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Investigating the Impact of Digital and Social Media on the Country Music Industry

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Investigating the Impact of Digital and Social Media on
the Country Music Industry

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in Communication Studies

Bridgewater State University

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**Investigating the Impact of Digital and Social Media on
the Country Music Industry**

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Honors Thesis Research Project

Bridgewater State University

Abstract: Recently, the country music industry has been impacted by the increased popularity of social media and digital music media sites among fans, and artists have begun trying to find ways to utilize these types of media for their benefit. This research project investigates several research questions: 1.) How are country music artists utilizing digital and social media sites to connect with fans? 2.) How do fans feel about artists using social and digital media to connect with fans? 3.) How has the inclusion of digital and social media impacted the ways in which country music artists connect to fans with their music and content? An analysis of artist and listener opinions showed that despite some mixed opinions among country music artists, fans seem to appreciate getting more access to country artists and their music through social and digital media sites.

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Introduction

In 1999, the music industry faced a major transition in the ways listeners obtained and listened to music with the introduction of digital “peer-to-peer” music sharing company Napster. Throughout the 1990s, most music fans either listened to physical albums/compact discs or digital music files if they wanted to be able to choose the songs they wanted to hear (Lamont, 2013). Co-founders Shawn Fanning and Sean Parker ignited a shift in music listening when they created Napster, a software product that let “people to dip into each other's hard drives, and share their MP3 music files” (Lamont, 2013). Instead of paying for a CD or mp3 file, music fans began sharing their music with other fans for free, which caused 2000 to be the first year in many in which global record sales decreased (Lamont, 2013). This “peer-to-peer” method of music sharing upset many of the biggest artists in the music industry, who were claiming that Napster allowed fans to pirate (or illegally download) their music. Napster has since faded, but it has influenced the creation of some of today’s biggest music sites and software. Today’s music artists utilize adaptations of the “peer-to-peer” sharing ideas in order to share music/connect with fans and allow fans to promote the music for the artists.

In recent years, country music has become one of the most popular genres in the music industry, as it accounted for 11.2% of total music consumption in 2014 (Nielsen, 2014). As the country music genre has grown, social and digital media have developed into assets for artists trying to connect with listeners. This thesis project analyzes the impact of both social and digital media on the country music industry and artists’ production and distribution of content. Following a review of recent case studies related to country music’s positive and negative relationship with social and digital media, a content analysis of select country music artists’ social and digital media sites will reveal the uses and gratifications of each site and how listeners

and artists use these sites to connect with one another. This project will also include a survey used to gauge audience opinions of these types of media.

This study will define “social media” as any website or application that allows users to share and interact with content and with each other (sharing videos with friends, “likes” or “favorites” on posts, etc.); “digital media” will be defined as any website, application, or technology that allows users to interact with content, but not share content or interact with other users (listening/streaming music online, purchasing music, etc.). Part of the goal of this study is to understand why listeners choose to use certain types of music listening media and how country artists are using this information to release songs to a wider range of listeners. Before beginning an analysis of the ways digital and social media impact country music artists, it is important to provide context of country music sales, new music listening sites, uses and gratifications of music, and social media’s connection to music, which will be detailed in the literature review below.

Literature Review

Country Music's Growing Audience and Lower Sales

Country music has grown over the past decade to become one of the biggest genres in the music industry. According to an International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) 2005 world sales report, country music albums only accounted for seven of the top 50 albums of 2004 according to worldwide sales (“The Recording Industry”, 2005). As of 2012, the country music fan base has grown to over 98 million adult listeners, which accounts for 42% of the total American adult population (“Connect with Country”, 2013). It is estimated that each year, country music gains an average of 2,882,000 new consumers/fans (“Connect with Country”, 2013). The country radio industry has also seen a boost in its audience in recent years. Birkner (2014) reports that, in 2013, country music was the number one music format for listeners 18-54 years old. According to the 2014 Nielsen Music U.S. Report, in 2014, “Country radio grew significantly with 18-to-34-year-old audiences through the first half of the year, peaking in June with its all-time best audience share, before ending the year on a downtrend. For the year, Country ranked second across the Nielsen PPM markets.”

Some of this popularity may be attributed to the fact that there are more awards shows dedicated to honoring country music than any other genre. Barkhorn (2011) explains that there are four awards shows (Country Music Association [CMA] Awards, Academy of Country Music [ACM] Awards, Country Music Television [CMT] Music Awards, and the American Country Awards) that reward country music artists for their work each year. These types of awards shows act as a sort of advertisement for country music and help promote the genre to a larger audience of television viewers, which in turn can help create more popularity for country music

(Barkhorn, 2011). Also, subgenres of country music have emerged in recent years, such as country-pop, country-rap, country-hip hop, and “bro-country.” “Bro-country,” a term that was coined by columnist Jody Rosen and defined as “music by and of the tatted, gym-toned, party-hearty young American white dude,” consists of light-hearted, fun party songs about having a good time (Dukes, 2014). While “bro-country” and the other subgenres of country music have been criticized by some traditional country music fans due to their divergence from traditional country music and light song subject matter, the subgenres allow country music to reach fans of other genres of music and gain popularity among music fans. Artists who have crossed over to become popular in other genres, like Taylor Swift, as well as artists like Kelly Clarkson and Steven Tyler who have attempted to start country music careers, have also helped draw non-country music crowds to the country genre. However, the growing size of country music’s audience is contrasted by the industry’s recent decline in sales.

Over the past several years, the country music industry has faced a significant drop in album and digital sales despite its growing fan base. According to 2014 mid-year sales reports, country album sales dropped 22% from the same time during 2013 (Roland, 2014). Also, listeners downloaded country digital songs 92.5 million times by mid-2013; digital song sales in June 2014, however, only reached 73.3 million, which equates to a 21% drop in sales (Roland, 2014). As 2014 finished, sales did not improve much in the country genre. One of the country music industry’s biggest sales concerns is the lack of platinum-selling albums (meaning those whose sales reach one million copies) in 2014. Music lawyer Bernie Resnick says of music sales:

Since streaming sites and rogue torrent sites make it easy for any teenager to access millions of songs for free, it comes as no surprise that young people, who are the music industry’s core consumer, are not paying for physical or digital singles or

albums... Without the support of the most important segment of the customer base, it becomes extremely difficult to sell enough units to qualify for gold or platinum sales awards. (Greenberg, 2014)

Dunkerley (2014) explains in an article for *Rolling Stone* that Jason Aldean's album *Old Boots, New Dirt* was the only country album to achieve platinum sales levels in 2014. Aldean was among only four artists, across all genres, to reach platinum sales in 2014. However, in 2013, ten albums across all music genres were able to top sales of 1 million copies, including three country albums (Dunkerley, 2014). This drop in album sales among country artists is especially alarming because country music is consistently among the top genres for physical album sales, and four of the top ten CD albums of 2014 were country albums, according to the Nielsen 2014 Year-End Report ("2014 Nielsen", 2014). Though several albums have reached platinum sales since the end of 2014, such as Eric Church's 2014 release *The Outsiders* and Luke Bryan's 2013 album *Crash My Party*, album sales have been extremely low (Betts, 2014). This significant drop in country music sales, along with country music's increase in popularity among music fans, has caused industry members to evaluate the recent changes in technology and question the impact of digital and social media formats on country music industry.

New Players in the Music Listening Game

Many industry professionals and music fans are attributing the low music sales numbers to a rise in popularity of online music streaming and radio sites. Online streaming sites, such as Pandora and Spotify, allow listeners to listen to a large free catalog of music while on their computers, phones, or internet-connected devices. Customers create an account and are able to add stations (Pandora) or songs (Spotify) to a personal list and can listen to these lists anytime.

Though there are many online music sites that allow for music to be streamed or customized to the listener (Songza, Google Play Music, Slacker, etc.), Spotify and Pandora have 80 million and 60 million listeners respectively (Stokes, 2015), so this thesis research will mainly focus on those two sites when discussing music streaming. Industry professionals and artists in many music genres have expressed concern over the impact of online streaming sites on the profits of the music industry and the individual artists.

In order to comprehend the impact of these sites on the music industry, it is important to explore the business models of some of the most popular online radio formats. According to its website, Spotify offers customers two levels of service: a free subscription and a \$9.99 per month subscription (“Spotify Explained”, n.d.). Customers who have the free subscription for a computer or tablet can “play any song in our catalog on-demand but users must view and listen to advertisements that interrupt their listening” (listeners who register for a free mobile subscription are only allowed to listen to music in a “Shuffle” mode and cannot select songs to play)(“Spotify Explained,” n.d.). Customers who purchase the Premium subscription can listen to any song in the Spotify catalog on any device. Spotify, in turn, repays artists and record labels for allowing their music to be shared on the website by giving them 70% of the site’s revenue, which includes subscription fees and advertising fees. Spotify claims that it does not use a “pay per stream” system, but when royalties are broken down, an artist earns an average of \$0.006 to \$0.0084 per stream (“Spotify Explained,” n.d.).

Pandora internet radio operates differently from both Spotify and traditional FM radio. When a song is played on FM radio, the song reaches a large number of listeners at the same time. Pandora, on the other hand, allows a listener to choose from previously created “stations,” which plays a list of songs that fit into a certain genre or artist (so a listener is unable to listen to

songs on-demand or create a playlist). Tim Westergren, founder of Pandora, explains that “one spin on Pandora reaches a single person, compared to a ‘play’ on FM radio that reaches potentially millions of people. In other words, a million spins on Pandora might be the equivalent to a single play on a large FM station” (Westergren, 2013, p.3). This model influenced the company to pay artists using SoundExchange, a company that “collects digital performance royalties on behalf of sound recording owners and performing artists” (Peoples, 2012, p.2). SoundExchange gives 50% of a song’s Pandora royalties to the owner of the recording, 45% of the royalties to the artist, and 5% of the royalties to artists who performed on the recording (Peoples, 2012, p.2).

XM radio also competes with terrestrial radio (broadcast radio that can be heard on an AM/FM frequency), but its business model sets it apart from streaming services like Pandora and Spotify. SiriusXM is the largest satellite radio company, with four XM radio satellites in orbit and five Sirius satellites in orbit (Cooper, 2015). Cooper (2015) explains SiriusXM’s business model:

Sirius attracts a sticky customer base that allows it to raise prices without fear of customer backlash. Exclusive content from CNBC, Rotten Tomatoes, the NFL, and other providers separates Sirius from terrestrial radio -- and what free streaming apps might offer once they are widely integrated into car dashboards. As a result of this rich content, fewer than 2% of Sirius' customers decline to renew their subscriptions -- even after price increases.

SiriusXM radio uses its monopoly in satellite radio to retain customers and remain a large player in the new age of music interaction.

In a study about audience and artist opinions about Spotify, Swanson (2013) asked artists from three rock bands (Braid, White Rabbits, and Company of Thieves) to offer their opinions about Spotify and its impact on the bands. The members of White Rabbits explained that they appreciate Spotify's ability to allow listeners to discover new music and artists (Swanson, 2013). Conversely, the band members of Company of Thieves and Braid replied that they believe Spotify is damaging artists' profits and revenue because the site allows customers to listen to songs as often as they wish, but artists only receive a small compensation for the "streams," so the artists believe they are losing money (Swanson, 2013). Though artists fear that sites like Spotify and Pandora are causing them to lose money, the sites are still growing in popularity among listeners.

Much like online streaming sites, online and new radio formats allow listeners to access a large collection of radio stations that their local radio signal might not pick up. iHeartRadio gives listeners an option to listen to radio stations of all genres from across the United States on their internet connected devices without having to pay a subscription fee. Similarly, XM radio offers multiple stations for each genre of music and allows listeners to give input into the creation of playlists for shows. Alper (2006) observed the station and show lineup for XM satellite radio and discovered that XM radio gives listeners a wider selection of channels per genre than the stations that are carried by local FM radio. Also, XM radio allows listeners to interact with DJs and programmers so that playlists reflect the musical preferences of listeners (Alper, 2006). Unlike iHeartRadio, XM radio's "music programming is original—it does not rebroadcast programs from terrestrial radio stations. Its programmers decide what music is aired and in what order" (Alper, 2006, p.508). iHeartRadio and XM radio offer alternatives to standard FM radio programs and stations and give listeners a wider selection of stations and content.

Recently, a new online streaming site has begun to cause a stir in the music industry and create questions about the longevity of these online music sites. In an article for *The Atlantic*, Kornhaber (2015) describes the release of Tidal, a new online streaming site created by rap mogul Jay-Z and backed by artists such as Madonna, Nicki Minaj, and Jason Aldean. Kornhaber (2015) explains that Tidal operates similarly to Spotify in its functionality and dashboard formatting, but offers customers access to “great, can’t-legally-find-it-anywhere-else offerings” like unreleased Rihanna singles and special playlists created by popular recording artists. Though its membership costs \$20 (compared to the \$10 monthly fee on Spotify), Tidal also allows listeners to access songs and artists from labels that are not available on other streaming sites (Kornhaber, 2015).

In his article, Kornhaber (2015) explains that Tidal is more than just a competitor in the online music streaming business; it could expose issues with the music streaming business. Tidal offers access to artists and songs that are not available on other streaming sites, but it does not offer selections from certain artists that are available on sites like Spotify, so it is difficult for listeners to be able to gain access to as much music as they truly want without the need for subscribing to multiple sites at a time. Also, as sites are competing to offer customers the lowest prices, Peoples (2015) explains that industry record labels are beginning to refuse to offer their music on online streaming sites if customers are paying less than \$9.99 for site subscriptions. Since online streaming sites do not want to lose the rights to artists’ catalogues, sites like Spotify are considering eliminating the “freemium” option for customers and require that all customers pay for Spotify’s services (Kornhaber, 2015). Some customers value the “free” aspects of online streaming sites, so a rise in subscription fees may cause a change in the amount and type of customers these sites have.

Even though online streaming sites are facing issues with their business strategies, music streaming has made a large impact on music sales. According to the Recording Industry Association of America or RIAA (n.d.), music streaming generated \$859 million in revenue and accounted for 27% of the total revenue of the music industry in the first half of 2014. In 2014, Americans streamed 164 billion songs, which was a 54% increase from 2013 (McIntyre, 2015). Each week, 67% of music listeners chose to listen to some type of music streaming site (“2014 Nielsen,” 2015). While some people believe that the large sales numbers directly correlate to the drop in physical and digital music sales, others believe that online streaming and radio help music sales. A March 2015 article for *Billboard* explains “the Pandora effect,” which states that Pandora and other online radio sites act as a promotional tool for artists:

A study performed earlier this year by Pandora found that its spins have a positive effect on music sales. For new music, the average positive effect was a 2.31-percent increase in sales of track-equivalent albums, a metric that counts 10 tracks as one album. For catalog songs, the average positive effect on TEA [track-equivalent album] sales was found to be 2.66 percent. (Peoples, 2014)

Similarly, a study done by The NPD Group (a market research company) reported that “among consumers who listened to music on Pandora and other free music-streaming services, 41 percent reported that owning music was important to them” (NPD Group, 2013). Those consumers stated that streaming and online radio services often lead them to purchase more digital music (NPD Group, 2013).

Online radio and streaming sites have undoubtedly made a large impact on the ways consumers listen to music. The remaining question is whether this impact is beneficial or detrimental to the music industry’s profit and success. Further research conducted in this study

will strive to determine how the introduction of these types of technology have changed the ways in which consumers obtain music and artists distribute and market their music.

Uses, Gratifications, and Gatekeeping: The Listener's Need for Input

Research suggests that music streaming sites offer different gratifications to listeners that are not fulfilled by other formats of music. The uses and gratifications theory of media states that consumers choose to use certain types of media in order to fulfill a certain need or gratification (Lin, 1996). Prior to the development of this theory, media effects theories looked at media consumption as a passive activity, where an audience consumes media without processing and analyzing it. In 1959, Katz suggested that research be geared towards understanding the audience as an active entity in media consumption instead of a passive one (as cited in Bryant & Miron, 2004). This idea represented a paradigm shift within mass communication research. This paradigm assumed that when a consumer selects a certain type of media, they have made a conscious decision to use that media in order to fulfill a gratification such as relaxation, procrastination, entertainment, humor, education, etc. Blumler, Gurevitch, and Katz (1973) explain that “each medium seems to offer a unique combination of: (a) characteristic content... (b) typical attributes...and (c) typical exposure situations...” so different formats of media are able to fulfill different types of gratifications based on their features and attributes. Therefore, different formats of music media serve different purposes for users.

Online music formats offer listeners the option to avoid completing their work and multitask while listening to music. Stark and Weichselbaum (2013) conducted a study in which they surveyed 253 participants about their music listening and media habits and why they choose to use certain types of media. Through this study, Stark and Weichselbaum (2013) hoped to

understand the difference between the uses and gratifications of listening to offline radio and online radio formats. The survey results showed that listeners expect a wider variety of music, control over the music selections, and less interruptions when listening to online radio formats (Stark and Weichselbaum, 2013, p. 193). Also, the study showed that listeners value online radio formats for relaxing, avoiding having to complete a task, and browsing the Internet while listening to music (Stark and Weichselbaum, 2013, p. 197). This contrasts the gratifications of traditional broadcast radio formats: respondents claimed that they used offline radio for leisure and to avoid feelings of loneliness. Traditionally, listeners have used radio as a way to receive news and music in a convenient way. These uses and gratifications for online radio formats offer insights into the ways listeners utilize online music sites, but the new developments in music media may require a new perspective on gratifications.

As new types of media are created and improved each day, new types of gratifications should be considered for new types of technology. Sundar and Limperos (2013) discuss the need for a newer set of gratifications that will reflect the reasons why consumers choose to use certain types of new media over other. They explain that as media formats are incorporating new types of features to appeal to users, the standard gratifications are not properly suited to compliment the new features (Sundar and Limperos, 2013). In order to accommodate new media formats that value user collaboration and input, Sundar and Limperos (2013) suggest that new gratifications categories, such as navigability, agency, modality, and interactivity, should be considered when evaluating a piece of media or technology. Users are beginning to evaluate media (especially music media) on the level of involvement the user can have in the media, whether it is choosing songs for a playlist, customizing the media, or publishing posts of their opinions. With these new developments in media and music formats, more gratifications focused on the customization of

content should be considered. This thesis study will contribute to this area of literature by suggesting other types of new gratifications that explain why listeners choose to listen to certain types of music media sites. This study will also use the uses and gratifications theory to understand how listeners use social media sites to interact with artists and music.

Listeners act as “gatekeepers” of new music and have begun to influence an artist’s rise in popularity. The term “gatekeeper” was originally developed by psychologist Kurt Lewin following World War II and adapted to communications research by David Manning White (Roberts, 2005). White, a newspaper writer, noticed that the editor of the newspaper determined which stories would be published in the paper, effectively acting as the “gatekeeper” and determining which types of information would reach the readers. The modern interpretation of “gatekeeping” relates to a consumer’s role in sharing information and how a consumer can decide which pieces of media and information should be shared with larger or specific audiences, impacting the accessibility and popularity of the content (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, and Wrigley, 2001, p. 233). Some of the newer music formats allow listeners to take on a type of gatekeeper role in the listening process. For example, since Pandora is a radio system that is individual to the user, the listener acts as a gatekeeper in the sense that he/she is able to rate songs (“thumbs up” to favorite songs, skip songs he/she does not like, etc.) so that only certain content is being allowed to be heard by the listener. Spotify gives listeners a gatekeeping role by allowing them to create playlists of their favorite songs and share the playlists with other Spotify members, effectively determining which songs are worthy of being shared with a larger audience.

In an article for *Rolling Stone*, Hight (2015) explains how XM radio allows listeners to determine the success of its artists and songs and act as musical “gatekeepers.” Hight (2015) explains that the traditional method to become successful on country radio was for an artist to “be signed by a major label...sealed in the most commercially savvy packaging possible and delivered to terrestrial stations with a pricy radio-promotion push,” so independent or unsigned artists had a difficult time having their music heard by a larger audience. SiriusXM radio and its foremost country music channel “The Highway,” on the other hand, play both mainstream country hits and songs by undiscovered artists in an effort to give listeners a chance to find new music (Hight, 2015). “The Highway” also allows fans to complete surveys about the channel’s music selections and give feedback on music that is being played so that the listener has the opportunity to tailor the channel’s playlist to his/her tastes (Hight, 2015). John Marks, Senior Director of Country Music Programming at SiriusXM, spoke about the listener feedback features:

Once the song is out of my hands and into the pool with the listeners...the only opinion that matters at that point in time is what the listener thinks. My perspective on the song is totally removed. And that makes it very easy, because there's no politics. There's no agendas other than, ‘Hey, is the song working or not?’ (Hight, 2015).

Though it is likely that there are more political and business-related factors that determine whether or not an artist will be played on XM radio, these features of XM radio have increased listeners’ “gatekeeping” role and have given them some power to determine (in part) the success of an artist.

A recent example of this power, Hight (2015) explains, is the skyrocketing popularity of country duo Florida Georgia Line. The duo's debut single "Cruise" received airplay on "The Highway" following its release in May 2012 (Hight, 2015). After the song became popular among XM radio fans, Florida Georgia Line "went on to sell a slew of downloads on iTunes, sign with Republic Nashville, part of Big Machine Label Group, and dominate terrestrial country radio for nearly half of the next year" (Hight, 2015). "Cruise" has become the top-selling digital country song of all time and the duo Florida Georgia Line has gone on to earn numerous accolades and is one of country music's top acts (Jessen, 2014). Without the initial exposure of XM radio and the "gatekeeping" role of listeners, Florida Georgia Line may have struggled to become a nationally recognized success.

As demonstrated in the previous Florida Georgia Line example, music sales can be influenced by the amount of user discussion about the music. Dhar and Chang (2009) conducted a study in which they looked at the online discussions and mentions of 108 albums over an eight week period (four weeks prior to the album's release and the four weeks following the release). The study attempted to uncover a correlation between the amount of user-generated content about an album and the sales levels of the physical copies of the album. They looked at CD reviews and ratings, the music label that released the album, consumer reviews, and blog/social media discussions about the albums. They found that user discussion, consumer reviews, and mainstream reviews were the most influential factors in predicting album sales prior to an album's release. This means that, prior to the album's release, fans were most influenced to purchase the album after hearing what other fans thought about the album. Therefore, user interactivity can have both positive and negative effects on music sales: sales may increase if listeners are telling others how good an album/song is, but they may also decrease if a listener

tells other listeners that an album/song is not good and is not worth spending money on. A later section of this project will look further into this idea via a case study about several new Billboard sales charts in which songs and albums are ranked based on their levels of popularity and discussions on social and digital media sites. Music fans' desire to have input in their music listening experience and expectations for music listening formats have influenced the ways that artists have begun to promote themselves and their products.

Your “Favorite” Artists: Social Media and the Music Industry

Music artists are utilizing social media outlets to market their products to listeners and give fans the power to promote their favorite artists. In an effort to understand why consumers use social media in relation to music consumption, Salo, Lankinen, & Mäntymäki (2013) conducted interviews and focus group studies with Finnish music fans and music management. The study showed that both artists and fans value the fact that social media allows content to be shared from artist to fan (Salo, Lankinen, & Mäntymäki, 2013). The results also indicated that “good quality content is an essential element driving artist marketing in practice” (Salo, Lankinen, & Mäntymäki, 2013, p. 38). Though this study was conducted in Finland, the same principles apply to artists and music fans' use of social media around the world.

Well-established artists use social media to promote and/or share their content with fans in a new way. In an article for *The New York Times*, Sisario (2013) describes the innovative methods used by pop star Beyoncé to release her most recent album, *Beyoncé*. Instead of promoting her album to fans, Beyoncé and her management team chose to release the album in early December 2013 without promotion. The album was posted on iTunes and the singer posted a picture of the iTunes posting with the caption “Surprise!” for her eight million Instagram followers. Since the album release had not been anticipated, conversation about the album

quickly reached social media, and “the news generated 1.2 million tweets in 12 hours” (Sisario, 2013). Sisario (2013) said, “In bypassing the industry’s traditional promotional machinery, she [Beyoncé] demonstrated social media’s power to amplify news and to forge a direct connection to her audience.” Beyoncé utilized social media in an unconventional way to share her album news with her fans and give fans the power to promote her album for her.

Not only does social media help established artists increase their fan base, but it allows unsigned or undiscovered talents to create an opportunity for themselves to be noticed by the music industry and fans. Shawn Mendes, a 16-year old pop singer who recently rose to stardom, used the social media site Vine to promote himself to the general music audience. Mendes filmed Vines (6-second videos created to by users) of himself covering songs from major pop stars like Beyoncé and Sam Smith (Sisario, 2015). As fans began to share his Vine videos, Mendes’ popularity and brand grew so rapidly that he was able to secure an opening slot on Taylor Swift’s upcoming “1984 World Tour” and release an album, which reached number one on the Billboard Top 200 Albums chart upon release. Mendes said of the popularity:

When I put that first Vine out, I was just doing it for fun; there was no wanting to become an artist...But then when I realized the potential it had, I thought Vine was the perfect platform because no one else was doing it. I would have been one of the only ones, or one of the first. (Sisario, 2015)

Mendes represents a group of up-and-coming artists who utilized social media to create their brand and garner a large fan base prior to signing with a label. In this sense, social media allowed Mendes to promote himself to his fans while giving fans the chance to share his videos and content themselves.

Social media allows an artist-fan relationship to strengthen and allow fans to play an active role in artist marketing. Nancy Baym, an Associate Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas who specializes in social media, explains that social media can help strengthen artist-fan relationships through “the steady streams of affirmation musicians receive that remind them that their music touches people and that helps them better understand their life’s work” (as cited in Cool, 2011). Through social media, fans are able to share their stories/admiration with their favorite artists, and artists are able to see that their fans appreciate their work. Also, certain social media applications empower fans to act as promoters for artists. Nash (2014) describes a social media application called Songkick Detour, where music fans are able to make an argument for why a certain band should play a show in a certain location. If enough fellow music fans support the argument, Songkick Detour will attempt to put the show into action, and “those [fans] who said they were ‘in’ are guaranteed a ticket” (Nash, 2014). This type of application puts the power of promotion into the fans’ hands; if a user can generate enough demand among a social media network, then they can influence the artist to play a show in the user’s hometown.

Social media marketing can be beneficial for promoting an artist, but it can also be a difficult, expensive process for management teams. Peoples (2013) collected responses from music social media marketing professionals about the difficulties of promoting artists on social media sites. Peoples (2013) summarizes, “For better or worse, social media never sleeps, and good social media management requires constant attention, planning, coordination and communication.” One of the major challenges of artist social media marketing is that each social media site is different, so content must be tailored to suit each site (Peoples, 2013). For example, Twitter only allows users to post up to 140 characters at a time while Facebook does not limit the

amount of text in a post. Therefore, the content shared on Facebook has to be reformatted and restructured in order to be posted on Twitter. Social media marketing also requires marketers to have a developed skillset in all aspects of marketing. Jennie Smythe, president of Girlilla Marketing, which runs social media marketing campaigns for country stars Zac Brown Band and Darius Rucker, explains:

I don't necessarily look for somebody with quote 'social media experience' ...Anybody can be taught how to post on social media, but you can't teach marketing intuitiveness. Just because you have a Facebook page doesn't mean you're a Facebook expert. (Peoples, 2013)

Peoples (2013) discusses the difficult decision social media marketers have to make about whether or not to directly involve the artist in execution of the marketing plan. Some companies choose to train the artist to run their own social media accounts so that they can promote themselves on their own, while other companies choose to outsource the process and allow outside marketers to run an artist's social media accounts for them. While training an artist can eliminate a step in the marketing process, it may also be difficult to teach the artist about effective marketing strategies in a short time (depending on the artist) (Peoples, 2013). The following chapter will explore the ways country music artists utilize social media as a tool to market themselves and connect with fans.

Methodology and Analysis

This analysis section has been divided into two parts. The first section consists of a presentation of several case studies conducted during the research of this project. The case studies focus on two areas of understanding: 1) how listeners utilize digital and social media sites to obtain country music and 2) country artists' opinions about this listener activity. The study explores the impact of former country artist Taylor Swift's decision to remove her most recent album, *1984*, from popular music streaming website Spotify and how her decision influenced country artists like Jason Aldean, Justin Moore, and Brantley Gilbert to reconsider offering their music catalogs on Spotify. Also, the case studies investigate the infusion of social and digital media with country music sales tracking in the form of Billboard's multiple country music charts. These charts track streaming and digital sales of country music songs, which allows for listeners to have more of an impact on the chart performance of a country song. It is important to understand how country music artists feel about the incorporation of digital and social media into the country music industry. This section explores opinions from artists Eric Church, Garth Brooks, and Hunter Hayes about the ways they view social and digital media's involvement in country music. These case studies offer insight into how social and digital media are being incorporated into the promotion and distribution of country music and how current country artists are reacting to this incorporation.

The second analysis section looks at the social and digital media sites that are used by listeners to connect with artists. An analysis of the social and digital media presence of country artists Brad Paisley, Lady Antebellum, and Eric Church was completed to understand how country artists use these sites to promote new music. The analysis looks at the social media (Facebook and Twitter) and digital media (music streaming sites, Youtube, etc.) habits of the three artists during the time leading up to each artist's most recent album release (Paisley's

Moonshine in the Trunk debuted in August 2014, Lady Antebellum's *747* released in September 2014, and Church's *Mr. Misunderstood* dropped in November 2015). This analysis examines how these artists used social and digital media to promote and share their new music with listeners. The second analysis also includes two listener surveys that shed light on the factors that motivate listeners to use social and digital media when interacting with and listening to country music. Each survey was created on Google Forms and distributed to music listeners of all ages via social media and email. Surveys were answered anonymously. Questions include:

- How often do you use social/digital media per day?
- How many social/digital media sites to you actively use?
- How old are you?
- How often do you listen to country music?
- How (by what method) do you most often listen to/interact with country music?
- On which social media sites do you connect with singers/music artists?
- Why do you connect with singers/music artists on social media?
- Do you think singers/music artists' use of social media helps increase their popularity/success? Why?

This research evaluates the involvement and impact of social and digital media on the country music industry's connection with listeners and how both listeners and artists feel it.

Analysis Section 1: Gauging Artist Opinions on Social and Digital Media's Influence on the Country Music Industry

The first section of this analysis will explore artist opinions about the incorporation of social and digital media in the country music industry and the ways in which this new media impacts the success of certain songs and albums. I will first analyze the 2014 decision made by country-pop superstar Taylor Swift to remove her music catalog from music streaming site Spotify and the implications of that decision in the country music world. In addition, this section will explore the different opinions of country music artists about social and digital media and to what degree artists appreciate these newer media. Also, the section will look at the power of social and digital media to earn artists a number one song or album on the Billboard charts. The purpose of this section is to gauge the mindsets and varying opinions of artists, as well as the impact of these types of media on the success of artists' music.

The ripple effect of Taylor Swift.

As described in the literature review of this project, Spotify is a recently created music streaming website where users can create a free account and listen to thousands of artists' music without having to pay ("Spotify explained," n.d.). Since Spotify does not make money off of music purchases on its site, artists only receive between \$0.006 and \$0.0084 each time his/her song is streamed on Spotify ("Spotify explained," n.d.). Though Spotify is one of the most popular music listening sites around today, not every artist appreciates the site's function and method of royalties payment, which had led some artists (especially those signed with top country music record label Big Machine Records) to take extreme measures to fight back against Spotify. Country-pop multiplatinum superstar Taylor Swift has been one of the most vocal and

proactive oppositions to Spotify. In an article she wrote for *The Wall Street Journal* in July 2014, Swift explained her frustration with Spotify and other music streaming sites:

Music is art, and art is important and rare. Important, rare things are valuable. Valuable things should be paid for. It's my opinion that music should not be free, and my prediction is that individual artists and their labels will someday decide what an album's price point is. I hope they don't underestimate themselves or undervalue their art. (Swift, 2014)

Even though Swift's immense popularity likely helps her earn more on Spotify, she still does not approve of the small payouts on Spotify and sees how Spotify and other streaming sites "have shrunk the numbers of paid album sales drastically" (Swift, 2014).

In October 2014, Taylor Swift decided her music was worth more than Spotify was willing to pay her and removed her music catalog from the popular music streaming site, save her number one single "Shake It Off" (Linshi, 2014). As an extremely popular artist on Spotify, Swift's decision shocked her fans, who had been streaming her music for free on Spotify. The head of Big Machine Records (Swift's record label and one of the biggest record labels in the country music industry), Scott Borchetta, explained that the departure was decided on in order to fight back against low royalties payment and to support Swift's most dedicated fans. If a fan decides to purchase a physical or iTunes copy of Swift's album, Borchetta details, and his/her friends look down at him/her for not getting it for free on Spotify, then the fan will feel embarrassed, so it easier to remove the music from Spotify and put all fans on the same level (Knopper, 2014). Borchetta shares Swift's views about Spotify's payment to artists. He said, "It can't be endless free. Give people a 30-day trial, and then make them convert. Music has never

been free. It's always cost something and it's time to make a stand and this is the time to do it” (Knopper, 2014).

On November 3, 2014, Spotify responded to Swift’s decision in a news post on their website. In the post, the company explains its affection for Swift and her music, sharing that “nearly 16 million of [Spotify’s users] have played her songs in the last 30 days, and she’s on over 19 million playlists” (The Spotify Team, 2014). Spotify went on to say that it hopes for Swift’s return to the site, understands that artists deserve to be paid for their music, and offered several Spotify playlists inspired by Swift’s departure (The Spotify Team, 2014). While Spotify did publicly comment on Swift’s departure, the streaming site did not make any changes to its company structure.

Swift’s main concern about Spotify seems to be the unfair payments artists and songwriters receive from Spotify. However, Swift’s own paycheck from her music’s Spotify streams has been debated. Spotify claimed that the company paid Swift \$2,000,000 in royalties for streams of her music in 2014 (Dickey, 2014). Borchetta refuted these claims, telling *Time* that Swift actually made only \$496,044 from Spotify in 2014 (Dickey, 2014). These numbers have been highly debated, and Swift’s decision to remove her music from Spotify showed her frustration over the payment conflict with Spotify.

As one of the biggest music superstars of the decade, Swift’s decision to remove her music catalog from Spotify influenced other country music artists to follow suit. Swift’s label mate, country superstar Jason Aldean, removed his 2014 album *Old Boots, New Dirt* from Spotify days after Swift’s departure (Leahey, 2014). After his decision, Aldean told *Rolling Stone*, “[W]hile I’m definitely paying attention to the business side of things, I am first and foremost an artist. I’m an artist whose career has been built by the songwriters, publishers,

producers and engineers that line Music Row in Nashville,” and believes that their efforts should be valued by Spotify (Leahey, 2014). After being released in early October 2014, *Old Boots*, *New Dirt* broke Spotify streaming records by gaining over 3 million stream in its first week of release, so its departure from the site likely hurt the company (Leahey, 2014). However, it is worth noting that, unlike Swift, Aldean left his first four country albums available on Spotify, only removing his most recent work (Leahey, 2014). This behavior brings into question why the “value” and payment of Aldean’s prior albums are not important enough to be removed from Spotify.

Fellow Big Machine country artists Brantley Gilbert and Justin Moore shortly followed Aldean and removed their music from Spotify in November 2014 (Leahey, 2014). Again, unlike Swift, Gilbert and Moore both chose to remove only their recent albums, sans one song each, from Spotify (Gilbert’s “Bottoms Up” from *Just As I Am* is still available, as well as Moore’s “Point at You” from *Off the Beaten Path*) (Leahey, 2014). While neither artist spoke out about the reason behind their decision, Gilbert and Moore were likely influenced by label mates Swift and Aldean to remove some music from Spotify. After reviewing Spotify’s music catalog on November 16, 2015, I found that Aldean, Gilbert, and Moore have all restored their recent albums to the catalog, while Swift’s music is still unavailable on Spotify. These findings make me wonder what type of impact (financial, popularity, etc.) leaving Spotify had on these three artists that made them repost their music on Spotify. It is also worth noting that Spotify has only publicly responded to Swift’s removal decision and has not commented on Aldean, Gilbert, or Moore (this may relate to Swift’s cross-genre popularity and the large number of fans her move would disappoint).

Taylor Swift's choice to remove her music from Spotify sent a rippling effect through the music industry, specifically country music. Artists like Jason Aldean, Brantley Gilbert, and Justin Moore removed newer portions of their music catalog from the streaming site.

Varying artist opinions.

Artists like Swift, Aldean, Gilbert, and Moore have taken large measures to express their opinions about digital music and media sites and their impact on artists. The country music industry as a whole seems to have varying opinions about the incorporation of social and digital media into the artist-to-fan interaction. The following section outlines opinions from artists who altered their music distribution methods to fit the changing landscape of the country music industry and oppose social media and digital media's influence on music production.

Hunter Hayes has recently used a unique method to release new music, which incorporates digital music media. In May 2015, Hayes announced "plans to roll out an EP's worth of singles primarily through streaming services (and eventually iTunes), eschewing physical retail partners altogether" (Hampp, 2015). Warner Music Nashville, Hayes' record label, has tried this sort of distribution tactic with other artists, but Hayes is the first high-profile country artist to release so much new music to Spotify and other streaming sites before sending it to country radio and physical music sales (Hampp, 2015). Hayes says of the plan, "We're constantly looking for new ways to get music to the fans in a quicker and more exciting fashion...Now it's just a matter of letting the fans speak. Change is not a bad thing -- it's a beautiful thing" (Hampp, 2015). His insight into music distribution seemed to pay off, with "21" (the first single released under this plan) earning 4.5 million streams on Spotify by the time it hit country radio in June 2015 (McClellan, 2015). When it did reach country radio, "21" became

Hayes' second biggest debut to country radio of his career (McClellan, 2015). Hayes chose to utilize the changing landscape of the music listening experience to his benefit, but other artists do not agree with these new types of technology.

Country music star Eric Church is one artist who has not endorsed the changes in how artists communicate and share music with fans. Though Church does have millions of fans following him on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, Church says that he has “never tweeted and I never will. I’m not on Facebook and I never will be” (Hackett, 2014). It is likely that someone who is part of Church’s management team or record label posts on his accounts for him, since he does have active social media accounts. Church’s team uses social media for promoting music and content, but Church himself prefers to connect with his audience through his music. Church prefers creating full, cohesive albums through which he shares himself with his fans (Allers, 2015). In connecting with fans in person, Church has been able to create a devoted fan base deemed “The Church Choir” (which will be discussed in the next analysis section) and his popularity among fans has only increased over the past several years. In an interview with *The Boot*, Church explained his opinion about the way digital media has changed how fans listen to music:

I liken it to when you sit down to read a book. You don’t read one chapter. You read the whole book...Same thing with music. You can’t hear one song, you can’t get a 99-second sound bite, and understand the artist, or be a fan of the artist, other than for just for that moment. That frenetic way of what we’ve turned music into, with digital technology, I’m so against that. (Allers, 2015)

Though Church does not approve of the technological changes in music consumption, he does seem to understand the impact of those changes on the type of audience he plays to. In a

statement on his webpage, Church says, “With satellite radio, social media and the way people consume music now, people have access to every kind of music, and you just don’t run into people now who only listen to one kind of music. People are smart enough to discern what’s good, and if the music makes them feel something, then they’ll respond” (“About,” n.d.).

Church is not the only country artist who has had some disagreement with social and digital media; one of the most notable long-time opponents of social and digital media in country music is country music legend Garth Brooks. Even after the creation of digital music allowed fans to purchase individual songs, Brooks (RIAA’s top solo artist in history) chose not to list any of his albums on digital music sites (specifically iTunes) (Brown, 2014). Also, Brooks was one of the few country music artists who did not have any social media accounts (Leahey, 2014). However, after opposing the changing technology for decades, Brooks joined the digital world in 2014. When announcing his return to country music with a new album and tour in 2014, Brooks also shared that he would be joining social media. In his announcement video, Brooks said, “I really wasn’t sure...but then a friend of mine said something that just made all kinds of sense. He said, ‘Think of it more as a conversation.’ I like that. But I’m already finding out on my own that it’s wiping out the walls between you and me, and I *really* like that.” (Leahey, 2014). At the same time, Brooks announced the launch of his new digital music service, GhostTunes (Brown, 2014). Instead of adding his music catalog to an existing digital music service like Amazon Music or iTunes, Brooks released GhostTunes, a service that combines digital music sales, music streaming, exclusive artist content, ticket outlet links, and social media to create a sort of one-stop site for music fans (Brown, 2014). Brooks’ music is only being released in a digital format on GhostTunes (his catalog is still not available on iTunes), which gives the service an added element of exclusivity (Brown, 2014).

Brooks' strategy was created in order to help him generate excitement and interest for his country music comeback, but it did not live up to expectations. Brooks' album *Man Against Machine*, which was to be released in physical copies and as a whole CD on GhostTunes, sold less than 50% of its projected sales in its first week (Smith, 2014). It was not until *Man Against Machine* underperformed that Brooks made himself available on social media for the first time (Smith, 2014). This brings into question the success of his strategy and the plausibility of being able to release an album without making digital singles purchasing available (since GhostTunes does not offer digital singles and Brooks' music can only be purchased as a full album). Plus, when I searched for articles and news about GhostTunes on Google, I found that the majority of the articles about GhostTunes were published very soon after the site was opened. There are no articles that discuss the current successes of GhostTunes, which leads me to believe that the site, while still available, has not found great success. Brooks, Church, and Hayes each take different stances on digital and social media's inclusion on the country music industry, but the next section will explore digital and social media's influence on the ability of country artists like Brooks, Church, and Hayes, to earn number one songs and albums.

More than one way to the top of the charts.

The most popular system of tracking the popularity of music today is the Billboard charts. Billboard is an international music company "built on its exclusive charts and unrivaled reporting on the latest news, issues and trends across all genres of music" ("About Billboard Magazine," n.d.). Billboard releases weekly chart updates that share which songs have become the most popular in the previous week. Currently, there are five different weekly country music Billboard charts: Hot Country Songs (the top songs in country music), Country Airplay (songs

that have received the most plays on radio), Country Digital Songs (songs that have been purchased the most on digital music outlets like iTunes, Amazon Music, etc.), Country Streaming Songs (songs that have received the most streams on streaming sites like Spotify), and Top Country Albums (the most purchased albums over all purchasing formats) (“Charts,” 2015). The variety of the charts means that artists have a better chance of placing on a Billboard music chart and earning a number one song/album.

However, while the diversity of the charts gives space for more artists to achieve success, it also lends itself to allowing popular country artists to dominate the charts. In the October 31, 2015, Billboard chart reports, Luke Bryan sat at number one on four of the five Billboard country charts (Asker, 2015). Bryan earned the number one song on the Hot Country Songs, Country Airplay, and Country Streaming charts, as well as sitting at number one on the Top Country Albums charts with his September 2015 release *Kill the Lights* (the Country Digital Songs chart was topped by Thomas Rhett’s single “Die A Happy Man”) (Asker, 2015). Though diversity in Billboard charts allows for artists to reach number one through streaming, digital music sales, and radio airplay, it also allows country’s top performers to gain even more dominance over the country music industry and makes it difficult for smaller artists to break onto the charts if a country superstar has recently released music.

Country music chart positions have also become influenced by social media. The Trending 140, one of Billboard’s newest music charts, determines music rankings based on the amount of discussion the music has created on Twitter (Rutherford, 2015). This social media incorporation into music charts has allowed artists to achieve high rankings for music that has not yet been released or has just been released, which allows for artists to earn immediate number one songs. For example, country superstar Carrie Underwood released her most recent

album, *Storyteller*, on October 23, 2015, but her first single from the album, “Smoke Break,” was released several weeks prior to the album (Rutherford, 2015). On October 9, while “Smoke Break” was still her promoted single, Underwood debuted another track from *Storyteller* called “Heartbeat” (Rutherford, 2015). As soon as it was released, the song “immediately found success on the Billboard + Twitter Trending 140 chart, rocketing to No. 2 upon its release before trending inside the top 10 for much of the morning” (Rutherford, 2015). Underwood was able to earn a number two song on a Billboard chart on the morning her song was released, which shows how the addition of social media-based charts like the Trending 140 allow artists to earn ranking-based achievements at a faster pace.

Underwood’s decision to debut “Heartbeat” while “Smoke Break” was still being promoted at country radio brings up an interesting idea of having multiple singles released at one time. With digital and social media’s ability to connect artists to fans immediately, artists now have the option to release music via Facebook, Twitter, and other social and digital media sites despite promoting a single song to radio. Though he is not a country artist, this concept can be seen in rapper Drake’s chart performance during February/March 2015. Once he released his album *If You’re Reading This, It’s Too Late*, Drake tied a record set by The Beatles by having 14 songs positioned on the Billboard Hot 100 chart (Trust, 2015). Drake’s situation is a rather extreme case, but it explores the idea that an artist can now have several different songs sitting on the Billboard charts at the same time, a feat that was not attainable in past years when artist would release one single at a time.

In recent years, country artists have become outspoken about the role social and digital media play in the ways fans interact with artists’ music. Artists like Taylor Swift, Jason Aldean, Brantley Gilbert, Justin Moore, and Eric Church have expressed some concern or distaste for

digital or social media in country music, and some have acted on their disapproval. Hunter Hayes and Garth Brooks have both come around to the inclusion of new media in country music and are tailoring themselves to use new media to release new content. Regardless of their opinions, country artists have seen social and digital media impact their positions on music ranking charts. In the next analysis section, I will conduct an investigation into how artists are using digital and social media to promote their music/content, especially in preparation for the release of their new music.

Analysis Section 2: Artist and Audience Interactions with Digital and Social Media Sites

In order to understand the impact of digital and social media sites on the music industry, it is important to observe how artists are using these sites to promote their products and how listeners are interacting with these sites to obtain music. The following section will look at artists' social and digital media use in practice, as well as the ways listeners feel about artists' involvement on these sites. The first portion of this section is an investigation of the ways three country artists (Brad Paisley, Lady Antebellum, and Eric Church) used social and digital media to promote their newest albums to fans and the effectiveness of those campaigns. The second of the section includes a review of two listener surveys I conducted. The first survey looks to understand listeners' motivations behind connecting with certain artists on social media and their opinions about the effectiveness of artists' use of social media. The second survey asks listeners to consider the types of digital music media they use and why they use them.

Social and digital media use for promoting new albums: Brad Paisley, Lady Antebellum, and Eric Church.

As previously explored in this project, country artists have differing opinions about the use of social media and music streaming sites in distributing their music and connecting with fans. However, it is very important to investigate the ways artists are currently using social and digital media to promote their music to fans. This section consists of an investigation and analysis of the social and digital media activity of country artists Brad Paisley, Lady Antebellum, and Eric Church in the time leading up to the release of each artist's most recent album (July-August 2014, September 2014, and November 2015, respectively).

This investigation focuses on each artist's use of Facebook and Twitter, as well as digital media sites like Spotify and YouTube, as part of their promotional efforts for their new albums. As detailed in an upcoming portion of this section, the listener survey described in this project explained that fans tend to use Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram most often to connect with artists. While Instagram was a popular option among survey participants, I found that none of the three artists in this study used Instagram as an important piece of their promotion for their albums (Paisley and Church did not submit any Instagram posts about their albums, while Lady Antebellum shared content that was also shared on their Facebook/Twitter pages, so Instagram's presence in promotion is not crucial in this study). This investigation will shed light onto the ways artists use these social and digital media sites in promoting their new music and the impact these promotional strategies had on their record sales.

Brad Paisley: "Moonshine in the Trunk" (July-August 2014)

Country music artist Brad Paisley released his album *Moonshine in the Trunk* on August 26, 2014; however, Paisley began promoting the album in July 2014. As I searched Paisley's Twitter and Facebook pages (on which he is normally very active), I found that social media promotion for *Moonshine in the Trunk* did not start until July 2014. On June 28, 2014, Paisley shared an image of the album cover on Facebook and advertised the pre-order for the album on June 23, July 6, July 9, and July 25, 2014. However, Paisley began utilizing social and digital media in his *Moonshine in the Trunk* promotional efforts on July 26, 2014. On that day, Paisley posted the following message to his Facebook and Twitter accounts:

"I'm going rogue. The label doesn't know I'm doing this. Seriously. But I made a Moonshine Preview teaser. Don't tell. <http://bit.ly/WILAMu>"
-Brad Paisley (@bradpaisley)

A month prior to the release date of the album and without his management's permission, Paisley shared a short YouTube video previewing some of the songs on *Moonshine in the Trunk*. These posts received 2658 Facebook "likes," 380 Twitter "favorites," and 130 retweets and started a flurry of discussion among fans. Later in the day, Paisley posted a picture of an email he received from a record label representative with the caption "Double uh oh." The fact that Paisley had evidence that his actions were going against his record company's policy ignited fans' curiosity, as that Facebook and Twitter post received 6102 Facebook "likes" and 552 Twitter "favorites." Paisley then shared a post that showed that the video had been made private (so fans could not watch it), but posted a follow-up note:

"That was fun while it lasted. Too bad I can't.... Oh wait...hmmmm."
-Brad Paisley (@bradpaisley)

On the following day, Paisley continued a posting system of sharing a YouTube video or comment about his new music, followed by a post of an image of an email or text from his management about rebelling against the planned promotional strategy for *Moonshine in the Trunk*. On July 27, 2014, Paisley began using the hashtag (a tag that, when used in a social media post, links the post to other content that has the same tag) #LeakingMoonshine. The first post to include #LeakingMoonshine reads:

“Okay. Here's the whole first chorus of Crushin' It. I love this mindset. Don't tell anyone it's up. <http://bit.ly/1nM7NzF> #LeakingMoonshine”

-Brad Paisley (@bradpaisley)

In the subsequent weeks leading up to the original release date of the album, Paisley posted clips of songs from *Moonshine in the Trunk* to Facebook and Twitter with #LeakingMoonshine so that fans could follow the hashtag and see Paisley’s rebellious antics. Paisley also began to incorporate other celebrities and digital music sites into his #LeakingMoonshine campaign. The following messages are a sample of those that were posted on Paisley’s Facebook and Twitter accounts between July 28 and August 24 that pertain to the inclusion of other sources for leaking the album early:

“Got this email. Hey suits, No thanks, this is my game. Appreciate the ideas but I'll paint, you clean up the mess.”

“Zinged! Here was the head of the label’s response to Kesha, Carrie Underwood, Kimberly Williams-Paisley, Joan Rivers and Olivia Munn leaking Cover Girl”

“We have a new partner in the resistance...
Welcome iTunes to the leakfest! You can go get Perfect Storm with a preorder. Whole dang thing! #leakingmoonshine <http://smarturl.it/moonshineinthetrunk>”

“It's Monday. But remember- Every week has a weekend. Show em @joshgroban!
#crushinit #leakingmoonshine”

“I’m at NASA - National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Apollo launch pad in FL! Leaking my new song, American Flag on the Moon. Take a listen <http://twitter.com/BradPaisley/status/500678018881159168>”

Paisley referred to his label/management as “suits” and positioned them as the “gatekeepers” of his music. Instead of allowing his management/label to determine when fans would be able to hear new music, Paisley claimed the “gatekeeping” power in this campaign. Through this action, Paisley appeared as the “gatekeeper” to his own content and was able to directly connect with his fans by sharing his music at a time and frequency of his choosing.

Paisley was able to not only include other celebrities in his social/digital media promotional campaign for *Moonshine in the Trunk* (which allowed his music to spread to other celebrities’ followers who may not listen to Paisley regularly), but he incorporated digital music retailer iTunes into his plans, which helped promote his music to fans who appreciated the immediacy and accessibility of iTunes’ digital music sales. Album sales during the week of August 24, 2014, were the lowest in more than 20 years, but Paisley’s *Moonshine in the Trunk* was still able to reach the number 1 spot on Billboard’s Top Country Albums chart with 53,312 albums sold (Morris, 2014). The #LeakingMoonshine campaign proved to be a success among followers, as fans still currently using the hashtag to discuss how much they enjoyed and miss the campaign:

“@BradPaisley Remember this?? #AYearAgoToday #LeakingMoonshine”
-Ashely Wagstaffe (@AshleyMaire12)

“@BradPaisley #leakingmoonshine #ThrowbackThursday”
-MaryGrace Gladden (@mgladdz)

Paisley’s #LeakingMoonshine social media campaign appears to have been a success, but some questions arise about the strategy. While Paisley continually spoke about the spontaneity of the campaign and the fact that his management did not know about his plans, it is worth questioning whether or not this strategy was unplanned or if it was designed to look spontaneous in order to garner for Paisley and *Moonshine in the Trunk*. Also, *Moonshine in the Trunk* reached

number 1 on the Billboard chart, which seems like an accomplishment, but since the album was released in one of the worst sales weeks in recent history, one should consider whether *Moonshine in the Trunk*'s "success" is valid or if Paisley spent too much time on the campaign but was not able to turn that effort into sales (in other words, Paisley's fans enjoyed the campaign, but sales did not match the buzz; therefore, did the campaign really succeed?) Fellow country act Lady Antebellum used a less aggressive method than Paisley, but found great success.

Lady Antebellum: "747" (September 2014)

As opposed to Paisley's unorthodox promotional strategy, country trio Lady Antebellum took a slightly more traditional approach in promoting their most recent album. Lady Antebellum released *747* on September 30, 2014. To promote the album, Lady Antebellum utilized Facebook, Twitter, and the premise of a "sneak peek" of *747*.

On August 26, 2014, Lady Antebellum introduced the "Lady Antebellum Passport" in identical posts on Twitter and Facebook:

"Start your journey to our new record *747* and hear a song from the album now! That and more here: <http://smarturl.it/passportLA>"

-Lady Antebellum (@ladyantebellum)

The "Passport" application allowed fans to sign up and complete different activities in order to hear a short clip of one of the songs from *747* (note: the application is no longer accessible or available to view). Those social media posts generated 7,492 Facebook "likes" and 141 Twitter "favorites." As I continued to scroll through Lady Antebellum's social media accounts, I discovered that from September 1 to September 12, approximately every other day, Lady Antebellum sent out either the previously shared post about the "Passport" application or the following post:

“Pre-order the new album, 747, on iTunes now! <http://smarturl.it/12qoks>”

-Lady Antebellum via Facebook

Each time the trio posted about the “Passport” application, a new song would be included as being available for preview on the application. On September 15, 2014, the band posted a message on their Facebook account about a special promotion for Samsung users:

“We’ve got a surprise for Samsung users! You can hear the new title track, “747,” off the upcoming album before anyone else! Listen here: <http://smgmb.us/6ca>”

-Lady Antebellum via Facebook

From September 15 until September 29, Lady Antebellum kept up a steady system of posting about the album pre-order, the “Passport” application, and videos in which the band talks about a single song from the album (videos about “Freestyle”, “Bartender”, and “Down South” were posted on Facebook). On September 29, the day before the album was released, Lady Antebellum gave fans early access to 747. The band posted this message on Facebook:

“Preview all 11 tracks from the new album, '747' before they're released tomorrow! Check out <http://www.ladyapassport.com/#album>”

-Lady Antebellum via Facebook

Also, in a search, I discovered that country radio stations like “Big 104.7” in Pittsburgh offered listeners a link to an iHeartRadio station which played all of the songs on 747 on repeat:

“We have Lady Antebellum's '747' a few days early! Listen to the album stream and let us know what you think! LISTEN --> <http://bit.ly/1xtbhet>”

-Big 104.7 via Facebook

Lady Antebellum was able to find chart success with 747. Variety reports that the album sold 74,000 copies and sat at number 2 on the Billboard Top 200, just behind Blake Shelton’s *Bringing Back the Sunshine*, during its first week of release (Morris, 2014). Lady Antebellum was able to turn social media buzz into chart success due to the systemic, but sporadic posts about the album. As expressed in the listener survey conducted for this project, listeners like to stay updated on artists’ new music via social media posts, but they do not like to be

overwhelmed with constant notices from artists. Lady Antebellum was able to connect with fans and give an opportunity for fans to hear some of 747's songs early on several different digital and social media formats, but did not overwhelm listeners with social media posts, which aided in the album's chart success. Also, while Paisley used a comical, casual tone when writing his Facebook and Twitter posts for his album release strategy, Lady Antebellum used a slightly more formal tone that served the purpose of informing fans. The Lady Antebellum posts were positive and friendly, but they were short and formal, while Paisley's posts were intended to make the audience laugh and feel involved. Eric Church, unlike these two acts, did neither when promoting his new album.

Eric Church: "Mr. Misunderstood" (November 2015)

While artists like Paisley and Lady Antebellum have used social and digital media to promote their albums to fans and allow for an early preview for their new music, Eric Church took a different approach to social and digital media when releasing his most recent album, November 2015's *Mr. Misunderstood*. The previous chapter explored Church's disinterest in using social and digital media and his emphasis on connecting with audiences through his music and live shows. For the release of *Mr. Misunderstood*, Church chose to let his fans use social media to promote the album instead of him.

Unlike Paisley and Lady Antebellum, Church gave no preview of his album to fans because he did not alert his fans of the existence of a new album until it was released. This method has been referred to as "pulling a Beyoncé" since the pop singer released an album in 2013 to iTunes without notifying fans (Hampp & Lipshutz, 2013). Many artists across all music genres have followed Beyoncé's lead and released surprise albums, but Church is one of the first

to use that strategy in country music. After searching “Eric Church” and visiting the Twitter page of @thechurchchoir (the Eric Church fan account) on Twitter, I found posts from fans on November 3rd, 2015, explaining that they had unexpectedly received a copy of a new Eric Church album in the mail that morning:

“@thechurchchoir Got this nice surprise in the mail today. Absolutely pumped to give it a listen.” -pat lauwereys (@pml669)

“So I check the mail and there is the new Eric Church CD and album. Kinda shocked. @thechurchchoir -Kristy Fadley (@kristyk88)

On November 4, 2015, more Church fans posted tweets about how they discovered *Mr. Misunderstood* in their mailboxes. Tweets show that certain fans received CDs, vinyl records, digital downloads, and/or free streams of *Mr. Misunderstood* from Church for free without warning:

“Totally saved my work day getting this @thechurchchoir surprise in the mail. Thanks for all you do! #CMAawards” -james paul hunt (@jamespaulhunt)

“I have a new Michael Connolly book to read and a new Eric Church album to listen to. Honey, life is good.” -Stephen King (@StephenKing)

“Thanks @ericchurch for the much needed inspiration for me. @thechurchchoir @ericchurchmusic #MrMisunderstood” -Bill Korlash (@Kolrph)

Billboard later confirmed that these surprise albums were sent out to members of Church’s “The Church Choir” fan club; premium (top tier) members received the vinyl record and CD, standard (second tier members) received the digital downloads, and non-paying members received the ability to stream the music early on Church’s official website (Christman, 2015).

While fans shared their excitement over *Mr. Misunderstood*, I discovered that Church’s Facebook and Twitter pages made no mention or acknowledgement of the album until the evening of November 4, 2015. Following Church’s performance of the never-before-heard title

track on the Country Music Association (CMA) Awards on the night of November 4th, posts from his Facebook and Twitter pages at 8:37pm saying “Eric's new album, ‘Mr. Misunderstood’ is out now! Download here: <http://smarturl.it/MrMisunderstood>.” The album was only available for digital download on Apple Music/iTunes, but Church’s Facebook post details how non-fan club members could purchase *Mr. Misunderstood* at a pop-up (temporary promotional) store located in Nashville. The CMA Awards are one of country music’s most important evenings, so Church’s decision to wait to confirm the existence of *Mr. Misunderstood* after playing the title track on the CMA Awards not only allowed fans to be responsible for sharing the news of the album on social media, but also allowed Church to draw in a larger audience of country music fans (CMA Awards viewers) who may not follow Church on social media or were not aware of *Mr. Misunderstood*.

Following the album’s release, Church slowly made *Mr. Misunderstood* available on several digital music sites. By November 11, 2015, Church posted on Facebook about the availability of the album:

“Hey Church Choir! Eric's new album, Mr. Misunderstood, is now available everywhere music is sold and all digital streaming services. Android users can now download on Google Play or Amazon.com , streaming listeners can hear it on Spotify, Pandora, Rdio, and more!”

Church’s method of releasing and promoting *Mr. Misunderstood* through his fans’ social media accounts proved to be effective with sales. *Billboard* reported that *Mr. Misunderstood* “sold 71,000 units -- 70,000 digitally -- in its first day-and-a-quarter of availability” (Christman, 2015). This total landed the album at number 3 on the all-genre Billboard Top 200 charts, behind Chris Stapleton’s resurging album *Traveller* and Carrie Underwood’s *Storyteller* (Cantor, 2015). *Mr. Misunderstood* is projected to sell around 80,000 copies in its first full week of availability (Christman, 2015).

Church took an unorthodox method of releasing his album, which seems to have paid off with fans. Since Church is not a fan of social and digital music media, he released *Mr. Misunderstood* as a physical album to fan club members and allowed them to be his social media promoters for the album. John Peets, Church's manager, said of the release's emphasis on physical albums in brick-and-mortar stores:

I care about these guys [brick-and-mortar stores], so I went to the heads of the three coalitions [CIMS, AIM, and The Department of Record Stores] and told them about the album. We talked about how to get the album to their stores, but to make sure that the release is still a surprise. (Christman, 2015)

This way, Church was able to stick to his opinions about new media's influence on music, allow fans to get involved with promoting the album through social media, and still give fans the types of music media they want. This emphasis on physical CD sales sets this promotional strategy apart from that of Paisley and Lady Antebellum. While this type of release may not work for smaller artists with less name recognition, Church's popularity in the country music industry and dedication from his fans helped make this release a success.

Each of the aforementioned artists utilized social media in a unique way to promote their new albums to fans. While Brad Paisley used social media heavily as a way to entertain and inform listeners about *Moonshine in the Trunk*, his constant posts on social media may have turned some listeners away from the album, which resulted in lower, yet number one sales. Lady Antebellum was able to find a balance between informing fans and letting fans experience the album for themselves, which led to great chart success. Eric Church, an artist who does not approve of social media, allowed his fans to do the social media promotion for *Mr. Misunderstood* instead of him, which allowed him to maintain his opinions about social media,

but utilize it in a way that let his fans interact with one another and the music in a new way. These case studies show that artists who can inform their fans about their new music in an exciting way *and* give fans a chance to play an active role in the album release find more success in their record sales. The next section will look to gauge how audiences feel about the ways artists utilize social and digital media to promote themselves and their music to fans.

Listener opinions about social and digital media's inclusion in country music.

This section of the chapter looks to apply the uses and gratifications theory of media to social and digital media in order to understand what aspects of social and digital media do fans enjoy in regards to connecting with artists. The uses and gratifications theory of media looks to understand how consumer use different types of media and the reasons/motivations, or “gratifications,” for using these types of media (Lin, 1996). Uses and gratifications can be found for any type of media, so this section looks to understand what the motivations are for listeners to use certain social and digital music media sites. The findings in this section will show how fans prefer to connect with artists and what fans are looking for when connect with artists on social and digital media sites.

In order to gauge the music listening habits of fans and estimate the effectiveness of these types of social and digital media strategies in country music, I conducted two listener surveys. These surveys were available to music fans of all genres in order to understand the overall opinions of music fans about the impact of newer media formats on the ways in which listeners interact with musicians and their music. In the discussion section of this project, I will apply these results to the country music industry and try to estimate how effective the country music industry's use of digital and social media is.

The first survey asked listeners to reflect on the ways they listen to music, which types of music formats (streaming, digital music, CDs, etc.) they listen to, and where they anticipate the music industry is headed. The survey was issued during the final two weeks of March 2015 through my Facebook and Twitter accounts. Through these social media sites, I was able to share the survey with a large group of people, and they would have the option to share the survey with more people they knew. The survey included 15 questions (eight multiple choice questions and seven short response questions). The multiple-choice questions were used to understand the age and frequency of technology use of the respondent. These questions helped me understand the way the respondent routinely used technology so that I could estimate whether or not using social and digital media is an effective way for artists to connect with fans. Results showed that 71 respondents answered the survey, with 63% of respondents saying they were between the ages of 18-24. Responses show that 80% of participants use technology for more than 10 hours per week, with the majority of those responses coming from respondents in the 18-24 age range. These results showed that 18-24 year olds are actively using technology each week, so there is a fan presence on media sites like social media and music sites.

The survey also asked participants to consider the method with which they obtain and listen to music. When asked, 54% of respondents stated that they use a music device (iPod, mp3 player, etc.) to listen to music. Results showed that 25% of participants said they do not purchase digital music (buying music from an online outlet like iTunes or Amazon Music), while 37% said they frequently purchase digital music. Of the total responses, 38% of participants said they sometimes purchase digital music from online retailers. These responses indicate that, despite the growing popularity of music streaming sites like Spotify and the concerns of country artists

about decreasing sales profits, there is a segment of music fans that still frequently or occasionally purchases music online at digital music retail sites.

Respondents showed a high level of appreciation for music streaming sites like Spotify, Pandora, and iHeartRadio. When asked how often they listen to music streaming sites, all but 8 participants said they listen to online music formats, with 34% of participants explaining that they listen to these sites between 1-5 hours per week. Respondents were then asked to explain what they enjoyed about these streaming sites, and four main gratifications were discovered.

Fluidity

Listeners expressed an appreciation that streaming sites offer little interruption between songs, which was an unexpected gratification. Traditional broadcast radio, on the other hand, often includes DJs and commercial breaks, so online listeners enjoy being able to listen to several songs in a row with only short interruptions in between songs. One respondent claimed, “I like that it is the music I like to listen to without commercials or interruptions.” This concept of not being disrupted by commercials and DJs is important to listeners. It is worth noting that streaming sites like Pandora and Spotify do have advertisements and very short interruptions if a user is listening to the free version of the site (a paid subscription for Spotify allows you to avoid all advertisements and listen to music without any interruptions), but listeners do appreciate the non-paid subscriptions.

Free Entertainment

The most interesting gratification expressed was that streaming sites often provide free entertainment. One respondent explained, “I use spotify to listen to music and i absolutely love it. It is incredibly easy to use, it has almost anything on it, and i don't need to spend money to listen to the songs which is important since i'm a broke college kid.” Another participant said, “I get to listen to songs that I am too poor to purchase.” Responses show that younger music fans, one of the most active groups online, are interested in listening to music for free, so they flock to streaming sites like Spotify and Pandora, which offer free subscriptions. This gratification does feed into concerns from artists like Swift, Aldean, and Brooks, who believe that music streaming does not pay as well as traditional music sales. However, it is worth noting that fans seem to appreciate the free aspects of sites like Spotify and Pandora, so artists may need to consider how they can get their music to a fanbase that is interested in spending as little money as possible.

Discovery

Streaming sites like Spotify and Pandora allow users to look through music from thousands of artists of varying levels of popularity, so fans enjoy being able to discover new music on these sites. A participant wrote, “You can find new music that is not mainstream.” Another respondent pointed out the concept of “rarities” and being able to find music that is not accessible anywhere else. This idea relates back to Hunter Hayes’ decision to only release his 2015 music on Spotify and other streaming sites before sending the songs to country radio. By debuting music only on streaming sites, Hayes added a level of exclusivity to his music and allowed fans to discover the music on streaming sites, which seems to be an important part of utilizing streaming sites for fans. This idea of “discovery” allows for fans to become gatekeepers, as explained by Hight (2013) in the previously-discussed *Rolling Stone* article about XM radio.

By being able to find new music on streaming sites, the user is able to play an active role in increasing popularity for an artist or a song, so it seems as though users enjoy having the power to find new music and be able to help an artist gain popularity and attention.

Customization

One of the most consistent gratifications discovered among respondents was the concept that streaming sites offer an element of music customization. One respondent said of streaming sites, "I like how online I can customize what types of music I listen to because it is what I want to hear, not what someone else thinks I want to hear. I also like how I can skip songs that I do not want to listen to so that I can listen to other songs that I will enjoy more." Fans like being able to choose songs and organize a playlist on these sites, something that is not available on broadcast radio and is not free with digital music. Another participant said, "I like [that] I can tailor the stations to my particular taste in music. I don't have to listen to music that I don't like." Fans do not want to listen to music they do not enjoy, so they like that sites like Spotify and Pandora allow them to jump between stations and make playlists that are tailored to their own musical tastes.

The survey asked participants to think about their favorite method of music listening, which varied greatly. Many respondents expressed that they use multiple methods to listen to music. One respondent said, "I prefer using spotify and pandora, i sometimes use itunes because its important to support artists and buy their music rather than cheating them out money and listening for free." This response was interesting because, instead of being concerned about his/her financial wellbeing, this respondent claimed that it is important for artists to be properly paid for his/her content. Also, despite artists like Church being concerned about the current value

of the album, many respondents claimed that they purchase physical CDs and albums because it is a familiar music format and they enjoy being able to own a physical copy of the music. One respondent detailed the benefits of using each type of listening method:

“CD/Vinyl: Superior quality.

MP3: Convenient (no CDs to carry around).

Terrestrial Radio: Convenient and it's everywhere.

Cable Music Channels: lots of genres.

Internet Streaming: If I have my computer or iPhone I can tap into stuff not available on

Terrestrial Radio or the Cable service.”

The final question of the survey asked respondents to consider the future of music and what type of listening method will become the most popular. Many respondents said that, while broadcast and digital music may not disappear, they will fall victim to the popularity of streaming sites. One participant said, “I think the future of music listening will end up with people using the Internet instead of albums or the radio.” Many respondents agreed with this sentiment, but there were some responses that seemed to have a more optimistic view of the future of music. One participant believes there is still hope for non-streaming and digital music: “I think that music will continue to be a fine balance between all the mediums.” Some respondents offer hope for traditional broadcast radio and CDs, but the majority of the participants shared that they believe streaming and digital music sites will become the most popular, and possibly the only music listening methods available in the future.

These responses show that concerns from country music artists about the idea of “free music” and new formats are justifiable, but listeners are still appreciative of more traditional music purchasing formats. Concerns from Swift, Aldean, Church, and more about the downfall of the full-length album and the rise of free online music formats are valid considering the responses to this survey, but most respondents seem to feel that there are benefits to both traditional music formats (CDs and albums) and newer music formats (streaming sites).

Social media survey: Evaluating listener opinions about artists on social media sites.

The second survey conducted for this study asks participants to reflect on their use of social media and the ways their favorite artists use social media to connect with fans. The survey was sent out via Facebook (so that all respondents would need to be well versed in social media in order to take the survey) from November 9-19, 2015. The survey was comprised of 6 multiple-choice questions and 3 short response questions. After reviewing the responses, I found that 33 responses were submitted. The first question of the survey asked respondents to give their age. All but two of the participants said they are between the ages of 18-24, with the remaining two respondents fitting into the 40-55 age range. When asked how many hours per week they use social media, 33% of participants said they spend over 15 hours per week on social media, and 24% explained that they use social media for 5-10 hours per week. Participants were then asked to share which music genre is their favorite. This question allows me to understand the demographic of the participants and whether or not the results of the survey directly reflect the attitudes of country music fans (if many respondents were country music fans) or if the information gathered in the survey reflects attitudes of music fans of all genres. The three most popular music genres among participants were alternative (33%), pop (24%), and country (21%). Both rap and rock music received 9% of the votes, while only 3% of respondents favored R&B music.

Participants were then asked to reflect on their favorite social media sites (this information was utilized to determine which social media sites to use to track Paisley, Lady Antebellum, and Church on). The most popular social media site among participants was Facebook, as 79% of respondents chose the sites alone or with other sites (respondents were

allowed to select multiple options). The most popular grouping of social media sites is Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram; 30% of participants chose these three sites, sometimes with an additional site, as their favorite social media sites. Participants were then asked to share which singer/artist they most enjoy following on social media and why. Several country artists, like Carrie Underwood, Cam, and Reba were written in as responses to the question. However, the most popular artist on social media among respondents was Taylor Swift. Participants were also asked to share which social media site is their favorite for connecting with artists. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram each received 27% of votes, with Snapchat, Soundcloud, and Youtube receiving less than 10% each.

Respondents were asked to explain why they enjoy following a certain artist on social media and why the respondent prefers using a specific social media site over another for following singers/artists. Responses for these questions were divided into three distinct gratifications that express the needs and habits of music fans on social media: immediacy/simplicity, content, and connection.

Immediacy/Simplicity

Respondents shared an appreciation for social media sites that allow for timely updates that are simple. Thirty percent of participants claimed that they connect with artists on social media in order to receive news about the singer/artist in a timely fashion. Participants also seem to value social media formats that are less used. For example, a respondent said, “Instagram can post pics and videos, and peoples usually don't Instagram as often as they tweet so it's not overbearing.” Another respondent claimed, “Twitter is easy to use and gets to the point of tweets with a short sentence or two.” Fans want to be able to receive information about artists quickly

and concisely, so these ideas play a large part in deciding the artists to connect with and the sites he/she will connect with the artist on.

Content

Content is a very important gratification for music fans when deciding which artists to connect with on social media and which sites to connect with them on. Seventy-eight percent of respondents said that their main motivation for using social media to connect with artists is to receive content/information about the artist and/or his/her music. One respondent said that he/she prefers to use Facebook to connect with artists because “You get to follow their page which is regularly updated. You can also share and follow links to new videos or songs they post.” Fans enjoy being able to access new songs, videos, tour information, and other content with social media. Participants also expressed an appreciation for artists who use social media sites for giveaways, charity, and updates about concerts. One respondent said, “I don't use Twitter or Instagram and I feel like Snapchat or Vine won't really give me information about new releases or tours.” Many respondents shared that they enjoy Instagram because it allows fans to access “a visual you can put an emotion to or a feeling to. Plus you can add music to instagrams too now.”

Connection

One of the most consistently discussed topics among respondents was a desire to connect with artists on a personal level and to communicate with artists. When asked why they connect with artists via social media, 15% of respondents said that their main purpose is to communicate with/contact singers/artists. Many participants who selected Taylor Swift as their favorite artist on social media enjoyed her Instagram account because it allows them a chance to see Swift in a behind-the-scenes setting. One respondent said, “Taylor Swift is really funny on Twitter and posts cool pictures on Instagram. She's also really nice to her fans on social media.” Fans seem to

appreciate a sense of humor from artists on social media, as another participant selected “[actress/singer] Anna Kendrick, because her Twitter posts make me laugh every time.” Another participant shared a similar outlook when asked why he/she prefers to use Twitter when connecting with artists: “Because I feel like other social media sites are mainly used to promote their shows and merchandise, while Twitter seems to be where they are most likely to just post about their day. It's more personal.”

Fans also appreciate building a connection with artists through interpersonal social media communication. One respondent who favored Swift said, “Taylor Swift- she noticed me on Instagram, which is linked to my twitter, and I was invited to her house for the 1989 Secret Sessions.” This respondent enjoys being noticed by artists on social media because it allows him/her a chance to meet the artist in person. Other participants seemed to favor the use of Twitter for following artists for the same reason. A participant explained that Twitter makes it so that “it is easier to connect and interact with them [artists].” Fans expressed a desire to connect more with artists and prefer to use social media sites that provide an intimate look at an artist’s life or allows the artist to directly communicate with fans.

The final question of the survey asked participants whether or not they believe social media helps increase artists’ popularity and why they believe that. Wording varied among respondents, but 84% of respondents answered with some variation of “yes.” Several participants (12%) did not answer the question or replied with “Unk”, which was understood as “unknown.” One participant gave a response that did not answer the question.

Participants shared positive opinions about social media’s role in artist promotion. One respondent shared, “Social media is a huge aspect of our lives. Artists are able to connect with sometimes millions of people in a few minutes. I think it also lets fans think they are more

involved with the person they are following.” Fans believe that social media lets artists give millions of fans an intimate look at their lives, which will help fans feel more connected to the artists. Another respondent shared a similar opinion:

“Yes- it makes them seem more like real people. If I see someone's photos and he or she is doing things that I also enjoy, it makes me feel a connection. I want to support artists with whom I connect because they often produce music to which I also feel a connection.”

One respondent gave an answer that touches upon each of the gratifications listed above and summarizes the findings of the survey:

“Yes!!! I believe that we are in the social media age and with an industry like music, you need to stay relevant and keep people interested. The use of social media allows these singers/artists to expose themselves and give themselves positive press in a manner which they choose, not what the paparazzi choose. Also I believe that having a social media presence shows that they care about their fans and want them to be involved and up to date which personally makes me like them more.”

The findings of this survey show that fans prefer connecting with artists on sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Fans look for immediacy/simplicity, content, and connection when deciding which sites to connect with artists on and which artists to follow. Artists like Swift were among fans’ favorites because she offers visual and behind-the-scenes content while also connecting/communicating/sharing with fans on several different social media platforms. This survey does face several limitations. The survey was only sent out via Facebook, so Facebook’s popularity in the results may come from the fact that each respondent was a Facebook user. Also, not all respondents were country music fans, so these results do not directly

reflect the opinions of country music fans. Instead, this survey offers three possible gratifications for music fans as to why they follow certain artists on certain social media sites. This information can be used to understand the motivations of music fans so that artist can effectively promote themselves and their music to fans via social media. These results show newer sets of gratifications that users are looking to fulfill when connecting with artists on social and digital media sites. These gratifications also reflect the evolution of the uses and gratifications theory of media and how the theory may need to continue to evolve as technology and media evolve.

Discussion/Conclusion

This thesis project attempted to understand how the country music industry has been impacted by digital and social media sites, how country artists are utilizing these sites to connect with fans, and how fans value these sites and the ways their favorite artists use the sites. Through the literature review, I brought attention to two major theoretical areas that are reflected in these digital and social media sites: “gatekeeping” theory and the uses and gratifications theory of media. Research shows that newer media formats are creating a need for new types of gratifications to help understand why people use these newer, more diverse types of media. Also, these social and digital media sites are allowing music fans to play a more active role in determining the popularity and success of an artist, song, and/or album.

By analyzing country artists’ opinions about social and digital media inclusion in their promotion and distribution strategies, I found that artists have mixed feelings towards these new sites. This contributes to our understanding of the incorporation of social and digital media in the music industry because it shows that artists have many hesitations towards using social and digital media to share content with fans, but some of those who use these sites seem to have success when promoting new content. The study of Brad Paisley, Lady Antebellum, and Eric Church’s album promotion campaigns shed light on the importance of finding a balance between promoting an album on social and digital media and making sure fans want to buy the album. Paisley’s strategy focused more on promotion than sales, which led to poor sales numbers. Lady Antebellum and Church were both able to find a balance and used social and digital media in a way that fit with their opinions about the sites (especially Church), which helped them find success with their albums. This information can teach artists and labels how to effectively

connect with audiences in a meaningful way (a way that will cause audiences to act) when promoting themselves and their content to fans.

The listener surveys showed several new gratifications for social media, some of which seem to be reflected in the social and digital media strategies of country music artists. Listeners appreciate digital music media like Spotify and Pandora because it gives them the option to discover new music, stay entertained, avoid commercial interruptions that are standard in broadcast radio, and listen to music for free. While this idea of “free” music concerns artists like Swift and Aldean, who pulled their music from Spotify because of the low royalties payments from these sites to songwriters and artists, the “free” aspect of streaming sites is one of the biggest appeals for listeners. Fans appreciate artist connections on social media for the personalization/exclusivity of the media, the visuals, and the relaxed nature of the posts. Fans showed a great interest in getting to learn about artists’ real lives and behind-the-scenes activities via social media. The surveys shows that fans want to act as their own “gatekeepers” and have the chance to discover new music and content on their own while also getting an in-depth look at an artist’s life. These new uses for social and digital media require new perspectives on the fan as a “gatekeeper” and the gratifications for why fans use certain sites to connect with artists and their music.

The results of this project show the importance for artists to recognize fans’ desire to learn about the artist on a more intimate and personal level, whether it be posting personalized or more revealing social media messages (like Swift) or finding a way to connect with fans during shows (for artists like Church who forgo social media.) Fans want to be able to interact and connect with artists on a more personal level; in a world where social media allows for more

connections to be forged than ever before, country artists should consider finding a method that works for them for connecting with fans on a more personal level.

The findings in this project present an opportunity for sharing content and connecting with fans. Many survey participants shared that they prefer following artists on Instagram because artists can share videos and photographs of themselves and their lives, which allows fans to forge a deeper connection with them. When conducting the social media promotion analysis for this project, I found that the artists I was tracking rarely used Instagram to share content. With so many fans expressing an interest in Instagram, country artists like Brad Paisley, Lady Antebellum, Eric Church, and more may want to consider utilizing Instagram as a way to promote themselves and their music. For fans, this information is important; as artists are seeing the need for a social and digital media presence, they could begin to only release content and music via social and digital media sites.

There are several limitations to this project. The listener surveys offered valuable insight into the motivations of music fans for choosing certain social and digital media sites to use when interacting with artists, but the surveys were open to fans of all music genres. Also, both surveys took responses from a convenience sample instead of a representative sample, so the results may not be directly representative of the opinions of all music fans. Future research that is able to investigate the opinions of a large group of country music fans may be effective at finding out exactly what country fans are looking for from artists on social and digital media.

An interesting topic for future research would be to consider the age/ “generation” of a country music artist and their presence on social and digital media. In this project, I discussed Garth Brooks’ return to country music and his long-awaited venture into digital and social media, an area of media most current country stars have been involved in for several years.

Brooks missed out on success with his music site GhostTunes and his comeback did not make the impact on country music that had been anticipated. Brooks has become a member of an older “generation” of country music, along with the likes of George Strait, Reba McEntire, Brooks & Dunn, Shania Twain, and Toby Keith. It would be interesting to consider how the age of an artist influences their popularity and behavior on social and digital media to see if the failure of Brooks’ comeback was simply a product of excessive hype or if artists need to be involved in social and digital media in order to stay relevant in country music.

The findings in this project show a bright outlook for country music artists, industry professionals, and fans. Though artists like Taylor Swift, Jason Aldean, and Eric Church have voiced concerns over the popularity of social and digital media among fans and the pressure for artists to incorporate social and digital media into their routine of connecting with fans, it seems as though fans do appreciate connecting with artists on these sites. Taylor Swift and Eric Church each have opinions about new music media and social media that they are unwilling to compromise on, but have found a way to promote themselves and connect with fans without jeopardizing their opinions. Artists need to be able to maintain these morals (if they are truly that important to the artist) while recognizing the popularity of social and digital media among fans. While social and digital media present some concerns for some artists, it appears as though social and digital media has made country music a more accessible media for fans and will remain an important tool for country artists who want to share their music and maintain popularity.

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Appendix A

Music and Radio Listening/Use Survey 2015

This survey is anonymous and the results will be used in a study about online and offline radio. Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated.

How old are you?

- Younger than 18 years old
- 18-24 years old
- 24-40 years old
- 40-55 years old
- Older than 55 years old

How often do you use technology per week?

- I do not use technology
- Less than 1 hour
- 1-5 hours
- 5-10 hours
- 10-15 hours
- More than 15 hours per week

Do you own a smartphone that includes applications for listening to music?

- Yes
- No

Do you currently use a music listening device (iPod, mp3 player)?

- Yes
- No

Are you involved in any type of radio and/or music production?

- Yes
- No

Do you purchase music online (digital music)?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes
- I don't know how to purchase music online

How many hours per week do you listen to terrestrial broadcast radio (radio which does not require the use of internet in order to be listened to)?

- I do not listen to terrestrial broadcast radio
- Less than 1 hour
- 1-5 hours

- 5-10 hours
- 10-15 hours
- More than 15 hours

If you do listen to terrestrial broadcast radio, what do you like about it and why?

How many hours per week do you listen to online radio/music streaming sites (ex. Pandora, iHeartRadio, Spotify)?

- I do not listen to online radio/music streaming sites
- Less than 1 hour
- 1-5 hours
- 5-10 hours
- 10-15 hours
- More than 15 hours

If you do listen to online radio/music streaming sites, what do you like about it and why?

What is your preferred method(s) of listening to music? Please briefly explain.

Ex. online radio, offline radio, music streaming sites, mp3 player/iPod, physical albums, etc.

Why do you prefer this/these methods of music listening? Please briefly explain for each method.

Do you consider online radio/music streaming sites to be "radio"? Why? Please briefly explain.

How do you define "radio"?

What do you believe the future of music listening will look like? Please briefly explain

Ex. the demise of terrestrial radio, the demise of online radio/streaming sites, the revival of the physical album, etc.

Appendix B

Social Media and Music Survey

This anonymous survey asks you to consider your activity on social media and the ways you connect with singers/music artists on those sites. This information gathered in this survey will be used in a research project investigating the impact of social and digital media on the country music industry. Please take several minutes to fill out this survey. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

How old are you?

- Under 18 years old
- 18-24 years old
- 24-40 years old
- 40-55 years old
- Over 55 years old

How much time per week do you spend on social media?

- Less than 1 hour
- 1-5 hours
- 5-10 hours
- 10-15 hours
- Over 15 hours

What is your favorite type of music?

- Country
- Rock
- Pop
- R&B
- Rap
- Alternative

On which social media sites do you connect with singers/music artists? (Choose all that apply)

“Connect”, in this question, means you regularly view content from the singer/music artist (“follow”, “like”, etc)

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- Snapchat
- Vine
- Other: _____

Who is your favorite singer/music artist to connect with on social media and why?

Which social media site is your favorite for connecting with singers/music artists?

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- Snapchat
- Vine
- Other: _____

Please briefly explain why you chose your answer for the previous question.

Why do you connect with singers/music artists on social media?

- To stay updated on their new music
- To get exclusive content
- To communicate with/contact singers/artists
- To receive news about the singer/music artist in a timely fashion
- Other: _____

Do you think singers/music artists' use of social media helps increase their popularity/success? Why?