The Sound of Tomorrow: Soulection and the Era of Cultural Curation

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From vinyl to streaming services, technological advances have completely reshaped the consumer’s relationship with artists and the music they produce. In the contemporary age of music, making and distributing music has never been so easy, allowing new artists to enter the marketplace without many barriers to entry. Not only do artists have the ability to make professional grade music using their own laptops and home studios, but also platforms like Soundcloud, Spotify, and Apple Music offer a distribution channel to share this music to the masses. Despite resistance from industry heavyweights, like Taylor Swift, streaming services have become extremely popular with consumers due to the convenience and simplicity. Across the board, the global music industry’s digital revenues were $6.85 billion in 2014, matching physical revenues for the first time in the history of the industry. This has caused the supply of music to increase significantly, arguably devaluing music content to become more of a commodity in the marketplace. Instead of purchasing music, a growing percentage of consumers are paying a monthly subscription fee for streaming access to an immense library of music. It is estimated that 41 million people have paid for digital streaming services, with the number increasing rapidly each year. In response to the widespread adoption of streaming services as the primary source of music, artists and music companies have shifted from relying on music sales as the main source of revenue, to focusing on alternative sources, resulting in a larger emphasis on merchandising, touring, and sponsoring in regards to the modern business model in the music industry. This model capitalizes on the emerging consumer mindset that values not only the material value of the products they are consuming, but also the lifestyle and values that are represented through these cultural artifacts. Essentially, the artists become a brand, and everything that they endorse and create becomes another potential way to make money. The effects of this change in consumer behavior have also amplified these effects though the proliferation of “new media,” which, as elusive as it is to define concretely, is a term for the various media platforms and artifacts that have created avenues for interactivity and co-creation, like social media, delineating the relationship between the consumer and creator. The impact of new media cannot be understated, as it has transformed the relationship between the consumer and artist by completely destroying the barrier between them. Within the hip-hop industry, this has begun to manifest within the way popular artists have begun to change their product and marketing strategy. Hip hop artists of all different scales, like Drake, Kanye West, Future, and Childish Gambino, among others, have used their own identities as brands, a vessel to sell a lifestyle and culture. Kanye West and Drake in particular are two hip-hop heavyweights who have leveraged their brand in the form of fashion, videos, and live experiences through their own music labels, clothing lines, video games, and events. In doing so, these artists have successfully created their own market segment that is tied to their name, to which they have a monopoly. Unfortunately, lesser known artists and smaller music labels cannot replicate the actions of Drake and Kanye simply due to issues of scale and capital. It then becomes essential for the vitality and sustainability of the industry as a whole to figure out how the independent artist and music label can thrive in the new music economy. Through an examination of the independent music label, Soulection, an independent music label that has embraced this industry transformation, viable strategies are explored.

The music industry is rapidly transforming due to an intersection of shifts in technology and consumer behavior. Widespread adoption of streaming platforms such as Spotify, Soundcloud, and Apple Music, among others, has created new opportunities for smaller artists and independent labels in an oversaturated marketplace, exemplified by the LA-based electronic collective, Soulection. By leveraging their eclectic, yet well-curated roster of artists through an early adoption of digital platforms, Soulection has been able to thrive and reach a global audience without the support of major labels. Through an examination of Soulection, and their rise to success, a successful business strategy in the digital era of music is explored.
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there was not much money to be had in running a music label. As a result, he focused on building a community through a grassroots approach early on, rather than trying to be financially successful. As Soulection begins to scale, the potential of those community-building efforts is realized. Like Kanye and Drake, with their respective creative endeavors, Soulection has created its own market space where they can be leveraged in a unique experience that acts as a physical extension of the label’s aesthetic and community. The result of this process is a tightly knit community so invested in the Soulection vision that they can be leveraged in a multitude of ways as consumers.

In an era where the consumer expectation is that music can be accessed instantaneously, Soulection takes a completely unique approach. Using Soundcloud, the label has regularly released radio shows, sometimes three hours long, with songs of various genres curated by the founder Joe Kay on a weekly basis. Competing against artists who simply release music to be available for download or streaming on various platforms, it seems unlikely that the Soulection Radio show would have any chance of survival. However, through thorough new media, the Soulection Radio show has garnered a devoted community of listeners, who share their thoughts through social media. The success of the label’s aesthetic and community.

Mainstream vs. Niche Strategies

In the music industry, there is a stark contrast between the marketing strategies of major label artists and niche market artists. Major label artists are sure to resonate with any content that they produce. The success of the clothing line, among other products, is only made possible by curating the Soulection experience to a narrow demographic that is sure to resonate with any content that they produce. Like Kanye and Drake, with their respective creative endeavors, Soulection has created its own market space where they are the leaders of a very specific cultural experience. The aesthetic reality of emerging artists. Artistry of music and discovery. This statement exemplifies Soulection’s relationship with its fans: instead of a traditional business to consumer relationship often seen in the corporates levels of the music industry, Soulection stands for more than just profit. As Soulection begins to scale, the potential of those community-building efforts is realized. Like Kanye and Drake, with their respective creative endeavors, Soulection has created its own market space where they can be leveraged in a unique experience that acts as a physical extension of the label’s aesthetic and community. The result of this process is a tightly knit community so invested in the Soulection vision that they can be leveraged in a multitude of ways as consumers.

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Soulection is a collective of artists, designers, and creators whose approach to business is rooted in its values and mission. On their website, they describe themselves in the following way:

**Soulection** is a record label, radio show, and niche collective of creative music makers and programmers worldwide. Based in Los Angeles, CA, Soulection promotes music from around the world and increases visibility for The Sound Of Tomorrow™ through weekly Soulection Radio broadcasts, as well as branded graphic and apparel designs.

As a trusted resource and global platform pushing forward honest music, Soulection aims to inspire and create a cultural shift in music consumption that values the artistry of music and discovery. This statement exemplifies Soulection’s relationship with its fans: instead of a traditional business to consumer relationship often seen in the corporate levels of the music industry, Soulection stands for more than just profit. In the primary stages of its business, co-founder Joe Kay recognized that Soulection’s relationship with its fans: instead of a community. On their website, they describe themselves in the following way:

**What is Soulection?**

Soulection is a collective of artists, designers, and creators who consider themselves in an oversaturated market. Soulection has been able to garner a very devoted community of listeners, who rely on these long radio shows, three hours long, with songs of various genres curated by the founder Joe Kay on a weekly basis. Competing against artists who simply release music to be available in the Soulection vision that they can be leveraged in a multitude of ways as consumers.

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bases, offering a more deeply curated experience for listeners rather than existing competitors. Beats Radio allows the curators to represent their brand on their own terms and appeal to passionate listeners who are more likely to spend money for the music and artists they are supporting. Drake can preview his latest unreleased tracks to his most devoted supporters through Beats Radio, strengthening the relationship between him and his fans while also maintaining his creative integrity. This less commercial approach seemed to have limited upside, but has been successful in getting consumers to subscribe to Apple Music over Spotify. While their overall service has mass appeal, it is not because they are making a radio station that inherently appeals to a mass audience. Rather, by focusing on hiring the finest ambassadors of specific musical styles/cultures, Apple creates a sense of authenticity around its programming with which other streaming services will not be able to compete.

This music philosophy led Apple Music to Soulection, as they took note of their niche market success due to their devoted community of listeners from around the globe. The Soulection approach was nearly synonymous with the Beats Radio programming strategy, and a partnership was formed in 2015 soon after the debut of the streaming service. Beats Radio offered a perfect platform for Soulection, who definitely stands out as the smallest name of the star-studded roster. Working with Soulection may seem like an anomaly given the resources that Apple has, but it is a smart move that looks beyond just the numbers and considers the cultural influence that Soulection has within its own self-curated community. Since the launch, Soulection has brought on a number of major artists, like Jhene Aiko, Ginuwine, and Omarion, which have raised the status of the label without compromising its identity. New listeners are exposed to the full Soulection experience through their radio, and the label can continue to thrive by building their community through distribution channels over which they have creative control.

Conclusion

The future of the music industry is not by any means predictable. Its dependence on the technological infrastructure makes it extremely volatile given the rapid rate of growth in the tech industry. Because there is no way to successfully control these technologically-based variables (as evidenced by the negative effects of the major labels’ resistance to the transition to digital music), music businesses must focus on the culture of the consumer in order to grow. The mediums in which consumers listen to music may change, but the reasons they continue to do so will remain constant. By accepting the inevitability of technology’s influence on music consumption, artists and music labels can focus on creating an ecosystem that is rooted in a set of values and a niche community. Soulection has been able to control its demand because the consumer is not a random individual who happens to be interested in their music. A Soulection fan is a part of the Soulection movement, and that means that their values align with that of the label in a much deeper way than any major label or mainstream artist typically has the capacity to achieve. By curating everything about their brand identity, from the music to the clothing, Soulection has been able to differentiate itself and create a new precedent for how artists can earn a living off their art and creativity. The most successful music businesses that will emerge in the next few years will be characterized by their strong, unique fan communities that are not there just for the music, but for the lifestyle and culture that these brands provide.