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Marketing Music in the Modern Age: Hip-Hop Emphasis

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Abstract

This Capstone paper is meant to discover the most effective marketing methods for modern day musical artists at different stages in their career. This paper focuses more on hip-hop artists, but there is content that applies to artists of all genres. First, this paper will provide some background and history on the overall goal and progression of music marketing throughout the years. This section will discuss when marketing first became important to music and how it has been done in the past as technologies advanced. It will then provide some background on when the internet started being used for marketing purposes. Additionally, it will explain how it created new opportunities for artists to remain independent from major labels, especially in hip-hop. Afterwards, this paper will move on to discuss some of the most popular and effective means of marketing musical artists in the modern age. Much of the paper will explain ways new artists can build up a fanbase on a low budget without signing to a label. The final section will examine some more creative and advanced marketing strategies popular artists have used to boost their sales. The paper will then conclude with a summary of the information that was discussed throughout.

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Background and History

General Marketing Goals and Strategies

Regardless of the time we live in, marketing always has the same end goal: connect buyers to sellers. When marketing something, the goal is to make the product appealing and find people who are interested in buying it. The same goes for marketing music and musical artists. The most important thing for artists is to get people to hear about them and discover, buy, or stream their music. If no one finds out about an artist, even if they made music that everyone would love, they wouldn't be able to find much success. So, it is important to find an audience that would most likely be interested in an artist and their music. After discovering the audience that would most likely enjoy the artist's music, finding where those people are likely to come across advertisement for it is quite helpful. For example, if an artist makes music for children, putting them on Disney Channel or Nickelodeon might be a good idea. However, if an artist appeals to older crowds, it might be better to advertise them on channels or radio stations that attract that older crowd.

Once the internet came about, targeting where to market became easier because people share their interests with each other online. However, before the internet, labels could only really promote new artists on the radio, at concerts, or with music videos on television channels like MTV or VH1 (Richard, 2016; Chen, 2009). Additionally, there were different magazines that published articles about music dating back to 1890s (Peacock, 2018). This meant that artists could only really be marketed in a few places. Marketing the artist on the radio could be a good idea with the right choice of station. Although, it can be harder for newer artists to get airtime over artists that are already popular on their station. Many commercial radio stations mostly play

music that are on top music charts like *Billboard*. It would be easier to try to get new artists airtime on local or college radio stations instead (Smith, 2015). Booking an artist as the opening act for a concert could be great as well, but similarly to the radio, it can be hard to book an artist who is not very well known yet. It is also not a guarantee that the crowd will enjoy them since they are most likely at the concert to see the headliner (Poe, 2019).

Nowadays, most musical artists are able to use social media to market their music. However, social media didn't even exist until the late 1990s. People had to find other ways to get their music to the public. In this portion of the paper, I will be going more into detail on some of the different ways people went about marketing music before the internet.

The Beginnings of Music Marketing

Marketing music became most important once physical copies could be produced and purchased by the public. The first copies of music people could buy were sheet music. To promote the music, the composer or their marketer would have to try to convince musicians to perform their piece during a show. This way people could be exposed to the musical piece and might want to buy a copy of the sheet music (Škoro, 2013, p. 783). Thomas Edison's invention of the phonograph in 1877 brought the first widely accessible physical recordings of music. This was a big step because instead of people buying something to read and try to replicate, they are buying a recording of music that they are able to listen to. In the 1890s, flat-disc records were introduced and made mass production of physical copies much easier (Albright, 2015). Once mass production of musical copies became possible, the potential to sell music became much greater. Beforehand, people could only listen to music live, but allowing people to listen to their

favorite music at their own will changed the game. *Billboard* first came around in 1894 and “quickly began publishing articles about the phonograph” (Peacock, 2018). As technologies continued to improve, physical musical recordings became easier to mass produce and sell. The creations of the radio, television, and the internet made reaching larger crowds much simpler than before. The changes these technologies brought in how music can be marketed will be discussed next.

Radio

The radio was one of the earliest ways musical artists got marketed and promoted on a large scale. Besides seeing live performances, hearing about music from other people, or seeing something in a magazine, the radio was one of the only ways for people to find new music and artists they liked. One great example of early successful radio marketing dates back to 1925 when a John McCormack recording was broadcast on the radio and resulted in over 150,000 copies being ordered (Chen, 2009). Before the television came out, the radio was one of the most popular forms of entertainment, so it made a great place to showcase musical artists. People listened to the radio in their cars, at home, or even while doing work. With so many people listening to the radio so often, many of them heard music they enjoyed and wanted to seek out. Record labels must have known this because they have worked with radio stations to gain attention for their artists since the 1920s. One of the ways they tried using the radio was by building good relationships with famous disc jockeys (Chen, 2009).

Disc jockeys, or DJs, were quite popular when it came to the radio. They were the hosts of radio shows, and they were in control of all the music that was played on their show. As some

DJs became popular, they gained a big influence on the music people listened to and enjoyed. Some people would follow their favorite DJs like they would their favorite musical artists, and that is how they found new music to listen to. Music labels tried to take advantage of this by attempting to influence the DJs to play their artists' music. Some labels would do so by sending money or other incentives in exchange for the promotion of their product. This exchange between DJs and music labels became known as payola. Eventually, DJs started getting in trouble for accepting payola and playing the label's music in return. Not long after this, DJs lost some of their influence as new programs, like talk radio and news stations, started taking over the radio. Then, music programs were introduced on the television, which started to become a more popular outlet for finding and listening to new music (Chen, 2009).

Television

In the 1970s, music videos became one of the next big things for the promotion of artists and their music (Chen, 2009). Music videos are a way to add another creative element to the artist's music. In a way, it is like the audience gets to watch their favorite artist perform live while they are watching a music video. The music videos can also help tell the story of the song and add to the mood. So, in some ways, it might be more entertaining to watch a music video than a live performance. This made showing music videos a great way to get people interested in an artist and their music.

Music videos became widely accessible with the launch of MTV in 1981. MTV was a television channel dedicated to playing music videos 24 hours a day. "Video Killed the Radio Star" by the Buggles was the first music video that aired on MTV (Chen, 2009). After the release

of MTV, music videos got quite popular and helped many artists gain the exposure they needed to become stars in the music industry. When it first came out, MTV worked quite similarly to radio stations. It even had its own version of the radio's DJs, called video jockeys, or VJs. These VJs hosted the MTV channel as it broadcast different music videos all day and night. With the great success of MTV, artists became inspired to create more interesting and unique videos. They started to see music videos as their own form of art in addition to the music itself. One of the most revolutionary and successful music videos ever created was "Thriller" by Michael Jackson. It cost \$500,000 to make the video, but it became so well known that it helped boost sales for the entire album. The album, *Thriller*, went on to become one of the best selling albums ever (Chen, 2009). This is also not the only evidence that music videos have helped boost sales: "80 percent of singles on the *Billboard's* Hot 100 chart were presented by a music video after the 10th year of MTV" (Chen, 2009). This new development in the music industry has lasted even to the present day. Although MTV is not showing music videos like it used to, music videos themselves are still popular on other platforms like YouTube: "music videos as an art form are as important now as they've ever been" (Pulse, 2016).

The Internet

When the internet became widespread, many things started to change. With the ability to access almost any artist's music or music videos at any time, things like the radio and MTV started to lose their importance and influence in the music industry. The internet and computers became much more popular than TV and radio for accessing and marketing music for a few reasons. One of these reasons is that people are able to choose exactly who and what they want

to listen to as long as the artist releases their work online. Additionally, it costs consumers less money to get music online than it does to buy physical copies. People can even listen to music and watch music videos for free on certain websites like YouTube. It also costs less money to promote artists online, since it could potentially be done for free. However, if one is willing to pay, the advertisements can be targeted at more specific audiences for a potentially higher success rate. It can cost about \$5.00 to reach 1,000 people with a paid advertisement on social media (“How Much Does it Cost to Advertise on Instagram?”, 2019). According to Meyers (n.d.), about 25 percent of people who see an ad on social media will visit the ads’ store or website, and “between 14 – 17% will ultimately convert by purchasing a product or service.”

With the addition of social media like Twitter and Instagram, artists are able to successfully promote themselves like never before. Additionally, online music websites like SoundCloud allow for the artists to make their music available to everyone online. This decreased artist’s overall need for record labels. “How the Internet has Changed Music” (2014) explains this quite well:

Simply put, the Internet allows people to connect with others all around the world. This enables certain smart musicians who are otherwise unknown to find their own audience without the aid or backing of a major label, virtually eliminating the need to be “discovered” by talent scouts or A&R reps...In other cases, it simply means they can market and sell their own music to their audience without the need for label or radio promotion.

With all of the technological advancements around the time the internet was on the rise, there was a shift in the industry to more artists remaining independent. With cheaper computers, music

equipment, cameras, and audio and video production software, artists are able to take care of all of the aspects of their career if they choose to. They can do almost everything a label can. This includes recording and mixing their own music, producing their own videos, and marketing themselves online (Jones, 2018).

The Shift in Hip-Hop

This shift to an increasing amount of independent artists in the music industry has been especially prevalent in hip-hop, one of the most popular music genres in this day. There are a few very notable hip-hop artists that made their way up the charts independently: Chance the Rapper, Tech N9ne, and Curren\$y. Both Tech N9ne and Curren\$y even went on to create their own independent labels with the level of success they have gained (Nguyen, 2015). The one thing that is consistent with all of these popular independent artists is a ridiculous amount of work ethic. Being independent means that they have to take care of everything themselves, even financially. However, it is still much easier to remain independent today than it was in the past.

In an interview with Wendy Day (Jones, 2018), she said, “[back] when I started in the ‘90s you didn’t have a choice, you were either signed or unsigned. Today independent artists can do everything that the major labels can, within reason, as long as they have the know-how and budget.” So, the internet has changed the options artists have to go about their career. Generally speaking, going independent will take more time and harder work, but the artist will make all of their profit and keep all creative control over their music. When signing to a label, artists don’t have to do as much work on the production and promotion side of things, but they could

potentially lose some artistic control and profit. Modern day artists are fortunate enough to pick between the two options, and the internet and social media has greatly helped make that possible.

Marketing Artists Now

Marketing in the Early Stages

One of the biggest struggles to overcome when marketing a new, upcoming artist is finding out how to market on a small budget. Luckily, with the internet and social media, there are plenty of ways artists can market themselves for practically free. One of the best examples of this is through using social media. Nowadays, it is more common to run into people that have social media than don't. According to Tjepkema (2019), there are 3.2 billion users on social media, which is close to half of the Earth's population. Most musical artists, famous or not, also have social media, and they use it to share their music and market themselves and their performances. Currently, one of the most popular social media platforms is still Facebook. According to Smith and Anderson (2019), 68 percent of adults in the US reported having a Facebook account in 2018. Following Facebook and its 2.38 billion active users (Noyes, 2019), Instagram has about 1 billion active users, and at least half of them visit Instagram everyday (Mohsin, 2019). Some of these users have accounts on both of these social media sites and more, but that is still a tremendous amount of people to be able to reach.

With all of these users and different social media sites, it is important to know what crowd would take interest in the artist's music. For example, ages 16-34 listen to hip-hop more than any other age groups (Statista, 2018). So, hip-hop artists should be marketed in places where these age groups are likely to come across them. About 65 percent of Instagram's users are ages 18-35 (Statista, 2019), so it would be a great place to market hip-hop artists. To keep

things within a small budget, it would be best for the artist to create their own page on Instagram and gain a following through their own posts. This method of marketing is completely free so it is a fantastic option for artists who need to save the money. However, gaining a following through posting on Instagram can be quite a bit of work, and it may not be as straightforward as one might think.

It might be one's intuition to try and promote their music as much as possible early on, but that may not actually be the best strategy. Getting people's attention would be difficult if the only thing they knew about an artist was that they made music. With so many different artists all over Instagram, they have to try and stand out in some way to get people interested in their music and life in general. It is quite valuable for artists to get people to like them as a person, band, or group, instead of just trying to get people to listen to their music without any knowledge of them or their background. Burgan (2018) puts it like this:

In the beginning, your fanbase will likely be built up of relationships with people that like you as a person. The more they like you, the more support you can expect from them.

Music plays a small role during the early stages of fan building and becomes more valuable as you scale up.

When starting out, it is very beneficial to have a solid group of people that support an artist as a person and a musician. If the artist is supported as a person, their music is more likely to be supported as well. When people support artists as people and musicians, they are more likely to spread the word about them.

To attract an audience and keep them interested, an artist must post new relevant content often. How much of their personal life artists want to share with the world is up to each of them

individually. Although most might not want to share much, it is helpful in building a fan base to let people get to know the artist a bit. There is no need to share any sensitive personal or family information, but rather little things that people may enjoy from the artist's day-to-day life or process of music creation. This helps connect artists to their audience at a more personal level than just sharing new songs and projects, especially when the artists interact with their followers in the comment section or respond to direct messages. With that being said, it is important to post just as much, if not more, about the artist's music and events they have been to or performed at. Artists should make appreciation posts after they have done a show or reached some level of self-achievement thanks to the fans. This could be posting about how many plays a new single has and thanking everyone who has listened to it, or thanking the fans for coming out to the artist's live performance. They could show live clips from the show and express their gratitude to the city and venue in addition to the fans. This shows everyone that the artist cares and appreciates all of them for the support and opportunity. This could also help artists build relationships with the venues they've played at and could help them be more likely to get booked there again. Overall, building good relationships between an artist, their fans, and anyone they work with can be very beneficial for their career. It could bring great opportunities that may not have come up otherwise.

Marketing the Artist's Music

With everything said about marketing artists as people themselves, it is still incredibly important for them to continue to produce new, quality musical content consistently. It is hard for people to support a musical career that doesn't seem to be taken seriously by the artist. The

artist should show that they are always making moves towards success in their career one way or another (Burgan, 2018). They can do this many different ways such as dropping hints for an upcoming album, showing the process of making some of their music, or posting new music and adding a link for easy access to the full song. SoundCloud and YouTube are two easy and free platforms to release and view music. Having a link to the artist's music on their social media pages would give their audience access to everything they have posted on those platforms. SoundCloud is for music specifically, but YouTube can be used for music, music videos and more. Easy access to the artist's work is important because if it is too hard to come across, people might lose interest before they can even find it. All someone should have to do is click a link and the new song should be right there to listen to with all of their other music.

Artists who have a little bit of money to spare can release their music on more popular music streaming sites like Apple Music or Spotify. To do this, the artist would have to sign up with a distribution company. There are many different options an artist can choose from. One of these companies is called Ditto, and it allows artists to release unlimited albums to major online music stores and streaming services for only \$19 a year. Additionally, when signing up with Ditto, the artist gets to keep all of their music's rights and the money it makes ("Pricing", 2019; "Sell Your Music," 2019). Another similar service is called Distrokid. It costs \$19.99 per year to distribute however much music one wants onto practically any available music store and streaming service. Distrokid also allows the artist to keep 100 percent of their royalties ("Upload Your Music to Stores Today," 2019). Pairing with distributors like Ditto or Distrokid gives artists the ability to release music in places most people keep their main playlists. SoundCloud and YouTube are great, but they are not as convenient for listening to music when people are out

and about. Spotify, Apple Music, and some other streaming services allow for people to download music onto their phone and listen to it without any internet. So, if an artist releases their music here as well, their chances of getting more plays and building an audience increases.

In addition to getting the artist's music on more streaming services and music stores for easier public accessibility, these distribution companies can even take care of some of the marketing themselves at a price. For example, Ditto has a social media marketing program an artist can purchase for \$349. "Ditto Music Social Media Packages" (2019) says this package is: "[ideal] for those with limited budget, but still wanting big results. Our creative team builds a bespoke 4 week Instagram campaign and directs 1000s of targeted new people to your profile to listen and love your music." They also have an upgraded version of this package for \$1,699 which is described as:

[The] way to go if you want your release to make the biggest impact possible across all social channels. We assign you an experienced project manager and creative team to build and implement a bespoke 6 week campaign, targeting Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Vine and Soundcloud. ("Ditto Music Social Media Packages," 2019)

Although these options, especially the second one, are pretty expensive for someone on a budget, they are something worth considering if the artist doesn't want to do much self-marketing. This would give them more time to focus on perfecting their music before releasing it instead of potentially sacrificing quality to spend time on marketing. These types of packages would best be invested in to help spread the word about an upcoming project or a project that has just recently dropped.

Advanced Marketing Strategies

An artist's exposure on social media and easy access to their music is vital when building a fanbase, especially in the early stages. However, once an artist has gained a decent following by themselves, there are other things they can do to help their fanbase and music sales or streams continue to grow. There are many examples from recent artists who have used creative marketing strategies quite successfully. Some of these strategies can be risky, but if an artist understands their crowd well, they can use them to their advantage.

One of these ways is by surprising fans with the release of an anticipated album. Surprising fans with a new album when they don't expect it can get them very excited to listen to it. With the extra excitement of an unexpected release, people might be more eager to tell all of their friends about it. Bryson Tiller used this strategy to release his second album, *True to Self*. He originally had the release date set for June 23, 2017, but he ended up releasing it about a month earlier without any warning (Orcutt, 2017). This early release helped result in Tiller's first number one debut on the *Billboard* 200 album chart. Although, it is important to note that his previous release placed eighth on the same charts (Caulfield, 2017), so he already had some good success before this strategy. The unexpected release strategy has been used successfully by many other artists as well. These artists include Future, Drake, Kendrick Lamar, and more (Kirst, 2016). The surprise release seems to be most effective for artists that already have a pretty large following. When there are not a ton of people hoping for new music from an artist, a release without any prior marketing might not reach enough people to be effective. So, this strategy should be used with caution.

Chance the Rapper provides another great example of good marketing tactics. In preparation for the release of his album, *Coloring Book*, he created and dropped merchandise with album artwork for his fans to buy. He also urged his fans to buy his poster sets, place them up around their cities, and take pictures to put on social media to show support. This was a great idea because it encouraged his fans to buy his merchandise and spread the word about him and his album while making them feel like they were helping him out (Orcutt, 2017). It also helped by marketing his new album both on social media and in real life wherever his fans put the posters. This strategy proved to work well. “The 13-song project was streamed over 57 million times in its debut week. It became the first streaming-only album to debut on *Billboard’s* charts (No. 8)” (Payne, 2017). He also won a Grammy for Best Rap Album with this project, and it was the first ever Grammy given to a streaming-only album (Havens, 2017).

Another big move artists have made to help promote their album is create a movie or some kind of visual to accompany the album’s release. Prince did this with his movie, *Purple Rain*, and his album, *Purple Rain*, as the soundtrack. This combo release became extremely successful:

The film grossed \$68 million. Prince had the top film, album, and single in the country.

The soundtrack was number one for 24 weeks and even a year later, album sales seemed unstoppable. Prince was “the biggest rock star in the universe.” (Transnoodle, 2017)

The success of this strategy has been seen again in the present day. Beyoncé released her album, *Lemonade*, with a film to go with it on HBO. According to Parisi (2017), *Lemonade* was the top selling album released in 2016. Both of these examples provide evidence that releasing an album

with a movie or accompanying visuals can gather a lot of attention and help boost the new music and artist's success.

Using new and creative ways to market one's music can help artists set themselves apart from others and gain an advantage. These different strategies, like the ones mentioned above, can really help boost an artist's popularity, especially if they have a good buzz to begin with. Early on in an artist's career it might be better to stick to more simple and straightforward tactics. However, if an artist feels up to it, they may want to try implementing new marketing strategies to see how it goes. Being able to try new things, fail, and learn from it is an important skill to have, especially as an artist. Not every marketing tactic used is guaranteed to work, but experimentation should surely be welcomed. It is also important to note that it is somewhat hard to tell how much of an artist's sales, streams, or downloads are thanks to their marketing tactics versus the music itself. At the end of the day, the best marketing in the world couldn't really make people enjoy music they don't like. On the other hand, poor marketing, or a complete lack thereof, could keep incredible music hidden from the public and block an artist from their potential success.

Conclusion

No matter what time we live in, the goal of marketing is to get people interested in buying some kind of product or service. When it comes to music, it is not much different. Marketing is used to spread awareness about an artist's music and existence in general. Before audio recordings, musical artists had to market and sell their musical scores (Škoro, 2013, p. 783, 788). Then, the invention of the phonograph allowed people to listen to pre-recorded music, and

the music industry took a large step towards where it is in the present day (Albright, 2015).

When these physical recordings of music became easily mass produced, marketing them became more useful. While more options came about for how people can listen to music, more options for where artists can market their music also emerged. New music and artists could be marketed in magazines in the late 1800s, after the phonograph was invented (Peacock, 2018). Then, the radio came and made it easier to reach an even larger audience. After this, television and music video channels, like MTV or VH1, came out as another way to market artists to a larger crowd. Finally, the internet and social media came out in the late 1990s and took over as one of the best ways to market music and musical artists as they became more widespread (Chen, 2009).

Early on in an artist's career, it is more important to get people hearing about the artist than it is to get them to actually purchase their music. Because of this, it is good for artists to market themselves in the cheapest ways possible. Social media is the perfect outlet for artists to market themselves since they can do it there for free. To do this, the artist can create their own account and slowly work on building a following through posts about themselves and their new music. According to Burgan (2018), building up a fanbase in the beginning can best be done by getting people to like the artist as a person and not just their music. However, it is still extremely important that the artist creates new quality musical content consistently so the fans know they are serious about their musical career.

In the modern day, artists can post their music online to sites like SoundCloud and YouTube for the public to access for free. The artist can post something on social media about a new musical release and then provide a link to direct people to the full song. If the artist could get their music on Spotify, Apple Music, or other popular streaming services, that could be even

better than SoundCloud. It would cost them about \$20 a year to get their music on these streaming services with a distribution company like Distrokid or Ditto Music (“Upload Your Music to Stores Today,” 2019; “Pricing,” 2019). These popular streaming services would be better because it is where most people keep their main playlists. If they are able to download the artist’s music onto their playlist, they are likely to listen to it more often than if they have to go out of the way to hear the artist’s music.

Although it may be a lot of work, marketing oneself through social media can help artists keep their creative control and profits instead of turning to a label to take care of this work. Labels typically have more access to finances for productions and marketing strategies, but they take some of the artists profits or sometimes even creative control. However, artists nowadays are able to do just about everything a label can (Jones, 2018). There are some creative marketing strategies artists could use to help them get more attention than they might otherwise get without the budget of a major label. Some of these strategies include releasing new music by complete surprise or ahead of schedule, releasing new music with accompanying videos or visuals, or encouraging fans to help promote a new release in creative ways. These examples have all been proven to work by different artists including Beyonce, Chance the Rapper, Prince, and Bryson Tiller (Orcutt, 2017). It is important to note that these artists had some decent success before these advanced strategies helped boost their sales and presence as artists even more. So, choosing the right time in one’s career to explore different creative marketing techniques is important. Otherwise, the time and energy can be wasted. However, everything can be a learning experience and help improve an artists overall strategy when it comes to marketing themselves and their music.

Overall, marketing can be quite helpful in gaining exposure for new artists and boosting the exposure for already successful artists. Although marketing alone cannot gain a following for artists and their music, the music by itself cannot gain a following either. An artist who makes amazing music but never markets it could go their whole career without being discovered. So, it is important for artists to find a balance between making quality music and marketing that music, along with themselves, in order to create the successful career they desire.

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