THE PATH OF INDEPENDENCE IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

Exploring how independent artists promote themselves through digital media and how record labels support artists in their careers

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Abstract

Background: In this world of rapidly developing technologies, it has become less of a challenge for individuals to start a career within music and promote their brand. The emergence of social media has revolutionized digital marketing and facilitated the distribution of music across different online platforms. Artists working independently in the music industry have been challenged to undertake a dual role of being both a creator of music, as well as a marketer.

Purpose: This research covers an uninvestigated topic. The paper firstly explores the various possibilities for self-promotion for independent artists, provided by living in a technological world. The second aspect which is examined is how record labels can support artists in their careers through doing their promotion campaigns and establishing their brand identity.

Method: This is an exploratory qualitative study, which was conducted deductively. Eight semi-structured interviews were held with independent artists working with music in Sweden, the findings from which were organized through a thematic analysis. The design of the research follows a case study approach.

Conclusion: The empirical findings suggest that independent artists use a DIY (Do It Yourself) approach in their careers, specifically in the marketing of their music and their personal brand. Using features provided by social media channels, distribution companies and music streaming services, as well as having consistent personal branding were some of the ways in which independent artists digitally self-promote themselves. On the other side, labels support artists by having bigger budgets and doing more outspread digital promotion campaigns, which allows the artists to focus on the creation of music, rather than on marketing planning and decision-making. The study contributes to research within the field of music marketing. Furthermore, suggestions for future research are provided.
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Table of Contents

1. Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 6
   1.1 Background ..................................................................................................................... 6
   1.2 Problem ......................................................................................................................... 8
   1.3 Purpose ........................................................................................................................ 9
   1.4 Delimitations ................................................................................................................ 9

2. Literature Review ............................................................................................................... 10
   2.1 Method for the literature review .................................................................................. 10
   2.2 The music industry ..................................................................................................... 11
   2.3 Signed artists VS Independent artists ......................................................................... 12
   2.4 Digital marketing in the music industry ...................................................................... 13
      2.4.1 Social media platforms ....................................................................................... 13
      2.4.2 Music streaming platforms ............................................................................... 20
      2.4.3 Distribution Platforms ..................................................................................... 22
   2.5 THE DIY approach ..................................................................................................... 23
   2.6 Branding ...................................................................................................................... 24
      2.6.1 Personal branding ............................................................................................... 24

3. Methodology and Method ................................................................................................. 27
   3.1 Methodology ................................................................................................................ 27
      3.1.1 Research philosophy .......................................................................................... 27
      3.1.2 Research approach ............................................................................................. 28
      3.1.3 Research strategy ............................................................................................... 28
      3.1.4 Research design ................................................................................................. 29
   3.2 Method ......................................................................................................................... 30
      3.2.1 Data collection .................................................................................................... 30
      3.2.2 Sampling Method ............................................................................................... 30
      3.2.3 Data analysis ...................................................................................................... 31
   3.3 Ethical Considerations ................................................................................................. 32
      3.3.1 Credibility ........................................................................................................... 32
      3.3.2 Transferability ..................................................................................................... 33
      3.3.3 Dependability ...................................................................................................... 33
      3.3.4 Confirmability ..................................................................................................... 33
      3.3.5 Anonymity and confidentiality ............................................................................ 34

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS ............................................................................................ 35
   4.1 Findings ......................................................................................................................... 35
      4.1.1 Rationality behind working independently ......................................................... 35
      4.1.2 Marketing and promotion with the help of a record label ................................... 37
1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the research topic by beginning with a background of the music industry and establishing the differences between being an independent artist and being signed to a major record label. Furthermore, the problem area and the purpose of the study are stated, together with two identified research questions. Lastly, the delimitations of the paper are also presented.

1.1 Background

The music industry is a dynamic dimension of the creative business sector (Henry, 2008), which is based on the production and distribution of music (Music Industry, 2021). It operates through built partner networks between the music production side (singers and songwriters), the consumer side (listeners) and the business side (labels, managers and agents) (Pastukhov, 2019). The global recorded music industry’s total revenue reached 21.6 billion USD in the past year (IFPI Global Music Report, 2020), with a prediction to keep growing due to the rise of music streaming platforms. According to Swanson (2013), music streaming allows artists to share their music to the public through commercial music services, such as Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube Music, Tidal and others. The adoption of this phenomena is the most significant change in the music industry in the last decade (Moore, 2021), completely shifting the industry’s way of operation: from how consumers experience music to how artists make a living out of each stream they receive.

According to Graham (2004), the music industry is dominated by five corporations: EMI Records, Sony, Vivendi Universal, Time Warner and Bertelsmann BMG. Also referred to as “The Big Five”, these record labels dominate 90% of the world music market (The Global Music Machine, n.d.) and have ownership of stakes in Spotify, the pioneer in music streaming (Pendlebury, 2021). These corporations aim to invest in artists in order to drive the development of the music industry. According to Benner and Waldfogel (2016), major labels are known for using costly marketing models in order to receive a good investment return. This is done by approaching a much broader market to reach that financial potential. Moreover, labels are accountable for promoting and distributing artists’ work, but the advancement of technology in recent years has reduced the relevance of The Big Five in the digitized music business. Social
media has become a tool of high importance, allowing artists to build self-promotions at their own pace and own style. At the same time, music streaming services make it possible for artists to upload their content directly onto various platforms without record label involvement. Due to these factors, many prefer to take the path of independence and work themselves, rather than be signed to a corporation (Daniels, 2019).

Being an independent artist includes the creation and sharing of music without the help of a major or sub record label. This allows individuals to keep 100% of all generated profits, as well as to have full control over their careers (Rani, 2018). It has become unchallenging for anyone to access the music market due to the digitalization of the industry, both in the production, as well as the promotion of music content. Technology plays a strong role in recording, where features such as sound distortion and augmentation are now widely available in different music recording softwares. The emergence of social media has also revolutionized digital marketing and facilitated the spread of music across different online platforms.

Personal branding refers to promoting oneself to society Johnson (2017). The idea is to run a business based on personality (Wayne, 2020) and to establish a professional reputation from it. A music artist’s self-brand can be a reflection of their consistent sound, artistic persona and a promise to the listeners, detecting their musical identity (Owinski, 2017). In this age, personal branding is mostly connected to social media presence, but it is in fact built both online and offline (Chattopadhyay, 2021). It is a relatively new marketing concept related to the marketing strategies that an individual adopts in order to promote themself in the market (Khedher, 2014).

When signed under a major label, artists are not responsible for their marketing campaigns. On the other hand, independent artists have split between creativity and commerce, having two roles: as artists and as marketers of sound (Sanders et al., 2021). In the second role, they are in control of their own assets and they decide what marketing activities to focus on. Nowadays, the available opportunities to develop a music career without the help of a record label are more than ever before (Ditto Music, 2021). Therefore, it is no surprise why unsigned artists are rising and overperforming the market (Paine, 2021).
1.2 Problem

In the contemporary world of music, being an artist is not just about talent and sound (Voorhees, 2019). It is also about branding. Self-promotion and marketing are important aspects in the world of business, as they make individuals noticed. However, there are independent artists, also known as indie artists, who struggle to stand out and market their music effectively (Carter, 2010). This is a consequence of the fact that such artists have too many aspects to focus on, as they do not have the support of a record label.

One way for independent musicians to succeed in a highly competitive industry is by using different marketing strategies and learning about their benefits. The digital era has made it possible for these artists to promote their music in an effective and successful manner (Pontes and Vinhas da Silva, 2017). Nowadays, artists have the ability to communicate and deliver value to an audience without the help of a third party, mainly owing to the effects of technological advancements. Independent artists are able to distribute their music through the same channels as artists under record labels (Haynes and Marshall, 2018). There are many newly emerged tools available, such as social media networks, music streaming services, playlists, and when utilized correctly, unsigned musicians can reach the success they have always longed for.

Given all the new dimensions imposed by technological developments, the topic of digital marketing is particularly relevant nowadays (Pontes and Vinhas da Silva, 2017). Since the key objectives of digital marketing are to promote a brand and market a product to consumers (Alagota, 2015), it is crucial for independent artists to adopt various marketing techniques for their self-promotion. Existing studies focus on self-promoting independent artists around the world, but limited research has been conducted on narrow regions. Thus, the authors of this paper took the decision to examine the Scandinavian region further. According to Henry (2008), the music industry in Scandinavia is continuing to grow in terms of sales, employment and global reach. In order to make the scope of the research more narrow, the decision to put focus on a single country was taken. The researchers chose to investigate Sweden’s music market on account of the facts that the country is one of the world’s most successful exporters of chart music (Export Music Sweden, n.d.) and is also among the global leaders in digitalization, according to the Digital Economy and Society Index 2020.
1.3 Purpose

The aim of this research is to give a more in-depth understanding of how Swedish independent artists in the music industry use digital marketing channels for promotion of their personal brand and music. The paper explores the various possibilities for self-promotion provided by living in a technological world, such as access to social media networks, music streaming platforms, distribution platforms and more. Another aspect which the research examines is how record labels can support artists in their careers through doing their promotion campaigns and establishing their brand identity. The focus of the study is on independent artists working without any record label involvement, or artists who have been signed to a record label in the past, who are living in Sweden.

In this paper, the choice of research questions are:

1. How do independent Swedish artists promote themselves using digital media?

2. How do record labels support an artist’s brand and promotion?

The study delivers information about various marketing tools and gives examples of self-promotion techniques, provided by individuals working independently in the industry of music. Furthermore, it discusses the limitations and possibilities of having a record label support artists in their music careers by building their brand and marketing content. To reach a deeper understanding of the entirety of the topic, the authors of the research have conducted semi-structured interviews with independent artists based in Sweden, and further supported their answers by using existing literature.

1.4 Delimitations

Delimitations are made to restrict the scope of the research. Since the primary focus of the study is on independent artists, all musicians who have any form of contract between them and a recording label have been excluded from the study. Moreover, another limitation of this paper is the investigation of the Swedish music market only. It is vital to consider that the results reflect only a small part of all independent artists across Sweden.
2. Literature Review

This chapter provides the theoretical background for the research. It begins with a description of the method of retrieving the literature review. Subsequently, concepts and explanations around the music industry and digital marketing are provided.

2.1 Method for the literature review

The following section of the paper reviews previously conducted studies which examine topics that are relevant to this research. The purpose is to discover a gap that could benefit from further examination, which the paper can contribute to with new and rich information.

The role of peer review is important in maintaining the standard and thoroughness of the research that is being carried out (Muller, 2001). Thus, the frame of reference for the research was created based on data, found in peer-reviewed articles, journals and books. The gathered findings were discovered through tools such as Google Scholar and Google Books by using key phrases like “Music industry”, “Independent artists”, “DIY approach”, “Digital marketing for musicians”, etc.

A good literature review does not include everything that has been found but is rather selective and presents only work relevant to the research itself (Hart, 2018). For this reason, the authors of this study conducted the literature review by primarily gathering a lot of findings, but eventually reducing their number to integrate only concepts and issues which are valid for the research. Several search rounds were conducted before a sufficient amount of information was discovered, ensuring that the sources were carefully handpicked and assorted, containing credible interpretations of previous findings.
2.2 The music industry

Music has been a primary form of artistic expression ever since the dawn of civilization (Throsby, 2002) and is one of the universal cultural aspects of humanity. The music market began to shape when different individuals engaged in the production of songs, which would later on be performed at various venues such as opera houses and concert halls (Leurdijk et al., 2014). The industry took its major turn at the end of the 19th century when more advanced recording equipment was invented and introduced.

In the modern world, the music industry is relentlessly commercial, generating billions of dollars in revenues for the individuals involved in it (Throsby, 2002). According to Nielson (2014), there are many key players in the industry: the musicians who compose and perform, the professionals who create and sell (producers, publishers), those who assist artists with their careers (talent coaches, managers), and those who broadcast music on outlets like radio stations and television (program directors, journalists).

The traditional business model, defined by Moyon & Lecocq (2015) as the one existing prior to the appearance of technologies, viewed the music industry as an oligopoly during the late 90s. This was due to the fact that five record companies were controlling the market, thus being in the centre of all processes, such as contacting stakeholders, and particularly artists, studios, publishing, etc. (Hracs, 2012). Up to now, these record companies are still designated as “major labels”. They consist of EMI Records, Sony, Vivendi Universal, Time Warner and Bertelsmann BMG (Graham, 2004). The way they operate is through entering into agreements presented in the form of contracts between the label and an artist, the duration of which can vary depending on the number of albums or songs released (Cook, 2003). Furthermore, the record companies’ responsibilities include creating, publishing and promoting artists’ music, as well as building their careers overall. Nevertheless, if labels were once critical in the manufacturing, distribution and promotion of music, digitalization has now undercut the traditional advantages which recording companies offered (Day, 2010). Technological advancements in the industry like music streaming platforms and digital marketing channels have intervened with the Big Five and minimized their iron grip on the music industry.
Digitalization has completely permeated the music industry. For many decades, technological developments have been affecting the industry (Dolata, 2020), the evolution of which began with the invention of radio broadcasting, followed by cassettes, vinyls and compact discs (CDs). However, one of the most dramatic shifts in the history of music has been taking place during this millennium in an ongoing manner, as the consumption of music has been moving from physical to virtual (Wikström, 2013). The sales of actual products have decreased, while there has been a noticeable steady increase in the consumption of digital music (Richter, 2021).

Technological breakthroughs have opened up the scope of reaching a much greater audience. Listeners are able to obtain high-quality music directly from the Internet (Lam & Tam, 2001), using streaming audio services as their primary method (Zantal-Wiener, 2019). Artists have also benefited from the digitalization of the industry, since they can use these newly existing streaming platforms not only as a means of distributing their music, but also as a marketing tool (Awbi, 2013). Social media also plays a critical role today, where artists have the ability to market themselves freely and reach out to their fans.

2.3 Signed artists VS Independent artists

There are two types of music artists: ones that are signed to record labels and owned by them through long-term contracts, and ones that work independently without the backing of an organization (Oliver & Green, 2009).

Music record labels hire producers who gather an artist’s talent, create a record, and package the result (Perrow, 1974). Furthermore, labels have a multiple-rights contract with artists (Allen, 2018), which entitles them to fully control and manage an artist’s music distribution, marketing and promotion. They can also decide the artist’s direction of music genre, as well as change the complete sound and lyrics of a song (McDonald, 2019). Even more, labels are often prone to altering an artist’s physical appearance and persona, in order to establish a visual identity that will be admired by a large audience (Do Looks Matter In The Music Industry?, 2021). In all scenarios, music record labels get a significant cut from an artist’s earnings (Negus, 1992).
At the same time, there are artists who operate outside a record label usually with self-funding (Oliver and Green, 2009). Examples of such are Macklemore, Frank Ocean, Chance The Rapper. Compared to signed artists, independent artists have full control over their career choices and retain the full amount of all their earnings. They also have the responsibility of handling their own distribution and promotion of music. According to Paine (2021), independent artists have strongly overperformed the music market.

2.4 Digital marketing in the music industry

Marketing is a complex web of interrelated fields including digital advertising, branding, and delivering to consumers (Harrell, 2021). In the music industry, marketing is the key component of turning an artist into a star, as it amplifies an artist’s hard work and talent to potential fans (Agrawal, 2016). According to Cohn and Vaccaro (2004), before the digitalization of the industry, the traditional marketing media consisted of radio stations, television and industry press. However, the business model today is more focused on the digital delivery and promotion of music (Cohn & Vaccaro, 2004). Currently, there is an abundance of online platforms where artists can distribute their songs, market their creative content, express their personal brand, establish a fan base and communicate with it. This paper divides these digital media into three main categories: Social media platforms, Music streaming platforms and Distribution platforms.

2.4.1 Social media platforms

Social media is perceived as an extension of promoting oneself as an artist (Lankinen et al., 2013). Moreover, Morris (2014) states that artists working within different fields of the music industry use social media channels as a market to share their music with fans, or to attract new ones. The emergence of social media has also made it much easier for consumers to find new artists, as well as to share and listen to music (Dewan and Ramaprasad, 2014). Social media is a tool that connects fans with an artist through direct communication, further allowing regular users to discover and follow an artist’s day to day activity. Moreover, social media allows the sharing of playlists, videos, sites, etc., hence playing a major part in the experience of a music listener (Johansson et al., 2019).
Social media platforms are a vital aspect of the promotion aspect for independent artists, since these individuals do not usually possess the same resources which major labels withhold (Drott, 2018). Moreover, Drott (2018) states that advertising music has always been an essential part of the industry. But now with the blooming of social media, it has become much easier for artists to promote their work themselves. Lim (2017) claims that the act of engagement with social media activities is crucial to any celebrity or business. This also applies to musicians, because their followers are more prone to listening to their music after being exposed to an advertisement or another type of marketing content promoting the artist on a social media channel.

According to Moreau (2018), social media are linked together, indicating that platforms like Instagram and Facebook can be connected through settings in order for a photo/video to be posted on both. Furthermore, posts can be promoted through target marketing by applying specifics like gender, age, location and more (Belanche et al., 2019). In this paper, we will be examining three main social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram and TikTok.

2.4.1.1 Facebook

Independent artists use the social media network Facebook in order to focus exclusively on Facebook Pages. Pages is the arm of Facebook and is designed for use by businesses, brands, celebrities and others (Jones, 2020). It allows the Page owner to establish an audience consisting of users who like the Page, and to broadcast out to them. Additionally, Jones (2020) states that Facebook Pages provides a feature-rich private messaging system, as well as access to various analytical insights and metrics about the Page owner’s audience.

The platform offers independent artists two different ways to make sure that their content is delivered to a comparatively larger audience. The option to ‘Boost’ a post requires the administrator of the Page to pay in order to have it delivered to the News Feed of the existing audience (those who currently like the Page). Moreover, the second option, as explained by Jones (2020), is to create a ‘Sponsored Post’. This enables the content to reach a new audience, with available options to constrain this audience using demographic and interest-based filters.
Facebook also allows the option to create an “Event”. This is a medium used for the promotion and organizing of a social gathering (Lee, 2010). Independent artists can create an “Event” through their Facebook Page, for a happening such as a concert, a tour, song release party, etc. People can be digitally invited and add friends who can also attend and potentially become fans.

### 2.4.1.2 Instagram

According to Sheldon and Bryant (2016), when viewing Facebook and Instagram as tools for self-promotion, Instagram is the more suitable platform. This application has been seen as the epicentre for distribution of photographs which aim to reach a broad audience (Lim, 2017). Furthermore, Instagram was bought by Facebook and developed into not only a platform for photo content, but for videos as well, according to Lim (2017). On Instagram, users can make catchy, trend-setting content and thus attract more followers, as stated by Tran (2020).

The Stories feature on Instagram involves posting short videos, also known as “micro-videos”, the success of which led to the development of a brand new concept. Instagram extended their features and created the now known IGTV (Instagram TV), according to Tran (2020). Before, the possible length of videos on stories were 15 seconds only (Wahid & Gunarto, 2021). However, the new option makes it possible for users of the platform to upload long videos which could be up to 15 minutes long for unverified users. Amaral (2018) states that verified users (public figures, celebrities, businesses) can upload up to one hour long videos. Moreover, to reach a broader audience with the videos that are being posted, it is now possible to create one minute long teasers of the videos on the main feed of the creator. It is important to consider that a popular Instagram account focusing on videos requires the created content to follow the same look and feel throughout time (Tran, 2020).

With IGTV, there are many ways that an artist can reach out to their audience, either by doing Q&A (Questions and Answers) videos to connect with their followers, or going behind the scenes of a certain event and streaming it live. Furthermore, Tran (2020) states that the content that is posted will work as a bridge between the creator and their followers, especially when it comes to gaining trust into the creator’s brand. Also, technical skills such as the use of hashtags
and a relevant design to the posts are valid, according to Tran (2020).

Another newly available feature on the platform Instagram is Reels, which according to Tran (2020) makes it possible for users of Instagram to create short, creative and fun video content. This feature resembles TikTok’s main mission and purpose. Users can create 15-30 second long clips which they add music to and then share through the newly made Reels feed (Tran, 2020). Reels is a page accessible in the Instagram navigation bar which is tailored for each user. There, they explore personalized videos according to their likings.

With more than 500 million users watching Stories on Instagram daily (Hootsuite 2020), celebrities have increasingly started to utilize the application’s various tools and features. The platform has a significant impact on attracting new users and aims to keep the existing ones on the application, restraining them from moving over to competitors like Tiktok instead. Moreover, Reels is becoming trendy, and the videos do not need to be perfectly executed as the ones made on IGTV, which can help to connect and resonate with the followers and build a strong relationship with them (Tran, 2020).

### 2.4.1.3 TikTok

TikTok has had a great influence on social media networks and has become a strong competitor of Instagram and YouTube, since its main mission is to inspire users to create videos (Martinez, 2021). The platform is the most rapidly growing and most downloaded app during 2020 (Apptopia, 2021). It works as a benefit to independent musicians who can upload videos with their own original songs which their audience can use. The feature to “Duet” a video motivates individuals to sing, play or dance along to a song which can be seen as free marketing for the artists. This results in expanding their audience, since more users start to discover the video and consequently, the song (Martinez, 2021).

TikTok’s users add more than thirteen million videos every day (Choudhary et al., 2020). The videos, the length of which must be between 15 and 60 seconds, can be distributed with the use
of filters and special effects. When a TikTok video goes viral accidentally, it creates a buzz around a new artist through the distribution of their song or video (El Gamal, 2012). This can lead to new and unexpected music career opportunities for the creator.

According to the Global Web Index, 41% of TikTok’s users in 2019 were aged between 16 and 24. The platform has created a user interface which meets the demands of the youngsters and has caught their attention (Patel & Binjola, 2020). Nevertheless, the target positioning is relatively narrow, making the market share limited (Yang et al., 2019).

2.4.1.4 Features available in most Social Media Channels

Use of Hashtags
According to Giannoulakis and Tsapatsoulis (2016), hashtags is a tag that is written with the symbol # which can be followed by either a word or an emoji. Moreover, by using these tags, users can get a better reach with their posts in a much easier way (Giannoulakis & Tsapatsoulis, 2016). Hashtags, according to Scott (2018), group together a set of images, as well as express a feeling or desire for something.

Live Streams
According to (Fonseca, 2019), live streams are quite a new tool which allows content creators to connect with their audience or follower base via a live video. Moreover, once a live stream is started by a user, their followers receive a notification that the user is broadcasting a live event. Furthermore, they can click on the link and start interacting by commenting, asking questions and reacting. This can be done in a less anonymous and more revealing manner, compared to doing Q&As or AMAs.

Q&A/AMAs
“Questions & Answers” or “Ask Me Anything” are innovative concepts used to connect with the follower base of a creator on a more personal level. This interactive communication can be executed either through the use of “stickers” posted on an Instagram Story, or by creating a live
event on other social media channels and getting questions asked in real time (Fonseca, 2019). The followers of the creator can ask their questions anonymously by typing inside the sticker, or they can comment in the section under a live stream.

**Like, Comment and Share**
According to Lorenzo and Francisco-Maffezzolli (2020), digital engagement on an artist’s image or video can be achieved through the amount of likes, comments or shares of the content, as this shows the interest in the post. Receiving a comment is seen as something more valuable than a like, since this shows a greater level of involvement in the post. Moreover, the like, comment and sharing features are something that sparks the algorithms of the social media channels, making the posts more visible and receiving a higher level of exposure.

**Direct messaging**
When it comes to direct messaging, also shortened to “DM”, content creators can connect with their followers and fans by answering greetings or questions in a private messaging system (Laaksolahti, 2010). This technique is also called micro-blogging that has been seen as firstly arousing on Twitter. For artists, direct messaging can also be used as a form of direct music promotion to others.

**Tags**
Cook and Pachler (2012) state that tagging enables users of social media to add labels and identify the location of where an image/video was taken, as well as who is present in it. Most social media sites support a tagging mechanism (Hung et al., 2008). This is a simple and quick act, allowing geo-reference annotations and social tagging information, exhibiting the username of the individuals recognized in a post (Atzmueller and Lemmerich, 2013).

**Targeted Sponsored Ads**
By creating targeted sponsored advertisements on different social media, individuals can find their niche audience, as well as potential new followers or fans. Since user demographics vary largely, each content creator has the ability to decide what filters to apply to their advertisement, based on their aim to target a specific group (Curran et al., 2011). Filters can be gender, age,
interests, location and more. Moreover, having a Page on Facebook gives the creator access to more features, such as to target only the Page followers, or the friends of the followers. This extended feature allows the Page Owner to be even more specific with the characteristics of the targeted audience for the promotional campaign that is being posted (Curran et al., 2011). Moreover, targeted sponsored ads are beneficial to both smaller artists, as well as bigger artists.

### 2.4.1.5 Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is a type of marketing where people on social media platforms, such as Instagram, promote products and services provided by others. These individuals can have a celebrity status, or even be someone unknown, according to Woods (2016). The only difference between the two scenarios mentioned is that the latter is not paid for the posts they create (Woods, 2016).

Cooley and Parks-Yancy (2019) state that influencers across different social channels have the ability and power to convince their audience into believing that a certain product which they promote is good, which leads to receiving support and even placing a purchase from the consumers’ side. Furthermore, according to Kirkpatrick (2016), marketing done by influencers has the potential to generate a return of investment which is 11 times more than what traditional advertisements can achieve.

When different entities reach out to influencers, they seek an individual with either a similar audience as the one they originally have, or work with someone that could help them cover a market that is not yet developed or reached (Costello & Yesiloglu, 2020). In the music industry, influencers are the ones who can promote an artist and their music. They contribute to creating a viral moment which could elevate the artist’s career and increase their music streams. Currently, the most popular platforms used for influencer marketing are TikTok and Instagram. Influencers on TikTok can create viral dances to an artist’s song, for instance, whereas influencers on Instagram can promote a certain song by using Stories or Reels, which are the two powerhouse options for music promotion (Influencer Marketing for Music, 2021).
2.4.2 Music streaming platforms

Music streaming services operate as an intersection of technology, advertising, distribution and finance (Vonderau, 2019). The main purpose of streaming platforms is to supply consumers with their favourite songs without the need of storing them, according to Bergman (2021).

Streaming services do not primarily produce the music, nor do they fully have ownership over the content that they put out (Prey, 2020). Big platforms like Spotify, Apple Music, Youtube Music, and others have provided listeners with a large library of music on condition that they pay for a subscription or use a free service with advertisements.

2.4.2.1 Spotify

According to Swanson (2013), the streaming music platform Spotify is growing rapidly. Vonderau (2017) states that Spotify has over 50 million subscribed users from all over the world today, the number of which has doubled in a period of two years. Spotify is the future of music (Lewis, 2009) and is a service which has helped new independent artists with its numerous features. One of them is the so-called “Discover Weekly” - a mixtape, generated at the start of a week specifically for each user, which contains songs similar to their liking in terms of genre and sound (Luckerson, 2015). Every artist has the chance to be featured in such a playlist, as it is algorithmically created by the platform (Peleg, 2020). Spotify also features a social element where consumers can see what their friends are listening to (Malkoč et al., 2020).

2.4.2.2 Apple Music

Apple Music is among one of the biggest competitors in the music streaming business. Originally, it was a service allowing individuals to share mp3 files with one another (Swanson, 2013). This service was previously known as iTunes, but decided to rebrand itself and become Apple Music (Kim et al., 2017). The platform currently has more than 10 million users, following a similar concept as Spotify with a monthly subscription (Nam, 2017). An interesting feature Apple Music provides is Apple Music For Artists - a platform enabling artists to share their own content, such as photos, videos, song lyrics, messages to fans and more.
Fans can like, comment and share through other social media channels (Spinnup, 2020).

2.4.2.3 Youtube Music

In 2018, YouTube Music was responsible for the increase of the on-demand music streaming services revenue (Rahimi and Park, 2020). A fundamental part of a streaming service like YouTube Music is that it creates playlists and becomes a curatorial power, according to Prey (2020). As previously mentioned, playlists are of high importance for both artists from major labels, as well as for independent artists, since they are dependent on being featured in playlists, as well as at what position they will be placed. This is the reason why platforms like Youtube still have power without needing any form of ownership of the uploaded music and content.

2.4.2.4 Tidal Music

Tidal is a company that is owned by big names in the music industry, some of which are Jay Z, Alicia Keys, Kanye West and Madonna and more. Tidal, however, is accessible in only 35 countries which is more limited than other streaming platforms who cover a bigger part of the world. Tidal is the very first artist owned streaming platform and fully advertisement free. It currently provides over 25 million different songs with a much greater sound than their streaming service competitors. Therefore, the benefit of choosing this platform for a consumer is that they can be given a premium experience through exclusive content (Aarstad et al., 2016).

2.4.2.5 Playlists

According to Shah (2018), playlists on music streaming platforms are the so-called “new radio”. The term “playlist” started in radio stations, and it referred to all songs which were scheduled to be played during the day (What Is a Playlist?, n.d.). Nowadays, playlists are lists of songs available on a music streaming platform, with a similar musical atmosphere. Playlists have a rising importance in the distribution of music and they have brought in many possibilities for artists, as they allow them to expand their audience to a much greater extent (Boder, 2020).
Independent artists rely on playlists. They pitch their own music to editorial teams who consist of musical experts, working with hand-picking of songs which would appear on a playlist (Spotify for Artists, 2021). These experts are also known as playlist curators and work within music streaming platforms. Their responsibilities include deciding, filtering and selecting what to expose listeners to and which songs to direct their attention to (Bonini & Gandini, 2019).

Independent artists strive to get a track featured on a playlist, as this guarantees them higher exposure and brings in potential visitors to their artist page. Consumers also have the possibility to build their own playlists and add personal favourite songs to them. These playlists can be private, but they could also be turned into public, which would allow other users to follow that certain playlist (Bonnin et al., 2014).

2.4.3 Distribution Platforms

The traditional way of distributing music digitally is through the service of record labels, which consists of adding an artist’s music to a streaming platform. However, independent artists do not have access to such a service and use digital distribution platforms instead, which act as intermediaries between the artist and the music streaming platforms. They eliminate the need for record labels and have become their newest competitors (Ahern, 2019).

According to McCabe (2019), distribution companies offer artists great exposure and content visibility. Their main purpose is to upload an artist’s music to a partner that can be either a streaming platform, or an online store, such as Google Play, Amazon, iTunes store, etc. (Bockstedt et al., 2006). The distribution platforms also deal with licencing rights, copyrights and contracts which are far from manipulative and obligatory (Ahern, 2019). Furthermore, they offer different analytics, as well as specialize in marketing, sales and additional services (Malkoč et al., 2020).

The most popular aggregators on the market are CD Baby and Distrokid. They offer simple plans such as a $19.99 yearly subscription for uploading an unlimited amount of songs and albums to
all existing music streaming platforms (DistroKid, 2021). Benefits include that artists can keep 100% of their earnings and get their royalties paid on a monthly basis. The Orchard is another prominent company, known as the music industry’s leading distributor, which aims to empower artists to connect with fans across the globe (The Orchard - Music Distribution, 2021). Through partnerships, they help independent artists amplify their reach and revenue across different business verticals.

2.5 THE DIY approach

Owing to technological advancements, it has become possible for independent artists to be self-sufficient and to work without the support of any major corporation (Oliver and Green, 2009). They have the ability to pursue new heights and build a successful career which has previously been available only for labeled artists. New channels for marketing of music have emerged, providing opportunities for artists to distribute their music independently and market themselves to niche markets (Harris, 2010).

The concept of DIY (Do It Yourself) refers to the practice of creating and building something by oneself without employing a professional (Kerwin, 2019). The term has gradually broadened to embrace a range of creative cultural activities, including music (Bennet, 2018). By using a DIY approach for marketing purposes, independent musicians can establish a personal brand, find innovative ways to spread their musical production and build a community of dedicated fans without external support from a label.

Young artists rely on DIY methods to make a name for themselves (Reitsamer and Prokop, 2018). And since independent musicians work separately from recording corporations, they have to “do it” themselves and stimulate excitement on their own, thus attracting the attention of those who appreciate them and help them grow (Borg, 2020). Such artists need to identify their business needs and establish their own models for marketing their music and brand.
2.6 Branding

Rooney (1995) explains branding as a valuable strategic marketing tool that has previously been considered a useful procedure. According to Sammut-Bonnici (2015), a brand is a tangible or intangible characteristic which exists to create awareness surrounding a product, place, person, service, etc. The main idea behind using branding is to stand out from other competitors by positioning oneself (Sammut-Bonnici, 2015). Furthermore, within branding, it is also important to form a brand identity which shows how an individual is perceived. Brand identity is developed through factors such as culture, personality, relationship and vision (Manolica et al., 2015). Moreover, a brand can be expressed through a name, term, design or symbol that makes the brands differentiate one from another (Maurya, 2012). Today, branding is experiencing even more success due to new and innovative applications.

When it comes to the labels’ involvement in branding of an artist, there are things that the label will be asking the artist in order to gain an understanding of the individual (Macy et al., 2021). Moreover, artists, together with the label, form a partnership with businesses which help to market the artist in the best way possible (Macy et al., 2021). These corporations can be involved within television, radio, advertisement, etc. and they work to spread the artist’s brand more widely. Moreover, artists build their strong brands by being consistent with who they are as an artist, as well as include themselves in partnerships with brands that excel their brand, rather than damage it (Macy et al., 2021).

2.6.1 Personal branding

To become and remain an independent artist, personal branding and how one markets themself to society are two factors of high importance to consider (Johnson, 2017). Personal branding is the process of marketing people and their careers as brands (Henderson, 2019). Fita (2020) states that it is a form of marketing which an individual uses to create a uniform public image, showing their values and reputation. Furthermore, it is an ongoing practice portraying an artist’s persona, set of skills, as well as their lifestyle within and outside the music industry. According to Matenge (2013), musicians and artists strive to become leaders in the market not for short-term,
but rather for long-term. Achieving this goal is possible through branding, as it ensures that fans will remain loyal to an artist. In the long run, this would result in greater streams, bringing in a potentially higher revenue (Matenge, 2013).

Within music, there are many different ways that one can market oneself and create a symbolic interaction with fans through music and art (Nanayakkara & Dissanayake, 2020). Personal branding techniques can be divided into sections which will be further examined down below. These certain methods have an impact on both building, as well as keeping a fanbase and listeners for an independent artist.

### 2.6.1.1 Consistency with a brand

According to Rooney (1995), keeping a brand in a strong position is a critical concern. There are some aspects that need to be taken into consideration when an artist must remain consistent with promoting their brand. According to Casas (2017), it is important that artists establish their values and follow them in all their communication channels, as well as in their way of behaving. Casas explains four key questions to ask before promoting: who is promoting, what is being promoted, where and for whom. These will help to better connect the artist with their audience. Moreover, Casas (2017) states that through social media tools such as Instagram, Facebook and others, an artist must follow a specific imagery style in order to achieve consistency in all posts created.

### 2.6.1.2 Personal Branding through cover art

Many surrounding factors play a vital role in self branding. Cover art is something that has been used when marketing CDs, vinyls or other media of tangible goods (Cook, 2013). Moreover, from the consumers’ perspective, cover art can bring a direct feeling of a song or an album. Furthermore, Cook (2013) states that the cover art is important, as it can be applicable to a branding logo, thus giving the listener a direct connection to the artist. However, due to the
digitized era, it is seen that cover arts are no longer the most fundamental aspect as they were during the age of physical copies.

2.6.1.3 Personal Branding through Social Media

Social media is one of the most straightforward ways of growing a personal brand or identity and becoming visible in a specific market (Petruca, 2016). Moreover, people tend to stay online which turns digital tools such as social media into a hub for people, looking for information about a certain individual or activity. Personal branding through social media requires minimum effort to create a profile. Petruca (2016), however, states that in order for someone to successfully promote their brand, they should find a consistent style and tone in order to make the profile special and to stand out. Moreover, Petruca (2016) believes that in order to be noticeable when building a brand, frequent posting has great value across all platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.). According to Lee (2015), the content that is posted online can be described as the fuel, and the social media platform is the engine. Furthermore, digital media platforms can be recognized as another source of income, as they are thought to be a great alternative for extend earnings within music or other areas (Slind and Urbanova, 2016).
3. Methodology and Method

This chapter explains and argues for the chosen methodological process to conduct the research study. It begins with a description of the research philosophy, approach, strategy and design, and further moves on to the methods for data collection, sampling, and analysis. The chapter ends with the ethical considerations of the findings.

3.1 Methodology

3.1.1 Research philosophy

A research philosophy is a belief about how data around a phenomenon should be gathered, analyzed and applied (Levin, 1988). It is of great importance to understand the different philosophies that exist, as this allows preparing for the research and understanding the analyzed problem better (Žukauskas et al., 2018). Furthermore, the choice of research philosophy will have a significant impact on the development of the research and what is being investigated (Saunders et al., 2009). According to Galliers (1991), two major research philosophies have been identified in the Western tradition of science, labelled as interpretivist and positivist.

3.1.1.1 Positivism

The positivist research paradigm claims that reality can be observed and described from an objective viewpoint (Levin, 1988). Positivism refers to the importance of what is “posited”, i.e. “given” (Saunders et al., 2009). Predictions can be made on the basis of previously explained realities and their inter-relationships. In other words, positivist researchers use universal rules and laws to predict behaviour in situations (Saunders et al., 2009). Furthermore, they can compare their claims with the objective reality and ascertain the truth (Popper, 1972). However, only phenomena which can be measured and quantified would result in the collection of credible data (Crotty, 1998). Moreover, Crotty states that a positivist paradigm entails remaining neutral and detached from the data in order to avoid influencing the findings.
3.1.1.2 Interpretivism

The alternative to positivism, namely interpretivism, asserts that reality can be interpreted in a subjective manner (Žukauskas et al, 2018). This research philosophy is recognized for its value in providing new, richer understandings and interpretations of social worlds and contexts (Saunders et al., 2009). Moreover, it is concerned with the uniqueness of a particular situation, contributing to the pursuit of contextual depth (Myers, 1997). Interpretivist researchers’ personal interpretation of materials, data, as well as their own values and beliefs play a vital role in the research process. Individuals form their own reality of the world in different contexts by interacting with others (Khan, 2014). Furthermore, actions and behaviour are unpredictable.

Interpretivism accepts that multiple realities of the truth can exist (Crossan, 2013). Since the purpose of this paper is to examine different independent Swedish artists and view each participant in the research as a separate case, an interpretivist philosophy is more applicable to this study. Moreover, an interpretivist research is suitable, given its aim to create new and richer understandings of social worlds and contexts (Saunders et al., 2009).

3.1.2 Research approach

This research adopts a deductive approach, starting from a priori concept. According to Collis and Hussey (2014), a deductive study follows a “top-down” approach which focuses on moving from the general to the particular, i.e. from the application of a theory to the obtention of observations and findings. A deductive approach helps to focus on the main purpose of the research and organize data into categories to maintain alignment with the research question (Bingham, 2021). In this paper, the DIY approach used by independent artists for their marketing strategies is explored and further tested in particular cases with different participants.

3.1.3 Research strategy

An exploratory strategy is chosen for this research. Such a strategy discovers an unstudied problem and explores the presented research question at stake (Collis and Hussey, 2014). Furthermore, it intends to provide an in-depth understanding of the investigated topic. By using
exploratory procedures, researchers can discover findings through their own experience and powers of reasoning (Stebbins, 2001). The research strategy helps to uncover details and facts around a topic and aids the researchers with acquiring new insights about the studied phenomenon.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the research employs a qualitative strategy. This strategy helps with answering questions such as “how” and “why” an event has occurred. Moreover, it has a dynamic approach to research such as conducting interviews, which are one of the most common data collection techniques for qualitative research (Gill et al., 2008). The participants in the study have the opportunity to freely express their thoughts and disclose experiences. This would not be possible if quantitative research techniques were used, since they use structured surveys which cannot generate a valuable conversation. Furthermore, with a qualitative method, data collection and analysis often result in additional questions and findings (Comer et al., 2018).

### 3.1.4 Research design

The design of the research follows a case study approach. Case studies are in-depth studies of a person, group or event. They are popular amongst researchers who want to generate a multifaceted understanding of a complex problem in a real life context. Rule and John (2011) state that a single case study presents a rigorous view of a particular situation or entity. Patterns are sought between cases and the expected outcome is to generalize the findings. Furthermore, a case study research design is useful for testing whether scientific theories and models work practically in the real world (Shuttleworth, 2008).

This research analyses different individuals across Sweden working as independent artists and views each of their situations as a specific case. Further, the established DIY approach to promotion is applied and explained through each artist’s individual story.
3.2 Method

3.2.1 Data collection

Qualitative research uses three types of data collection: focus groups, observations of events in the real world, and interviews (Davis & Meyer, 2009). Interviews were selected for this specific research, in order to attain the needed primary data.

According to Stuckey (2013), interviews are divided into three categories: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. The conducted interviews followed a semi-structured approach, the choice of which was made on account of the fact that such types of interviews have loose structure. Since the study aims to examine independent Swedish artists’ own perceptions and beliefs, this resulted in viewing semi-structured interviews as the most suitable data collection method. This allows the participants to share narratives and express themselves more openly (Doyle, 2020). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews provide a more in-depth understanding of the fundamental areas of the research, according to Collis and Hussey (2014). An interview guide was created by the researchers, containing open-ended questions based on the nature of the research question.

A total of 8 participants were selected to take part in the interviews. Each was given the chance to answer freely and share their own perceptions of each question. Expectedly, different follow-up questions were asked, based on the answers provided by the participants.

3.2.2 Sampling Method

The sample used for the interviews was chosen based on characteristics from the research question. The participants had to meet the requirements of being independent artists who are located in Sweden.

Convenience sampling was the chosen sampling method, since it is claimed that this allows the participants for the interviewees to be selected depending on their availability and willingness to take part (Ben-Shlomo et al., 2013). A snowballing sample was also considered suitable for the
purpose of the study, as it allowed the chosen participants to refer to their personal acquaintances who share the same characteristics as them.

The two sampling methods were used collectively to ensure that the researchers were provided with relevant and sufficient results. The number of interviews to be conducted was predefined, therefore the recruiting of participants was finalized once the number had been reached. Invitations to participate in the interviews were sent individually to the people selected to take part.

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<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>DANCE POP</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>CONTEMPORARY POP/ELECTRONIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>DEEP HOUSE/POP</td>
</tr>
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*Table 1: Interviewee Participants*

3.2.3 Data analysis

From all incredibly diverse, complex and nuanced qualitative data analysis approaches (Holloway & Todres, 2003), several methods were considered, but the researchers found thematic analysis the most suitable for this study. Thematic analysis, also abbreviated as TA, is an extremely flexible and increasingly popular method of qualitative data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). It is used for the identification, analysis and description of patterns within data. Furthermore, it minimally organises and reports the data set in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this research, codes were generated where similarities between the participants’ answers were discovered. Themes were also established, based on the frame of reference of the research.
Compared to other data analysis methods such as discourse analysis and grounded theory, a thematic analysis does not require focus on social interaction and language use, nor theoretical knowledge. The method rather provides a description of experiences, meanings and realities, further helping to reduce the data and finally concluding it (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

The researchers gathered and transcribed 7 independent Swedish musicians’ valuable answers to the interview questions. Moreover, one of the researchers volunteered to be a participant, inhabiting a dual role within the study. This situation is unusual, but not unlikely in research (Probst, 2016). The choice was made on account of the fact that the researcher was a member of the general population as those being studied. To avoid potential bias, the co-researcher interviewed, analyzed and thematically organized the received answers. Furthermore, the researchers reflected on the experience and worked to avoid affecting the research process.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

The researchers decided to work with several criteria in order to ensure that the ethical guidelines are followed, and that the participants are respected and protected during the entire process of the research. The chosen areas of focus for accommodation of these requirements were credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, anonymity and confidentiality.

3.3.1 Credibility

Credibility is concerned with correctly interpreting and exhibiting the research participants’ answers in the writing (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To convince the readers that the findings are credible, investigator triangulation and data triangulation were applied. The investigator triangulation entails that more than one researcher participates in the study, which strengthens the accuracy of the data and its interpretation. In the case of this research, the authors are two, and they were both present during the interviews with the research participants. Furthermore, the data triangulation approach involves improving the validity of the results through the use of information gathered from different individuals at different times (Denzin, 1970). This research involved interviewing 8 individuals in total in a time span of 2 months.
3.3.2 Transferability

Transferability investigates whether the results from a study can be generalized and applied to a future one. In order for the findings to be suitable for transferring to other contexts, they must have common characteristics and features (Rodon & Sese, 2008). The researchers of this paper cannot guarantee the transferability of the results, due to their focus on independent artists located only in Sweden. However, the level of transferability of the paper can be considered high since the paper examines digital marketing channels, such as social media and music streaming platforms, which are available across different countries and cultures. Therefore, there is a likelihood that the findings related to these concepts can be generalized and used in future research.

3.3.3 Dependability

Dependability refers to the logic and transparency of the research process, as well as the coherence between all data and findings (Dew & Tong, 2016). Dependability is crucial so that the study could be repeated by other researchers. The research must be reliable which can be achieved through recording and transcribing the data as much as possible. Using computer software can facilitate a traceable coding process, according to Dew and Tong (2020). The researchers of this study transcribed and categorized all similar patterns in the interviewees’ answers in a shared document. Coding was performed by both of the researchers by working together simultaneously.

3.3.4 Confirmability

Confirmability ensures that the real viewpoints of the participants are presented in the findings without demonstrating any biases from the researchers (Polit & Beck, 2012). Moreover, it is crucial to draw interpretations of the results without any form of personal motivation. The researchers of this study can assure that none of the gathered data in this paper is invented by them, and that all findings are accurately presented. This was achieved by involving both of the inquirers in the interviews, as well as in the analysis of the findings from the other participants. According to Schreier (2012), it is recommended that more than one person performs the
analysis in order to increase comprehensivity and to provide reliable interpretations of the data. Furthermore, transparency was ensured through providing rich quotes from the research participants which depict the themes that emerge in the theoretical framework.

3.3.5 Anonymity and confidentiality

The code of ethical conduct emphasizes the importance of respecting the anonymity and privacy of research participants (Grinyer, 2002). The researchers guaranteed the anonymity of the participants by verbally letting them know at the start of each interview that neither their names, age nor location would be provided to the reader. It was clearly stated that the gathered information would be treated confidentially and that their answers would not be identifiable as theirs. By taking such actions, the inquirers can expect more expressive and rich answers from the interview participants, as Collis and Hussey (2014) claim. Due to the fact that there were interviewees who are prominent Swedish independent artists, their wishes to not link their stories to them were well respected. To protect the participants’ identities, the researchers labeled each of them as “Interviewee”, and a number following.
4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter includes both the findings from the interviews, as well as an analysis of them. The most significant insights from the gathered data are shown. The chapter also entails rich quotes, enhancing the credibility of the research.

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Rationality behind working independently

The first dimension which the researchers focused on was why the interviewees had chosen the path of independence in their music careers. The interviews began with a short description of how each participant had taken the decision to pursue a career in the music industry, followed by their current occupation. From all interviewees, 6 stated that they work full-time as independent singers/songwriters, while 2 work part-time in the music industry. When it came to their motivation behind being independent, Interviewee 1 answered:

“Being independent gives me control over what music I want to release. I can switch genres without disturbing my “direction”. I can choose my percentage deals with people, how to market myself and with which tools. It is a freer way of working.”

Interviewee 2:

“I never aspired to be independent, it just turned out to be the best alternative for me. After releasing songs with the help of bigger labels, I still received the same amount of streams that I get today as an independent artist.”
The majority of the interview participants mentioned the word “freedom” when responding to the question why they think it is better to work outside a recording label. Some claimed that they have more freedom in their decision making, whereas others believed that they had freedom in the creative side, such as making their own music and marketing content. As Kerwin (2019) explains, these individuals employ the practice of creating and building something by themselves, choosing to receive no help from a professional. Interviewee 5 and Interviewee 6, however, had similar opinions regarding becoming part of a record label in the future. They were attracted by the help they could receive from having a team and by the fact that they would “not be totally alone in the journey”.

To the question “Have you ever been signed to a label”, half of the respondents answered with “No”, but three claimed to have released songs via a label without actually being signed to it as an artist. This gave the label ownership of these specific artists’ songs, but no control over the artists themselves. Regarding this, Interviewee 1 shared the following:

“I have signed single by single releases through Sony, Warner, Universal. Unfortunately, they were not as dedicated to promoting the song releases as they would have been if I had agreed upon signing a long-term contract with them.”

All participants were also asked if they believe that recording labels have too much ownership and control over artists. 4 out of 8 participants had been signed to a label in the past and could describe their personal observations, while the rest stated facts they only suspected are true, or shared stories they had heard from acquaintances who have been working with major labels. Three artists shared similar views, stating that “both the label and the artist need to make money, therefore balance should exist between the two parties”. However, the majority agreed that recording labels take too big a share of an artist’s profit compared to the effort they put into promoting the project. Interviewee 3 stated:

“Finding a label which can understand the artist’s wishes is hard. I think that they remove the creativity and fun around music.”
What stood out the most was that the answers of the majority of the participants were concentrated on the inability to symbiose with a recording label. Some interviewees believed that recording labels have their own way of operating which is more business-oriented, rather than providing an environment for artists to be creative. The artists who have previously had a contract with a record label felt limited and restricted from making their own decisions in terms of creativity, sound and marketing during the time.

4.1.2 Marketing and promotion with the help of a record label

The participants were asked what the benefits of having a record label build an artist’s marketing and promotion are. To this, Interviewee 2 answered:

“If labels are handling all promotion, this would give us artists more time to focus on the music without having to be so involved in the marketing process which can be time-consuming.”

Interviewee 5 & 6 had similar answers. Interviewee 5 stated:

“Labels have more money and usually larger networks which gives a greater opportunity of doing bigger campaigns and promotions.”

To the question, Interviewee 1 answered in terms of traditional marketing methods:

“The benefit of having a label is that they have good connections, such as giving an artist exposure on radio stations and TV shows. Most radio stations have deals with labels, but getting a song on the radio for an independent artist is very difficult.”

According to the artists, personally taking care of the creation of marketing and promotion content can switch the focus from the actual creative side of making the music. Independent artists struggle with standing out and marketing their music effectively (Carter, 2010), and after interpreting the participants’ answers, it became noticeable that the reason for this is their lack of
time and good networks. Moreover, the above-mentioned artists explained that labels in many cases have much better connections and can provide a higher level of exposure for musicians offline. Independent artists have access mostly to online promoting channels, but are rather restricted in terms of traditional media due to their low level of connections with radios, television and press. According to Chattopadhyay (2021), branding is built both online and offline, therefore in this aspect, working with a recording label gives an advantage over working independently, since labels can give artists exposure on traditional media as well.

To the question asking the opposite, like what the drawbacks of having a label create an artist’s marketing and promotion are, most of the artists had a similar response, which was that “you have no control”. They felt that labels take too much responsibility for what type of marketing they are going to execute, and the artist in many cases can become left out from the entire process.

Interviewee 4:

“You have no control over how labels spread their budgets, but you have to show trust. It varies from label to label though, when it comes to how much insight you get into how their marketing campaigns are done.”

Interviewee 2:

“A drawback may be that the label could present a big promotion plan for an artist, but could get away with doing much less work as they present in the beginning”.

These drawbacks could be avoided if there was better communication between the record label and the artist. Interviewee 3 shared their experience with a lot of miscommunication during the time they had been signed to a label. The people working at the label had no time for back and forth discussions with the artist, therefore the marketing plan was not executed to the standards and expectations of the artist.
Record labels differ in the level of transparency they propose to their artists (O’Dair, 2016). Nevertheless, most interviewees were left with the impression that labels are not transparent in terms of their budgeting, as well as decision making on where the money for a certain marketing campaign goes. Interviewee 6 stated:

“The label uses the money in a way that you do not agree with. For example, they could spend a lot on a makeup artist for a photoshoot when you could have done it yourself, and then they put less money in the actual promotion.”

What is understood is that labels keep the artists out of the marketing process and prefer to keep them uninformed about their budgeting decisions. Furthermore, the artists are seen as a product of the corporation, therefore they do not have room for expressing their opinions on the matter. As Hracs (2012) states, record labels are in the centre of all processes, even creating budgets, arranging photoshoots and hiring stylists. However, most participants shared their desire for more transparency between the two parties and more involvement in the budget planning, as well as in the stage prior to executing the marketing campaigns.

### 4.1.3 Social Media

The interviewees were also asked questions regarding how they operate independently when it comes to promoting themselves and their music through different social media platforms. All artists mentioned either Instagram, Tiktok, or Facebook in their answers, which was the reason for putting emphasis on these specific channels. When it comes to Instagram, the following are quotes about the participants’ experiences with the platform.

Interviewee 8:

“I try to update my audience on what is going on with my music. Sometimes, I create Instagram Stories presenting the ongoing process of a project I am doing.”
Interviewee 1:

“I mostly use Instagram to promote my self-created content material. Also, I know many influencers that share my music on Instagram Stories which allows me to reach a bigger audience.”

According to Wahid and Gunarto (2021), the possible length of videos posted on Instagram Stories is 15 seconds only. The above-stated artists preferred to post “micro-videos” on Stories about their music or day-to-day activities to keep the interest of their followers whose attention span is decreasing in this modern world, according to Subramanian (2018). The artists also aimed to not give away too much information around their unreleased material in terms of songs and projects. Moreover, they claimed to follow this strategy in order to create suspense and more engagement with their posts on social media. Furthermore, 6 out of 8 participants thought that it was of high importance to stimulate excitement and awareness prior to a song or album release.

According to some interviewees, the most appropriate time to introduce an upcoming song or album to the followers online was around 5 days before the release. Others claimed that a longer period of time is more suitable, which gives the artists the ability to post more content, such as teaser videos and alerts. Iskandar and Arden (2016) state that by using Instagram Analytics, content creators can view what the best times for posting are according to their audience’s engagement. One interviewee answered that they try to pay attention to the findings from these analytics, especially when an important post needs to be created, in order to reach the highest level of response possible.

After reviewing the answers, it was understood that all the interviewed independent artists were using Instagram Stories on a daily basis as a tool for keeping the followers engaged in their day-to-day life. It was regarded that regular posts which go on the feed of the platform should have some meaningful caption describing the image or video. This would make the post more communicative towards the followers of the creator by getting a message across and keeping the
viewers informed about something (Meisani et al., 2016). This could either be related to an upcoming release, celebrating an event or raising a public issue.

When it comes to the social media platform TikTok, neither of the 8 participants highlighted that they use TikTok to a big extent as a way of digital promotion. Interviewee 3 stated:

“I have chosen to use Instagram and Facebook as my main platforms. But I fall in and out of TikTok. Most of my listeners do not belong to the age group which uses the platform.”

Since 41% of TikTok’s users are aged between 16 and 24 (Global Web Index, 2019), the social media platform’s target audience is much younger than the interviewed artists and their audiences. The above-quoted artist also said that TikTok is a platform which they try to use, because they know they would benefit from it. However, they have not noticed a major success in terms of views and interactions with the videos created by them. Furthermore, Interviewee 4 claimed the following:

“I created a TikTok account one week ago. I just initiated this step because I want to try to build a following on this platform too and to see how it goes in the future.”

Due to the fact that this participant had just started an account on the social media channel, they could not give more insights about how useful it actually is for an independent artist. However, this interviewee had decided to target the younger generation and expand their fan base by trying out this fairly new digital channel.

All interviewees were aware of the features of the platform and the ability to create viral dances or any other type of videos to their songs. Nevertheless, they were not so ambitious about creating more accounts, since that would increase the amount of work they would have to put in
digital marketing.

The final platform which the researchers examined was Facebook. Due to the connectivity between Facebook and Instagram, two artists brought up the fact that whenever they create a post, their image or video automatically becomes available on both. Interviewee 2 said:

“I post the same images on both Instagram and Facebook. You reach different people on the two, your posts get a good presentation and exposure on the two platforms at the same time.”

If an individual follows an artist on Instagram, this does not indicate that the same person has liked their Facebook Page as well. Therefore, Interviewee 2 explained that by utilizing the two platforms at the same time, more people can see and react to the same post. This does not require additional time from the independent artist, since the channels are automatically connected through settings. Content creators can remove the setting, but more exposure is guaranteed when a photo/video is uploaded to more than one media channel.

Another feature which is offered by Facebook was brought up by Interviewee 3:

“I use Facebook to promote my live gigs by creating Facebook events.”

This participant used Facebook as a space for the promotion of a personal event, such as a live gig or a concert, or as Lee (2010) describes, any form of a social gathering. The Facebook Events application is an important venue for the marketing of music artists’ work and an invitation to their organized happenings. This tool can be considered beneficial to independent artists who do not have a big possibility to advertise their events on traditional media, such as billboards, television, radio, etc.
The research participants were also asked how they interact with their fan base through social media. To the question, here is how the interviewees answered:

Interviewee 4:

“I do Q&As and try to answer as many people as possible through DMs, especially if they have music related questions and want new intakes.”

Interviewee 1:

“I try to do interactive Q&As and live streams to connect with my audience. Answering their DMs and replying to comments under my posts in the nicest way possible is my strategy. I try to show my true values and be humble.”

Interviewee 4 aimed to give inspiration to the people reaching out to them, as well as to help out future musicians following in their footsteps by directly messaging them back. On the other hand, Interviewee 1 put more attention on themself by accepting greetings and compliments. Both tactics can be beneficial, depending on what the followers are looking for - receiving recognition and gratitude from their favourite artist, or getting life or career advice.

Apart from Direct Messaging, the participants’ answers also put focus on live streams and Q&As. Q&As can typically be implemented in live streams where the followers ask their questions openly in the comment section in real time (Fonseca, 2019). Nonetheless, the more popular method amongst the respondents was to use “stickers” which can be posted on an Instagram Story. This allows the users to ask their questions anonymously through typing inside the sticker. The difference is that it can take several hours for the artist to respond to the questions placed using the “sticker” function, whereas doing a live stream allows immediate response. However, live streams were preferred for showing a rehearsing process, a short part of an artist’s gig, or for having a face-to-face conversation with the followers prior to a song or album release.
Commenting was also an essential part of the interaction process, raised by three participants in the research. They shared that they can express a more personal and genuine response to their fans by answering to them in the comment section, sometimes generating a thread. In most cases, their comments were straightforward, such as a simple “Thank you” to a compliment. Nevertheless, it was observed that comments are a much better function for communication than likes and shares which the artist cannot interact with.

One interviewee stood out from the rest. They shared that they do not feel like they put enough effort in socializing and getting back to their fans. Interviewee 7’s words were:

“I have always been bad at interacting with my followers. However, I always answer in direct messages, but I would like to have the time for more Q&As and live streams. I have told myself I will begin to do so.”

The participant had a realization for the need to connect with their fan base, as it is an important part of digital marketing. This wins the artist loyal followers, who eventually can elevate their music and promote it further.

When the respondents were asked if they have any specific methods or marketing techniques they utilize in order to increase their followers, they answered in the following way:

Interviewee 1:

“I follow trends and use specific songs or sounds which have a big upswing for creating Instagram Reels and Stories. Another thing is to create sponsored ads, which allows me to choose locations, select gender, so I can focus on the right group of people which I think my song will suit best. Then I hope they become a fan and follow along my journey.”
The quoted participant was the only one who put emphasis on Instagram Reels. They explained the importance of following trends and using viral sounds to expand to an unknown and undiscovered audience. However, this strategy is more commonly employed by TikTok users, thus the reason for no other of the researched artists to mention it. Furthermore, Reels are more tricky and time-consuming to create because of the wide variety of features they offer. Therefore, independent artists who take care of all aspects of their music career may lack the time to make Reels or IGTV videos which require extra attention and detailed work.

The other digital marketing tactic involving the use of sponsored ads was mentioned several times by other participants as well. They were appealed by the low cost of boosting a post, regardless of which platform they use. Some preferred to put a post across Instagram, while another respondent merely used the “Facebook Boost” option on their Facebook Page. This gives artists the power to constrain their audience by using demographic and interest-based filters (Jones, 2020).

Two participants agreed that hashtags are also a helpful push for expanding to more users on social media platforms. Interviewee 3 had the following opinion:

“To increase my follower base, I use hashtags that reflect my niche. I have tried out both English and Swedish and mixed them. I always tag people in the pictures and tag the location.”

Interviewee 5:

“I like to appear on accounts which have a similar fanbase as mine, either other artists, or record labels. They usually tag me or post an image of me to promote a song release of mine.”

Hashtags were used by the independent artists to accentuate their values and to reflect what can be observed on the posted photo or video. By doing so, the artists’ content can reach users who searched for a specific hashtag in the Search Bar. Thus, they can stumble upon something
unseen, which brings in new viewers of the original content creator’s posts. Furthermore, hashtags can organize posts, meaning that if an artist creates a hashtag with the name of a song or album they are releasing, all images related to that will be organized in one place. However, this was not something the interviewed artists were utilizing or found more beneficial than other digital marketing methods. However, none of the interviewed artists saw this option as any more special or helpful. An important point was that the language which the hashtags are written in should be dependent on where the artist’s target audience is located. If the artist is aiming for global recognition, the captions and hashtags under their posts should be written in English. On the other side, if the artist desires to be noticed only in Sweden, then all text should be in Swedish. Interviewee 3 felt that a mix of hashtags in the two languages was beneficial for getting exposure in different countries and being seen by users of different nationalities.

Tags were regarded as more useful than hashtags since they lead to another person's profile or show the location of a past concert, a place where a song was recorded, etc. That is the reason why Interviewee 5 felt the importance of tags. They could get their face shown on another artist’s account, which would make that person’s followers click on the tag of the individual and eventually land on their profile.

Interviewee 4 shared an interesting digital marketing technique:

“One technique I use has been to hang out with people with a large following base. I have a large group of followers too, so I help them out if they need any support or promotion of their companies. Then they help me to get a broader reach by posting Stories with my music or using it in Reels. It is a kind of “I scratch your back if you scratch mine” type of friendship.”

In some cases, independent artists can have a dual role and act as influencers on social media as well. This means that the artist can engage in a collaboration with a brand and promote a product or service of theirs. This can generate money for the two parties. Additionally, the brand can also repost the photo or video on their own brand account, giving more exposure to the artist. Tagging also plays a role here, since the brand can tag the artist’s account in the post, and vice versa.

However, in other cases, artists can be the ones reaching out to other influencers and asking them
to promote their music. One of the interviewees shared their experience in collaborating with a famous dancer on the platform TikTok. The influencer made a dance choreography to the artist’s latest song right after its release in order to spark an interest and create an innovative way of sharing the sound. This was a deliberate intention from the artist’s side, since they were aware that a buzz would be created from the video, as El Gamal (2012) states.

The importance of having online presence is crucial now more than ever (Curtis, 2020). Therefore, the researchers felt that it was inevitable not to ask how active the interviewed independent artists are on social media. The following responses were given:

Interviewee 6:

“I post 3 images a week on Instagram and daily on my Stories, from studio sessions to more personal life.”

Interviewee 8:

“Being active is the most important thing. The more you interact with others, the more interaction you will receive.”

The artists avoided posting too much content on their regular feed, since that drops the engagement of their followers. However, their choice of posting Stories on a daily basis was because Stories disappear after 24 hours and the followers cannot like or comment publicly on them. Artists claimed to not engage that much in the creation of a Story, since they are aware that it will disappear after just one day. Furthermore, making a Story was seen as being a more casual and less permanent way of engaging with their communities. Interviewee 8 strongly emphasized the significance of being active and showing their everyday life on social media, thus revealing more personality and openness to their fan base. Moreover, they expressed that posting Stories frequently shows a more honest image of their work and their projects, and unveils their true self.
Two participants recognized that they are not as active as they should be. However, Interviewee 2 believed that their strategy was a good approach. They stated the following:

“I guess it is a strategy to post less frequently, as it makes a nicer feed on Instagram and also increases the significance of each post. If you post more rarely, each post becomes a little bit more important than posting every single day.”

The same independent artist described that the only posts they created were strictly concerning their music career. This would include a photo or video about an upcoming song/album release, moving into a new studio, or a significant future show or live performance of theirs. Since social media is an invaluable tool which has proven to be an easy-to-use, efficient and cost-effective type of digital marketing (Lester, 2012), then the independent artists should try to remain active at all times on their platforms.

4.1.4 Distribution

The artists were asked three different questions surrounding the distribution of their music. The first question was related to how they deliver music to their consumers. This was asked because independent artists have no access to the service which record labels provide, which is to upload their songs and albums to streaming platforms. Instead, independent artists have to apply the DIY approach and personally take care of the delivery of their music.

From the answers, it was understood that 6 out of 8 participants used The Orchard as their distribution platform. Two of the artists had previously worked with Distrokid, but changed to The Orchard, since it provided more functions and was known to be the music industry’s leading distributor (The Orchard - Music Distribution, 2021). One artist thought that using a distribution company as an intermediary between them and streaming platforms was extremely simple, cost-efficient and not time-consuming at all. The artists were also pleased with the contracts which they had with their chosen distribution platform, which are claimed to be far from manipulative and obligatory (Ahern, 2019). The artists also earned a lot from working with a distribution platform, because these companies not only upload an artist’s music to streaming platforms, but
also offer it on online stores (Bockstedt et al., 2006). One artist shared their experience with using The Orchard for marketing purposes. The company helped with creating marketing content for the artist’s song release and ran promotion campaigns across social media platforms.

The rest of the interviewees stated that they worked as featured artists, which indicated that the main artist of a certain track was responsible for the distribution of it. Therefore, the featured artists had no knowledge of what platform was used to deliver their music online.

The second question to the participants was how they use music streaming platforms to their benefit. The artists thought it was important to get their music out on all streaming platforms, making the songs available globally. However, the majority of the respondents believed that they received the most streams on Spotify, with YouTube Music coming second. According to one respondent, Spotify also offers better analytics for independent artists who believe it is crucial to follow the diagrams and graphs. They give them insights about the geographics and demographics of their listeners which can be important information to consider when the time to execute the marketing for a future release comes.

The final question was focused on playlists and whether the artists relied on getting their songs added to playlists which are created by other users or by the streaming platforms. Interviewee 6 replied in the following way:

“I rely on getting my songs on playlists because this is key to receiving more streams and exposure.”

According to Boder (2020), playlists allow artists to expand their audience to a much greater extent. Furthermore, two more interviewees had similar points to Interviewee 6. They thought it was important to work towards not only increasing streams, but also increasing the number of monthly listeners which could only be possible through being added to popular playlists. One interviewee had interaction with independent playlists owners, also known as curators, who specifically work with creating their own playlists within different music genres. They also offered a higher position in a playlist, but at a higher cost due to a demand for receiving bigger streaming numbers.
Several of the independent artists brought up the importance of playlists, titled “New Music Friday” which are curated by Spotify and are country-specific. They are updated every Friday with new songs with the intention to test them and see how people react to them (Morgan, 2018). According to Aguiar and Waldfogel (2018), inclusion on such lists substantially raises the probability of song success, and that is something which the interviewed independent artists also believed. Furthermore, they also thought that being added to different countries’ New Music Friday playlists boosts their song and gives them an extra push. What is beneficial is that the list owners do not only add signed artists, but also give exposure and a chance for success to independent artists.

4.1.5 Personal branding and promotion

Personal branding and how one markets themself to society are two very important aspects (Johnson, 2017), especially for an independent artist who has to work on their own without any help from a record label. Furthermore, personal branding is an ongoing form of marketing which every individual can use to create a uniform public image, as well as to show their true values (Fita, 2020). These are the reasons why the authors of this research decided to emphasize on this concept in their interview questions.

Firstly, the participants were asked to describe their personal brand. The researchers’ intention was to investigate whether the artists had already developed their own brand or were still in the process of building it. These were the following answers given by the interviewees:

Interviewee 8:

“My brand is real transparency. I try to give my fans an honest picture of what I am doing and not sugar coat anything.”
Interviewee 3:

“I love music, but I also love to workout and live healthy, so my personal brand has developed into being a holistic health artist. This has grown over the years and become my current niche.”

Interviewee 2:

“The vision of my brand is constantly developing and still is at the moment.”

Interviewee 6:

“I am a music nerd who just likes to create and put out music. I try to be myself and I think that is what makes an artist relatable.”

From the gathered information, similarities could be noticed in the answers. The majority of the interviewed desired to be transparent towards their audience and to demonstrate truthfulness. One artist stated that they work towards achieving these goals through being personal on social media, such as talking about mental and physical health. Furthermore, Interviewee 2 highlighted that their brand and vision were still in the development stage. This was due to the fact that different trends are constantly reshaping the music industry (Throsby, 2020), therefore the artist wanted to be perceived according to what is popular and up-to-date. This could include entirely changing the genre they work in, or changing their appearance.

According to Casas (2017), it is vital for artists to establish their own values and follow them throughout all channels. This relates to the idea of consistency in brand image, as well as in the way of behaving. On that account, the researchers wanted to investigate what actions independent music artists take in order to keep their brands consistent. The quotes below were their answers.
Interviewee 8:

“I spend many hours a day prioritizing my time and working hard in order to keep brand consistency.”

Interviewee 1:

“When it comes to the overall visual aspect of my content, it has kept a common thread throughout the years. However, it can change from year to year depending on new trends that come out.”

As Casas (2017) states, an artist must follow a specific style when uploading images on social media channels in order to achieve consistency in the posts. Interviewee 1’s statement indicated that it is advisable for an artist to have “a common thread” in their visual and textual content online, as well as to stay alert for any sudden emergence of trends in the market. Moreover, some of the respondents’ answers highlighted that working hard was an essential part of following brand consistency.

The concept of DIY (Do It Yourself) refers to when an individual builds or creates something by themselves without the help of a professional (Kerwin, 2019). To apply this in context, independent artists build their music careers without record label involvement. If independent artists had access to the resources and industry contacts which record labels have, then they would be receiving all the support from professionals in areas like distribution, media, marketing, merchandise, etc. However, artists working independently usually have a limited network and budget. Therefore, receiving such professional help can sometimes be hard, but it is very valuable and needed in order to attain high quality marketing content, as well as better engagement and exposure online. This led to the idea of researching whether independent artists produce their marketing content solely by themselves or by employing an external team. Here is what some of the participants responded:
Interviewee 3:

“I produce all the marketing content by myself. I did receive some help making promotion videos and Canvases for Spotify, but I never got 100% satisfied with the results, so I would rather do it myself.”

Interviewee 2:

“Almost in every case, I have hired someone local to do it. I usually discover and contact the person through social media, such as a good photographer or videographer, to take photos and short movie clips from night clubs and festivals I am performing at.”

Interviewee 1:

“I work both by myself, but also with other independent people who create films, videos, photos. My team and I have an 80/20 rule – we do 80% ourselves, and the rest of the 20% we can outsource due to time limitations.”

It has become evident that independent music artists constantly need to look for new and creative ways of spreading their music, as well as build a community of followers without the access to or support of a label. The participants' answers showed that each of them had their own specific way of working with this matter. Some relied entirely on themselves and preferred to create their promotion content alone, while the rest were satisfied with the help they received from external forces. This statement can be connected to the fact that being independent has its beneficial sides, one of which is that such artists have a freedom of choice and can make their personal decisions about how to operate in their career. Moreover, 6 out of 8 participants stated that they use self-funding for all of their projects and marketing campaigns, which indicated that they had to do practical budgeting and maximize the use of their money. Interviewee 3, however, claimed to receive external funding from a project built to support artists in their music careers. Furthermore, Interviewee 7 was mainly featured in songs where the main artist’s team was in charge of everything around the marketing of the release.
Lastly, the authors wanted to get an understanding of whether independent artists feel that they can express their personal brand through song/album cover artworks. According to Ward (2018), artworks are a very influential part of selling an album not only for marketing purposes, but for the impact it will have on the public as well. Moreover, Ward (2018) continues by stating how cover art represents the visual aspect of the sound of the song itself to a very big degree. Moreover, from the consumers’ perspective, cover art can bring a direct feeling of a song or an album. In terms of this, the research participants answered in the following ways:

Interviewee 3:

“I find it easier now to express myself through cover art. Today when I hear my songs, I see the picture clearly in my head of how the artwork shall look.”

Interviewee 4:

“I do not have a lot of knowledge about this process of artworks and I do not really think too much about it.”

Interviewee 2:

“If an artist is aiming a song towards a specific niche, then cover art can be more specifically used. You can change the way a song is perceived by having a certain cover artwork. But when you try to make a hit song, which is what I have been trying to do, then the cover art becomes less important.”

After gathering all artists’ answers, it was shown that the majority believed that cover artworks are a significant step of the release and distribution of a song or an album. One participant expressed that an artwork must be relevant to the project, while another one emphasized on the need to professionally execute artworks in order to catch the eye of the listener. Only Interviewee
4 was unsure of the effects that cover arts may have on an audience and further stated that a simple thing like an artwork cannot “make or break” a song/album. However, Interviewee 1 had the opposing opinion which was that “an artwork must represent the feel, genre and style of a song”. This traces back to the idea of connecting the visual to the auditory, explained by Ward (2018).

4.1.6 Sweden

Sweden, the country of focus in this research, was a crucial aspect which the authors wanted to learn more about from the interviewees. Valuable findings were discovered from the gathered answers, in terms of whether Sweden has a sufficient number of available tools for independent music artists when it comes to marketing networks, music industry contacts and possibilities for career development.

Interviewee 2:

“A lot of the networks are on the Internet, so the access in Sweden is as good as anywhere else concerning digital marketing, which is 100% the marketing I have been doing for my projects. But when it comes to finding vocalists to feature in my songs, most of the good ones are based in Stockholm, whereas I am on the West Coast. This makes the whole recording process a bit more difficult.”

Interviewee 3:

“I am satisfied with the marketing platforms I use today (Spotify, Instagram, Facebook, Youtube and Tiktok). I do not think that I actually need more. But If I could dream, I would like a platform where I can stream my unfinished music and have an open discussion and conversation with my fans.”
The answers of the two participants showed that they were satisfied with the social media channels which they can use within Sweden. An issue which was brought up by some was that due to the country’s expansion over a large area, traveling to work with fellow independent musicians and creators could sometimes present a challenge. One interviewee mentioned that they have connections with professionals in areas like artwork design or playlist curation, who are located in Spain, Germany and Estonia. This made the artist and the teams’ marketing planning processes much more internationalized and rarely involved working with people in Sweden.

Furthermore, the researchers also investigated if Sweden is a country which the independent artists considered easy to become successful and well-known in without receiving support from a record label. To this, here is how the participants responded:

Interviewee 5:

“There are a lot of good indie artists that can be found in Sweden and we are recognized for having a well-known music scene.”

Interviewee 2:

“I feel like I could become big in Sweden if I wanted that. I could put more effort into releasing more songs in Swedish. But I am aiming more internationally.”

Interviewee 4:

“Sweden in general is such a small market and tough to grow in. You have to walk around and become famous for something else first or have the right contacts.”

All of the interviewed artists had different views regarding the question of whether it is easy to become well-known as an independent artist in Sweden. Interviewee 5 demonstrated confidence
and considered themselves already prominent on the Swedish music market. According to them, the country has a well-established reputation across the world for having superiority in the music industry, therefore artists have the tools and needed environment to excel within music. Interviewee 2, on the other hand, wanted to focus more globally and gain popularity in other countries and markets. They thought that as long as an artist desires to reach success, they have to put time and effort into it.

Finally, the interviewees were asked to identify what the advantages and disadvantages of being an independent artist in Sweden are, according to their personal beliefs. Regarding advantages, here is how the participants answered:

Interviewee 8:

“You get to control and decide when to release, how to release and what to release.”

Interviewee 5:

“It is very easy to connect to other artists since everybody knows each other. You can easily go around for sessions, etc. It is a good country when it comes to writers and vocalists, especially in Stockholm.”

Interviewee 6:

“In general, the Swedish music business is widely known and respected in pretty much the entire world, so that is definitely an advantage.”

There were several advantages of being an independent artist in Sweden which the majority of the interviewed mentioned. Firstly, Sweden has really talented songwriters and producers which enables independent artists to create music of high quality without needing to be signed to a label. Secondly, it is much easier to establish a network and find other independent individuals in the industry to work with, “compared to other bigger countries, such as the USA.” Thirdly,
being independent gives artists freedom to decide when, how and what to release without seeking approval from a label. And finally, Sweden is a respected country which is recognized as a top exporter of music.

Regarding disadvantages of being an independent artist in Sweden, these were the received answers:

Interviewee 8:

“Budget-wise, it can be hard. Time-wise, it can also be hard, since you have to spend hours on making the mixes and artworks. You also have to take help from the outside for certain things that you cannot do yourself.”

Interviewee 4:

“It is such a small market and even if you get big here, you are not big in general, because you need to go abroad to really make it. For example, if you make it in the UK or the USA first, then people in Sweden will hear about you, but it is rare the other way around.”

Interviewee 1:

“Time is costly – you do everything yourself. You need to create a marketing campaign, take the photos, write a pitching text, contact Spotify and other platforms. You need to be creative in the studio. You need to build up a network from the ground up and work your way though finding more people to collaborate with. There is a lot of planning, scheduling trips and sessions. You put your own economics at risk every single time.”

To summarize the responses regarding the downsides of being an independent artist in Sweden, the interviewees believed that firstly, money and time are limited. If there is something which the respondents could change about that, it would be to get more funding and people around them who reduce their workload. Secondly, Sweden was seen as a small market, which means that
even if an independent artist succeeds to become prominent in Sweden, this does not guarantee them global reach. A third point was that the night club culture is limited and the attendees do not focus on the music. This indicates that even if an independent artist arranges to do a live performance at a club, they still might not receive the desired engagement from the crowd, where they could have found potential future fans. And lastly, the path of independence is a very long one to take. As one interviewee said, “Record labels are just a shorter way to make it.”
5. Conclusion

This section is a summary of the empirical findings and aims to answer the two posed research questions in this paper.

The purpose of this paper was to examine how independent Swedish music artists promote themselves through digital media, as well as how record labels support artists in their careers. The analysis of the findings can be synthesized to answer the two research questions.

RQ1: How do independent Swedish artists promote themselves using digital media?

Independent artists follow the DIY approach in their music careers by personally taking care of all aspects and putting emphasis specifically on marketing. Digitally, they use a number of different platforms, such as social media channels, distribution companies and music streaming services to share their music with listeners. The participants’ focus was mainly put on playlist curators, having a dual role of being an artist and influencer, following trends and striving to become viral, and receiving additional help from external professional teams. Furthermore, using all features provided by social media channels, such as live streams, hashtags and Q&As, establishing a brand image and having consistent personal branding were other ways of promoting oneself through digital media.

RQ2: How do record labels support an artist’s brand and promotion?

This question was examined in connection to the first question, since comparisons were made between the benefits of being an independent artist and the benefits of being signed to a record label. From the gathered findings, it can be concluded that labels support artists by providing a higher level of exposure for them on traditional marketing channels like television and radio, having bigger budgets, doing more outspread digital promotion campaigns, and letting the artists create music, rather than spend time on marketing planning and decision-making.
6. Discussion

This chapter outlines the contributions, practical implications, limitations and ideas for future research.

6.1 Contributions

The findings of this paper could prove valuable to independent artists, or future musicians standing at a crossroads whether to take the path of independence or pursue a career with the support of a label. The study also makes new contributions to previously existing concepts and theories by highlighting relevant issues and examining the currently existing social media marketing strategies in depth. The paper can also be used for future research in the field of music marketing, which is a field lacking knowledge due to the constant advancement of technologies.

6.2 Practical Implications

By using the empirical findings of this research, independently working artists in the music industry can improve their ways of utilizing digital media for marketing purposes. In the age of digitalization and increasing online presence, the results from this paper can help musicians to find more innovative strategies for self-promotion of their brand and music online, as well as to encourage them to develop their own digital marketing plans.

6.3 Limitations

One of the main limitations derived from the purpose of the research, which was to examine only musicians who are working independently in Sweden. However, during the literature review process, the authors noticed a lack of studies conducted on this certain demographic and geographic segmentation. On account of this, the decision to examine this particular group was made in order to contribute to future research. It should be acknowledged that the findings represent only a small fraction of all independent artists in Sweden, which can alter the relevance of the results in other countries.
6.4 Future research

Based on the outcome of this paper, the authors propose several suggestions for future research. Firstly, the study can be extended further by investigating how independent artists plan their budgeting for their online self-promotion, and the actual process of its execution. Secondly, the analytics of social media platforms and music streaming services can be explored in order to provide artists with useful information about how to understand the performance of their posts, interpret the statistics and identify patterns in them. Finally, the last suggestion from the authors is to examine the opposite demographic, represented by signed artists who operate with the support of major record labels. Further, comparisons can be drawn between the ways in which signed and unsigned music artists work.
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8. Appendices

8.1 Appendix 1

Interview Participation Information

You have been invited to participate in a bachelor thesis study. The participation will consist of conducting an interview with you, during which the researchers will gain insightful and relevant information about their explored topic based on your provided answers. Taking part in this research is voluntary.

The study investigates independent Swedish singers and songwriters and their ways of marketing themselves digitally. Most questions will be open-ended, expectantly resulting in discussions and narrative answers. Anonymity and confidentiality are guaranteed. The transcript with all recorded answers will be deleted after the researchers’ thesis is graded.

The interview is expected to take approximately 40 minutes. It will be conducted entirely in English. Do not hesitate to interrupt the interviewee if there are any questions you do not understand.

If you have no questions right now, we can begin the interview.
Interview Guide:

Rationality behind being an independent artist
Do you work as an independent artist full-time?
What is the reason for your choice of being independent?

Labels
Have you ever been signed to a record label or considered becoming part of one?
Do you think labels have too much ownership of and control over artists?
What are the benefits of having a label build an artist’s marketing and promotion?
What are the drawbacks of having a label build an artist’s marketing and promotion?

Social media
How do you work with social media when promoting yourself and your music?
How often do you update your social media channels?
How do you interact with your follower base?
What are some digital marketing techniques you use to increase your follower fanbase?

Distribution
Do you use any distribution company/companies to deliver your music?
How do you use music streaming platforms to your benefit?
Do you rely on getting your songs featured on playlists to get more exposure?

Personal branding and promotion
How would you describe your personal brand?
How do you work with keeping brand consistency?
How do you produce your marketing content: by yourself or with the help of an external team?
Do you get any external funding for your self-promotion?
Do you feel like you can express yourself and your personal brand through cover art?
Sweden

Do you think Sweden has access to enough digital marketing networks and platforms for singers and songwriters?
Do you feel like you can become well-known in Sweden as an independent singer/songwriter?
What are the advantages of being independent in Sweden?
What are the disadvantages of being independent in Sweden?