

## **DIGITAL IDENTITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF GENERATION X MUSICIANS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Generation X musicians represent a transitional generation from the pre-digital to the digital era, having experience developing their musical identity and reputation in both. In the process of development, they use digital platforms to communicate directly with their audience and utilize digital technologies for music production, promotion, and distribution. They face the challenge of reconciling traditional approaches they used in the pre-digital era with the demands of the digital ecosystem. The research explores how Generation X musicians perceive the transition process in developing their musical identity using traditional and digital approach and what strategies they have adopted to keep relevance in the digital age. The results show that Generation X musicians use a combination of traditional and digital tools, with this integrated approach proving to be the best strategy for them as they feel nostalgic and question the quality and relevance of online visibility. Although they have digital skills, they still need to take full advantage of the digital ecosystem in building their digital identity, leaving room for further research in this area. Continuing previous autoethnographic research identifying the information and communication challenges musicians face when developing their digital identity, this study gives deeper insight on those challenges from the perspective of Generation X musicians and the difficulties they face when reconciling traditional musical practices with new digital opportunities. The input of this study is to contribute to the existing knowledge of the strategies musicians from various generations use to build digital identity, in particularly Generation X musicians, and to contribute to a better understanding of musician digital identity overall since there is a lack of research in this field.

### **KEYWORDS**

Digital Identity, Musician, Generation X, Digital Public Relations, Digital Ecosystem

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Development of digital technology has highly impacted music industry and changed the way musicians develop and maintain their identities. The Generation X grew in this period of technological change from pre-digital to digital era and musicians of this generation remained active with the audience in both pre-digital and digital era. They have laid the foundation in the

development of digital ecosystem and their perception is very valuable because they face the challenge of maintaining a stable identity in the digital age (Schedivy et al., 2021). They need to develop multidisciplinary skills that include navigating through digital ecosystem and understanding digital public relations, while at the same time, digital transformation offers creative potential for them (Eiriz & Elite, 2017). Development of digital technology has changed musicians' role in music industry allowing musicians to become more independent in the process of production, promotion and distribution (Kiresci, 2021).

To further explore the perceptions of Generation X musicians in transition from pre-digital to digital era, this study builds on previous autoethnographic research in which the authors identified the information and communication challenges musicians face in the digital ecosystem, including digital literacy, managing digital networks, promotion, audience, media relations, and virtual concerts (Duras Gled & Luic, 2024). It is important to examine how technological advancements have shaped generational experiences, to get a deeper understanding of how Generation X musicians navigate the digital ecosystem, as they represent a critical transition point between the pre-digital and digital eras and offer a unique perspective, having developed their identities in both the analog and digital eras. This generation is authentic in its position to utilize the benefits of digital technology for production, promotion and distribution of music while adapting to the challenges of combining traditional approaches with new digital opportunities.

This research aims to analyze how Generation X musicians perceive digital change in the development of their digital identity within the modern digital ecosystem and which challenges they face. As an extended version of the previous research identifying the information and communication challenges musicians face when developing their digital identity, this study gives deeper insight on those challenges, offering unique perspective on how these musicians adapt to modern tools for digital promotion, music distribution, and public relations and what strategies they use to adopt to digital ecosystem.

Building on the previous research questions that defined the information and communication challenges musicians face in forming their musical identity and the public relations strategies in the digital ecosystem that contributes to the formation of a musician's digital identity; this research asks additional questions that allow for a deeper analysis of Generation X musicians' views and their navigation of the digital world.

RQ1: How do Generation X musicians perceive digital transition in building their digital identity?

RQ2: What strategies do Generation X musicians use to adapt to the digital ecosystem?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The evolution of independent musicians is shaping the way the music industry functions, following a radical shift in the late 1990s with the introduction of peer-to-peer (P2P) music sharing through Napster, which enabled free music downloads, and the transition to digital MP3 recordings (Owsinski, 2014). Digital technology has enabled musicians to promote their music, make direct sales, and communicate with their audience (Stewart, 2018), contributing to the development of music entrepreneurs and a new music business model (Tronvoll, 2019). As digital technologies advance, digital ecosystems create new values that vary in type and size. At the same time, there is a need for a community of participants within which products and

services are developed based on the platform's resources (Valdez-de-Leon, 2019). Virtual communities emerge within the digital ecosystem, where individuals build a digital presence through virtual interaction. The importance of developing and creating new identities in the digital environment mirrors real-world identities (Zimmerman & Woolf, 2014). Therefore, developing a musician's digital identity means transforming human identity into digital data, which should be observed through digital identity systems as data sources (Masiero, 2023). The representation of a digital identity that mirrors a real identity is dominated by the observation of its systems (Masiero & Arvidsson, 2021). This process of self-presentation in a virtual community, in this case of a musician, is built through the user's relationship with the digital system by creating the user profile as an identity for the system to process activities and present the active identity to the public (Ertzcheid, 2016). A digital identity, therefore, also includes activities that define the user through specific written, audio, or video content that the user publishes on different platforms and that the system defines through numerical variables related to the number of followers or friends (Ertzcheid, 2016). The outcome of user activity within the system, which occurs during the construction of a digital identity, determines the creation of a digital reputation, which can be partially controlled through a series of strategies and recommendations (Ertzcheid, 2016).

Technological development has enabled musicians to create, market, and distribute music without needing a record label. This has significantly impacted the independent sector's growth, accounting for 32.5% of the music industry (Houghton, 2020). However, it has also led to an oversaturation of the market in which a musician acts as an entrepreneur trying to achieve a successful music career in a digital environment, focusing on developing a digital identity while still relying on the traditional values of good songs, quality recordings, brand development, and promotion, just with a significantly different approach (Tronvoll, 2019). Independent musicians operate in a changing digital ecosystem where new digital communication channels develop, enabling successful promotion (Armit & Oliver, 2019). In this process, they face the challenging task of transitioning from music production to entrepreneurial activities that require the mastery of new information and communication skills (Caves, 2000). In a new communication environment, new forms of interaction with end users are emerging (Kwilinski et al., 2019) as well as new opportunities for innovative processes in the creative industries (Peris-Ortiz et al., 2019). Musicians can now connect to audiences without any barriers, including geographical distance (Morris, 2020). The Internet offers several advantages over traditional media: increased visibility for musicians and their official websites through search engine optimization (SEO), real-time interaction with stakeholders, gaining valuable data on target audiences, and measuring the effectiveness of public relations (Amodu, 2019). Musicians today use digital technology in the music production process mostly in their home studios (Kalliris, 2019). They then bring their music to market via global online distributors such as CD Baby or TuneCore and promote it on various platforms (Giones, 2017). The evolution of platforms, accelerated by mobile media development (Zhang & Negus, 2021), affects the market's oversaturation and changes the audience's needs, who can now choose from a pool of many musicians. The fact that there is a growing number of smaller record labels and music entrepreneurs in the music industry who share the common goal of finding their audience (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2018) represents a significant market opportunity for independent public relations professionals in the digital environment (Tankosic, 2016; Hyatt, 2012).

Current research focuses primarily on the impact digital technology development has on record labels, audiences, and the media (Coelho & Mendes, 2019), while the effects of digital technology on independent musicians still need to be explored (McSweeney, 2020). Some

research addresses the need for musicians to adopt a new mindset when developing their music careers (Blanning, 2008) and the importance of financial planning (Morrow, 2018). Yet, research is limited regarding the information and communication challenges musicians face in developing their digital identities. Furthermore, it is noticeable that new media has influenced public relations, particularly in the music industry, and therefore, digital public relations require more research. Public relations practitioners often apply traditional media techniques to the digital ecosystem (Grunig, 2009).

## 2.1 Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach of in-depth interviews to explore musicians' perceptions of digital transformation and adaptation to the digital ecosystem. The in-depth interview is ideal for exploring respondents' perceptions, attitudes, and personal experiences as it is an effective way to collect reliable and valuable data (Saunders et al., 2009). Once respondents feel free to express their opinions, the researcher has more possibility to collect valuable information and insight into their experience (Hair et al., 2010). The questions were open-ended and asked in the form of a semi-structured interview, which is appropriate as it is an interview that allows participants the freedom to express their opinions and provide additional insight into their perceptions (Walle, 2015). The use of the semi-structured approach allowed for greater flexibility in the order of structured questions and flexibility for the interviewees to answer questions on specific topics more freely (Saunders et al., 2009).

The sample includes three musicians from Croatia from various music genres, traditional folk music, pop music, and musicals, who represent Generation X and can look back on a successful music career of more than twenty-five years. They are full-time musicians whose profession and livelihood depend exclusively on music. This particular sample allows for a greater depth of information linked to the quality of the dialog (Malterud et al., 2016). The authors used the purposive sample to select respondents with specific characteristics who can provide relevant data for the research problem (Ajdukovic, 2014). The criteria set for the research encompass established musicians with 20 to 30 years of successful music careers, users of digital platforms for music presentation, representatives of various music genres, singer-songwriters with home studios, and active participants in the Croatian music scene. The interviews lasted up to 40 minutes and were conducted online via Google Meet since participants' live in different regions of Croatia. The interview was transcribed and themes were derived through a systematic coding process with the focus on the research questions. The data were then analyzed using an inductive approach, a methodical procedure for analyzing qualitative data that is guided by specific evaluation objectives (Thomas, 2006). In the thematic data analysis, responses were grouped into key thematic categories, and each category was analyzed in terms of frequency of occurrence. Identical questions were used for all participants to ensure comparability and consistency in data analysis.

One of the main limitations of this approach is the relatively small sample of respondents, which may limit the generalizability of the results to a broader population of musicians. However, this in-depth study builds on previous autoethnographic research of musicians from Croatia. Therefore, it is essential to gain insights into the perceptions of Generation X musicians who meet the above criteria. Digital music platforms appeared in Croatia in 2020, which shows how slowly digital platforms have developed in Croatia and how much musicians are still clinging to publishers until they fully transition to independent music publishing and new digital

opportunities. For this reason, it was a challenge to find suitable musicians who met all the necessary criteria for the survey. Therefore, the results of this interview are very significant for the Croatian context, but also provide valuable information for musicians worldwide, considering the lack of research in the field of musical identity development for Generation X musicians.

The authors adhered to ethical guidelines and ensured the anonymity of the interviewees. The ethical code of academic conduct of the University of North was observed during the interviews.

## 2.2 Results

The interview data was grouped according to key themes, with follow-up questions identified in line with the research questions, as shown in the table.

Table 1. Overview of topics and questions

Research question	Topic	Question	Question
RQ1: Perceptions of digital transition	1-Promotion and distribution	1-Importance	2-Value
	2- Audience and media	1-Importance	2-Value
RQ2: Musicians' strategies	3-Digital literacy and the use of technology	1-Interaction	2-Challenges and response
	4-Professional support and resources	1-Interaction	2-Challenges and response

For the first research question regarding the perception of digital transition in developing a digital identity, the follow-up question was posed: What is the importance of digital change for the professional development of Generation X musicians? This sub-question explores how musicians perceive the impact of digital change on their careers and identity formation. The focus is on the importance of promoting and distributing their music as well as their relationship with the audience and the media. The second sub-question was posed: How do Generation X musicians value the process of building their digital identity in comparison to traditional methods? The focus is on the perceived value of efficacy of digital tools and platforms used for promotion compared to traditional methods of promotion, as well as audience and media relations.

For the second research question, which relates to the strategies that Generation X musicians use to adapt to the digital ecosystem, two follow-up questions were posed about interaction and challenges. A third sub-question: How do musicians engage in the digital ecosystem to promote their work and connect with their audience? The focus is on digital literacy and musicians' engagement in the use of technology, such as specific digital platforms, social networks and online tools musicians use. A fourth sub-question: What challenges do musicians face in adapting to the digital ecosystem, and how do they respond to these challenges? The focus is on challenges such as technical difficulties, lack of support, lack of knowledge, or lack of financial resources, and how they respond to these challenges through professional support or other resources.

### 2.2.1 Promotion and Distribution

Respondents recognized the importance of promotion and social media presence in building their reputation. When it comes to distributing their music, they still prefer to work with publishers, even as a sub-label.

Table 2. Promotion and distribution of music

Question	Respondent 1	Respondent 2	Respondent 3
Importance	<i>"Today, you can't get by in the real world without being in the virtual one."</i>	<i>"You need to immerse yourself in this activity."</i>	<i>"It all comes down to managing everything yourself and making connections."</i>
Value	<i>"It has positive potential, but boundaries and criteria need to be set."</i>	<i>"Those of us who were old school have lost a lot."</i>	<i>"I think it's great. It's good to get direct input."</i>

The importance of promotion is a key factor for all participants and they are aware of the benefits of digital technologies, although they believe that it is very demanding and that they should not be responsible for promoting their own music. When evaluating the process of building an identity in a digital environment compared to traditional promotional approaches, all respondents expressed dissatisfaction. They feel that they are operating in a space that has potential, but where musicians still have a lot of work to do to successfully promote and distribute their music. The respondents' emotions differ when it comes to recognizing the importance of these changes. Interviewee 1 is more attached to the pre-digital era, while interviewee 3 is highly motivated and enthusiastic about the new digital possibilities. Interviewee 2 recognizes the benefits but is aware that a combination of traditional and digital approaches is not sustainable in the long term. There is a feeling that traditional methods are becoming increasingly outdated as the world becomes more and more dependent on digitalization. The opinion was also expressed that promotion is extremely stressful and interferes with creativity and creation, and that it also depends on financial investment. Interviewee 3: *"If I had more money, I would do it myself. It all comes down to the fact that you have to take care of everything yourself and make contacts. I find that difficult. The publishers claim they are doing something, but they do not do anything. I've changed three record companies. It was shocking to find out that they weren't doing anything. I wanted attention from them. Then why don't some well-known artists release their own music?"*

In terms of music distribution, interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with past collaborations with publishers who have not adapted to the digital age and still rely on a traditional approach just using the new digital format. Interviewee 2: *"Today, publishers simply upload a new single to the media. It used to be much more networked and had a personal touch. It cannot survive in a hybrid form."* Interviewees agreed that analog releases and the way music was distributed to listeners were of great value. Interviewee 1: *"I think the analog approach was more tangible, it was something real. There was something written inside about the album, it was graphically designed, you pulled it out, played the music and read. Reading it, you learned something — what mastering is, what percussion is. I would love to release a record, that was always a childhood dream. Artists used to work on the covers, a whole range of artists... Also, the problem today is that people don't listen to music the same way anymore. You used to have to listen to a song from beginning to end, but now you can skip songs. There are people who like fast food and people who prefer slow food."*

### 2.2.2 Audience and Media

Digital networks have enabled a new level of interaction with audience, but musicians feel that this engagement is often superficial and depends on constant presence and activity on social media, which takes up a lot of time that they would otherwise spend on their creative work. The results demonstrate that they place more value on traditional relationships with audiences and the media.

Table 3. Audience and media

Question	Respondent 1	Respondent 2	Respondent 3
Importance	<i>"For me, it's not important to have a big audience, but a good one."</i>	<i>"Only when we arrive at the concert we know if we have an audience."</i>	<i>"I prefer an online approach with the audience."</i>
Value	<i>"Even journalists don't ask about music or songs anymore, it's become tabloid journalism."</i>	<i>"We lack a way to make this digital world something I can ultimately believe in."</i>	<i>"I think we need to do both for different audiences."</i>

In his relationship with the audience, interviewee 1 neither cultivates a close connection nor makes any effort to address the audience. Interviewee 1: *"I post songs, and if someone comments, I reply. But if they start arguing on my wall, I don't let them; I delete the post."* Interviewee 1 highlights a clear difference between the relationship with the audience in the pre-digital era and emotionally expresses the problem of media content saturation, where popularity is determined by the number of views rather than the quality of the music. Interviewee 1: *"When you put up a poster of Johnny Cash, it represents something that people want to be. It inspires them, and I see that as a positive thing. They will follow their idols. It's a natural process. I remember when I saw someone, everyone wanted to have an idol. Today it's: 'Johnny Cash? I can do that too.' And they can, in their profile, because they gained views making a tomato stew."* Interviewee 1 also emphasizes that a large audience is not as important as a good audience. Interviewee 1: *"I'd rather have 50 people than 200 just filming me. I like the interaction, the knowledge that I'm singing for a person and not for a device. Bob Dylan stopped a concert when people pulled out their cell phones and said, 'Do we want to take pictures or sing?'"*

The value of the audience is perceived as unrealistic in both digital and real environments. Respondent 2: *"Only when we arrive at the concert we know if we have an audience or not. Someone may have great visibility but can't even get three people in the audience. We lack a way to turn this digital world into something I can really believe in. With Adele, for example, you fall in love with the songs digitally, but it doesn't work like that in Croatia. There is no consistent audience where I can say I have my own followers. It's not about how famous you are, but how important you are. That importance is measured when someone needs you. How often is your music played? That would be real, and does it really have concert value? Otherwise, you end up as a starlet without substance."*

Respondent 1 is very emotional when it comes to the audience and how the ability to recognize quality music is being lost. Respondent 1: *"Audiences no longer educate themselves so that they know what to listen to and where. There's been a big culture shock... The mainstream chooses shallow lyrics and music. There are only a few small subcultural groups (rock, metalheads, punk), but that's where you find the essence of quality music, even if it's not mainstream, because something else is blaring out of the cars."* In contrast, interviewee 3 sees considerable advantage in the relationship with the audience, especially in recognizing their preferences and adapting to the market. Interviewee 3: *"I prefer an online approach with the audience because I get information where they occasionally write something. When I meet them after a concert, they are overly enthusiastic and you are on an adrenaline high, so everything feels too good and vague. This way you get specific, varied feedback. Even simple, trivial comments, if you read them carefully, contain enough input to figure out what you're doing right or wrong. In the past, someone had to work up the courage to write a letter. I don't feel like posting much, but I make more jokes, and that's good — I think people like that feedback."*

Both traditional and digital approaches to interacting with the media are encouraged. Interviewee 3: *"I think both approaches are necessary for different target groups. For example, young foreign stars are followed by younger people, but they are not on TV. Television is good for general awareness and gives you advantages when booking gigs. If you are targeting an older audience who are not familiar with digital networks, it's a different story. The problem is with radio stations that accept only certain formats. I think this is a great time for young people. If I was starting out in music now, I would be recording content and videos. That's what I wanted to do, but I didn't have cameras."* Respondent 1 points out that the media are also losing their sense of quality in music. Respondent 1: *"I try to only post things that have to do with music and not do stupid things. Even journalists don't ask about music or songs anymore; it's all become tabloid journalism. I think there must be a barrier between the artist and the audience. Take Michelangelo for example, the audience didn't climb on top of the Sistine Chapel. There should be a difference between the artist and the audience. Now it all boils down to working alone and having money. Everything seems to be open, but it's all geared towards making a profit. It's become much more perfidious and closed."*

### 2.2.3 Digital Literacy and the Use of Technology

The results indicated that respondents have highly developed technical skills, but still have difficulties in using digital tools, especially algorithmic systems which musicians find to be challenging and it leads them to frustration.

Table 4. Digital literacy and the use of technology

Question	Respondent 1	Respondent 2	Respondent 3
Interaction	<i>"I don't think I'm competent enough."</i>	<i>"I want to understand so that I can do it myself."</i>	<i>"I taught myself everything."</i>
Challenges and response	<i>"My bigger problem is time and attitude."</i>	<i>"Right now it's a frustration."</i>	<i>"I've solved everything successfully. It's all clear to me."</i>

Most respondents are engaged over Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, while respondent 3 is the only one who also uses TikTok and has his own website. Respondent 1 has no difficulty in learning new skills and mastering digital tools but lacks the time to do so and believes that musicians should not do it themselves. Interviewee 2 is particularly worried about the influence of artificial intelligence on music and stresses the importance of preserving emotions. Interviewee 2: *"I understand all that, but I don't want robots running alongside me. With the advent of AI, that's exactly what we could become. We have become slaves to AI because of the humans who invented it. The AI generation will dry up when humans realize that it lacks human emotions. That's what will happen when you confront Paul McCartney. It's unnecessary and unpoetic. AI has become aware of its existence because we no longer have anything to separate us from it — only emotions."* In terms of virtual concerts, one of the latest digital music trends using holograms, the interviewees accept this to a certain extent, but believes that personal contact with the audience cannot be replaced. Interviewee 2: *"It's nice that this option exists. The platform should be active in case something happens, so we organize concerts from home to solve problems. You can watch a virtual concert, but physically it's irreplaceable. King Cole was on the screen and his daughter was singing and this was really emotional."* Interviewee 3: *"It could be really good, depending on the type of concert. But I don't know how well it would work in acoustic spaces. It could work for big concerts because the performer can't see anything through the stage lighting anyway."*

There is a clear desire to continue to improve and overcome challenges. Interviewee 2: *"I struggle with understanding Google Ads — analytics, marketing tasks, conversions, clicks, bids. I want to understand it so I can do it myself. Right now it's a frustration. I know how to do all the campaigns, but Google is pretty important. I've decided to do it myself because this business has become very expensive. Digital marketing. I need to understand enough to take it into my own hands. I pay directly for the advertising budgets."*

### 2.2.4 Professional Support and Resources

The results revealed that all respondents prefer to receive technical support from a record company or a public relations specialist. A common challenge is working with publishers and finding the right PR experts. They resolve this challenge by combining occasional collaboration with record companies after preparing songs in their home studios. They are not satisfied with this option and all interviewees emphasized that they would rather work with a PR professional who could arrange everything according to their wishes.

Table 5. Professional support and resources

Question	Respondent 1	Respondent 2	Respondent 3
Interaction	<i>"Publisher, but with a division of tasks by agreement."</i>	<i>" I think it's better for young artists to do PR than to hire a publisher."</i>	<i>"I've changed three publishers."</i>
Challenges and response	<i>"I'd like to have a public relations person."</i>	<i>"I'm completely online with my collaborators"</i>	<i>"I've started PR a few times."</i>

There is interest for professional support in particular for services of publishers, although the interviewees clearly expressed that the skills of publishers in the digital age are not sufficiently adapted to the needs of musicians. Interviewee 2: *"The problem with publishers today is that they don't know how to create new artists. Very few know that. The battle for visibility in the media is extremely difficult. I have tried to do PR myself. There were no results worth mentioning. They push something here and there, newsletters. It only happens if it's worthwhile and if the audience falls in love with the artist. I think it's better for young artists to do PR than to hire a publisher, because they wouldn't bother."* Interviewee 3: *"A couple of times I started with some people, but it turned out to be pointless. Publishers say they'll do something, but they don't do anything. I have changed 3 record companies. It was shocking to realize that they don't do anything."*

There is also great interest in working with a public relations person, although the interviewees remain skeptical based on previous experience. Interviewee 1: *"I would like a PR person, I don't think I'm competent. I'm not a secretary, manager or PR person. I don't make my own posters, advertise myself, write about myself in the third person. That seems ridiculous and absurd to me in today's world of narcissistic nobodies, where anyone can become a star through social media. A person who is really worth something can't stand out unless they have management skills. It's a sad situation. The record companies are just offices that get it done..."*

They are also open to collaborating with other musicians via digital platforms, which they already use for their work. Interviewee 2: *"I'm completely online with my collaborators, they send me everything from their home studios and everyone works at a time that suits them. It's a great thing. I order string arrangements from LA."*

## **2.3 Discussion**

Themes from the results that were extracted from the interviews include promotion and distribution, audience and media, digital literacy and the use of technology, professional support and resources. These themes correspond to the previous research authors conducted indicating digital literacy, digital network management, album promotion, audience engagement, media relations, and virtual concerts, as key challenges. The deeper insight of the research was conducted through follow-up questions within these themes, defining four categories that can be used to compare the results from the previous research including importance, value, interaction, challenges and responses.

### **2.3.1 Comparison**

The importance of digital technology for the role of the musician in the development of his identity in the digital age is evident in this study as well as in the previous one. Compared to the previous research, the results show that Generation X musicians have successfully adapted to digital tools, however they show a strong resistance and determination to give full value to digital tools as they take time away from their creativity, contrary to the previous study where musician was open to take full advantage of digital tools. As in the previous study, Generation X musicians are aware of the importance of being visible on different platforms and they use YouTube, Facebook and Instagram as their main networks, but also prefer traditional methods of presenting music through other media or live performances. The reason for this is that their previous success was based more on traditional methods. Studies show the importance of engagement in promotional activities on social media (Klein et al., 2017). Interaction with

audiences via social media has a significant impact on the development of musicians and is crucial for the promotion and reputation of musicians (Stafford, 2010), and previous research where musicians had a public relations strategy to define primary communication networks established through Facebook and YouTube channels also confirms this study. These platforms have successfully attracted a target audience and have been used to promote a musician's digital album. Generation X musicians are in the process of releasing their digital album but are willing to give it to a publisher because they don't believe they can make it successful online, despite using YouTube to showcase their video content. Unlike a previous study where the digital album was released independently through social media and YouTube platforms, it proved to be very effective as it remains the most popular video sharing platform among musicians due to its multiple features (Mulligan, 2018). Audience interaction in both studies mainly took place via Facebook, although the frequency of communication differs as Generation X musicians communicate less frequently with their audience. Studies have proven that Facebook has a strong influence on changing the approach to the music industry and the promotion of musicians (Stafford, 2010).

The results of both studies show how important online presence is for building a good reputation. The increase in the number of likes, shares and views has become a new form of recognition and Generation X musicians refuse to take this for granted as they question the quality of the audience compared to the number of likes. They are unwilling to accept the multidisciplinary role of being responsible for their own promotion and taking control of their careers. Research has shown how important it is for musicians to take on multiple roles and balance entrepreneurial and creative activities (Haynes & Marshall, 2017). Contrary to previous research findings, Generation X musicians have not yet recognized this as an advantage. They prefer to rely on record labels, although research shows that musicians who are signed to record labels have very little influence on their promotional activities (Hracs, 2012). Social media has enabled musicians to promote their music and explore different options within the digital ecosystem (Resnick et al., 2016). One of the interviewees questioned why well-known artists still sign to major labels when it is so attractive to work as an independent musician. Hesmondhalgh et al. (2019) provide insight into this question by identifying two types of streaming services: large-scale services that partner with rights holders and services that allow anyone to upload their music. Platforms such as SoundCloud and Spotify have democratized music distribution, but artists are still favored over independent musicians (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2016).

Contrary to previous research, musicians do not show the enthusiasm or motivation to fully engage in all activities related to their music career, mainly because they do not want this to interfere with their creativity and development as musicians. Research has confirmed that the lack of communication skills is a challenge for independent musicians' careers (Throsby et al., 2023) and that observing communication methods before joining a social network is an excellent strategy to connect with the target audience, familiarize themselves with the communication tools and take advantage of the platforms (Barry, 2013). This is the strategy that has been shown to be successful in previous research. Secondary research also confirms that this strategy provides musicians with the necessary tools to succeed in the digital ecosystem so that they can skillfully take advantage of the opportunities it presents (Wiebe, 2015). Research has shown that the new digital public relations in the music industry is focused on increasing audience engagement as part of the promotional process (Gamble et al., 2019). Fans will inevitably participate in communication within the digital ecosystem, putting artists in the challenging role of being constantly accessible (Baym, 2018). The dynamics of the digital ecosystem play an

increasingly important role in the development of the digital identity of musicians, who must find a balance between digital activities and artistic creativity.

Previous research has shown that managing media relationships and constantly interacting with audiences is a challenge for Generation X musicians. They do not deny the need, but are not particularly motivated because they still rely on traditional promotional methods such as live concerts, radio shows and print media, especially with an older audience that also favors this approach. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) point out that digital marketing and social media have created new opportunities for more efficient and effective interaction with the end consumer than traditional press allows. Previous research has shown that musicians are open to new media and are willing to advertise and learn through all possible means without being closed to the traditional approach. Another major challenge for Generation X is time, which was also addressed in the previous study. It is important to invest time in building relationships with the audience, as research has confirmed that it is crucial to keep the audience interested in their creativity, as they quickly grow tired of content (Maksimow, 2016). Although studies have confirmed that two-way interaction between musicians and their audience is advisable (Bennett, 2016), the study has shown that Generation X musicians are not very open to proactively communicating and having conversations with fans.

One of the challenges that has emerged in both studies is the relationship with the media. Despite media convergence, traditional media still play an important role (Meier, 2017; Armit & Oliver, 2019). This is confirmed by the findings of this study, in which interviewee 1 highlights the decline in the quality of the media, which no longer ask musicians meaningful questions about their music, instead claiming that they have become tabloid journalism. They also highlight the importance of radio as a key factor, a medium that still has a big influence on the music industry, especially in Croatia, because it has its own criteria when it comes to which songs are eligible for airplay. Another topic that came up was the creation of instant stars on TV, as mentioned by interviewee 2, who explained that their fame is short-lived and fades quickly because everything is based on instant production.

The emergence of virtual concerts as the latest trend in the music industry is accepted by Generation X musicians. The research shows that they only welcome the trend when it comes to special crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they note that the effectiveness depends on the type of concert and that virtual concerts can never fully replace live performances. Studies have confirmed this recent trend in the music industry, which has seen a significant increase during the COVID-19 pandemic and continues to grow (Vandenberg et al., 2021). Live concerts are hosted on social platforms, especially Facebook and YouTube Live (Breese et al., 2020). Virtual concerts rely on high-quality production and technology, including virtual reality and live streaming (Lee et al., 2020). Live communication through virtual concerts plays an increasingly important role in the development of new communication approaches and enhances the audience experience as an integral part of the development of the music industry and as a complement to real concerts (Breese et al., 2020). Live communication enabled by virtual concerts can be a valuable addition to traditional live concerts (Breese et al., 2020).

### **2.3.2 Key Findings**

The lack of PR professionals has emerged as one of the new challenges for Generation X musicians. The research confirmed that algorithms and digital public relations have become the new gatekeepers in the music industry, influencing musicians' visibility and success (Frenneaux, 2023; Morgan, 2019). The findings showed that Generation X musicians are aware of this

important service that a public relations expert could provide, but they need help to find the right person. Public relations activities include advertising, sharing content, networking, and hiring communication specialists to develop effective publicity and distribution strategies (Swedberg, 2006; Barry, 2013). This is something that was not an issue in the previous research as the musician was also a public relations specialist. To fulfill this need, Generation X musicians at a certain point use digital marketing and social media, although they are uncomfortable with the financial investment required. The results of this research also show that financial resources are a new challenge. Studies also confirm that the cost of a music career can be quite high and independent musicians generally lack financial support (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2015). As Wang (2016) notes, it is a challenge to even reach the point where costs are covered, let alone earn a living. The opinion was also expressed that promotion is extremely stressful and affects creativity and creation, and that it also depends on financial investment. As Interviewee 3 stated: *"If I had more money, I would do it myself"*.

The value of online fans is questioned in this study as a new concept, which is also confirmed by secondary research (Baym, 2012). Generation X musicians have embraced digital tools but emphasize that maintaining a consistent digital identity is a challenge as they must constantly adapt to new tools and strategies on social networks. Musicians can upload their music to SoundCloud and Spotify and share it on platforms (Hesmondhalgh, 2019). However, research has shown that Generation X musicians prefer someone else to do this for them. This is in contrast to previous research that emphasizes the importance of using these digital platforms independently. Interestingly, all respondents have their own music studio and are willing to spend more time using digital tools for music production and the creative process, confirming the importance of music production and distribution in the digital ecosystem (Arditi, 2019). The value obviously lies in the recognition of their identity and creative work that they present to online audiences. However, it was clear that they had different opinions on what kind of recognition was essential for each of them. Interviewee 1 valued the preservation of the bands' subcultural tradition, interviewee 2 valued emotion, while interviewee 3 valued the openness of the audience's comments. It is also important to consider the value of concerts. Respondent 1 emphasized in his answer that it is possible to have many followers but few people in the audience. This cannot be a true representation because only those who can attract an audience to their concerts are truly relevant.

The results of the study brought another new insight by measuring relevance in social media. Interviewee 2 explains: *"It's not about how well known you are, but how relevant you are. This relevance is measured when I need you. How often the music is played, that would be real, and whether it has concert value."* With the concept of relevance as a potential future research focus, the implications for the digital music ecosystem could be significant. As the interviewee suggests, relevance is best measured by the frequency of audience engagement with an artist's music rather than the number of followers. This concept resonates with respondents who are dissatisfied with the oversaturation of music content from individuals who need more musical quality but have a large following or video views. Oversaturation is another new challenge that has emerged from this research. Tronvoll (2019) also mentions the oversaturation of the market in which a musician operates as an entrepreneur trying to achieve a successful music career in a digital environment.

The research results so far show that advertising measures can be very creative and that it is important to incorporate songs with appealing video clips. These various incentives on social media can generate greater interest and lead to an increase in the number of fans (Barry, 2013; Wiebe, 2015). The previous study also mentions that the focus is on gaining truly loyal fans who are willing to attend concerts, which makes the consistent publication of high-quality content essential. Another valuable insight from this research comes from interviewee 1 of

Generation X: *"It's not important to have a large audience, but a high-quality one."* Studies also confirm that audiences in the new era are developing more judgments due to the wide availability of music (Wiebe, 2015). The quality is questionable as they constantly demand interaction with the musician (Barry, 2013).

### 3. CONCLUSION

The study explored how Generation X musicians perceive digital change in the development of their digital identity within the digital ecosystem. As an extended version of previous research that identified the information and communication challenges musicians face in developing their digital identity within the digital ecosystem, this study provides a deeper insight into the unique perspective of Generation X musicians. The results of the interview with Generation X musicians extracted four themes that include promotion and distribution, audience and media, digital literacy and the use of technology, professional support and resources. These themes correspond to the previous research authors conducted indicating digital literacy, digital network management, album promotion, audience engagement, media relations, and virtual concerts, as key challenges. The deeper insight of the research was conducted through follow-up questions within these themes, defining four categories that can be used to compare the results from the previous research including importance, value, interaction, challenges and responses. Building on the previous research and the challenges musicians face in forming their musical identity, additional research questions were posed in this study. The first research question explores how Generation X musicians perceive digital change, while the second provides insight into the strategies they use to adapt to the digital ecosystem. In answering the first research question, it emerged that Generation X musicians perceive the digital transformation as a challenging process, although they do not deny its necessity. As a generation that started their careers in the pre-digital era, they nurture a sense of nostalgia for the pre-digital era, although they recognize the opportunities that digital platforms offer for the development of their digital identity. Quality is crucial to them, as they want their digital identity to represent their music and personal values, which they are yet to in the digital ecosystem. The second research question focuses on Generation X musicians' strategies for adapting to the digital ecosystem. Generation X musicians recognize the benefits of digital technology, especially in terms of music promotion and distribution. However, unlike previous research, they are not taking full advantage of digital tools to build and maintain connections with their audience. Instead, their strategy is based on a balance between traditional promotional tactics and digital tools.

Compared to previous research, the new findings of this study suggest that the information and communication challenges are equally present among Generation X musicians, but the intensity and methods of adaptation differ. Although Generation X is digitally savvy, unlike previous research findings, they are reluctant to use these skills for their own promotion, distribution or production. Instead, they are more willing to work with a publisher or preferably hire a public relations expert.

New challenges have emerged as the result of the research that add value to the previous research. One of the new challenges is the lack of professional outreach in the digital music ecosystem and the lack of financial support for independent musicians, which provide opportunities for further research in the field of digital ecosystem. Other challenges are also important outcomes of the research and provide valuable perspectives for further investigation. For example, maintaining the emotion of music in the digital environment, a perspective that

was questioned by interviewees and may be very important for research. A new perspective sheds light on the possibility of maintaining both traditional and digital approaches to audience interaction and promotion, depending on the genre of music and the age of the audience. This is also the strategy that Generation X musicians are currently using to maintain their visibility and identity. It would be interesting to investigate whether this hybrid model would also be possible in the current music industry strategies. Generation X musicians are also questioning the oversaturation of the market and the loss of a quality audience, all of which are valuable insights for future research. Another concept of relevance proved to be a valuable key finding and an interesting potential for future research focus. This concept questions the relevance of the musician, meaning it is not important how well known the musician is, but how relevant he/she is, and it could be possibly measured by the frequency of the music being played and if the music has a concert value. All of these insights enable new implications for the digital music ecosystem that could greatly enhance the ability for independent musicians to build a successful digital identity and develop strategies that could serve as a guide for musicians. It could also enrich the relationship with the audience, allowing them to learn more about the quality of the music, or with media representatives. The results of this research provide an important insight for the music industry as there is a lack of research, especially in terms of generational approaches to digital change and the challenges they face.

One of the main limitations of this research is the relatively small sample of respondents from only one country, which could limit the generalizability of the results to a broader population of musicians. Although the research findings are very significant for Croatia, they still offer valuable information for musicians worldwide, considering how little research there is in the field of musical identity development, especially for Generation X musicians. However, the study offers deep insights into the perceptions of Generation X musicians and provides new concepts about the relevance of musicians on social media and the quality of audiences, which provide valuable insights and could be explored in more depth on a larger sample.

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