (Baym, 2018, p. 34). Importantly, a true indicator of credibility is authenticity. Concluding that the primary ingredient for recognition is authenticity (Riesch, 2005, p.2), that was revealed as being demonstrated through stage presence and live performance delivery. This represents one of the main takeaways about milestones and strategies – presence. For artists to build and maintain their career in the music industry, they must continuously create and maintain presence on a regular basis, across channels, being present in both digital and traditional media. Unfortunately, artists are faced with barriers in achieving this standard – with milestones being increasingly ambivalent and individualized, audience demand for differentiation in a saturated market increases tension and requires artists to devote a surplus of labour, without getting fair compensation in the process. The demands enhance the necessity of full-time commitment to the career and being financially stable during this process. This translates to sacrificing personal and financial elements in order to fully devote maximum time and effort in order to gain recognition. Reflecting other significant conclusions about the necessity of financial stability and full-time

commitment to a career in the music industry. These strategic requirements strongly contradict each other. Gatekeeping similarly continues to hold determining power of influence in deciding which artists subjectively deserve access to milestones and gain recognition. Although the digitalization of the industry showed initial signs of decentralized power, findings demonstrate that unbalanced structures are reproduced and even enhanced by the algorithmic curation. Concluding that digitalization has merely transformed existing gatekeeping inequalities in more concealed ways and similarly as powerful – even more so when artists are reduced to data-driven profiles and need to rely on unpredictable algorithmic visibility. In answering the research question underlying this study, milestones and strategies exhibit a highly fluctuating significance, subject to growing challenges when entering the market in the early-career stage. The careers in hip-hop and r&b genres centered in the investigation diverge from the conventional expectations and career trajectories in mainstream culture. Conclusions contribute with an in-depth comprehension of the pursuit of recognition through alternative, more individualized routes – emphasizing the structures and position of the genres within the broader music industry.

5.1 Limitations and Future Research

The present study includes several limitations, that are important to critically acknowledge. Firstly, issues of reliability and trustworthiness may be attributed to participant variation in experience - specifically related to position in the early-stage or degree of industry expertise. These may have influenced interpretation and framing of key concepts, indicating heterogeneity in the participant sample. Nevertheless, the final artist sample was somewhat homogenous in terms of age, slightly improving the generational subjectivity in perspectives.

Furthermore, the positionality of participant and researcher roles should be considered. For instance, multiple industry experts held dual roles, such as managers that also hold a producer in their label, which may have introduced bias on certain systematic issues – background characteristics may have increased the degree of subjectivity on certain topics such as gatekeeping or institutional dynamics. Interpretation of the conclusions made by the present study should be taken with caution by taking the sampling outcome limitations into consideration.

In regard to methodology, the implementation of semi-structured interviews for data collection facilitated an in-depth investigation of participant experiences, but also attributed an interpretative role on the researcher. Thus, subjectivity and positionality of the researcher – such as pre-determined knowledge and assumptions – may have influenced the analysis process and outcome of findings. Finally, due to the purposive sampling strategy utilized and small sample size, generalizing findings to the wider research context is not permitted. Conclusions generated from this

study offer conceptual generalizability – contributing with theoretically supported insights on early-career strategies and milestones for success.

Artists and industry professionals must learn to adapt and navigate to the evolution of the landscape, considering the interplay of challenges, maximizing benefits in chosen strategies and minimize risks and tensions when entering a rigid industry that prioritizes legacy over new talent.

Leading to the conclusion that: media is as important as ever, and it will increasingly become more important, particularly in the music sector of the creative industries.

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**Appendix A**

**1. Overview of Artist Participants**

| Participant Number | Gender | Genre | Industry status | Nationality | Age |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Male | Hip-Hop | Signed | Dutch | 27 |
| 2 | Male | Hip-Hop | Independent | French | 26 |
| 3 | Female | R&B | Independent | Beninese | 26 |
| 4 | Male | R&B | Independent | Dutch | 25 |
| 5 | Male | Hip-Hop | Independent | Dutch | 25 |

**Overview of Industry Participants**

| Participant Number | Gender | Role | Industry Status | Location | Age |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Male | Manager | Independent Label | Amsterdam, NL | 32 |
| 2 | Female | Representative | Large label | Milan, Italy | 35 |
| 3 | Male | Founder | Independent Label | Barcelona, Spain | 40 |
| 4 | Male | Promoter | Marketing Specialist | Rotterdam, NL | 30 |

**Interview Guide A (Artist Sample)**

**1A. Career Milestones:** key practices that artists engage in to build a favourable reputation that contributes to establishing career success (Everts,2022, p.2)

**1.1. The value of signing with a major record label**: Research suggests that pursuing a deal with a major record label is a central milestone, and is often associated with higher visibility and resources (Arakelyan et al.,2018, p.12)

1. Have you pursued or desired signing with a record label? Why or why not?
2. How important do you consider the size of the record label in the opportunities
3. What are added opportunities you identify that getting a record deal can provide?

3. Do you think getting signed by a major label is seen as an important milestone compared to an independent path?

4. How important is the size of the record label in an artist reputation?

**1.2. The value of financial incentives**: Literature demonstrates financial rewards can positively affect career advancement (Young, Beckman &amp; Baker, 2012). The aim of this topic is discovering the importance of financial success as a milestone in career success.

5. How important do you consider financial success as a measure of success?

6. How have financial rewards (such as partnerships or streaming revenue) influenced your career development?

7. In your perspective, how necessary is being financially stable in creative freedom and career life span?

**1.3. The value of reputation in career success**: Drawing from research demonstrating that a building a favourable reputation in the music industry is particularly crucial for early-stage artists, offering additional support in their career development (Everts et al., 2022, p.3). The topic aim is extending the understanding of the role of reputation in securing an established career.

8. How do you describe your reputation in the industry and level of influence over your development?

9. What are some specific strategies you have applied to build or sustain your reputation?

10. Do you believe that having a strong reputation can have establish more presence than user metrics such as your social media following or streaming numbers?


**2. Strategies for success**


**2.1. Use of social media marketing**: With the increased digitalization, independent artists can benefit from self-promotion on social media to connect with their fanbase while building their brand. (Kamara, 2018, p-22)

possible interview questions

10. To what extent do you promote yourself in the digital realm?

11. How important is social media your career development?

12. How do you communicate your artist brand identity?

13. What tools do you use to reach your fanbase?

**2.2. Value of live performances**: Performing live can increase artists exposure, showcasing their value in the physical realm. (Garner &amp; Channell, 2019, p.)

14. How does performing live contribute to your growth as an artist?

15. What kind of venues or events that you recall as an important milestone in gaining recognition?

16. How can you describe the importance of live acts to visually showcase your talent?

**2.3. Value of full commitment to career**: Pursuing a full-time career in music comes with challenges, especially in the streaming era. (Ramesh, 2024) emphasizes the emergence of music streaming has resulted in an unequal distribution of earnings for artists. In this environment, artists are often required to seek alternative sources of revenue. However, additional evidence suggests that artists adopting an entrepreneurial strategy including artistic and managerial responsibilities are more likely to gain career success (Udo, 2025, p.16). The aim is gathering insights on a how important it was for the artists to completely devote their energy to build a successful career in music.

17. At what point did you decide to pursue a full-time career in music, and what factors influenced this decision?

18. How has navigating between creative and professional responsibilities influenced your career trajectory?

19. Did you sacrifice personal or financial aspects in your full-time commitment to a career in music?

20. What do you consider to be necessary to for commitment? What was your mindset in relation to the possibility of failure?


**3. Effective channels**: mediums utilized by artists to build engagement and increase visibility. (Burgess, 2021, p.24)

**3.1. Use of Youtube in gaining exposure**: Previous research findings suggest Youtube has increasingly become a central platform for creatives to showcase their talent and build a community (Cunningham &amp; Craig, 2019, p.2). The aim is to discover the relevance of using the platform for emerging artists in early stages.

21. To what extent do you consider Youtube to be a useful platform for promoting music and building your fanbase?

22: What are some challenges or benefits you encounter with Youtube as an emerging artist?

23: Have any opportunities emerged from promoting on Youtube?


**3.2. Willingness to collaborate with streaming services**: Streaming platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music transformed the nature of music consumption, possibly

bringing additional challenges on artists' rise to success (Wlömert &amp; Papies, 2016, p.325). The aim is to find insights about implications of streaming services in artists career trajectory.

24: How important are streaming platforms (such as Spotify or Apple Music) in your strategy?

25: What is your perspective on the visibility and financial rewards artists can receive from streaming platforms?

26: What kind of strategies have you tried to increase your presence on streaming platforms?

**3.3. The relevance of traditional channels**: Although digitalization has altered the process of music promotion, traditional mediums continue to have an important role in reaching larger audience segments and legitimizing emerging artists (Cain, 2011, pp.16-17). The topic aim is to investigate the value of artists' presence in traditional channels in their process of becoming visible.

27: Have you appeared on traditional media such as tv, radio or press? How has that influenced your reputation?

28: In comparison with digital platforms, how powerful do you currently consider traditional channels for legitimizing artists?

29: How challenging is establishing presence across both digital and traditional platforms?

**Interview Guide B (Industry Professionals)**

Introduction

- What is the title of your job position?
- When did you start working in the music industry?
- What are your main job responsibilities in your current position?
- What is the frequency and proximity of your interaction with the artists you represent at your label?

**1B. Career Milestones**: key practices that industry professionals consider important in establishing artists career success

**1.1. The value of signing with a major record label** (Everts, 2022; Arakelyan et al., 2018)

1. In your perspective, how important is signing with a major label in growing an artist's career path?

2. What are the opportunities that getting a major record deal provide compared to an independent route?

3. How important is the label's reputation in an artist's legitimacy? How the label's role in an artist's career declined in regard to the past?

**1.2. The value of financial incentives** (Young, Beckman &amp; Baker, 2012)

5. How crucial is financial success when evaluating an artist's potential?

6. In what ways do financial rewards contribute to an artist's career growth?

7. What is the relationship between artists' financial stability and their creative decisions?

**1.3. The value of reputation** ( Everts et al., 2022)

8. How do you, as a person in the industry, define and identify an artist's reputation? Can you name some indicators?

9. What strategies do you advise artists to employ in order to build or sustain a strong reputation?

10. Can you describe to what extent is reputation linked to audience engagement metrics?

2B. Strategies for success: favourable approaches that industry professionals support in building a successful career in music

**2.1. Use of social media marketing** (Kamara,2018)

11. Do you encourage or guide artists to utilize social media as a tool for career development?

12. In your own practice, how crucial is social media in evaluating or increasing an artist's visibility?

13. Is navigating between artists' brand identity and digital presence a common concern in social media promotion?

**2.2. Value of live performances** (Garner &amp; Channell, 2019)

14. What is the weight of live performances in an artist's growth?

15. What are some types of shows or events that you identify as a milestone in an artist's career?

16. How do you and other industry experts use live shows to assess long-term performance potential?

**2.3. Value of full commitment to career** (Ramesh, 2024; Udo, 2025)

17. In your perspective, how necessary is an artist's full-time commitment to their music career to success?

18. What are some challenges you observed that artists face when entering the career full-time?

19. From a managerial aspect, how do you support artists when navigating their creative and professional role?

**3B. Effective Channels**: platforms perceived as most relevant in ensuring artist's visibility

**3.1 Use of Youtube in generating exposure** (Cunningham &amp; Craig, 2019)

20. How effective do you consider Youtube to be as a tool for artist discovery?

21. What are some useful strategies you identify when using this platform?

22. What advantages or challenges do you encounter with Youtube?

**3.2. Relationship with streaming services** (Wlömert &amp; Papies, 2016)

23. What role do streaming platforms, such as Spotify and Apple Music, have in artists' exposure?

24. To what extent do you collaborate with streaming platforms in your practice?

25. What challenges do you face with the rise of the streaming industry, and how do you manage these in your practice?

**3.3. The relevance of traditional channels** (Cain, 2011)

26. How powerful is traditional media in legitimizing artists today?

27. From your experience, what factors differentiate traditional channels from digital channels in terms of reach?

28. How accessible is presence on traditional channels for artists in their early career stage?

29. In what ways do you guide artists to maintain their presence?

**Appendix B**

**Coding Frame**

| Theme | Sub-theme | Illustrative Quote |
|---|---|---|
| Industry Gatekeeping | Strategic role of Labels | "And if you really want to reach the top level and become an extremely known artist, then I think you have to join a major label. Because I think they still have the grip on the top part of success." |
| | Label role transforming | "I don't think it's declined. It's a bit shifted. I don't see any decline in the label's role I see year on year the label is changing" |
| | Symbolic value of traditional media | "I think still powerful, as in it gives you a wider range. It reaches a very different audience, maybe an older audience, which can be really good, you know, to be to be more like broadly known." |
| Institutional & Financial Barriers | Necessary sacrifice to full-time career commitment | "It's not necessary. It's mandatory. If you want to do this, it's mandatory to have full-time commitment." |
| | Insufficient Compensation | "And then when it's access, you're paid the lowest amount of money, uh, per, per stream. So, you can't even, you can't even like make money from streams, to be honest, if, if you're not like a big, big artist." |
| | Importance of financial incentives | "it just gives you more space to invest in whatever. So, if they earn financial rewards, then they can invest it in, for example, production to get a higher-level product." |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Authenticity as Central | Building Organic Reputation | "You can look at social media followers or Spotify monthly listeners, but I think what for me the most important metric would be is looking at numbers if you do shows and people show up. Because you can have a lot of monthly Listeners or Instagram followers but then the monthly listeners are because you were in a paid playlist the followers are because you are attractive, I don't know. And when you do a show nobody comes to your show because they don't care about your music that much. Well, that is then a more important thing for me to look at." |
| | DIY Distribution | 'Now that everything is digital, everyone with a laptop can actually make music. For better or worse, but that's the reality of it. I don't think the labels are as important or as necessary as they were.' |
| | Brand Alignment | "The most important thing is that you are honest, and you are yourself. And you show that in your music but also in your presence. You just do that for a very long time and you're not afraid to make mistakes, you just keep it going because that's who you are and it's authentic." |

**AI Declaration**

**Student Information**
Name: Sofia Stefanica
Student ID: 736433
Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000
Supervisor Name: Erik Hitters
Date: 25.06.2025

Declaration:

**Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools**
I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:
-   Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
-   ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
-   Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
-   Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
-   Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

☐ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically [Name of the AI Tool(s) or Framework(s) Used], in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

☐ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature:

Date of Signature: 25.06.2025

**Extent of AI Usage**
☒ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

**Ethical and Academic Integrity**
☒ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated

material have been properly referenced in accordance
with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this
declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full
responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and
am prepared to discuss and explain the role of
generative AI tools in my creative process if required
by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further
affirm that I have used generative AI tools in
accordance with ethical standards and academic
integrity expectations.

Signature:

Date of Signature: 25.06.2025


Prompts Used:

"Look up existing literature on artist's careers, specifically in CI and music"

"Justify the use of expert interviews as a data collection method. provide a few points that i can write
out myself with citations if necessary"

"Does the following statement adhere to the correct APA7 format guidelines: 'Nancy Baym's work
on relational labor highlights how artists perform emotional and interactive labor to foster intimacy
with fans, often blurring the boundaries between personal and professional identities"

"Provide an example of a good participant recruitment message appropriate for social media"

"Provide possible advantages of using an inductive-deductive methodological approach in qualitative
analysis"

"Propose a good order structure for a theoretical argumentation section that facilitates clarity and
conciseness"

"Explain Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital in a concise way so I can apply the framework to my
own thesis research"

"Look up relevant applications of Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital in the context of the
music industry of creative careers"

"Summerize the literature: Leyshon, A., & Watson, A. (2025). The rise of the platform music
industries. and Schieb-Bienfait, N., & Emin, S. (2023). Between Professionalisation and
Marginalisation in the Creative (and Cultural) Industries: A New Look of the Work of Musicians in a
French Large Creative City. In Creative (and Cultural) Industry Entrepreneurship in the 21st Century
(pp. 135-149). Emerald Publishing Limited."

'Suggest possible codes I can assign to this quote on the topic of reputation …'

"Propose possible codes for a preliminary brainstorming format for this quote regarding the
importance of major labels as a career milestone…"

'What are some possible ways I can link platform logic to gatekeeping in the music industry?'

"Can you briefly explain the implications of digitalization on visibility in the context of careers in the
music industry?"

"Help me structure a paragraph that explains the interplay between authenticity and visibility"

"Brainstorm ideas for themes regarding recognition in the digital age"

"Proof read this content for grammar and academic tone without generating or replacing new content"