

IDENTITY, GENRE, AND CHART SUCCESS
Application for the Music ID Digital Research Fellowship

The rise of digital music distribution and consumption has seemed to flatten many boundaries that barred historically marginalized genres and artists from mainstream success, opening up what Spotify co-founder Daniel Ek (2018) recently called “a new world” in which “music has no borders” and success is available to all musicians. Concurrently, sociological research on taste (e.g., Peterson and Kern 1996; García-Alvarez et al. 2007; Ollivier 2008; Lizardo and Skiles 2015) has shown a decrease in discrimination among listening publics as omnivorousness has generally replaced high-brow habits among current audiences. Despite this restructuring of taste and despite streaming services’ equal-opportunity utopian vision, many recent articles (e.g., McKinney 2017; Pelly 2018) have suggested that success in popular music continues to cluster around white male musicians, reflecting and reinforcing structural inequalities.

In this study, I will research correlations between musician demographics, their associated genres, and their success across a variety of charts to determine any effects the former two have on the latter. By employing the Music ID platform, this study will be able to provide a robust, multi-format, geographically diverse, and chronologically contextual exploration of these interrelated factors. In particular, I will use the Music ID database to determine if the ubiquitous access offered by streaming services helps to open avenues of success for historically marginalized communities of musicians. For example, I can quantify what Tricia Rose (1990) called “the marginalization, deletion and mischaracterization of women’s role in black cultural production” as hip hop entered the mainstream U.S. market in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and compare that to demographic factors in the success of current rappers. How have digital practices of distribution and consumption affected success of artists from diverse backgrounds and across different genres? By increasing access, have streaming services helped to “flatten the playing field,” as it were?

I have already constructed a database of Spotify’s publicly available metadata for genre and acoustic parameters for every artist and song to appear on the Billboard Hot 100 weekly charts since the early 1960s, and will use these as an initial point from which to compare the success of artists in various genres across different charts. Specifically, I will determine how artists’ identities affect their success and whether there are consistent correlations or trends based on the genres they perform. MusicWeb will help me efficiently parse semantic data about artists, and Music ID will help me establish statistically significant measures of success by utilizing charts that span a broad range of time, locations, and styles. In particular, besides hip hop, this study will cover genres like contemporary country, tropical house, indie pop, and R&B.

Recent technologically mediated social movements like #metoo and #blacklivesmatter have increased awareness of the many systemic gendered and racial inequities that plague modern life. This study will investigate how these inequities affect success in popular music, and Music ID will provide a vital tool for collecting data and visualizing the results.