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 through 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.
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.

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

**What is Soulection?**

Soulection is a record label, radio show, and niche collective of creative music makers and programmers worldwide. Based in Los Angeles, CA, Soulection is determined to break from around the world and increases visibility for The Sound Of Tomorrow™ through weekly Soulection Radio broadcasts, curates timeless music from around the world, and builds a community. On their website, they describe themselves in the following way:

Soulection is a collective of artists, designers, and creators 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 of their label’s musicality, clothing, and media are all consistent with one another and impeccably curated. This is evident in how every aspect of the consumer’s experience is presented as a cultural identity: we instead of I, us instead of me. Even their apparel speaks to the value of community through shirts with “Soulection Tribe,” or marks of various nations with the Soulection logo embossed on them. Their music is diverse and is difficult to categorize under any one specific genre. Their artists are passionate music lovers who simply call it the Soulection genre. Furthermore, live shows allow fans to participate in the experience as a physical extension of the label’s aesthetic and community. The result of these processes is a tightly knit community so invested in the selection 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 competing. However, in the 18th episode and show no signs of slowing down. From this radio show, Soulection has been able to garner a very devoted audience and music listener, who appear through new media have inherently undermined the value of tanning as a marketing concept. Through these capabilities people can reveal extremely specific patterns based on personality and cultural insights with extremely high granularity. This approach is applicable to the priorities of niche culture. However, it allows them to segment their market extremely precisely and differentiate themselves in an oversaturated market. Soulection has consistently leveraged social media from their core audience, and it has allowed them to grow despite the highly competitive market condition.

Mainstream vs. Niche Strategies

In the music industry, there is a stark contrast between the marketing strategies of major label artists and niche, self-curated artists. It is an ongoing debate as to which is more successful. In the music industry: “In the music industry we talk about how we are in the age of curation. Soulection is successful because it’s understanding of the wack song. You’ll never see a wack photo. You’ll never go to a wack show. They have a standard that people have come to expect when they go to a wack show. They are only going to be marketed to ubiquitously is extremely idealistic and underdeveloped when examining less established brands. Data analytics capabilities that have arisen through new and new media have inherently undermined the value of tanning as a marketing concept. Through these capabilities people can reveal extremely specific patterns based on personality and cultural insights with extremely high granularity. This approach is applicable to the priorities of niche culture. However, it allows them to segment their market extremely precisely and differentiate themselves in an oversaturated market. Soulection has consistently leveraged social media from their core audience, and it has allowed them to grow despite the highly competitive market condition.

The success of the clothing line, among other things, is a testament to how Soulection has leveraged influential music icons in order to penetrate the market. It seemed counterintuitive that Apple was going to compete with the current edge Spotify platform with what seemed to be a relatively archaic medium of distributing music. However, through their careful selection of musical tastemakers in the industry, they capitalized on existing market segments that tapped into a deeper level of relevance than the convenience that Spotify offered. Artists like Drake, Disclosure, DJ Khaled, Pharrell, and Elton John host their own radio shows, where they play music, not for the masses, but for their specific fan base.
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 are the leaders of a very specific cultural experience. The aesthetic of the label, music, clothing, and media are all consistent with one another and impeccably curated. This is evident in how every aspect of the music and consumer experience is presented as a cultural identity: we instead of I, us instead of me. Even the apparel speaks to the value of community through shirts that read, “I am Soulection.” It has become a cultural phenomenon that has forced companies to understand youth consumer behavior without any consideration of race or other narrow demographics that have been used in the past. Deconstructs how large companies treated music as a service, the Soulection brand speaks to the new emerging consumer mindset to best sell their talent to the masses of America and beyond. While there is validity to Stoute’s approach, it applies mainly to large corporations who can leverage superstar celebrities in their marketing approaches and are trying to target large broadcast audiences. In the music industry, this applies to major record labels that are trying to penetrate the mainstream music market. The notion that consumers across the entire generation can be marketed to ubiquitously is extremely idealistic and underdeveloped when examining less established brands.

Music Curation

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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.