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Authenticity in a Modern Music Industry: A Qualitative Exploration into “Selling Out”

Sean McDonald, Kerrie Bridson and Michael Volkov, Deakin University

Abstract

This paper looks at the impact of authenticity in the modern music industry. With a focus on the influence of an artist’s life cycle and the evolution of the music industry, this paper explores the relationship between authenticity, the concept of selling out and social perception. A conceptual model is presented depicting the above relationships derived from the relevant literature. The paper concludes with a discussion of the method that will be used to undertake this research.

Contextual Background

This fictitious radio broadcast creates a real life, practical introduction to the current issues surrounding authenticity in the modern music industry and the concepts this study addresses.

DJ 1: “Welcome back, you’re listening to WKM Radio. That last song you heard was the first single of Little Jerry’s recently released second album entitled ‘We’re Here to Stay’. The album has generated a lot of hype on the charts smashing sales of their previous album. There has been a lot of fan backlash questioning the new musical direction and the band’s motives. So call in and let us know your thoughts and if you think we should keep playing it”.

DJ 2: “Yes, well they have certainly moved away from their raw live sounding recordings. The new stuff I’ve heard is very studio sounding with a lot of production. I guess that is to be expected after signing to such a big label after their first record”.

DJ 1: “Progressed or regressed? A lot of people have said to me that they have sold out and are looking to appeal to a wider audience, let’s take some callers”.

DJ 2: “Well it’s only natural that as they grow as musicians they are learning to write music that appeals to a greater number of people. I think a lot of these ‘selling out’ claims stem from the Pepsi commercial that used their song”.

Ben: “Hey guys, I’m a big fan of this new song, it rocks. Keep playing it!”

Jason: “Get that rubbish off! Those guys used to be good because you could tell they were unaffected by trying to make the big bucks! Now they are on Pepsi commercials!”

Sarah: “That last caller has no idea! TV commercials are common for bands these days, they are just trying to make a living. I bought the album and love it!”

Kate: “Hey, I went to their show the other night, they were great! Sounded really tight, just like the album, I love the artwork that comes with the album too!”

Tim: “Just look at them, their whole style has changed; they are using keyboards and synthesiser. They are even dressing like The Killers now! Definitely sell outs!”

Pam: “That caller from before, Tim, seriously what is he on about? They are popular because they are making great music! Not because of how they dress! What does he even mean by sell outs?”

DJ 1: “Well that’s a good point, what is selling out? You also used that term earlier. I think it’s a harsh term to use because people seem to have a very different understanding of what it means. What do you think it means?"
DJ 2: “Yeah I think I did use it, umm, gee you have put me on the spot here. I guess it’s compromising your music to what mainstream society wants, to make more money? Like the Pepsi commercial! I’m not really sure”
DJ 1: “But the Pepsi commercial never changed or affected their music, only their image really. Does their image affect their music then or vice versa?”
DJ 2: “Hmm yeah, they had already written and recorded the song before Pepsi picked it up. Let’s see what the listeners think selling out is because it’s hard to tell.”

Introduction

The evolution of the music industry, led by a 25% drop in CD sales over the past decade (Goodman 2008), has pressured artists to find new ways of making money in order to survive (Knopper 2008). The record label business is dying as, despite having “wonderful assets, (labels) just can’t make money off them any more” (Hiatt and Serpick 2007 p.1). Consequently, as artists find new ways to make money, the question of authenticity becomes more crucial than ever and fuels the debate as to what is selling out in the modern music industry. In today’s contemporary culture, authenticity is highly sought after and occupies a central position in society (Fine 2003). At a time when society craves authenticity (Fine 2003; Guthey and Jackson 2005), the notion of selling out is ending artists’ careers in a tornado of negative perceptions. Consumers have to make purchase decisions, whether it may be to attend a concert or buy merchandise, that affect artists survival. Yet perceptions of selling out are based on vastly different opinions of what it means to be authentic (Fine 2003). As such, it is important to understand the role authenticity plays in the context of a modern music industry. Sites such as Myspace, as well as file sharing and downloading have resulted in greater access to artists and more choices for consumers than ever before, shining a light of importance on the quest for authenticity to differentiate products. Despite fairly extensive research to date on authenticity, the concept of selling out has yet to be explored. This study aims to afford academics and members of the music industry a better understanding of the concept of selling out through an investigation of the relationship between the evolution of the music industry, the artist life cycle and social perception which will lead to consumers perceiving the artist as being authentic or a sell out. While the primary research question for this study is, from a consumer’s perspective what is selling out, this paper focuses on two key constructs that influence the way selling out is perceived; the artist’s life cycle and the evolution of the music industry.

Conceptual Model and Literature

A detailed review of extant literature, expanding from the central theoretical domain of authenticity, has identified several key constructs of authenticity that underpin this study. Authenticity has been explored not only in the music industry, but also other art, cultural and tourism industries as well as brand related authenticity. An analysis of the broad range of literature has been used to draw out a definition of authenticity in the context of the music industry. This study postulates that authenticity can be inherent in an artist(s) or object such as a piece of music (Frith, Goodwin et al. 1993; Auslander 1998; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Fine 2003; Beverland 2005) or derived from deliberate strategies to achieve authenticity. Regardless, it is society’s perception that ultimately has the final say over whether an object or artist(s) is authentic (Trilling 1972; Fornas 1995; Moore 2002; Peterson 2005). Society evaluates authenticity based
on their social and musical knowledge and beliefs (Auslander 1998; Fine 2003). Additionally, authenticity is not a stable concept as it is constantly subject to evaluation and open to change (Peterson 1997). In discussing authenticity it is important to acknowledge the presence of both emergent and deliberate strategies (Beverland 2005; Jones, Anand et al. 2005). Whether authenticity originates from an emergent or deliberate strategy, without society to confirm or deny this authenticity, like a tree falling in the woods, how does one knows if it really exists? The concept behind emergent versus deliberate strategies refers to the nature in which those, whose authenticity is being judged, behave in order to influence consumer’s perception of their authenticity. That is, authenticity that can be either socially ascribed or naturally inherent in an artist(s) or product is influenced by the emergent or deliberate strategies used by an artist(s) and/or their management (Beverland 2005). This study suggests that emergent and/or deliberate strategies form the starting point for the conceptual model (figure 1) that illustrates the way authenticity and/or selling out is perceived in the music industry. Whether a deliberate or emergent strategy exists, the literature suggests that several core constructs influence how an artist(‘s) or object’s authenticity is perceived. These include style, live performance, nostalgia, single singer songwriter creative identity, biography and place. This paper specifically investigates the section of the conceptual model that has a holistic effect on the entire process - the artist(s) life cycle and the industry evolution.

Evolution: In the modern music industry, “we have to collectively understand that times have changed” (Hiatt & Serpick 2007 p.2). The evolution of the music industry discussed earlier has created a new playing field for artists such as Little Jerry. Auslander (1998) states that the accepted norms for authenticity are constantly changing and as such artists need to adapt with these changes. Consumers calling in to WKM Radio expressed a variety of responses to the way Little Jerry has adapted to the modern music industry. Both DJ 2 and Jason questioned Little Jerry’s authenticity as a result of selling their music for a Pepsi commercial, yet Sarah suggests that licensing a song for a TV commercial is quite common these days and is an important avenue for artists to make a living. Bruce appears disillusioned with the band after seeing them perform on the popular television show The O.C. and hearing their song on an Xbox game. Where is the boundary between making a living and staying true to your art, and has this boundary evolved along with the music industry? Carol Sue Baker from Ocean Park Music Group supports Sarah’s observation noting that some of the bands she represents now receive more income from licensing than record sales (Goodman 2008). Bands such as Little Jerry are extending their product offerings to move beyond the traditional structure presented by the music industry in the past and offer more than just a collection of songs. Kate expressed her satisfaction with the bonus artwork Little Jerry included with their album. Artists such as Angels and Airwaves, the new band by Tom DeLonge, the former Blink 182 front man, have released a full-length movie to support their album as well as smaller creative movies to accompany each song. This study looks at how the evolution of the music industry has blurred the traditional lines of acceptable behaviour for artists and what effect their behaviour and use of extended product offerings have on the perception of authenticity, and ultimately, selling out. This study postulates that the music industry is a constantly evolving domain where expectations and perceptions are strongly influenced by the current state the industry is in.
Life Cycle: The concept of a product life cycle (PLC) from the context of an artist(s) in the music industry is an under researched area. As the life of an artist(s) evolves, they are likely to behave differently as they develop and evolve both as artists and people and expectations from consumers are likely to evolve as well. The perception of an artist’s behaviour, such as Little Jerry’s involvement in a Pepsi commercial, or their change in dress or musical style, is likely to impact on their perceived authenticity. Has the natural evolution and development of Little Jerry as a product in terms of their song writing development leading to a different sounding product impacted on Tim’s perception that they have sold out? The PLC consists of five stages including product development, introduction, growth, maturity and decline (Kotler 2006). It describes the ‘evolution’ of the product (Cox 1967), and for this study, the evolution of the artist(s). One can assume Little Jerry’s first album occurred during the introduction stage of the PLC and, as they now release their second album, they are entering the growth stage where, at least according to Jason and DJ 1, they are trying to expand their audience. Is it fair of Bruce to compare Little Jerry to ACDC and The Rolling Stones? Both ACDC and The Rolling Stones are well and truly into the maturity stage of their PLC and have already built up a strong image and association with music consumers, not to mention they would be far more financially secure. Little Jerry however, are at the stage where they are trying to expand their audience. As a young band they need sources of income generated from the likes of a Pepsi commercial or the licensing of a song for an Xbox game just to survive. This study aims to address the extent to which the artist(s) life cycle influences consumers’ perception of authenticity and what role the issues discussed above play in the perception of selling out. Thus it is represented in the conceptual model as a continuing factor. That is, as an artist or their product is being perceived by consumers, the stage of the artist’s life cycle will influence how each stage of the process is viewed.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Model: The Process of Perceiving of Authenticity**

The conceptual model (figure 1) derived from the literature review posits that society ultimately has the final say on whether they perceive an artist(s) or object to be authentic or as having sold out (Trilling 1972; Fornas 1995; Moore 2002; Peterson 2005). Thus, the conceptual model depicts the process an artist(s) or object undertakes before its authenticity is perceived by society. Regardless of the emergent or deliberate strategy, authenticity will be affected by the artist(s) attributes of style, live performance, biography, place and the singer songwriter identity. These constructs are inclusive and a combination can be used to either build a perception of authenticity, or be given a perception of authenticity by consumers and key social figures. Inevitably, society will be the final factor that decides where an artist(s) or object is perceived on the authentic/selling out spectrum. This paper has looked in particular at the way the
evolution of the music industry and the artist life cycle affects how authenticity is either claimed or ascribed at all stages of the process.

Methodology

At the heart of the study lies the central research question to be explored, from a consumer perspective: ‘What is selling out?’ This paper has looked closely at two sub-questions including; Does today’s music industry drive artist(s) to sell out? And, what is the relationship between the perception of authenticity and an artist(s) life cycle? To best answer these key questions, this study utilised a general qualitative exploratory research design using in-depth interviews. The lack of literature and research relating to selling out in musical discourse, and the need to gain a better understanding of what selling out means, naturally led to exploratory research (Glicken 2003). In an exploratory approach like this particular study, it is vital to talk to people (Creswell 2007) in order to truly explore the concept under investigation. Eleven semi structured in-depth interviews were conducted running for an average of one hour. Focus groups were not used as it was feared that they may lead to group consensus (Stokes & Bergin 2006) as less confident or outgoing participants may hold back their deepest held beliefs in fear of potential social disapproval as quite often, the type of music one likes is judged to be a reflection of their character. To find a sample that best represents the population involved, this study used a purposeful sampling strategy that identifies those who will enhance the chance of obtaining data that will answer the research question (Creswell 2007). Intensity cases were used as the sample (those cases that are information rich and that are entrenched in the authentic music phenomenon without being an extreme or deviant case) (Creswell 2007). Everyone interviewed was a passionate music fan with several participants also involved in the music industry including artists, a band manager, a studying producer, a JBHiF music manager and a singing teacher. While in-depth interviews were the primary source of data collection, secondary data was also used to triangulate the study. A series of online videos by an artist in a rock band was used. These videos had been posted on YouTube requesting feedback from fans as to what they believed selling out is. Consequently, dozens of fans have posted videos themselves to discuss their views on the issue. Further, prominent music magazines (e.g. Rolling Stone), newspapers (e.g. Beat) and websites (e.g. www.absolutepunk.net) will be also be used for background knowledge and to exemplify key elements of the literature.

Conclusion

The demise of CD sales and the evolution of the modern music industry have redefined the way artists earn a living placing the issue of authenticity at the forefront of both consumers’ and artists’ minds. The perception of selling out can end an artist’s career yet we do not know what selling out means. A greater understanding of selling out would enable artists and marketers to make more informed strategic decisions and provide a base for future research in the area. Melbourne Rock band Kisschasy are currently fighting these many issues that plague artists of the modern music industry proclaiming “we can't relate to this losing industry but it's alright, we'll always fight for the things that we believe” (Kisschasy 2007). But what happens when artists don’t fight for what they believe? This study delves into the mind of consumer perception and will unravel the mystery behind the myth of selling out.
References


Kisschasy 2007, “Hymns For The Non Believer”, Track 1 A Perfect Way To Meet.


