

Berklee College of Music

DIY OR DIE:

**An Applied Case Study of Metrics and Identity in Independent Artist Career
Strategy Within the Contemporary Industry Landscape**

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of
Master of Arts in Global Entertainment and Music Business

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary music industry increasingly demands that independent artists and their teams navigate complex commercial landscapes without the safety net of major label resources. This study examines how integrated quantitative performance metrics and qualitative artist insight can shape more effective, context-sensitive artist management strategies in the contemporary music landscape with free, accessible tools.¹

Using a convergent mixed-methods case study design, this study tracked and managed **ranger**², an emerging indie³ dream pop band based in Reno, Nevada, over a three-month period. Baseline and final quantitative data were collected across streaming (Spotify) and social media platforms (YouTube, Instagram & TikTok) alongside qualitative data drawn from semi-structured interviews, field notes, Likert-scale feedback, and internal communication. All organizational analytical and communication infrastructure was built using free or low-cost tools: **Notion** for project management, **MailChimp** for email marketing, **set.bio** for link-in-bio consolidation, **Buffer** for post scheduling, **Google Sheets** for metric tracking, and the artist's low-cost **Squarespace** website.

Findings demonstrate that **strategies grounded in both measurable data and artist insight produced stronger outcomes than metric-driven approaches alone**. YouTube views increased by 297%, Instagram engagement held at 6.3%, and direct-contact channels launched from zero with strong early retention signals. All growth occurred with zero advertising spend. Qualitative findings revealed that artist-defined success shifted from broadly creative terms to

¹ Except for a low-cost website at \$20 a month

² Intentionally left lowercase

³ Independently managed

operationally clear frameworks over the study period, suggesting that structural management clarity enabled rather than constrained creative autonomy.

This study argues that effectiveness and authenticity are not competing priorities in independent artist management and when strategies are informed by both data and the artists' own insight, they reinforce rather than conflict with each other. These findings offer a transferable, accessible framework for independent artists and their teams seeking to build sustainable careers outside of a structurally disenfranchising music industry.

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Thank you to my cat, Mimi, who sat on my lap, keyboard or mouse throughout this process of this study, so forgive any typos.

⁴ Femmes

Thank you to my fingers, I could always count on you – until I developed carpal tunnel from writing this study.

Ὁ βίος βραχύς,
ἢ δὲ τέχνη μακρή,
ὁ δὲ καιρὸς ὀξύς,
ἢ δὲ πεῖρα σφαλερή,
ἢ δὲ κρίσις χαλεπή.

*Vīta brevis,
ars longa,
occāsiō praeceps,
experīmentum perīculōsum,
iūdicium difficile.*

Life is short,
and craft long,
opportunity fleeting,
experimentations perilous,
and judgment difficult.

Hippocrates, *Aphorismi*

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OBJECTIVES

The contemporary music industry reflects what economists describe as an oligopoly – a market structure in which a small number of firms⁵ dominate supply and establish barriers to limit outsider access. Prior to the internet and streaming age, six major record labels controlled 93% of global music (Pareles, 1990), shaping which artists accessed mainstream audiences, virtually eliminating the commercial viability of unsigned⁶ artists. Although digital distribution, social media, and streaming have disrupted many aspects of this industry model, today's three-label conglomerate continues to dominate market power, gatekeeping access to resources, and increasingly constricting contractual control over artists.

Artists therefore confront a strategic crossroads: submit to the music industry oligopoly at the expense of their artistic autonomy, or remain “DIY” (do-it-yourself), independently navigating the intricacies of the music industry.

Because the DIY ethos exists on a spectrum, some artists choose to self-manage their careers, while others seek out aid from independently contracted managers. In either case, without a label cookie-cutter success template, artists and their teams must develop, implement, and adapt successful strategies aligned with industry expectations and their own creative goals.

The central guiding question of this study concerns the relationship between quantitative data and qualitative artist insight specifically:

Primary Research Question

How do integrated quantitative metrics and qualitative artist insight shape the effectiveness of artist management strategies in the contemporary music landscape?

⁵ In this case the major labels

⁶ Unsigned, independent, and DIY will be used interchangeably throughout the study

This question is further pursued through three secondary questions that structure the study's analytical framework

1. *What made the strongest measurable impact?*
2. *Which strategies did artists consider the most useful?*
3. *Where did effectiveness – perceived or actual – converge and diverge?*

Research Objectives

In pursuit of these questions, this study is guided by the following core evaluation objectives:

- To assess how quantitative performance metrics across social platforms can be used to measure the effectiveness of artist management strategies.
- To examine how artist insight and subjective priorities inform management decision-making in practice.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of a mixed methods approach in developing dynamic, responsive career strategies.
- To design and implement a data-informed strategy and monitor its outcomes over a sustained period of study.
- To analyze how strategic decisions differ when informed by quantitative metrics alone versus integrated qualitative artist insight.

These core guiding objectives are accompanied by secondary, personal objectives of the researcher:

- To empower independent artists and their teams to leverage creative entrepreneurship, self-reliance, and resourcefulness.
- To support independent artists in pursuing commercially viable music careers without sacrificing creative autonomy.

- To aid and abet the resistance of systems of economic, cultural, and social oppression by empowering artists and their teams to radically navigate, circumvent, and thrive outside of historically oppressive structures.

Literature Review

The management of independent artists has undergone a significant transformation with the entrance into the digital era of music. Where twentieth-century artist management was heavily reliant on gatekept structures (such as major labels, radio programmers, print media, and live booking monopolies (Hesmondhalgh, 2013)) the contemporary music industry landscape is distinctly defined by its platform plurality, direct to audience communication and abundance of available data (Meir, 2017) .While this abundance of measurable growth signals has led to a significant scholarly and industry push towards data-driven management, it raises critical questions about what metrics can and cannot accurately gauge and moreover, whose interests they ultimately serve (Morris, 2015) (Prey, 2020). This literature review examines and synthesizes discourse surrounding four critical themes central to the overall study:

1. Critical role of power, autonomy and resistance within the music industry
2. Artist management in the independent music scene
3. Goal creation
4. The role of quantitative data in strategy framework
5. The role of qualitative data in strategy framework
6. The mixed method approach framework

Power, Autonomy and Resistance in the Music Industry Oligopoly

Critical cultural industry studies and musicology studies have documented the mechanisms that the major-label infrastructure, live promotion monopolies and platform algorithmic architecture is used to concentrate power and form oligopolies (Meir, 2017; Seabrook, 2015). British socio-musicologist Simon Frith characterizes the extraction of artistic value as the historical appropriation of creative labor, with artists generally bearing the brunt of financial and reputational risks while corporate conglomerates absorb most of the generated economic value (Frith, Straw, & Street, 2001). On the surface, contemporary digital platforms present an ambivalent battlefield for independent rejection, however, as authors Robert Prey and Lee Marshall note, streaming and social media platforms reproduce extractive dynamics (Prey, 2020; Marshall, 2015). Algorithms favor established artists, royalty structures grossly and systemically undercompensate artists and data architectures grant entities proprietary ownership of fan relationship data (Prey, 2020; Marshall, 2015). Because of this, effective management strategies must be adaptable and practice what Meir calls “platform agility,” leveraging platforms while resisting dependence based on the cultural contexts (Meir, 2017).

Structural inequity within the music industry is rampant along axes of race, gender, and cultural identity, requiring a critical account of power dynamics (Mahon, 2004; Weheliye, 2005). Hip-hop, R&B and traditionally Black popular music have been chronically appropriated by industry structures, extracting commercial value while marginalizing the very communities that produced the music itself (Kelley, 1997). Female artists and artists of color continue to face documented disparity in label representation, booking fees, press coverage and algorithmic visibility (Smith, Pieper, Choueiti, Hernandez, & Yao, 2021; Kjus, 2016). Independent

management strategies oriented towards artistic identity and empowerment cannot be politically neutral with respect to these festering structures.

When effective management infrastructure requires expensive proprietary software and premium platform subscriptions, artists without capital resources are systemically disadvantaged (Moglen, 2003). Existing literature suggests that free and accessible tools not only reduce costs but also enable previously systemically disadvantaged artists to develop equivalent competencies (Ormerod, Potts, Cunningham, & Hartley, 2008).

Artist Management in the Independent Music Scene

Historically, artist management leadership has inferred and centered upon the major-label ecosystem, where the manager's core objective was to secure a recording contract with a major label and further develop the career of the artist once signed (Hutchinson, Strasser, & Hull, 2011). The entrance into the digital era fundamentally offset this calculus.

On one hand, the sheer volume of artists competing for label attention has made the previously defined workflow increasingly difficult to access. On the other hand, historical patterns of major labels issuing contractually unfavorable agreements has led many artists to pursue (and succeed in) music careers without typical label infrastructure (Herstand, 2017). This shift places considerably more responsibility on the manager.

Without the success template from a label, managers must now oversee the full scope of developing their artists' careers. Whether it manifests as networking with career professionals, cultivating audience relationships, executing marketing campaigns, navigating distribution, or managing finances, responsibilities typically shared by the label now rest solely on the shoulders of the manager.

The first critical challenge within this model is identifying the artists' unique selling points (USPs), a process that author Paul Allen describes as serving a dual purpose, not only defining the artists as a "branded product," but assisting the artists in locating and refining their creative identity (Allen, 2018). Notable industry practitioner Ari Herstand argues that authenticity is the most essential quality a musician can possess (Herstand, 2017), a view concurred by Allen's assertion that ingenuity naturally attracts industry key-holders (Allen, 2018). Tour manager Chris Arnestien proposes that artists clarify their intentions through what he coins as a "decision-making tree," the principle that all career decisions should be rooted in the artist's core identity (the tree) (as cited in Borg, 2015). When an artist is attuned to their motivations, a manager can use those values as the foundation to shape a creative and professional identity.

A distinctive caveat within the independent music scene is the cultural tension between the DIY ethos and professional management structures. Within a DIY cultural context, management has often been perceived as "selling out" or compromising the self-sufficiency central to independent artistic identity. Author and USC Educator Bobby Borg reframes this tension, describing strategic management as "a way to attract the attention of those who can better help you by first helping yourself" (Borg, 2015, p. 23). The framing positions management as an extension of the DIY ethos rather than that of a concession to industry pressures. The framework established by work sociologist Susan Coulson suggests that the persistence of independent artists in unstable economic conditions reflects autonomy, creative control and authentic audience connection rather than a condition of naivety (Coulson, 2012).

Once a creative identity is formed, managers translate it into a "brand identity" through the development of elevator pitches, electronic press kits (EPKs), and consistent presentations

across social platforms. Borg recommends identifying an “attitude and vibe that fits” as a guiding principle (Borg, 2024), ensuring that all branding properly aligns with the artist’s identity.

Goal Creation

With a developing identity and an understanding of the manager’s role, goal setting transitions abstract ideas into tangible action. A manager must evaluate the artists’ personal and professional aspirations to ensure that foundationally the strategy aligns with their objectives. As Allen notes, “without a plan and accompanying timetable, coupled with a vision shared by the manager and artist, an artist’s career becomes a dream that blindly searches for opportunity” (Allen, 2018, p. 90).

Herstand recommends structuring goals using the SMART framework (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timebound) organized around a six-month, one-year, three-year, and longer horizon. He advises that every six months, artists revisit and revise these goals to ensure continued alignment with the artist’s professional trajectory and personal circumstances (family planning, employment, etc.) (Herstand, 2017). This process transforms goal setting from a static exercise into a dynamic component within management strategy, ensuring that expectations are clearly defined and that strategy is executed collaboratively. This framework aligns on a broader management scale, emphasizing the criticality of adaptivity in volatile environments – in this case, the music industry (Martin & Eisenhardt, 2000). For independent artists and their teams navigating the ever-tumultuous platforms, the capacity to revise goals in response to new data – both qualitative and quantitative – is operationally crucial.

Quantitative Metrics

The capacity to measure audience behavior to granular datasets is a versatile tool, tracking metrics across platforms, and, when strategically interpreted, can inform anything from

release timing, to touring decisions, to marketing investments (Datta, Knox, & Bronnenberg, 2018). Tools like Spotify for Artists and YouTube Studio made previously proprietary data accessible to their consumers, enabling what University of Oslo professor Yngvar Kjus observes as evidence-informed decision making (Kjus, 2016). Longitudinal metric analysis allows managers to identify patterns of organic growth that indicate genuine audience development aside from “vanity metrics” (algorithmic inflated spikes in views). Comparative analysis provides a mechanism for measuring the impact of specific strategic decision, lending academic rigor to a historically intuition-driven field.

A Datta, Knox, and Bronnenberg study identifies differential consumption patterns between what are known as passive (algorithmic playlist) and active (intentional searching and saving) listening (Datta, Knox, & Bronnenberg, 2018) .. The 2011 Muntiga, Moorman and Smit study concurs, establishing a COBRA (Consumer Online Brand-Related Activities) framework, a framework that distinguishes consumption, contribution, and created behaviors. COBRAs ultimately suggest that comment and share rates indicate more durable audience development and retention than metrics that inflate raw stream of follower counts (Muntiga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011). This study adopts the signal-quality perspective in its metric analysis framework.

Qualitative Artist Insight

“Tacit knowledge,” or the understanding of creative process, community dynamics and artistic identity (a term originally defined by physical chemist and economist Michael Polanyi and applied to a creative context) is a critical tool in navigating the volatile nature of the independent music scene and changing creative priorities (Polanyi, 1966). When coupled with external market information, it can contribute to more effective artist-manager relationships as emphasized within *In Their Own Write* by music journalists Paul Gorman and Charles Shaar

Murray (Gorman & Murray, 2001). Fundamental music business author Donald Passman further emphasizes the need for integration, arguing that overreliance on metrics over artistic integrity can harm genuine fan loyalty long-term (Passman, 2019). This finding aligns with Microsoft senior principal researcher Nancy Baym's framework that suggests that audiences develop meaningful attachments to artists who are authentic and further synthesizing that authenticity is incompatible with purely metric-driven decision-making (Baym, 2018).

Self-determination theory theorizes that intrinsic motivation produces high-quality, more sustainable creative output than motivation driven by metrics and other extrinsic motivations (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Management strategies that are informed solely by short-term metric reward risk undermine the intrinsic motivation that ultimately sustains creative output in the long-term. The concept of "cultural capital," especially within the DIY context, argues that reputational and symbolic value through perceived artistic integrity converts to commercial value over an extended timeline (Throsby, 2001). Together, these explored theories offer a rationale for treating artistic insight as a primary driving force rather than a secondary one.

Qualitative research methods, specifically ones explored within the context of this study, have a well-established tradition in music industry scholarship for their capacity to answer the question of *why* choices were strategically implemented and their direct responses (Galuska, 2015; Stratchan, 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Because of possible distrust of extractive research and the DIY tradition of self-documentation (Stratchan, 2007), participatory and applied approaches were taken into practice throughout the duration of this study.

The Mixed Method Approach

Because existing literature has suggested the immutability of artists insight in management strategy as well as the importance of metrics as a tool, triangulation of data is

critical in ensuring findings are robust and nuanced. In a music industry context, University of Leeds Professor Hesmondhalgh and Baker advocate for approaches that are focused on an integrative dataset, arguing that neither sole-quantitative or qualitative analysis account for the complexity of cultural contexts without the other. This design acknowledges that effectiveness is more of a composite construct rather than an unvaried set of opposing variables.

Synthesis

The existing literature reviewed above converges on four evidence-backed claims that inform this study's framework:

1. Metrics are a necessary tool but insufficient without qualitative data
2. Artist insight is a primary strategic input
3. Convergent mixed-methods study designs yield robust evaluations
4. Effective independent management is a political practice in and of itself

Gaps in Literature

While the existing body of literature offers a strategic framework for artist development, identity formation, and goal setting, a notable gap remains in the practical application of these techniques and their measured efficacy in real-world contexts. The existing scholarship, while addressing what managers *should* do, provides limited evidence of *how* these strategies perform when implemented, particularly in DIY and independent management contexts where resources, time, and infrastructure are constrained. Literature from practitioners such as Allen, Borg, and Herstand offer prescriptive guides grounded in professional experience, however largely without empirical validation.

Another gap exists in the intersection of quantitative and qualitative methods with both subsets of existing research developing complex methodological processes but rarely applying

them to singular study. Research that approaches strategy development and execution using artists insight *and* performance metrics is particularly scarce, creating a relevant knowledge gap given the conclusions drawn from the existing body of literature.

This study addresses both gaps in literature and knowledge by applying defined strategies to the management of an emergent independent artist over a sustained study period, integrating both platform analytics with structured artist insight and systemically assessing which approaches yielded the most meaningful, measurable, and artistically aligned outcomes.

RESOURCES

This study utilizes a range of digital materials and tools that support data collection, analysis, organization and strategy implementation.

Research and Literature Resources

- Academic journals, books, videos, forums, and articles on:
 - Music industry and cultural studies
 - Management and business
 - Music industry and cultural theory
 - Research methodology
 - Psychology and philosophy
 - General cultural theory
 - Practitioner and industry guides
- Industry reports from Sprout Social and Hootsuite

Creative Materials

- Artist branding assets and campaign materials
- Social media content and posting schedules
- Mailing list campaigns

Digital Platforms and Analytical Tools

- Streaming analytics dashboards:
 - Spotify for Artists
- Social media insights:

- Instagram Professional Dashboard
 - TikTok Studio
 - YouTube Analytics
- Email marketing analytics from MailChimp
- Link-In-Bio analytics from set.bio
- Website analytics from Squarespace Analytical Dashboard

Qualitative Data Collection Resources

- Interview guides and questionnaires
- Field notes
- Internal communication records
- Meeting notes and strategy documents
- Likert Scale survey questions

Data Management and Analysis Tools

- Google Sheets spreadsheets for metric tracking
- Notion for project management and qualitative coding
- Buffer for social media cross posting and scheduling

TASKS

This study was an applied case study that triangulated quantitative metrics and qualitative insights to develop, execute and evaluate artist management strategies. The study was conducted in organizational “phases” over the course of three months with ranger⁷ as the primary case to answer the following questions:

Primary Research Question

How do integrated quantitative metrics and qualitative artist insight shape the effectiveness of artist management strategies in the contemporary music landscape?

Secondary Research Questions

1. *What made the strongest measurable impact?*
2. *Which strategies did artists consider the most useful?*
3. *Where did effectiveness – perceived or actual – converge and diverge?*

Research Design

A convergent mixed-methods approach was chosen to address the study’s research questions, integrating both measurable quantitative metrics and qualitative artist insight to provide a triangulated understanding of strategy efficacy. A case study approach was chosen due to its ability to provide transferable, in-depth explorations of multi-faceted subjects in a contemporary setting (Annamalah, Aravindan, Ahmed, & Sentosa, 2025). Case studies contribute lucrative frameworks that are helpful when studying highly volatile subjects such as the career trajectory of a musical artist. This framework can inform and empower independent artists, their

⁷ Intentionally left uncapitalized.

teams and other practitioners to apply the strategies explored within this study to their own projects and research, therefore bridging a critical gap between practice and academia.

This study was conducted in a series of three organizational phases with a study period of three months:

Table 1

Phases of Study

Phase	Objective	RQ Addressed
Phase 1: Preparation and Baseline Quantitative Data Collection	Designed study framework, selected cases, and collected baseline quantitative data.	PRQ, SRQ1
Phase 2: Baseline Qualitative Data Collection and Goal Creation	Captured artist perspectives and created guiding goals with artist case studies.	PRQ, SRQ2
Phase 3: Strategy Development and Implementation, “Study Period”	Combined metrics and insights to develop strategies and implemented findings in management actions.	PRQ
Phase 4: Final Quantitative and Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis	Collected quantitative and qualitative data, analyzing it in alignment with research questions	PRQ, SRQ1, SRQ2, SRQ3

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select cases that aligned with the research questions while enhancing the credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability of the case study design (Campbell, et al., 2020).

Two cases were selected for comparison based on the following criteria:

Table 2

Criteria & Reasoning

Criteria	Reasoning
-----------------	------------------

Must be willing to participate in study and consent to comprehensive artist management.	Credibility, Transferability, Dependability: case study participants signed an informed consent form in addition to a six-month unpaid management agreement.
Must be an independent/DIY artist with no prior management from a label or a third party prior to the study.	Transferability, Credibility: results were observed without confounding variables.
Desire to pursue a professional career as a musician and exploit their music as such.	Transferability: Artist was committed to adopting, cooperating and shaping their management strategies to further develop a professional career within the music industry.
Availability to meet a minimum of once a week	Dependability: ensured that strategies were aligned and relevant to the artists' personal and professional goals. Additionally aided with proper data collection timeframes.

The selected artist case studies met the selected criteria at the time of sample recruitment in the first phase. A total of two artists were ultimately chosen for the study.

Case 1, ranger, is an emerging indie dream pop band based in Reno, Nevada and had been active for nearly four years at the time of case selection. They had been self-managed with some defined goals; however, the goals were monitored and recorded inconsistently and sporadically. ranger had a somewhat established audience presence⁸ and often engaged in ad-hoc social media campaigns.

Case 2, Deficit Space, was selected as a representative band; however, during the period of study, the band experienced significant lineup changes and ultimately disbanded, preventing the collection of comparable qualitative and quantitative outcome data, highlighting the volatility and unpredictability of the music industry.

The study continued with ranger as a primary case study, providing ample detailed quantitative and qualitative data to explore hybrid management strategies. While the study only includes one primary case for measurable outcomes, the depth of data analysis ultimately allowed for a detailed examination of hybridized management strategies in a real-world context providing comprehensive explanatory value despite the limitation.

⁸ Active engagement across social media and streaming platforms

Data Collection Methods

Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative data was collected from multiple social media, streaming, and administrative platforms to capture audience size, reach and engagement.

Specific metrics were obtained from the following sources:

Table 3

Quantitative Metrics Collected

Platform	Metrics	Collection Source	Purpose
Spotify	Monthly listeners, total streams, followers, saves, playlist adds	Spotify Artist Dashboard	Track audience size and reach
YouTube	Total views, watch time, subscribers, click-through rate	YouTube Studio	Track audience size, reach, and engagement
Instagram	Followers, reach, interactions	Instagram Professional Dashboard	Track audience size, reach, and engagement
TikTok	Followers, total video views, profile visits, shares	TikTok Studio	Track audience size, reach, and engagement
Squarespace	Visits, bounce rate, unique visitors, page views	Squarespace Analytics	Track audience size, reach, and engagement
MailChimp	Sends, open rate, click rate, clicks per unique opens, unsubscribed rate	MailChimp Analytics	Track audience size, reach, and engagement
set.bio	Total visits, unique visits, total clicks	set.bio Analytics	Track audience size, reach, and engagement

Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data was collected to provide context and insight into each band's internal strategies, decision-making, and audience engagement practices as well as to evaluate insights and management strategies

Table 4

Qualitative Data Collected

Method	Purpose
Semi-structured interviews and Likert Scale feedback about goals, strategy, and reflections on growth	To explore participants' strategic intentions, decision-making processes, and subjective evaluations of growth, allowing for in-depth insight into how qualitative artist perspectives and quantitative metrics informed management strategies.
Observations of management meetings and promotional activities recorded via field notes.	To document real-time strategic decision-making and implementation processes, enabling triangulation between stated intentions (interviews) and observed behaviors.
Analysis of internal communications, including emails, planning documents, shared calendars, and direct messaging exchanges related to strategic decision-making.	To examine how strategic decisions were discussed, negotiated, and refined, providing insight into collaborative decision-making processes and the integration of quantitative findings with qualitative artist input.

Procedures

Quantitative Data

Baseline metrics were recorded prior to management strategy implementation. Streaming performance data, social media engagement metrics and advertising performance indicators were recorded. Data was then collected again at the end of the study period three months later. All data was collected directly from platform analytics dashboards, from streaming analytics platforms and social media business tools. Metrics were recorded in a centralized spreadsheet to allow for comparison over time. Streaming metrics were collected at the start of the study period (November 26th) whereas baseline social media platform data was collected as net values from the three months preceding the study period so as to ensure equal comparison and account for analytical dashboard limitations.

Qualitative Data

Qualitative data was collected to capture strategic intent, artist insight and perceived effectiveness of management strategy application. Data collection occurred concurrently with quantitative tracking to allow for integration and triangulation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at key stages of the study including pre-strategy planning and post-implementation

reflection. Interviews followed a guiding framework focused on goals, branding, audience perception, and perceived growth while allowing flexibility for emergent themes. Observations of management meetings and promotional activities were documented through structured field-notes, capturing key discussion points, strategic reasoning and implementation processes. Internal communications were reviewed where relevant. All materials were organized thematically and coded to identify recurring patterns related to strategy formation, implementation and perceived outcomes.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data

Quantitative data was analyzed using a longitudinal comparative approach, measuring the same variables over time. Baseline metrics were first established, and additional data points were collected at the conclusion of the study period to assess growth trends and campaign-specific performance. Patterns were analyzed descriptively rather than inferentially, as the focus was on a bounded case context rather than statistical generalization.

Qualitative Data

Qualitative data was analyzed using a thematic analytical approach. Observational field notes, Likert scale survey responses, open-ended interview questions and internal communications were reviewed to identify recurring themes related to participant strategic intent, branding alignment, perceived growth and the decision-making process overall. Themes were refined through comparison across data sources to ensure internal consistency. Triangulation was employed by comparing participant reflections with observed behaviors and documented internal communications to strengthen credibility. Rather than treating qualitative

data as anecdotal support, analysis identified patterns in how artist insight interacted with quantitative metrics to shape management strategies.

Coding was conducted, grouped into the following broader thematic categories:

- Internal organization
- Authentic alignment
- Optimization of networks

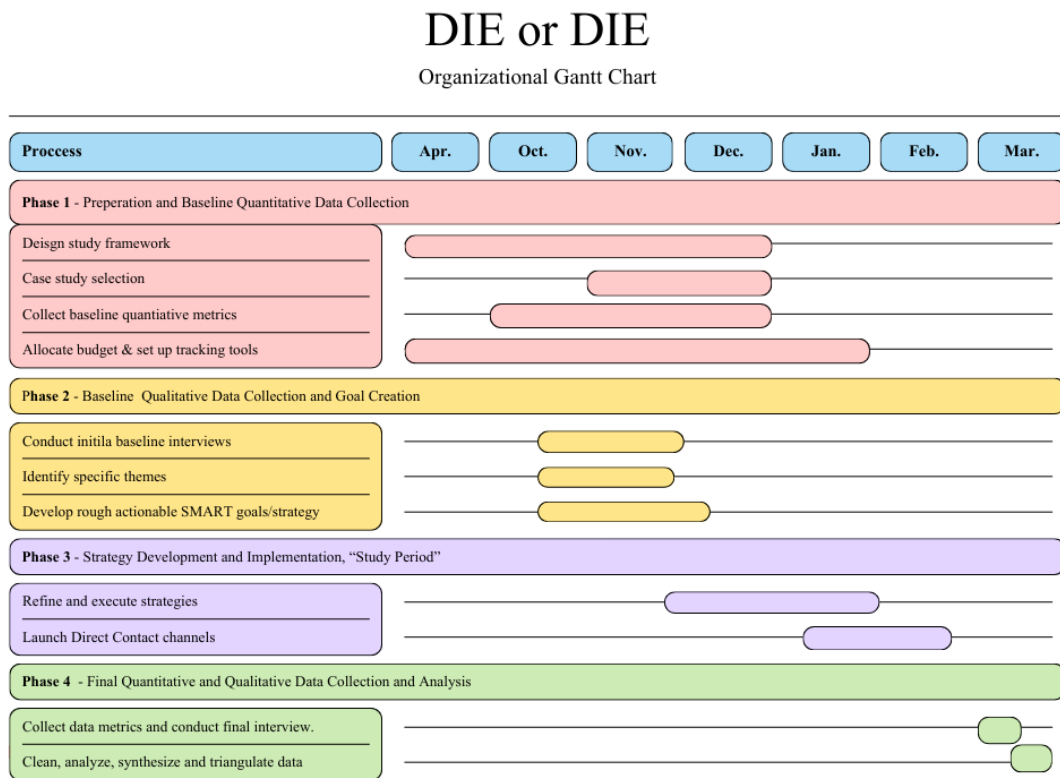
Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Following the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, findings were integrated through a convergent mixed-methods approach. Quantitative trends were examined alongside qualitative themes to assess alignment between measurable growth and participant perception of efficacy. This integrative process allowed for examination of how quantitative metrics and qualitative artist insight collectively influenced strategic effectiveness.

GANTT CHART

Figure 1

Gantt Chart



RISKS

Due to the short duration of this study, data collection and strategy implementation occurred over a relatively brief period, which may have not capture long-term trends, sustained growth, or delayed effects of management strategies. The small sample size, chosen to allow in-depth engagement with each artist, limits the generalizability of findings and may not reflect the experiences of all emerging artists or managers and should be interpreted as a guide rather than definitive advice. Participant interviews and feedback rely on self-reporting, which introduces potential bias; artists may have overstated or understated progress, engagement, or adherence to strategies, affecting the reliability of qualitative insights. External factors such as genre, location, and existing audience may also influence outcomes and limit applicability to other contexts. Despite these limitations, the study's methodology provides a practical framework for testing and refining artist management strategies, offering insights into how independent artists and their teams can apply targeted hybridized strategies to foster growth.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research principles concerning informed consent, data protection, and researcher reflexivity. Given the applied and practice-based nature of the study, particular attention was paid to transparency in dual roles and power dynamics.

- All participants were informed of the purpose of the research, the nature of their involvement, and how their data would be used within the study. All data was voluntarily shared and informed consent was obtained prior to any collection.
- All anonymity has been maintained in accordance with participant requests. Given the public-facing nature of streaming and social media metrics, publicly available

quantitative data was used responsibly and reported in aggregate form where necessary to avoid unintentional reputational harm.

- All data was stored on a password-protected laptop and backed up on an encrypted storage system. Archived materials were retained solely for academic analysis purposes.
- As the researcher also held a managerial role within the case study context, potential bias and power dynamics were acknowledged. The researcher's dual position may have influenced both data collection and participant responses. To mitigate this, the study employed structured data collection procedures, triangulation across multiple qualitative sources, systemic quantitative tracking and reflexive documentation of decision-making processes. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to critically examine how the researcher's involvement may have shaped interpretation. All management services were contractually offered to participants at no cost by the researcher for the entirety of the study period.

OUTCOMES

This chapter presents the outcomes of the study’s strategic applications, comparing baseline and final metrics for each performance indicator. Quantitative metrics are supplemented with qualitative insights from interviews and observations to provide a comprehensive understanding of effectiveness in strategy development.

Overview of Implemented Strategies

A core tension in contemporary artist management and associated research is the mono-faceted reliance on algorithmic platforms for discovery and fan engagement. While the platforms offer reach, the artists do not “own” the relationship. Visibility on algorithmic platforms is highly mediated and any change in algorithm or posting cadence has the potential to collapse any growth.⁹

In Phase 3, the researcher developed and executed SMART¹⁰ strategies that aligned with the overarching guiding themes intentionally identified by the baseline initial qualitative objectives outlined in Phase 2. All strategies were implemented without the use of paid tools or resources and utilized zero ad spend:

Table 5

Strategy & SMART Goals

Theme	Strategy	SMART Strategy (Timebound by the end of Phase 3)
Internal Organization	Communication Infrastructure	Implement a free centralized platform (Notion) for schedules, tasks and documents.
	Booking System	Build a shared booking tracker (Notion) that logs all venue inquiries, confirmed dates, and follow ups, reducing missed opportunities.
	Financial System	Establish a shared expense and income log (Notion) updated after every transaction

⁹ As seen later with TikTok’s negative decline

¹⁰ Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timebound

Authentic Alignment	“Brand Bible” or branding guide	Co-create a brand bible document that defines the band’s visual identity, tone of voice, and core values.
	Promotion of passion projects	Identify passion projects and build them into central content and narrative.
	Intentional posting ¹¹	Implement a content calendar with a minimum of 3 planned posts a week
	Removal of unaligned posts	Conduct a full social media audit across all band profiles, identify posts that conflict with brand identity and archive or remove unaligned content.
	Unifying profiles	Ensure all band social profiles share consistent bios, profile images, and links.
Networking	Network database	Build a contact database in Notion with all industry contacts including name, role, platform, and lead strength.
	Link-in bio tool	Set up a free link-in-bio page (set.bio) that consolidates streaming, social, booking, and mailing list links, updating as needed.
	Targeted relationship building	Initiate personalized outreach to at least 10 contacts from the network database.
	Established a mailing list	Launch a free mailing list (MailChimp) and send at least 1 newsletter.
	Launch of a website	Publish a band website with bio, EPK, tour dates, and mailing list sign-ups.

Quantitative Outcomes

Spotify

The 412% jump in saves-to-stream ratio is a standout metric on Spotify; this data point can be interpreted as a strong indicator that listeners who did find the participant’s music actively saved the music – indicating a strong intent to return. Because there were no new releases or streaming campaigns within the period of study, the stream and listener decline is best read as a function of reduced promotional surface area rather than audience disengagement. Follower growth of 9.9% further supports the interpretation that the core audience remained intact and continued to grow organically despite there being no new activity and a less frequent posting schedule.

¹¹ Posting frequency was dramatically reduced.

Table 6*Spotify Outcomes*

Metric	Baseline	Final	% Change
Monthly Listeners	3,757	2,221	-40.9%
Total Streams	24,658	187	-99.2%
Followers	487	535	+9.9%
Saves	7	28	+300.0%
Playlist Adds	9	5	-44.4%
Saves to Streams	2.92	14.97	+412.7%

YouTube

YouTube had the clearest growth from the social media datasets, and its significance was amplified by the reduced posting context. Views nearly quadrupled and watch time more than doubled despite less content being published. This disassociation between output volume and performance suggests the content itself – not posting frequency – was driving results. The improvement in click rate (22.9%) points to the stronger content-market fit. YouTube stands out as a platform where the participant’s creative work is compounded independently of frequent posting and paid promotional ads.

Table 7*YouTube Outcomes*

Metric	Baseline	Final	% Change
Total Views	1,237	4,916	+297.4%
Watch Time (hrs.)	23.1	53.0	+129.7%
Subscribers (period)	101	7	-93.1%
Click-Through Rate (%)	3.44%	4.23%	+22.9%

Instagram

Despite drops in reach and follower growth rate, the engagement rate on Instagram held at 6.3% – well above the 1-3% industry benchmark (Zote, 2025). This rate was maintained with significantly fewer posts, signifying that each individual piece of content performed at not only

an equal but at a higher level. This is a strong indicator of audience quality over quantity, indicating that existing followers were genuinely engaged with the content. Profile visits held at a steady rate (+0.4%), further reinforcing that interest in the participant persisted independently of posting volume.

Table 8

Instagram Outcomes

Metric	Baseline	Final	% Change
Followers	121	96	-20.7%
Reach	10,959	7,409	-32.4%
Interactions	690	464	-32.8%
Engagement Rate (%)	6.3%	6.3%	0.0%
Profile Visits	930	934	+0.4%

TikTok

TikTok showed the steepest decline, but the presented figures must be interpreted considering significantly reduced posting activity during the study period. TikTok’s algorithm is uniquely volume-sensitive (Hootsuite, 2025), meaning that its algorithm relies on a steady feed of new content to surface accounts for discovery. Fewer posts mean drastically less algorithmic surface area, making volume-metric declines expected rather than alarming. The baseline figure of 63,000 views may also reflect a prior viral or campaign-driven spike. Taken together, the data reflects reduced input, rather than audience disengagement.

Table 9

TikTok Outcomes

Metrics	Baseline	Final	% Change
Followers (period)	347	9	-97.4%
Total Video Views	63,000	13,000	-79.4%
Profile Visits	869	258	-70.3%
Shares	65	15	-76.9%

Direct-Contact Channels

Simultaneously, three direct-contact channels were launched within the study period: a set.bio link-in-bio tool (January 22nd), a MailChimp email list (January 29th), and a low-cost Squarespace website¹² (February 3rd). All three platforms were launched during the final four to six weeks of the study period, with these figures representing early-stage establishment rather than mature performance. Because these accounts did not exist prior to the study period, there is no baseline to compare against; therefore every metric represents new growth from zero.

The most significant signal is directional; management strategies simultaneously built owned and direct-contact channels (email list, website, link-in-bio tool) while algorithmically reliant social platform activity was reduced. This reflects a strategic orientation towards audience ownership, prioritizing channels where the artist controls the relationship over platforms dependent on algorithmic mediation. The 0% unsubscribe rate and the 16.67% clicks-per-unique-open rate from the mailing list are the most actionable metrics, indicating genuine interest in the participants' owned content and the potential for long-term audience retention and engagement over time.

Table 10

Emerging Platform Metrics

Platform	Metric	Value	Context
set.bio	Total visits	163	Account launched 1/22/26 (~ 5 weeks of data) 85% unique visits, low return rate typical of early-stage link pages.
	Unique visits	139	
	Total clicks	10	
MailChimp	Sends	60	Account launched 1/29/26 (~ 4 weeks of data).
	Open rate (%)	10.17%	
	Click rate (%)	1.69%	

¹² Less than \$20 a month

	Clicks per unique opens (%)	16.67%	Below ~20-25% music industry average but expected for a new list. Strong engagement amount by openers, high retention signal
	Unsubscribed rate (%)	0%	
Squarespace	Visits	83	Website launched 2/3/26 (~ 4 weeks of data). High bounce rate but expected for new site with no SEO or returning visitors.
	Bounce rate	91.14%	
	Unique visitors	74	
	Page views	92	

Qualitative Outcomes

Perceived Effectiveness of Strategies

Prior to the assessment of effectiveness of implemented strategies, participants were invited to define their definition of success within the context of the study. Establishing the participants' own evaluative framework was a necessary pre-condition for meaningful outcome assessments, especially as this study centrally argues that management effectiveness cannot be fully determined by external metric alone.

During Phase 2 data collection, participants defined an effective strategy as one that had “alignment with life, happiness, mental health, force and presence,” a definition that was primarily creative and personal in orientation, prioritizing artist satisfaction and authenticity over measurable metric outputs. By Phase 4, the participants' definition shifted notably. Strategies were considered “effective” when they were consistent, straightforward and clearly outlined.

This represents a movement from a broadly defined strategic framework to a more operational one. This suggests that engagement and involvement with the management systems and strategies over the course of the study period shaped how participants understood, actualized and evaluated the effectiveness of strategies.

The shift in definition, rather than being an atypical deviation, emphasized a more developed understanding of how structural clarity created by management strategy could enable creative alignment. When management systems and strategies are optimized, the organizational and cognitive burden for the artists was reduced, allowing more bandwidth for creative and personal goals to become more attainable. All in all, the definitions are complementary rather than contradictory, serving as a foundation that operational effectiveness can allow the creative alignment initially described within Phase 2.

Data as a Decision-Making Tool

Participants were not presented with final platform metrics during Phase 4; rather they were asked to reflect on the conceptual relationship of quantitative data within the management process more broadly rather than with specific outcomes. Participants acknowledged that data should play a meaningful role in informing strategy development and was a useful tool in receiving feedback on their online presence. To the artists, data functions as an active input rather than a passive record and shapes how and when strategies should be implemented. Notably, participants were clear that data should only represent a subset of information that informs management strategies. They described performance metrics primarily as a tool for understanding how they present online and as a feedback mechanism. To them, data is useful for reading an audience's response and refining output, not determining creative direction. This positions data as a supporting instrument rather than that of a governing one. This framing is meaningful for informing artist management practices, suggesting that the most productive use of data is not to prescribe strategy, but rather supplementing and refining it.

Balancing Data and Insight

Phase 4 findings revealed that the relationship between data and artistic instinct was more about mutual clarification than tension between competing forces. Prior to the study, participants had adopted trend-driven content strategies not necessarily out of creative interest but out of perceived obligation to conform to platform norms and industry expectations. These approaches generated a heightened sense of busyness without producing consistent meaningful returns. Performance metrics on the content failed to yield a suitable return on investment, both metrically and creatively confirming what participants had intuitively already sensed. To them, trend-chasing was neither creatively fulfilling nor strategically effective. Rather than data overriding artistic instinct, the data validated it – providing an evidence-based rationale for discontinuing approaches that had already felt misaligned. Participants expressed a sense of relief at no longer feeling compelled to produce content that did not reflect their creative identity. This finding carries significant implications for artist management practices, not as a creative-decision directive but rather as a tool to protect artists from external expectations and wasted investment. When metrics confirm that authenticity and effectiveness are not in conflict the artist has more bandwidth to invest their energy in work that is both personally meaningful and strategically impactful.

Integrated Analysis

The quantitative and qualitative datasets produced during this study do not solely complement each other; rather, they explore the multi-faceted approach critical to successful strategic management. Together they suggest that strategic intention and creative authenticity, rather than output volume and platform conformity was the primary driver of meaningful outcomes during the study period.

A deliberate decision was made to redirect creative energy towards Instagram and YouTube, prioritizing intentional, less frequent posting over the high volume, trend-driven approach on TikTok that had previously characterized the participant's content creation. The quantitative outcomes validated this reallocation. YouTube saw the strongest growth signal of any platform with views increasing by 297% and watch time more than doubling. Instagram's engagement held at 6.3% – well above industry benchmarks (Zote, 2025) – with fewer posts generating equivalent or stronger individual performance.

All outcomes were achieved with zero advertising spend. No paid promotion, boosted posts, or platform advertising were deployed at any point during the study period. This eliminates paid reach as a contributing variable, meaning that every growth signal is attributable entirely to strategic decisions and content quality. These signals are not incidental, reflecting a direct correlation between creative investment and audience response.

YouTube's growth was not only quantitatively driven but also driven by the artist participant's direct visual identity and enjoyment in producing the content hosted on the platform. This alignment between creative satisfaction and platform performance is one of the study's most significant integrated findings. It challenges a widely held assumption that is prevalent in most platform-driven discourse – that consistent output and algorithmic conformity are the primary drivers of growth. In this case, authenticity and intentionality produced stronger – qualitative and quantitative – returns than volume.

The TikTok decline, when viewed in isolation, might appear to undermine the study's outcomes. Contextualized within the integrated dataset, it reinforces them. The calculated withdrawals from TikTok were a strategic decision rooted in both ethical concerns of its recent acquisition by US conglomerates and a creative reorientation towards more intentional content.

When metrics fell on a platform where input is deliberately reduced, the results were expected rather than a cause for alarm.

The creation of direct-contact channels adds a further integrative layer in hybridized strategy approaches. The simultaneous launch of a link-in-bio tool, mailing list, and website during a period of reduced social media activity reflects a strategic orientation of increased intentional connection with the artist's audiences. The early retention signals from MailChimp, particularly the 0% unsubscribe rate and 16.67% click-per-unique-open rate, suggests such connection was reciprocal to audiences. Owned channels, although early stage, point towards a model of quality relationships that are less mediated, more personable, and more durable than those found on algorithmic platforms.

Across all findings, the integrated picture is consistent: the strategies that performed best quantitatively were the ones the participants felt most aligned qualitatively. This convergence suggests that in career strategy, effectiveness and authenticity are not competing priorities, moreover, when well-designed and informed by the artist's insight, they reinforce each other.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine deceptively simple questions: how do artists and their management teams develop strategies that are effective? Does it matter how strategies are developed? The overarching consensus found within this study indicated that strategies informed by hybridized management are the more fulfilling – both metrically and creatively. The study finds that metrics alone are insufficient developmental tools and that artist-defined success should be the primary guiding metric.

Answering the Research Questions

The primary research question asked how integrated quantitative metrics and qualitative artist insight shape the effectiveness of artist management strategies in the contemporary music landscape. The evidence produced by this study suggests that neither data nor intuition alone is sufficient in producing meaningful results. Metrics provide measurable feedback on audience response and strategic direction, but without the context of the artist's values, creative identity, and personal goals, they risk driving decisions that are statistically logical but creatively misaligned. While quantitative data is a useful tool, it is only a piece of a larger dataset compounded from artist instinct and vision. Both artist instinct and vision, while essential, do benefit from the evidential grounding that data provides and vice versa, with the most effective strategies produced during this study emerging as the intersection of both.

The secondary research questions further clarify this claim. The strongest measurable impacts were found with the redirection of creative energy toward intentional, less frequent content (particularly on YouTube and Instagram). This re-prioritization and realignment yielded the study's most significant growth signals, with YouTube views and watch time growing exponentially while Instagram's engagement rate held steady at the same spend – well above the

1–3% industry benchmark, despite a reduction in posting volume and zero ad spend. These stipulations therefore reinforce that strategic intentionality and content quality outperformed volume and algorithmic conformity.

Strategies that the artist considered the most useful, were ones that reduced cognitive and organizational burden. The implementation of Notion as a centralized project management hub, the establishment of a shared booking and financial tracker, and the co-creation of a brand bible were identified as the structural strategies most directly experienced as useful. These free tools created the organizational clarity that participants described as allowing them more bandwidth for creative and personal priorities, a finding that underscores the relationship between operational effectiveness and creative freedom.

Where effectiveness converged and diverged most clearly was in the evaluation of TikTok. Quantitatively, TikTok showed the steepest decline across all metrics. Qualitatively, participants expressed the least alignment with the platform's content demands and harbored ethical concerns regarding its recent acquisition. Rather than representing a failure of strategy, the TikTok outcome represents a convergence: when artists feel creatively and ethically misaligned with a platform, reduced investment in it is both personally justified and, when contextualized within the broader dataset, strategically sound.

The Case for DIY, Free-Tool Management

The study was not only practical but transferable, utilizing free, publicly available tools to create systems, databases, communication channels, content calendars, and analytical frameworks. Notion replaced expensive project management software. MailChimp provided professional-grade email marketing at no cost. set.bio consolidated the band's digital presence without subscription fees. Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Spotify all offered native analytics

dashboards that, when used with intention, provide an actionable intelligence comparable to paid third-party platforms. The sole financial investment was the band's \$20 a month Squarespace website, which was a deliberate choice.

The barriers to effective artist management are not solely primarily financial, but also informational, organizational, and strategic. This study demonstrates that motivated, informed, and reflexive management strategy can be developed without institutional resources, label infrastructure, or significant financial investment. DIY does not mean low quality execution, rather it means deliberate, resourceful developments on the artists' own terms.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is bounded by its scope. The three-month timeframe, while sufficient to establish baseline trends and implement strategic frameworks, did not capture long-term outcomes or the compounding effects of sustained strategy. The reduction to a single primary case following the disbandment of Deficit Space limits the generalizability of findings, though the depth of analysis possible within a single case provided compensatory explanatory value. Additionally, the dual role of researcher and manager introduced potential bias, which was mitigated through triangulation, structured data collection, and reflexive documentation, but cannot be considered fully eliminated.

Future research would benefit from longitudinal applications of this framework across multiple artists and genres, larger and more diverse participant pools, and comparative studies between metric-only, intuition-only, and integrated approaches to strategy. The role of ethical considerations including platform trust, data sovereignty, and the ethics of algorithmic dependency also warrants further attention, particularly as artists increasingly reckon with the

political and commercial dimensions of the platforms on which their visibility depends. The researcher plans to continue the study following publication.

A Final Note

The music industry has always been an industry where access and power are unevenly distributed and has developed into an overarching oligopoly. Major label infrastructure has historically determined which voices are amplified and those which are not. The digital era has not resolved this inequity, but rather, opened doors that did not previously exist. This study is a testament that artists do not require a label key to be successful.

This study began with a conviction that effective artist management does not require institutional validation, expensive tools, or algorithmic conformity, and ended with an evidence-supported conjecture that it does not. With intentionality, organization, a mixed-methods approach, freely available platforms, and an unwavering commitment to the artist's values, it is possible to build a platform – what's more— a sustainable music career, by being authentic and true to their artistic vision. While the work is not as glamorous as shredding guitar on stage, it is, as described earlier, the soundcheck. Essential, often unseen, and yet, worth the investment.

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