How Authenticity Shapes Your Playlist

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In the digital era, the way we assess authenticity in music has changed.

It's an experience from a bygone era: that physical sensation of crossing the threshold of a record store. If music was "your thing", it was like being a kid in a candy store, paradoxically spurred into action by the sheer volume of music available, yet paralysed with indecision about where to begin. Under the casually judgmental eye of the shop clerk, you contemplated your options. Silently, you and the other patrons would engage in a slow-dance of (non-)avoidance in the aisles, searching for a record that reflected who you were – or wanted to be.

No one talked about how they came to acquire their taste in music. No word was mentioned about how the organisation of the musical genres in the store would map seamlessly onto socio-demographic backgrounds. In the shop, your influencers – the radio DJs and MTV VJs who had decisively shaped your musical taste – remained nameless and anonymous. Any self-respecting teenager was expected to have an innate knack for picking cool, edgy

records as if taste were written into our individual DNA instead of being formed by what was getting airtime.

This experience was part of the authentication process: What you went through to get the music, after you'd spent weeks listening to it and reading everything you could about it, contributed to your appreciation of it. It connected you, the music and the musician.

Now, yesterday's brick-and-mortar stores have been replaced with a very different experience. Following or creating a digital playlist that will soundtrack our day, we put in our earbuds as we leave home and surrender ourselves to the distracted mob of fellow music zombies also navigating their commute.

But if the tangible experience of the record store, the vinyl sleeve or the CD liner essentially no longer exists, how do we manage to connect with music in the digital era of Spotify, YouTube and Apple Music?

In search of lost aura

Authenticity, or being true to something, provides a link that informs consumers about artistic and economic value. Claims of authenticity provide perceptions of realness that help prevent music from becoming a completely disposable good; authenticity allows us to connect with the music and its creators. Since music was first recorded, its authenticity has been hard to define, yet deeply meaningful to listeners. Fans have used certain elements as factors of authenticity – where music comes from, who else listens to it and what marks other fans as part of a particular tribe, for example.

In the digital era, authenticity has taken on new meaning. No longer tied to a tangible, physical product, authenticity is more ephemeral, yet the connection between artists and their fans seems closer than ever before. In our article, **"Institutionalizing Authenticity in the Digitized World of Music"**, we examine where that new meaning comes from, how it's changing and what it means to be authentic – the linchpin underlying the institutional landscape of the music industry.

Musicians have struggled for a long time to make a name for themselves amidst listeners' limited attention spans, and they now must also compete amongst nearly frictionless access to every piece of music ever published. We have an embarrassment of riches and a dearth of scarcity. To stand out,

artists in the digital age need to find ways to harness authenticity, that is, to demonstrate their own realness and that of their music. In the past, big stars had (accurately or not) a singular, fixed identity, often as pure punk/rap/heavy metal musician; that identity accounted for their authenticity.

However, such star power is now often about being a person with whom fans can directly connect. Access via social media gives the impression of breaking down the barrier between artist and listener. "Real" artists on social media – those who seem to curate their own message – ostensibly have more influence. Yet the number of followers artists have on Instagram or other social media has less to do with their musical talent than with the fans' interest in what they post due to the popularity of the artist. **Celebrity** is suddenly a sufficient marker of authenticity, and one that is often unrelated to the music itself. Simply being more well-known often appears to be enough to demonstrate an artist's worthiness.

## The institutionalisation of authenticity

We suggest that authenticity has three varieties: archetypal, stereotypical and prototypical. Respectively, these capture people who are true to themselves and their backgrounds, those who are true to the genre or form with which they are most closely affiliated, and those who are truly original (i.e. the first of their kind).

As with many social phenomena, authenticity is less a fixed attribute than a process by which originality is established. With the advent of recording technology, music became a product instead of exclusively an experience. But this technological advance would have failed were it not for the emergence of an institutional landscape that could cater to the increased need for authenticity. Mass production required a separation of the production and consumption of music. Because the production and consumption of music no longer coincided in time and space, a process of translation and validation was required. In the absence of the producer of music (i.e. the artist), listeners could still trust that they were consuming the real thing. A century later, the process of establishing originality needs to shift once more.

In our article, we discuss five institutions within the music industry that have contributed to the designation of authenticity. They have had to adapt to the age of digital music, but they are: Production, Consumption, Classification,

Selection and Appropriation. The socially produced and verified connections between these institutions (see Figure 1) can be used to determine where attributions of authenticity may occur or break down. We briefly describe each institution below.

Figure 1: Authenticity vis-à-vis the institutional configuration of the music industry
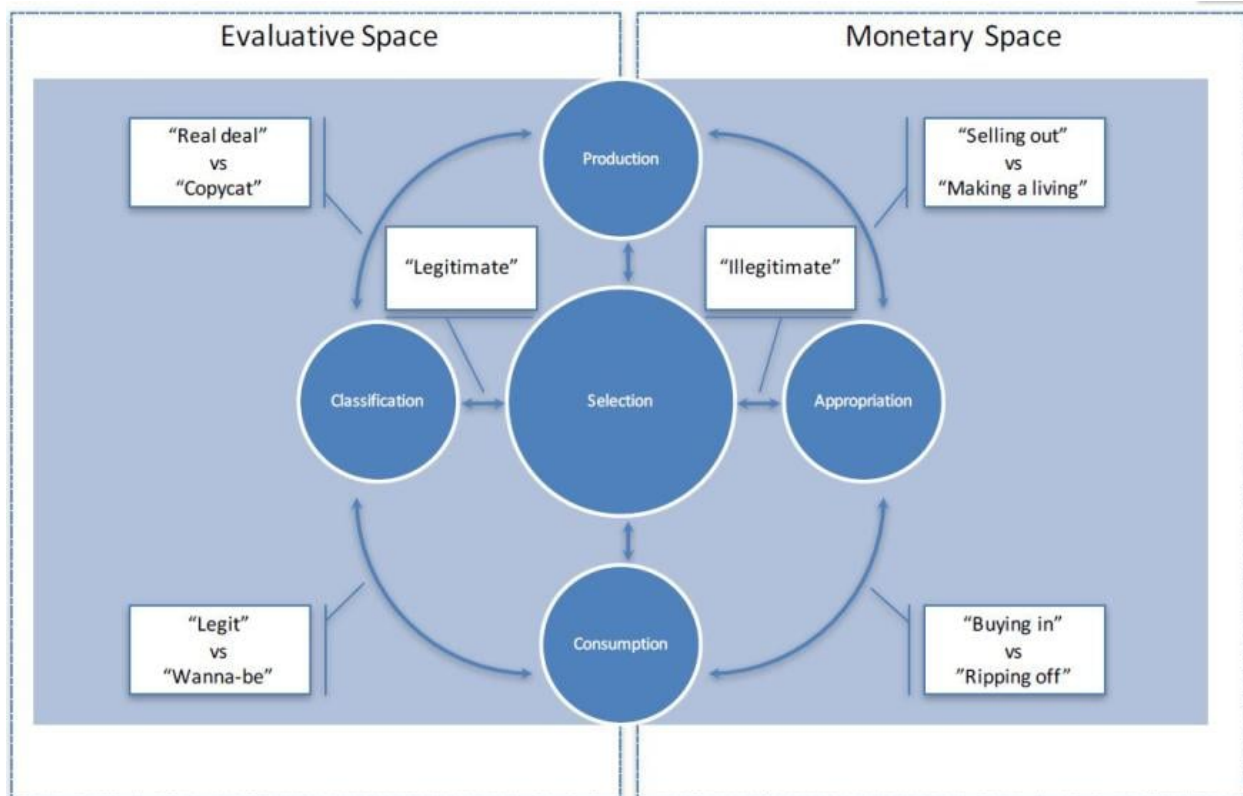
Production: The delivery medium has changed – it's now likely your smartphone or computer instead of your stereo – and the means of production have become substantially cheaper and more broadly accessible. But the product is still the song. This is the supply side of the music market and it captures the entire creation process from writing a song to the moment it's heard.

Consumption: The demand side of the music market. Digital music consumption started with an ownership model (think iTunes), replicating our old record or cassette collections. Over time, the consumption model shifted from purchasing albums to peer-to-peer sharing single songs on Napster then buying them on iTunes to browsing entire catalogues on digital

platforms like Spotify or YouTube. Each shift has pushed the role of curation further towards the consumer.

Selection: The means by which the signal is separated from the noise. Or who tells the listener what to listen to next. In the pre-digital era, radio DJs were major actors in determining how valuable a song might be. Now, although some humans (bloggers and programmers) recommend and review music, algorithmically generated playlists have become the new discovery mechanism of choice; **Music Information Retrieval (MIR)** is a machine-learning subfield of computer science that aids that discovery process as much as humans do. Data has removed the "power of serendipity" that previously accompanied an appreciation of the arts. Listeners used to turn radio dials or trust certain critics for music recommendations. Now selection is pre-packaged in a digestible, 30-song weekly playlist based on previous choices and the listening patterns of listeners with similar tastes. Exploration for its own sake is no longer necessary as we are immersed in a digitally spoon-fed culture designed to keep us happy and continually streaming.

Appropriation: Who extracts the value from the music marketplace? Since the launch of **Napster** in 1999, revenue in the music industry has not yet caught up to 1998 numbers. Where money goes in the industry is byzantine, but one example is particularly illustrative. YouTube, increasingly the most popular destination for listening to and discovering music, does pay rights owners for songs, but only for legitimate and officially identified videos. Safe harbour provisions, which make a video's uploader, not YouTube, responsible for copyright infringement, mean that users can post unofficial videos and listen to music free of charge, leaving artists empty handed.

Yet despite all the changes in the music landscape, record labels, via their catalogue ownership, still sit at the centre of monetary flows in a once-again growing industry. And although it's less overt than old-style **payola**, major labels continue to **influence** the biggest playlists so their listening counts are bumped up and their songs are on the prime playlists. Even with labels' thumbs on the scales, most artists, with a few notable exceptions, still find it difficult to make real money. Rather than signing managers first, fledgling artists sign lawyers early in their careers in order to protect their song rights.

Classification: We think of genres as institutionalised prescriptions of what artists should produce and what fans should listen to. But has giving consumers direct access to 40+ million songs killed the concept of "genre"?

Most younger listeners are more apt to choose songs based on the setting, time of day or mood than on genre. Perhaps because digital natives have had access to all music for most of their lives, belonging to one group or "scene" is no longer mandatory. With clear genres it was much easier for musicians to express authenticity; they had a fixed space within which they could play with identity. As listeners are no longer concerned about genre, the ability for a particular artist to maximise authenticity in this way is lost. But the lasting effects of genres linger on in the industry.

Having attained success in any one of these institutions does not create authenticity, but rather it is afforded by the means through which the connection between the institutions is maintained. A compelling life story does not necessarily make an artist authentic. Nor does mainstream success and popularity necessarily prohibit it.

An excellent example of a current artist who effectively connects the institutions is Adele. She writes her own songs, has a "natural" (untrained) voice, and though she sells millions of albums and does well on the charts, is considered absolutely authentic. Adele ticks the boxes in Production (not overproduced) and Classification (her work recalls music from a previous era, yet sounds contemporary), and with that connection between the two, as Figure 1 suggests, is the "real deal".

Silent disco

Authenticity in music – essential since performing and listening were first separated – has had to evolve with the disappearance of the physical product. Now that other media are being disrupted by the digital revolution and find themselves in a similar position, they need to reappraise the authenticity required. As televisions and movie theatres have shrunk to smartphone-size, the music industry can serve as a vignette of how to create "true" art in the digital age: by ensuring that perceptions of the process of creation and distribution are legitimatised by the right people across the various institutions that comprise the industry.

If there is one lesson to be gleaned from the music industry, it is, as journalist **Liz Pelly** has said**:** "[w]e live in an increasingly isolated culture, and, more and more, music listening is something that happens in solitude via headphones as opposed to collectively." As we navigate the streets and our open office spaces with headphones on, we are less exposed to the collective experience of the institutions that made the authentication of

music possible in the first place. Heads down, focused on the user interface of Spotify, we are much less exposed to the gaze of our fellow travellers. The normative pressure stemming from suggestions such as "fans also like" is much less palpably experienced than the encouraging, dismissive or curious looks we got in our record-shopping days. Yet how we can experience music authentically will remain a decisive feature of the listening experience into the industry's next era.

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