

# **The Balance Between Person and Persona**

*How social media has impacted the dynamic relationship between artists and their fans*

by

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## Author's Note

Growing up, some of my favorite musicians were multi-talented celebrities like JLO and Shakira. I knew all about their personal lives. Jennifer Lopez (JLO) was born and raised in the Bronx, New York, where she started her professional career as a dancer in 1990 when she auditioned for the show, *In Living Color*.<sup>1</sup> From there, Lopez's success was rapid, and soon she was starring in successful movies like *Selena*(1997) and *The Wedding Planner* (2001). Lopez's first album, *On the 6* (1999), was another massive success. "In total, *On the 6* shifted over eight million copies worldwide and put Lopez on track to release eight more albums over two decades that have collectively moved over 80 million copies globally".<sup>2</sup> She was in every magazine and newspaper devoted to popular culture being declared the new Latina 'it-girl'.

Lopez was finally achieving the fame and acclaim that she had always wanted. "I wouldn't trade it for the world. For me, coming from that struggle this is a dream come true for me. I don't say that lightly".<sup>3</sup> However, with this fame came higher levels of scrutiny. Every aspect of her life was exposed and analyzed from basic details about her life to personal relationships. Lopez's relationship with actor Ben Affleck was one of those aspects of her life that was exploited and ultimately destroyed. Instances like being called a 'mean-spirited bitch' in an episode of *South Park* or a Conan O'Brien sketch that portrayed Lopez and Affleck's

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<sup>1</sup> Hassan , Marcos. "Watch the 1990 Audition Tape That Didn't Get J.Lo Hired for 'in Living Color'." Remezcla, July 27, 2018. <https://remezcla.com/film/jennifer-lopez-1990-audition-living-color/>.

<sup>2</sup> Harrison, Quentin. "Revisiting Jennifer Lopez's Debut Album 'on the 6' (1999): Retrospective Tribute." Albumism. Albumism, November 21, 2021. <https://albumism.com/features/jennifer-lopez-debut-album-on-the-6-turns-20-anniversary-retrospective>.

<sup>3</sup> Staff, LT. "Jennifer Lopez Reveals Her Struggles on Her Way to Fame & Fortune - Latintrends: INFORMS, Entertains & Inspires the Community. Your Source for Latin Culture, Entertainment and Daily Inspiration." LatinTRENDS, June 19, 2021.

<https://latintrends.com/jennifer-lopez-reveals-her-struggles-on-her-way-to-fame-fortune/>.

relationship with stand-ins, a ‘cleaning lady’, and a ‘script intern’<sup>4</sup> all exacerbated the situation.

In an interview, JLO talks about how the public interfered with her private life in devastating ways. She states,

*“It’s funny because Ben and I were together, and we were so in love. It was one of the happiest times of my life,” she began “But also, there was this other thing happening where we were being criticized, and it really destroyed our relationship from the inside out, because we were just too young to understand at that time what were the most important things in life, she went on”*<sup>5</sup>

Later on, in the article, she mentions that now that she and Affleck have rekindled their relationship, they are approaching it with more caution. Lopez applies this mentality towards her whole life in general. She states, “You are sharing your life, right? There is that responsibility. But how do you do that in a way that doesn’t kind of crush your soul and put all of the special things out there to be stepped on? And so you have to learn”.<sup>6</sup> It has taken JLO almost 32 years to figure out this balance between private and personal life as a successful musician, but it is clear that she recognizes its importance.

Coincidentally, JLO is the musician that inspired me to pursue music as a child. I wanted to achieve her level of success, so I signed up for dance classes and sang every chance I got. From Lopez, I learned success results from hard work and dedication. But how much commitment? To be successful, some would say that one has to ‘sell their soul.’ Lopez states when you “...are fortunate enough to become successful in this business, which is a rare thing – and I see that as a blessing – you wind up having somewhat of a responsibility and obligation to

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<sup>4</sup> Romualdi, Melissa. “Jennifer Lopez Details Why Her and Ben Affleck's Relationship Was 'Destroyed' in 2004 .” ET Canada. ET Canada, April 14, 2022. <https://etcanada.com/news/885553/jennifer-lopez-details-why-her-and-ben-afflecks-relationship-was-destroyed-in-2004/>.

<sup>5</sup> Durney, Ellen. “Jennifer Reflected on the ‘Brutal’ Criticism She and Ben Faced When They Were First Together and Admitted That It ‘Destroyed’ Their Relationship.” BuzzFeed News. BuzzFeed News, April 5, 2022. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ellendurney/jennifer-lopez-on-criticism-of-ben-affleck-relationship>.

<sup>6</sup> Iorizzo, Ellie. “Jennifer Lopez Learnt to Keep Parts of Personal Life Away from Public Scrutiny.” Irish Examiner, February 4, 2022. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/celebrity/arid-40801014.html>.

share a little bit of your life”.<sup>7</sup> As I was striving to become a musician, I realized that the music itself was only a part of being successful. Musicians are baring all of themselves, essentially selling themselves to connect with their fans. “One of the cornerstones of fandom is a desire for connection with the object of one's appreciation, from sports to anime to, of course, music”.<sup>8</sup> Creating that vital relationship between the musician and fan is essential for success in the music industry, but the more access fans have to their musicians, the more they want to know.

Writing music has always been an outlet for expressing parts of myself that I had trouble voicing in person. It was ironic that I never wanted to share those songs with my family and friends. Sharing my music felt like I was naked, which is a terrifying thought for young artists. Imagine being naked in front of random strangers worldwide, judging all of your hard work and personal thoughts under a microscope. Most people start creating art for themselves, but when these artists pursue a career in their fields, they have to create art with others in mind, not just their own.

As I grew as a musician, I realized that relying on my creative and technical skills as an artist would not be enough to secure my career success. Even at the Conservatory, there was an emphasis on the need to create a personal brand, cultivate a fanbase, and determine your voice or identity as a professional musician. I was taught to describe myself in one sentence and find my aesthetic to translate to my website. The hard work I had done on my music was not enough. Instead, I was taught that fans need something else to latch on to, whether it is a YouTube channel where an artist posts daily vlogs or exclusive merchandise that proves their loyalty as a supporter. The Conservatory prepared me for my career by mirroring a fact of the music industry,

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<sup>7</sup> Iorizzo, Ellie. “Jennifer Lopez Learnt to Keep Parts of Personal Life Away from Public Scrutiny.” Irish Examiner, February 4, 2022. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/celebrity/arid-40801014.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Kelly, Kim. “Are Music Fans Too Greedy for Attention from Their Favorite Artists?” VICE, January 4, 2016. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/rjxknd/do-fans-want-too-much>.

just on a smaller scale. Within the industry, there seems to be an unspoken rule that as a musician, one is expected to sacrifice a private life in order to satisfy the need fans have to connect with artists in a personal way.

## **Introduction**

The rise of digital and social media in the last two decades has changed expectations regarding the nature and degree of relationships between artists and their fans. Now fans have easy access to their favorite musicians through various digital platforms that close the communication distance between the two. On the one hand, digital media provides the artist unprecedented access to people across the globe and the means to establish and cultivate a close and loyal community. On the other hand, these same tools facilitate expectations for deeper and more personal contact between artists and fans, leading in some cases to unrealistic and inauthentic relationships and risky social behaviors. Privacy seemingly doesn't exist for many of today's most successful artists. In order to attain maximum exposure and social capital, many transform their person into a recognizable brand, demanding consistency of personality, values, and other characteristics to ensure fans' continued interest and support. A meaningful, separate private life seems like a pipe dream for musicians aspiring to mainstream success - a significant price to pay for the opportunity to share and profit from their creative work.

The research for this paper centers on how success in the music industry is often tied to a distinct and relatable persona or a person-centered brand, as well as the mental and emotional toll on artists who feel forced to foster a solid and personal connection with an unprecedented number of listeners and fans to achieve visibility and transactional success. Among questions that will be addressed are:

- How has the emphasis on constantly sharing personal and intimate aspects of their lives impacted the well-being of artists?
- How can musicians achieve a better balance between the demands of their careers and their personal lives?
- How can they effectively differentiate between their performing/producing persona and themselves as a person?
- Why is it essential to establish a clear boundary between private and personal lives?

The paper starts with an exploration of how success in today's music industry is tied to the cultivation of a personality-based brand fueled significantly by the rise of social media. In addition, the negative impacts of the need to constantly cultivate a solid digital and physical presence resulting in a lack of separation between a private and public life will be explored, including resulting parasocial relationships, loss of privacy, and burnout. Finally, I will discuss a potential solution to this problem that has been adopted by some of today's successful artists: the creation and development of a separate pseudonymous (sp) persona intended just for the creation of music.

The goal of this paper is to increase self-awareness and coping mechanisms to assist aspiring young musicians like me in creating and developing their art while safeguarding personal privacy and mental health necessary for a meaningful and fulfilling life.

## **Personality-centered brand**

A personality-centered brand is essentially the identity of the artist. How the musician behaves, thinks, and presents themselves, is represented through their work or what is offered to the public. Many artists naturally base their brand on their personal lives. This is a key to being successful for creative entrepreneurs. While it may seem like this concept is new, in actuality, a strong easy to identify brand has always been a part of success in the arts, perhaps most especially in music performance. Music is not a tangible medium for art. One cannot hold it in their hand or stare at it for long periods of time. As a result, fans look for a way to connect with the work in a substantial way, and the most direct path is through the actual musician. Musicians are not merely seen as creators and performers. They are people with opinions and feelings that admirers want to learn more about and feel closer to. “You see yourself in your favorite artists — you associate with them, whether it’s just the music or it’s their personality”.<sup>9</sup>

In an article about the history of A&R (Artist & Repertoire), it states, “Artists such as Frank Sinatra, Peggy Lee, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Nat King Cole and Bing Cosby were amazing performers, personalities and vocalists who could capture the emotional essence and vocal performance of a great song”.<sup>10</sup> The combination of a strong personality and emotional vulnerability made these musicians connect with fans of their music. Essentially music industry success was about finding the right character to mold to a song. Then as the industry started to evolve, A&R managers were not just looking for a musician to fit a song; they were looking for artists with a strong identity and voice. “By the mid-1950s and the explosion of rock n’ roll to

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<sup>9</sup> Coscarelli, Joe. “How Pop Music Fandom Became Sports, Politics, Religion and All-out War.” The New York Times. The New York Times, December 25, 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/25/arts/music/pop-music-superfans-stans.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Parlesc. “The History of A&R.” MusicKite, April 14, 2014.  
<https://musickite.wordpress.com/2014/04/14/the-history-of-ar/>.



the youth market, artists started writing their own songs. Artists such as Chuck Berry, The Beatles, The Beach Boys, The Kinks, and Rolling Stones expressed the feelings of their generation and started writing their own songs for creative and financial reasons”.<sup>11</sup> The brand that they created as a musician was not crucial to the rich A&R managers anymore but was instead necessary for the fans.

One of the most well-known performers of the 1950s was the “King of Rock & Roll”, Elvis Presley. Although he was not the first to perform this genre of music, which originated from African American rhythm and blues and other genres<sup>12</sup>, he was credited as the artist who uplifted the genre into the mainstream. Presley was not just known as a musician. He was identified by his fans and others as the personification of a cultural movement, one that would change the dynamic between artist and fan.

The 1950s were a time when societal expectations were extremely conservative. A time when the American Dream was a picket-fenced house with a housewife, two kids, and a dog. When Presley came onto the scene, he flipped that idea on its head. “Amidst the norms of conservative etiquette and manners, Elvis fans threw away their inhibitions to scream and dance freely, mass buy records, and turn up the energy at sold-out shows in a way no one had ever seen before”.<sup>13</sup> Presley represented everything the rebellious youth of America wanted to express but could not, an outlet. His personality was controversial and abnormal. “He also moved on stage in a sexually suggestive manner that was in direct violation of the purity values imposed by the churches. On top of all that, he was a poor Southern boy who at times was unrefined in his

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<sup>11</sup> Parlesc. “The History of A&R.” MusicKite, April 14, 2014.

<https://musickite.wordpress.com/2014/04/14/the-history-of-ar/>.

<sup>12</sup> Nguyen, Therese. “What It Was Really like to Be an Elvis Presley Fan in the 1950s - Grunge.” Grunge.com. Grunge, October 20, 2021.

<https://www.grunge.com/316670/what-it-was-really-like-to-be-an-elvis-presley-fan-in-the-1950s/>.

<sup>13</sup> Nguyen, Therese. “What It Was Really like to Be an Elvis Presley Fan in the 1950s - Grunge.” Grunge.com. Grunge, October 20, 2021.

<https://www.grunge.com/316670/what-it-was-really-like-to-be-an-elvis-presley-fan-in-the-1950s/>.

speech and mannerisms”.<sup>14</sup> This only made him more popular with his young demographic and more hated by the older generation.

The appeal of Presley and his personality is what set him apart from previous performers before, especially females. During a time when sexual behavior was repressed more so among women, Presley was a new channel for women to explore these thoughts. “Elvis is, to these women, the promise of full sexuality and passion, the desire-that-must-be-hidden made manifest, who promises a solution to the trauma of adolescent sexuality”<sup>15</sup>. His persona of a rebellious boy, one that was seen as ‘sleazy’ and ‘low-class’<sup>16</sup> strengthened the relationship between the artist and the fan. Presley knew that not only was his music impactful but also what he symbolized to fans. Unfortunately, “Elvis Presley had a history of taking advantage of his fans' adoration for him, particularly in the form of preying on underage girls”<sup>17</sup> While this behavior was and still is abhorrent, it only further proves the point that his personality was an important factor in his success because it strengthened the connection he established and cultivated with his largely female audience base. The closer those fans felt to Presley, the more attention and support they would give.

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<sup>14</sup> Nguyen, Therese. “What It Was Really like to Be an Elvis Presley Fan in the 1950s - Grunge.” Grunge.com. Grunge, October 20, 2021.

<https://www.grunge.com/316670/what-it-was-really-like-to-be-an-elvis-presley-fan-in-the-1950s/>.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, Lisa A. *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. London: Routledge, 1992.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis, Lisa A. *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. London: Routledge, 1992.

<sup>17</sup> Nguyen, Therese. “What It Was Really like to Be an Elvis Presley Fan in the 1950s - Grunge.” Grunge.com. Grunge, October 20, 2021.

<https://www.grunge.com/316670/what-it-was-really-like-to-be-an-elvis-presley-fan-in-the-1950s/>.

## Artist-Fan Relationship

The self-congruity effect of music is a theory that states, "... people have a preference for the music of artists that have similar personality characteristics as them".<sup>18</sup> The connection between artist and fan is not solely based on their own personality, but more specifically the personality they present, their persona. According to a study conducted by the American Psychological Association, the self-congruity effect can be used to predict the personality traits of a listener based on the perceived persona of their favorite musician.<sup>19</sup> In the second part of this study, researchers used a computer to discover a musician's persona by analyzing the artist's most popular song lyrics.<sup>20</sup> "Our approach rests on the assumption that the artist's lyrics provide listeners with a window into their thoughts, feelings, values, beliefs, and life histories".<sup>21</sup> It was concluded that in tandem with enjoying an artist's music, fans love who they are, what they wear, and what they like because of the sense of familiarity generated through close listening to their self-expressive songs.

Fans' desire to establish a close connection to a preferred artist affirms the demand for artists and managers to establish and nurture relationships with their audiences. The artist provides fans with a sense of self and community, while fans provide financial or emotional support whether that be through a monetary or psycho-social connection. "Fans contribute a tremendous amount of support financially, creatively, and promotionally...".<sup>22</sup> This dynamic at

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<sup>18</sup> Greenberg, David M, Sandra C Matz, H. Andrew Schwartz, and Kai R Fricke. "The Self-Congruity Effect of Music." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 121, no. 1 (2021): 137–150.

<sup>19</sup> Greenberg, David M, Sandra C Matz, H. Andrew Schwartz, and Kai R Fricke. "The Self-Congruity Effect of Music." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 121, no. 1 (2021): 137–150.

<sup>20</sup> Greenberg, David M, Sandra C Matz, H. Andrew Schwartz, and Kai R Fricke. "The Self-Congruity Effect of Music." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 121, no. 1 (2021): 137–150.

<sup>21</sup> Greenberg, David M, Sandra C Matz, H. Andrew Schwartz, and Kai R Fricke. "The Self-Congruity Effect of Music." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 121, no. 1 (2021): 137–150.

<sup>22</sup> With The Band With the Band is a fan engagement platform based out of Nashville. "Why Is Fan Engagement Important to Artist's Teams?" *Symphonic Distribution*, July 28, 2021. <https://blog.symphonicdistribution.com/2021/07/why-is-fan-engagement-important-to-artists/>.

its core is based on the interaction between the two, and although the methods have changed, this fundamental exchange-based relationship remains the same. There are many ways fans and artists can generate and feed the bond that satisfies their desire for closeness. Whether visiting Shakespeare's birth home or creating fan blogs and art, the intense desire to establish and maintain a close and ongoing relationship with an admired artist can take a wide variety of expressive forms.

Before the digital age, a popular form of communication between performers and audiences was through fan mail. "At the end of the 1920s, the Hollywood studios collectively received over 32 million fan letters per year for both male and female stars. By this point there were entire departments in place to monitor and respond to fan mail..."<sup>23</sup> The need to employ staff to acknowledge and respond to these admirers proves that business-wise, enabling this relationship was important. Elvis Presley fans were encouraged to create fan clubs.<sup>24</sup> These clubs would meet to discuss all news based on Presley and his current endeavors. Presley's team "work(ed) in tandem with these local fan clubs to promote "upcoming album releases and performances in their area".<sup>25</sup> It may seem like this situation was one-sided, but fans also benefited from the perceived stronger connection with their idol as well as feeling part of a like-minded community.

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<sup>23</sup> Duffett, Mark. *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Nguyen, Therese. "What It Was Really like to Be an Elvis Presley Fan in the 1950s - Grunge." Grunge.com. Grunge, October 20, 2021. <https://www.grunge.com/316670/what-it-was-really-like-to-be-an-elvis-presley-fan-in-the-1950s/>.

<sup>25</sup> Nguyen, Therese. "What It Was Really like to Be an Elvis Presley Fan in the 1950s - Grunge." Grunge.com. Grunge, October 20, 2021. <https://www.grunge.com/316670/what-it-was-really-like-to-be-an-elvis-presley-fan-in-the-1950s/>.

## Social Media and the Evolving Fan-Artist Relationship

The digital age opened up an unprecedented opportunity for enabling multiple direct interactions between artists and fans. An early example of new technology being used to deepen the connection can be seen with British singer Jarvis Cocker who established his own social networking area, Jarvspace in the early 2000s, in order to facilitate direct communications with over 60,000 ‘friends’.<sup>26</sup> Jarvspace was essentially a more primitive version of modern social media platforms like Instagram or Twitter. However, the internet as a whole redefined the fan/artist relationship as fans now considered their favorite musicians as ‘intimate strangers’.<sup>27</sup> Digital technology has allowed for a more direct relationship with artists who were previously seen as unreachable though familiar.<sup>28</sup> “Since so many [now] communicate with their loved ones long-distance, the internet has made the idea of intimacy at a distance more normal and acceptable”.<sup>29</sup>

The advent of social media has only increased the expectation and demand for direct access and interaction between fans and artists. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter make engagement and relationship-building between the two parties more straightforward and instantaneous than ever before. “Two key elements of this fan-musician SNS (social networking sites) “relationship” are: first, the ability of the fan to “interact with the musician; and second, the display of sincerity by the musician”.<sup>30</sup> As a result, fans can connect with the artist and have meaningful interactions, which strengthens the bond between the two.

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<sup>26</sup> Duffett, Mark. *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Duffett, Mark. *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Duffett, Mark. *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Duffett, Mark. *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Daellenbach, Kate, Rachael Kusel, and Michel Rod. “The Ties That Bind? Online Musicians and Their Fans.” *Asia Pacific Journal of marketing and logistics* 27, no. 2 (2015): 168–190.

An artist's "social capital" is increasingly the most important measurement of their career and financial success. Social capital is a "concept in social science that involves the potential of individuals to secure benefits and invent solutions to problems through membership in social networks".<sup>31</sup> In the music industry, musicians and other content creators leverage their presence on social media to nurture a loyal and active fanbase that will drive demand and support the artist's work such as recordings, public performances, merchandise, etc. These fans are those who are relied upon as the "base" to assist with meeting marketing, promotional and financial goals. Before the digital age, the salary and support for a recording artist were primarily the responsibility of professional managers employed by record labels and artist management agencies. A&R representatives at labels took a personal role in discovering artists and developing their careers. As the internet grew in use and influence over the public, it democratized the industry by providing unprecedented access for the consumers (fans) to connect to, promote and share feedback on any producing artist rather than only those with management. In a 2016 study about the evolution of the fan kingdom, authors noted, "...devoted fans can contribute to a brand through a number of similar behaviors, such as cross-buying, counter-argumentation, and positive word-of-mouth".<sup>32</sup> Digital platforms and tools have provided a means for today's fans to have a significant role in establishing and maintaining a musician's success. Nurturing the artist-fan relationship gives more power to the fans, but most importantly to the musicians. U.S. country music star, Priscilla Block made a TikTok campaign in 2020 for fans to fund her next single "Just About Over You" which then went viral, reaching

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<sup>31</sup> "Social Capital." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Accessed May 14, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-capital>.

<sup>32</sup> Huang, Stephen Chi-Tsun, and Tsui-Ju Huang. "The Evolution of Fan Kingdom: The Rising, Expansion, and Challenges of Human Brands." *Asia Pacific Journal of marketing and logistics* 28, no. 4 (2016): 683–708.

No. 1 on iTunes's all-genre chart.<sup>33</sup> Block could garner the means necessary to release a single directly from fans and not through traditional label personnel.

Digital technology has given musicians more control of their business, including their finances. "This new technology permits creators to maintain relationships so that the customer can become a fan, and so that the creator keeps the total amount of payment, which reduces the number of fans needed".<sup>34</sup> While this quote is describing the benefits of a digital application (app) designed for online entrepreneurs, it also reflects the current business model and a common practice, supporting artist success in a digital economy. Musicians can directly communicate with their fans and ask them directly for support, whether that be raising money for a new project or simply buying merchandise.

In this age, many musicians who are striving for success face tremendous challenges earning money through recordings alone. "Spotify Technology SA says it already pays roughly 70% of its revenue to rights holders, including labels".<sup>35</sup> With the division of revenue being split to a whole team of people, it leaves very little money for the musicians themselves. Developing artists are increasingly turning to leverage their core base to ensure expenses are covered and that their brand and work reach others who might lend support.

The 1,000 true fans theory is the idea that if an artist has 1,000 true fans, people who will buy their products without question and promote through word-of-mouth, then that musician can

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<sup>33</sup> 'Making Music Is About Making Assets for Social Media': Pop Stars Battle Digital Burnout; Musicians Today Are Under Steady, Sometimes Ruinous Pressure to Be 'Always on'. Acts Including Tegan and Sara and While She Sleeps Explain Their Tactics to Remain Engaged Without Breaking Down." The Guardian (London). Guardian News & Media, 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Kelly, Kevin. "1,000 True Fans." The Technium. Accessed May 9, 2022.  
<https://kk.org/thetechnium/1000-true-fans/>.

<sup>35</sup> Shah, Neil. "Making TikTok Videos Leaves Musicians Feeling Burnout; Self-Promotion has always been a Part of being a Music Star. some Musicians Say they are Now Spending More Time on Marketing than Music." *Wall Street Journal (Online)*, Feb 23, 2022.

<https://ezproxy.purchase.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fnewspapers%2Fmaking-tiktok-videos-leaves-musicians-feeling%2Fdocview%2F2631866918%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14171>.

make a steady living.<sup>36</sup> As musicians solidify their relationship with fans and they start to feel connected to them, some of them will become “super fans”... these are the fans that are going to talk about and promote these musicians through social media & blogs.<sup>37</sup> The key to maintaining 1,000 true fans is through the establishment of long-term relationships between the musician and their devotees. As summarized at the outset of this research, the strength of this bond is often rooted in the value and the perceived fan identification with the musician’s personality and personhood (e.g., values, attitudes, experiences, etc.). According to a study undertaken by The Journal of Product and Brand Management in 2020 to analyze how different narratives told by celebrities impact their relationship with fans, the more relatable and personable a celebrity, the more connected their followers will feel.<sup>38</sup> A musician whose career has benefitted from an ability to cultivate close and long-standing relationships with existing and new fans through digital media is a pop music icon, Taylor Swift.

Born in 1989, Taylor Swift first came to public attention in the early 2000s, at the same time digital technology was becoming common in everyday households. A natural communicator attuned to public perception, Swift uses social media and other forms of digital media to stay connected with her fans. Swift is known for “her habit of following her fans on social media, sites like Tumblr and Instagram, almost as closely it seems as they follow her”.<sup>39</sup> She will like, comment, and reblog many of her fan's social media content simply because it interests her. As a result, fans see her as a genuine person who truly cares for them. When thanking admirers for

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<sup>36</sup> Kelly, Kevin. “1,000 True Fans.” The Technium. Accessed May 9, 2022. <https://kk.org/thetechnium/1000-true-fans/>.

<sup>37</sup> Kelly, Kevin. “1,000 True Fans.” The Technium. Accessed May 9, 2022. <https://kk.org/thetechnium/1000-true-fans/>.

<sup>38</sup> Eng, Bennie, and Cheryl Burke Jarvis. “Consumers and Their Celebrity Brands: How Personal Narratives Set the Stage for Attachment.” *The journal of product & brand management* 29, no. 6 (2020): 831–847.

<sup>39</sup> Jeff Mahoney. “Sparks Fly as Swifties Fulfil Wildest Dreams; Two Hamilton Fans of Taylor Swift Invited Personally to Hear Singer’s New Album at Her Nashville Home.” *Toronto Star*. Toronto, Ont: CNW Group Ltd. - Toronto Star Newspapers, 2019.



their constant support, she uses phrases like ‘without you’ or ‘our community’ all to nurture their connection. “She’s giving fans a sense of ownership for her triumph, to her you’re not just a fan - you’re a friend and a confidant”.<sup>40</sup> Swift has further broken down the perceived barrier between musicians and fans, by inviting them to her house and having a slumber party.<sup>41</sup> “Swift met all 113 of them, one on one, separately, in a smaller private room in her family home in Nashville. The fans got to take pictures with her. They got to hug her”.<sup>42</sup> In return, these people have become devotees to Swift and support her in any way they possibly can. Currently (2022), Swift’s “*Red (Taylor’s Version)*” was cited as the most-streamed album in a day from a female artist on Spotify, with more than 90.8 million global opening-day streams, surpassing the previous record of 80.6 million by Swift’s own *folklore*.<sup>43</sup> The ongoing meaningful connection that Swift has with her fans has sustained her growth and success for almost two decades.

### **Negative Impacts of Social Media on Cultivating Artist/Fan Relationships**

The rise of digital technology and social media platforms has allowed unprecedented means for aspiring musicians to directly promote and distribute their work to audiences everywhere. However, digital tools and resulting expectations from core fans and followers have also resulted in unintended harmful impacts on artists and their careers. As musicians are pushed to increasingly utilize social media and other digital platforms to interact with their fans, they are

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<sup>40</sup> Winter, Velvet. “Parasocial Relationships Are Becoming Very Valuable in Music and Taylor Swift Knows It.” triple j. Australian Broadcasting Corporation, November 24, 2021.

<https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/the-latest/parasocial-relationships-taylor-swift-red-taylors-version/13644504>.

<sup>41</sup> Jeff Mahoney. “Sparks Fly as Swifties Fulfil Wildest Dreams; Two Hamilton Fans of Taylor Swift Invited Personally to Hear Singer’s New Album at Her Nashville Home.” Toronto Star. Toronto, Ont: CNW Group Ltd. - Toronto Star Newspapers, 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Jeff Mahoney. “Sparks Fly as Swifties Fulfil Wildest Dreams; Two Hamilton Fans of Taylor Swift Invited Personally to Hear Singer’s New Album at Her Nashville Home.” Toronto Star. Toronto, Ont: CNW Group Ltd. - Toronto Star Newspapers, 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Winter, Velvet. “Parasocial Relationships Are Becoming Very Valuable in Music and Taylor Swift Knows It.” triple j. Australian Broadcasting Corporation, November 24, 2021.

often forced to be the most marketable version of themselves or of the person they are understood to be by their fans . That version is the center of their personality-based brand or persona. A persona is “the personality that a person projects in public”.<sup>44</sup> Close and regular interaction with diverse audiences is key to cultivating a musician's visibility and a connection to their fans. However, easy, unfiltered, and often unidentifiable access to artists through a wide range of platforms also allows fans to voice criticism or unrealistic expectations of the artist that is often not healthy or constructive. Media psychologist Pamela Rutledge states that the closeness of these relationships creates an authentic connection that “makes negative remarks and harassment seem all the more hurtful”.<sup>45</sup> Over time constantly being under that amount of scrutiny will cause damage to an artist’s mental health. Mental health struggles that come with social media are only enhanced for musicians. “... the professional requirement for many artists to stay *on* makes ‘just leaving it’ much harder. Add to that the numbers of followers and the pressure to keep them entertained, and it's not hard to see how mental distress can emerge”.<sup>46</sup> For musicians, there is no way to ‘log off’ because they are reliant on close connections with their admirers to gain and keep their support and maintain their visibility in a very crowded, dynamic industry. Musician William Doyle stated in an article written about how social media impacts a musician’s mental health that after a show, he would constantly be checking online for people’s reactions and felt that he had to be more attentive the more followers he got.<sup>47</sup> If the fans stop listening and engaging, that artist no longer has the means to maintain their lifestyle. A perceived part of a musician’s job is to be a ‘friend’ to their devotees by being a constant presence online.

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<sup>44</sup> “Persona Definition & Meaning.” Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster. Accessed May 14, 2022. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/persona>.

<sup>45</sup> Murray, Eoin. “Help or Harm? How Social Media Can Impact Musicians' Mental Health.” VICE, August 10, 2017. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/7xxpvx/social-media-musicians-mental-health-east-india-youth>.

<sup>46</sup> Murray, Eoin. “Help or Harm? How Social Media Can Impact Musicians' Mental Health.” VICE, August 10, 2017. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/7xxpvx/social-media-musicians-mental-health-east-india-youth>.

<sup>47</sup> Murray, Eoin. “Help or Harm? How Social Media Can Impact Musicians' Mental Health.” VICE, August 10, 2017. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/7xxpvx/social-media-musicians-mental-health-east-india-youth>.

The problem with this expectation is that these artists are not and cannot possibly be true friends. Many have never met or interacted in ways that go beyond the need for that friendship for transactional purposes. When these connections start to blur, so do socially acceptable boundaries. As a result of the seemingly constant need to generate and maintain meaningful or impactful relationships with swelling numbers of fans and clients to support business goals, artists, and others dependent on their digital presence, many artists face numerous psychosocial challenges including parasocial relationships, loss of creative time/focus, and burn-out.

### **Parasocial Relationships**

Although digital technology has made these untouchable musicians seem within reach for fans, the connection is in fact not personal and thus does not establish a true friendship. Nancy Baym, Associate Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas and online fandom expert states, "...real friendships are mutual – friends choose to be connected to each other, they do things for each other, their relationships are based on equality, they spend time together".<sup>48</sup> However, many of these followers do not realize that what they have established with a favorite artist is not an authentic personal relationship and tend to overstep boundaries. As mentioned above, hateful comments made by strangers are an example of overstepping a boundary, even if the comment is meant as a joke. An example can be seen in an exchange between Indie Pop musician, Melanie Martinez, and her fans when the former was called 'Mom' by the latter.<sup>49</sup> Martinez states in her blog, "I reach out on Twitter trying to find who took my

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<sup>48</sup> Cool, Dave. "Fans or Friends? How Social Media Is Changing the Artist-Fan Relationship (Part 2)." Bandzoogole Blog. Bandzoogole, July 30, 2018.

<https://bandzoogole.com/blog/fans-or-friends-how-social-media-is-changing-the-artist-fan-relationship-part-2>.

<sup>49</sup> Norton, Jessica. "Melanie Martinez Explains Why You Should Probably Stop Calling Your Favorite Stars 'Mom'." MTV News, August 31, 2015.

<http://www.mtv.com/news/2257295/melanie-martinez-purse-stolen-fan-dehumanizing/#:~:text=Melanie%20isn't%20the%20only,call%20me%20'Mom'%22>.

purse and all you write is 'mom' 'Queen' 'follow me'. How is that normal?! How is that okay? How do you sleep at night?”.<sup>50</sup> While these followers may be trying to express their love, in reality it comes off as dehumanizing to the artist and makes them feel uncomfortable.

The term parasocial relationship was originally devised to explain an extremely close relationship a fan perceives to have with a famous actor or radio star.<sup>51</sup> However, with the explosion of social media, that term has changed to include influencers and other content creators whose livelihood depends on their internet-based work and audiences. “The spectrum of PSRs [parasocial relationships] is wide, and like social relationships, they range from parasocial friendships – liking and trusting the media performer, feeling solidarity with the media performer, and desiring self-disclosure from and communication with the media performer – to parasocial love, which entails strong emotional responses and even romantic desires involving the media performer”.<sup>52</sup> The negative effects of this relationship can range from daily disturbances to deadly interactions. A simple shopping trip can turn into a mob that’s out of control or a private conversation can be pictured and posted everywhere on social media.

Even Taylor Swift, considered a social media veteran, is not immune to the consequences of parasocial relationships. According to an article published by the British Broadcasting Channel in 2019, “Taylor Swift says she is so worried about her safety that she carries military-grade bandages at all times. "You get enough stalkers trying to break into your house

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<sup>50</sup> Norton, Jessica. “Melanie Martinez Explains Why You Should Probably Stop Calling Your Favorite Stars 'Mom'.” MTV News, August 31, 2015. <http://www.mtv.com/news/2257295/melanie-martinez-purse-stolen-fan-dehumanizing/#:~:text=Melanie%20isn't%20the%20only,call%20me%20'Mom'%22>.

<sup>51</sup> Reinikainen, Hanna et al. “‘You Really Are a Great Big Sister’ - Parasocial Relationships, Credibility, and the Moderating Role of Audience Comments in Influencer Marketing.” *Journal of marketing management* 36.3-4 (2020): 279–298. Web.

<sup>52</sup> Reinikainen, Hanna et al. “‘You Really Are a Great Big Sister’ - Parasocial Relationships, Credibility, and the Moderating Role of Audience Comments in Influencer Marketing.” *Journal of marketing management* 36.3-4 (2020): 279–298. Web.

and you kind of start prepping for bad things," the pop star wrote in an Elle Magazine column".<sup>53</sup> The article mentions how she has two restraining orders on men that have threatened her and even one man was arrested for attacking her front door. While carrying bandages may not seem like a big deal for her to do, it's more about why she is doing it as well as how this affects her sense of self and wellbeing. This global superstar, someone who can afford extensive security, does not feel safe going out because of the real possibility that many of her legion of fans have developed an unhealthy attachment to Swift. Her personality as a musician is impacting her life as a person. "It becomes hard to take control of your own life or even to be 'normal' off stage when there is a total invasion of privacy".<sup>54</sup> The difference between an artist's public life and private life starts to disappear as the importance of developing relationships with fans and followers grows.

### **Loss of Creative Time/Focus**

It is essential to understand the difference between a private image and a public image. Gary D. Fenstermacher, Professor of Education at the University of Michigan, describes it as two contrasting worlds, 'in here' and 'out there'.<sup>55</sup> While a private life comprises a smaller, more intimate setting where one has the freedom to be themselves, public life is visible to anyone that looks. The dynamic of achieving a balance between private and public life has always existed not just for artists and celebrities but for anyone that interacts with those in a social setting outside a small set of family and friends. How one interacts with their family is different than how someone would behave in a work setting. With this shift between different lives, many try to find

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<sup>53</sup> Savage, Mark. "Taylor Swift 'Carries Stab Bandages' after Stalker Scares." *BBC News*, BBC, 6 Mar. 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-47472507>.

<sup>54</sup> Murray, Eoin. "Help or Harm? How Social Media Can Impact Musicians' Mental Health." *VICE*, August 10, 2017. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/7xxpvx/social-media-musicians-mental-health-east-india-youth>.

<sup>55</sup> Fenstermacher, Gary D. "On Restoring Public and Private Life\* - Wwww-Personal.umich.edu." Accessed May 10, 2022. <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~gfenster/mspubpri.PDF>.

a balance between the two, however, with the rise of social media that balance is being rapidly tipped over. The struggle exists even for individuals without a heavy social media presence. “The intimacy of social media can lead us to share a lot, and being vulnerable in those spaces can give us a rare sense of power. Yet at other times, sharing can have unexpected negative consequences, like shaming, security issues, or professional and personal conflict”.<sup>56</sup> Artists grapple with this balance in a unique way, because of the necessity to form personal bonds with fans in order to be successful.

As mentioned before, musicians need to consistently use social media as a strategy to keep their admirers engaged. The more engaged they are, the more supportive they are of the musician. The COVID-19 pandemic starting in the Spring of 2020 exacerbated the need for virtual work and social engagement forcing artists “to constantly share updates on their work online”<sup>57</sup> along with other aspects of their life. In essence, artists generate a persona based on their private lives as a way to differentiate themselves from the many other content creators striving for visibility and worth. The ceaseless need to find a balance between private and public life is damaging to artists who are both well-established and just entering the field.

Singer-songwriter Noah Kahan states, “If you're a young artist or songwriter who creates beautiful music with a process that requires time, space, contemplation and privacy, you are going to have a really sh— time here”.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Burton, Nylah. “When Does Sharing Become Oversharing?” The Verge. The Verge, June 11, 2021. <https://www.theverge.com/22526811/oversharing-social-media-protect-personal-harassment>.

<sup>57</sup> ‘Making Music Is About Making Assets for Social Media’: Pop Stars Battle Digital Burnout; Musicians Today Are Under Steady, Sometimes Ruinous Pressure to Be ‘Always on’. Acts Including Tegan and Sara and While She Sleeps Explain Their Tactics to Remain Engaged Without Breaking Down.” The Guardian (London). Guardian News & Media, 2022.

<sup>58</sup> Shah, Neil. "Making TikTok Videos Leaves Musicians Feeling Burnout; Self-Promotion has always been a Part of being a Music Star. some Musicians Say they are Now Spending More Time on Marketing than Music." *Wall Street Journal (Online)*, Feb 23, 2022. <https://ezproxy.purchase.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fnewspapers%2Fmaking-tiktok-videos-leaves-musicians-feeling%2Fdocview%2F2631866918%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14171>.

The lack of balance between these two spheres of an artist's life is particularly a problem for rising musicians hoping to break through the industry because it is a distraction from developing their work. These artists have to divulge a huge amount of their private lives to keep the connection with their fans strong and they are often tasked with doing this without training or support.

*Industry executives push artists to maintain busy feeds on TikTok, Instagram and Twitter; tasks that they say leave them with too little time to focus on writing and performing. The pressure is particularly acute for up-and-coming and midsize acts, who have built audiences but not enough of a business to hire digital-promotion teams to handle posts.<sup>59</sup>*

On top of being musicians, these artists have to be their own brands, managers, marketers, and social media teams, jobs that should not fall to a single person. Artists have no time to focus on their personal lives which is the fuel for creativity in the industry. Kahan states, “he focuses more on hooky, viral verses and choruses than on finishing whole songs”.<sup>60</sup> Musicians are constantly working because they are ‘always on’. Not only is music their career, but so are their personas. The combination of these two worlds may seem like a smart plan, but it is not sustainable.

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<sup>59</sup> Shah, Neil. "Making Tik Tok Videos Leaves Musicians Feeling Burnout; Self-Promotion has always been a Part of being a Music Star. some Musicians Say they are Now Spending More Time on Marketing than Music." *Wall Street Journal (Online)*, Feb 23, 2022.

<https://ezproxy.purchase.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fnewspapers%2Fmaking-tiktok-videos-leaves-musicians-feeling%2Fdocview%2F2631866918%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14171>.

<sup>60</sup> Shah, Neil. "Making Tik Tok Videos Leaves Musicians Feeling Burnout; Self-Promotion has always been a Part of being a Music Star. some Musicians Say they are Now Spending More Time on Marketing than Music." *Wall Street Journal (Online)*, Feb 23, 2022.

<https://ezproxy.purchase.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fnewspapers%2Fmaking-tiktok-videos-leaves-musicians-feeling%2Fdocview%2F2631866918%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14171>.

## Burnout in Musicians

A major and increasing concern for today's musicians as they work tirelessly to stay in front of their fan base is burnout. According to Merriam-Webster, the definition of burnout is "exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration".<sup>61</sup> The concept of burnout is usually used in the context of work or work-related issues. Workplace burnout is not an uncommon problem. "A Gallup study found that 23% of people in the workforce experience burnout very often or always, and an additional 44% feel burnt out sometimes".<sup>62</sup> This concern is different from feeling tired or stressed from work because the intensity can cause problems that impact a person's daily life. Burnout can lead to symptoms like insomnia, heart disease, and high blood pressure<sup>63</sup>, in addition, to the emotional and mental strain that can occur. The matter of burnout is even worse for musicians and others whose job today depends as much on self-marketing and management as it does on creating and distributing their work.

Musicians are asked to generate a brand based on their personal selves and are constantly pressured to put that brand 'out there' for their fans to see and consume. Singer-songwriter Chelsea Cutler, a public figure with more than 300,000 followers, states, "It feels exhausting to be constantly thinking of how to turn my daily life into content".<sup>64</sup> Industry professionals will

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<sup>61</sup> "Burnout Definition & Meaning." Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster. Accessed May 9, 2022. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/burnout>.

<sup>62</sup> Stahl, Ashley. "Workplace Burnout: Here's What's Causing It (and How to Avoid It)." Forbes. Forbes Magazine, March 10, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ashleystahl/2020/03/10/workplace-burnout-heres-whats-causing-it-and-how-to-avoid-it/?sh=79dfc3ee178d>.

<sup>63</sup> Mayo Clinic Staff. "Know the Signs of Job Burnout." Mayo Clinic. Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, June 5, 2021. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/burnout/art-20046642>.

<sup>64</sup> Shah, Neil. "Making TikTok Videos Leaves Musicians Feeling Burnout; Self-Promotion has always been a Part of being a Music Star. some Musicians Say they are Now Spending More Time on Marketing than Music." *Wall Street Journal (Online)*, Feb 23, 2022. <https://ezproxy.purchase.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fnewspapers%2Fmaking-tiktok-videos-leaves-musicians-feeling%2Fdocview%2F2631866918%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14171>.



advise their artists to “make a TikTok a day, music-related or not”.<sup>65</sup> The idea is that making this content will keep fans engaged with the artist enough that when new music comes out, admirers will be incentivized to support it. However, this constant pressure leaves musicians feeling exhausted and leaves almost no time for what their job really is, making music. In fact, it is not uncommon that musicians will be inactive on their social media during or after the release of a big project. After singer-songwriter Mitski ended her tour in 2019, she deleted all of her social media accounts.<sup>66</sup> As a result of the pandemic, leaving social media is not as easy as it used to be. “...the lack of gigs and in-person promotional opportunities diminished during the pandemic, increasing the pressure on artists to constantly share updates on their work online”.<sup>67</sup> The negative impact not only impacts the musician, but also the fan.

Among the consequences of career burn-out is the artist leaving social media permanently, severing the tie between fan and artist. An example is Selena Gomez, who still has social media accounts, but does not even know her own password and posts on her friend’s phone.<sup>68</sup> Another consequence can be even more deadly, such as serious mental health problems. An extreme example would be the death of Kurt Cobain leaving behind thousands of mourning fans because of the burnout he experienced trying to maintain his music career. In a note he left before he died, he wrote, “I haven't felt the excitement in listening to as well as creating music ...

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<sup>65</sup> Shah, Neil. "Making TikTok Videos Leaves Musicians Feeling Burnout; Self-Promotion has always been a Part of being a Music Star. some Musicians Say they are Now Spending More Time on Marketing than Music." *Wall Street Journal (Online)*, Feb 23, 2022.

<https://ezproxy.purchase.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fnewspapers%2Fmaking-tiktok-videos-leaves-musicians-feeling%2Fdocview%2F2631866918%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14171>.

<sup>66</sup> Matozzo, Marissa. “Mitski Says She Is ‘Deleting Socials,’ Adds Second September Show with Lucy Dacus.” *pastemagazine.com*. Paste Magazine, June 12, 2019.

<https://www.pastemagazine.com/music/mitski/mitski-announces-she-is-deleting-socials-and-adds/>.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Making Music Is About Making Assets for Social Media’: Pop Stars Battle Digital Burnout; Musicians Today Are Under Steady, Sometimes Ruinous Pressure to Be ‘Always on’. Acts Including Tegan and Sara and While She Sleeps Explain Their Tactics to Remain Engaged Without Breaking Down.” *The Guardian (London)*. Guardian News & Media, 2022.

<sup>68</sup> “7 Musicians Who Quit Social Media (and the Reasons Why).” *BBC Music*. BBC, September 6, 2018. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/music/articles/378f18f7-00a1-48e5-9682-06defa1f0d49>.

for so many years now ... I don't have the passion anymore. So remember, it's better to burn out than fade away".<sup>69</sup> Even though he was writing music before the importance of social media, it is important to recognize the serious danger that job burnout can create, and as proven above, a digital presence only amplifies that.

Musicians are then left at an impasse. They need social media to connect with fans and be successful but allowing that barrier between artist and fan to reach an intense level and expose a musician's personal life is unhealthy. How can artists maintain a digital presence with fans while keeping a healthy balance between their public and personal lives? As mentioned above, taking a break from social media is a popular option. Another solution is to hire a social media team to create a buffer between the fan and the musician. In 2020, Lizzo announced that she would no longer post on Twitter citing a large amount of negativity on the platform as the reason.<sup>70</sup> However, Lizzo's Twitter account is still active, it is just now run by her management team.<sup>71</sup> The boundary created by a social media team can relieve the pressure to constantly post and prevent burnout. Musicians can focus on creating their music instead of digital marketing.

However, for rising artists, these options are not available because of the lack of reputation and resources. One proven strategy for achieving a healthy balance between private and public lives that has been adopted by artists is creating and promoting a persona under a pseudonymous name.

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<sup>69</sup> Malcolm Jones Jr, Charles Fleming, and Melissa Rossi. "The Fallout of the Burnout: Rock: The Sad, Sordid Last Days of Kurt Cobain." *Newsweek* 123, no. 17 (1994): 68–.

<sup>70</sup> Maria Yagoda and Sophie Dodd Updated December 24, 2021 03:50 AM. "Ariana Grande Says Goodbye to Twitter, plus 22 More Stars Who Dropped Their Accounts." PEOPLE.com. Accessed May 9, 2022. <https://people.com/celebrity/stars-who-quit-social-media-justin-bieber-leslie-jones/?slide=7446754#7446754>.

<sup>71</sup> Maria Yagoda and Sophie Dodd Updated December 24, 2021 03:50 AM. "Ariana Grande Says Goodbye to Twitter, plus 22 More Stars Who Dropped Their Accounts." PEOPLE.com. Accessed May 9, 2022. <https://people.com/celebrity/stars-who-quit-social-media-justin-bieber-leslie-jones/?slide=7446754#7446754>.

## **Pseudonymous Musicians**

Creating artwork without revealing one's birth name has been happening for centuries in various fields. This type of work is common in the visual art field. Consider the famous visual artist Banksy and their decision to never show their face. While anonymous artwork is common in other fields, it is still rare in the music industry, in part because of the pressure musicians have to connect personally with their audience as an aspect of their value. Self-promotion is seen as a necessary action that rising musicians themselves have to take on alone. However, creating a pseudonymous brand could provide an opportunity to connect with fans while creating a solid boundary between the artist and the private person behind their work.

Pseudonymous musicians are artists who choose not to reveal their personal identities when releasing and promoting their music. For example, if the famous EDM musician Marshmello was walking down the street, almost no one would recognize him because he never reveals his face when performing his music. Musicians using alternate personas is not a new concept. It can be traced back to the beginnings of the industry enabling creators to protect their private identity for a variety of reasons (including women not permitted or valued to produce artistic or any work outside of domestic settings who had to adopt alias or the names of husbands or fathers). Among more recent examples is the rock band KISS who was a leading brand in the 1970s distinguished by their theatrical face paint to current musicians like SIA with her wig that is big enough to cover her face. There is a variety of reasons that artists throughout history have adapted pseudonyms and altered egos. When the musical group known as Drag Step was asked why they decided to remain anonymous their answer was, "Essentially, to protect ourselves from

personal criticism”.<sup>72</sup> An anonymous artist called Burial posted in a MySpace post in 2008 that “I wanted to be unknown because I just want it to be all about the tunes”.<sup>73</sup> The musician SBTRKT said “he decided on the name SBTRKT because it symbolized the idea of scrubbing his identity from his work.”<sup>74</sup> He says the approach affords him the psychic freedom to pursue music more directly — something he describes as an intrinsically “faceless medium.”<sup>75</sup> However, Marshmello’s reasoning is slightly different. “...pseudo-anonymity has served as a useful marketing tool for the artist, who had already tried to make it as Dotcom with a different sound and his name and face to the public. “We were like, ‘How do we create something that’s not driven by who it is, or what it’s about?’” his manager Moe Shalizi told *Forbes* in August.<sup>76</sup> “We’re creating more of a faceless brand.”<sup>77</sup> Pseudonymous musicians use social media to their advantage by self-promoting their work with content they can control. In other words, they market the parts of themselves that they want to, which can exclude their face or real name, and brand themselves with an alternative persona.

As stated before, celebrities lose their sense of privacy because of the overexposure they have to show online. “Currently, celebrities have essentially no legal rights to privacy in their

<sup>72</sup> Fulton, Nick. “Why Do Musicians Sometimes Hide Their Identities?” Medium. Cuepoint, November 6, 2016. <https://medium.com/cuepoint/the-curious-case-of-an-anonymous-artist-94c2aeb9a76d>.

<sup>73</sup> Fulton, Nick. “Why Do Musicians Sometimes Hide Their Identities?” Medium. Cuepoint, November 6, 2016. <https://medium.com/cuepoint/the-curious-case-of-an-anonymous-artist-94c2aeb9a76d>.

<sup>74</sup> Richards, Chris. “Among Masked Musicians, Maintaining Anonymity Is the New Fame.” *The Washington Post*. WP Company, March 29, 2012. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/among-masked-musicians-maintaining-anonymity-is-the-new-fame/2012/03/29/gIQApzEvjS\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/among-masked-musicians-maintaining-anonymity-is-the-new-fame/2012/03/29/gIQApzEvjS_story.html).

<sup>75</sup> Richards, Chris. “Among Masked Musicians, Maintaining Anonymity Is the New Fame.” *The Washington Post*. WP Company, March 29, 2012. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/among-masked-musicians-maintaining-anonymity-is-the-new-fame/2012/03/29/gIQApzEvjS\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/among-masked-musicians-maintaining-anonymity-is-the-new-fame/2012/03/29/gIQApzEvjS_story.html).

<sup>76</sup> Robehmed, Natalie. “Unmasking Marshmello: The Real Identity of the \$21 Million DJ.” *Forbes*. *Forbes Magazine*, March 2, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nalierobehmed/2017/11/14/unmasking-marshmello-the-real-identity-of-the-21-million-dj/?sh=675081524ffe>.

<sup>77</sup> Robehmed, Natalie. “Unmasking Marshmello: The Real Identity of the \$21 Million DJ.” *Forbes*. *Forbes Magazine*, March 2, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nalierobehmed/2017/11/14/unmasking-marshmello-the-real-identity-of-the-21-million-dj/?sh=675081524ffe>.

personal lives. Although the Supreme Court has indicated that public figures may not abandon their privacy rights entirely, in reality, the legal doctrine makes it virtually impossible for a celebrity to claim a sphere of private life and conduct”.<sup>78</sup> Anonymity provides a layer of protection that a lot of traditional celebrities do not have. Using a persona not only offers a means to protect a musician’s privacy but also gives them control of the content they make.

In her book, *Spectacular Disappearances: Celebrity and Privacy, 1696–1801* by Julia H. Fawcett, the author explains the idea of ‘over-expression’ and how eighteenth-century actors like Colley Cibber would use this method to maintain a private life. Over-expression is “the method worked by focusing attention on a particularly striking or unusual aspect of self-presentation while at the same time distracting attention from, and indeed deliberately obscuring, the rest of the performer’s persona”.<sup>79</sup> In a lot of ways one can see how this concept translates to modern pseudonymous musicians. Artists can decide what aspect of themselves they want to share and keep the other parts of their life private. For example, SIA posts on social media using a huge wig to promote her music, while leaving out other details of her life like her face. She currently has 6.8 million followers on Instagram, a social media platform based entirely on posting pictures. This method allows fans to form a relationship with their idols online while giving the musicians the space to step away from the public spotlight when they drop their manufactured persona. CORPSE is another recent example of a famous musician that has successfully generated a pseudonymous persona. In an interview, when asked about whether he stands by his decision to be faceless, CORPSE states , “I do think it’s also the best decision for me because I

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<sup>78</sup> Ware, Hilary E. “Celebrity Privacy Rights and Free Speech: Recalibrating Tort Remedies for ‘Outed’ Celebrities” *Sexual Orientation and the Law: A Research Bibliography Selectively Annotating Legal Literature through 2005*. Buffalo, N.Y., William S. Hein & Co. (1997)

<sup>79</sup> Fawcett, Julia H. *Spectacular Disappearances: Celebrity and Privacy, 1696-1801*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016.

don't think I could handle that many people judging me at once".<sup>80</sup> Before his most recent rise in popularity, he had a fanbase from his YouTube channel CorpseHusband devoted to horror narration, a separate endeavor from his musical pursuits. At that point, he was still relatively unknown.

During the pandemic, he gained popularity, and as a result, so did his music. His Spotify account currently has 5.68 million monthly listeners and his most popular song *E-girls Are Ruining My Life* has over 120 million listens on Spotify. The rise of the musician CORPSE was the perfect storm of trends, self-branding, and external factors. "Corpse started live streaming with some of YouTube's top gamers in September, quadrupling his subscriber count in under two months".<sup>81</sup> Not only did he start live streaming with famous YouTubers, but he was also playing a popular multiplayer game called Among Us. As a result, he was able to increase his fanbase and reach a wider audience by tapping into current trends. He was also able to use self-branding to his advantage. His YouTube channel has an avatar as an icon which gives fans a persona to latch onto and he himself has a USP, a unique selling point, which is his deep voice. The smartest aspect of this unique selling point is the fact that it transfers through all content like his horror narration, video game commentary, and ultimately his music/musical career. Finally, the external environment of a global pandemic played to his advantage. Since COVID-19 forced everybody to stay inside, a lot of live music events were canceled. Therefore people looked for entertainment online and would eventually find CORPSE streaming on YouTube, playing games with friends while other people could not. As a result, he created a brand for himself online with millions of followers that would like anything he did without ever revealing his name or face.

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<sup>80</sup> Padilla, Anthony. I spent a day with CORPSE HUSBAND. Other. Accessed May 19, 2022. <https://youtu.be/hP6KfYEr1w0>.

<sup>81</sup> Dodgson, Lindsay. "Meet Corpse Husband, the Anonymous Youtuber with an Unbelievably-Low Voice Who Gamed with AOC." Insider. Insider, November 13, 2020. <https://www.insider.com/corpse-husband-face-reveal-aoc-real-name-look-like-youtuber-2020-11>.

## **How a Faceless Persona Solves the Negatives of Social Media Interaction**

Using a persona as a musician can combat the negatives of connecting with fans on social media like parasocial relationships and loss of creative time/focus. When artists use a fake name and hide their face, it creates a barrier that protects a musician's privacy and makes it harder for fans to form an unhealthy attachment. Since the persona allows for a clear distinction between private and public life, many fans do not get access to a musician's personal life and can only attach to the public one. This does not mean that fans do not have an engaging relationship with their favorite artists because interactions on social media are still authentic. However, the engagement is controlled by the artist and they can set boundaries in place to prevent parasocial relationships. While all musicians can use this tactic, this solution is more effective with pseudonymous musicians because of the lack of information about one's private life. Without a face or a name, most fans would not recognize their favorite musician in real life, allowing the artist to have a normal day-to-day routine that would otherwise be interrupted by fans that consider them 'friends'. A lot of artists start creating because of their love of the art itself, not to be a public celebrity. Using a persona could not only protect a musician's privacy but also gives them the ability to step back and work on their music.

Another problem mentioned above is burnout. A persona would be able to prevent burnout because it would combat the 'always on' mentality with which many musicians struggle. A pseudonymous brand facilitates a regular 9-5 job. Musicians are proactive for the day by creating music and engaging with fans, but once they log out, they go back to their private lives. The expectation is different from normal artist-fan interactions online because it forces the fan to realize that they do not know this musician personally. As proven above, engaging with fans on social media is a necessity for success, but having a persona allows the artist to create a clear

boundary for fans to respect if they truly care about the musician's well-being. Personas create a needed barrier for musicians that clearly defines the line between public vs. private which gives artists the chance to reach a healthy balance that will regulate the problem of burnout.

It is important to remember that even though personas can help with the negative consequences of artist-fan relationships online, it does not necessarily solve them. There is still a risk of burnout and private lives can be exposed depending on the artist. However, many rising artists may see this as an alternative to the standard path to success. Navigating social media is still a relatively new concept that many people still have not figured out and because of this lack of knowledge, they use the same plan and apply it to all artists. That method is not applicable to all artists and there are many other paths to success. Whether musicians chose to hide their face or their name, the benefits of keeping a private life away from the public eye can greatly improve the problems musicians face in the digital age of the music industry.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the key to success for musicians in a competitive, media-saturated environment lies in the ability to establish and maintain a strong relationship between the artist and their audiences. Fans desire a personal connection with their favorite musicians in order to fully support them. This connection is often established through an affinity with the artist's "person" including their values, experiences, aspirations, and lifestyle. As a result, musicians can feel forced to overexpose aspects of their lives as artists and private individuals in order to generate the perception of authentic personal connections with many whom they've never met. Social media has exacerbated the problem because musicians can easily share their private lives and fans can see and react to that content directly. The easy access allows fans to indirectly



create negative problems that artists have to tackle. These issues include fans crossing a personal boundary by creating a parasocial relationship, the loss of privacy and creative time musicians experience as they overexpose intimate aspects of their private life to fans, and burnout from constantly needing to satisfy their fans with content. All of the more obvious solutions like hiring a social media team or even leaving social media is not an option for rising musicians trying to create a fanbase. A solution to this problem can be to create a pseudonymous persona that can separate the private lives of musicians while still being able to foster a fanbase. The creation of this persona would exclude their face and real name, which would allow artists to set boundaries that would prevent unhealthy relationships, allow for private details to be kept private, and offer musicians a way to avoid burnout by stepping away from their public life because of the separation.

I was drawn to music because of the art form. I enjoyed everything about it from learning the history to creating the actual music. As a rising musician, the music industry is a daunting world that many young artists now have to navigate by taking on multiple jobs that are only adjacent to the music they make. As Cutler states, marketing “is not my job—and I don't want it to be my job”<sup>82</sup>. The industry is ruining the mental health of musicians by requiring unlimited access to an artist's life in order for success. Pseudonymous personas that allow musicians the privacy of normal life could be the future of the music industry in a time when there is not a clear distinction between personal and public life.

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<sup>82</sup> Shah, Neil. "Making TikTok Videos Leaves Musicians Feeling Burnout; Self-Promotion has always been a Part of being a Music Star. some Musicians Say they are Now Spending More Time on Marketing than Music." *Wall Street Journal (Online)*, Feb 23, 2022.  
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