

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

**National College of Ireland**

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## AI Acknowledgement Supplement

### Capstone Project

Your Name/Student Number	Course	Date
Ashraf Mmanga/22531353	BAHBMD3	31/05/2025

### AI Acknowledgment

Tool Name	Brief Description	Link to tool
ChatGPT	I used ChatGPT to assist me with topics to write on	<a href="https://chatgpt.com/">https://chatgpt.com/</a>

### Description of AI Usage

ChatGPT	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I used it to get literature review topics that I could write about.</li> <li>2. I wanted to have a list of research questions to see what type of question I should be asking.</li> <li>3. I needed to ask questions for my interviews, so I asked it to give me questions.</li> </ol>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What 3 topics would be interesting to cover for the literature review on why artists go independent in music from a business perspective</li> <li>2. Based on my topic give me a list of research questions</li> <li>3. I'm doing interviews can you give me 12 questions to ask and base it off of my themes that I've done</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ownership and Revenue Control            Why it's relevant: A major business reason artists go independent is to retain ownership of their master recordings, publishing rights, and royalty streams. In traditional deals, labels often take a significant cut — sometimes the majority — of an artist's earnings and control distribution rights.             What to explore: How ownership allows for full monetisation of one's catalogue (e.g. sync deals, royalties, resale), and how this influences artist decision-making.             Direct-to-Fan Engagement and Personal Branding             Why it's relevant: With social media, artists can bypass label intermediaries and engage fans directly. This reduces         </li> </ol>

reliance on traditional promotion and allows for more control over branding, release strategies, and audience interaction.

What to explore: How direct relationships with fans allow for better conversion (e.g. merchandise sales, crowdfunding), and create sustainable career models through loyalty over scale.

### Entrepreneurial Autonomy and Long-Term Career Sustainability

Why it's relevant: Independence enables artists to operate like entrepreneurs: managing their brand, financials, release strategies, and team. Many value this flexibility even if it requires more work.

What to explore: How being independent allows for longevity, brand-building, and strategic freedom that labels may restrict, and the skills required to make it viable.

## 2. Primary Research Question (Overarching)

Why are contemporary music artists choosing to pursue independent careers from a business perspective, and how do they sustain themselves in the current digital music economy?

Secondary / Supporting Research Questions (You can use 3–5)

What role does ownership of music rights (e.g. masters, publishing) play in an artist's decision to remain independent?

How do independent artists monetise their work without the backing of major labels, and what revenue strategies are most effective?

In what ways does direct-to-fan engagement support brand-building and career sustainability for independent musicians?

How do independent artists use digital platforms (e.g. social media, streaming services) to promote and distribute their music?

What are the key challenges independent artists face in managing their careers, and how do they overcome them?

To what extent does the entrepreneurial identity of independent artists influence their creative and financial decisions?

How has the shift to online business models changed the traditional definition of success for musicians?

### 3. Theme 1: Personal Motivation and Background

Biographical Question:

Can you tell me a bit about your journey in the music industry and what motivated you to pursue a career as an independent artist?

Motivation for Independence:

What were the key factors that influenced your decision to go independent rather than signing or staying with a record label?

Perception of Autonomy:

How has being independent impacted your ability to control your creative direction and business decisions?

### Theme 2: Financial Considerations

Ownership and Royalties:

How important was the ownership of your music and royalties in your decision to go independent?

Investment and Funding:

As an independent artist, how do you manage funding for production, marketing, and distribution of your music?

### Theme 3: Industry Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges in the Independent Route:

What have been the biggest business challenges you've faced since going independent?

Opportunities and Growth:

Do you feel the rise of digital platforms has created more opportunities for independent artists to succeed financially? Why or why not?

Competing with Major Labels:

The way the industry structure is now do you think independent artists are given a fair chance to compete with labels in terms of income, support and visibility?

Theme 4: Marketing, Promotion, and Fan Engagement

Marketing Strategies:

What marketing strategies have you found most effective in growing your audience as an independent artist?

Social Media and Direct-to-Fan Models:

How has direct-to-fan engagement through platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or Patreon impacted your business model?

Branding and Personal Identity:

How important is personal branding in your approach to sustaining your career as an independent artist?

Theme 5: Future Aspirations and Reflections

Future Plans and Reflections: Looking back, would you recommend other artists go independent? Why or why not, and what advice would you give based on your experience

### **Abstract**

This dissertation examines the growing trend of artists starting to become independent or why they remain independent than going to a record label from a business perspective. Digital platforms have disrupted the traditional music industry models and artist development models; many artists are seeking to get out of their contracts and pursue more autonomous career paths. The research explores the motivations, challenges and strategies independent artists use in a digital age where you have to have an entrepreneurial approach.

The research question asks about the business motivations behind artists shift to independence in the music industry. This study shows all aspects of independency whether it is the pros and cons of it, it also addresses the business rationale behind an independent artists journey.

A qualitative approach was used, using a semi-structured interviews of 5 participants actively involved in an independent space. A thematic analysis had revealed 5 key themes: artistic autonomy, financial sustainability, marketing and branding, industry challenges and future aspirations. Findings had indicated that being independent allowed the artist to retain their masters, control their revenue and build fan relationships but it had caused pressure on the artists as they have to manage every aspect of their careers.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my lecturer, Robert MacDonald, along with friends and classmates who contributed and helped me with this dissertation. A special thanks, also, to all the participants who were involved in the study and gave up their spare time to have an interview with me.

## Glossary

**D2F** – Direct-to-Fan

**UCPS** – User Centric Payment System

**NFT** – Non-Fungible Token

**DAO** – Decentralised Autonomous Organisations

**IP** – Intellectual Property

**DIY** – Do it Yourself

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## **1.0. Introduction**

Independent artists have been on the rise throughout the years bypassing going the traditional label route. We know this as **(Houghton, 2020)** states that the income increased from 1.7% in 2015 to 4.1% (\$873 million) in 2019, \$2.15 billion got dispersed to artists who are independent and not in a record label contract. With stats that display that being independent has grown along with the income this is good to artists and myself because I'm an independent artist and I would advocate for artists to go through this path rather seeking record labels. The research will explore why this is the case by examining business strategies, technological advancements and also the intersection of artistic control. The rise of streaming platforms and social media caused a shift which challenged the music industry because it made new opportunities and risks for artists. The streaming platforms allowed artists to monetise through a distribution without a label and with social media it allowed artists to engage with their fans and creatively do promotion tactics leading them to gain an audience. I see social media as a tool, and I use it for promotion as you can reach big on a global scale, and you don't know who is listening. The study positions itself with the growing discourse on the digital transformation of music and focusing on the business rationale behind being independent.

This dissertation is organised into 6 main chapters, each addressing the key components of the research process:

### **Chapter 1 – Introduction:**

The introduction highlights the increasing trend of artists becoming independent and wanting to stay independent. It provides the background, rationale, the significance of the study and it outlines the core research question and objectives.

### **Chapter 2 – Literature Review:**

The literature review evaluates the existing academic and industry research surrounding D2F engagement, online business models and modern music entrepreneurship. It identifies knowledge gaps and provides the theoretical basis for the study.

### **Chapter 3 – Research Methodology:**

The methodology shows the research design, including the philosophical approach, sampling criteria, data collection instrument and the method of analysis. It considers the limitations and ethical considerations of the study.

### **Chapter 4 – Data Analysis and Findings:**

The findings from the interviews are presented thematically in relation to the themes: motivation, finance, marketing, industry challenges and future aspirations. Key quotes and insights from the participants are analysed and contextualised and I give my opinion also.

## **Chapter 5 – Discussion:**

The discussion interprets the research findings in relation to the reviewed literature, identifying patterns and discrepancies. It evaluates the significance of the findings, discusses implications and acknowledges limitations.

## **Chapter 6 – Conclusion:**

The conclusion summarises the key findings and how they address the research question. It reinforces the study's contribution to the field, offers recommendations and reflects on the future of independent artistry from a business perspective.

## **Background:**

The research will investigate the business motivations that drive artists to go independent, focusing on business strategies that are in place to enable successful careers. The topic is significant as it explores how things like digital tools and entrepreneurial approaches can disrupt the traditional way the music industry structures in place and also create new opportunities for artistic autonomy. Independent artists who seek this knowledge can grasp and obtain a good career by utilising the tools. With the study there will be a contribution to understanding the dynamics, particularly as to why the industry grapples with digitalisation.

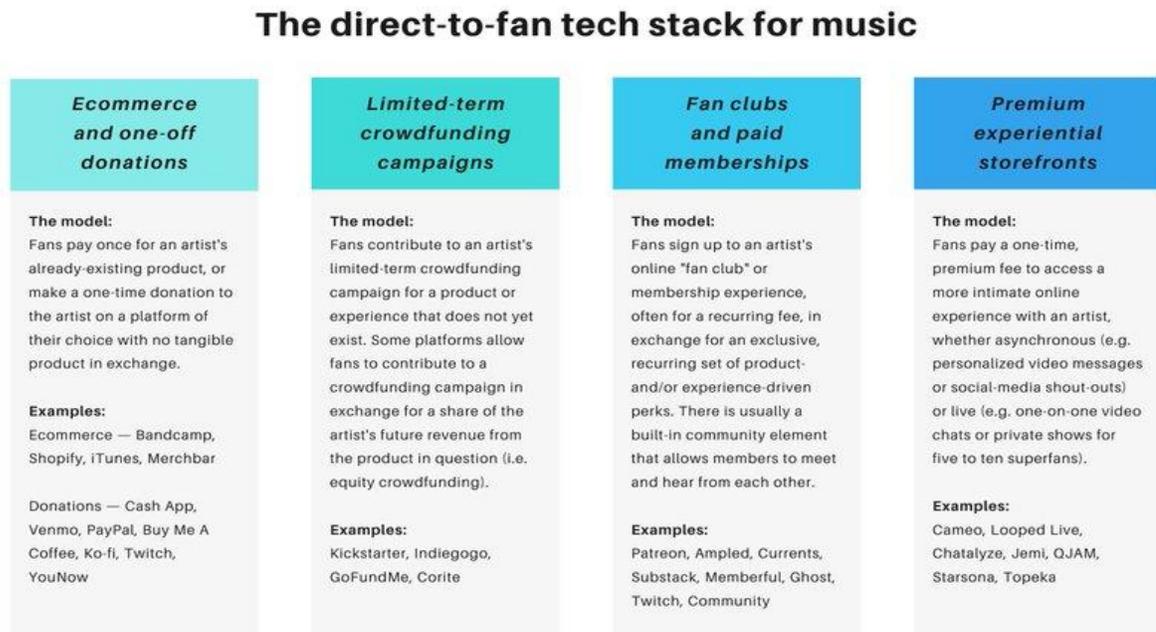
## **Rationale:**

With the music industry undergoing rapid decentralisation but the independent artists face challenges such as scalability, algorithmic bias on platforms and having the need to have comprehensive business skills. Once these challenges are addressed it allows artists to understand how to achieve a sustainable successful career while navigating these challenges. The challenges they navigate with is financial instability, lack of institutional resources, limited access to promotional infrastructure and a toll on having to self-manage. Once these barriers are acknowledged whether through alternative revenue models, strategic brand building or community support it allows artists to construct a sustainable and successful career. Sustainability here is not just a financial thing it also refers to a holistic model of creativity and longevity. If you want to be a successful independent artist you must possess a blend of business acumen, digital literacy and be authentic so you thrive. The research becomes a focal point by unpacking this intersection: how and why artists pursue being independent, what business strategies they could pick up and how they define what success is on their own terms. Focusing on these challenges will help independent artists to lay out a foundation, plan so they could execute and implement a successful strategy once it takes off.

## **2.0. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Direct-to-Fan Engagement**

**Figure 1 The direct-to-fan tech stack for music (Cherie Hu, 2020)**



The direct-to-fan (D2F) engagement is a good transformative business model in the music industry that independent artists can opt to do, it enables them to foster a direct relationship with their fans and generate a sustainable income. The traditional route would involve record labels and artists depending on them to manage how they would engage with their fans through mass marketing campaigns and radio promotions. The rise of social media which is a digital tool allowed a shift to occur because you have platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Ko-Fi, Tiktok, Patreon and Bandcamp which have allowed independent artists to interact directly with their fans and these platforms empowered artists to be able to do this creating interactivity and intimacy, which significantly can enhance fan loyalty and financial support. I've seen this approach as I use it myself and looking through analytics you can see an organic growth rather than getting marketed through a label. However, while D2F provides all the advantages it comes with challenges such as sustainability, scalability, and reliance for digital platforms. This section will highlight the benefits, limitations and long-term viability regarding the music industry.

## **2.2. The Promise of Direct-to-Fan Engagement**

Proponents regarding D2F engagement stated that it empowers artists enabling them to control their creative output, branding and revenue streams (Baym, 2018). As an artist all of this is important and plays a vital role as its your art, you don't want someone else dictating how it should be done to what you want done. I would argue that no one knows your creativity outlook regarding how a song should be made. Patreon, Bandcamp and Substack allowed artists to monetise fan engagement through a subscription-based content, crowdfunding and exclusive

releases. It is known that D2F allows artists to retain a high percentage of earnings while if it was a traditional record deal it would have restrictions and profit-sharing models (**Passman, 2023**).

Benefits come with D2F regarding the financial side, crowdfunding is where artists can raise money from their audience donating to them. An example of an artist that done this Amanda Palmer on the platform Kickstarter she managed to raise \$1.2 million in 2012, this is a demonstration of what an artist can do with bypassing the traditional industry gatekeepers once they obtain a hardcore fanbase (**Baym, 2018**). As we know with the social media with Bandcamp artists can set their own revenue and it allows them to receive an average of 82% of each sale that is made, contrasts towards the streaming industry with a platform like Spotify where it pays its artists as little as \$0.003 – \$0.005 per stream (**Eriksson et al. 2019**). Spotify is low in terms of paying its artists and in 2024 they made a new policy to where you need to obtain 1000 streams to receive your royalties. Artists like myself I would argue that this is bad because when you have songs that don't generate 1000 streams in can be an issue so that's why I would agree artists should opt to do the likes of Bandcamp so you can get paid for what your art is worth (**Murray, 2023**).

Unlike just having fans streaming your music through Spotify and Apple Music, D2F allows a whole process behind the scenes where fans get to participate in an artist's creative process, gaining the behind-the-scenes of what the artist does, exclusive songs and having a more direct communication to the artist. With this type of engagement, you get fans that are loyal and have a sense of feeling that they're a part of a community, which can lead to a more stable long-term support compared to the nature of the streaming royalties (**Morris, 2020**). Instagram have a feature where you can make a channel with fans to join which I've made for my fans, and you get to interact with them they get to give feedback on everything you do so I would agree this helps you build that relationship with the fans.

### **2.3. Challenges and Limitations of D2F Engagement**

Even though D2F is good there is still limitations surrounding it. One of the major concerns would be the scalability of the model. Established artists have it easier to generate a good revenue stream through these D2F channels while emerging artists will struggle to attract people to come and support them making this model a bit tricky for them to do. As an emerging artist myself I can see problems with this as I face this problem myself, but it is a long-term game as I've to do everything myself with my team. Unlike the record labels, which provide things like the distribution, financial backing and marketing they have the budget to do all of this and excel at it but D2F independent artists must know that these things take time to grow, requires effort and resources (**Tschmuck, 2017**).

From what I seen and heard to tackle scalability as an independent artist it involves a lot of things such as heavy engagement on social media, developing a consistent visual aesthetic, collaborating with people whether small or big and being authentic. I've used these methods, and I have seen change as for example the engagement with social media I done polls, lives and

answered questions from fans the more you engage the more you get put into the algorithms is what I noticed. Having a good visual aesthetic plays a major role too as you can tell stories through videos and music videos are actually used as promotion for a song so if you can have a good videographer on your team it can go a long way, I have found a good videographer that I do videos with and I always get good feedback on the videos we shoot because its telling a story in the video and I feel like people enjoy a good music video. Collaborating with people can also scale you up as you're engaging with both audiences and it's a benefit to both parties as you can gain from each other. I generally like to collaborate with people within my realm of music, I done a collaboration with someone from LA and I got good reception as we done a co-release and collaborated on Instagram where both are audiences can see the post and I gained from it by receiving followers and people listening to me and so did he. Lastly being authentic can help a lot I would agree with because you can relate to people and they can see that so I always just try be myself and never try fake an image I feel like it'll backfire in the long run in you building up as an artist and it can taint your image.

Another issue would be platform dependence. D2F engagement is known for allowing independent artists to thrive off on but the reality also is that artists remain dependent on digital platforms like your Spotify, which continues to take a cut from their earnings and operate under shifting policies. As much as I advocate for independency artists like me must gain an audience by depending on Spotify knowing that the pay is not as good but can help you get discovered while the likes of Patreon and Bandcamp is hard to scale up. In this instance I would claim that independent artists do both but once discovered enough they can scale a lot more effectively on D2F platforms. For example, Patreon do charge its creators a 12% in fees, and when they done the change, they got backlash among independent artists (**Lobato, 2021**). Also, Bandcamp got acquired by Epic Games in 2022 which raises up concerns about potential changes that might occur to how the revenue model is. An argument that can be made is that the reliance towards the third-party platforms contradicts the narrative of complete artistic independence and it would underscore the precarious nature of D2F models (**Eriksson, et al., 2019**).

#### **2.4. Conclusion: Future of D2F Engagement**

D2F engagement has represented a significant change in the music industry, offering independent artists control over their art and the revenue streams from it. D2F has its challenges and issues associated with it such as scalability, platform dependence, and the audience discoverability all these need to be critically assessed. D2F engagement is highly effective for artists that are established while emerging artists like me that have no record label backing it can be difficult to gather financial sustainability.

#### **2.5. Merging Online Business Models with Modern Music Creation and Distribution**

Online business practices have converged with music creation and distribution which has fundamentally altered the industry's landscape. Social media, Web3 models, digital streaming platforms and e-commerce tools have allowed artists to merge their artistic creation in

conjunction with entrepreneurial practices, this bypasses the traditional gatekeepers like record labels (Tschmuck, 2021). (Wikiström, 2020) had discussed that Spotify and Apple Music allowed independent artists to get their music accessed worldwide as previously it was inaccessible for independent artists to do this. With these platforms the revenue they do payout is very low and I would argue that it benefits more mainstream major artists than it does smaller artists leaving them at a financial disadvantage.

## **2.6. The Rise of Digital Platforms and the Transformation of Distribution**

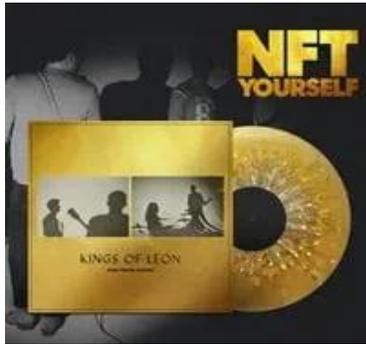
Streaming services have become dominant in the past few years of distribution with platforms like Spotify, Apple Music and YouTube, replacing the traditional retail and downloads people had to do. Streaming services did change the industry by allowing people to get discovered but I would argue that replacing the traditional way of selling music was better because on a financial scale you receive more money than the streaming services and also you physically have a copy of an artist's art which can create long-term value. One thing you can argue is that the streaming services allow you to scale globally without the need for a record label and be visible to people while traditionally you couldn't.

With streaming the revenue model gets debated all the time, particularly the pro-rata payment system, which would distribute royalties depending on total streams rather than individual contributions (Mulligan, 2021). The model likes to benefit big artists and major record labels while with independent artists it doesn't really benefit them (Eriksson et al., 2019). Studies have shown that there is an alternative model, such as a user-centric payment system (UCPS), this system could offer a fair compensation to independent artists, the system works by directing the subscription fees to the artists each user listens to. This is a good system for both big and independent artists, but streaming platforms have resisted adopting UCPS, largely because of corporate partnerships and record label agreements that reinforce existing power structures. I agree with having the system in place as it can help small independent artists get better revenue from streaming services but an artist like me the way I tackle this would be reverting to the traditional way of selling physical copies and introducing vinyls, this helps out a lot of independent artists as they can make these things limited and also make the fan have something of value. It allows you to set your own prices on physical copies and vinyls therefore the revenue can be large.

## **2.7. Web3, NFTs and the Decentralised Future of Music**

The emergence of blockchain-based music distribution models, include non-fungible tokens (NFTs) and decentralised autonomous organisations (DAOs), has been indicated as a potential revolution for artist monetisation and creative ownership. Web3 technologies are trying to eliminate the corporate intermediaries by allowing artists to sell their music via tokens, exclusive content, and digital ownership stakes (Passman, 2023).

I think NFTs are a good thing for independent artists to access because they can provide new revenue streams beyond streaming, enabling them to monetise exclusivity. The first people to do an NFT for music related was Kings of Leon it was released in 2021, and it exemplified how blockchain technology can be leveraged to offer a tier access to music, digital collectibles, concert tickets which could all generate a lot in revenue within days. Another artist that went independent and used NFTs for an album release was Tory Lanez, he decided to release an album via NFT breaking a record of selling 1 million copies in less than a minute. This shows the importance of how independent artists should outlook towards and using these digital platforms that can hold your art and make it have value.



**Figure 2 Kings of Leon When You See Yourself NFT (YellowHeartFactories, 2021).**



**Figure 3 Tory Lanez When It's Dark NFT (Tory Lanez, 2021).**

## **2.8. Conclusion: Merging Online Business Models with Modern Music Creation and Distribution**

With online business models and modern music creation it has created both opportunities and challenges for independent artists and industry stakeholders. Since digital platforms came into play it facilitated better accessibility and new monetisation models for independent artists. Web3 remains volatile and experimental.

The sustainability of online music business models would depend on policy reforms and fairer revenue distribution. Independent artists and me should continue to advocate for fair compensation models.

## 2.9. Modern Artists as Entrepreneurs

The transformation that happened in the music industry refine the role of artists, turning them into entrepreneurs that must have a balance between the business strategy and the creative output. Going independent has challenges associated with it as it's not easy. I've been independent my whole music career and I've faced ups and downs by being independent, you must get a team around you to help you and do everything hands on and expect failure. The new technologies have offered autonomy, it requires the artists to take on entrepreneurial roles, including marketing, financial management, and audience engagement (**Tschmuck, 2017**). The section will examine the choice of going independent from a business perspective, assessing revenue control and scalability of independent models compared to traditional industry structures.

## 3.0. Financial Autonomy and Revenue Control

A reason why artists go independent is to retain full control over their earnings. Traditionally with the label deals they included high recoupment costs, where the label would invest a huge amount of money into the artists career, but they want to recoup their investment, so this leads to artists not seeing any money until they recoup their expenses back, artists that tend to fall into this category are normally trapped in a deal they can't get out of. I see this and I wouldn't want any parts to it due to the label basically owning me and I don't have full control on things (**Hesmondhalgh, 2022**). These major labels contracts are normally offering royalty rates from 10-20%.

Like what was discussed in the D2F section independent artist monetise through that model so they can receive a higher % of revenue. Bandcamp is good for allowing artists to keep their sales as they allow artists to keep up to 85%, compared to Spotify where it's so low per stream (**Krikorian & Kapczynski, 2017**).

Financial sustainability is still a challenge for independent artists. Artists must invest their own funds into marketing, production, merchandise, videography and tour costs, which would all be traditionally covered by a record label. All of this is a big costly price as you want to achieve a good standard for your work, you could also do all of this by yourself by learning it slowly which I am starting to do which eliminates a lot cost wise so you can save money in the long run and dump it all into 1 section.

## 3.1. Entrepreneurial Marketing and Branding Strategies

Another factor behind being independent is the ability to control personal branding and marketing strategies. Traditional labels impose branding restrictions, dictating the artists image, sound, and promotional approach to maximise commercial appeal. I would not like to have this imposed on me as I admire having full control on everything rather than being told how to navigate that's why I respect independency so much because you have full control over your brand and how you engage with your fans (**Hull et al., 2019**).

Social media has been an instrument for independent artists as it helps them market themselves without traditional gatekeepers. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and

YouTube have allowed the potential of reaching millions of people organic engagement and viral content (**Baym, 2018**). Lil Nas X went viral on TikTok having a strategy, this demonstrates how independent artists can use digital tools to bypass traditional industry barriers (**Morris, 2020**).

These models require digital labour meaning that artists must constantly produce social media content, engage with fans and monitor analytics to remain in the platform's algorithms. Algorithmic control with platforms like Spotify and Instagram means that visibility is not entirely in the hands of artists (**Marshall, 2019**).

### **3.2. Creative Freedom and Ownership of Intellectual Property**

Creative control is a major reason as to why artists choose to go independent. Labels normally enforce creative constraints, demanding the artist to make commercial music so it aligns with market trends (**Hesmondhalgh, 2022**). Independent artists like me can retain full artistic ownership, allowing me to explore with unique sounds and niche markets I can tap into.

Another advantage of being independent is owning intellectual property (IP). Once an artist is signed to a label, they often have to surrender master recording rights, meaning the label earns money from streams, licensing and sync deals (**Hull et al., 2019**). Independent artist who own their masters maintain full rights to their music, allowing them to generate income from TV, film and commercial licensing (**Tschmuck, 2017**).

Independent artists take on the responsibility of having to manage and protect their IP. Things like negotiating handling licenses, publishing deals, and legal protections, which is traditionally all managed by labels and managers (**Krikorian & Kapczynski, 2017**). I have to negotiate all of this and study the industry on how deals work and what's the best. I had a time where I was doing a gig for a venue, I went through promoters, they made a contract, and I looked at it at home. Things like that can happen you shouldn't sign straight away you should read or get a lawyer to help navigate the deal.

### **3.3. Conclusion: The Business Case for Artist Independence**

Looking from a business perspective, being independent offers better financial control, creative freedom and branding autonomy. D2F platforms provide alternative income outside of the traditional label model (**Tschmuck, 2017**). However, being independent comes with its challenges, including financial risk and increased administrative responsibilities.

The success of being independent depends on an artist's entrepreneurial skills, digital strategy and ability to adapt to evolving market dynamics (**Passman, 2023**).

Ultimately, the viability of independence depends on an artist's entrepreneurial skills, digital strategy, and ability to adapt to evolving market dynamics (**Passman, 2023**).

### **3.4. Research Question**

I've refined my research question to business motivations behind artists shift to independence in the music industry. The music industry is evolving as artists have been trying to pursue to become independent straying away from the traditional route. The research explores the business motivations and addresses the question of why artists go independent in music on a business perspective.

The literature review had influence in helping me frame my question. My literature review highlighted several factors as to why artists go down the independent path including myself. **Eiriz and Leite (2017)** discussed that the digital distribution has changed the business models of independent artists, enabling them to manage their careers more autonomously. In my opinion, the digital distribution side of music I feel like it has impacted independent artists in a way of collecting royalties from your music, the streaming side is low like I've discussed and discovered myself and I believe that it'll never be more than an individual selling copies of their own music. That's why I do both, so I get the best of both, and you don't trap yourself to 1 income from receiving royalties.

Also, entrepreneurship has become more prominent as independent artists have taken control of their branding, marketing and distribution. **(Walzer 2017)** shows the technology, individuality and creative entrepreneurship influencing the industry emphasising a role of personal agency in career management. Essentially being independent means you're an entrepreneur too as you must do everything yourself. I don't mind it because I learn a lot and I can transfer to something else. I would argue and tell other independent artists if you can get things done by yourself go for it as if you take on management you must share a % with them, yes it means you have more work to do for yourself but if you can do the same work they can do I'd say there's no need to.

### 3.5. Sub-Questions and Research Objectives

To fully understand the research question, you can dissect it into sub-questions.

1. How does the distribution platforms influence an artist with the decision to go independent
2. On a financial thought with things like revenue distribution and profitability how these influence the artist to go independent
3. How does D2F contribute to wanting to pursue being independent
4. What role does creativity play in wanting to become an independent artist

These sub-questions aim to answer the question as to the business motivations behind the artist decision to go independent.

### 3.6. Research Questions

The objectives of the research are:

- To see the impact digital distribution platforms have on artists career choices **(Peltz)**
- Explore the role of D2F in supporting independent artists careers
- Evaluate the significance of creative autonomy for independent artists to remain independent

- Assess the financial factors, things such as revenue models and profitability which influence independence (**Murphy 2020**)

### 3.7. Methodology

### 3.8. Research Philosophy

The research that I'm doing adopts an interpretivist paradigm, it aims to understand a subjective experience of independent artists navigating the music industry from a business perspective. Interpretivism likes to explore a social constructed reality, allowing a nuanced analysis of why artists go independent in music and the impact of business models on their career (**Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019**).

Another approach would be phenomenological as it focuses on lived experiences of independent artists. Phenomenology likes to explore how an individual would perceive and interpret their realities, making it relevant as to studying artists motivations and challenges in the music industry (**Creswell & Poth, 2018**). It aligns with the objective of the study of capturing the decision-making processes behind independence and examines whether business sustainability, artistic freedom and financial incentives drive this choice.

Ethnographic research is another approach and as I'm doing this whole research on independent artists, I can give my own experiences and challenges I face. Ethnography can help contextualise D2F engagement, online distribution and entrepreneurial strategies as these are a factor for independent (**Hesmondhalgh, 2021**).

### 3.9. Qualitative Approach

A qualitative approach is much better for the research than a quantitative approach. Quantitative approach would be considered as collecting numerical data and use of formal methods, such as questions that are structured with predetermined responses (**Bryman & Bell, 2015; Hair, Wolfinbarger, Ortinau & Bush, 2010**). A Qualitative approach isn't really big on numerical data.

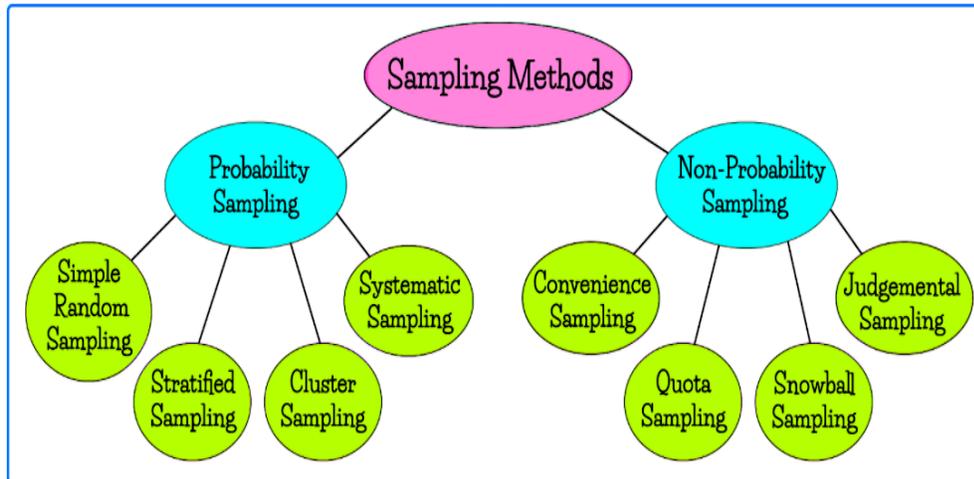
### 4.0. Research Sample

For my sample group the study focuses on independent artists who follow these criteria's I would like them to have:

- Have experience in distributing your music, marketing and revenue generation outside of traditional label structures.
- Have engaged with their audiences through social media or streaming platforms.
- Actively working as an independent artist for a minimum of 1-2 years.
- Provide different perspectives based on the genre of music you're in, in terms of business approaches that can be used.

The sample is going to be 5 interviews of 4 independent artists and 1 manager who manages an independent artist. I know all the participants so I would approach them by asking them.

The sample has a diversity as each participant will have a good insight as to where each artist is independently. The diversity will have a comprehensive examination of business strategies through how each artist tackled this.



**Figure 4 Classification of Sampling Methods (StudyPug, n.d.)**

#### 4.1. Research Instrument

The primary research instrument is semi-structured interviews, allowing a combination of both open-ended and predefined questions. By doing this it allows the key business themes to be discussed giving the participants the freedom to talk comprehensively on their own unique experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

The way the interview was guided was through the literature review as the themes were based off of that and the objectives off of the research design. There are five themes involved, and the questions revolves around these themes:

1. **Personal Motivation and Background:** This theme would aim to understand each of the artists background, values and personal reasons as to why they wanted to go the independent route and not go with a label. It will enable them to set a context for the entire interview process and also be able to narrate their journey.

Question 1: “Can you tell me a bit about your journey in the music industry and what motivated you to pursue a career as an independent artist?” This first question is a biographical question as it allows the artist to give a quick background of themselves.

Question 2: “What were the key factors that influenced your decision to go independent rather than signing or staying with a record label?” I will want the artist to explain as to why they wanted to go independent and not sign to a label, so it’ll explain the motivation behind their decision.

Question 3: “How has being independent impacted your ability to control your creative direction and business decisions? As I’m independent I know that you can control how you want to do things creatively and how you want to conduct business so I would want these artists outlook on it also.

2. **Financial Considerations:** This will explain the financial side as to what motivates them to choose independent and also show the consequences to involved. It will explore income models, investment strategies, and the importance of ownership.

Question 4: “How important was the ownership of your music and royalties in your decision to go independent?” This will explain the importance of ownership and also being able to own 100% of your royalties as being independent, I know the value of these things they mean a lot to an artist.

Question 5: “As an independent artist, how do you manage funding for production, marketing, and distribution of your music?” Dealing with costs as being independent is costly, I will want to hear how they tackle these issues as I've said I've spent thousands without a major return yet.

3. **Industry Challenges and Opportunities:** This will assess all the barriers in place and enablers that shape independent artists careers. It will also show the complexities of working outside the traditional label system.

Question 6: “What have been the biggest business challenges you’ve faced since going independent? The challenges I’ve faced were things such as not having the same funding, support and networks a label would have so you face difficult challenges along the way, this question can help me see what the artist faced, and we could help each other.

Question 7: “Do you feel the rise of digital platforms has created more opportunities for independent artists to succeed financially? Why or why not? I’m asking this because I would agree that it has but also disagree in the area of distribution of music, I think it killed it and made independent profits lower, so I want to discuss that with the artist.

Question 8: “The way the industry structure is now do you think independent artists are given a fair chance to compete with labels in terms of income, support and visibility?” As social media changed the game it's easier to be visible to a lot of people meaning you can gain more support and income, so I would like to know how these artists feel about it.

4. **Marketing, Promotion, and Fan Engagement:** Being independent you have to essentially be a brand and be able to interact with your audience, this theme will delve into the strategies being involved of what artists use to reach and retain an audience.

Question 9: “What marketing strategies have you found most effective in growing your audience as an independent artist?” I’ve used a couple of marketing strategies to try grow my audience, I think this important as marketing is a forever thing you have to learn and adapt to, and I would like to hear how these artists have marketed themselves.

Question 10: “How has direct-to-fan engagement through platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or Patreon impacted your business model?” I think the more you engage with your audience it boosts you into the algorithm, I’ve seen this by doing it myself it boosts your reach, and more people tap into your page, this question would want the artist to explain their way.

Question 11: “How important is personal branding in your approach to sustaining your career as an independent artist?” I think personal branding is really important it makes you relate to the people and if you can brand yourself well people can see that and would like you, I want some tips on it myself and looking to hear their opinions on it also.

5. **Future Aspirations and Reflections:** This is a closing theme as it will let the artists reflect on their journey, share their insights and could offer more guidance to other artists who want to become independent.

Question 12: “Looking back, would you recommend other artists go independent? Why or why not, and what advice would you give based on your experience?” This final question will allow the artists to say whether or not they would tell someone to go independent.

## 4.2. Data Analysis Method

For this study, the data will be used through a method called thematic analysis. It is widely used for analysing, identifying and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative work (**Braun & Clarke, 2006**). Using thematic analysis will allow me to interpret the personal accounts of the artist from the interview, using reoccurring concepts and then matching them with the business and cultural landscape of the music industry.

There are six steps involved with Braun and Clarke will guide the analysis:

1. **Familiarisation with the data:** By familiarising myself with the data the way I will do this will be by taking notes and immersing in the transcripts through repeated readings and listening to it. Also, since I’m an independent artist myself I am familiar with the topics as I have to deal with them myself and try figure out an answer to these questions constantly. These observations will serve for a deeper analytical work.
2. **Generating initial codes:** Throughout what will be said I will be looking out for systematically coding interesting features across the data that is relevant to the research question. These codes could represent business decisions (e.g., “changed to Bandcamp to earn more revenue”), or recurring themes (e.g. “Financial autonomy”, “audience loyalty”).
3. **Searching for themes:** As I already have my questions into themes it will enable me to gather relevant information about the data.
4. **Reviewing themes:** If I need to refine the themes it will be to make sure it reflects both individual data and the overall data. This will include checking the coherence of data with each theme and making sure they match.
5. **Defining and naming themes:** Outlining each of the themes in relation to the research question being asked.

6. **Producing the report:** After all this is done, I can gather a narrative insight and have an answer to the research question of “why artists go independent in music on a business perspective”.

### 4.3. Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical research standards National College of Ireland has in their ethical guidelines. Prior to conducting fieldwork, an ethics form was submitted. All the participants were provided with an information sheet and signed consent forms before taking part in the research. They were informed of the voluntary nature of the study, their right to want to decline participation at any time and the procedures in place to keep their confidentiality and anonymity. No identifiable information was linked to the participants in any way.

The interviews were conducted in a respectful and non-coercive manner, with efforts made to minimise any potential discomfort. Due to the nature of the topic focused on artists careers, motivations and challenges there was a minimal risk of harm to participants. All the data is stored on a password protected device. Audio recordings were only used for transcription and analysis, with the access being restricted to the researcher only. All these ethical safeguards in place ensured that the research was conducted responsibly, respectfully and in alignment with the academic practice.

### 4.4. Limitations

The methodology is designed to capture an in-depth perspective; it is not without limitations. The sample sized being used is 5 participants which is small, which could possibly raise concerns about generalisability. The aim for this qualitative research though is not to generalise statistically, but it will provide rich, contextual information that you can understand in broad terms (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Another limitation involved could be potential bias because I'm an independent artist myself and I have direct connections to these topics; there is a risk of confirmation bias. Hearing what aligns with expectations and downplaying contradictory insights. To make sure that I don't have a bias I'm being transparent with the documentation and also seeing both sides with pros and cons.

Finally, with thematic analysis, it is good, but you can say that it can be inherently subjective because there is no algorithm or formula to determine what themes are most relevant. That responsibility lies with me the researcher to identify evidence-based interpretive choices. Transparency in reporting, reflective journaling and letting the participants see the themes so they can give feedback on it.

### 4.5. Analysis & Findings

#### Introduction:

The importance of this section is the findings from the primary research that was obtained. There were 5 interviews, and they were all semi-structured. Raw data such as quotes from the interviews will be included. There will be a box below showcasing the themes with their objectives.

<b>Theme</b>	Motivation
<b>Theme</b>	Finance
<b>Theme</b>	Marketing
<b>Theme</b>	Challenges
<b>Theme</b>	Future Aspirations and Reflections

**Table 1: Interview Themes**

#### **4.6. Motivation**

A theme that kept reoccurring was the desire to obtain greater autonomy and creative freedom. The participants highlighted how signing to a label could mean compromising their artistic vision, brand and creative control. Independent for them was key as they agreed that it allowed them to have control over their music, image and business decisions.

(Walzer, 2021) is that he views that “independent music production is driven by a desire for artistic individuality, supported by accessible technology and entrepreneurial values”.

#### **Interviewee 1:**

“Record labels seize you, right, okay. We’re going to sign you, we’re going to give you X amount of money but what will happen is we want you to produce songs of such and such quality where you or us write it and if we don’t like it you’ll do it over and over again”.

This shows how a record label can operate where you don’t have creative control, in terms of you making songs and it doesn’t appeal to them, so they conform you to make other songs just do it fits to their criteria. This puts a creative block on artists and can be a heavy burden for them. I agree with what was said as I see it more than just an artistic thing it's also a conflict of vision and ownership. I believe true independence allows you to do everything at your own control without having to conform to anyone.

#### **Interviewee 2:**

“Some of the key factors like I said are freedom of expression, when I say freedom of expression I mean being able to write about what I want and releasing when I want and not having to ask for approval.”

Like I've discussed already this is a common thing as artists want to be able to have creative control and release when they want to, when you put a constraint on them it can make them not enjoy their passion. This I agree with too as freedom of expression is a crucial component of being an independent artist, as you can express yourself how you like and also with the releasing

of your music you can do it whenever you like. I've had days when I recorded a song and released it that same day or week not having to abide by a timeline.

### **Interviewee 3:**

“I believe music should have art and creativity as its focal point rather than business, business is designed .... its foundation itself is a constraint while art is free. So, if you have the constraint as the overall core then that means the foundation is going to have to be the constraint, if you have freedom as the foundation and the constraint is business it's just a little part of it then it only boxes a small part of it leaving the rest free”.

Creativity and art are key it's the whole being of an artist identity you can say and boxing it away creates problems for them. I do agree with this that if you solely focus on the business side of being an independent artist you might lose touch of the artistic side, but I also agree with that you do need to be knowledgeable too in the business side if you want to have a successful career.

### **Interviewee 4:**

“Having the ability to choose whether they want to do something goes a long way, these are decisions being made by them and not some head of director”.

Shows that independence is a source of empowerment, contrasting the experience of autonomous decision-making with labels. I strongly believe this as having the ability to define your own vision and how that autonomy can build a stronger brand in the long run.

### **Interviewee 5:**

“When you're independent you do everything yourself, that includes the creative control but that does also include your image shaping, your marketing, how you're going to present a project or yourself as an artist etc. So, I think it is important to have control over that aspect as well not just the creative control but the control all of creations and presenting yourself”.

This underscores that creative autonomy is more than just songwriting. It involves things like visual identity, branding and how an artist is perceived publicly. I resonated with what was said as I think sometimes it's not always the art, your image and branding is key too and how you show the world who you are and having the control over this is big as you get to be authentic.

## **4.7. Finance**

As we know how much creative control is for being independent, financial autonomy is equally important. The participants highlighted control over revenue, revenue retention and also how they were managing to do the marketing, distribution and production for their music.

Unlike the label model, where artists receive an advance that have to be recouped through future earnings, often with minimal long-term royalties, independent artists will earn less per project but have the ability to retain a much larger share of their revenue.

(Milam, 2019) highlights that if you're independent you must develop financial literacy to thrive, as they are responsible for budgeting, investing in marketing and planning tours.

### **Interviewee 1:**

“One of my friends in the industry, let's say he drops a song today and it blows up, now he's made music well before he has a few tapes here and there along with collaborations, now imagine he didn't own any of his master's.... But that one song blows up now all the rest of the songs blow up generating streams and you won't get paid for it while owning is very important”.

This highlights the long-term consequences of not owning one's masters. The participant explains how your catalogue revenue is important. I believe this to be very important as myself owning all my master's, it just takes one song to blow up and the rest follow like a chain reaction. Now imagine if I had sold my master's to a label, they recoup all the money towards them forever whereas if I own it, it comes to me forever.

### **Interviewee 2:**

“Ownership is everything it is very key; a lot of artists will end up getting tricked out of very good positions in the rap game because they don't have the knowledge of the importance of owning their master's and intellectual property”.

It underscores the educational gap many artists face when entering the industry of not knowing the knowledge of ownership as they can get in a disadvantageous contract or position, they may face. Like I said previously ownership is key and not having the knowledge and just selling it away I feel like is a mistake and I would say my music is priceless no price can make me sell my master's.

### **Interviewee 3:**

“Every track takes a piece of you, it's an embodiment of your character and for you to give that away for financial gain is like giving a piece of yourself away, you want to have some sort of ownership to the piece you created for the world”.

This participant stated a moral and emotional perspective on ownership. There's a sense of personal value in retaining rights and your music as an identity. Yeah, I resonate with this as you are pouring a piece of your life into art form and to just say yeah, I'm going to sell it away permanently for financial gain is a mistake.

### **Interviewee 4:**

“If you want to go further in terms of like sync placements, getting your music on radio and performing at live shows or different venues you don't have to worry about getting certain stuff cleared and making sure you're allowed to perform because sometimes there is contracts in place and you might not be able to perform that song that you want to perform while having that ownership you avoid a lot of constraints”.

This participant stated the operational side of ownership stating that you might not be able to do commercial things without having ownership. It's like what I mentioned with owning your things if you want to do these things having ownership is better.

#### **Interviewee 5:**

“The royalties is what makes it legacy and investment, it takes investment to get your own stuff out there independently, when you take venture capital and the capital is not your own you have to pay people back .... when you have all the royalties you can invest in a project or a single and the royalties stay with you infinitely and you control the masters”.

The participant stated the long-term as stamping a legacy in ownership. It shows that you should think long-term and the future value of ownership. This is completely true because I always tie it back to life with anything you do business related there are risks involved, investments you may have to do or even if you take capital you'll pay it back so it's the same with being independent and your royalties being the investment paying you back in the future passively.

#### **4.8. Marketing**

Independent artists take full responsibility for promoting themselves and growing an audience. This will include things like building personal brands, engaging with followers on social media and looking at your analytics to improve your reach.

Rise of social media has shifted power towards artists. **(Stewart, 2018)** has argued that for artist-fan engagement model, independent artists rely on authentic connection and visibility rather than mainstream advertising.

#### **Interviewee 1:**

“I believe it is a social media aspect as well as the platforms, you see TikTok taking over as long as your content is on TikTok and there is accessible means to go listen to your music or even clips of yourself being out there in the open”.

This participant stated the importance of short-form content and platform accessibility. Also, stated that visibility and presence on platforms as independent artist is a non-negotiable for trying to grow. I noted that when I was uploading on social media consistently people were on my page more often.

#### **Interviewee 2:**

“I've gone out my way to create more of a bond between myself and my listeners, letting them in my personal life a bit more, I started making gym content in which I'm speaking to the microphone speaking to people..... just to build that familiarity and that personal connection to the fans”.

Highlighted the shift from promotion to personal storytelling. The participant is treating his audience as friends rather than fans which builds long-term trust and loyalty. The more you relate to your audience it'll help; I found myself thinking about doing related things to people beyond the music just to build that connection.

### **Interviewee 3:**

“Being myself is sustaining my career, if I wasn't me, I don't think the music would matter. A quote I heard that says “if you take away the character from the art does the art still impact the way it does”. So, I just sustain my career as being myself”.

This states that the role of personal identity is more of a brand asset. Rather than separating the person from the art they're being themselves within their art. 100% I agree with it as I feel like if someone took my character away from the music it wouldn't be the same or impact the same.

### **Interviewee 4:**

“The word of mouth and being at events, my job is to be a visible person and have my ears to the ground”.

Being hands on in the field is crucial for this participant as being seen at these events can increase brand credibility and also open the doors for collaborative work. Doing shows I've seen people come up to me and ask for my social media or just interact with me and every time I've done this more people know me.

### **Interviewee 5:**

“The thing I enjoyed the most was interacting with fans and engagement; I love that, and I've took that, and it would be good going forward because I think it is important to have that mentality because I don't think you'll go far as an independent artist if you treat your supporters as just customers or consumers, they're the people that try support your livelihood you're trying to create”.

This participant states that it is a community more than a paycheck. Also, recognised that fans are not passive consumers, but they're considered more like an active stakeholder in the artist's career. Yeah, I think you can't just see your audience as a paycheck because they're essentially a part of your life as you're for them.

## **4.9. Challenges**

Being independent comes with its challenges too. The participants were describing self-management and survival, highlighting that the digital age has opened doors for independent artists but also created challenges. Tools for recording, distribution and promotion are accessible easier now, so there is a volume of music entering the market.

### **Interviewee 1:**

“Things cost a lot of money, I know people rapping for 5 and 10 years, it pains me that why haven’t they seen their return yet”.

This participant noticed the financial strain and delayed returns many independent artists face. They also noted that beside the talent of the artist, the cost of production, promotion and time invested in can go unrewarded. This is true as I’ve been rapping for 6 years now and I’m still not in the profits yet, but I don’t do it for the money.

### **Interviewee 2:**

“100% social media has definitely provided a new avenue for artists to be seen but also allowed them to find new avenues to create income”.

The participant acknowledged the dual nature of the digital economy for visibility and monetisation. Yes, social media has allowed different ways to be visible and create new income streams, I’ve looked at doing exclusive content for my audience that will hold value in the future.

### **Interviewee 3:**

“It’s never going to be fair, if you look back at what happened to TikTok I think a year or two ago, when they were trying to pressure TikTok to pay a certain amount per each track that’s used on their platform, you can see all these big music labels trying to bully the big social media platforms”.

This stated that power imbalances are still at play in the music industry. Digital platforms seem to empower independent artists, the influence of major labels in policy, revenue sharing and visibility is significant.

### **Interviewee 4:**

“Getting the notoriety of getting looked at for my artist of how do I get him out there, how do I create plays and opportunities for him”.

This showed the challenge of breaking through the noise. Independent artists lack access to industry networks, curated playlists and promotional budgets, making discovery of an artist harder.

### **Interviewee 5:**

“Absolutely, I think the rise of the digital age and streaming era is the biggest 2-edged sword of being an independent artist. I think that it is the digital age that has enabled artists to be independent much more often than in the past. Being independent artist 30 years ago was close to impossible because you can’t get the resources for distribution, marketing and promotion. Social media and the digital space is the biggest enabler for artist to be independent but it is also the biggest reason why being independent is difficult”.

The participant stated that the tools for success are available but the system to use them effectively are complex. Yes, I feel that it is a 2-edged sword in today's world as before it was difficult, but it is easier to be big now than before.

### **5.0. Future Aspiration and Reflection**

The final theme is centred on how these independent artists reflect on their journey and envision the future for their careers. The participants were asked if the independent was worth it to the point that they would recommend it to others. The reflections that they had provided an insight into the sustainability of independence.

#### **Interviewee 1:**

“I do believe artists should start out independent whether you go along the lines somewhere or not, always, always be independent first because it is good to know both sides, but you need to know how to do it yourself”.

This participant looked at it in a strategic mindset. They see being independent as a learning phase and a form of self-education that will offer you long-term knowledge and advantage. I agree just having the knowledge is important because it'll go a long way, I know information that a label would have done for me, and I wouldn't know how to do.

#### **Interviewee 2:**

“For me I've always recommended artist to stay independent but it's a nuanced thing, I'll break it down. If you have a plan of how you want to do your music, once you have a plan and you began releasing and building a discography etc... I do believe everyone should start off independent and build up some knowledge of the industry. If labels do come calling, you have to know what you want and be willing to walk away until you get what you want”.

This participant discussed on how independence builds negotiating leverage. By understanding the business side, it positions artists in a better position to evaluate contracts and partnerships. I agree because from learning the ins and outs of the industry by myself I feel like if it came down to a label approaching me, I would have certain knowledge through experience of being independent.

#### **Interviewee 3:**

“Another thing for reflecting is find ways to collaborate and if you're going to be an independent artist make sure you have the capacity”.

This participant stated on how there is an importance of planning, skills and resource management. Independence from his perspective I would say is not just creative freedom you have to collaborate with others.

#### **Interviewee 4:**

“Based off my experience I would say to people if you’re doing this because you want a quick cash grab, I would tell you go somewhere else. Don’t do this if you don’t have patience, don’t do this if you’re not willing to put the work in, don’t do this if you want some sort of notoriety or fame that’s not what this is about”.

This participant states the long-term artistry of being independent. Independence to the participant wasn’t just a get quick rich scheme, it takes hard work and dedication to succeed. Yes, I fully agree with this because if you do it for the love of money, I feel like you’ll just do everything in order to receive money whereas myself I don’t do it for the money, I do it for the art and to inspire others.

### **Interviewee 5:**

“I would say absolutely, I would advocate everyone for independency because I think what will make you successful in that is what people should be doing in life anyways, you should be authentic and stay true to yourself”.

The participant linked independency with artistic and personal authenticity. They stated that staying true to yourself and in this life makes you successful.

## **5.1. Discussion**

### **5.2. Interpretation of Findings**

I’ve established with experience firsthand and also conducting interviews that the journey of independent artists in the music industry today is complex with both opportunities and challenges. The interviews had conducted that the digital platforms have both democratised music distribution and introduced new hurdles in play.

### **Digital Platforms as Double-Edged Swords**

For exposure independent artists a long with myself we look for platforms like TikTok and Instagram and use it as a tool to gain recognition. Interviewee 1 had showed that being on these platforms is a necessity to gain exposure and visibility. However, relying on these platforms causes challenges like algorithmic visibility and content saturation. Having the pressure of having to try have a viral moment can cause artist to stray away from their artistic authenticity, a concern that was stated by **(Baym, 2018)**.

### **Authenticity and Fan Engagement**

The participants were highlighting how important it is to build genuine connections between them and the audience, by doing this you create a sense of friendship, I’ve had a similar approach as to where I’ve connected with my audience by sending messages and creating a private channel for them. Interviewee 2 stated how it is if you share personal aspects of your life to have familiarity, it aligns with **(Stewart, 2018)** model of artist-fan engagement, it showcases the value of authenticity in having a loyal fanbase. This approach also resonates with user-

generated content, where the audience is allowed to actively participate in the creation of content, creative process and enhancing their connection with the artist (**Symphonic Blog, 2025**).

### **Financial Challenges and Sustainability**

The cost of being an independent artist and sustaining a career came up a lot. Interviewee 1 had showed that there was a lack of return despite all the effort being put in. This is a big thing as till this date I haven't seen a positive return from being an independent artist, but I still release music for the passion of it. There is a finding that states 82% of global independent artists cannot afford to tour in 2025, with many relying on savings to fund their careers (**Ditto Music, 2025**). I would agree to a certain degree of this because if you don't have a buzz to your name, you have to spend money to venues to allow you to perform, whereas if you have some sort of buzz venues and festivals will hit you up and ask you to perform. The low per-stream payouts from streaming platforms also support the financial instability (**Musicade, 2024**).

### **Strategic Independence**

Nearly all of the interviewees along with myself had advocated for going independent to gain industry knowledge and control over your career. Interviewee 2 had emphasised that having a plan and being able to negotiate properly with labels from a knowledgeable point of view is good. I agree with it because not all record deals can be bad if you're knowledgeable and you have leverage you can get a good deal.

## **5.3. Implications in Relation to Existing Literature**

From looking at the findings in this study I seen that it contributes to a broader discourse on independent artistry in a few ways:

### **Reinforcement of the DIY Ethos**

In independent music circles, things like self-management and D2F engagement align with the do it yourself (DIY) ethos. Approaching it this way is to maintain creative control and authenticity.

### **Challenges of the Digital Economy**

Digital platforms offer access to audiences; they also present challenges related to monetisation's and visibility. The findings in this study echo concerns for sustainability of independent careers in the digital age, where the algorithms can have biases and there are revenue disparities which can hinder artists success (**Ferraro et al., 2021**).

### **Need for Industry Support Structures**

The interviewees highlighted the financial and logistical challenges associated with being independent and that there needs to be a support structure in place to support independent artists.

Things like access to funding, mentorship and platforms that have fair compensation, organisations like the Live Trust advocated for this while raising funds to support grassroots venues (**MusicRadar, 2025**).

#### **5.4. Conclusion**

This study has explored a multifaceted of experiences of independent artists and me navigating the music industry without a record label. Findings were highlighting the dual nature of digital platforms as both enablers of exposure and challenges involved, challenges revolving around financial sustainability and algorithmic visibility was a concern. It was expressed that being authentic was important, strategic planning and D2F engagement were key themes in the artists trying to build a career and sustaining it at the same time.

As shown independency offers a path of creative control and personal connection with audiences, it also has its challenges such as it demands resilience and adaptability associated with it. The study shows that there needs to be more industry practices and support structures for independent artists where they can gain help if needed and sustain a career in the digital age.

Future research should still be done because being independent is evolving and it could help the future of independent artist that may be on the rise.

For improving the study for future research, they should:

- Expand the sample because by doing 5 interviews you don't get an overall overview of how people would feel about being independent. Include different artists from different regions and different genres this will capture a different outlook.
- Have a longitudinal study so you can track evolving challenges and strategies over time, this would provide a more understanding of how independent careers could go.
- Look at platforms and examine the impact of digital platforms on independent artists careers, exploring how the algorithms could help benefit artists.
- Examine the policies that are in place and check the effectiveness of industry support mechanisms that are aimed at independent artists, assessing their impact on career sustainability.

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