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# Undergraduate Research Fellowship Working Paper Series

## Title:

*"Marketing's Impact on the Music  
Industry"*

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## **Marketing's Impact on Music and the Music Industry**

Abstract: In recent decades the complexity of modern popular music has consistently declined. This paper seeks to explain the economic impact marketing has had on music itself, as well as the industry it occupies. The increased ease with which artists can market themselves through social media platforms has led to a detriment in the quality of music being produced today. As a result, an artists' success is now less dependent upon skill. Rather, prospects for success are increasingly about consistent output, and how the artist promotes themselves. Music streaming platforms have contributed to the degradation of musical originality in recent years, favoring artists who are consistently creating good work over those interested in creating great work that will stand the test of time.

### **Marketing's Impact on Music and the Music Industry**

Musical taste has evolved dramatically over the last six decades. Namely, the complexity and quality of music has been steadily declining every year since 1955. A study by the Spanish National Research Council (SNRC) in 2012 titled, “Measuring the Evolution of Contemporary Western Popular Music,” reveals this. They took approximately 500,000 songs from the Million Song Dataset ([millionsongdataset.com](http://millionsongdataset.com)), spanning the years from 1955 to 2010. Each song was then put through several algorithms. Musical complexity differs from visual art in that it operates through a temporal dimension. For instance, songs that contain predictable melodic and rhythmic contours tend to be considered simpler by the public domain (Güçlütürk, Yağmur, et al). The study by the SNRC in 2012 sought to bring tangible data to this general consensus. Their algorithms tested for three main tenets: timbral diversity, harmonic complexity, and loudness.

Timbre is what allows us to differentiate different instruments from each other, and is often used as a catchall term to describe anything related to music that doesn't directly involve pitch, duration, spatial location, or dynamics. To many music lover's dismay, according to a study by the SNRC, timbral diversity peaked in the 1960s and has been on a steady decline ever since. A prime example of a song that hit the aforementioned timbral peak, would be the 1967 masterpiece, “A Day in the Life” by The Beatles. According to an article by [beatlesbible.com](http://beatlesbible.com) titled “A Day In The Life,” the work features an orchestra of 41 instruments; 12 violins, 4 violas, 4 cello, 2 double bass, 2 clarinets, 1 oboe, 2 bassoons, 2 flutes, 2 french horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, 1 tuba, and 1 drumset. Meanwhile, “Blurred Lines,” a 2013 song created by the tripartite Pharrell Williams, T.I., and Robin Thicke, was recorded using mostly a drum machine, keyboard, and sampler. It is considerably less timbrally diverse than its Beatles comparative, due mainly to dynamic range compression.

As it pertains to physics, a sound cannot be made louder than its original recording without an inevitable reduction in quality. As the noise floor is equalized, all nuance is normalized, effectively terminating it. This in essence is dynamic range compression, and the more of it applied, the greater the reduction in timbral diversity. Subtle nuances are gone, never again to be appreciated. In a YouTube video appropriately titled “The Loudness War,” Paul McCartney’s masterpiece, “Figure of Eight,” had dynamic range compression applied to it, and a comparison was made between the original recording and what a modern engineer might do today. On NPR’s “All Things Considered,” Bob Ludwig, a recording engineer who has worked with the likes of Jimi Hendrix to Radiohead, explained a snare drum on McCartney’s song after compression was applied. “It really no longer sounds like a snare drum with a very sharp attack. It sounds more like somebody padding on a piece of leather or something like that.”

What could have possibly led to this catastrophic decline in timbral diversity over the decades? The Principal Agent Problem certainly contributes. Considered to be one of the hallmark examples of a moral hazard, Prateek Agarwal on his site Intelligent Economist articulates that this phenomenon, “...occurs when one person (the agent) is allowed to make decisions on behalf of another person (the principal).” In the music industry, this dilemma occurs between artists and their producers. The artist in this case is the principal, and the producer, the agent. The producer’s goal is to secure a guaranteed level of success, and the artist’s goal is to create music. In the present day, the vast majority of successful producers have a streamlined approach to their craft, which can often collide with the objectives of the artist, who is more concerned with creating rather than producing. Producers often serve many artists, and there are tried and true elements to a producer’s craft that almost certainly guarantees a level

of success for the artist. These tried and true elements are what have led popular music today to sound similar from artist to artist, even on a lyrical level.

Indeed, many of the lyrics we hear today in popular songs were conceived by two individuals, Lukasz Gottwald and Max Martin. According to a New York Post article by Larry Getlen, "...Gottwald, a former pot dealer who later spent six years as the guitarist for the house band on "Saturday Night Live," wanted to start producing records, he sought out Martin, who became first his mentor, then his partner." Martin, who began experiencing commercial success in the late 1990s, has written lyrics for artists like Katy Perry, Taylor Swift, Backstreet Boys, et cetera. According to an article by Michael Cragg on The Guardian titled:, "'Britney Spears is a genius': Max Martin, the powerhouse of pure pop," Max Martin "...has co-written and co-produced 73 US Top 10 singles....," and is the third most successful songwriter in terms of number one singles in United States history, with John Lennon (26) in 2nd and Paul McCartney (32) in 1st. Artists who are interested in a hit seek out Martin because his lyrical style has a certain level of guaranteed success attached to it. Martin's agency over a multitude of artists' lyrics distinctly demonstrates why popular songs are so similar to one another today.

Additionally, as shown by Andrew Powell-Morse in his 2015 study, lyrical intelligence has been on a steady decline since 2006. By using The Flesch Kincaid Readability Index (also known as the Flesch Reading Ease), Powell-Morse was able to assign an average reading grade level and word count for 225 songs in various genres that spent a minimum of three weeks at No. 1 on the Billboard charts over a ten year timespan, from 2005 to 2015. Invented by Associated Press consultant Rudolf Flesch in the 1940s to simplify the readability of newspapers, this linguistic analysis tool gives a readability score between 1 and 100, with 100 being the most difficult readability score (Kelly, 2021). By using this linguistic analysis tool, sentences are

measured by their average word count, and words are measured by their average syllable count. According to the article “New Study Says Popular Music Lyrics are Dumber than Ever,” Powell-Morse found substantial data that songs generally are at a third grade reading level. This is down an entire reading grade level from 2006 (Manders, 2021). Generally, the modern artists’ myopic inclination to give their producers power over their lyrics is what has caused this significant decline in lyrical complexity.

Furthermore, John Seabrook in his book “The Song Machine,” accurately conveys the current songwriting marketplace as “...an impersonal, assembly-line-driven process that would make Henry Ford proud.” That’s not to say that this is necessarily a bad thing for business. Indeed, music that has a shorter shelf life grants producers the opportunity to write music more frequently in a given quarter or calendar year, which incentivizes the customer to buy more music. There is however, considerable cost in this push for quantity over quality. Not only in the facilitation of harmonic, melodic, and lyrical mediocrity, but also in the increased marketing costs. Promoting an artist or band today to the global music scene is more expensive than ever before, costing anywhere from \$500,000 to \$3,000,000 according to the IFPI (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry), to bring an artist on and start them on their career in the music industry. This has forced record companies to figure out dependable formulae for success. Instead of pursuing genuine talent, record labels bring on an attractive individual and influence the general public to like them through subtle psychological tactics in order to mitigate financial risk.

This leads producers to the necessary implementation of a psychological phenomenon known as the mere-exposure effect. It’s a well-known psychological phenomenon where people develop a subconscious preference for something because they’ve seen or, in this case, heard it

often. While payola has existed in the past, this actually isn't the case with a music streaming platform such as Spotify. According to an article by Noah Yoo titled, "Could Spotify's New Discovery Mode Be Considered Payola," artists pay nothing, and their work gets promoted organically via the public. It uses a search engine optimization (SEO) system similar to what YouTube has. Dopamine hits increase precipitously in potency and persistence with each repetition. Without even realizing it, the consumer subconsciously develops neural pathways that influence their future musical consumption habits. Indeed, in Steven D. Shaw and Richard P. Bagozzi's study titled, "The Neuropsychology of Consumer Behavior and Marketing," they argue that "...musical preference formation occurs in the early 20s." That's not to say that this is fixed and unchanging, but rather to show that artists' marketing teams are aware that getting minds attached to a particular artist or genre early in life creates a strong connection between the artist and the consumer.

As it pertains to music, among other things, our attention spans have shortened dramatically. This causes "the hook" of a song to be placed sooner in the work rather than later. Unless a song is virtually instantaneously captivating, we tend to ignore it. The sheer abundance of songs we have access to has led to a degradation in the appreciation of the songs themselves. When an individual can flick through thousands of songs on their smartphone through services like Spotify, Apple Music, and Google Play, and still barely scratch the surface of what's available, it tends to degrade the inherent value that the songs have. This is why John Seabrook's aforementioned investigation into the world of song assembly-lines makes sense. These song factories are a vital piece to the current musical marketplace. Their churning out of as many hits as possible as fast as possible meets the demand this modern marketplace of insatiability necessitates.

Record labels in their prime would receive thousands of tapes, only offering the most skilled artists record contracts. Even if the artist was only marginally better than their competition, they would still promote them. The record label only needed to invest a few thousand dollars into each budding artist for marketing costs. Since music at this time had a higher degree of scarcity than it does today, even small amounts of promotion served the budding artist well, because the public was more inclined then to actually listen to what they had to say through their music. It was more of a “we the people” approach. The general public had all of the power. An artists’ success was deemed so by the public eye. Thus, musicians during this time had to be incredibly talented in order to win favor with their audience. This is why Queen is so vastly different from Journey, who are so vastly different from Van Halen, et cetera.

With no room for sloppy musicianship, musicians’ sales depended on successful touring which led to more album sales. Now, the reverse is the case. Artists today make the majority of their income by going on tour and creating a better atmosphere than their competitors. Their music sales are negligible at best, due to music streaming services like Spotify, Google Play, and Apple Music offering the vast majority of music available for a nominal monthly fee. That new “hit” that you hear on the radio tends to follow you around. Not only is that not a coincidence, but it also costs quite a lot of money to pay radio, TV, filmmakers, et cetera, in order to promote your song. If a song is truly great, then the individual listener would notice this immediately, and wouldn’t need to be forced to love it. Popular music today is designed more to sell, than it is to inspire.



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