

The rise to fame: The power of music fandom communities using Social Network Sites to promote musicians.

Abstract

The abilities of the internet have allowed independent music artists to take the distribution and production of their music into their own hands, but they need the fandom communities to publicise their music. The goal of most musicians is to achieve success, which often involves sales and interest from a record label. The fandom communities will use a variety of Social Network Sites (SNSs) to communicate and generate buzz in their choice of music or artist. While streaming services may serve to deliver curated music content to a listener, fandom communities focus on SNS to share their passion for the content.

Introduction

The use of Social Network Sites (SNSs) and streaming services has changed how music is produced and distributed, and how fans share their music. Access to SNSs and streaming services has allowed independent and celebrity musicians to have more control over the production and distribution of their music. The convergence of social media platforms and the networking of music fandom communities allows musicians to rapidly spread their music and increase the potential for their song to go viral. At the core of the success to a musician is their fans. A large fan base online can generate interest in an independent artist to be signed by a record label. Despite the hype of musicians being discovered online, most musicians still need to be backed by a record label to generate true celebrity status. Therefore, using the right online services could make or break a musician; using the wrong online services or not diversifying could result in their music being left undiscovered or not reaching the right fandom community. I argue that SNSs are essential for supporting a music fandom community to communicate and publicise their passion resulting in generating sales and record label interest for the music artist; but that streaming services are inconsequential for the music fandom community.

Production and Distribution

One of the hardest achievements for a musician is having their music heard. According to Crupnick (2018) 9 out of 10 people who extensively use social media also partake in music or artist related activity (para. 1). Digital recording technology has provided the independent musician with the means to produce music, and access to social network platforms and

services has allowed for the distribution of this music (Arditi, 2014). The ability to produce and distribute music online combined with the networking on social media by music fans opens the potential for musicians to have their music exposed to a wide audience quickly; to receive real-time feedback on the music; by-pass the middleman; engage directly with fans to generate interest to build income; and with little over-head involved (Haynes & Marshall, 2018). This also allows for a potential increase in public exposure compared to the pre-internet days of sending out demo's that may not be given 'airtime', which was how the music industry operated over 10 years ago (Nevue, 2003 as cited in Haynes & Marshall, 2018). It is the sharing within individual communities networked across various SNSs with a reach outside of the traditional music industry that creates a power of awareness for the music that transcends what would be possible by an independent music artist acting on their own. In turn the social media platforms are benefiting from the music artists. The music generates connections and conversations (Crupnick, 2018) on the platforms that keeps users engaged and coming back to the platform.

Fandom Communities and SNSs

The best place for an independent musician to be noticed is through the networking of music fandom communities engaging over converging SNSs. Today, people want to connect on social media with others in their networks by showing what they are interested in. This pervasive awareness allows a person to keep others in their networks updated on their interests and hobbies, providing a shallow contact with these networks (Hampton, 2016). Sharing music is one of the ways to reach out and connect with others and results in expanding the potential audience for the music (Cole, 2019). People experience music on a personal level, and it becomes a representation of who they are or how they are feeling in that moment and sharing it reflects a side of themselves to their network. SNSs are developed to encourage people to highlight interests such as music when constructing their online identity (Baym, 2007) and allows people to identify common interests. Music fandom communities are then generated from a "collective of people" brought together through a shared interest in a music artist or group (Baym, 2007, para. 6). These collectives "develop a sense of shared identity" (Baym, 2007, para. 7) through connecting on SNSs and through continual contact and shared interests they develop a sense of community that can be just as strong and have more in common than a geographical based community (Baym, 2007). This collective of people consists of different groups contained within different social media platforms that are loosely connected to one another through acquaintances or shared interests. Baym (2007)

sees these loose connections as “networked collectivism” (Baym, 2007, para. 60) which builds on from “networked individualism” (Hampton & Wellman, 2018, p. 643). The transition from networked individualism to networked collectivism brings strength to the relationship and with it a sense of community and belonging rather than a network of individuals. Some of these online connections contained within the networked collectivism then develop from online community into real world relationships whereby they engage with each other in person, such as attending concerts together (Baym, 2007).

Generating Awareness and Sales

Despite the increased public exposure social media can provide, it can be difficult to generate online fandom into paying fans in the form of gigs and music sales (Haynes & Marshall, 2018). In these instances, it may be preferential to have an intermediary who is experienced. There are success stories of what seem to be instant celebrity of an independent artist being discovered through a social media platform; Justin Bieber and The Weeknd on YouTube, Shawn Mendes on Vine and Adele on MySpace, but these were not instantaneous successes. Justin Bieber was only signed to a music label once his view count grew, The Weeknd leveraged off Justin Bieber by singing one of his songs to garner notice, Shawn Medes had to wait in a spike of ‘likes’ to have success on iTunes, Adele was signed by a record label after succeeding online (Daystage, 2017). These examples show how important the online fandom community is in generating interest in musicians. According to Baym and Burnett (2009) “fans are gatekeepers, filters, and influencers on a scale they never were before the internet. They are needed by both industry and other fans” (Baym & Burnett, 2009 as cited in Lundkvist, 2017, p.3). Record labels take note of these communities before signing on a musician artist and still play a pivotal role in turning a musician into a celebrity. The competition remains fierce for independent musicians, competing with other independent artists and record labels, therefore the support of a record label can be beneficial to a musician from a marketing perspective (Lundkvist, 2017) but first they must be noticed.

SNSs and Convergence

An artist’s music is introduced through various social media platforms and streaming services before the music garners a following from the fandom communities who publicise the music through their extensive social media networks. The ability of the internet to give fans and musicians a chance to interact and share media across multiple platforms is called convergence culture, coined by Henry Jenkins (Arditi, 2014, p.411). It is through the

convergence of these platforms' musicians can leverage off these "overlapping connections" (Papacharissi, 2011, p. 305) produced by fans and rapidly spread public awareness of their music. Whether it be using Twitter to follow or get updates on music artists, Instagram to view music artists updates and posts or Snapchat to send photos and videos from concerts, "music underpins the conversation on social platforms" (Crupnick, 2018, para. 2). The capacity for communities to network across varying platforms also opens the potential for sharing the music globally to reach diasporic communities (Haynes & Marshall, 2018). So that a Latin singer could reach popularity at home and abroad without the backing of a record label (Forde, 2017) or that a singer not located within a large regional centre could potentially reach an audience as easily as a musician located in a city centre (Haynes & Marshall, 2018).

Streaming Services and Artificial Intelligence

By comparison, a streaming service such as Spotify does not encourage the networking or communication that SNSs do. Almost 60 percent of social media users are visiting streaming services to listen to music after they see an update, tweet, or post (Cole, 2019, para. 30; Crupnick, 2018, para. 5). Therefore, they are getting their communication regarding what to listen to from their interaction on SNSs before they engage with a streaming service. Streaming services personalise the user experience by using machine learning and algorithms to identify the user's preferred music genre and curate playlists (Cole, 2019). This means that an independent artist can be at the mercy of artificial intelligence (AI) as well as what the listeners are interested in. Remixes and multi-formats are becoming common to satisfy the algorithms for varying playlists to reach the greatest audience, speeding up the networking and exposure of a song between social communities. Coined "playlist carpet-bombing" (Forde, 2017, para. 9) the goal is to be on as many playlists as possible to reach the widest audience. Alternative variations of the music can also be "drip fed" (Forde, 2017, para. 9) over time to keep the song fresh and relevant to playlists (Forde, 2017). If the music is hitting the right note, then the AI within streaming services can help push little known artists into the public spotlight, generating instant large-scale visibility (Cole, 2019; Forde, 2017). Credit is then generally given to the platform that launches an independent artist's career. A streaming service such as Spotify "can catapult an act from obscurity to the top of the worldwide charts" (Forde, 2017, para. 2) but this not done without the networking of communities outside of the streaming service generating interest. In fact, "streaming services such as Spotify offer catalogues of over 30 million tracks, while SoundCloud users upload approximately 12 hours of music every minute" (Walker, 2015 as cited in Haynes &

Marshall, 2018, p. 1984). Therefore, there is a relationship between a platform and the community that is attracted to the music it displays, and “it’s this combination of music being released in strategic ways on online streaming platforms, combined with how fans consume it which helps to exemplify how much of an impact tech and social are having on music” (Cole, 2019, para. 26).

Streaming Services and Passive Listening

How fans are encouraged to consume music on streaming services, such as using playlists, does little to encourage the engagement of fandom communities. Streaming services introduce music to a listener which in turn leads to generated interested and the building of fandom. However, streaming services can also fail to encourage inquisitive exploration as playlists feed music to a listener turning them into a “passive listener rather than an intentional one” (Donaldson, 2019, para. 11) resulting in the creation of an echo-chamber for the same type of music, discouraging the exploration outside of the algorithm’s control. Instead, what you hear on a streaming service is due to its popularity. If the song is not popular it gets dropped (Forde, 2017). This leads to lack of exposure to a song even though it is your kind of music because it does not satisfy an algorithm or popularity contest. In addition, streaming services make music less special by the music always being available, reducing it being sought after and anticipated to listen to, reducing fandom, reducing obsession, and reducing revenue (Donaldson, 2019). This dissuasion from exploration and communication on streaming services results in the engagement of fandom communities occurring elsewhere, such as SNSs, where they can connect with each other and possibly with the musician and generate real conversation and interest in the music.

Conclusion

The internet has allowed for the independent music artist to get a jump on populating interest in their music by producing and distributing their music online. However, it is the fans through fandom communities that generate passion and inflame interest in an artist’s music which in turn leads to sales and possible record label interest. Real celebrity status through media publicity and tours still tends to require the backing of a record label and these record labels are paying attention to the interest a music artist gains online before offering that opportunity. Therefore, the fandom community and interest they generate are essential to an independent artist. Music fans will choose to engage on SNSs that best allow them to communicate. Therefore, while a streaming service like Spotify provides the potential for a

musician to have their music listened to, depending on the whims of an algorithm, streaming services do not support or encourage the communication and generation of passion required by a fandom community and are therefore inconsequential to the music fandom community. Instead, it is the underlying structure of a SNS which encourages communication and the sharing of interests that will be an independent artist's ticket to success through the publicity the fandom community will provide for that artist that will in turn potentially result in revenue and record label interest.



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