

**Masterminding the Music Industry: How Strategically “Weird” Promotion Functions in a Successful Musician’s Career**

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## Abstract

This research focuses on the discovery and dissection of the process in which a musical artist goes from a niche performer to an acclaimed and beloved idol seemingly overnight. In today's digital era, the success of musicians often hinges not only on their talent, but also on their ability to harness the power of strategic promotion to encourage fame and global recognition. With an emphasis on the importance of having sectored listening groups – affectionately referred to as “weird people” by author Seth Godin – this research elaborates on how listening styles heavily impact an artist's following size.

A comprehensive analysis of singers Taylor Swift, Noah Kahan, and Chappell Roan's journeys through rising celebrity status revealed artistic success is reliant on four distinct elements: talent, discography accessibility, the artist's interpersonal skills with their fans, and consumer behavior. Author Malcom Gladwell coined the term “the tipping point” to encompass the notion that an artistic catalyst is not solely the result of profound vocal talent, but the result of a series of changes leading to a “boiling over” of a musician's fame and notoriety. These three changes – or “rules” as Gladwell refers to them – are the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context. The entirety of this research led to the conclusion that “overnight viral sensations” are anything but curated overnight. Calculated promotional moves alongside talented individuals are what ultimately lead to global fame.

## Introduction

Gone are the days of landing a record deal being the sole indicator of a musician's success. Aspiring superstars no longer consider a contract with a music label as the turning point where they have “made it” in the industry.

The explosion of digital platforms and social media has transformed the landscape of the music industry, offering both new and seasoned musicians alike unparalleled opportunities for exposure and engagement with audiences worldwide.

The perception of popularity and need for a high number of chart-topping songs has emerged as a fundamental factor of success for many well-known artists due to the staggering ability of viral content to be rapidly shared across digital and physical platforms in seconds – often propelling lesser known musicians to fame and fortune. Theoretically, anyone can post a song on the internet and have the chance at it gaining traction and catapulting them to the top of listeners’ playlists.

However, the path to fame is not solely determined by the quality of the music itself – rather, it is increasingly influenced by the strategic deployment of promotion techniques aimed at capturing the attention and loyalty of audiences whether they would organically follow the musician or not.

Case studies including pop-superstar Taylor Swift, A-lister indie-folk musician Noah Kahan, and queer pop-superstar-in-the-making Chappell Roan will be dissected to determine the common underlying factors to their success – and how an aspiring musician might replicate it.

This research paper aims to explore the multifaceted relationship between promotional strategies and the virality of musicians, delving into the mechanisms through which influential interventions shape the visibility, resonance, and longevity of artists’ careers in the digital era.

## Methods

This research project relied heavily on a mixed-methods approach to assist in analyzing the mechanism(s) that allow a musician to go from having no following to being known around the world – in other words: configuring the tipping point of their career.

The research primarily relies on secondary sources including book chapters, online articles, and documentaries to supplement findings. Although the music industry was established in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, this research focuses on studying the digital properties of the modern industry that allow for a musician to gain a following seemingly overnight. Qualitative case studies centered around three notable musicians at varying stages in their careers – Taylor Swift, Noah Kahan, and Chappell Roan – will focus on identifying the promotional methods used and their effect on audience engagement and reach.

Quantitative analysis will involve compiling data related to social media engagement, as well as streaming and chart numbers to determine any correlations between promotional efforts and viral outcomes. Since the focus is on the digital age, most of the supplemental sources were produced within the last decade to yield a more accurate understanding of the current state of the music industry and the musicians within it.

## Four Interconnected Factors

Four central elements determine a musician's potential to go from only being known in a niche community – such as only having a TikTok following – to being known globally: talent, consumer behavior, discography accessibility, and the artist's interpersonal skills with their fans. Artists like Taylor Swift, Noah Kahan, and Chappell Roan are prime examples of these factors working seamlessly together in their favor.

Talent is not an all-encompassing term, and it does not directly translate to an artist's capability to perform for a crowd – for the purpose of this research, it simply means the artist has a natural aptitude for vocals.

However, a 1985 study published in the American Economic Review clarified that stardom may be independent from talent altogether, citing that “consumption requires

knowledge” (Adler, 1985). Meaning, for individuals to consider a shared interest in a musical artist, there must first be a mutual baseline understanding of who the artist is and some songs they sing. Without this shared knowledge, no singular discussion is possible, and no one artist can outrank the rest.

Access to new music has expanded immensely in the last two decades with streaming platforms like Spotify available to the public – which operates with over 600 million monthly active users (Dean, 2024). These platforms allow artists of every-sized following to release music to the online community with or without a record label’s assistance (Spotify for artists, 2024). Spotify specifically is a free channel to use and gives the artist data-driven insight on what their listeners’ musical preferences are.

With the world being more connected than ever due to access to the internet, musicians can interact with their fans in a much faster and more intimate way than even twenty years ago. The social media outlet TikTok is favored by musicians and their managers (if they are signed with a record label) because of the free app’s over 1 billion monthly active users (Woodward, 2023).

This short-form video application centers around content created for and consumed by its users. While most of the application’s data is comprised of choreographed dances to snippets of songs or other viral sounds, musicians have taken to making personalized videos to interact with their fans and potential followers (Whateley, 2023). Society largely appreciates a celebrity’s ability to relate to their audience, and TikTok is a prime example of that.

The average attention span has declined from 75 seconds in 2012 to 47 seconds in 2023 (Mills, 2023). TikTok is capitalizing on society’s lack of attentiveness by popularizing the use of thirty-second videos to keep users engaged. Often, musicians will post videos to their TikTok

accounts with a portion of their newest song playing in the background. Not only does this engage followers in what the artist has to say, but it also garners more interest in the artist's new material.

The musician's original use of the song snippet will create a chain reaction of sorts where creators on the app will use the audio in the background of their choreographed dances, story times, and other interactive videos posted for their followers (Whateley, 2023). This new-aged version of the game telephone can sometimes acquire so much interest in a song that it charts before being released to the public.

Accessibility plays an important role in a musician's chance at stardom. While the majority of a musician's fans support them on streaming platforms, it is not enough to have a singly delivery mode. Streaming music, purchasing CDs or vinyl records, and downloading shared music files are diverse listening channels that consumers tend to combine in various ways (Weijters & Goedertier, 2016).

Still considering consumer behavior, it is essential to note that often these mixes of delivery modes are because of the level of difficulty there is to have a discussion with other individuals about the music. For example, if a person only listens to CDs, they may struggle to discuss music that was newly released with their colleagues.

## The Psychology of Marketing and Promotion

Malcom Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point* explains that the best way to understand the titled phenomenon is by thinking of it like an epidemic. Ideas and messages spread just like viruses do, with one dramatic moment in which everything changes: the tipping point. Contagiousness and the fact that little causes can have big effects are two characteristics that rely

on the aforementioned “dramatic moment” and gives the greatest insight into why modern change happens in the way it does (for any major situation, not just musical artist stardom).

The third property of something’s tipping point – the dramatic moment – abandons the notion of proportionality. In other words, sometimes big changes follow from small events, and sometimes these changes can happen very quickly. Despite most of society being gradualists – having expectations set by the steady passage of time – the tipping point is a certainty for most everything (Gladwell, 2000, p. 114).

Three rules of this phenomenon provide direction for how to go about reaching the tipping point for any facet of life: the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context.

Even today, with most of the world’s developed nations remaining connected through the Internet, word of mouth perhaps remains as the most important form of human communication. As Gladwell puts it, “... word-of-mouth appeals have become the only kind of persuasion that most of us respond to anymore.” It is not enough to put out a showstopping advertisement and wait for new customers to appear. Success is heavily dependent on the involvement of Connectors: people who seemingly know everyone and have a knack for bringing the world together.

Not only are Connectors invaluable for the number of people they know, but also the varying *types* of people they know. The idea behind “six degrees of separation” is a prime example of this. Because not all degrees are equal, most human associations can be made with six or less links, regardless of world location and assumed difficulty of linking two people.

To capture the magnitude at which the role of Connectors play in the world, it is helpful to note that the closer an idea (or musician name and work) gets to a Connector, the more power and opportunity it has.

However, Connectors are not the sole people who matter in the context of a social epidemic. For Connectors to gather information to spread, they often utilize Mavens.

While similar, Mavens usually do not have the extensive network that Connectors do. Mavens accumulate a wealth of knowledge about a lot of different subjects, then share this “inside scoop” with others. They know information the rest of us do not, which is the most valuable piece in starting social epidemics.

The context of a message matters as much as the nature of the messenger does. “Stickiness” is how memorable a message is for an audience and is the difference between an audience being spurred to action and sitting idle.

In the advertising business, there is an adage that for an advertisement to be remembered, a viewer must have seen it at least six times. While that may be helpful advice for decades-old, multi-million dollar companies like Coca-Cola, it is not the best advice for musicians in today’s “Information Age.” Stickiness has become a problem in today’s world. Much of the media we consume is immediately forgotten due to information overload.

Engineering stickiness into a message and improving its chances of being memorable can be done by simply reorganizing the way the information is packaged. For example, releasing a single song in anticipation for a full-length album often performs much better for a musician than if the single was only introduced to the public as part of the album.

“Epidemics are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which they occur (Gladwell, 2000, p. 139).” Relatedly, society is intricately sensitive to changes



in context, and the types of contextual changes capable of affecting an epidemic's tipping point depend largely on the permeability of the situation's environment.

What truly matters in the power of context is the little things; big problems do not need to be solved for the underlying message to be changed for the better. Gladwell states that "behavior is a function of social context... [and that] our inner states are the result of our outer circumstances (2000, pp. 151, 152)." Character is largely contextual, and for something to reach its environmental tipping point, relatively small changes in elements are necessary.

Groups play a critical role in social epidemics. Once part of a group, a person is often subjected to peer pressure and other contextual influences that lead to the beginning of an epidemic. While establishing groups is often a beneficial way to establish a shared public understanding of a topic, they often lead to Group Think. This is the idea that, once someone is in a shared space with many other individuals, distinct perspectives are often lost, and a "majority" opinion is born and followed by the entirety of the group.

## The Formulaic Way to Go Viral

Fortunately, there is no singular way to ensure a musician reaches global success. However, author Donald Passman offers various strategies musicians often use to build an initial fanbase that ultimately leads them to stardom.

At the crutch of it all, the aspiring star must have a clear vision of who they are and what their music is (or they hope it will be). As Passman puts it, "no one has ever had a serious career by imitating others, or trying to guess what the public wants... [which is] someone whose music resonates with their heart... [and] emotionally impacts the listener/viewer (2023, p. 15)."

Other than utilizing TikTok to gain a following, some artists will put the hook at the beginning of the song to reduce the skip rate – the number of people who listen to a few seconds

of a song then hit “next” (Passman, 2023, p. 15). Another popular tactic musicians use is studying how viral videos were shot to see what visual components led to virality.

Breaking through the noise of music streaming platforms can seem daunting for artists, and with over a hundred thousand tracks uploaded online daily, it is incredibly difficult to do so without a prior engaged fanbase.

Streaming services rely on algorithms, with the more a song is listened to, the more the algorithms will push it to new listeners. For a song to be extensively listed to, early musicians often begin their journey of growing their fanbase by playing local gigs.

At these performances, artists will offer incentives (usually a free sticker or pin) in exchange for attendees to sign up for the band’s email list or following their social media accounts. By building the fanbase on their own, musicians own all rights to the list of their fans and can choose how they prefer to engage with followers. This is important, as it denies record labels or other related entities controllable access to the followers list.

Even if a band becomes an internet sensation for a song they put out, the popularity is often short-lived if they do not have a prior fanbase to bolster the attractiveness of the song(s). With increasingly more musicians specializing the type of music they wish to produce, there comes a need of followers who specializes in the type of music they enjoy listening to. Seth Godin, author of *We Are All Weird*, described the four groups of people that spearhead societal demands.

## Mass

Mass is what Godin defined as “undifferentiated;” the easily reached majority that seeks to conform and survive (2015, p. 4). Historically, the mass market (one that produced average

products for average people at large quantities) was invented as a way for companies to maintain efficient systems within their factories.

The mindset for record companies was: “we need to make a record the masses will buy, because otherwise, it will not be a hit and the masses will buy something else (Passman, 2015, p. 12).” In other words, it cost companies too much money to personalize their products for each customer, and the more the market conformed to the definition of “mass,” the more money large companies would make.

## Normal

More specifically, normal describes the defining characteristics of the masses; it is localized. What is normal in one part of the world is not normal in another part, and over time, marketers made being normal an ethical and cultural custom (Godin, 2015, p. 5). Increasingly, normal is not selling as fast and widespread as weird is, in all aspects of the purchasing world.

Those who are in the normal tribe understand that their influence will increase if they can expand the group’s following. Try as they might, though, people in the normal group are unable to maintain the standing they once had before weird became less stigmatized.

## Weird

“Everything that is not normal is weird, and right now, there’s more weirdness than ever (Godin, 2015, p. 19).” Godin’s manifesto focuses on the choice to be weird, and how refusing to conform to the masses may be more beneficial in the long run.

It is easier than ever to find these “tribes” of weird people because weird is becoming contrarily more normal, due largely in part because of the Internet. The web connects and protects the weird by linking and strengthening their tribes.

## Rich

Most often, the term “rich” is categorized as a descriptor for someone who is financially secure and wealthy. However, someone who can afford to make choices and has the resources to do more than merely survive are foundations to being rich that are unrelated to monetary aspects.

In short, to be rich means to be able to care about having a choice. Even financially poor people want control over what they do and how they do it. When we give people choice, we make them richer. Godin explains that the rapid increase in the availability of choice means the world has gotten richer at a shocking speed, and by enabling choice for all, we improve societal well-being. The demand for normal is now ironically clashing with the trend toward weird, and the attractiveness of mass will continue to falter (2015, p. 52).

## Making What the Market Desires

New subsets of culture are created daily from the innumerable weird groups in society. One thing remains the same, though: people simply want to feel like they have made an impact within their chosen tribe (Godin, 2015, p. 34). When an artist can have their work amplified, it shows themselves and their followers the impact their creative work has on society.

In niche communities, individual impact is certainly found on a smaller level than it would be in throngs of normal people, yet it has the same level of influence, further cementing the notion that mass marketing is the wrong choice. A study conducted by Ronald Inglehart and reported on by Passman states that regardless of income, race, or geography, when we let people choose among things that are important to them, they are increasingly happier.

The United States is a capitalistic society that relies on having choices so heavily, that it is almost deplorable when there is not one. In addition to being able to physically *create* what the market wants, the innovative marketers of today’s world are far better at identifying *what* the market wants than in the past.

As marketers and their respective companies continue to cater to these weird pockets, they are encouraging further weirdness within society by showing how accessible it is to be different. Rising support of tribes and the loss of a cultural center are leading to an innovative outcome: we are getting weirder, and all our choices are leading further away from the center of a mass society.

Consumption – what we pursue, travel for, or discuss with colleagues – and its levels is based not on abundance of whatever is being sought out, but the niche elements instead (Godin, 2015, p. 46). Weirdness is encouraged by the countless information channels available at a consumer’s fingertips. At least one of the inestimable platforms matches every person’s precise definition of weirdness, and if not, it takes seconds for that person to create a new outlet.

A prime example of the power of choosing is billboard charts. Almost every weird group that has a relevant music genre they relate to can impact these charts by simply listening to their preferred music. Since charts pull their data from algorithms that calculate how often a song is streamed - independent of the song’s genre - there are numerous billboard charts that encompass a variety of listener groups. People care less about everyone and more about the collective *us* “– where us is our people, our tribe, our interest group, our weirdness – not the anonymous masses (Godin, 2015, p. 53).”

While the practice of sampling – the reuse of a portion of a sound or lyric recording in another recording – is not new in the music industry, many artists with all following sizes have come under fire for allegedly sampling in their songs without clearance. Meaning, these artists are not receiving permission to use the intellectual property of other artists. Specifically, Taylor Swift’s hit single “Shake It Off” from her debut pop album *1989* (2014) was scrutinized for striking similarities its hook had to 3LW’s 2000 hit song, “Playas Gon Play.”

In CNN's 2023 documentary, *Taking on Taylor Swift*, MTV correspondent Dometi Pongo gave his perspective on Swift's presumed lyric theft by stating, "...there's also a cultural component here where a lot of...artists like Taylor Swift [have] the agency to take a little bit of black culture, use it and say, 'I didn't know this is where it came from.' And it might not even be happening purposefully, or maliciously, but it does happen (32:34)." The lawsuit was dismissed from multiple courtrooms because judges stated the phrase in question was too brief and unoriginal to be deemed a copyright infringement issue (CNN FlashDocs, 2023, 29:57).

Music charts, specifically the Billboard Hot 100 list, are curated based on a combined calculation of radio play, online streaming, and song sales – both physical and digital (Inside the Industry, 2023). These lists are presented weekly and rely primarily on sales, so an artist may be trending on free streaming platforms but not chart because they do not have the sales needed to verify their accomplishment.

Even with an artist having substantial organic interactions with their music, fake streaming numbers are on the rise. Research performed by associate professor of music theory at the University of Texas at Austin, Eric Drott, illustrated exactly how damaging these bots can be to aspiring (and established) artists. Drott explained that "bots" are software programs that perform repetitive tasks on the internet, and the music specific ones are programmed to control individual Spotify accounts to play the same song(s) or playlist(s) on a loop (2020, p. 155). With the rise in streaming bots has come a false sense of validation for some chart-topping artists.

Success in the music industry is not merely about music – it is about business. Artists increasingly collaborated with brands to establish a new "normal" within the music industry, which denounced how new markets, namely streaming validity, are often positioned by record companies (Meier, 2019, p. 323). On the flip side, independent popstar Taylor Swift has been

able to expertly craft her brand through strategic moves over the last decade, independent of streaming numbers. In 2020, Swift's previous record company, Big Machine, and its owner, Scooter Braun, sold the master rights to her recordings. In an unparalleled move, Swift re-recorded four of her six albums produced under Big Machine, thereby gaining personal control over the master rights to her new records.

A quote from an article by the University of Oregon's School of Music and Dance puts it simply, "The newly recorded albums have been wildly popular and have supported the Eras Tour, getting fans excited about her old songs, not to mention the massive increase in royalties she will now receive." The article goes on to mention that Swift's success would be difficult, if not impossible, to imitate. The pop genre is "in its Taylor Swift era," emphasizing her intelligence as a businesswoman cleverly navigating the music industry with both talent and expertise (Hudgins).

## Social Media's Impact on the Music Industry

Up-and-coming and established artists alike prefer to release single songs as teasers for full albums. This is done rather quickly to cater toward a more consumer-friendly listening experience, as a single song is much shorter than an entire album and is not expected to develop an entire story within three minutes in the same way a three hour long album is. A single song is the time for an artist to test out potential new sounds or a genre switch and see how the public reacts to the change.

Indie-folk singer-songwriter Noah Kahan capitalized on the impact a single can have on an audience through his 2022 release, *Stick Season*. Kahan released his first single, *Young Blood*, with Republic Records in 2017. He went on to release four additional pop singles that year, but none skyrocketed his career quite like his 2022 release of the single *Stick Season* as a prelude to

an album by the same name. Kahan teased snippets of the song on TikTok since the beginning of 2020, which allowed him to slowly gain a larger following than what he began with from his pop records.

With the rate at which snippets of songs go viral on the app, Kahan seemingly “blew up overnight,” when in reality, it took five years for the folk singer to gain global popularity. Amassing over 2.4 million followers on TikTok, Kahan utilizes this digital platform to connect with his fans through countless personal stories including how a sunflower seeds snack once landed him in the emergency room.

True “overnight success” is so rare, that people have a higher chance at winning the lottery than gaining a large following in a matter of hours (Romero, 2016). Usually, a series of “sudden” events happen over time in a musician’s early career that eventually lead to an instant change – or tipping point – that catapults them into a new sector of the music industry: one where their songs continually top charts and their fanbase regularly grows.

These “unexpected” events are often planned by the musician or their manager (if they have one) to boost views on the artist’s social media platforms as well as to gain traction at live events. For example, Gracie Abrams opening for some of the shows on Taylor Swift’s 2023 Eras Tour grew her fanbase by thousands within the first handful of shows she performed at due to the millions of eyes already following the tour because of Taylor Swift.

Moreover, it is misleading to assume an individual’s rate of success in the music industry is dependent on variables as abstract as age. Often, society confuses *overnight* success with *early* success when referring to younger musicians – like Olivia Rodrigo – who break records and top charts before they are of legal drinking age. In either circumstance, a musician’s (*overnight* or



*early*) success often does not come without dedication to their art and commitment to hard work despite the difficult setbacks they may endure.

Noah Kahan's music is primarily accessed for free on streaming platforms, although his merchandise website has albums on vinyl available for sale that are often sold out, proving the reappearance of vinyl users and collectors is not solely reserved for Taylor Swift's fans.

In one word, Noah Kahan can be described as authentic. He writes profound lyrics that resonate with his audience on a sincere level, which helps reinforce his ability to connect with fans. After the initial release of his album *Stick Season* in 2022, Kahan went on to collaborate with noteworthy artists including Hozier and Post Malone to duet his original work and release an extended version of the album in 2024. By partnering with artists across all genres, Kahan has expanded and diversified his fanbase while creating unimaginable opportunities for the growth of a relatively new artist.

Beyond the musical side of Noah Kahan, the artist established "The Busyhead Project" – a mental health initiative named after his 2019 debut album – in 2023. A portion of all ticket sales purchased for future touring dates is donated to the foundation, which has proved to be a widely accepted notion by those in and out of his fanbase.

Since gaining a large following seemingly overnight in 2022, Kahan has released thirty songs including duetted versions with other admired musicians. Compared to Taylor Swift (and the norm for song and album release trends), Kahan has been quite busy putting his work into the world.

Like Taylor Swift, the number of sold-out shows, album purchases, and followers on social media can reasonably prove that Noah Kahan does not lack vocal talent. Similarly – like Swift – Kahan would not be famous if he relied on vocals alone. Kahan knew how to capitalize

on the dominant consumer behavior surrounding TikTok and focused on primarily promoting his original music on that platform as opposed to others such as X (formerly Twitter) or Instagram.

Arguably the most novice of the three artists, budding queer star Chappell Roan has found her spot on the music popularity charts with the help of popstar Olivia Rodrigo. Roan got her start in the industry by posting performances of original songs on YouTube, which led to her signing with Atlantic Records in 2017. The record label dropped Roan in 2020 due to her song *Pink Pony Club* not being profitable enough for the label. The tipping point for Roan's career did not come until years later.

In late 2023, Olivia Rodrigo announced the first set of dates for her upcoming world-tour, including Chappell Roan as one of her tour openers. Both artists have seen a sharp uptick in following since announcing the performances, which can be attributed to their ability to personally connect with their fans by creating a safe and inclusive environment at every show.

Chappell Roan is a pop drag persona created by twenty six year old Kayleigh Rose Amstutz. In a field that historically pressured openly queer performers like Emeli Sandé and Sam Smith to stay in a "glass closet," the music industry has welcomed Roan with open arms largely due to her vocal aptitude and fresh perspective on what it means to be a female musician in the twenty-first century.

Roan's discography is primarily available for free on streaming services, making her music more appealing to people who may not have heard of her "campy" musical style before. Best described by Roan herself as music inspired by "80s synth pop and early 2000s pop hits," it makes sense the young singer has a distinct growing fanbase. Roan's original music hinges on bittersweet aspects of young-adult life, from growing up and moving away from home to sour

break ups. A strong fanbase surrounds her due to the raw emotions and relatability of her poignant lyrics – something not always present in songs by other similar artists.

The music market desires differentiated music – therefore artists like Chappell Roan are vital to the industry’s success. Since there is a countless number of weird groups that must be accounted for through music, it is all the more impactful when a niche weird artist can have their songs magnified (Godin, 2015, p. 34). To captivate a crowd both on and off stage goes beyond their ideal music preferences.

## Streaming Farms Don’t Cultivate Large Fanbases

A large portion of the aforementioned artists fanbases are comprised of real listeners, but almost ten percent of all streams across platforms are fake. Despite fake streams being an illegal practice, musician popularity is partly a numbers game – and experts cannot seem to figure out how to solve the problem (Drott, 2020). Fake streamers – “bots” (robots) – simulate plays of music to increase an artist’s streaming numbers and are often not created by the artist’s choice.

Streaming farms employ sometimes hundreds of computers and phones with automated scripts to use music services like Spotify, SoundCloud, YouTube, and Apple Music as a way to generate thousands of fake streams in minutes (Drott, 2020). While larger, more established artists like Taylor Swift might not feel the direct impact of these fraudulent streams, musicians like Noah Kahan and Chappell Roan who are still gaining popularity may feel the consequences differently.

Many of the said platforms have implemented procedures to combat these bots by requiring account verification. Additionally, streaming platforms have established advanced algorithms that can recognize suspicious activity and delete fake streams from their records

(Drott, 2020). Unfortunately, sometimes these algorithms do not work quick enough and fake streams can be the distinguishing factor that lands a song on the top of the music charts.

Disappointingly, established artists and their labels are typically the ones who can afford to pay for manufactured streams and do so because they are struggling to maintain their spots on the charts alongside popular independent artists.

Rappers G-Eazy and French Montana have both been accused of buying streams to boost their past songs (Drott, 2020). The most effective way to combat these fraudulent streams is to perform live shows and organically build up a following. Real fans attending real shows is not something that can be fabricated, no matter how hard bots and scalpers might try.

The viral short-form music app, TikTok, is known to be where up-and-coming artists are “found” by fans and recording professionals. Users can manipulate the speed at which their selected song plays in the background of their video, and studies have shown fans actually prefer sped-up versions of songs to their regular-speed counterparts.

Fans are speeding up songs by roughly 40%, and the fast-paced results are finding more widespread success across TikTok and beyond than the original versions (Whateley, 2023). The pace of the songs often do not even correspond with the videos in which they are playing over – users purely prefer that version over the original song.

This trend is so successful, labels are having artists rerecord hit songs simply to speed them up and become popular again. The proof is in the hashtags. The TikTok hashtag ‘spedupsounds’ currently has over 11 billion views. Labels know fans have depleting attention spans and want quicker music (Whateley, 2023). Combined with the fast rate at which trends are cycled through younger generations, record labels have found the multi-million dollar prize in TikTok users.

While there is no straightforward answer as to why faster songs are dominating the music industry, one theory is that it has to do with a genre of music called nightcore. Essentially a micro-genre that hinges on speeding up tracks by at least 35%, often – but not always – accompanied by anime artwork, nightcore has steadily become more popular since its inception in the early 2000s.

A simple TikTok search of “Taylor Swift nightcore” yields countless results with related accompanied hashtags under lyric videos of sped-up songs by the artist. These jingles are then used as the background music to dances, story times, and other viral videos that are seen by thousands, if not millions, of other app users. The songs range in time of original release, allowing for some sounds to be based on Swift’s debut album that has not yet been rerecorded.

## A Swift Trailblazer in the Music Industry

Taylor Swift has dominated the music industry since 2006 because of her unparalleled ability to successfully transition between vastly different music genres. Originally introducing herself as a country singer, Swift has expertly produced pop and indie-folk music while still maintaining her signature voice and style society has come to associate her with.

How does she do it *and* uphold her star status? Simple: her versatility through storytelling and her business expertise (Hudgins). These two gifts did not come until much later in Swift’s career, though.

Swift’s fourth studio album in 2012, *Red*, was the first time the artist switched genres, going from country to pop – although she still maintained her country roots with banjo instrumentation across the album. The world witnessed another genre shift in 2020, when Swift released indie-folk sister albums *evermore* and *folklore*.

While the beloved singer can often write a new song within a matter of hours, it frequently takes about two years for her to release a full album, which aligns with the expected timeframe for album releases for any artist (Spotify, 2024). Taylor Swift is the textbook example of what it means to successfully implement the four elements that determine an artist's success. From her musical beginning in 2006, Swift became one of the first musicians to use social media as a way of interacting with fans rather than simply updating them on important music news.

She prolonged that form of familiarity and intimacy with her fans through personalized gifts, secret listening parties at her house, and meet-and-greets during her biggest sold-out shows. Swift focused on being personable and relatable for her fans from the get-go, and the rest came naturally after.

As was previously mentioned, Taylor Swift is in the process of rerecording the albums she released during a contract with Big Machine Records. When she releases an album, whether it's new music or already beloved tunes, Swift has routinely made the songs accessible on all platforms, including streaming, CDs, and vinyl. With the resurgence of vinyl collecting in the younger generations, Swift has made it a point to not skimp out on record design and production.

Emphasizes her opinion that her work will one day be artistic collector's items rather than simply a collection of melodies, Swift has promoted her music releases by encouraging fans to listen and be part of the conversations dissecting her lyrics early. As part of a collaboration with Target retail stores, Swift releases a limited edition vinyl and CD color that can only be found in Target stores for every album – including rereleases. Her fanbase, affectionately referred to as “Swifties,” will often purchase multiple copies of the same album with color variants being the only differing aspect of the copies.

Since Swift, like many other mainstream artists, plans her albums two years in advance, she has been known to place what are called “easter eggs” in promotional work for preceding albums. Taylor Swift’s musical easter eggs are hidden components that can be found in lyrics, music videos, and even award show outfits and acceptance speeches. The mastermind herself once confirmed in a fall 2021 interview with Jimmy Fallon that she purposely hides these mysteries for her fans to figure out online. Not only do these hidden messages hold her audience’s interest, but they also frequently gain media coverage outside her fanbase that piques the interest of even the most anti-pop music listener because of the innate sense of mystique.

Outside of the recording studio, Swift is an advocate for musician rights and regularly motivates her fans to register for and utilize their political voting power. With the rerecording of her older albums, Swift’s choices have resulted in countless record labels reconsidering the terms of album contracts to include language outlawing new signees from rerecording their music for up to thirty years.

While Swift did not have a direct role in this contractual overhaul, her actions have shown other artists including Switchfoot and Wheatus that they, too, can reclaim their music by rerecording previous albums (Hudgins). Her persistent significance through generations has little to do with vocal talent (although the artist certainly is gifted) and plenty to do with her constant reinvention through delicate storytelling, deliberate album announcements, promotional campaigns, and regularly sold-out stadium shows.

Swift has managed to retain her stickiness in the industry by knowing exactly when to release new music to retain fans. Like previously mentioned, Taylor Swift wrote and recorded two albums at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Both albums centered around a

melancholy, stripped-down feeling of loneliness Swift likely felt alongside the rest of the world in quarantine.

If either of those albums had been released earlier – for example, in place of *1989*'s release in 2014 – they would not have garnered nearly as much of a following. The albums emphasized Swift's work ethic and flexibility and range as an artist, allowing critics to ultimately acknowledge her musicianship after over a decade in the industry. Critics in 2014 were not interested in analyzing Swift's songs like they were during the pandemic.

With such drastically different musicians having comparable levels of fame for where they are in their careers, does the speed of song and album releases truly matter in determining if an audience will accept the music?

*Not exactly.*

The rate at which one artist releases music compared to other musicians is merely one variable that affects and is affected by countless other variables to success. Releasing albums more frequently can help an artist maintain visibility in the industry, and can encourage growth and the room to refine their craft. However, taking upwards of two years or more to produce an album can also prove to be a beneficial move for an artist.

Fans often eagerly anticipate new music from their favorite artists, and the longer they are made to wait, the higher anticipation often grows.

Artists can capitalize on the momentum surrounding an album release regardless of the length of time fans have to wait (Passman, 2023). This leads to the potential for amplified coverage through press reporting, increased fan excitement, and an expanded following. Taking more time between album releases allows for more strategic promotional and marketing efforts.



However, taking too long to release new music – as was the case for Guns N’ Roses’ “Chinese Democracy” which took close to a decade to fully record and release – can lead to a drop in listener interest (Sawdey, 2024). No other albums were released from the band in the years they spend creating “Chinese Democracy.”

In contrast, Ariana Grande released two albums roughly five months apart in 2018: Sweetener in August 2018 and Thank U, Next in February 2019 (Erlewine, 2024). Sales for Sweetener are over double that of Thank U, Next, likely because the two albums were released so close together and listeners associate them as one album.

Instead of posting on social media the day before an album is set to go live, artists can plan elaborate announcements that in and of themselves can garner more exposure for the artist (Passman, 2023). Musicians often tour while creating and promoting albums, and having longer breaks between releases offer the time for more intensive touring routes and for the artist to connect with more fans on a personal level around the world.

Ultimately, producing albums too regularly can lead to market saturation, and the artist may perform worse on the music charts because consistent listeners have too many options that they are unable to listen to everything an artist puts out. Yet, the length of time between song and album announcements is entirely up to the artist and their label (if they use one). Both ends of the release-timing spectrum are known to be successful.

## Conclusion

Success in the music industry is not reliant on a sole indicator. While vocal talent is certainly a necessary trait to possess in order to maintain relevancy in the industry, a musician cannot gain global recognition without excelling at connecting with their following, understanding consumer behavior, and having discography accessible through numerous outlets.

This research sought to interpret the complex interplay between contemporary promotional strategies and their musical counterparts. By examining case studies, theoretical frameworks, and empirical data, this study intended to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of marketing and promotion in creative industries and how musicians' careers are molded by this structure.

There has been discourse on whether the speed at which an artist releases new songs or albums heavily impacts their star status. This notion – while difficult to verify due to a considerable number of genre-fueled niches in the music industry – poses the question of whether future research may be relevant in determining just how often an artist's releases should be slated to get the most traction possible.

While strategic promotion may amplify artist visibility and improve their chance at overwhelming success in the industry, the legitimacy and artistic integrity of a musician must not be undervalued. The findings presented in this research serve as an invitation to future scholars to join in the ongoing conversation about the way in which creative promotion impacts musician success – not as a final determination in promotional impact on artistic success.

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