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What Tune Does the Bluebird Sing? A Cross-Genre Examination of Twitter Usage

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ABSTRACT

The music industry is home to some of the most famous people, groups and institutions in the world. As the evolution of mass media and social media continue to drive changes in the landscape of interpersonal interaction, musicians continually adopt new media in order to maintain social relevance, influence and dominance over competing media forces and, indeed, other musicians. Using Twitter data on 1000 musicians, cleaned from an initial web-scrape data pool of 3500 musicians, and summary online social metrics collected from Next Big Sound, this study seeks to identify trends and opportunities for musicians and music acts of different genres. Examining data on musicians from all Billboard-identified genres, representing several hundred music acts, the researcher critically discuss concepts of promotional differentiation through social media, relevance of social media to target market segments and demographics in light of several music act/musician case studies. Trends have been identified through the production of various data visualizations and methods of regression analysis. Notable findings include the 89.5% absence of classical musicians on Twitter accounts and an average following of

Keywords: classical music, digital marketing, marketing, media, music business, musicians, new media, online social media, social media, Twitter

0.0 DEFINITIONS

By the author

General:

Music act: an individual or group that performs under one name

Musician: any member of a music act

Reach: in the context of Twitter, the number of possible “impressions” (visible in Twitter Analytics) attainable within a given timeframe.

On tweets:

Personal: any tweet containing commentary or report of an individual’s experiences or opinions, unrelated to their profession

Professional: any tweet containing commentary or report of an individual’s professional activity

All artists’ genres, when referenced in this report, are assigned by Apple, Billboard, and Next Big Sound or a combination of the three.

By Next Big Sound

Audience Engagement: relationship between recent fan activity and overall audience size, identified in Occasional, Moderate, Strong and Passionate

Audience Reach: growth in overall audience size, identified in levels of Small, Moderate, Large and Enormous

Metric Trends: most recent changes across multiple (web-based, social) metrics, identified in Slowing, Stable, Growing and Viral

(Artist) Social Stage: the size of an artist’s social reach compared to social reach values at common career milestones, identified in Undiscovered, Promising, Established, Mainstream and Epic—through either Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Vevo.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

It has been over four decades since the Internet first began to assist researchers in sharing information with each other. For more than half of that time, the World Wide Web has permitted the everyday computer user access to myriad websites and data points, facilitating an exchange of all sorts of information on regional and global levels. With the rise of massive online social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, the potential connectivity between individuals, subcultures and whole societies has never been higher. Innovators—a descriptor that, here, means “people who seek to bring about significant, positive change”—continually discover and invent methods and tools that inspire others to publish to the world parts of their lives that were, until recently, considered private, sometimes intimate, details. A growing trend of sacrificing privacy in place of microfame, satisfying media-driven stimuli on a personal level and crafting one’s own social image is dominating much of the Internet-connected world.

However, not all Internet users are equal in their utilization, understanding and perceptions of the Internet. Though much of the population of Africa accesses Wikipedia, Africans are markedly less likely to edit the free encyclopedia than Americans or Europeans. Different age groups first access the Internet in different ways, from different

types of locations, and approach available content in distinctly differing manners. Only a minor portion of Internet users are currently viewed as content creators. Facebook, Twitter and blogs are notable for allowing users certain options surrounding the durability of their personal documentation; in contrast, some users create content through only platforms that destroy their created content within a set time, as is observable with SnapChat. Time will tell how expendable content will influence social media and use of the Internet, at large, though for now it is durable media that dominates the social attention of the Internet.

The entertainment industry requires media outlets for its survival. As durable content on YouTube, Spotify, Twitter and other places can service an audience as limited only by server constraints and the number of Internet-connected devices, it is now possible for any musician with Internet-based content to be heard across some ten billion devices. While this possibility leads content providers through cycles of competition for attention and interaction with content consumers—as noted in theories of attention economics, the paralysis of choice, the Blockbuster, superstar and water cooler effects—there is a certain level to which the playing field is flattening. With the ability to reduce mechanical and distribution expenses to the cost of placing music on a hosting platform, the quality of the music and the renown of the artists become two of the greatest factors in how many or few sales, streams or audience members a music act will have. Some level of competitive advantage is required between music acts that perform similar types of music at similar qualities. For example, consider two professional symphony orchestras of comparable quality, operating within the same city, performing the same song in the same

type of concert hall. Even the audience members of this now-niche genre would have little reason to prefer one performance to the other for reasons related to either music act.

These considerations raise critical questions about how music acts of differing levels of renown, of differing genres and from differing regions engage with their audience through social media. Over the last year, the researcher's conversations with a renowned jazz musician, a pioneer of digital distribution strategies and methods, a nonprofit/professional orchestra manager and the founder of a major music crowd funding platform have revealed remarkable inconsistency across the industry in the perceived value of utilizing online social media for increasing the visibility and consumption of music acts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A distressing lack of large scale, formal research is available on the quantitative or qualitative opportunities and costs associated with a music act or musician maintaining a Twitter presence and following. What is immediately observable, though, is that major musicians maintain a near-obsession with popularity on Twitter. In January of 2015, through the use of Twitter-specific analytic software, Music Business Worldwide—a leader in music business industry original research, news and commentary—examined the base of followers maintained by each of the five most-followed musicians on Twitter.¹ Going through Katy Perry, Justin Bieber, Taylor Swift, Lady Gaga and Rihanna, respectively, this follower analyzing software estimated that some 65%, 58%, 67%, 55% and 62% of their following base was fake. For Katy Perry, the most-followed Twitter account on the service

¹ Music Business Worldwide, "The World's Biggest Music Stars: Who's Faking it on Twitter?," *Music Business Worldwide* (London, U.K.), January 31, 2015.

with, then, 64.2 million followers, over 41.6 million of her following was fake. As Twitter's active monthly user base has only recently exceeded 300 million as recently as April 2015, months after Music Business Worldwide's fake followers analysis, it is clear that a troubling portion of Twitter seems to be for-hire.² With this understanding, the number of followers, retweets, favorites, and direct mentions surrounding major music acts and musicians seem unsound measures of reach and engagement.

Despite its most recent valuations, the future of Twitter continues to grow. Currently, Twitter is working to expand its platforms and mechanisms for facilitating and curating massive experiences for its users. An upcoming "Project Lightning" will provide regional and global curation of events, featuring both typical text tweets and all sorts of media tweets.³ A current comparison to this coming platform facet is SnapChat's Live Stories, which successfully attracted some 40 million views of videos and photos of Coachella. As SnapChat's Live Stories views are believed to generate ad revenue for the service, brands and music acts, alike, would soon be vying for visibility on a service as large as Twitter—particularly with potential licensing opportunities for Twitter's Periscope.

Cynicism aside, as long as real people do occupy and participate in the Twitter space, there will be opportunity for benefits. Kelly Clarkson held a Twitter listening party with her most recent album release, 'Piece by Piece,' tweeting commentary to her

² S. Dredge, "Twitter passes 300m active users but growth questions remain," *Music Ally* (London, U.K.), April 29, 2015.

³ Music Ally Blog, "Twitter's Project Lightning will curate tweets from events," *Music Ally* (London, U.K.), June 19, 2015.

followers as a global audience listened to it at the same time.⁴ While she boasts over 10 million Twitter followers, her Tweets received relatively low levels of interaction for someone of her status around a release. That said, her music still placed on top of the Billboard Top 200. The contribution directly attributable to Twitter remains a mystery, as so many factors go into a successful release. This is just the type of mystery that companies like Next Big Sound hope to answer. In response to questions of value and reach through online media, Next Big Sound was founded on the notion of tracking as many relevant online data sources as could be accurately matched to an artist and working to map them. Through years of measuring online social, sales and streaming numbers, Next Big Sound sets itself as one of the best sources for interpretation of past and recent online trends for thousands of music acts, with the hope of assisting labels and acts in taking more efficient data-driven strategies.

3. RESEARCH QUESTION AND RATIONALE

Research question: What differences exist in how musicians and music acts of different genres utilize Twitter?

In light of this question, the researcher identified the following goals to guide the data selection and methodological process for a large-scale study:

⁴ Music Ally Blog, "Kelly Clarkson holds Twitter listening party for new album," *Music Ally* (London, U.K.), March 5, 2015.

Identify trends in how major music acts and their members use Twitter, and their overall social reach, through

- noting the presence/absence of music acts and their members on Twitter.
- noting the nature of content contained by tweets from music acts and their members.
- noting the types of on-platform interpersonal interaction pursued by music acts and their members.
- noting the number of tweets of music acts and their users.
- noting the numbers of accounts following and followed by music acts and their members.
- noting the overall metrics of music acts of different genres, as reported by Next Big Sound.

The pursuit of increased understanding of how established music acts of all genres utilize Twitters in different ways, and pursuit of increased understanding on how different music acts, musicians and their audience engages with each other on Twitter, stands as the primary rationale for this study.

For this study, the researcher chose the geographic focus point of the U.K. for two reasons. First, a sample size said by the U.K. government to be representative of the entire populations is between 800-1000 persons. This meant that a targeted sample size of over

a thousand musicians based, or popular in, the U.K. would be fantastically robust. Second, a substantial amount of study has been conducted of the U.K.'s Twitter population, which drives further usefulness of future iterations of this study.

3.2 Subjects

Music acts were selected based on several factors, varying by genre. In the case of classical acts, each examined act has been any combination of the following: featured within any Billboard Charts within the last two months; been existence for an excess of fifty years; or is classified by Next Big Sound metrics as having an Established social stage. For acts of all other genres, which span all Billboard Chart-specified genres, each music act has either been featured on any Billboard Chart within the last two months or has been classified by Next Big Sound metrics as having an Epic social stage. Data on every identifiable, current member of every act from each of the following Billboard Charts, as populated of June 6, 2015 was collected for this study:

Twitter Emerging Artists; Catalog Albums; Digital Albums; Digital Music; Heatseekers; Independent Albums; Latin Albums; On-Demand Songs; Next Big Sound; Top 100 Songs; Social 50; Streaming Songs; Tastemaker Albums; Top 100 Artists; Top 200 Albums; Twitter Songs; U.K. Music/ Top U.K. Albums; U.K. Music/ Top U.K. Songs; YouTube Music; and every genre-specific albums chart (notably including Adult Pop Music & Songs and Classical).

For purposes of granularity, the researcher provides brief case studies of five selected groupings from this pool, represented by the London Symphony Orchestra (hereafter LSO), the London Philharmonic Orchestra (hereafter LPO), Lindsey Stirling, Sam Smith and Ed Sheeran, and finally Coldplay.

4.1 METHODS AND DATA

The researcher undertook the following process when measuring subjects.

- Identify the presence or absence of a music act/member's publicly-visible Twitter account.
- Record the number of tweets, number of accounts followed by, number of accounts following and number of tweets favorited by each account.
- Observe the presence or absence of any account activity to declare the account active or inactive.
- Examine the content of the last six months' tweets for if the examined account Tweeted about personal, professional or both kinds of activities, in order to better understand the intended audience of each account.
- Examine the presence or absence of mentions, hashtags and replies for the examined account within the last six months, in order to establish the fluency of use with which the account user utilizes Twitter.

The researcher populated a cloud-based database with this data for each act and its members. The populated data fields for this first database are the following:

Name; Twitter handle; number of tweets; number of followers; number of following; number of favorites; verified (Y/N); active/inactive; tweets contain content of a personal, professional or combined nature (E,R,B); outgoing, original account tweets contain hashtags, direct mentions, both or neither (#,@,B,N); # of unique hashtags outgoing (most recent fifty tweets only, based on software constraints); account age; number of tweets per day.

To this Twitter data, the researcher added the following fields, and populated each for every account:

Type of act (group, soloist—G/S), descriptor of account (act main, member—A/M), genre (multiple codes).

Finally, Next Big Sound metrics were added to the data sets for each musical act's main account row.

Based on the field, various null responses were coded and assigned to inactive and nonexistent accounts.

After cleaning the dataset of unusable rows and fields, the researcher charted several experimental visualizations of each genre, and of genres side-by-side.

5.1 OVERVIEW OF DATA

Though publicly identifiable, much of the Twitter webscrape data carries highly personal information. For these reasons, the original dataset and visualizations are not included in an appendices section of this paper. The dataset and visualizations are considered proprietary by the researcher, who will present them in defense of this report during

5.2 Twitter Data

The following data reflects significant numbers surrounding the aforementioned case musicians.

Pop and other multigenre groups:

Lindsey Stirling, Ed Sheeran, Sam Smith and Coldplay each have verified Twitter accounts for the main account of their acts. All accounts from each of these groups were recorded as being active within the last three months. Followers range from Lindsey Stirling's 408000 to Coldplay's 15000000, and all account within these groups Tweet at least once a day. Each of these accounts maintain the use of @ and hashtags, communicating with

others on the Twitter space. Interestingly, none of Coldplay's members have visible Twitter accounts associated with their name or group.

Orchestra-level Classical Music Acts:

LSO and LPO each have verified official Twitter accounts to spearhead their organizations.

Out of scores of LSO members—not including honorary and visiting musicians and ancillary conductors—only sixteen have publicly-discoverable Twitter accounts. Of these accounts, one is inactive and one is verified. This verified account is maintained by the LSO's current conductor. The number of tweets from these accounts ranges from 4 to 22500 (LSO official). The number of accounts followed by this group ranges from 22 to 14400 (LSO official). The number of accounts following this group ranges from 21 to 203000 (LSO official). Three of these sixteen accounts have only Tweeted personal or professional content in the last six months, as opposed to having Tweeted both. Three of these sixteen accounts have not used a hashtag or the @ sign within the last six months, and one of these accounts has only used the @ symbol, as opposed to having Tweeted using both.

Out of scores of LPO members—not including honorary and visiting musicians and conductors—only nine LPO members maintain publicly-discoverable Twitter accounts. Of these members' accounts, none are verified. Two of these nine members' accounts are inactive. The number of tweets from these accounts ranges from 23 to 5225 (LPO official). The number of accounts followed by this group ranges from 22 to 3656 (LPO official). The number of accounts following this group ranges from 32 to 101000 (LPO official). The

official LPO account and one member Tweet only professional content. The official LPO account only uses the @ sign, rather than utilizing hashtags as well. Two members' accounts use neither hashtags nor the @ sign.

5.3 Next Big Sound Summary

Please see the definitions in section 0.9 of this paper for meanings behind Next Big Sound metrics.

LSO is listed as having moderate audience reach, a slowing metric trend, moderate audience reach and established social stage.

LPO is listed as having moderate audience reach, a slowing metric trend, moderate audience engagement and established social stage.

Lindsey Stirling is listed as having large audience reach, a stable metric trend, moderate audience engagement and epic social stage.

Ed Sheeran is listed as having enormous audience reach, a slowing metric trend, moderate audience engagement and epic social stage.

Sam Smith is listed as having enormous audience reach, a slowing metric trend, strong audience engagement and epic social stage.

Coldplay is listed as having enormous audience reach, a slowing metric trend, an occasional audience engagement and epic social stage.

6. DISCUSSION

The researcher identifies three major observations about these groups, first in the comparison of Lindsey Stirling to other classical musicians, second in the overall metrics of classical music groups and third in the metrics of all other groups researched.

Lindsey Stirling is a solo musician who plays popular movie, video game and other songs on the violin while wearing associative outfits and dancing. While this is a completely different routine from the musical approaches maintained by featured soloists and visiting members of LSO, LPO and BSO, it raises the interesting point of audience growth.

Though Lindsey plays nothing but the violin—granting her, by Billboard’s standards, entry to the classical music genre—it is largely her unique performance elements and her intelligently-selected selection of pieces that helps her grow and maintain her audience.

Next Big Sound lists her metric trend as “stable;” the researcher would suggest that this stable type of growth is because no single franchise or catalogue holds her selection of pieces, and fan association and recruitment is likely to occur as she covers a selected work from a particular subcultural niche. Lindsey is a performer with each a unique selection of works, a unique performance method, a low level of competition and a high level of activity with online social media.

Unsurprisingly, the members of classical performance groups do not maintain personal Twitter accounts at levels near approaching the comprehensive Twitter presence of all other groups analyzed. Of a cleaned sample size of 505 classical musicians, 89.5% of this group was absent from or inactive on Twitter. Of non-classical groups, over 85% of

act members were present on Twitter—often verified, and often boasting large followers/following ratios. Not a single member of either of the two case orchestras has an excess of 7000 followers—the minimum number of followers enjoyed by a member of the non-classical group of examined accounts. A major consideration in the approach adopted by classical musicians to Twitter may be the perceived audience, or the perceived perception of using Twitter. Though the hundreds of members spread across LSO and could drive any hashtag to trending within minutes, based on nothing other than sheer power of numbers, these organizations seem to rely on natural demand rather than promoting their groups' activities or engaging a major audience through the targeted use of the @ sign, engaging other Twitter accounts, or using tailored hashtags to drive unique visibility. While most of the Twitter-present orchestra members do Tweet both professional and personal content, their combined audience is so small that the impact and visibility of such tweets are sure to be drowned out by other voices in the Twitter space.

Unsurprisingly, again, non-classical groups maintain enormous followings across social media, whether they are solo acts or groups with Twitter-absent members. While the presence of band members on Twitter is significant in that it allows the superfan of each group to connect with specific members of the band in meaningful ways, Coldplay is an excellent example of an older group with a huge following and little perceived need to engage in personal, digital space social activity. Most every account from the non-classical group featured personal and professional content to tweets, the targeted use of the @ sign

to engage other users and the ever present use of the hashtag in order to draw attention to certain long-term or unique campaigns.

7. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS, CONCLUSIONS

Future studies would do well to examine other social media platforms in addition to Twitter, and should attempt to uncover whether observed results are a symptom of the associated music groups' images/cultures, or if they are a cause. Other points worth examining are how different methods taken by individual groups have influenced levels of interaction, sales and popularity of the respective group. This sample size should be considered very robust and representative of the U.K. music scene, based on size and depth of analysis.

Not all Internet users are equal. Ancillary to this point is the fact that not all musical group audiences are equal. Major consideration to the average and median age of each music group's members should be applied to future iterations of study, as it would be unsurprising for the actual use of Twitter by group members to largely align with the overall age demographic use of Twitter on a national level. Similarly, the perceived and projected audience demographic of each group should be evaluated when discussing this study as, again, it is likely that the perceived, projected and indeed real audience demographic of each group is still aligned with the overall usage demographics within the nation. Further consideration, still, must be applied to the intended image desired by each group, and how perceptions of Twitter use may affect a music act's willingness to drive its members to engage with the public and its audience through online social media or not.

The researcher draws two major conclusions from this study. First, there is incredible difference in the ways classical groups and musical groups of other genres utilize Twitter. Though the researcher has not developed a sophisticated scientific framework for evaluating the entire Twitter landscape, the varying percentage of members utilizing Twitter is so incredibly different between genres that there is certainly merit of further study. Second, the classical music scene is failing to utilize online social media in a way that insures the survival of an individual orchestra, or of classical music at large; as dozens of professional orchestra span the musical landscape of the UK, and as the performed repertoire is generally quite similar, this art form is doing itself discredits in several ways. Without fostering engagement with younger generations, who are currently growing up with Twitter, are Internet natives and are willing to listen to recordings of the best orchestra rather than the closest orchestra, the failure to adopt Twitter in significant ways is furthering dying business models propagated on scarcity and locality. Rather than utilizing online social media as a major differentiator, the examined official orchestra accounts and member do little to carry on a meaningful dialogue into the Internet. For the survival of the genre as the researchers know it today, it is the researcher's belief that this failure to adapt will represent a major obstacle to a bright future for classical music.

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