The emergence of promotional gatekeeping and converged local music professionals on social media

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Abstract
The digitalization of creative industries has undermined the business models of legacy media outlets as well as the music industries. This article discusses the two primary ways that legacy media has functioned in the context of the music industries— as a producer of symbolic value and as an engine of music promotion. However, the central aim of this study is to analyze the development of these functions in the new media sphere by identifying music promotion practices on Facebook. Based on in-depth interviews conducted with local music industry professionals in Estonia, two sets of promotional approaches have been identified: brand-centered approaches and community-oriented approaches. The findings indicate a continuing convergence of autonomous music criticism and music promotion across many dimensions and the presence of “promotional gatekeeping” as a form of business activity in small creative industries.

Keywords
affordances, Estonia, Facebook, music criticism, music journalism, music promotion, music industry, role convergence, social media

Introduction
The music industries were among the first creative sectors to be dramatically transformed by the digital revolution. The story about the intervention of new communication technologies in the dynamics of the recording industry has already been told, analyzed, and archived from a variety of perspectives both inside and outside the academic spheres, making it one of the best-known examples of digital disruption. Currently, since much music-related business has moved to the cloud...
(Wikström, 2009), most scholarly works have focused on music streaming services. This includes qualitative studies about the changing patterns of music consumption and musical experience (Hagen, 2015; Johansson et al., 2018; Kjus, 2016), the specifics of music curation and algorithmic functioning of playlists (Bonini and Gandini, 2019) as well as data mining techniques associated with it (Morris, 2015). Another strand of media and cultural studies has focused on the political-economic power structures within streaming economies in the context of the rising dominance of the big tech companies (Meier and Manzerolle, 2019; Negus, 2019) and their relationships with other digital platforms (Eriksson et al., 2019). All of these insights have raised questions about the fair compensation to the artists (Hesmondhalgh, 2020) and the value of recorded music in general (Marshall, 2019).

Unlike the specifics of music streaming, the (in)significance of legacy media, as well as popular social media platforms, have received much less attention from scholars of music culture. Therefore, the main purpose of this article is to examine the music promotion practices of industry professionals on social media in the specific local socio-cultural context of Estonia. This enables us to identify the ways how social media amplifies, transforms, and disrupts the relationships and dependencies of legacy media and the music industries.1

Specifically, we will draw on earlier literature dealing with the media’s role as a producer of cultural and symbolic value (Bourdieu, 1993), as well as its role as an essential source of music promotion (Debenedetti, 2006; Meier, 2019; Powers, 2013). This duality reflects the media’s contribution to economic legitimacy as a business activity, and its contribution to esthetic legitimacy that is associated with varying degrees of autonomy from market logic (Schmutz, 2016). It has been argued that legacy media has lost much of its sway in both these functions, but qualitative up-to-date evidence remains scarce. This article seeks to explore how these roles converge in the context of “promotional culture” (Meier, 2017; Wernick, 1991). The study of the music industries in Estonia—among the smallest in Europe, in which role conflicts are the rule rather than the exception—contributes to a detailed understanding of tightly interwoven local music economies in the digital era.

The analysis of the 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with local music industry professionals and experts who represent various genres and business mentalities, reveals that legacy media coverage still matters to music industry professionals, especially when cultivating an artist’s brand and creating widespread visibility in mainstream music. However, the players involved in niche music genres are concerned about the decline of traditional forms of specialized music journalism, such as music criticism. As a result, they have found ways to create visibility and generate specialized exposure by mobilizing and catering to taste-specific communities on social media and alternative radio programs, while also becoming expert curators in their own right. We will dub them “promotional gatekeepers.”

The study of gatekeepers in newsrooms has been recently revised for the analysis of Spotify and “platform gatekeepers” (Bonini and Gandini, 2019), Twitter and “networked gatekeepers” (Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013), and Facebook as an “algorithmic gatekeeper” (Tufekci, 2015). All of these studies have highlighted the increasing and largely opaque role of algorithms in gatekeeping processes. Without underestimating the power of algorithms, this article focuses on how music entrepreneurs make use of the features of Facebook. For this, we link to the widely discussed concept of affordances—understood as possibilities for action enabled by media technologies—by distinguishing between features, affordances, and outcomes (Evans et al., 2017). We argue that the creative use of the features such as the Page, the Event, and the Group afford niche music entrepreneurs multiplication and convergence of their various roles facilitating “promotional gatekeeping.” While previously, this term has been used to describe the usage of real-time audience metrics for positioning content in the online news industries (Neheli, 2018), we find it relevant for
explaining the transformations in cultural authority and autonomy of the gatekeepers in the creative industries such as music journalists and critics.

**Media as a producer of symbolic value**

To begin with, music journalism, and music critics specifically, can be imagined as being more or less independent of the music industries—“autonomous gatekeepers” or “surrogate consumers” (Hirsch, 1972: 694)—which confirms the power and credibility of critics as cultural authorities and opinion leaders. This power is exhibited in the way they select, “legitimate and canonize” (Fenster, 2002: 86) musical works and artists. Therefore, the print media, specifically, serves as a meaning-making machine that attributes symbolic and cultural value to music and constructs cultural classification systems (Schmutz, 2009). As a result, only the cultural phenomena that meet certain esthetic criteria and are valorized as such are legitimized as art. Regev (1994), for instance, demonstrated how rock critics since the 1960s had struggled to legitimize rock music as an autonomous art form through the adoption of “high art” value criteria. Relatedly, one of us has previously shown how Estonian elite print publications have adopted Romantic ideology to consecrate classical music over various forms of popular music to perpetuate the traditional distinction between “high” and “low” culture (Järvekülg, 2020). At the same time, such classification systems can entail symbolic distinctions by categories like gender or race imposing certain social norms and excluding others (Schmutz, 2009). For example, quantitative studies of album reviews have uncovered that the male-dominated ideology of rock criticism downplays “trivial, feminine ‘prefabricated’ pop music” (McLeod, 2001: 47) and echoes “color-blindness” (Schaap, 2015).

On the one hand, numerous studies have shown how popular music has enjoyed an increasing share of media attention in elite newspapers during the last decades which, arguably, is a sign of its growing esthetic legitimacy (Schmutz, 2009, 2016; Schmutz et al., 2010). On the other hand, it has been argued that during this period, popular music criticism became “industrialized,” meaning that its focus shifted from “matters of music to matters of business” (Conner and Jones, 2014: 7). Rather than being concerned with the output of music criticism, the current study is more focused on the role of music criticism and journalism in the music industry value chain.

Namely, in the context of the rise of participatory digital media technologies that challenge traditional cultural authority and institutionally affiliated cultural experts (Kristensen et al., 2018), music, as well as information about music, has become widely accessible and the ideological role of rock critics as musical authorities has become redundant (Frith, 2019: 515). This article explores the transformations of such musical authority on social media.

**Media as a promoter**

Another body of research has addressed the media as a vehicle for promotion. As such, media outlets are in many ways dependent on the commercial demands of the music industries. Unlike criticism, which in addition to evaluative elements, should include description, classification, contextualization, elucidation, interpretation, and/or analysis (Carroll, 2009), promotion can provide media exposure without any verbal explanation. Being in control of the audience-media engine—reaching the target audience and generating revenue through media presence—has always been at the center of the music business’s strategies (Wikström, 2009: 87). In previous literature, this research focus has primarily centered on broadcast media. For example, radio was traditionally considered as the most important promotional medium for the popular music industries (Frith, 1981; Hirsch, 1972). Music promotion can be understood to be “the cumulative effect of efforts intended
to increase the awareness, presence, longevity, and sale of [...] music among the listening public” (Powers, 2013: 315). However, increased digital connectivity and audience fragmentation have made it impossible for music companies to retain traditional control over the commercial flow of music. As Tschmuck (2016: 27) has argued, “push music culture,” dominated by legacy media houses, has been replaced by “pull music culture” in which the audience decides what they want. This is especially true since the on-demand streaming services embody “a new relation between exposure and sale, united within one and the same service” (Kjus, 2016: 129) that blurs the line between promotion and consumption.

On the one hand, the digital social platforms provide new marketing opportunities for all music entrepreneurs enabling them to reach their audiences while bypassing traditional gatekeepers, such as music journalists or radio DJs. On the other hand, the accessibility of music production and distribution tools has resulted in an unprecedentedly intense competition for audience attention. As Meier (2015: 406) notes “in this era of musical abundance, the ability to create and monetize audiences—the work of market-making and marketing—is paramount.” Despite the supposedly democratizing effect of digital technologies, the power in the music industries “remains tied to access to capital, financing, and marketing support” (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2015: 103). In other words, the power remains in the hands of the major companies.

Furthermore, Meier (2017: 67) argues that the artist’s image and reputation, “understood by record companies as the artist’s ‘brand,’” has become the core revenue source for the music industries. The growing reliance on business-to-business (B2B) markets, including brand partnerships, music licensing, and 360-degree deals are characteristic of this approach. Moreover, branding logic has extended beyond major music companies, as new forms of promotional labor have become expected of all music professionals (Meier, 2015: 408; Tschmuck, 2016), but especially of the less known ones who cannot afford professional marketing teams. This article explores the forms of such promotional labor on social media.

**The blurring of evaluative and promotional perspectives**

Of course, the two perspectives on media’s role presented above can overlap as, in reality, the critical and promotional aspects often occur in combination or in mutual dependency (Forde, 2001; Negus, 1992). This is particularly pertinent in the context of the “industrialization” of music criticism in print publications (Conner and Jones, 2014). As early as 1982, Stratton noted that the independence of rock critics, specifically, is solely perceived and this provides them with a “taken for granted credibility” when it comes to the marketing strategies of music companies (Stratton, 1982: 272). In other words, it has long been argued that any music review is naturally partly promotional because it conditions the promotional strategies of the music firms by contributing to the public “buzz,” especially, when breaking new acts (Frith, 1981: 174). In that sense, even unfavorable coverage in mass media is functionally an equivalent of direct advertising (Hirsch, 1972: 647) and snippets of reviews are often added to promotional materials as a form of “experiential labeling” that signals the product’s worth (Larceneux, 2001). In Bourdieusian language, the symbolic capital derived from criticism can be converted into economic capital through marketing and advertising. Rock journalism, for example, has been described as a “semi-autonomous” field in Bourdieu’s sense (Atton, 2009; Lindberg et al., 2005) because music critics often sit in-between the autonomous and heteronomous (commercial) pole of cultural activity. Moreover, in the Anglo-American tradition, the specialized music titles have always relied on the advertising revenues from music firms which challenges the idea of autonomous criticism (Forde, 2001; Frith, 1981). The key role in mediating the relationships between music companies and media channels is played by the press officers,
dubbed by Negus (1992: 115) as “media matchmakers.” Their work not only entails continuous socializing to match artists with particular publications and individuals but also writing press releases that could be used as copy by publications (Negus, 1992: 118). By shaping the journalistic output of various forms—for example, reviews, features, interviews, glamor stories—they engage in articulating the artist’s identity for a particular audience (Negus, 1992: 123). From the 1980s onwards, the organizational power of public relations (PR) has grown significantly, especially in the music industries, and become central in directing cultural production (Forde, 2001: 169).

As a result, critics have become increasingly engaged in promotional activities (Debenedetti, 2006) and PR materials are presented as arts journalism without much editorial filtering and gatekeeping (Strahan, 2011). All of the above can be viewed as a manifestation of promotional culture (Wernick, 1991) and the increasing influence of promotional industries on music culture (Meier, 2017). The central aim of this study is to analyze the blurring of evaluative and promotional elements in the context of the contemporary media environment that is increasingly dominated by social media. Previously, it has been argued that in the digital spheres, criticism is “practically a subversive political act, challenging consumerist approaches to culture and resisting the monetizing logic of the market” (Gillespie, 2012: 72). In particular, Facebook facilitates “a web of positive sentiment in which users are constantly prompted to like, enjoy, recommend and buy as opposed to discuss or critique” understood as “like economy” (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013: 1362). However, Facebook’s role as a platform for music promotion is still underexplored. Accordingly, the central research question of this study asks: How do music criticism and music promotion converge in the work of music industry professionals on Facebook? This study does that by operationalizing the concept of affordances.

What Facebook affords music promoters?

After the emergence from Gibson’s (1979) ecological psychology, the concept of affordances has been the focus of interdisciplinary theoretical debates (Davis and Chouinard, 2016) as well as functionally applied to the analysis of empirical datasets, especially, in social media research (Ellison and Vitak, 2015). These studies have revealed many inconsistencies in the application of the term (Evans et al., 2017). On the most general level, affordances can be understood as perceived “possibilities for action” (Evans et al., 2017: 36) describing what “media technologies, allow people to do” (Bucher and Helmond, 2018: 235). In the context of social media, on the one hand, the potentials such as visibility, anonymity, persistence, replicability, scalability, or searchability are widely understood as affordances (boyd, 2011; Evans et al., 2017). On the other hand, and in the context of music, specifically, Facebook has been found to afford the do-it-yourself musicians actions such as digging, rallying, and surveilling (Jones, 2020).

Evans et al. (2017) have argued for the conceptual differentiation of features, affordances, and outcomes; affordances, therefore, are neither features nor outcomes. They also stress that for something to qualify as an affordance, it needs to have variability. We abide by this particular guide and employ the concept of affordance to examine to what extent and in what ways the local music industry professionals make use of the following features of Facebook: the Page, the Group, and the Event. The creative use of these features introduces the central affordances identified in this article—multiplication and convergence of roles—that enable promotional gatekeeping. While the Facebook pages (Jones, 2020) or profiles (boyd, 2011; Ellison and Vitak, 2015) have received specialized treatment in the framework of affordances, this study views “Facebook as a toolkit” (Smock et al., 2011) by detailing on the combination of features that were seen by music entrepreneurs as most essential for their promotional work.
The Estonian context and research design

The Estonian music industries are comprised of micro-enterprises and a dynamic network of freelance professionals, in addition to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and larger privately-owned collectives, all of which form an “entrepreneurial music ecosystem” (Sillamaa, 2020: 52). According to the latest survey of creative industries, in 2016, 1924 legal bodies, including 504 NGOs and 792 LLCs, were operating in the core music sector in Estonia with a combined income of over €82 million (Estonian Institute of Economic Research, 2018). The overwhelming majority of these companies are single-worker enterprises. However, these numbers do not tell us very much about the actual situation in the Estonian music ecosystem because the categorization of the data does not accurately represent the actual economic activities in the music sector and the capacity to gather data is very limited (Sillamaa, 2020: 57).

Also, due to the small size of the Estonian market, a number of professionals engage with the music sphere from a variety of different positions. Relatedly, many of the interviewees claimed that the Estonian music industries are very immature and advanced entrepreneurial knowledge has not taken root among most professionals, especially when it comes to the digital streaming economy. Nonetheless, based on their primary activity/role, our sample includes the following informants:

- The founder of the biggest (showcase) music festival Tallinn Music Week (TMW);
- The organizer of one of the biggest international popular music festivals Intsikurmu;
- The organizer of an underground grassroots non-profit music festival Skeneraator that ceased operations in June 2020;
- The digital marketer of the biggest international jazz festival Jazzkaar;
- The digital marketer of major concerts working for the local branch of Live Nation;
- The CEO of Made in Baltics (MiB), a label and management partnered with Sony;
- The sales manager and the label manager of a major label;
- The manager of a mainstream music production house and artist management Moonwalk;
- The owner of a booking agency Damn.Loud Agency (DLA);
- The founder of Estonian Funk Embassy (EFE)—a booking agency, artist management, record label, DJ service, and a radio show;
- The chief of a niche cassette label Trash Can Dance;
- The owner of a carefully curated record store Biit Me in Tallinn;
- The owner of a popular underground live venue Sveta Baar in Tallinn;
- The founder of a non-profit internet radio IDA—a platform for local underground scenes;
- The founder of Rada7, one of the most popular online journals and discussion sites for popular and underground music which closed down in September 2019;
- The producer at the state-funded foundation Eesti Kontsert (Estonian Concert)—the largest concert agency in Estonia;
- The general manager of the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra (ENSO);
- The chairman of the Estonian Composers Union;
- The director of the Estonian Music Information Centre focused on classical music;
- The founder of Music Estonia—a music industry development center and export office.

This totals 21 people who represent activities with diverse funding streams (e.g., state-subsidized or private businesses), and various genres (from classical music to mainstream popular music), various “industries” (e.g., live or recording industry), and business motives (non-profit and for-profit). The sample includes “micro-independents” who may cater to “no more than a few hundred
afficionados” (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2015: 95) as well as the Estonian branches of the global market leaders. The in-depth interviews, which lasted between 47 and 244 min, aimed to position the activities of the interviewees in the Estonian music ecosystem, explore their relationship with legacy media outlets, and, most importantly, focused on their social media promotion practices. The interviews were conducted by one of us between February 2019 and February 2020. Additionally, based on the interview material, we made related observations on Facebook. This social media platform was chosen as the main site of interest because, early in the interviews, it became apparent that it provided the greatest diversity of promotion and engagement practices.

For the coding of the interview transcripts, we applied the constructivist grounded theory approach as introduced by Charmaz (2006). First, initial coding entailed naming each segment of data that expresses one consistent idea, whether a sentence, a line, or a short paragraph. Second, focused coding included the selection of the most significant codes and constructing categories according to the patterns uncovered by initial coding. Lastly, we applied theoretical coding to recognize possible relationships between categories developed in focused coding to form an analytic whole. In this stage we looked for connections between the data, the topics covered in the interviews, and the theoretical material that informed them. This three-layered method enabled us to avoid determining data by pre-existing concepts. As a result, we identified the differences in using the features of Facebook in relation to the degree of the interviewees’ multiplicity of roles. Qualitative data analysis software NVivo was used for the coding process.

Findings

Before getting to social media, a brief overview of the relationship between the music industry professionals and legacy media is necessary.

The mutual dependency of the music industries and legacy media

First of all, in terms of music criticism, only a handful of critics in Estonia were mentioned as cultural authorities and sources of esthetic legitimacy and prestige. The influence of Estonian music criticism in general was believed to be minimal and its share in legacy media outlets shrinking. This is consistent with earlier arguments about the decline of the authority and impact of arts journalism. However, when it comes to music promotion, radio was still considered the most important tool for business, especially among mainstream-oriented businesspeople. The reason is the consistent exposure it provides. Indeed, based on the latest survey about music consumption in Estonia, radio is by far the most popular medium for music consumption and discovery (Music Estonia, 2018). Television, also, was believed to have a direct and positive impact on the audience’s awareness and sales. Specifically, talent shows as well as the national pre-selection competition for the Eurovision Song Contest, Eesti Laul, were mentioned as influential sources of recognition (see also Ibrus et al., 2019). As the sales manager of a major label said, popular commercial radio stations “would not waste their time on songs that are not kept alive in other channels.” Or as the CEO of MiB explained, anonymous radio airplay is insufficient because consumers need to recognize the artists whose songs are being played. This underscores the need to develop widespread “relatable brand identities that will traverse permeable media boundaries” (Klein et al., 2017: 228). Relatedly, celebrity and gossip-oriented online news media serve as a lively source of visibility for the mainstream-oriented players. Much of the coverage in these outlets results from continuous industry lobbying, “mutual favors,” or longstanding media partnerships/cooperation. Therefore, it is rarely subject to rigorous and autonomous editorial gatekeeping. As one digital marketer commented:
I usually suggest several topics that could be written about to the portals; or, for Delfi, we even provide the content; we write stories about the top-5 songs of the artist and give them the text to publish.

By “portals” he means the online new sites mostly run by the two largest media companies in Estonia: Postimees Grupp and Ekspress Grupp. Delfi is run by Ekspress Grupp and is one of the two most popular commercial websites for online news and entertainment. Therefore, the portals are simultaneously associated with the digital information sphere and organizational functioning of legacy media companies. While most of the interviewees were perfectly content with these online outlets as partners in pushing their marketing agenda, some were still, in principle, disappointed to see “unedited press releases published in the name of online arts journalism.”

At the same time, the representatives of niche music businesses emphasized their concern of remaining largely invisible to commercial legacy media outlets. This is also where the absence of traditional authoritative music journalism was missed the most. Then again, some small businesses—Sveta Bar, the Biit Me record store, and EFE—have been given their own shows on Radio 2, a public service radio station, which they, occasionally, use to promote their businesses. As the chief of EFE said, there have been cases where he interviewed artists managed by his own label. This not only represents a blurring of the lines between music gatekeeping and industry promotion but a total convergence of the two. On the one hand, this goes against traditional public service media principles. On the other hand, these people are among the best experts in their field of activity which makes them appropriate public radio DJs. Moreover, as the manager of a major label said, “Radio 2 doesn’t even have a proper playlist system” and “the song they play the most doesn’t even make it to the Estonian Top 50,” making this channel largely irrelevant to their business. Therefore, having a show on Radio 2 in the evening section is unlikely to boost one’s commercial score. However, it does help building niche prestige and audience. This illustrates the continuing contrast between long tail and blockbuster business logic (Anderson, 2006) and their corresponding types of promotional legacy media support.

### Building brands and communities

However, in both cases social media has become one of the most important tools for music promotion, simultaneously amplifying and disrupting aspects thereof. We have identified a number of distinctive music promotion practices on social media broadly categorized as brand-centered approaches and community-oriented approaches. The former are built on a more or less centralized flow of promotional messages, while the latter are more focused on building larger taste-specific networks of promotional nodes. They are different in the specific ways they utilize the features of Facebook that afford variable degrees of role multiplication and convergence. However, these sets of approaches should not be viewed as mutually exclusive, but rather as ones that overlap and complement each other, depending on the specific business aims and profiles of the players in any particular situation. In other words, none of the businesses in our sample employ a pure form of either set of approaches.

### Brand-centered approaches

On social media, the artist’s brand is most evidently manifested in its fan page, either on Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok. Of course, based on our sample, the brand can also be the representation of a label, record store, concert agency, venue, etc. To a great extent, these social media spaces have replaced the functions once performed by online homepages. Another Facebook feature that can be
used to focus on and display a brand is the Event—indispensable tool for concert promoters and agencies in terms of effective ticket sales—which also enables the temporary targeting of the “interested” audience. Importantly, the brand-centered approaches to using Facebook are typically characterized by a strict distinction between one’s personal and professional spheres on social media. This means limited public activity on the personal profile and only working through the pages directly associated with the business. For example, a label manager, as a rule, has administrative control of the main label page as well as some artists’ pages represented by this label. In other words, the roles of a brand-centered entrepreneur are well separated and not converged by, for example, cross-sharing.

All the participants agreed that without a strong social media presence one’s brand would remain invisible. Meier (2019: 326) has referred to the digital music industries as promotional industries, in which marketing costs ought to be understood as production costs. Two of our interviewees referred to the same argument in reverse: producing songs or music videos could be treated as marketing costs. According to this approach, all artistic, as well as promotional, materials are basically designed to be exhibited first and foremost on social media, and this includes anything from verbal texts to music videos, GIFs, and even memes. Therefore, the boundaries between music production and marketing have blurred. Marketing has become more important than ever before, and it occurs most tellingly on social media. In the words of the CEO of MiB, the music industry has become very “personality-centric” in which artists’ social media channels “function as media companies” that are constantly in need of fresh content.

Besides creating and posting original content, all the material derived from print media—such as music reviews or interviews—can be reused as promotional content on social media and directly linked to digital shopping environments. In that sense, social media has amplified the interconnection between media and music industries by providing another platform to showcase their dependency. As the interviewees explained, it enables the creation of “new reasons to talk about the artist,” a “promotional rhythm,” or the opportunity to include some bits of the coverage in the next press release or event description as a form of “experiential labeling” (Larceneux, 2001). Moreover, the copywriters and text editors working for some music festivals, such as TMW and Jazzkaar, were previously known as music critics, and this is still evident in their copywriting. As the founder of TMW explained:

> From time to time, we have a conversation that goes… hey, we can’t use your original text—you have such a clear, recognizable style … So, how can we … eliminate some of the personal style. But, since the person is a music critic by nature and has also worked as one, she doesn’t know how to write a fluffy promo piece. She just writes to make things interesting for herself.

Of course, job mobility between the music press and industry PR is not a new thing (Frith, 1981: 173). Nonetheless, these cases exemplify how, as the creative author’s position turns to promotional texts, “the spirit of independence” (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2015: 108) associated with autonomous music criticism gets incorporated into the brand.

The growing importance of the B2B market on social media is occurring in cooperation with influencers. The mainstream-oriented businesses in our sample routinely work with selected social media influencers as part of their “media plan.” As the manager of a major label said, it needs to “appear organic” and is not usually directly paid for:

> We can offer them exclusive access. After all, they are content creators in need of distinctive content. Of course, we will pay for the trip, hotel, dinner, and drinks, you know… But we haven’t worked with
influencers like… “Here, we have a product, and we offer 300 euros to get a specific post or story in return….” We definitely don’t do that…

This means that influencers have become valuable targets for the “media matchmakers” (Negus, 1992: 115) disrupting earlier relationships between music firms and legacy media workers. As many of the artists represented by the brand-centered businesses are local stars, they themselves are coveted influencers and brand partnerships comprise an important share of their revenue. However, this type of cooperation must not come across as overly commercialized. For example, the interviewees stressed that they “would never trade a song for a pair of sneakers” to avoid the artist’s brand “turning into a shopping channel.” These statements convey a belief that partnered consumer brands must be “authentically linked, not only to a recordings artist’s music, but also her or his (perceived) personal lifestyle or star persona” (Meier, 2017: 91). Also, this suggests that even the players with the strongest commercial orientation still hang on to the old discourse of “selling out,” which appears to endure in the digital music industries in “less stark but no less meaningful terms” (Klein et al., 2017: 231).

However, even in the case of some niche-oriented music businesses, it is quite common to see brand-centered cooperation in the form of shared Facebook posts. In this way, for example, Jazzkaar, the jazz music festival, has contributed to the popularity of Haage Vesi, a bottled water brand, and the Facebook presence of ENSO bolsters Epiim, an Estonian dairy company. Before social media, these commercial sponsorships might have gone unnoticed, but the publicly manifested associations between their Facebook pages have made these ties much more visible. Common strategies that capitalize on these public ties include tagging, ticket giveaways, and co-hosting events. The benefit of these strategies is that they enable the exhibition of content on multiple pages simultaneously, thereby broadening one’s reach.

For example, co-hosting an event ensures that it will appear in the calendars featured on other pages in addition to the page of the event’s creator. The more pages that co-host an event, the larger the audience that will potentially be reached through automatic event notifications. Therefore, co-hosting is a way to make initial contacts with the fans of other pages. Using this strategy, ENSO’s page, with around 7700 followers, could reach more than 31,000 fans of Epiim’s cheese products. In exchange, ENSO lends its cultural prestige to the cheese brand. Along with the main organizers and sponsors, the co-hosts of shared events usually include the artist, the venue, and the ticket seller. These partnerships generally reflect actual monetary relationships.

In terms of direct advertising, all of the interviewees had used “boosting” or sponsored posts on Facebook. On the one hand, advertising on social media has largely replaced advertising on legacy media outlets because it is better targeted and costs less. In this aspect, social media has disrupted the traditional dependencies between media and music companies. On the other hand, rather than systematically quantifying their social media audiences, most claimed to have adopted a primarily “cognitive” or “intuitive” approach to social media marketing, based on simple social media observations, professional long-term experience, and a “gut feeling.” Only one major company in the sample had a very specific big data strategy, including computational analysis of social engagement across platforms and predictions of musical success. The specifics of the relationship between music businesses and their audiences are not the focus of this study. However, these implications are signs of personal approaches that constitute the so-called “community-oriented” music promotion on Facebook.
Community-oriented approaches

First, community-oriented approaches to social media marketing entail better awareness and understanding of the music-specific discussion groups and communities on Facebook and the systematic integration of the group function into promotional strategies. Unlike pages that are meant to provide “updates from business, organizations, and public figures,” groups represent places “to communicate about shared interests with certain people.” Essentially, they are designed to be communities. However, pages can also take the form of communities and were often perceived as such by the interviewees. The academic discussion around the rise of virtual, online, or digital communities has been continuous, ambivalent, and longstanding. Without delving into the depths of this debate, we are adopting the term “community” primarily because many of the interviewees themselves tended to use its Estonian equivalent (“kogukond”) when speaking about their business-related social circles. Also, it has been widely used in earlier studies dealing with local music scenes, either online or off (e.g., Baym, 2011; Kruse, 2010). When mapping Estonian music-specific discussions on Facebook, one of us identified over 100 music-specific groups, about half of which were active to varying degrees. Most of them lacked verbal debate, but many were actively used for sharing musical discoveries via links to music videos or audio files on various streaming services.

For example, Henrik Ehte, the head of EFE, is one of the 14 administrators of a public group called “Soul Funk Disco Eesti,” which unites more than 1800 aficionados of these genres. He uses this group to promote new releases and events. However, unlike the fully branded Facebook pages, he implied that groups should be used in moderation.

When there’s an important event, where I need lots of promo, then I definitely post it. If it’s a new release, an Estonian one, then I definitely post it. Maybe there’s some really amazing old-school Estonian find, then I also post it. I usually post a short promo text, short introductory text, and a link where it can be heard and where people can search for themselves. I don’t post something like, “listen to Rita Ray, new Estonian soul, really awesome,” and then a new post saying “read the review in the Müürileht.” I think this is like spamming. I feel that people would be more resentful than grateful for this.

This is an example of a balancing act between the promotional and the communal aspects of online music culture. The central nodes related to Ehte include the “Soul Funk Disco Eesti” community, EFE’s Facebook page, another page of a popular venue in Tallinn where, until recently, he worked as a program manager, as well as artist pages such as Lexsoul Dancemachine, Estrada Orchestra, and Rita Ray. These nodes combine a musical taste network that can be effectively used for synchronized social media promotion and represents a substantial share of the entire soul/funk culture in Estonia.

Another example of this is Roman Demchenko, the head of DLA who is also the program manager of TMW, the co-organizer of another music festival, the administrator of Estonianmetal.com (a local metal-community promotion page), the Facebook page of Rada7, etc. At the time of the interview, he held administrative control of more than ten music-related Facebook pages and participated in numerous groups. These cases demonstrate that the multiplicity of roles played by the professionals in Estonia’s independent music business can be further replicated on Facebook. Of course, converging these roles provides extra opportunities to promote events:

The first things that you do—make the band into a co-host, make the venue into a co-host, make the ticket outlet into a co-host. And then I always add Estonian Metal as a co-host, because people will automatically get a notification in their feed that Estonian Metal added an event that may interest them.
And then I definitely add Rada7 as a co-host, because...well, that’s how it’s developed. There was an events calendar on their site... and since the site is now shut down—it’s as if they moved this calendar to Facebook.

As Ehte said, launching an event—“creating an explosion”—is probably the most important thing on Facebook. This often entails partnering with oneself in various administrative roles: tagging oneself, co-hosting with oneself, etc. However, just like Ehte, Demchenko also feels there are limits to this type of community-oriented promotion. For example, one should not overdo ticket giveaways, because, that would signal an undervaluing of one's work. For the same reason, some interviewees avoided paid social media promotion because they thought they would risk their credibility if their audience saw it. These are additional examples of the negotiations that independent music professionals undertake to justify their cultural autonomy in everyday social media settings (Klein et al., 2017). Essentially, their strategy is to increase visibility by drawing on the sense of community without appearing to give in to the omnipresent commercialism of promotional culture. Moreover, Facebook provides less aggressive and subtler ways to show one’s affiliation with certain taste groups or cultural ideologies that can be conceptualized as taste performances (Liu, 2007). For example, the owner of Sveta Bar implied that liking other pages, or sharing their events on the Sveta Bar page is a way to show support and present a common underground ethos.

I enjoy liking those pages... I like the idea that you can see, for instance, that Sveta Bar likes these pages... usually three are visible. I like to think that maybe someone sees that and finds an interesting underground label or band. Well, like Trash Can Dance—just recently I noticed that, oooh, Sveta Bar hasn’t even liked it. Trash Can Dance is so, well, significant and important, so why shouldn’t it be visible on our page somehow.

Therefore, in the context of these more or less publicly presented interconnections on social media, independent niche cultural venues, record stores, labels, or festivals can be positioned as the insiders and co-creators of a particular taste culture/community. This is the central aspect that sets them apart from the brand-oriented approaches to social media marketing. By promoting their businesses, they appear to signal shared identities of a broader scene or taste community.

Relatively, broader aspirations to promote and cultivate ‘the local’ underlie such an approach. For example, the owner of the record store said that he would feel weird if he did not post on Facebook about every Estonian record that comes in his store. However, by following this principle he might have to breach his cultural autonomy as a gatekeeper if he happens to dislike some of these records:

There are times with Estonian records, when I, on principle, try to avoid the role of a critic, but rather just provide information, for instance, by saying “they’re back,” “they haven’t produced anything for 10 years,” “fabulous, they released a vinyl”... although as far as I’m concerned they can burn that vinyl.

This was not the only example of how independent music entrepreneurs were willing to identify as tastemakers or even critics. In that sense, through selecting and highlighting various music as part of their social media activities, these independent niche music enterprises—record stores, venues, labels—are not only curators but have become the expert gatekeepers, tastemakers, or even critics in their own right. Their inclusion and exclusion practices on social media, their posted reactions, or the tone and emphasis of their posts can be viewed as authoritative judgments, despite their niche impact and compromised autonomy as potential music critics. Also, as community-oriented approaches to Facebook promotion often involve the blurring of public and private (boyd, 2011) and
more active use of the personal profile, their identities are more visible. Importantly, while many of their secondary roles may go unnoticed by the public on social media, in the case of a public service radio channel, as exemplified above, it would be manifested as a conflict of interest. However, without these enthusiastic individuals being engaged with and simultaneously promoting the local music culture in so many positions at once, many niche music scenes and practices would have arguably died out long ago. In such a small society like Estonia, therefore, it is hard to integrate the principle of autonomy and independence from the market with the highest degree of authority and expertise in any particular musical field. Role conflicts tend to be inevitable. The practices discussed above illustrate how Facebook affords the multiplication and convergence of roles and contributes to transformations in musical authority as promotional gatekeeping outperforms autonomous gatekeeping.

**Big festivals integrating brand-centered and community-oriented approaches**

In many ways, the distinction between brand-centered and community-oriented approaches reflects the old dichotomy between the commercially oriented (extrinsically motivated) majors and culturally innovative (intrinsically motivated) independents (Wikström, 2009: 30). Indeed, the brand-centered approaches tend to be represented (not solely, but primarily) by the mainstream-oriented, major-linked players, or institutionally embedded ones; whereas the community-oriented approaches tend to be adopted by the smaller niche and less-profitable non-institutionalized enterprises.

Tallinn Music Week, the largest music showcase festival in Estonia, is an example of the successful integration of brand-centered and community-oriented approaches. On the one hand, TMW, and its founder Helen Sildna personally, were frequently mentioned by the other interviewees for their forceful and far-reaching, non-music-related branding techniques. On the other hand, on Facebook, TMW is organized as smaller individual events that revolve around the main brand. These genre-specific showcases—each a separate Facebook event—are led and curated by representatives of the particular musical scenes who are more or less active in specialized Facebook groups and communities. Therefore, as Helen Sildna said, TMW has a central channel under which the satellites can operate at their own discretion. Naturally, TMW’s official page co-hosts all the events being held during the festival, thereby making its brand visible among niche publics. At the same time, according to the international press, TMW’s brand has come to represent one of the most important music industry events in Europe.

That’s why TMW differs somewhat from other international showcase festivals. After all… many of them are really industry-based or based on “getting a recording contract,” but we are really interested in providing an in-depth introduction to various scenes. For instance, if someone really knows something about mumble rap, let them come and talk about it and interestingly—so specific knowledge can develop from it.

Similarly, the Facebook page of Jazzkaar, the extensively branded jazz music festival, is not only used as a channel for festival-related information but provides a year-round flow of curated jazz news that aims to “keep jazz on the map.” This is an attempt to become the online center for the jazz-related community. As the digital marketer of Jazzkaar illustrated:
Ramuel Tafenau,⁴ who released a record the day before yesterday said, “I’m bringing you a record; it would be really great if you could promote it too.” And we’re happy to do it if a musician steps in the door.

It is no coincidence that both of these festivals closely collaborate with Music Estonia, the music industry development center, to facilitate the successful export of music. By mixing branding-intense approaches and community-oriented approaches in their social media promotion strategies, they serve as bridges between the established/fully professionalized music enterprises and those that are emerging or semi-professional, and this reflects their broader aims to contribute to more professional national music industries. In several ways, their gatekeeping role also exploits the functions traditionally provided by music critics. Their promotional messages on social media not only describe and inform but often engage in contextualization, interpretation, as well as evaluation of music. In their case, of course, judgments made are invariably positive in tone. As a result, they appear to legitimize particular music under the disguise of promotion. Jazzkaar even had a review section on their homepage that featured “reviews” of the Jazzkaar concerts written by the festival volunteers. As already mentioned, these tendencies seem to be an inevitable side-effect of the increasing impact of promotionalism as a dominant cultural condition in the music industries (Meier, 2017; Wernick, 1991).

Conclusion

The findings from this study show that the cultural authority of traditional music criticism as an autonomous gatekeeping force barely has any impact on the local music industries and is generally fading. This is primarily because the rise of the global digital and interactive media sphere has disrupted traditional media companies and opened up new avenues for the flourishing of promotional culture (Meier, 2017; Wernick, 1991).

However, in terms of music promotion, legacy media, especially radio, television, and online media directed mostly at mainstream players, is still important for local music industries. Since entertainment- and celebrity-oriented commercial legacy media outlets are not interested in covering more peripheral music cultures, niche music businesses are struggling to attract sufficient attention. Traditionally, they have relied more on specialized music journalism that, arguably, used to represent a greater degree of editorial autonomy, credibility, and cultural authority. In other words, and especially considering their lack of resources for marketing, these niche businesses are inevitably losing the race for attention.

In this article, we have shown that the dynamic between various industry players and legacy media is echoed in their social media promotion strategies. We have demonstrated that both brand-centered as well as community-oriented approaches blur the boundaries between music criticism and promotion, whether through “experiential labeling” (Larceneux, 2001), or other content that “attempts to obscure its promotional intent” (Meier, 2017: 135). Thus, it could be argued that even if audiences encounter critically evaluative material amplified by social media, it only functions as an auxiliary component in the promotional and branding schemes. In digital economies, indeed, much of the gatekeeping occurs within the framework of promotion which has become “virtually co-extensive with our produced symbolic world” (Wernick, 1991: 182).

At the same time, however, we have demonstrated that adopting community-oriented approaches to music promotion has enabled some of the representatives of small music businesses to cultivate their respective subfields of music culture and maintain influence as cultural authorities. Besides utilizing purely market-driven practices, they also make creative use of platform features that afford a high degree of multiplicity and convergence of roles, while carefully balancing between their

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⁴ Ramuel Tafenau is a musician from Estonia.
sense of autonomy, ideological integrity, and promotional necessities. Due to their business interests, they are far from the ideal type of “autonomous gatekeepers.” However, as they perform some of the functions that used to be served by autonomous music criticism, we could call them “promotional gatekeepers.” In that sense, niche promotional gatekeeping has transformed the role in which ever more commercialized and shrinking music journalism has failed.

Also, the variable degrees to which multiplicity and convergence of roles occurred among the total sample of interviewees illustrates the context-specific and relational nature of affordances as they are conditioned by perception, dexterity, and cultural and institutional legitimacy (Davis and Chouinard, 2016: 245–246). To put it another way, some of the participants had never thought about or did not perceive the potential of certain promotional approaches; some did not have skill to apply them or interest in learning; and some were subject to institutional or social regulations that prohibit or discourage multiplicity of roles.

Finally, the convergence of industry promotion and music journalism and the fragmentation of taste cultures in the digital sphere is not just a local but a global development. One only needs to go to Pitchfork, the most popular online music publication, to see that the reviews have direct links to the Rough Trade record store; or think about the electronic music powerhouse Resident Advisor which is a magazine, social media, and promotional platform, ticket seller, etc.—all at once.

However, we want to stress that for small music industries like the ones in Estonia, with its population of 1.3 million, these processes are often necessary to maintain a diverse and dynamic field of music culture in the digital era. And social media platforms such as Facebook are among the few arenas that allow this to manifest, which underscores the importance of the local cultural dimensions of global platforms. Due to the chosen research setting and highly inductive methodology, the limitations of this study include the non-generalizable nature of the findings to other social media sites, samples, or national contexts. However, this article could be indicative of a more general dynamic worth studying on a transnational scale.

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**Notes**

1. This is inspired by Flew (2018). According to his typology social media has intervened in the creative industries in three ways: by amplifying, disrupting, or transforming them.
2. See Groups and Pages at: https://www.facebook.com/help.
3. Müürileht is a publicly funded monthly print publication focusing on alternative youth culture.
4. A young Estonian jazz drummer.

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