

2023

## Successful Digital Marketing Strategies of Independent Artists

Wendy Renee Hicks  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Wendy Renee Hicks

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2023

Abstract

Successful Digital Marketing Strategies of Independent Artists

by

Wendy Renee Hicks

MBA, Trinity Washington University, 2013

BS, Trident University, 2011

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

March 2023

## Abstract

A lack of effective digital marketing strategies can hinder profitability for independent artists. Artists who cannot develop digital marketing strategies are at risk of not sustaining their independent businesses. Based on the foundational principle of marketing mix as its conceptual lens, the purpose of this qualitative, exploratory multiple case study was to explore what digital marketing strategies some independent artists used to achieve and sustain profitability. The participants were nine independent artists on the east coast of the United States who published original music at a profit during the last 5 years. Data were collected from semistructured interviews. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-step interpretive analyses. Three themes emerged: primary digital marketing strategies, marketing analysis tools, and key barriers to sustaining profitability. The key recommendation is for independent music artists to implement technological advances to support the digital marketing of their music. The implication for positive social change includes the potential for independent music artists to contribute knowledge to support and encourage fellow artists to continue composing music.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

### **Background of the Problem**

The business of music and the careers of music artists once managed by major record labels shifted because of the influence of disruptive technology. The music industry experienced a decline in record sales, which prompted labels to change their business model and created a new music industry business model in which independent artists could manage their own careers (Eiriz & Leite, 2017). According to Naveed et al. (2017), artists used the internet to produce, market, and distribute their music online; however, independent artists are entrepreneurs and responsible for implementing business practices to represent themselves in the music industry. To succeed in the new music business model, independent artists needed to develop entrepreneurial strategies, specifically digital marketing strategies to achieve and sustain profitability.

### **Problem Statement**

The growth in technology changed the music industry and contributed to the disruption of traditional music business revenue streams causing musicians to become more involved with career management duties (Aguilar & Waldfogel, 2018). According to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) Midyear 2020 Music Revenue Statistics, revenue from compact discs (CD) sales declined to 2.3% of music sales of \$5.65 billion (Friedlander, 2020). The general business problem was that independent artists lacked entrepreneurial strategies to succeed in the new music business model (Tarassi, 2017). The specific business problem was that some independent artists lacked digital marketing strategies to achieve and sustain profitability.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory multiple case study was to explore what digital marketing strategies some independent artists used to achieve and sustain profitability. Independent music artists in the Washington, DC metropolitan area who published original music at a profit during the last 5 years were the population for the study. An implication for positive social change is that artists who were successful in managing their careers may have contributed knowledge and experience to help the next generation of artists.

### **Nature of the Study**

I chose the qualitative method because I wanted to examine a phenomenon (see Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). McCusker and Gunaydin (2015) stated qualitative research is characterized by the social aspects of life and methods generating words versus numbers for data analysis. To study the problem, a qualitative researcher collects data conducive to the people and places under study. The quantitative research method is used to study the aggregates of a population's characteristic and variables' relationships rather than the uniqueness of individual lives (Saunders et al., 2015; Yin, 2017). I did not choose quantitative research method because it lacked human experiences and belief. Mixed methods includes both quantitative and qualitative research methods to analyze and collect data for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of a research problem (Saunders et al., 2015). I did not choose mixed methods because I did not plan to use the quantitative method.

I considered many research designs for this study. I chose a qualitative multiple case study. Researchers use cases to answer *what*, *how*, or *why* research questions in unexplored research (Atmowardoyo, 2018). Researchers use qualitative case studies to explore a phenomenon in depth and in its natural setting (Yin, 2017). Researchers use case study designs to select small groups and focus on the subjects. A case study research design was based on observed or measured phenomena derived from knowledge gained by real life experiences (Yin, 2017). I used a multiple case study to explore real life scenarios using interviews, documentation, and reports from collected data. I originally considered phenomenology as the research design for this study. Phenomenology is a philosophical study to understand the meanings of lived experiences of others (Neubauer et al., 2019). I did not seek to understand the meanings of lived experiences of independent artists and therefore did not choose phenomenology as my research design for this study. I also considered ethnography, which includes exploring an entire group that shares a common culture (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). The ethnographic design was not appropriate for my study because I did not explore a group culture.

### **Research Question**

The central research question in this study was: What digital marketing strategies do independent music artists use to achieve and sustain profitably?

### **Interview Questions**

1. What digital marketing strategies did you use to target sales?
2. How did your strategies address the key barriers that prevent independent artists from sustaining profitability using digital marketing strategies?

3. What are some proven, successful digital marketing strategies you used to increase profits from your music sales to sustain profitability?
4. What is your primary digital marketing strategy as an independent artist?
5. What sources did you employ to assist in developing a digital marketing strategy for your music?
6. What processes and tools do you employ to develop your digital marketing analysis?
7. How do you assess the effectiveness of your digital marketing strategies?
8. Why were this primary digital marketing strategy chosen?
9. How, if at all, have the changes in technology affected your digital marketing strategy?
10. What resources did you use to finance your music project?
11. Please provide additional information or comments regarding digital marketing strategies.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework links concepts together to provide an understanding of a phenomenon (Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017). Marketing mix, referred to as the 4Ps, was a potential means for understanding the findings from my study. The term marketing mix refers to the mixture of elements useful in pursuing a certain market strategy. Marketing mix is a combination of factors (product, price, place, and promotion) used to market a product or service. The four factors are foundational and were used to achieve balance by incorporating these factors into a marketing strategy that can meet customer needs while

generating income for the business (Olson et al., 2018). I examined independent artists applied the four factors in the marketing mix to provide value to the customer and generated income with selling their music products.

I chose marketing mix because the mix is a combination of various factors used to develop a strategy independent artists (entrepreneurs) used to market music products and appeal to their target audience. Marketing can be used to determine the best product, pricing, and placement with how products are distributed, sold, and promoted. The purpose of this study was to identify the various digital marketing strategies independent artists used to reach their fan base and increased profitability.

Neil H. Borden began using the term marketing mix in the late 1940s while teaching at Harvard Business School. Borden introduced the concept of a marketing mix during a speech at the American Marketing Association in 1953. The marketing mix included 12 aspects for successful marketing. Several marketing mixes were proposed; however, once Jerome McCarthy introduced his model of the 4Ps in 1960, he gained consensus approval (Anderson & Taylor, 1995). McCarthy defined marketing mix as the controllable variables that an organizational leader can coordinate to satisfy the target market (Rafiq & Ahmed, 1995). The marketing mix included useful examples of what independent artists incorporated into their own digital marketing strategies for success. I used this theory to gain insight into how independent artists used various marketing frameworks to digitally market their music.

### **Operational Definitions**

The terms listed below are some of the terms that I used in the study.



*Inbound marketing:* Digital marketing strategy that connects with potential customers using media such as email distribution lists, blogs and social networking (Venisse, 2016).

*Independent artist:* Music artists with no ties to a major record label (Oliver & Armit, 2018).

*Major Labels, record company:* The dominant record industry major record labels (EMI, Sony, Universal-Vivendi, Time Warner and Bertelsmann BMG) that control the market for recorded music in terms of both production and distribution (Mall, 2018).

*Marketing Mix (4Ps):* A set of regulated and controlled marketing tools that a company uses to meet its needs and achieve its goal for the desired response of the target market which consists of product, price, place and promotion (Vynogradova & Drokina, 2020).

*Value co-creation:* A theoretical concept that allows companies and customers to create value through interaction (Prahalad, 2000).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations are critical research components and necessary for a viable study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In this section I discuss the Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations in this study.

#### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are thoughts believed to be factual but are unable to be validated by the researcher (Babbie, 2015). In this study, I assumed that independent artists would be open about their profits, that independent artists had the technical aptitude to leverage the

technology and marketing skills to digitally market their music, and that independent artists can earn a living working solely in the music industry. I also assumed independent artists that participated in the study would provide honest answers to the research questions. I ensured that the participants fully understood their contribution to the study and the potential for positive influence on other artists.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are inherent weaknesses found in the design of a research study (Yin, 2017). Limitations for the study included: limited amount of peer reviewed articles for information regarding past and present music industry business models, the sample size of ten independent artists, following the trend of technology and not knowing future effects of disruptive technology. The final limitation was the amount of time in which to conduct the study.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are the limitations or boundaries researchers consciously set for the study (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The main delimitations were the number and scope of the selected research participants. I focused on independent artists that were in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. Selecting this group of participants seemed most relevant to view the business of music through the lens of the group who worked strictly as entrepreneurs. In addition, the scope of the study was limited to digital marketing strategies independent artists used to sustain profitability.

### **Significance of the Study**

Artists in the music industry experienced a shift in revenue and sales because of technology and the creation of the independent artist concept (Eiriz & Leite, 2017). The decline in record sales, from the effects of disruptive technology, affected the music industry business model and independent artists (Gamble et al., 2017). The record industry model changed, and the new era of independent artists is one in which artists are a part of the do-it-yourself (DIY) culture (Vito, 2019). I aimed to increase music business knowledge of how independent artists used successful digital marketing strategies to market their music and sustain profitability.

### **Contribution to Business Practice**

I sought to identify successful digital marketing strategies used by independent artists that contributed to business practices and aided in sustaining profitability. In addition to contributing to the body of knowledge, my goal for the study was to inform independent music artists of various digital marketing strategies. With the use of social media and technology, independent artists discovered innovative solutions to market their music beyond the sale of CDs. My goal for this study was to expand on the strategies that were proven successful and provided opportunities for independent artists to profit.

### **Implications for Social Change**

People worldwide can hear and enjoy recorded music using a multitude of receivers based on new technology (Vismara, 2018). Changes in the music industry's business model arising from technological change created challenges for new artists to remain viable and sustained their careers in the music business, which resulted in artists

not entering the music business (Sun, 2018; U.S. Department of Labor, 2015). In this study, I focused on digital marketing strategies to sustain profitability; however, the implication for social change could be that independent artists continue to make music. A detailed description of successful digital marketing strategies of some independent artists might create awareness for other independent artists about how to sustain profitability in the music industry and stimulate the economy.

### **A Review of Professional and Academic Literature**

My objective for this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore what digital marketing strategies some independent artists in the Washington, DC metropolitan area used to sustain profitability in the music industry. The findings from the study may provide independent artists with various digital marketing strategies that could increase and sustain profitability in the music industry. My goal in this literature review was to conceptualize the foundation for marketing strategies. I began with marketing mix as the primary framework and then incorporated configuration theory, marketing, and entrepreneurship to develop additional insight into this phenomenon.

My literature review includes articles that support the general business problem. I reviewed entrepreneurial strategies for independent artists to use to thrive in the new music business model. I also explored digital marketing strategies to sustain and increase profitability. The following literature review consists of peer-reviewed research studies for the topics (a) conceptual theories in marketing, (b) digital marketing, (c) history of the music industry, and (d) independent artists in the music industry. Other sources include statistical reports from music industry trade associations, small business associations and

scholarly books. Walden University databases included Thoreau, Business Source Complete, Emerald Management Journals, Google Scholar and Sage Premier were the sources, and searches included peer reviewed journal articles, preferably within the last 5 years. Keywords in the search process included *independent artists, music industry business models, digital marketing strategies, recording revenue, profit, marketing and music, impact of covid and the music industry, and social media analytics*. The emphasis was on peer-reviewed studies within 5 years old at the time of publication. The study included 178 references: 89% peer-reviewed articles; 59% of the articles were from 2017 to 2023; 30% older than 5 years; and 11% are nonpeer reviewed. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the references used by frequency and percentage.

**Table 1**

*Table of References Used by Frequency and Percentage in Study*

Resources	Within 5 Years	Older than 5 Years	Total	%
Peer-Reviewed Articles	105		105	59%
Peer-Reviewed Articles		53	53	30%
Non Peer-Reviewed Articles			20	11%
Totals	105	53	178	100%

### **Application to the Applied Business Problem**

I explored the various digital marketing strategies that independent artists used to sustain profitability. Technology changed how consumers listened to songs; interacted with music and how revenue was generated for the artist. This shift within the music industry provided opportunities for independent artists to not only create their own music

but also conducted all aspects of their business endeavors (Walzer, 2016). The functions that the record labels once served for promoting, marketing, and distributing music were now the responsibility of the independent artist, those who were not signed to a major label. Independent artists leveraged various marketing strategies to build a fan base and strengthen sales by merchandising and touring (Best et al., 2017).

### **Theories to Support the Conceptual Foundation**

I used marketing mix as the primary theory to explore successful digital marketing strategies. In addition to the marketing mix theory, I used theories such as configuration theory, and marketing and entrepreneurship theory to better understand and enlighten this phenomenon.

### **Marketing Mix**

Professor Neil Borden first began using the term marketing mix in the classroom in the mid-1940s. In 1953, during a speech for the American Marketing Association, Borden introduced the marketing mix concept. Marketing mix refers to variables a marketing manager can control to influence sales or market share. Borden (1964; as cited in Constantinides, 2006) initially identified 12 marketing elements that would increase profitability for a business if managed properly.

McCarthy (1964) reduced Borden's 12 to a four-element framework (4Ps): product, price, promotion, and placement. An understanding of marketing is essential to analyze the success of marketing strategies for business models in the music industry (Vaccaro & Cohn, 2004). Kannan and Li (2017) revealed how technology changed

consumer buying intention and the marketing factors that influenced sales with music products.

Kotler (2001) elucidated the optimal allocation of marketing efforts can produce an optimal marketing mix by using mathematical programming as an alternative framework. Constantinides (2006) posited a mixed review of some authors proposing alternative marketing frameworks while others accepted modified versions for the 4Ps with new elements added to the traditional parameters. In the music industry, price becomes a major factor because of the possibility of consumers who want to spend money on a song they like. Sales of digital music products that use technology increased because of the decline in CD sales (Kusumawati et al., 2014). The quality of music products and good promotion can increase sales of music products such as promotion through social media, mobile phones and the internet. Place in the music industry is the distribution channel used to sell music through digital outlets such as websites, Spotify, and iTunes.

The marketing strategy should either apply to a product or service. According to Grönroos (2020), the various marketing models differed from conventional models because they included aspects related to service production and interactions between customers and service providers. Product is a key marketing variable consistent with the foundational marketing principles. Without an understanding of the product being marketing, successful outcomes cannot be expected. Marketing concepts and theories evolve constantly and with each evolution a new thought, concept and model is developed based on customer requirements (Homburg et al., 2017).

East et al. (2017) explained the influence of word-of-mouth (WOM) communication and the effect on consumer purchasing behavior. Customer satisfaction positively influences customer affective commitment (Iglesias et al., 2019). Such communication can have a strong influence on consumer behavior. WOM can influence people to buy product when it's recommended from a person, they know and trust inducing the purchase of certain products (Bugshan & Ahmed, 2021). Roy et al. (2018) reviewed how electronic word-of mouth (eWOM) influenced consumer buying behavior through the online exchange of customer opinions and experiences using social media. The result from their study is indicative of online marketing efforts enhancing positive effects of the eWOM campaign on brand building and online behavior.

To expand further, Todri et al. (2021) posited the relationship between geographical distance and the effectiveness of eWOM is significantly related to an increase in eWOM effectiveness. The results from the study were proven that the relationship between eWOM and the likelihood that online customers make product purchases significantly strengthens as the spatial proximity between disseminators and receivers grows and can tether the potential of eWOM. The analysis of marketing mix is the basis which aligns marketing activities and concepts included in the configuration theory.

### **Configuration Theory**

The configuration theory is used in organizing marketing activities in ways that align with an organization's business strategy. According to Leenders et al. (2015), the configuration theory provided detailed insight into viable and unviable marketing



strategies. Managers may use configuration theory to align strategies to design options that independent artists used when they experiment and seek a position for a competitive advantage in an atmosphere that delivers acceptable performance. Independent artists can use configuration theory to develop various strategies such as the use of radio airplay, live performance, and social media platforms to generate profitable sales. Configuration theory posits that for each marketing strategy, there are organizational characteristics that align with strategic initiatives that form a significant source of competitive advantage (Leenders et al., 2015). For example, despite the decline of CD sales, CDs could be a feasible resource for artists during live performances, on-site CD merchandising sales, and used as a social media promotional tool.

In dealing with the disruption of technology and its impact on new media and sales opportunities, artists needed to experiment with their configuration to ensure that the configuration stays viable in the competitive landscape. To generate revenue, there exists media and sales platforms such as radio airplay and live performances, social media marketing strategies, and recorded music on different platforms (e.g., streaming) that yielded above average performance. Configuration theory played a role in research on how these interdependencies combined marketing and media platforms for maximum effect (Peng et al., 2020). The analysis of configuration theory led to marketing concepts entrepreneurs (independent artists) can use to sustain profitability.

### **Marketing and entrepreneurship theory**

Hu et al. (2017) stated in the music industry, environmental turbulence created the emergence of entrepreneurs, who thrive in this environment. According to Anderson et

al. (2018) entrepreneurs and business owners had different interpretations of marketing. Entrepreneurs are driven by creating value to make money and mainstream marketing can be criticized for neglecting an entrepreneur's understanding of what can be brought to the markets and marketing behavior.

Entrepreneurial marketing (EM), referred to as the 'marketing of small firms growing through entrepreneurship' and mainstream marketing shared commonalities with identifying opportunities and transforming resources into value creation for customers; thus, how value is created is accomplished differently. Entrepreneurial marketing orientated firms integrate critical aspects of marketing and entrepreneurship, from which marketing becomes a process used by firms through the particularities of entrepreneurial behavior. Because entrepreneurs typically have a limited marketing budget it is particularly important that the marketing budget be well-spent to maximize the number of new customers that it generates (Wienclaw, 2021).

Karami and Tang (2019) examined entrepreneurial orientation (EO), a key concept used to describe executives that craft strategies with the intent of doing something innovative and exploiting opportunities other organizations are unable to exploit. EO is defined as an organization's strategic posture relating to the processes, business practices, and decision-making styles of organizations that act entrepreneurially (Karami and Tang, 2019). An organization's level of EO can be understood by examining how it stacks up to five dimensions, also relevant to independent artists: risk-taking; competitive aggressive; innovativeness; proactiveness and autonomy (Saha et al., 2017).

Risk taking is the tendency to engage in bold rather than cautious moves that include venturing into new and unknown markets, creating new products and services, or contributing significant resources to ventures with uncertain outcomes (Gauthier et al., 2021). Competitive aggressive is the tendency to directly challenge competitors rather than trying to avoid them. Actions consistent with competitive aggressiveness include dramatic price-cutting, ambitious marketing spending, and significantly boosting production capacity. Innovativeness is the tendency to pursue creativity and experimentation and is aimed at developing new products, services, and processes (Karami and Tang, 2019). Innovation has long been seen as central to entrepreneurial behavior. Organizations that are successful in innovation efforts tend to enjoy stronger performance.

There are substantial benefits for being first to market and proactive in helping an organization gain first mover advantage. The forward looking perspective inherent in proactiveness is central to entrepreneurial behavior (Lumpkin and Dess, 1996). Autonomy allows the freedom to develop entrepreneurial ideas and see it through to completion. Within an organization that promotes high autonomy, people are offered the independence required to bring a new idea to fruition without the interference of corporate bureaucracy.

### **History of the Music Industry**

After World War II, the recorded music industry grew rapidly because of an increase in demand from affluent and highly educated young people with leisure time. Technology prompted new recording formats, improved the quality of recorded music

and increased music on the radio after shows moved to television. To support this growth, pioneers PolyGram and Warner, followed by EMI and later by Sony Music (CBS) and BMG were formed because of enormous market growth and musical diversity. By the late 1990s these music companies dominated the entire industry (Sun, 2018).

Major record labels such as Sony/BMG, Universal, and the Warner Music Group, deliberately worked to constrain the options available for the exploitation of the experience of music down to one format: the full-length album on compact disc. Several important countervailing forces emerged in this period. The means through which music was being experienced were proliferating, becoming more numerous in both technological form and geographic spread (Fairchild, 2015; Harris, 2018). Sony closely followed by EMI and pioneers PolyGram and Warner later Music (CBS), two older firms that eventually managed to adapt to the new environment, unlike some of their peers. From the 1980s onward, BMG, and then MCA built and expanded multinational organizations.

Technology caused the recording industry to change. The traditional business model in the music industry included the record labels that manufactured the product (mainly CDs) and distributed via bricks-and-mortar stores, direct mail clubs, and online retailers, as well as artists selling their CDs at concerts (Daidj, 2020). The record label model promoted artists' albums and handled all aspects of artist management from marketing, artist development, music distribution to legal representation and touring. The artist would sign contracts and receive advances, which the record label recuperated from CD sales, touring and merchandising. The contribution from the artist was mainly

focused on the creative aspect of making music with a minimal concentration on the business aspect of music. Hu et al. (2017) posited environmental turbulence created the emergence of entrepreneurs, which thrive in this environment (Kearney, 2020).

The ubiquitous music industry record production model has traditionally been comprised of four main components. The first and most important component was the record label needed to identify and sign an artist to the label. Next, the record label invested substantial resources to cultivate the artist and develop the music project utilizing expert songwriters, music producers, marketers, and skilled engineers to operate expensive and often complicated recording equipment. Third, to increase the artist's visibility and marketability, the record label produced music videos for television and secured radio airplay for the artist's songs. Finally, the label produced the physical album or CD and distributed them to retail outlets (Waldfogel, 2017).

### **Legal and Legislative Controls/Copyrights and Music**

According to the International Federation of Phonographic Industry (IFPI) (2019), the success of the music industry depended on the legal environment and copyright law. Before the artist posts any intellectual property online, such as music, videos, lyrics or the like, the artist should clarify and secure all necessary copyrights. Copyright not only protects the inherent right of intellectual property, but also safeguards the production, distribution, and consumption of music. In 1995, the Copyright Act was amended in anticipation of the impending digital revolution and its potential effect on album sales (Lesser, 2018). The Copyright Act amendments were the center of debates focused on piracy and copyrights infringements. The recording industry pursued copyright

infringement against both companies and individuals. They cited profit damages to both record label and artists signed to the labels in the decline of record sales because of illegal use of copyrighted material (Haynes & Marshall, 2017).

The Music Modernization Act (MMA) was passed in October 2018 to protect artists and allow them to collect payments from royalties for music they owned. Technology visibly changed the music economy as evidenced through on-demand streaming, becoming the most widely used music platform, foregoing CD sales. Streaming complicated the process of how musicians were able to gain royalties for their work. Songwriters needed to be paid more, while streaming services needed to increase their profit margin. MMA enhanced copyright law for music and addressed the compensation issues of music artists and songwriters with digital streaming services (Paganelli, 2018). Some of the benefits included (a) compensation of royalties prior to 1972, (b) producers, engineers, and mixers will receive a share in royalties, (c) songwriters and music publishers will be paid for more digital performances, and (d) new criteria for setting future digital royalty rates (Paganelli, 2018). The MMA's implementation helped artists in the industry get paid during this digital era transition, provided legacy artists, from work dating back to 1972, with federal copyright protection, and codified the process for producers and recording companies to receive royalties (Dahrooge, 2021).

### **Industry Reaction to Disruptive Technologies**

Digital technologies are changing the way consumers listen to songs, interact with music, and generate revenues for music artists (Lerch, 2018). Changes in popular music

resulted from technological developments ranging from recordings on LP (vinyl records), cassette tape, compact disc (CD) and MP3. Digitization entered the music industry in the 1970s when digital technologies were introduced for recording music. In the 1980s, CDs were introduced which extended to the field of distribution. In the 1990s and 2000s, internet technologies gained a major impact, by supporting all activities in the value chain, from talent scouting through production, promotion, distribution, and consumption (Sahut et al., 2019).

The digitization of music and streaming increased in popularity, causing a steady decline in music sales. Music piracy, considered a monumental obstacle to the advancement of the music industry, caused a great loss of revenue. According to Moon et al. (2015), record companies attempted to mitigate illegal music downloading by implementing technological protection such as software encryption and digital fingerprinting. To limit the damage file sharing was causing, record companies offered file sharers an alternative to illegal downloading which was to license content to online music services (Butz et al., 2017).

The supply chain of the music industry evolved drastically since the late 1990s, from a traditional model to an online model. Physical product (CD) sales rapidly declined while record companies strategically integrated with new service companies. The supply chain for the music industry transitioned from the production and sales of CDs from record stores to digital outlets. As independent artists found the transition easier to enter the music industry, a shift in revenue streams forced the record labels into a new strategic direction and positioning (Butz et al., 2017).

Digital distribution facilitated a quick exchange between the independent artist and consumer (Walzer, 2016). Streaming platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, Sound-Cloud, and Pandora substantially increased the accessibility of music with little to no distribution costs to artists and record labels (TuneCore, 2017). When Apple introduced the a-la-carte legal digital download service, this new model created a greater gap between consumer purchase of legally obtained digital music and music acquired through alternate means (Vamosiu, 2018). New Apple innovation prompted the music industry to revise its business model to a more fluid model that could be continuously adjusted to provide greater value to consumers. Digitization created an evolution with the music industry business model and changed how music is distributed. This change influenced the relationships between musicians and record companies; and between independent artists and consumers (Eiriz & Leite, 2017).

### **Digital Marketing**

Digital marketing was introduced in the 1980s after IBM launched its first personal computer. Digital marketing involved promoting product and service by means of a range of digital channels to reach customers (Kamal, 2016). Cruz et al. (2017) posited content-based marketing strategies such as blogging or posting on popular social media platforms have become staples of digital marketing practice. In the contemporary world, every part of the consumer decision-making process is influenced by social media (Appel et al., 2020). The rise of the internet allowed the potential to reach far greater numbers of prospective customers than was previously possible and social media has become key for branding because of the brand's ability to connect with consumers in a



more personal and interactive manner (Du Plessis, 2017).

The growing momentum of digitization and the scale of disruption had a profound impact on current marketing practice (Ruyter et al., 2018). Digital marketing has become the most effective method of doing business online and is a diverse marketing platform used for marketing all types of products and services over the internet or any form of electronic media (Jaya & Jaya, 2016). During the digital era (1970s), the sales of music cassettes and CDs dropped drastically, prompting the manufacturers to create innovative ways to develop their music products by adjusting the development of technology. Consequently, the development of technology also helped to revive music products. Consumer preference shifted and the sale of music products that used internet technology began to increase (Kannan & Li, 2017).

Hamari et al. (2016) reviewed collaborative consumption online and the influence the internet has on the relationship between the consumer and service. The researchers posited service should be pleasurable to use because enjoyment is an important motivator. Independent artists have more opportunities to communicate, network, promote and distribute music, which previously could not be widely published against the commercial power of major labels (Haynes & Marshall, 2017). Aguiar and Martens (2016) posited music producers view digitization as a threat to their revenue; however, an alternative adaptive strategy was to provide content for free and find other sources of revenue.

## **Digital Marketing Strategies**

The importance of understanding the digital world and digital marketing is crucial for independent artists. Customer behavior and the identification of the right perspective segment is important when determining a marketing strategy. According to Anjum et al. (2020) marketing was undergoing a transformation and can no longer rely on traditional marketing techniques (Kannan & Li, 2017; Opreana & Vinerean, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic emphasized this need even more, but even pre-pandemic, challenges were incurred with reaching fans and presenting work to a wider range of audiences without utilizing digital tools. The focus was on the consumer and their needs to provide an effective communication strategy toward them. Digital marketing can reach a diverse audience and foster a benefit at a lower cost (Patruti-Baltes, 2016).

Social media has become a primary digital marketing strategy. One strategy used to make a meaningful connection with the audience is to post daily. According to Jenkins (2009), what grabs the most attention are posts with works in progress, photographs, and time lapses, as well as tutorials. The artists should ask questions to their followers and share stories from their personal life, establishing a participatory relationship with them, making them feel like they know the artist and making them believe that their contribution matters. Additionally, meaningful hashtags are a way to be found, and after sharing a post it is beneficial to reply to comments as soon as possible. In addition, it is noted that artists with strategies on what to post to Instagram based on the number of likes or comments increased their visibility.

Blogging is an essential key to expanding business and competing in the digital age (Fialkoff, 2019). When done correctly, blogs boost online traffic, leads, and conversions. According to Fialkoff (2019), the key to blogging success is posting 2 to 3 times per week which keeps a website in high ranking with Google and helps potential customers to find a business online.

Slootweg and Rowson (2018) stated age groups or generational considerations were a factor when determining marketing strategies. Identifying the optimal marketing approach required consideration of the target audience and generation groups. Baby Boomers and Generation X and Y data revealed a clear division between traditional marketing strategies and online marketing strategies. While Baby Boomers preferred traditional marketing practices, Generation X and Y inclined toward online marketing. Lissitsa and Kol (2016) suggested social media has a direct and positive influence over online purchases.

One form of marketing, inbound marketing, is based on creating content that generates leads from social media networks. Inbound marketing is the most important digital marketing strategy that connects with potential customers using media such as email distribution lists, blogs, and social networking. Venisse (2016) defined inbound marketing to use social media as a tool to convert an audience into customers. For an artist to set up this strategy using inbound marketing, artists must offer interesting, relevant content on their site, blog, or social network page, to attract and sustain an audience.

## **Co-creational Marketing**

Prahalad (2000) first coined the term *value co-creation* as a theoretical concept that allows companies and customers to create value through interaction. Co-creational marketing is based on customer experience and value created through interactive relationships. Social media is a digital marketing strategy that is used to identify and engage customers. Through this engagement, the researcher can analyze the results from the study to determine the effectiveness of the marketing strategy and its effect on sales. Co-creational marketing applies to trends in the recorded and live sectors of the music industry which constantly changing technology influenced consumer preferences and behavior. Consideration of marketing concepts to include societal processes not only to apply to the marketing concept itself, and for the roles of the parties implicitly involved in the market process. According to Baumann et al. (2017), the customer is co-producer of value and marketing offered value propositions or suggestions to consumers. The one-on-one relationship between buyer and seller or producer and consumer has been replaced with a marketing focus in which value is created and shared by either party (Eggert et al., 2018).

## **internet Marketing**

Developing an effective marketing strategy has contributed to independent artists generating revenue on the internet. Naveed et al. (2017) stated new business opportunities in distribution and live entertainment will increase in popularity as the progression of the internet continues. According to Haynes and Marshall (2017), the internet had several benefits the independent artist used to build a fan base and sell their music. Those

benefits included a worldwide audience or portal to publicize music and a means through which artists can keep their audience engaged.

Music videos represented a significant musical expression and are an important vehicle for the artist to connect with their audience. Maljkovic (2017) suggested newer forms of creative expressions will continue to progress as digital technology progresses. Digital technology provided an increase of access to potential customers. According to Schuster et al. (2019), the increase of music reviews and musical sampling encouraged an increase in online sales. Online markets functioned as communication markets which consumers can learn about and experience new products (Hu et al., 2017).

### **Social Media Marketing**

The term social media is used to describe a group of popular internet based platforms and networking sites which have different functionalities and are chosen for different reasons left up to the individual. In addition to social media sites that an individual musician could sign up for such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn, other options exist which contain a significant social media element, such as, user-generated content sites to include YouTube Soundcloud, Bandcamp Songkick, and Spotify. Social media is a natural platform for promotional efforts because of its wide access to consumers (Torres et al., 2018).

According to Choi and Burnes (2017), social media was a marketing and business practice; however, there is insufficient insight into what drives small businesses to use social media and how the interaction builds bonds with consumers. While acknowledging that there are examples of artists who have benefited from using social media, and have

generated a sustainable living from their music, Choi, and Burnes (2017), question how representative success stories are and whether they reflect the experience of most musicians working today. More research is needed to investigate how new internet technologies work (or do not) for most working artists, and on how these technologies are being integrated into existing music industry practices. Haynes and Marshall (2017) also concluded that social media is an important tool for an independent artist, and does provide advantages for them, but disadvantages have emerged, and benefits of social media are overstated.

Social media refers to ‘a host of web-based applications’ collectively forming ‘an expansive ecosystem of connective media’ whose key characteristics are social networking and the creation and exchange of content generated by users (Haynes & Marshall, 2017). Social media is becoming saturated and hard for artists to monetize social media activity, with traditional means of accessing or developing audiences more effective in generating the income needed to survive (Faisal, 2016). Effective use of social media continues to be viable in targeting an audience.

Despite the challenges recognized by researchers, social media fostered an important role with relationships between performer and the audience (Oswari et al., 2019). Researchers provided results that show small companies use social media to establish relationships and interact with fans to engage current fans, develop new fans, and identify valuable content. The creation of online postings that contain artist authenticity, intimacy, insider commentary and quick response time to posts, maximizes online engagement (Herrera, 2017).

Saboo et al. (2016) agreed social media played a big role in the music industry and the consumer buying process is influenced by social media activities. Because music tracks are a digital product, shopping via social media websites also provides instant gratification to consumers bringing the consumer a complete retail experience. Social media has become an advertising platform used to reach consumers online (Evans et al., 2017).

### **Web analysis tools**

Social media redefined marketing strategies and broadened marketing potential (Misirlis & Vlachopoulou, 2018). Social Media Analytics (SMA) is used to measure and analyze social media data (Holsapple et al., 2018; Keegan & Rowley, 2017; Suseno et al., 2018). Marketing metrics are used to measure data to analysts and marketers who monitor and analyze behavioral targeting and marketing performance indicators for effective data. Companies are increasingly becoming reliant on social media management tools to gather information and insight into competitor's activities, industry trends, and brand penetration (Saboo et al., 2016). Analytics consists of several steps, of which data analysis is only one. Before the data can be analyzed, they must be discovered, collected, and prepared. Data mining can identify specifically defined features on social media. The large amounts of information make data analysis challenging to identify useful information (Chen et al., 2017).

Social media experienced exceptional growth and adoption across all generational groups, which contributed to the speed of information sharing and expansion of relationships (Gawas et al., 2018). According to Risius (2015), social media predicted

elections, stock markets, product design, and brand communication. This exceptional growth encouraged the invention of an innovative brand to consumer engagement tools. With the emergence of new e-Commerce platforms such as Topspin, Big Cartel, and Bandcamp, musicians can sell products directly to consumers with a higher profit margin.

Booth (2017) identified the development of long tail economics in which retailers sell small amounts of a product with a large distribution. According to Anderson et al. (2018), long tail economics provided an entrance into the seller's market segment which the independent artist can realize a market niche. The rise of the internet lowered the cost of entry and provided several small markets which has become quite profitable.

### **Revenue Streams**

Independent artists are increasingly identifying as multifaceted brands and venturing outside of the music industry. Kessler (2017) specified the independent artist (or entrepreneur) is wary of sharing an income outside of record sales and coupled with the challenge of making a living solely from sales of recorded music are steering clear of recording contracts and expanding into non-music areas (e.g., restaurants, radio ads, fashion lines, and movies). Revenue streams are diversifying to incorporate other sectors of the industry such as live events, as Gamble et al. (2017) acknowledged under existing music industry business models, top popular musicians earn far more from concert ticket sales than from record sales royalties (Maasø, 2016).

Galuszka and Wyrzykowska (2016) agreed with diversifying revenue streams toward live events, publishing rights and merchandising. With this insight into how revenue streams are diffusing into the live sector of the music industry. Naveed et al.



(2017) added with concerts increasingly becoming a revenue stream, the cross buying behavior from records to concert tickets might be more relevant (Papies & van Heerde, 2017). In 2019, streaming generated 75% of the music industry's revenue from generational change and the newfound popularity in music streaming applications. This popularity has caused an increase in streaming companies such as Spotify, Apple Music, Tidal, Pandora, and Amazon Music gaining household recognition (Friedlander, 2020).

### ***Crowdfunding***

Crowdfunding is a type of crowdsourcing that artists use to raise money for a project or touring. Crowdfunding traditionally is not considered a source of profit, but a funding source tool to cover the cost of projects. However, once the project is funded through crowdfunding, an artist can experience profits through ticket sales and merchandising (Gamble et al., 2017). The researcher's suggested crowdfunding is a viable practice for the independent artist to engage fans in the creative and financial side of music production. As Gamble (2019) described, the crowdfunding sector consisted of several other models such as the donation model (which contributors receive nothing), the lending model (also known as peer-to-peer lending) and the equity model (which contributors gain a share of profits or other return on their investment).

### ***Digital streaming***

Digitization of music, particularly streaming services have become increasingly popular, and Naveed et al. (2017) posited the parallel path and increasing popularity of streaming and live music would likely find the most success in promoting their music. Streaming services such as Spotify as a commodity that sells a subscription to consumers,

provided access to songs without purchasing a song (Fleischer, 2017). Although free streaming can have a negative effect on revenue, paid streaming overcompensates for the negative effect (Wlömert & Papies, 2016). Music streaming services could serve as a channel for music discovery resulting in an increase of sales and customer fan base for the independent artist (Aguiar, 2017). Sanitnarathorn (2018) concluded an artist's passion for their music fans is the primary factor of their fans intent to stream and pay for digital music.

### **New Model for Presenting Music to Consumers - Independent Artists**

Before the internet, artists depended on exposure from major record labels if they obtained a recording contract. Technology levelled the playing field and provided opportunities for independent artists to manufacture, promote and distribute their own music. Independent artists should have a more professionalized approach, which required both entrepreneurial skills and the possibility of economic rewards (Tarassi, 2017). To make a living through music required different roles such as musicians, venue owners, bookers, managers, and more.

As the sophistication of home recording equipment improved, music production became possible and allowed artists to have control over the process of arranging and recording music. Independent artists refined their recording and promotion skills through creative marketing and a desire to connect their personal ideologies with a global audience (Walzer, 2016). The multiple roles once held by various actors and departments within major labels were the responsibility of the independent artist. Departments such as artist development, songwriting, music production, legal and marketing were the sole

responsibility of the independent artist; however, according to Thomson (2012), independent career management may have presented fiscal and logistical challenges.

### **COVID-19 and Impact on Music Industry**

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unforeseen crisis which impacted lives and businesses worldwide. Changes in purchase options from people around the world were significant and indicated by an increase in online shopping transactions because of quarantine. The massive upheaval of the pandemic impacted digital marketing and influenced new marketing practices which created opportunities for organizations to attract new customers.

Consumer spending decreased by 45.1% pre-pandemic with a decrease by 13.3% after the outbreak (Denk et al., 2022). One effect of the pandemic was the undermining of the self-sufficiency and self-promotion from independent artist that managed their own careers at a point when it was beginning to gather momentum. The restrictions ordered by governments worldwide, prohibited live music events, which caused a major loss of income for independent artists (Howard et al., 2021).

According to Howard et al. (2021) participants reported despite the cessation of live music performances, there was a substantial increase in music production and lyric writing. Additionally, musicians experimented with various digital alternatives to record and collaborate to release more music online. The creation of new and innovative alternatives to perform live included solutions such as virtual performances that would provide opportunities to profit. Musicians benefitted from the time to 'turn inwards' to

practice their craft, to work on the 'business side' and develop their social media profiles (Howard et al., 2021).

Howard et al. (2021) posited some musicians were disadvantaged by the periods of isolation, others demonstrated productivity in relation to releasing new music without the interruptions of daily life and work. One of the strategies adopted during the pandemic was the release of albums or songs and subsequent dissemination on social networks as a way of remaining active (D'Amato & Cassella, 2021). With no end in sight for the pandemic and recurrences with the wave of the virus becoming commonplace, artists were faced with finding options to earn money to replace income lost from live music. One of those options was moving live performances online and learning to work with streaming platforms for music consumption (Lehman, 2020). Lehman reported participants responded, live streaming gigs seemed to be more effort than playing a real show and had no financial reward for them.

### **Transition**

In Section 1, I introduced the background to a business problem that has influenced the music industry. The music industry experienced a change in business model that allowed independent artists to manage their own careers. The business problem was that some independent artists lacked digital marketing strategies to achieve and sustain profitability. To succeed in the new music business model, independent artists needed to develop entrepreneurial strategies, specifically digital marketing strategies to achieve and sustain profitability. Given the problem, a qualitative descriptive multiple case study was determined as the optimal approach to address this phenomenon. I

provided criteria used for the selection of participants and their specified geographic location. The conceptual framework or lens used to guide the study was marketing mix.

I used peer reviewed journal articles and followed the 85% rule for incorporating articles within the 5-year timeframe. The primary Walden Library database used was Thoreau for most of the searches and included were citations from industry journals and seminal books used in the literature review. Keywords in the search process included *independent artists, music industry business models, digital marketing strategies, recording revenue, profit, marketing and music, impact of covid and the music industry, and social media analytics.*

In Section 2, I expanded and provided an in depth analysis of why the qualitative approach was chosen, the research design and data collection methods used to support the purpose of this research, and explored successful digital marketing strategies some independent artists used to achieve and sustain profitability. I also defined my role as a researcher, provided information about the participants used for the study and detailed the ethical procedures used to protect the participants. The reliability and validity of the study was paramount to ensure the data captured was accurate. I detailed the various methods used to validate the accuracy of the information obtained.

In Section 3, I presented the findings from the study. The findings included the themes emerged from the interview responses that responded to the overarching research question: What digital marketing strategies do independent music artists use to achieve and sustain profitably?

## Section 2: The Project

Section 2 included an analysis of the research project including the purpose statement, the role of the researcher, participants, research method and design, population, and sampling. Additionally, Section 2 contained an examination of ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization technique, data analysis, reliability, and validity of the study.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore what digital marketing strategies some independent artists used to achieve and sustain profitability. Five independent artists in the Washington, DC metropolitan area who published original music at a profit within the last 5 years were the participants in this study. An implication for positive social change was that artists who were successful in managing their careers may contribute knowledge and experience to help the next generation of artists. Another implication for positive social change of digital marketing strategies was sustained profitability could stimulate the economy.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I focused on digital marketing strategies independent artists used to sustain profitability in the music industry. My personal and professional interest as an independent artist prompted the subject of the study. I released several singles online in digital form and marketed songs using various social media platforms. The singles were released between 2013 and 2018 and generated revenue worldwide. I am currently

working on a music project and will incorporate some of the successful digital marketing strategies from this research to market my music.

In a qualitative study, the researcher is the primary instrument (Gaus, 2017; Stuckey, 2015). My role as the primary researcher was to select the participants, generate the interview questions that guided data collection, code, and interpret data. The selection criteria for participants of the study were ten independent artists in the Washington, DC metropolitan area who demonstrated a proven track record of success with digital marketing strategies at a profit within the last 5 years. Interviews in qualitative research are shaped by the interrelationship between the interviewer and interviewee (Gill & Baillie, 2018; Karagiozis, 2018).

Some of the participants chosen for this research were known; however, to minimize bias, I used a journal to record field notes during the interview of interactions with the interviewee that guided interpersonal reflexivity within the interview (Ibrahim & Edgley, 2015). Silver and Rivers (2015) posited a critical undertaking of the researcher is analyzing data and understanding the relevance of knowing how one's bias is imperative to the study. I sent a summary of the data analysis to participants for review as one of the recommended procedures to confirm or enhance credibility (Kornbluh, 2015).

As a researcher my role was to safeguard participants and their data by adhering to the principles outlined in the *Belmont Report*. According to Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2016), an Institutional Review Board (IRB) implemented the federal policy based on the *Belmont Report*, which protects participants in the most ethical method possible. The *Belmont Report* proposed three principles on underlying ethical conduct for human

subjects: respect for the person, beneficence, and justice (Miracle, 2016). I provided information in a comprehensible format and confirmed participants' agreement to participate, by requesting they acknowledge approval in their approval email response with the consent form attached.

The interviewing protocol contained a full explanation of consent and details of how the interview would be conducted was detailed in the interviewing protocol. According to Gaus (2017), an interviewing protocols framework is a systematic approach for developing and refining interview protocols. The interview protocol framework is a four-phase process to develop interview protocols. The four phases included ensuring interview questions aligned with the study's research questions, organized an interview protocol to create an inquiry-based conversation, ensured the protocol was reviewed by others, and piloted (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). This method is strengthened by the reliability of the interview protocols and can contribute to improving the quality of data obtained from research interviews.

### **Participants**

I chose participants that met the selection criteria to minimize risk and to assure participants had the knowledge to address each interview question in depth. Participants of the study were 10 independent artists in the Washington, DC metropolitan, 18 years old or older and had a proven track record of success with digital marketing strategies at a profit within the last 5 years. From the 10 participants chosen, I interviewed nine participants because data saturation was achieved. Participants confirmed multiple revenue streams including sales of merchandise, CDs or digital streaming sales, and



demonstrated high profile use of technology and successful digital marketing strategies used to generate revenue. The artists chosen had a significant presence on social media and well respected in the music industry.

I used multiple resources to conduct the participant search. Facebook was a primary resource to recruit participants (Sikkens et al., 2017). I posted an open call request in various Facebook groups specifically for independent artists and requested referrals or recommendations for known artists that met the requirements detailed in the protocol (see Appendix B). As the interview concluded, I requested referrals based on the criteria provided to the participants. This snowball sampling method, or word-of-mouth technique, were used to gather information from independent artists (Fereshteh et al., 2017).

I opted to approach known artists which was beneficial to find willing participants and a demonstrated level of comfort with sharing experiences because of previously established rapport (Peticca-Harris et al., 2016). The participants were not aware of the other participants and remained anonymous. Each participant was 18 years of age or older and contacted initially by email or Facebook messaging to confirm willingness to participate in the study. The sample request (see Appendix B) includes a formal introduction and is used to detail the requirements for the participants. Participants received full disclosure of the study by email and volunteered to participate by approval of the consent form before the interview. I used Zoom to conduct interviews in a private setting.

## Research Method and Design

### Research Method

The research method chosen for this study is qualitative. The qualitative method is subjective and provides an in depth understanding of a phenomenon and answers the questions about *what*, *how* or *why*, rather than *how many* or *how much*, which are answered by quantitative methods (Dasgupta, 2015; McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). I explored the effect of digital technologies and how independent artists used technology to market their music to sustain profitability. The qualitative paradigm of research was adopted because the objective for this study is to understand and not measure the successful digital marketing strategies used by independent artists. In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. The role of the researcher is to ensure the quality of the process and data to interpret the results after obtaining the responses from the research questions.

I did not choose the quantitative method because this study did not require statistical analysis or quantifiable information. According to Booysen et al. (2018), quantitative research was considered objective. This method is applicable to phenomena that can be expressed in terms of quantity (Nelson, 2016). In quantitative research relationships are identified, facts are established, statistical descriptions are provided (Boachie & Amoako, 2017), and hypotheses are tested (Saunders et al., 2015).

A mixed method is the blending of research methods from both quantitative and qualitative traditions. The use of both methods can be complex (Saunders et al., 2015). In mixed method research, the analytic process of combining qualitative and survey data by

quantifying qualitative data can be time consuming and expensive and, thus, may lead researchers working under tight budgetary or time constraints to reduce sample sizes or limit the time spent interviewing (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). I did not use the mixed method approach because the qualitative method was best and sole method used for this study.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative researchers can choose between five distinctive approaches to qualitative inquiry: narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. I used multiple case study research design to explore successful digital marketing strategies independent artists used to sustain profitability. According to Dasgupta (2015), multiple case study research is the study of similarities and differences amongst cases. The multiple case study method is in-depth focus and a holistic, real-world perspective of behavior (Yin, 2018). Generally, these research methods shared some characteristics, but they had different focuses which resulted in variations in how the research question was asked, sample selection, data collection, and analysis, and report writing.

Narrative, phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory designs were not appropriate research methods for this study. Narrative researchers seek experiences as expressed individual stories (Lewis, 2015). Storytelling was not my focus and was not a chosen method for this study. The purpose of phenomenology is to describe and understand the essence of a phenomenon to grasp the nature of an experience. In order to understand the essence or structure of an experience, the researcher put aside personal attitudes or beliefs about the phenomenon, and therefore this method was not chosen.

Ethnography is the study of behaviors for a cultural group and requires an extensive amount of time and observation. The purpose of this study was not to observe cultural behaviors and was not a consideration for this study. The grounded theory design is based on building a theory that explains the phenomenon. I did not choose grounded theory because the focus of this study is not to create or discover a new theory. I did not choose single case study because this study does not represent a critical case in testing a well-formulated theory or an extreme or unique case. For this to be a single case study, one program would be the unit of analysis.

I chose ten independent artists knowledgeable in the music industry and demonstrated success in using digital marketing strategies. Participants were interviewed until no new information was discovered in responses. I achieved data saturation after interviewing nine participants. Data saturation is a means to discontinue data collection and/or analysis (Saunders et al., 2017). Data saturation is reached when no new analytical information emerges and the data is generally repetitive of what was previously stated by previous participants (Moser & Korstjens, 2017; Namdarpour et al., 2018).

### **Population and Sampling**

The sampling method for this qualitative study was purposeful sampling (Yin, 2017). Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the selection of cases related to a phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015). I selected the criteria for this sample based on independent artists knowledge and experience with digital marketing strategies. I chose ten independent artists in the Washington, DC metropolitan area to

participate in this study. Each participant is a full-time independent artist with primary sources of income from music sales and performances.

I used a formal introduction with a cover letter to detail the requirements from the participants and how the study is conducted. Participants received full disclosure of the study and an email confirmation of approval with the attached consent form submitted before interviewing. I conducted interviews using Zoom videoconference. Participants acknowledged and agreed to recording before the start of the interview. Before the start of the interviews, participants acknowledged and agreed being recorded.

According to Nelson (2016), data saturation is reached more rapidly for a small study than a larger study. The researcher must determine whether the responses to the interview questions reached data saturation. Saunders et al. (2017) posited saturation had multiple meanings when applied to various approaches to qualitative research. Some of the indicators of data saturation are: enough information to replicate the study, attainment of no new information, and code saturation (Nelson, 2016).

### **Ethical Research**

This research involved an interview with nine full-time independent artists that agreed to share their experiences and contributed to the results of the study. Participants received an introductory letter containing information about the study, their role as a volunteer, the confidentiality of their responses and an informed consent form. Research participation was voluntary and certain aspects of the study disclosed so that volunteers made an informed decision to participate (Tadros et al., 2019). I forwarded a schedule to the participants to determine the time for each interview. The participants were provided

an opportunity to ask questions and discuss the significance of their participation to minimize withdrawal from study. I informed participants they had the right to withdraw at any time by notifying me if they could no longer participate in the study.

Participants received no incentives for their voluntary participation in the study. Participants shared experiences and digital marketing strategies which contributed to how independent artists can possibly sustain profitability in the music business. I complied with Walden University's Internal Review Board (IRB) as a measure to protect the rights of the participants and reduce risks. Additionally, I used an ethical framework for research, the *Belmont Report*, as a reference to ensure ethical compliance (Miracle, 2016). Participants of the study remained anonymous, and all files password protected and contained electronically on my personal laptop. The email acknowledgement of consent and form was attached and sent to my Walden email. There was no paper copy of signed consent forms.

To ensure confidentiality, each participant's name was replaced and named Participant 1 through Participant 9. Data will be stored for 5 years and after the retention period; all documentation pertaining to confidential interviews will be deleted. The field notes will be stored with study data and protected from disclosure in the same manner as the interviews, audio, and transcripts (Tsai et al., 2016). The Walden IRB approval number for this study is 04-26-22-0523359 and it expires on April 25, 2023.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

The objective of this research was to explore digital marketing strategies some independent artists used to achieve and sustain profitability. I was the primary data

collection instrument and conducted semistructured interviews to ascertain participants' perspectives regarding digital marketing strategies used to achieve and sustain profitability. According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), the researcher might understand the everyday activities of the participant through interviews; however, a limitation of interviewing is, the participant may not be willing or comfortable sharing all that the researcher hopes to explore. Semistructured interviews, involved in depth conversations between the researcher and participant, guided by the participants perception, opinion, and experiences (Carr et al., 2019). A semistructured interview helped to define areas to be explored and allowed the interviewer or interviewee to expand on an idea in more detail. I arranged a mutually agreeable date and time to schedule the Zoom interviews via videoconference.

### **Data Collection Technique**

The intent of this study was to explore what successful strategies independent artists used to digitally market their music to achieve and sustain profitability. For this qualitative study, the technique used to gather data was semistructured interviews. To obtain potential participants, an open call seeking independent artists participation for study, was posted on various Facebook groups specifically for independent artists. participants were asked for recommendations of potential candidates that met the criteria to participate in the study. Volunteers who expressed interest in participating in the study received detailed information via email or Facebook messenger, to obtain their email address and to ensure the criterion to participate was met. Detailed information was provided in the sample request for participants form (see Appendix B).

Ten participants were selected for the interviews. Interviews were conducted until the responses become redundant and no new information was provided, reaching data saturation (Alam, 2020). Nine of the 10 participants were interviewed before data saturation was reached. Interviews were conducted by videoconference using Zoom. Upon agreeing to a time for the interview, each participant received a consent form with a request to respond to the email with approval to participate along with consent form (see Appendix A). The interview protocol (see Appendix B) was used to guide the interview process (Tenório et al., 2017). The interview protocol was an integral component to obtain good qualitative data. The anticipated length of the interview was 90 minutes and included post interview questions and responses.

Responses to the interview questions were recorded using Zoom and field notes entered in a journal. I audio and video recorded the interviews and used the audio files for transcription that were saved to my laptop. Field notes are widely recommended in qualitative research to document contextual information (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017). The primary benefits of using field notes include (a) allows researcher to closely observe the environment and interactions, (b) supplements language focused data, (c) increase rigor and trustworthiness, and (d) provides context to inform data analysis (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017).

Triangulation is a research method strategy that uses multiple data sources, theories, and research methods to ensure the comprehensiveness and accuracy of a research study (Moon, 2019). Field notes were used to collect data relevant to the research questions from interviews, music industry websites and YouTube videos. Field



notes can be used to reference behavior or nonverbal cues that may not be captured in audio recordings (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017). The primary data source were participants in the interviews. I conducted one-on-one interviews and recorded using both audio and video interviews to ensure an accurate account of the responses. Secondary data sources were the review of music industry websites such as the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), and third source was the review of YouTube videos.

Member checking, or participant validation, is a technique used to explore the credibility of results and to eliminate the possibility of misrepresentation (Birt et al., 2016; Varpio et al., 2016). Member checking enhanced the credibility of the data collected (Thomas, 2016). Participants were emailed Section 3 and requested to review for additional comments to further expand on responses or review for accuracy. A deadline of one week was requested to expedite the analysis. From the nine requests, six responded with no further comments added.

### **Data Organization Technique**

According to Yin (2017), a researcher should prioritize and focus on organizing the data. Data collected from music industry websites and from YouTube videos were organized by incorporating the data into my field notes. I also developed transcribed notes from the audio recordings from my interviews. All data collected was stored for later use on my laptop in an encrypted folder. Document reviews and field notes confirmed themes from thematic analysis in support of the data analysis process and what I perceived or derived from notes from body language (nonverbal cues) were used for inclusion of interpretive analysis. I used a number in conjunction with the participant and

labeled the participant interviews Participant\_1 through Participant\_9 with the correlating participant identification saved in a separate, password protected file to protect anonymity, ensure confidentiality and privacy at the early stage of the data collection process. The identity of the participants with the correlating label was recorded in an encrypted note file. The notes were labeled Notes\_1-9 for each corresponding participant.

Audio recorded data was transferred to my laptop. I created a backup of all files on a password protected thumb drive that was locked away in a safe located in my home. The thumb drive will be incinerated, and the transcripts and recordings will be deleted. Paper data will be shredded, and electronic data will be securely erased to destroy data files after 5 years.

### **Data Analysis**

Marketing mix is a combination of factors (product, price, place, and promotion or 4Ps) used to market a product or service. The four factors are foundational and can be used as the basis to formulate or expand the 4Ps into digital marketing strategies independent artists can use to achieve and sustain profitability. I conducted semistructured interviews with nine independent artists located in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. The responses from the interview were examined, categorized, tabulated, and tested to uncover themes (Garbarski et al., 2017). Data was organized into structures to identify codes and categories as they emerge from themes regarding digital marketing strategies.

Interview questions were recorded and transcribed. Interviews were recorded using Zoom videoconferencing and responses transcribed using NVivo version 12

transcription software. The Zoom videoconference has the capability to save both the video and audio file which was used to save the interviews. The NVivo transcription software saved the transcribed interviews as a text file. The text files were labeled with the Participant 1\_9 naming convention and password protected. In qualitative research, data analysis is simultaneous with data collection (Maher et al., 2018). Yin (2017) recommended a series of steps for data analysis (a) compile data, (b) disassemble data, (c) reassemble data, (d) interpret data, and (e) data conclusion. I used Yin's recommendation as a guide to provide a sequential process for data analysis.

Transcribed notes were uploaded into NVivo. Computer-aided or assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) can support research in efforts to present analysis and findings in a transparent way, enhancing trustworthiness (O'Kane et al., 2021). To identify the best CAQDAS for my study, I started with a google scholar search for the top software solutions. Next, I reviewed the capabilities of each and narrowed my search to three: MAXQDA, NVIVO and ATLAS.ti9. MAXQDA is software designed for computer assisted qualitative and mixed methods data analysis and helps to develop themes and codes (Marjaei et al., 2019). ATLAS.ti9 is primarily a tool for qualitative data analysis and built on the learning principles of Noticing, Collecting and Thinking (NCT) (Friese, 2019). The software has the capability to extract, categorize, and link data segments from a wide variety and volume of documents. These software packages offer similar functionalities, but functions are designed in different ways. I used NVivo, version 12, to organize and compile data from transcribed notes related to the central research question (Burke et al., 2015; Zamawe, 2015).

Field notes were used as part of interpretive analysis for nonverbal language resulted from interviews, notes from industry websites and notes from YouTube videos which added to the creditability and confirmability of the responses. Another form of data analysis used was thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. The six step process to identify thematic analysis are: familiarization of data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This method of data analysis is important to categorize themes and patterns that emerged from the responses of the interviews. NVivo was selected because after careful review of on-line demonstrations and ease of use, NVivo was my preference. I chose not to code manually using Excel because I am not proficient in Excel and believe the best method was using NVivo software.

### **Reliability and Validity**

The aim of this section is to discuss the role of reliability and validity in qualitative research, and to demonstrate methodological strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings from this study. Qualitative research is frequently criticized for lacking scientific rigor promoting researcher bias (Lub, 2015; Noble & Smith, 2015). According to Denzin (1978), the way to achieve validity and reliability was to eliminate bias using triangulation. Methodological triangulation was used to improve validity using multiple data collection methods (Heesen et al., 2016). For reliability and

validity to be accurately obtained, both must be built into the qualitative research process and not addressed at the end of the inquiry (Cypress, 2017; Morse et al., 2002).

### **Reliability**

Qualitative research design must have reliable results. Reliability occurs in relation to dependability for a qualitative study. According to Mohajan (2017), reliability focused upon the reproducibility of the data and produced by the research instruments involved; however, Spiers et al. (2018), stated reliability in qualitative research is rooted in the idea of data adequacy, which demonstrates support for analysis across participants. I used semi-structured interviews, field notes and document reviews to accomplish methodological triangulation. Video recordings were reviewed for accuracy and data interpretation to ensure responses were free from error or in which the transcribed notes were not clear.

### **Validity**

Validity for a qualitative study includes dependability, credibility, transferability and conformability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Validity makes checking possible to provide an accurate account of the experiences of participants to ensure that the results are robust (Spiers et al., 2018). To establish conformability, I kept detailed notes after each interview and documented a running account of observations of surroundings. For credibility, I enlisted participants in member checking to review Section 3 from each individual interview to ensure validity of responses. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) defined transferability as the ability of the researcher to demonstrate that the findings have meaning to others in similar situations. Transferability denotes the use

of thick description, a technique in which a qualitative researcher provides a robust and detailed account of their experiences during data collection (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017). The research must be detailed with aspects of data collection that help provide an in-depth understanding of the research setting (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

For this study, a multiple case study method was chosen for 10 independent artists in the Washington, DC metropolitan, area who are 18-years old or older and had a proven track record of success with digital marketing strategies at a profit within the last five years. The participants were the unit of analysis with data collected from each member, semistructured interviews, field notes containing document reviews of industry websites and YouTube videos were used for triangulation. From the 10 participants chosen; nine interviews were used because of data saturation.

### **Transition and Summary**

In Section 2 I provided an in depth analysis of why the qualitative approach, research design and data collection methods were chosen to support the proposal exploring successful digital marketing strategies independent artists use to sustain profitability. I expounded further my role as a researcher and detailed information about the participants used for the study. I provided a step-by-step detail of how data was collected and analyzed; and detailed how the participants will be protected. Measures taken to ensure the reliability and validity of the data were also outlined in Section 2.

Section 3 includes a detailed report of the data collected and the research findings from the study. The section begins with an overview of the study, included an application for professional use, the implication for social change, and a recommendation for further

action. The findings include the themes emerged from the interview responses that responded to the overarching research question: What digital marketing strategies do independent music artists use to sustain profitably? In the final subsections, I reflected on my experience as a researcher, then concluded and summarized the study.

### Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Section 3 includes an overview and findings of the study. This section also includes the following: (a) application to professional practice, (b) implication for social change, (c) recommendation for action and further study, (d) reflections, and (e) conclusion and summary.

### **Introduction**

The objective of this qualitative descriptive multiple case study was to explore the digital marketing strategies some independent artists used to achieve and sustain profitability. The primary data collection technique consisted of semistructured interviews using open-ended questions. The multiple case studies consisted of independent artists in the DC metropolitan area that demonstrated success using digital marketing strategies. The initial number of participants was 10; however, I interviewed nine participants because data saturation was accomplished after nine interviews. All interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom. I emailed consent forms to the participants before the interviews and received a return acknowledgement and consent form.

I verbalized an introductory summary before each interview to ensure each participant understood the requirements detailed in the consent form and once again reminded the decision to withdraw from participation could occur at any time. All participants understood the ethical nature of the consent form and their involvement with this study. I used Zoom to conduct the interviews and upon initiation of the video conference, participants consented to be recorded using both audio and video formats.



Once each interview was concluded, I imported the Zoom audio and video files into NVivo and transcribed the audio files using the NVivo transcription feature. I reviewed the transcriptions for each interview and edited the responses that were not transcribed accurately. A few instances required an additional review of the video because of inaudible responses. I forwarded a copy of the summarized data to participants for member checking to ensure validity and accuracy of responses. The interviews lasted on average 35 minutes. The shortest interview was 20 minutes and the longest was 58 minutes. Participants provided lengthy responses and demonstrated a great willingness to share information about digital marketing strategies that were successful.

In addition to responses from open ended interviews, I used document reviews and field notes to record body language or nonverbal cues and used for interpretive analysis. Document reviews included modified interview questions, industry websites such as the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) and YouTube videos. An analysis of the findings revealed from interview responses, identified the various digital marketing platforms and strategies independent artists used successfully to sustain profitability. Furthermore, participants proposed an analysis of the key barriers and challenges independent artists faced because of the COVID-19 virus. The analysis of participant responses demonstrated a detour from some of the findings presented in the literature.

### **Presentation of Findings**

The overarching research question guiding the study was: What digital marketing strategies do independent artists use to sustain profitability? Employing a purposive

sample, I was able to obtain information rich responses from the selected participants. Some of the findings confirmed results from the literature, while others extended the body of knowledge and provided an innovative approach to the various digital marketing strategies that can be used with social media solutions or created questions for further study. The major themes revealed from the interviews were (a) primary digital marketing strategies, (b) marketing analysis tools, and (c) key barriers from sustaining profitability. The following themes extended those identified in the peer-reviewed articles presented in Section 1: marketing mix, configuration theory, marketing and entrepreneurship, digital marketing strategies, and the impact of COVID on the music industry.

The conceptual framework of marketing mix is the basis of marketing concepts that demonstrated how the 4Ps of marketing product, promotion, placement, and price evolved to the current generation of independent artists that are now using digital marketing and the widespread use of social media to market and gain fanbase. In relation to the music industry, a correlation between the 4Ps in marketing include merchandise such as CD's, t-shirts, and paraphernalia for product; social media, mobile phones and the internet for promotion; music placement through digital outlets, for instance, website, Spotify, and iTunes for the distribution channel; and actual value acquired from cost of music product for pricing.

As indicated by the data, primary digital marketing strategies range from identifying the various social media tools independent artists used most and the various strategies used to engage fans to increase fan base. Configuration theory is the interdependencies between combined marketing and media platforms for maximum

effect (Peng et al., 2020). Participants validated merchandising of CDs at live performances were used in combination of live performances for profit. Co-creational marketing is the interaction with customers through social media based on customer experience and value created through interactive relationships. As indicated by the data, most participants used Facebook and Instagram as their primary social media platforms to engage their audience and analysis of the effectiveness of marketing strategies (Evans et al., 2017).

### **Emergent Theme 1: Primary Digital Marketing Strategies**

The emergence of the primary digital marketing strategy's theme from the interviews with the study participants, aligned with the literature reviews revealing how technology changed consumer buying intention and the marketing factors that influenced sales with music products (Kannan & Li, 2017). According to P1, P2, and P6, the advancement of technology provided opportunities for artists to reach a wider, diverse audience and made it easier to create content such as pictures or videos for upload to social media. The use of the internet and social media allowed pricing strategies at a more affordable price.

I chose marketing mix as the primary theory used to explore and support the concept of successful digital marketing strategies. McCarthy's (1964), 4Ps marketing mix included the foundational elements of marketing: product, price, promotion, and placement. Promotion through social media, mobile phones and internet can increase the sales of music products (Kusumawati et al., 2014). According to P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6,

P7, P8 and P9, each revealed 100% use of social media marketing, using Facebook or Instagram as their primary solution.

Placement in the music industry is the distribution channel used to sell music through digital outlets, for instance, website, Spotify, and iTunes. Each of the participant responses supported this literature by confirming use of digital outlets to sell music and as part of their strategy to advertise and gain followers. Participant 1 remarked the addition of a song to a Spotify playlist that has “thousands or hundreds of thousands of followers” can be used to gain a broader fan base. Participant 2 added a layered approach to social media strategy by adding a song to Spotify once music was placed on television. Music placement increased fanbase and created a more diverse audience.

Marketing mix was the primary concept chosen because the 4Ps of marketing is the foundation of marketing principles that can be used to build on other theories to enhance the digital marketing strategies independent artists used to sustain profitability. Configuration theory is the combination of media and sales platforms integrated to combine a variation of strategies to generate revenue (Leenders et al., 2015). For example, despite the decline of CD sales, CDs can be a feasible resource for artists during live performances, onsite CD merchandising sales and used as a social media promotional tool. (Leenders et al., 2015). Participant 7 revealed they profited from the sale of merchandise such as CD’s, tshirts and stickers and accepted donations as a revenue stream. Participant 8 added, “the sale of vinyl and momentums like tshirts enlist the sales from their older fans”. The combination of strategies derived from participant responses confirmed successful.

Social media and building a fanbase to target sales emerged as primary digital marketing strategies. According to Herrera (2017), postings that contain artist authenticity, comments, and quick response time to posts maximizes online engagement. Social media is an important tool for an independent artist and fosters an important role with relationships between performer and the audience (Haynes & Marshall, 2017; Oswari et al., 2019). Participant 3 used Patreon, a subscription based model that has the capability to connect fans with different tiers and rewards that offer access to exclusive content. Participant 3 stated, “this attracts fans because they want to get closer”. Participant 4 used various social media platforms to target certain age groups to attract different consumers. The participant also stated, “they all have their strengths, for example, TikTok has a lot more organic traffic because it’s the one that’s up all the time. So, you have an advantage of potentially going viral more so on TikTok than other platforms.” Participant 5 strategized to post on Twitter to connect to different platforms and includes engaging images, videos, best text, and fonts. Within the different postings, fans are directed to their website with instructions to follow actions requested for ticket purchases or notifications for upcoming performances. Participant 5 added, “you have to tell people exactly what to do and be focused with content”. Participant 6 advertises on Eventbrite and creates an event page on Facebook to maximize ticket sales. They responded the best day to post and call to action for purchasing is most effective when centered around payday (Thursday or Friday). All participants collectively used some form of social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok) and ads to engage audience and promote ticket sales.

According to the literature, social media is essential for the independent artist and an inordinate way to build and maintain audiences (Haynes & Marsall, 2017). Participant responses confirmed social media was monumental in creating a significant fanbase by the interaction and engagement with independent artists. Participant 1 responded the way to connect with people from all over the world is via the internet and uses ads for music placed on Google and YouTube to increase exposure. Participant 4 posts on various platforms to capture certain age groups and certain types of consumers for a greater opportunity to increase fan base. Another strategy is offered by Participant 6, who shared that in addition to posting primarily to Facebook and secondary to Instagram, they use opportunities to gain additional fans while performing with well known artists. Participant 7 connected with fans that posted videos after shows and realized the longer they stay, the more intent they will be to purchase and become invested in what they have built. Table 2 represents the emergent themes related to primary digital marketing strategies from the participant responses.

**Table 2**

*Table of Frequency of Themes in Primary Digital Marketing Strategies*

Theme	<i>n</i>	% of Occurrences
Social Media Strategies	8	89%
Marketing	6	67%
Strategies to Increase Sales	5	56%
Technology & Benefits	9	100%
Additional Guidance	8	89%

### **Emergent Theme 2: Marketing Analysis Tools**

The emergence of how marketing analysis tools and marketing metrics were used to measure data and analyze behavioral targeting as performance indicators, partially

aligned with the literature and participant responses (Saboo et al., 2016). Social Media Analytics (SMA) is used to measure and analyze social media data (Holsapple et al., 2018; Keegan & Rowley, 2017; Suseno et al., 2018). Participants 1 and 2 responded the various social media applications such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Google have tools that can provide analytics, i.e., number of people reached, number of likes, and length of time video was reviewed. Participant 2 also used SEO for website analytics and with email campaigns, which can identify who opened an email, percentage of people that forwarded their message and number of customers that opened their email. Participant 6 has heard of and tried various tools with social media; however, questioned the accuracy of the reports and at the time of the interview was not using any of the analytics. The participant indicated the use of ticket sales from events and surveys. In addition to using the analytics from various social media sites, Participant 7 used Google spreadsheets to manually record and analyze budget information; MailChimp for email analytics and merchandise sales from Printful which provides monthly summary of sales, profit and best music campaign used to generate sales. Arguably, the widespread use of Google Analytics is because of its established presence in digital marketing in general, such that it allows parallel collection and analysis of data across beyond social media, to include websites, search engine marketing and e-mail marketing channels (Keegan & Rowley, 2017). Participants 8 and 9 used YouTube analytics for analysis of demographics and specific information and in addition, Participant 9 used analytics incorporated in website; however, did not find it very helpful because they already know their demographic.

Park et al. (2021) suggested an example of an analysis tool, ANCOVA.

ANCOVA calculates engagement scores for analysis and could help marketers to regularly monitor the performance of their social media marketing by assessing engagement among users and investigating specific comments posted by users. Although participants confirmed the use of various social media analysis tools, none of the participants indicated in their responses that level of statistical analysis to determine the effectiveness of their social media strategies. Table 3 reflects the frequency in which the participants referenced the marketing analysis tools used most.

**Table 3**

*Table of Frequency Referencing Marketing Analysis Tools*

Theme (Top Responses)	Participant	(n) of Frequency of Occurrences
Websites	P2, P9	2
Google	P1, P2, P7	3
YouTube	P1, P3	2
Facebook	P1, P2, P8	3
Instagram	P1, P2, P8	3
Spotify	P1, P6	2
Email	P2, P7	2

### **Emergent Theme 3: Key Barriers from Sustaining Profitability**

The emergence of the key barriers independent artists described, and strategies used to overcome perceived barriers to profitability aligned with the literature and interview responses. Independent artists may deal with structural barriers such as cost advantages, working relationships, access to distribution, and regulation such as intellectual property to finding a customer base or having start-up money (Whitaker, 2017). Participant 4 did not feel a level of success or consistency with the outcome of any specific strategy based on profitability (as a measurement) since they did not have the



time required to focus or implement strategies to build consistent revenue; however, shared that when they were aggressively implementing their marketing strategy, the best strategies were honest, honorable, heartfelt, and unplanned. Those characteristics created approximately 99% success because they resonated most with Participant 4's audience. The biggest barrier for Participant 7 was lack of budget and stated, "as an independent artist, the benefit of having a major label to market and fund an artists' project is non-existent. The strategy to counter lack of funding was bartering with artists in a similar position and donations".

COVID-19 also affected every part of the music industry and caused disarray for many independent artists' profitability (Ralston, 2020). The restrictions ordered by governments around the world, prohibited live music events, which caused a major loss of income for independent artists (Howard et al., 2021). Participant 1 responded, "before COVID-19, they were not investing enough time into marketing and building an online global presence". As a result, Participant 1 was able to increase fanbase worldwide and focused most in areas outside of their local area. Participant 2 responded, "COVID-19 created a shift in revenue stream". Most of their income was strictly from opportunities online and focus shifted from booking shows and live performances, to creating music for television (synch licensing). Participant 3 used a combination of strategies to 'cross market' from on-line concerts to open discussions that would lead to donations and record sales. Since most people were confined to being inside, there was an opportunity to connect with existing fans and obtain new fans by sharing past and present projects and establishing a repertoire which would turn into supporters for live events once venues

started to reopen. Participant 3 added, “a profitable strategy that increased profitability by 25-30% was to allow supporters to name their own price for music that was sold directly from my website”. Participant 5 used the time during COVID-19 to reflect, gained additional skillsets to increase marketing endeavors and developed strategies to stay current with fans. One strategy was the replay of shows from their weekly concert, interview series which leveraged new technology that allowed musicians to collectively perform virtually from separate locations. Although some musicians were disadvantaged by the periods of isolation, others demonstrated productivity in relation to releasing new music without the interruptions of daily life and work. Participant 5 used the time to recreate music, publish videos and collaborate with other artists to bring awareness to social issues. The achieved goal was to relay hope during a time when the world needed it most, and as a caveat provided an opportunity to increase fanbase. Additionally, they had multiple streams of income from other business ventures and music services that included singing for online weddings and funerals. Some of the music services were gifted; however, in return those customers became supporters by the purchase of music and ticket sales once venues reopened. Participant 6 stayed connected to fans primarily via social media and shared that there was no set strategy to plan to address key barriers from COVID-19. They did notice an increase in engagement from fans during Facebook live interactions and leveraged more opportunities to create music at home which resulted in releasing singles every two to three weeks.

Participant 8 admitted the impact of COVID-19 reignited their career. The last CD was produced in 2011 (recent CD launched in 2021) and because of the quarantine,

forced them to purchase and learn more about the technologies and equipment to produce music, as well as provided an opportunity to learn more about the business and how to obtain the needed resources to convert to revenue. Participant 9 transitioned most of their work to Patreon and leveraged memberships to provide exclusive access for a fee. Table 4 represents the emergent themes related to barriers from sustaining profitability for the participants.

**Table 4**

*Table of % of Occurrences for Emergent Themes Related to Key Barriers from Sustaining Profitability*

Theme	<i>n</i>	% of Occurrences
Challenges	8	89%
Impact of COVID-19	7	78%
Team Building	5	56%

### **Application to Professional Practice**

The purpose of the study was to explore what digital marketing strategies some independent artists used to achieve and sustain profitability. The findings confirmed the digital marketing strategies can be successful if artists are consistent and willing to stay abreast of current digital marketing technologies (and platforms). Although the various social media platforms were commonly used, the integration of various strategies coupled with those platforms was key with individual success factors. There was no set ‘how to’ instruction for any specific strategy. The interview responses indicated that independent artists used similar strategies to getting heard, getting noticed, or finding opportunities.

The study revealed six strategies advantageous to artists: (a) consistent and proficient in social media platforms, (b) constant analysis of strategy to identify what works (and eliminate what does not), (c) use the full capability of the internet to expand audience (domestic and overseas), (d) increase business/entrepreneurial skills, (e) multiple revenue streams, and (f) collaboration. According to Anderson et al. (2018), entrepreneurs and business owners had different interpretations of marketing. Entrepreneurial marketing (EM) and mainstream marketing shared commonalities with identifying opportunities and transforming resources into value creation for customers; however, how value is created is accomplished differently. As creative industries such as recorded music, became increasingly technology intensive, independent artists found it imperative to learn the business of music and technology used to reach target audience. Given the advancement of social networking the independent artist or entrepreneur must become an expert in a variety of platforms to sustain profitability.

### **Implications for Social Change**

Although the focus for this study was independent artists, the knowledge for digital marketing strategies is useful throughout society despite occupation or business model. The growth in technology changed the music industry and contributed to the disruption of traditional music business revenue streams causing musicians to become more involved with career management duties (Aguiar & Waldfogel, 2018). Technology provided opportunities for independent artists to manufacture, promote and distribute their own music which created a new model for presenting music to consumers. The

multiple roles once held by various actors and departments within major labels are the responsibility of the independent artist.

Independent artists could benefit from specialized training to include social media strategies and entrepreneurial skills to expand knowledge and increase the potential to sustain profitability in the music industry. More secondary institutions should include a curriculum tailored to specific digital marketing strategies, social media strategies and awareness of various funding sources. An increase of specialized workshops and artist showcases could not only educate but provide additional opportunities for artist exposure. Participant 1 recognized the lack of local support which could partially be a result of fans not knowing who the local artists are to support. The focus of this study was digital marketing strategies to sustain profitability; however, the implication for social change could support and encourage independent artists to continue to make music.

### **Recommendations for Action**

The lack of innovation hubs, business resource labs, music advisory boards, available spaces and places for music and network, a receptive and engaged audience, and music related businesses makes it challenging for independent musicians to maintain profitability or drive economic growth (Schmitt & Muyoya, 2020). Findings of this study such as lack of time invested in increasing fanbase, funding, resources, and music related business is the reason why some independent artists have not reached their fullest potential for profitability. The impact of COVID-19 was an unforeseen, added devastation that resulted in independent artists having to pivot and create innovative solutions to be profitable using digital technologies. Some leveraged bartering of

expertise and services, collaboration, and funding subsidy resources to survive financially.

With these findings in mind, I recommend the following actions for researchers: (a) determine gaps with digital marketing strategies that independent artists face, (b) explore and expand on funding sources, (c) explore methods to communicate new social media tools as they are released (d) explore solutions to increase opportunities for fans to connect with artists outside of their network. Scholars specializing in business and creative industries might increase the body of knowledge with more research into the entrepreneurial and digital marketing strategy needs of independent artists. Lastly, peer-reviewed articles published in industry magazines, websites and webinars could reach a wider audience and benefit more artists.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The purpose of the study was to explore what digital marketing strategies some independent artists used to achieve and sustain profitability. The results from this study were indicative of the various social media strategies, analysis tools and barriers addressed that sustained profitability. To learn from and build upon this study, future researchers might want to address how independent artists can best use these resources to expand on and achieve their goals to reach optimum success with digital marketing strategies. After analyzing the participant responses, I concluded that consistency, knowledge of various social media platforms and targeted marketing are recommended for digital marketing strategies to be most effective. I recommend further research into

digital marketing methods and how various digital marketing solutions can be used to gain a broader fan base to increase sales.

There were a few limitations that emerged within this study because of the use of qualitative methodologies. Limitations are inherent weaknesses found in the design of a research study (Yin, 2017). The limited amount of peer reviewed articles for information regarding past and present music industry business models, the sample size of 10 independent artists, following the trend of technology and not knowing future effects of disruptive technology were identified limitations. Based on limitations of this study, more studies and additional assessment could help provide a more detailed study by researchers and practitioners to decide if the findings are distinctive to independent musicians located in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, or relevant to other independent musicians located in other places.

### **Reflections**

My research topic on independent artists and the recorded music industry was one of great and personal interest to me. As an artist, I had to increase awareness of personal bias by ensuring I followed the requirements outlined in the IRB requirements to protect the participants and asked open ended questions to gain a perspective from the responses without inserting my personal belief or opinion. The participants chosen for this research were independent artists some known; however, to minimize bias methodological triangulation was used to ensure the accuracy of the results from open ended interviews, document reviews and field notes. Document reviews included modified interview questions, industry websites such as the Recording Industry Association of America

(RIAA) and YouTube videos. Field notes used to document reviews from industry websites and YouTube videos which supported the interview responses. My intent was to conduct a scholarly study that contributed to the body of knowledge and provided practical information for independent artists to use and add to their existing strategy. An added benefit was that I gained insight and knowledge that enhanced my personal marketing strategy with the upcoming release of my music project.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, I conducted a literature review to identify several factors that supported the general business problem and reviewed entrepreneurial strategies to help independent artists thrive in the new music business model and explored digital marketing strategies to sustain and increase profitability. Also, other factors included independent artists personal experiences and strategies used to increase fanbase, funding and strategies to overcome barriers to sustain profitability. The ‘take home message’ of the study was if artists demonstrate consistency with posting on social media platforms, maintain consistent testing and analysis of various strategies, use extensive capability of internet to expand domestic and overseas audience, and expand knowledge of music business, then artists may have the opportunity to have a sustainable career in the music industry business.



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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Researcher Role - What I Will Do	Researcher Script - What I Will Say
<p>Introduce the interview and set the stage.</p>	<p>Hello and thank you for agreeing to participate in the study.</p> <p>You were invited to participate in this study as an independent artist in the DC metropolitan area that has demonstrated success with digital marketing strategies.</p> <p>The interview is scheduled to last no more than 90 minutes. I will ask you several questions with the aim of understanding what digital marketing strategies you use to sustain profitability.</p> <p>To supplement my notetaking, I would like your permission to audio-record our interview today. This recording will help me to recall and analyze the data later on. Is that OK with you? Any data I collect will be kept in a safe place and destroyed after 5 years.</p>
<p>Present participant with the informed consent form and explain the articles in the form.</p>	<p>I would also need you to sign the informed consent form before we proceed.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ask questions according to the guide.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Watch for non-verbal cues.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Paraphrase as needed.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in-depth responses.</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What digital marketing strategies did you use to target sales?</li> <li>2. How did your strategies address the key barriers that prevent independent artists from sustaining profitability using digital marketing strategies?</li> <li>3. What are some proven, successful digital marketing strategies you used to increase profits from your music sales in order to sustain profitability?</li> <li>4. What is your primary digital marketing strategy as an independent artist?</li> <li>5. What sources did you employ to assist in developing a digital marketing strategy for your music?</li> </ol>

	<p>6. What processes and tools do you employ to develop your digital marketing analysis?</p> <p>7. How do you assess the effectiveness of your digital marketing strategies?</p> <p>8. Why was this primary digital marketing strategy chosen?</p> <p>9. How, if at all, have the changes in technology affected your digital marketing strategy?</p> <p>10. Please provide additional information or comments regarding digital marketing strategies.</p>
<p>Wrap up interview thanking participant.</p>	<p>Thank you for your time and sharing your insights with me. Your responses will be useful to understand the strategies independent artists use to sustain profitability.</p> <p>As a next step, I will transcribe the interview and analyze the data. I will share a summary of our discussion with you so that you may verify its accuracy as well as, my research findings.</p>

## Appendix B: Sample Request for Participants

Good Day and To Whom It May Concern,

I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I am reaching out because I am seeking participants (independent artists) for my doctoral study, Successful Digital Marketing Strategies of Independent Artists. The purpose of this study is to explore what digital marketing strategies some independent artists use to achieve and sustain profitability. Successful strategies identified through this research may help independent artists identify various digital marketing strategies that can potentially improve profitability. I am inviting independent artists in the Washington, DC metropolitan area who have published original music at a profit during the last 5 years, to participate in the study. Eligible participants 18-years old or older, should have multiple revenue streams including sales of merchandise, CDs or digital streaming sales and demonstrates high profile use of technology and successful digital marketing strategies used to generate revenue. The artists should have a significant presence on social media and are well respected in the music industry.

The potential benefit of this study is to contribute to the body of knowledge for various digital marketing strategies that have proven successful by independent artist participants willing to share.

I will not ask for financial information and any information provided will be kept confidential. I will not use personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, I will not include the artists' name or anything else that could identify them in the study reports. Once the analysis is complete, the researcher will share the results by emailing a 1-2-page summary of the results.

Interviews will be conducted via videoconference using Zoom or Teams.

Kindest regards,

Wendy Hicks