Milestones in music: Reputations in the career building of musicians in the changing Dutch music industry

Rick Everts a, *, Pauwke Berkers b, Erik Hitters a

a Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, Department of Media & Communication, Erasmus University, Burg. Oudlaan 50, 3062 PA Rotterdam, Netherlands
b Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, Department of Arts & Culture Studies, Erasmus University, Burg. Oudlaan 50, 3062 PA Rotterdam, Netherlands

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ABSTRACT
This study addresses the role of reputation in the career building strategy of early-career musicians in a transforming music industry. Drawing from interviews with 21 musicians, we find that musicians continue to believe that building their reputations within the established music industry is important for career success, despite technological changes that could lead them to focus instead on alternative career strategies. Our analysis proceeds in two stages that broadly reveal how market culture shapes workers’ strategies. First, we discuss how musicians put considerable effort towards achieving particular career milestones that they believe will signal success to industry intermediaries. Second, we show that new technologies that connect artists directly to audiences without the need for intermediaries have allowed musicians to pursue new career building strategies. However, they have not eliminated musicians’ belief in appealing to industry insiders through milestones. Even though achieving industry milestones may not lead to immediate economic benefits, musicians pursue them because (1) they believe that backing from industry intermediaries may result in later success and (2) they value the symbolic appeal and romance of being part of the industry.

1. Introduction

The music industry has undergone major transformations due to (illegal) downloading and streaming causing a shift in revenues from recorded music towards revenues from live performances (Naveed, Watanabe & Neittaanmäki, 2017; Young & Collins, 2010). In addition, the arrival of social media and other technological innovations allegedly democratized the means of production, promotion and distribution of music (Fox, 2004). Recent scholarship has examined the implications of these transformations for the work practices of pop musicians, focusing on the rise of Do-It-Yourself (DIY) or entrepreneurial business models (Bennett, 2018; Threadgold, 2018) and (new) required tasks and skills (Everts, Hitters, & Berkers, 2021), such as aesthetic labour (Hracs & Leslie, 2014) and social media skills (Haynes & Marshall, 2017). Like in other labour markets such as ‘sports, the arts, academia, knowledge work and fashion modelling’ (Dumont, 2018, p. 515), reputation is an important commodity for musicians to build a career, as it helps them to receive support and opportunities from market actors (Lingo & Tepper, 2013). However, because of these transformations, previous key signals of reputation may no longer hold as much weight in the current music industry (e.g. releasing an album). Yet, few studies have

* Corresponding author. 
E-mail address: Everts@eshcc.eur.nl (R. Everts).

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examined how musicians use their reputation to build a career in a context marked by technological changes. Therefore, drawing on in-depth interviews with 21 Dutch early-career pop musicians, this article addresses the role of reputation in the career building strategy of early-career musicians in a transforming music industry.1

In our paper, we break this research problem down into two parts. First, we investigate how musicians attempt to create and signal a favourable reputation to build their career. Ample research has been done on how cultural intermediaries cope with uncertainty due to the lack of formal evaluation standards, relying on reputation to select and promote artistic products, for instance in television (Bielby & Biely, 1994; Zafrau, 2008), visual arts (Velthuis, 2013) and literature (Franssen & Kuipers, 2013). However, it remains unclear how cultural workers themselves can create a favourable reputation to increase their chances to be selected by these intermediaries (Dumont, 2018). Moreover, the way in which musicians, and artists in general, build their careers by promoting themselves is currently underexplored (Lingo & Tepper, 2013; Zwaan, Ter Bogt and Raaijmakers, 2009) – which is especially pressing in light of changing working conditions. To address this issue, we argue that musicians can be thought of as workers in a ‘status market’ (Aspers, 2011) where cultural intermediaries decide which workers they will offer business opportunities to (Bielby & Biely, 1994) by ranking them on the basis of their reputations (Aspers, 2011). Here, according to Podolny (2010), reputation ‘denotes an expectation of some behaviour or behaviors based on past demonstrations of those same behaviors’ (p. 13). Therefore, workers may want to perform practices which help to create a favourable reputation (Dumont, 2018). In our analysis we show that musicians attempt to achieve milestones; they create such a reputation and can be used to signal past and future success to music industry representatives. In this way, we introduce milestones as a mechanism through which market culture shapes reputational practices.

Second, we examine musicians’ beliefs about the ways in which new technologies impact their career building strategies. As the music industry is changing, strategies that meet ‘traditional’ market demands – work in line with the market culture – might not guarantee immediate economic success anymore, and musicians might want to leave the existing market. While we can expect that reputational practices, such as the collection of milestones, are shaped by how artists like musicians interpret these transformations, i.e., which processes affect reputations and how the value of this reputation may be changing, it remains unclear how such artists are navigating technological changes in the creative industries and how they adjust their career building strategy accordingly. Therefore, we draw from the sociology of markets and cultural sociology to explain why artists may (or may not) be resistant to technological changes and continue to follow (or deviate from) established industry practices, pointing out structural factors such as power dynamics (Beckert, 1999) and cultural factors such as ‘cultural lag’ (Swidler, 1986). In our analysis we show that musicians experience a continuing dependency on the traditional music industry, leading to a situation where milestones are collected that meet the demands thereof and are expected to help achieve long-term career success, but do not translate in short-term economic profits – contributing to our understanding on why effects of transformations on the career building strategies of workers may be mediated.

2. Theory

2.1. The role of reputations in the career building of musicians

To understand how artists find work in uncertain labour markets (Menger, 1999), previous research investigated ‘the symbolic work that artists do to build reputations, convince others of their legitimacy as artists and professionals’ (Lingo & Tepper, 2013, p. 338). For artists, it is especially important to convince cultural intermediaries, because in art markets they function as gatekeepers, connectors, marketers, distributors and more (Janssen & Verboord, 2015). This is also the case in the music industry, which has been conceptualized as a network of intermediaries, where ‘the manager, record firm or bookie introduces artists to the industry (input), while media, retail and concert promoters present the artist to a public (output)’ (Keunen, 2014, p. 26). Because of this role of matching supply and demand, artists try to influence decisions of these intermediaries to increase ‘the probability that a given new release will be selected for exposure to consumers’ (Hirsch, 1972, p. 648).

Yet, as art markets lack a standard to assess the quality of new releases and the work and demand uncertainty causes high economic risks (Hirsch, 1972; Negus, 1992), intermediaries face high levels of uncertainty when selecting artists (Franssen & Kuipers, 2013; Velthuis, 2013). For this reason, intermediaries look for solutions to assess and value the quality of artists (Smits, 2016), in an attempt to filter out the oversupply of candidates (Hirsch, 1972). Most importantly, intermediaries create a network of stimuli, i.e. a network that ‘reinforces credit, trust, and reciprocity within its perimeter but organizes exclusion and inequality in relation to outsiders’ (Zelizer, 2010, p. 315). For instance, research on the (Dutch) music industry has shown that intermediaries use their professional networks to obtain information about acts (Zwaan & Ter Bogt, 2009). Furthermore, these circuits share evaluation repertoires that help to value art works (Zelizer, 2010) based on a combination of institutional culture such as ‘shared values, norms and conventions’ (Mears, 2011, p. 159) and expertise consisting of professional standardized knowledge and personal dispositions (Smith Maguire & Matthews, 2012). For example, Dutch A&R (artist and repertoire) managers select musicians on the basis of ‘the live performance, quality of the music, musical skills, appearance, motivation as well as potential media and audience appeal’ (Zwaan & Ter Bogt, 2009, p. 97).

Intermediaries rely on these evaluation repertoires to judge, as a proxy for quality (Podolny, 2010), the reputations of artists and rank them relative to each other in the market (Aspers, 2009). As such, art markets such as the music industry can be understood as status markets: based on this hierarchical order, intermediaries award artists with a certain amount of status and higher levels of status translate into increased rewards (Aspers, 2011). In this way, reputation (based on past behaviours of artists in the market) is converted

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1 To be sure: the purpose of this paper is not to establish a before and after snapshot of the Dutch music industry regarding the empirical impact of these technological changes.
into status (the position one has in this hierarchical order) (Podolny, 2010), and business opportunities are awarded accordingly. For example, having a ‘favourable’ reputation (Zafirau, 2008, p. 102) is a strong predictor for products being picked up by intermediaries (Bielby & Bielby, 1994). For this reason, reputation is often used as a rhetorical strategy to legitimize choices for certain artistic products (Bielby & Bielby, 1994). Therefore, to take advantage of the career opportunities that intermediaries offer, musicians need to perform practices that help to create a favourable reputation (Dumont, 2018; Zafirau, 2008) by performing actions in the market that signal their qualifications (Jones, 2002). Performing reputational practices is especially important for early-career artists, as this helps them to acquire support in a market where educational credentials do not function as closing mechanisms (Eigler & Azarpour, 2020; Jensen & Kim, 2020; Skaggs, 2019). Indeed, research has shown that pop musicians engage in a process of capital mobilization and conversion to draw attention from intermediaries (Scott, 2012). Moreover, music industry actors attempt to increase the symbolic value of musicians, for example by promoting their work and using their network (Lizé, 2016). Furthermore, music industry actors tend to ‘aggrandize’ their businesses, which is to acquire or inflate their reputation (Schreiber & Rieple, 2018). Yet, it remains unclear how musicians themselves attempt to create favourable reputations.

In sum, artists rely on a circuit of commerce of intermediaries to build their career. These intermediaries look at their reputations to evaluate them and therefore artists perform practices to create a favourable reputation to meet industry expectations. Based on these reputations, intermediaries rank artists in a hierarchy, and in this way convert the reputations into status and offer business opportunities accordingly.

2.2. Building a career in a changing market

As new technologies provide career opportunities that do not depend on intermediaries, one might expect that musicians may abandon their orientation on traditional intermediaries (e.g. record labels, radio stations) and corresponding career building strategy. As mentioned, a shift in revenues from recorded music to live performances and a series of technological innovations allegedly democratized the means of music production and distribution. As a result, some intermediaries such as record labels, music retailers and media outlets lost their central role in the industry. Most importantly, record labels lost economic power (Rogers, 2013), making them less inclined to take risks with regard to offering contracts to new acts (Frith, 2014). At the same time, other and new intermediaries such as live venues and streaming services became more important for musicians (Naveed et al., 2017). Moreover, new technological opportunities can help musicians to monetize direct contact with their fans, which holds the promise (or requirement) to bypass labels, record and distribute one’s own music, reach audiences directly and create new revenue streams (Haynes & Marshall, 2017; Young & Collins, 2010). To understand the way in which musicians navigate these changes, the combination of sociology of markets and cultural sociology can help to analyse how market culture and structure shapes career building strategies and why market change may affect such strategies.

To start, market sociologists distinguish three ingredients that influence the practices of workers: structure, agency and culture (Aspers, 2011). First, the position that a worker has, and the structural conditions of that position, affects the opportunities for action. For example, research in music has shown that the strategies of musicians can be understood as a response to the specific configuration of the local industry (Everts & Haynes, 2021; Tarassi, 2018). Furthermore, workers strategize their actions by reflecting on their current and desired position. Lastly, market culture creates order by providing a set of rules of ‘how market actors are allowed and expected to cooperate and compete in the market’ (Aspers, 2011, p. 94). Here, institutionalized decision rules enable actions because they make outcomes predictable, while they constrain other actions because these would possibly violate these rules (Beckert, 1999).

Research in the sociology of markets has shown that these transformations can have two effects on the practices of workers: first, practices can remain resistant to change ‘the more they enjoy high levels of social legitimacy and the more they have the backing of powerful agents’ (Beckert, 1999, p. 791). This shows that agents with more capital can continue to promote practices when they understand them to be appropriate, which especially tends to happen when changes affect the distributional outcomes in the market (Beckert, 2010). Under these circumstances, workers experience normative pressures to resist new practices even if they are more efficient (Beckert, 1999). A second effect is that markets may become destabilized, changing power dynamics and altering opportunities (Beckert, 2010). This, then, results in a process where is re-established what actors want to trade (Aspers, 2011). For example, Ryan and Peterson (1993) argue that in the market of pop music new technologies can lead to shifts in the power balance, causing a re-evaluation of the skills of musicians.

Cultural sociological approaches inform a conceptual framework to understand how an established market culture exercises possibilities and constraints on actors, by highlighting the effects of explicit and implicit culture (Lizardo & Strand, 2010). First, according to Swidler (1986, 2001), explicit culture functions as a ‘tool kit’ (Swidler, 1986) which structures the actions of actors and the goals they have, as ‘action and values are organized to take advantage of cultural competences’ (Swidler, 1986, p. 275, original emphasis). These practices are experienced as taken-for-granted, which has been demonstrated in research investigating the way in which risk coping strategies of theatre actors are shaped by local institutional contexts (Klepppe, 2017). Second, according to Bourdieu (1993), practices are affected by implicit culture as actors have a habitus shaped by their position in a field that structures their practices. In pop music, Threadgold (2018) has shown that for musicians the DIY culture of their music scene has a symbolic appeal which informs their actions. Moreover, this habitus influences the way actors perceive the field and their chances for success, or how the field ‘presents itself to each agent as a space of possibles’ (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 64, original emphasis). For example, this model has

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2 Because workers create a reputation and intermediaries convert this into status, when focusing on the practices of workers we will refer to reputation, and when focusing on the ranking practices of market actors we will talk about status.
been used to explain how musicians choose out of a range of creative possibilities when writing or playing music (Toynbee, 2016).

Moreover, cultural sociology helps us to understand that how musicians interpret industry transformations might also affect their career building strategy. Cultural sociology has shown that implicit and explicit culture can mediate the effects of market change. First of all, change disrupts the influence of implicit culture on actors, as it causes ‘temporary disjunctions between habitus and field’ (Sweetman, 2003, p. 541, original emphasis), forcing actors to be more reflexive (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In addition, explicit culture can both hinder and stimulate innovations of actions in times of change. If the existing cultural scaffolding breaks down, the old culture might lose its influence and actors can experience ‘unsettled times’ (Swidler, 1986). In those cases, actors need to draw from new cultural repertoires to create new actions (Swidler, 1986) which most often is done by new ‘institutional generations’ (Lizardo & Schaap, 2010, p. 223) such as early-career musicians. At the same time, ‘cultural lag’ may occur where actors fail to take advantage of new opportunities because it requires them to change their way of doing things (Swidler, 1986). In these situations, the ‘old’ cultural scaffolding is retained and keeps being taken for granted, even though it might not be functional anymore.

Overall, to understand how musicians build their career by creating a favourable reputation in the changing music industry, we should understand their career building strategy as an outcome of 1) the interplay between their structural position and agency within the dynamics of a status market, 2) the explicit and implicit culture of the market they operate in, and 3) the way market change may affect this.

3. Data and methods

For this study, musicians were targeted who participated in the 2018 edition of the Noorderslag festival, an influential showcase festival in the Netherlands. The focus on this festival helped to identify pop musicians who were in the same phase of their career, as acts who perform here are promising early-career artists (Kamer, 2016). Furthermore, targeting this population helped to identify musicians that aimed to build their career in the Dutch music industry, as Noorderslag is widely perceived as the place where the new generation of pop-rock acts presents itself to the intermediaries of the Dutch music industry (Keunen, 2014; Van Vugt, 2018). More specifically, musicians and intermediaries that partake in this festival are active in what Keunen (2014) has called the ‘alternative mainstream’ part of the Dutch music industry. This circuit is situated between the underground and mainstream and contains musicians active in a multitude of sub styles such as indie pop, punk or folk that all rely on the same network of intermediaries (ibid.).

To reach this population, we employed a purposeful sampling strategy: first, we left artists performing at the two main stages of the festival out of the sample, as these were more established acts. Second, to achieve a geographical spread, acts from various cities in the Netherlands were selected. Third, as musicians might have different roles in an act, we aimed to speak with musicians of each act who were involved in reputational and career building practices. Fourth, as gender significantly affects music careers (Berkers & Keunen, 2018), we aimed for a gender balance in our sample. However, because of rejections on interview requests, the sample consists of fourteen respondents who identify as men and seven who identify as women.

To ensure their privacy, interviewees have been anonymized and their age is reported in categories.

The interviews were semi-structured to obtain information in light of the research question, while allowing the possibility to ask follow-up questions (Kvale, 2007). During the interviews, questions were asked about: 1) their goals and motivations in music, 2) how they build their careers and created favourable reputations, and 3) their reflections on the transforming music industry and how their work practices are shaped by this. In addition, a more general set of questions was asked for context, for example about the financial aspects of their work.

The interviews were performed face-to-face by the first author and took place in a location convenient for the interviewees, ranging from cafes to rehearsal spaces, between 18 June 2018 and 11 January 2019. The conversations lasted on average 66 min. Audio was recorded and afterwards transcribed verbatim. After transcription, the data have been thematically analysed in ATLAS.ti version 8 (Braun & Clarke, 2006), producing 750 initial codes capturing the interesting features of the data in light of the research question. Afterwards, in the process of searching for, reviewing, and defining themes, fifteen code groups were created containing patterns found in the data.

4. Results

In our analysis, first we explore how musicians attempt to build their career by creating a favourable reputation. Then, we investigate the musicians’ beliefs about the ways in which new technologies impact their career building strategies.

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3. 31 musicians were contacted, of which ten declined the invitation to participate. The reasons for refusal were diverse: from a busy schedule due to touring and recording, to a more general refusal. Except for our effort to sample more women, upon comparison the musicians who refused did not show substantial difference from the included interviewees regarding age, label type, music education and style.

4. While not large enough to represent all early-career musicians in the Dutch music industry, the sample does have a sufficient size to reach saturation (Small, 2009).

5. In the analysis each interview is referred to by the number of each interviewee.
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In addition, they try to earn money and increase their revenues. Notably, to reach these goals, all interviewees feel that they depend

on the traditional intermediaries within the Dutch music market, such as media, labels, bookers, managers, pop venue and festival

programmers:

It is difficult to earn a steady income in music … this depends on whether you are counted in based on whether people think you’re
cool or believe that you belong in the media and music world. … It is not public opinion that informs this, it are the people from the
music industry that decide. (15)

Interviewees understand these intermediaries to be linked together in a powerful network, which they characterize as ‘cliquish’ (7,

11, 15). According to the interviewees, this network shares information and draws boundaries to outsiders (Zelizer, 2010) and they
believe that a positive judgement of this small circuit can lead to new business opportunities: ‘bands … get hyped because they know
the right people’ (12). Surprisingly, Spotify was the only new intermediary mentioned often by the interviewees: ‘I am releasing
singles. … I hope that they get on playlists on Spotify, because that is so important these days’ (13). In particular, curated playlists seem
to increase musicians’ visibility in the Dutch music industry and can provide additional revenues.

This dependency on the established market and its intermediaries can to some extent be understood as a forced marriage. As
musicians do not see a lot of opportunities to reach their goals outside the market (see Section 4.2.1), they experience a dependency on
the industry to reach their goals. At the same time, musicians are pessimistic about their chances that they will reach these goals within
the industry, as they consider the market to be characterized by heavy competition and difficulties with establishing an income. As one
musician argued about creating a sustainable income:

That is probably never going to happen. … If you aim for a minimum: then you should pay yourself 1 000 euro per month. That is 4
000 per month for the whole band, and the booker and manager go on top of that. And the additional fixed costs like the van, your stuff,
the rehearsal space, gas, that kind of shit, and you have big expenses such as the studio etcetera. Then you need to earn 10 000 euro per
month. How? That is never going to happen. (7)

Nevertheless, the interviewees believe that they rely on the mentioned intermediaries to reach their goals. However, according to
the interviewees, because these intermediaries are confronted with an oversupply of new musicians and because it is uncertain who
will become successful, intermediaries are selective about who they work with. Therefore, to receive support, interviewees pursue a
strategy where they try to create a favourable reputation and signal this reputation to intermediaries, in the hope to convince them of
their suitability. To create a reputation, musicians engage in a career strategy consisting of a pursuit to reach what some interviewees
refer to as milestones. According to the musicians, milestones are ritualized practices that they believe to function as signals of prior
success and predictors of future success to intermediaries. By achieving those milestones of which they believe that they will be
evaluated positively by intermediaries, musicians aim to reflect the evaluation repertoires of these intermediaries. Musicians hope that
collecting milestones and signalling them to intermediaries will increase their status and lead to new business opportunities. As one
musician said: ‘the more you achieve, the more milestones you collect, the higher your fee’ (8), and another:

Yes, successful singles are sort of milestones that you have. Like: ‘o, we released this single, that did well and got airplay on this
radio station and was picked up by them’, and that will give you some leverage for the next one, so to speak. (4)
In other words, while the core of being a pop musician revolves around their material performances for musical audiences (on-stage and in recordings), musicians also give symbolic (offstage) performances for an organizational audience of intermediaries where they, together with their bookers and managers, act out their success story (or prior hits, see Bielby & Bielby, 1994) to create a favourable reputation for their act.

The milestones that were mentioned can be categorized on the basis of the different cues they signal (Jones, 2002). First, several milestones signal the competencies and experiences of these musicians in the music industry, such as releasing EPs or albums, participating in pop competitions, organizing tours, playing a lot of gigs, or playing abroad. Collecting such milestones can be used to signal that an act has acquired a level of success in the market that enables them to perform such activities, indicating that they have the capacity to reach similar or bigger success in the future. For example, one musician argued that touring abroad had a signalling function for the Dutch industry, rather than that it helped to build an audience in those countries: ‘Of course you don’t play very big venues there, so you really don’t get a lot of fans there, but it’s good for the people here to see that you play abroad’ (20). Second, other milestones signal social relationships with high-status industry actors. Because of this association, the reputation of musicians is confirmed (Bielby & Bielby, 1999) and the status of these actors rubs off on them (Podolny, 2010). Examples of these milestones are playing at prestigious festivals and venues, getting attention from blogs, television, newspapers, magazines, and radio stations such as 3FM and signing with established (international) bookers or managers. For example, playing at a prestigious showcase festival signals to the industry that your band is promising and is worthy to invest in, or as one musician reported: ‘playing at Noorderslag holds a certain value for people, like ‘okay, that band played at Noorderslag’’ (9).

As said, according to the interviewees, collecting these different kinds of milestones is key for creating a favourable reputation. In the field, having a ‘favourable’ reputation means that musicians display a capacity for commercial success, for example that they have potential audience appeal and can be ‘ticket sellers’ (2), and have the necessary qualities to do well, such as having a good live performance and appearance, and music that ‘is good and preferably something unique’ (20) and ‘poppy enough to reach a more mainstream audience’ (13) (cf. Zwaan & Ter Bogt, 2009, p. 97). As such, collecting and signalling milestones has a performative quality as it helps to build such a reputation of potential success, because it creates the expectation with intermediaries that they could reach similar successes in the future, or to rephrase Podolny’s discussed definition of reputation, it is this past behaviour that causes an expectation of similar future behaviour (2010, p. 13). For example, one musician told how good reviews on a showcase gig led her to small tour as it built a reputation that she was able to give ‘very good shows’ (6). In a similar manner, for one musician a successful single on a streaming platform led to attention from labels, because, as a musician told, these labels hoped that: ‘maybe they can make another one, then we’ll can earn something with that’ (20).

In an attempt to convince intermediaries of their suitability, musicians signal these milestones to intermediaries in multiple ways. First, musicians send out PR packages and press releases to the industry. For example, one musician discussed how they used the milestone of releasing their first EP to acquire new gigs: ‘Well when we released our first EP we did a lot of promotion then. So, we made promotional packages and sent them to all kinds of people’ (9). Furthermore, achieved milestones are mentioned in social media posts to show to the industry (and audience) that they are busy doing ‘interesting’ things (11) because ‘you need to keep them warm, otherwise they leave’ (7). Most importantly, musicians together with their bookers and managers contact intermediaries and use these milestones to signal the musicians’ reputation. For example, one interviewee explained how his band managed to get a gig at a big festival by obtaining milestones which their booker used to pitch them to representatives of that festival. They asked themselves:

How can we reach this with a minimum of resources? We thought we can do that with 20, 25 gigs. That was the strategy. … In addition, we did two weekends in Germany, because it was interesting for our Dutch booker. (21)

In a similar manner, for one musician a successful single on a streaming platform led to attention from labels, because, as a musician told, these labels hoped that: ‘maybe they can make another one, then we’ll can earn something with that’ (20).

While you want to try to live in the now as much as possible, especially as a musician, because you want to make music now, you just have to look at what we will do in the future, and how can you make sure that you can be at festivals again and so on. (11)

As such, these milestones have a double function: they often are pleasurable activities for the musicians themselves, while at the same time they are strategically collected and used to signal the act’s quality to the industry to reach their goals. Therefore, according to several interviewees milestones should not be strived for just for the pleasure of musicians but should always be incorporated in a long-term strategy: ‘for example, if you perform a lot, but there is no good plan behind it, if you have no good reason why you are doing it… You should not forget the end goal…’ (6). Therefore, as one musician said, the collection of various milestones must strategically tie into each other’ (10). For example, this musician came up with a planning so that the ‘autumn tour comes after the release of the EP’ so that his act then ‘can send out a press release again and promote those songs again’ (10).

As shown, the collected milestones function as symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1993) and musicians hope that a positive evaluation of their reputation can help them to convert this acquired capital into more and other forms of capital necessary to build their career (Scott, 2012), such as economic (e.g. new gigs), cultural (media attention) or social capital (management deals) – which then on its turn can be used to obtain new milestones. For example, one musician explained how a representative of a radio station said to her that ‘if you release this single, it will not get in our day rotation, so that would not be smart’ (4), after which she chose to release an alternative single. However, when that new single did well on the radio, the station became interested in the single they rejected earlier. In addition, milestones can be used to negotiate higher fees. One musician described how their booker could increase the fees after they scored a hit on the radio, another musician could do this when their live show was well-received, and a third one did just the
opposite and accepted a lower fee offer from a prestigious concert organizer because playing that gig would provide their booker leverage in future negotiations with that and other concert organizers:

We make certain choices so our booker can slowly increase our fee. That is why we did that gig for less, because it was from that organizer. We did a show for 150 euro … our booker said that it was the right thing to do. (20)

These examples show that initial success can influence your chances for future success, or as Bielby and Bielby state ‘success breeds success’ (1999, p. 80).

In sum, the interviewed musicians see the pathway to reach their goals within the boundaries of the traditional music industry and experience a dependency on traditional intermediaries. As a result, they create a favourable reputation by means of achieving milestones and signalling those milestones to these intermediaries to obtain status and corresponding business opportunities. In this way, their career building practices are shaped by their attempt to reflect the evaluation repertoires they perceive to exist in the existing market (Zafirau, 2008).

4.2. Transformations of the music industry

To understand how musicians account for the changing conditions in the discussed career building strategy, we first discuss the new technologies and new roles that have been incorporated in the existing career strategy. Then, we show how due to cultural lag several work practices have remained resistant to change.

4.2.1. Incorporating changes

To start, musicians have incorporated work practices made possible by new technological innovations. All musicians are active on social media and several musicians record their music themselves or release their songs independently on Spotify. Moreover, multiple musicians have a web shop through which they sell merchandise. Nevertheless, the interviewees believe that these technological possibilities only make a modest contribution to reaching their career goals and they are not optimistic about their economic potential. For example, musicians report that it is difficult to build a following online: ‘smaller artists are suffering, because it is very difficult to reach the mainstream social media’ (11). Moreover, an online fanbase is difficult to monetize: ‘having 100,000 followers does not translate into higher ticket sales’ (19). As a result, musicians continue to feel dependant on the traditional career path that the music industry offers, in part because they perceive a lack of economic opportunities outside the music industry, indicating that power dynamics have remained unchanged. In addition, interviewees report that some of these new practices, such as getting selected in highly rated Spotify playlists and having a strong presence on social media, have become understood by intermediaries as milestones, revealing that the evaluation repertoires of the intermediaries too have adapted to the new situation. As one musician expressed:

I think that a lot of labels base their choice on what stands out with regard to Spotify plays. We released something independently and that did pretty well for something that was released without a label, and that led to attention from labels because these were plays that we could generate ourselves. (16)

In other words, these new work practices are also incorporated in the discussed career strategy within the traditional music market, creating additional market demands that these musicians must try to meet by adding supplementary reputational opportunities.

Second, while musicians adopted entrepreneurial and DIY approaches before, the decreased support of labels and the increased technological opportunities have transformed these models from a niche alternative into a dominant approach for new aspiring musicians (Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Hracs, 2015):

Everyone can release music on the internet. Earlier you had the whole process of recording and pressing. And you had to manage to sell it. Now, everyone can record in their bedroom and put it online. (9)

As a result, interviewees take on managerial tasks such as developing long term strategies, business tasks such as networking and finance and technical tasks such as recording or selling merchandise (see Everts, Hitters, & Berkers, 2021), reflecting research on protean careers in creative industries (Bridgstock, 2005). However, they remain pessimistic about reaching their goals relying on the new technological opportunities and they continue to depend on traditional intermediaries, for example to reach bigger audiences. In addition, they acknowledge the limitations of a DIY approach most importantly as it limits the possibilities to build a network and create a favourable reputation with the circuit of intermediaries. Here, building an alliance with managers, bookers, labels and other professionals in the industry can help to get access. As one musician reflected on the benefits of collaborating with industry partners:

A large part of music is networking. So yes, if your manager is friends with programmers that can help a lot. And labels can get you on television. We played Noorderslag twice, and at other prestigious festivals, but we don’t get to do that. …. These days, it is about who knows who. (20)

Therefore, in their organization of work they choose the middle ground between a DIY approach and collaborating with traditional actors in the industry. Whereas previous research predicted a shift towards DIY and entrepreneurial approaches, this study only partially confirms these findings as musicians opt for a hybrid approach.

In short, while these musicians also draw from new repertoires to create new capacities, they continue to depend on the – to a large extent – unchained structure of the music industry. Their traditional career strategy based on creating a favourable reputation within the industry and corresponding toolkit maintains its influence, suggesting that only new tools are added to the toolkit, instead of replacing outdated tools. As a result, this generation of musicians experiences a moderate adjustment of their work practices rather than a fundamentally unsettled time (Swidler, 1986).

4.2.2. Resisting changes

The lasting importance of the traditional industry structure also has the effect that several milestones have been resistant to change.
However, whereas in the traditional industry these milestones perhaps would predict revenues from sales and reaching an audience, due to the transformations this is no longer necessarily the case. Here, the two most striking examples are the releasing of albums and getting radio airplay. First, musicians continue to release albums, even though they believe that audiences listen more to individual songs in playlists: 

Playlists are doing well. People don’t listen to albums. The medium of the album … is becoming less relevant. People go for one specific track. In the 80’s you had more physical sales and people had to listen to your whole record to hear that one single that they really wanted to hear. (10)

Moreover, releasing one album does not generate enough attention (‘buzz’) to tour for a year. For example, by regularly releasing songs it becomes easier to capture the attention of the audience over a longer period:

The music industry is volatile. You want to be in the spotlights all the time because those are the moments where you can build an audience. Releasing an album … only gives your audience one release moment … and then they have to remember your album for the next couple of months. Whereas if you release tracks every three, every two months, you are in the picture more often. (8)

Second, due to changing media consumption the prominent 3FM radio station is becoming less influential. The musicians believe that receiving attention from this radio station does not have the same effect anymore with regard to reaching an audience. Nevertheless, musicians continue to pursue airplay on 3FM: ‘right now, 3FM is a difficult brand to aim for I think (…) but our management doesn’t doubt that we should focus on them, so we trust them in that’ (10). According to the musicians, because of the transformations these traditional milestones are suboptimal strategies as they have become (at least partially) decoupled of immediate economic success.

To understand why these musicians continue to pursue such practices, we have to look at the way the existing culture of the music industry mediates the market change. First, musicians believe that intermediaries continue to use several milestones as part of their evaluation repertoire, and therefore these practices still appear to receive backing from these powerful actors (Beckert, 1999). According to the musicians, getting radio airplay remains an important way to signal the potential quality of an act and get picked up by the industry: ‘radio airplay really is a factor that can bring you success’ (5). In the same manner, releasing albums continues to be considered essential, because dominant music critics still focus on them: ‘That is how the industry works. … [I]f you want to get a review in De Volkskrant (Dutch newspaper) or in Oor (Dutch pop music magazine), then you have to release an album’ (9). In other words, because musicians continue to rely on intermediaries, and these intermediaries continue to rely on these milestones, the cultural scaffolding of the traditional industry seemed to have remained stable causing cultural lag (Swidler, 1986). Even though the milestones have little or low economic benefit, they remain important steps for the accumulation of reputation over time and hence are expected to contribute to later economic success. Therefore, musicians have come to perceive these milestones primarily as useful for building a favourable reputation. However, as discussed earlier, because they feel that they have such a small chance to reach their goals in the industry, collecting these milestones has the risk of becoming an ‘empty’ story to hold on to, without much guarantee that this investment will pay off in the long run.

A second reason why milestones are resistant to change is because musicians keep drawing from the traditional market culture as a toolkit to shape their work practices. When asked why a musician wanted to release an album with his act, he responded: ‘it is a band thing I guess. Bands will always release albums’ (11). Here, the market culture continues to provide these practices with a certain taken-for-grantedness (Swidler, 1986). In addition, several practices also have a symbolic appeal for musicians, which too causes them to continue to perform these practices. This symbolic appeal relates to romanticized connotations that musicians attach to the archetypical image of the pop artist. As one musician captured this appeal:

I think that everybody secretly wants to be a rock star. As in: travel a lot, see a lot of places, people think you’re cool, a lot of crazy parties, crazy people, yes that is very cool. It’s just fun. (12)

Musicians enjoy being part of the traditional music industry (see also Crossley & Bottero, 2015), and continue to be attracted to its symbolic appeal (Threadgold, 2018). As a result, they orientate themselves on the opportunities, or space of possibles (Bourdieu, 1993), that the music industry offers and they shape their work practices in accordance with this. As a result, musicians still aspire for example to play at prestigious festivals, ‘our ultimate goal is to play at Glastonbury’ (10), or tour abroad, ‘we want to play [abroad] more often. These are very small pub shows, but that is a lot of fun’ (9), even if they lose money with it, because, in addition to their function as milestones, these activities correspond with the romantic myth of the musician.

Of course, the experiences of these musicians have been altered by the transformations of the music industry: they earn less from record sales and depend more on performing, they might have less the role of industry workers and more as entrepreneurs and try to take advantage of the new technological opportunities. Nevertheless, because of their continuing dependency on traditional intermediaries and because they continue to value the symbolic appeal of being part of the music industry, musicians continue to perform reputational practices with low immediate economic impact.

5. Conclusion

In this article we investigated the role of reputation in the career building strategy of early-career musicians in a transforming music industry. In the first part of our analysis, we showed how the interviewees create such a favourable reputation. Here, we argued that to build a sustainable career in music they experience a dependency on the intermediaries within the Dutch music market. Therefore, to improve their status and acquire rewards, they aim to create a favourable reputation by collecting milestones to signal a track record of prior successes and their capacity for future success (cf. Bielby & Bielby, 1994). Together, these findings provide insights on how early-career musicians solicit the support of intermediaries when entering the music industry (Lingo & Tepper, 2013; Zwaan, Ter Bogt and Raaijmakers, 2009) and the role that reputations plays in this process (Dumont, 2018), by showing how musicians attempt to
manipulate the decision processes of intermediaries by means of these milestones.

In the second part of our analysis, we studied musicians’ beliefs about the ways in which new technologies impact their career building strategies. While digital optimists were hopeful about the opportunities that the transformations held for musicians (Frost, 2007; McLeod, 2005), in line with other recent scholarly work (Haynes & Marshall, 2017; Young & Collins, 2010) critiquing the prediction that digitization has democratizing effects, all in all for our interviewees the potential effects of the technological transformations on their career strategy have been largely abated. Results indicate that musicians have only moderately implemented new technologies and roles, and they continue to see the music industry as the most viable pathway to reach their goals. In addition, several milestones remained resistant to change even though their immediate economic impact is limited, creating cultural lag. Reason for this is that the evaluation repertoires of intermediaries continue to function as a cultural scaffolding (Swidler, 1986) and that musicians believe that the intermediaries still back traditional milestones – showing that agents with high levels of capital can continue to promote practices, even if change occurs (Beckert, 2010). In addition, as musicians continue to value the symbolic appeal part of the music industry, they continue to experience traditional milestones as meaningful within the context of that market (Bourdieu, 1993).

Overall, our study offers a framework to help explain how culture structures reputational practices. We introduce milestones as a mechanism to illustrate that workers perform certain reputational practices because they believe that they reflect the evaluation repertoires of intermediaries. In this way, these evaluation repertoires function as a cultural scaffolding for cultural workers and these milestones serve as signposts structuring their careers. Similar analyses in other creative industries can yield comparable patterns of institutionalized practices used by workers to be valued and selected by intermediaries to increase capital volume and capital types. At the same time, systematic comparisons of different markets can show how the importance of milestones may differ based on the degree to which finding audiences for artists are ‘contingent on gatekeepers’ actions’ (Hirsch, 1972, p. 655).

Furthermore, our findings contribute to our understanding of why reputational practices may be influenced by industry transformations and help to understand the circumstances under which workers may be resistant to technological changes and continue to follow established industry practices. First, at this point in time, the discussed technological changes in itself were not enough to destabilize the market, as the power relations appear to have remained stable. This confirms the point of Hesmondhalgh (2009) that changes due to technological innovations in the music industry are recurring patterns and should not be understood as market disintegration. Second, when change occurs, workers do not immediately turn into reflexive entrepreneurs who under such circumstances can ’envision alternative modes of getting things done’ (Beckert, 1999, p. 786, original emphasis), because they may continue to take the cultural scaffolding as taken for granted and leaving the market altogether might undermine the whole reason why they chose to participate in the first place, i.e. the romantic appeal of being part of the industry.

Of course, this paper is telling only one part of the story of careers in music. The practice of gradual accumulation of reputation and its value for early-career musicians as described here is also reflected in the discourse in the Dutch music industry when the importance of a ‘chain approach’ is discussed where musicians work their way up in small steps (e.g. Bussemaker, 2013; Gielen, Van der Veen & Van Asselt, 2017; Van Vugt, 2018). Yet, as we focused on the perspective of musicians, we cannot provide evidence that this strategy based on creating a favourable reputation is appealing to intermediaries other than what the experiences of these musicians tell us. Moreover, not all musicians want to build an act in the music industry: some opt for careers as a music teacher, session musician or songwriter. Some try to build an act completely outside the traditional music industry where different business models exist (e.g. cover bands or resident DJ’s). For example, the new generation of hip-hop musicians relies ‘only on informal DIY channels for the production, performance and consumption of rap and hip hop to make their names’ (Reitsamer & Prokop, 2017, p. 13). Therefore, it remains important to investigate other forms of work in music and the role of reputation in it as well.

Nevertheless, the perceived importance of the strategy of investing in milestones shows the necessity for new acts to accumulate reputation in the music industry to stand out amongst their peers. Yet, chances for success are low as the music industry has been characterized as a winner-takes-all market where a lot of musicians struggle to make a living – which has only further intensified due to the industry transformations. Consequently, these practices may cause ‘value slippage’ as other industry actors may benefit more from the investments made by these musicians than the musicians themselves (Hoeven et al., 2021). Even so, acquiring a competitive advantage in this way can very well make the difference between sold-out tours or the margin of rehearsing in your parent’s garage.

Author biographies

Rick Everts is a PhD candidate in the sociology of arts and culture at the Department of Media and Communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. His research focuses on the position of pop musicians in the Dutch live music ecology.

Pauwke Berkers is Full Professor of Sociology of Popular Music and head of the Department of Arts and Culture Studies at Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. He is author of Gender Inequality in Metal Music Production (2018, with Julian Schaap) and has published widely on gender as well as race/ethnicity in popular music in Gender & Society, Consumption Markets & Culture, Journal of Gender Studies and IASPM@Journal.

Erik Hitters is Associate Professor at Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. He has co-founded and is the managing director of ERMeCC, the Erasmus Research Centre for Media, Communication and Culture. Erik’s research interests lie in the broad field of transformations in the media and creative industries.

Declarations of interest

none
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