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# Aggrandisement: Helping Micro-Enterprise Owner-Managers Construct Credibility in the Recorded Music Industry

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## Abstract

In this paper, we are interested in understanding the role of aggrandisement in the construction of identity within a creative industry. Our empirical data is based on interviews and observa- tional data from thirty-six respondents in twenty firms from the music industry. Through our analysis we seek to explain how aggrandisement can be "externally directed" towards others to construct a professional reputation of competence and importance while portraying cultural relevance and expertise. Or, "internally directed" in order to build a positive illusion of oneself as a competent and worthwhile participant in the industry. Ultimately our research contributes to the reasoning behind perso- nal reputation and confidence building in professionals in the music industry.

## Introduction

This study contributes to an understanding of how and why aggrandisement (Adler and Adler, 1989; Scott, 1979) is used to construct a credible identity within the popular music industry, an industrialised context characterised by uncertainty and risk-taking. Specifically, it focuses on the extent to which creative individuals in small-to-medium sized enterprises (SMEs) draw on real and imaginary justifications to portray themselves as having attained greater success than they have actually achieved in order to construct a credible identity both to themselves and to others. As a positive self-illusion, such as

self-aggrandisement, lends psychological benefits as well as the means to achieving self-fulfilling high performance, we conclude that aggrandisement may enhance the individual's performance both professionally and personally. Although the extant literature highlights how positive self-illusions can influence identity construction, the role aggrandisement plays in this process within a creative context does not appear to have been researched. We were able to uncover this phenomenon only because we had elected to use a qualitative approach based mainly on semi-structured interview data. By approaching the data in this fashion, it allowed us to uncover the motivations behind the reasons why individuals choose to act in this manner, for the sake of themselves and their business. Aggrandisement emerged as a theme throughout our analysis that warranted further discussion and articulation.

The music industry is typical of many of the creative and cultural industries (Pratt and Jeffcutt, 2009) which produce highly symbolic goods. It is an environment with an "infinite variety" (Caves, 2000, p. 6) of products and services, most of which are vulnerable to a low probability of commercial success. Our data, obtained from observation and interviews with the owners and managers of micro music firms suggests that self-aggrandisement is a common strategy in the industry. These owners can often be the same person producing the creative product, such as singer-songwriter or studio producer, while also conducting the day-to-day business. Blurring these functional lines does not alter the motivation that drives the use of this aggrandising behaviour. It can be *externally-directed*, towards other actors who will perceive the individual as having high status and legitimacy. As such it helps to construct a professional reputation of competence and importance, portraying cultural relevance and expertise. This is key to the mutual success of potential professional partners, given the importance of building legitimacy and symbolic power. Secondly, it is *internally-directed*, as the individual builds a positive illusion of themselves as a competent and worthwhile participant in the industry. It contributes to a sense of self-worth for people who are themselves often highly insecure and working in an industry that does little to reduce such insecurity and in which there are numerous opportunities for self-worth to be undermined.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we review the characteristics of the creative personality and the music industry, before reviewing the literature on the construction of identity and the role that self-aggrandisement as a form of positive illusion plays in developing psychological well-being and a confident and hopeful sense of self. We then describe our choice of research design and methods based on interview data with owner-managers and senior executives involved in the marketing and distribution of music. Finally, we present our findings and draw out implications for both theory and practice.

## The creative personality and the music industry

Creative individuals are typically rather complex characters, subject to a wide array of emotions and expressing behaviours that at times can be quite unpredictable (Gotsi et al., 2010). They are remarkable at adapting to situations, and can be resourceful in coming up with new ideas, able to integrate and synthesise concepts in ways that others would find difficult (Fisher and Barrett, 2019, Negus and Pickering, 2004). They may be idealistic in their views and genuinely value intellectual and cognitive matters as well as their own independence and autonomy. They enjoy aesthetic experiences and respond favourably to them. Creative individuals also tend to have a strong internal locus of control (Roy and Gupta, 2012). However, creative personalities have also shown

tendencies towards high neuroticism, especially those who work within the field of popular music; they can experience high anxiety, anger more easily and experience a wider range of emotions than others. (Gillespie and Myors, 2000). Generally, creative individuals who have achieved a level of recognised success are confident in their skills and have high self-efficacy.

However, many are riddled with doubt in their abilities, something that is exacerbated by the uncertainties of the industry in which they work (Bockstedt et al., 2006; Rindova et al., 2006; Wikstrom, 2012).

Creative industries are, by definition, focused on the production of a creative product and attract individuals who show creative personality traits, especially in functions that work closely with the identification of and/or marketing of the creative output (Bilton and Cummings, 2014; Saintilan and Schreiber,). The popular music industry is an oligopoly dominated by three "majors" that together have about 80% market share; the remaining sales are shared amongst the small and micro-sized enterprises (SMEs) that comprise almost 96% of the industry's firms (Peltoniemi, 2015). This means that small firms in this type of context can rarely feel secure in their economic future. Along with other creative industries, the popular music industry also tends to be based around latent, short-term, project-based units driven by strong personal networks (Gander et al., 2007; Lizé, 2016; Lorenzen and Frederiksen, 2005; Pratt and Jeffcutt, 2009). The industry is one in which there are hundreds of aspiring performers, songwriters and producers chasing very few recording contracts, and even fewer successful recordings from those who succeeded in obtaining a contract (Hendricks and Sorensen, 2009; Wikstrom, 2012). The industry is trend-driven, socially constructed, and notoriously uncertain (Bockstedt et al., 2006; Rindova et al., 2006). Whether an artist will succeed is unpredictable, and success is fickle (Keuschnigg, 2015; Kretschmer et al., 1999). The construction and transmission of an identity in this context is especially important because the product itself is symbolic *and* attached to the creator of the product, in whichever project or organisation they areto be found.

## The construction and performance of identity

Our focus in this paper is on aggrandisement, a form of positive illusion that has the effect of manipulating the opinion that others, and the person themselves, have of the originator. In order to understand why this is so important we first review how identity, and the performance of an identity, are so important to social functioning in the creative and cultural industries (Eigler and Azarpour, 2020; Endrissat et al., 2017), and specifically the music industry. Identity is a way to establish who we are through our embodied, emotional and articulated practices (Burland, 2005; ; Coupland, 2015). It is a process of self-understanding, but also of expression, as the identity is "performed" so that it is discernible by others (Goffman, 1959; Visser et al., 2018). Identity work is the way that people engage in forming, strengthening and/or revising their sense of personal coher- ence and distinctiveness (Horst and Hitters, 2020). As with other industries where there are overlaps between the individual and the business (for example, the arts (Loizos and Alexandra (2020)) identity work is a way of creating their personal brand (Gouitcheche, 2018; Sylvester, 2018). With micro-enterprises making up a large portion of the music industry, this can shade into organisational branding, since they are often one and the same. There are numerous examples of identity performance within the music industry, both classical and popular. Classical orchestra conductors perform an identity of control, power and authority (you will do what I say), and female pop stars (although not exclusively) that put forward a performance of a sexualised identity (Saintilan and Schreiber, 2017).

Identity is increasingly understood as malleable (Kreiner et al., 2006), impermanent (Round and Styhre, 2017)), and contextual (Alvesson, 2001). It is shaped and

reshaped through an "erratic path of detours, hiatus and disruption caused by discontinuities" (Beaven, 2013). Thus, someone's identity can be influenced by context, which shapes how others respond to the performance of this identity, which can in turn shape how the person perceives themselves and performs their identity (Brown, 2001) whether through interpersonal action or by means of technological platforms (Horst, Sven-Ove et al., 2020).

Research has shown that creative people draw on specific ways of speaking when asked about their craft. What they say speaks to who they are, what they do and their perceived status or reputation (Haynes and Marshall, 2018). Garud et al. (2014) describe the link between storytelling, metaphor and identity as being a way of building legitimacy; the life story is a powerful identity-forming agent (Hytti, 2005). As an example of this, when musicians were asked to describe their involvement in events and festivals, stories of the "self" as a legitimate player or rightful member of the community were usual precursors to the dialogue (Coupland, 2015). Furthermore, when asked to discuss their work on specific projects, replies were often preceded by a list of venues that they had played. Coupland concluded that "messages" about the importance of the musician were embedded in the dialogue about the acts they supported at elite venues, by their performances at these venues or the credibility they had by working with a certain record label. This helped to establish themselves in and amongst the community of other musicians.

Identity also emerges from the meanings people attach to the different roles they play (Sundaramurthy and Kreiner, 2008). Roles, and the scripts that they embody, locate people
within a structure (Kuhn, 2006) that merges autonomous action with institutional expectations (Colombero and Boxenbaum, 2018; Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006). An idealised role identity is one that people aspire to occupy supported by relevant individuals or groups who must grant the right to occupy that role. In the music industry the arbiters of this process are not only the community of musicians but also commentators such as the written and social media. To be legitimate the community must approve of the way role identity aspirations are expressed and enacted (Stryker and Burke, 2000).

As a person's sense of self-esteem is at least partly dependent on the successful execution of a role (Owens and Serpe, 2003), and as individuals' work is motivated by the seeking of rewards (Kelman, 2006), aspiring role-holders may experience emotional distress if they do not find support for their desired role. Bad experiences such as disapproval from persons whom the individual considers to be important, may encou- rage an attempt to switch to other roles, or cautiousness in revealing those aspects of the ideal self that are likely to be rejected by important peers (Brenner, 2011; Cha et al., 2019).

Some authors go so far as to argue that multiple or variable identities are possible (Josselson and Harway, 2012; Weick et al., 2005), and are constructed in order to respond to multiple and changing social contexts (Down and Warren, 2008; Watson, 2008). This is especially pertinent in the creative industries, which have been described as "ambiguous playgrounds that render identity regulation more problematic than other settings" (Gotsi et al., 2010). Being part of a bohemian milieu and sharing cultural, and not materialistic, values lie at the core of artistic self-perceptions (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007). Yet a key feature of the creative industries is that their goods are not developed just for the sake of art; deadlines, budgets, market demands and needing to respond to the wishes of clients, force identification with a business ethos (Beaven,

2013; Davies et al., 2017; DeFillippi et al., 2007). Musicians have to innovate within bounds as music production is embedded in a socio-economic context where art and business are intertwined (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007). Creative workers thus often grapple with competing artist and business identities (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; Hackley and Kover, 2007). Musicians need to work hard at constructing the identity of a "practical artist" (Gotsi et al., 2010)and performing convincing simulacra of both artist and business person (Haynes and Marshall, 2018). Multiple identity demands such as this are not easily maintained, and can be a source of conflict or stress (Beaven, 2013; Hackley and Kover, 2007). This means that psychological coping mechanisms may be needed (Townley et al., 2009).

## Positive illusions and self-aggrandisement

Positive illusions, of which self-aggrandisement is an example, are psychological coping mechanisms that take the form of self-deception or self-enhancement. They are a factor in the construction of an identity that signals confidence and positive attributes (Ascenso et al., 2017; Colombero and Boxenbaum, 2018). They help people to feel good, maintain self-esteem, or stave off discomfort (Kernis and Heppner, 2008; O'Mara and Gaertner, 2017; Robins and Beer, 2001). People with positive self-illusions tend to be better off (Biggane et al., 2016; O'Mara and Gaertner, 2017; Pirinsky, 2013; Taylor and Brown, 1994) as it promotes psychological well-being (Kleinke and Miller, 1998), as well as "higher motiva- tion, greater persistence, more effective performance and ultimately, greater success" (Taylor and Brown, 1988, p. 199). Such mechanisms may be particularly beneficial in environments, such as many of the creative industries, where open criticism of the person or their outputs or the devaluation of a personal reputation are part of the competitive or social rules of the game (O'Mara and Gaertner, 2017).

Much of the research on positive illusions derives from the social psychology literature and relates to the need for individuals to achieve positive affect and sense of self-worth (Driver, 2018; Sedikides and Alicke, 2012). The functional effects of positive illusions encompasses the idea that selective memory and other distortions of reality can be helpful to people's resilience when they have to deal with negative or stressful events (Taylor and Brown, 1994; Wolfson and Neave, 2007); if individuals believe themselves to be competent within a world where there are challenges to this perception, it can lead to resilience in overcoming setbacks and damage from losses to self-esteem (Hoyt et al., 2007; Lewicki and Hogan, 1983; Major et al., 2003).

Constructing a positive illusion uses a number of linked psychological mechanisms. Firstly, judgment tends to be directed towards a pessimistic or optimistic interpreta- tion of a situation, depending on the person's affective state (Daniels, 2003); thus, a more positive judgement may follow the creation of a positive emotional environ- ment. Secondly, people exhibit an evaluative bias in favour of objects associated with those they perceive to be superior in some way (Nikander et al., 2014). Finally, emotional contagion, where one person's affective state induces that state in another, is particularly strong where individuals work together and/or share common goals (Van Doorn et al., 2012). Recent research into positive illusion-making from the field of sports psychology has shown that there are benefits to behavioural outcomes from sportsmen and women demonstrating, or performing (Weaver et al., 2016), a belief in themselves, potentially against all evidence to the contrary. Constructing an identity of a successful individual helps to improve internal affective states in a highly competi- tive environment, but the expression of positive illusions also signals to opponents

that the sportsperson, is a credible opponent, setting up an expectation that they will not be easily defeated and leading to a recursive process of better competitive performance.

The form of positive illusion-making that we focus on in this paper, self-aggrandisement, also appears to have both performance-enhancement and self-esteem functions. Yet it has barely been researched, particularly in the business or management field. Self-Aggrandisement may be defined as the attempt to appear to be greater in power, influence, stature, or reputation than is really the case (Adler and Adler, 1989; Crevani and Hallin, 2017), and is an example of a psychological mechanism that serves to improve an individual's affective and functional state (Donnelly et al., 2016). Self- Aggrandisement forms part of the way that someone communicates; it is part of the performance of the "self" (Goffman, 1959); a form of identity work that takes place in a social context and is a way of communicating who we are to others and with whom we interact. Self-Aggrandisement attempts to portray power, status and relevance (Schnugg and Lehner, 2016). Overwhelmingly, in previous research the concept is treated rather negatively and is often defined as a constituent part of narcissism (Pinto and Patanakul, 2015; Rousseau and Duchon, 2015). As Assor and Tal (2012) put it, shame and self- aggrandisement are "different sides of a fragile and unstable sense of self-worth". Almost nowhere is it discussed as a positive trait or critiqued in terms of its potentially beneficial outcomes.

Yet self-aggrandisement can be a form of positive illusion-making that may have both rational and emotional benefits (Weaver et al., 2016). For example, Fothergill and Wolfson (2015) provide what they suggest is a novel insight into how individuals working in the stressful and heavily criticised context of soccer refereeing use self-aggrandisement as a "functional cognitive illusion that can help maintain confidence and resilience in the face of threats to their expertise". It is possible to imagine that similar dynamics may be found in the music industry, characterised by high levels of uncertainty, whose workings are heavily inspected by consumers and peers alike, and whose decisions can sometimes be seen as highly irrational and often based on "gut feelings" and intuition (Hesmondhalgh, 2012; Seifert and Hadida, 2006).

In the cultural industries symbolic capital is an important source of legitimacy and power, underpinning the ability to attract new artists to a label and negotiate favourable deals with suppliers and collaborators (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2006; Hesmondhalgh, 2008; Schreiber, 2014). It forms a sense-making structure (Hadida, 2015; Weick, 1995) that shapes both current financial performance and future earnings' potential by indicating to others that the firm is actively involved in developing a particular genre and is open for business. Given that the active creation of a successful future is dependent on both a vision of a possible future and the confidence to enact it, being associated with people that have the aura of success thus may be a rational choice as well as an emotional one (Brown, 1997; Nikander et al., 2014), especially where hard facts on which to base predictions of future economic performance are rare or unreliable.

To summarise, we seek to understand what role self-aggrandisement plays in identity construction in a creative industry where the need to alleviate negative emotions, reassure insecure dispositions, and construct a vision of a successful future are important factors. Doing so, we are able to address a gap in the literature by contributing to the reasoning behind the use of these behaviours. Personal reputation- and confidence-building in professionals in the music industry are a common practice that is worthy of further investigation.

## Research design and methods

We interviewed thirty-six owners and senior managers from micro-sized firms based in the USA. All were involved in the creation and distribution of popular music *(See Appendix A1)*. The focus on micro-sized firms was mainly because that type of business is dominant within the industry. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and two hours and were supplemented by observation notes as the interviews were typically held in the companies' premises. Supplementary data came from company websites and social media sites, as well as trade journals such as *Billboard* and *MusicRow*. These provided details of people, places, chart position, awards received and other relevant information that was discussed in the interviews.

The interviews were semi-structured, initially based on questions that were derived from previous literature. This format allowed for new insights or unpredicted themes to emerge. We analysed our data using a qualitative thematic analysis approach (Boyatzis, 1998;) that allowed for an in-depth, iterative and reflexive analytic process.

During this coding process the role of self-aggrandisement inductively emerged as an important concept even though this was not the main focus of interest at the outset. The authors of this paper are both practicing musicians of many years standing, yet self-aggrandisement was something that we were barely conscious of, and certainly had not considered formally investigating. We had not expected our data to show such strong evidence of its use, but once it became clear that it was a purposeful behaviour within the industry, we re-interrogated both our data and the literature in order to develop a better understanding of its role.

A total of 122 initial categories were narrowed down into ten themes that emerged from the data (;), rather than through using a predetermined, theory-testing, type of framework (). Two of the ten major themes centred on individual and firm aggrandisement *(See* Table 1). For each instance of aggrandisement, we looked to explain inductively why it was used, for example, any relationships between the characteristics of the environment and what the interviewee hoped to achieve by using it, which ultimately led to whether it was "externally" or "internally" directed. We use quotes to illustrate our findings and as justification for the reliability and validity of our analysis (Johnson et al., 2006; Symon et al., 2018). We do not claim that our findings are statistically representative of a wider population. Instead, we hope to provide a compelling and transparent account that explains the use of the phenomenon reported on here.

**Table 1.**

| Aggrandisement Coding Themes | |
| --- | --- |
| Firm Level Aggrandisement Themes | Individual Level Aggrandisement |
| Business | Personal |
| Chart Rankings | Name Dropping: Prominent Artists |
| Firm Ranking | Name Dropping: Prominent Producers |
| Industry Awards and Artefacts | Name Dropping: Prominent Companies Firm |
| Size | Name Dropping: Prominent Positions Held |
| Firm Associations/Business Dealings/Networks | Exaggeration of Truth |
| Firm Association within Business Cluster Clientele | |

## Analysis

Our focus on self-aggrandisement came about as a result of an inductive analysis of our interview data, where it emerged as an endemic and vital aspect in the construction of a credible identity in the popular music industry. Aggrandisement was used in two principal ways. The first, an externally-directed mechanism, was used to portray cultural relevance and expertise and/or to convey a sense of legitimacy, this came out in behaviours such as name dropping of prominent artists and producers or public display of awards or achievements, among others. The second was internally-directed and used as a way to reinforce the individual's sense of self-worth and belief in what he or she was doing, often portrayed in a similar fashion but brought out through deeper discussion and analysis. In the following section we present our data, followed by a section in which we discuss the implications of our findings.

### self-aggrandisement as a mechanism for portraying cultural relevance, expertise, and legitimacy (externally directed)

The portrayal of legitimacy (Hu et al., 2018) through conveying the individual's cultural relevance and expertise is an important factor in an uncertain context like the creative and cultural industries, especially when it is believed to be key to attracting potential industry partners. All but one of our interviewees used aggrandisement in this way. One example concerned the owner of Kapooshki Music, a company with seven employees, $1 million in gross revenue annually, and with businesses in recording, music publishing, booking and artist management. Joe, the owner-manager, felt he and his company could benefit from expanding into different industry sectors, but doing so with a specific strategic intention:

> 'Why turn them all into separate entities? One, because credibility with those labels in Nashville and other companies, like it was all just one - my Mickey Mouse music company they wouldn't take it very seriously'.

Here, Joe is equating size and organisational complexity with power and expertise, hoping to (in effect) persuade others to buy into the fiction, even though the Nashville-based industry is a localised and tightly connected one. Constructing a credible identity that suggested he had a large and powerful network with strong business associations (Engelen et al., 2016; Nowiński and Rialp, 2016) and therefore status, was a priority for Joe in order for him and his company to be seen as legitimate. In essence, Joe was attempting to balance the perceived lack of power and status he felt his organisation had.

In one industry sector specifically, Joe was venturing into adding a new recording studio where he was hoping to inflate its reputation by associating it with his current company name, Kapooshki Music. By doing so, it would allow him to use the bands that already "signed" and recorded under the record label and capitalise off that association through the act of "name-dropping":

> 'Right now I think it's going to be Liquid, LLC and "Doing Business As" Kapooshki Studios . . . to everyone else - the public - it looks like it is connected to Kapooshki and has the prestige, which in Christian music for an indie band is a big deal . . . home of [artist name purposely withheld], home of [artist name purposely withheld] current artists that's on radio, home of Dove award winning [artist name purposely withheld], they won rock album of the year in Canada.'

Joe continued on to clarify how this would benefit the organisation:

> 'This is the first time that we are trying to milk something. I have never . . . I've been about real value over hype value all the time and I'm finally going to the dark side

*and saying well if that's what people want, we will give it to them . . . They are going to buy into us because of perceived value.*

By aggrandising through name-dropping of prominent artists, Joe is attempting to accommodate for what he believes is his lack of a credible professional network, economic resources and reputation.

Another example that emerged from our data concerns Cisco Newman, a veteran singer-songwriter with 14 years' experience who makes a modest living writing and performing regionally in the US. He has released six albums and co-written multiple songs with Grammy award-winning songwriters. Here, personal and business aggrandisement took the form of choosing to release a full-length album, 10–12 recordings, rather than the "Extended Play" (EP) version that typically only includes 4–6. This decision served two purposes; one, to be seen as a credible entertainer in the eyes of his fans and industry agents and two, to help distance himself from the countless other singer-songwriters trying to make a career as a performing musician. At the time, Cisco believed that a full-length album release, instead of an "EP", would be a career-enhancing move:

*'Any fool can get Photoshop, Garage Band . . . and a website, and look like they have enough going on.*

It was important for him to signal that he was a credible professional, and not simply a hobbyist musician. This attempt to portray success also happened when Cisco communicated very explicitly to his fans where he was playing if it was an established venue with a reputation for hosting well-known acts. aggrandisement manifested itself not only in the specific people and places that he chose to associate with, but in the subsequent broadcasting, and on some occasions over-claiming, of association with them. Although the choice to play at a particular venue may be an economically rational one, it was the venue's reputation for only allowing artists with a strong fan base or who can draw certain crowds that was an alluring factor for Cisco. Playing there created symbolic meaning and stature: if you are able to play at such a venue with such an artist "*you must have a lot going on*" and therefore be worth following.

Similar motivations were also observed when deciding the importance of locating a company within a prominent industry cluster (Florida, 2005) as it helps to portray the firm as legitimate and credible. One locale in particular, "Music Row", a geographic area and music industry epicentre in Nashville, TN, is home to hundreds of businesses working in the country, gospel and contemporary Christian music industries. David Sax, owner and manager of Bench Puppet Entertainment, a social media marketing firm in Nashville with three employees and a modest yearly income, felt his business had finally "made it" when he was able to relocate:

*'It had to be 'Music Row' . . . [I might as well] go back and build an office in the back of my house . . . if I can have an office on the Row, it means I can do it, I have the potential to make it to another level . . . What comes with 'music row - those five streets mean so much . . . projecting that to the world is so important in this industry'.*

An awareness of the symbolic importance of the 'Music Row location, helped to underpin David's decision:

*'Everyone thinks 'Music Row'. My old boss came to me on 'Music Row' offices and said "congratulations you are on 'Music Row'. I am like, thanks, I don't think it's*

*that big of a deal. He said, "I understand that, but everybody else does. When you finally get to 'Music Row' they think holy shit you made it'.*

Not only was the importance of this location recognised by his former boss, but also a recent new employee, Sarah:

*'I think when it came to my perception about where David was at with his business, I perceived that he was doing well moving to 'Music Row', and that it was a big deal. It was a big deal to go . . . to an office with desks and chairs and in a building with other music industry people on 'Music Row'.*

Although this decision had other locational benefits such as proximity to buyers and opinion formers that would allow additional business to be generated, being perceived as someone who had "made it" had practical benefits; it attracted more (and better) people to work at the firm while helping to establish a sense of legitimacy for those seeking the company's services. aggrandising by moving his business near to and associating it with others on the "Row" served a practical marketing and promotion purpose, but, as David also states, it helped him to believe he could continue to be successful. One of David's colleagues, Sarah, described how it not only instilled more confidence in themselves, but others in the industry were also starting to change their perceptions of the company now that they had moved – it had a different "aura" around it. The atmosphere in the office had changed and a difference in productivity was discernible. There was a more positive view of the company's future. Employees started working longer hours, were beginning to take on more projects and were increasingly willing to network on its behalf. The relocation created a sense of purpose and instilled a feeling of self-belief and confidence in what they were doing. There was a suggestion that they were now much more legitimate in the eyes of others, and even their own.

### self-aggrandisement as a way to reinforce the individual's sense of self-worth(internally directed)

We could also identify examples where aggrandisement appeared to be used as a psychological prop to strengthen an insecure identity in an unpredictable industry. The use of self-aggrandisement related to the actor's confidence in their ability to "play the game". Those who perceived that they lacked the resources to be successful in the music industry – a strong and well-connected network, financial capital and an established reputation – went to great lengths to talk themselves into feeling better about what they were doing. This could also be seen as an attempt to inflate the individual's sense of self-efficacy, especially since limited success at this point in their career was leading towards a feeling of self-doubt in their ability to achieve what they had set out to do.

An insecure disposition is characteristic of many music industry personalities (Assor and Tal, 2012). Self-promotion, whether on behalf of their company or for personal advancement, takes confidence to execute. If this confidence does not exist, a damaging sense of inferiority can result, especially as an actor sees, very visibly, what competitors have been able to achieve. Artist associations, chart success, earned awards or industry status, are all prominently in the public domain. In this industry, success is very visible, as is failure. So, the importance of promoting *real* success stories, if they exist, or "putting up fronts" by creating a false sense of illusion is seen as a necessary way to maintain a public persona in order to do business, or even survive, in the industry. A lack of confidence can easily creep in, in such a highly competitive and turbulent environment (Pratt and Jeffcutt, 2009). Problems such as high levels of risk in an

inherently subjective product, with uncertain demand and a seemingly endless supply of new offerings are pervasive (Caves, 2000; Hesmondhalgh, 2012; Saintilan and Schreiber, 2017).

Self-Aggrandisement was also used when a lack of other resources such as a strong professional network, financial capital or an understanding of industry practices were not available, leaving them concerned for their own reputation and how they were perceived by others. As Joe, the owner of Kapooshki Music, lacked these resources himself, he was concerned about how others perceived him and his business. If he didn't create an illusion of having a larger company he felt:

> ' . . . they weren't part of something great that's moving forward . . . but [something] that is slowly dying . . . '

Joe's need to be perceived as a *"big fish in a small pond"*, and the belief by Cisco that he would be seen by his fans and industry "insiders" as credible only if he released an EP' (extended play 3–5 songs) rather than an album (full-length 10–12 songs), were a way of strengthening self-worth. Joe contends that he doesn't have much engagement in the industry as he would hope, or think he should at this point in his career. It affects him emotionally:

> 'So, by having Liquid, Kapooshki Music - which is our record company - Stealth Artist Agency, they looked [bigger] - individual logos, individual phone numbers and email addresses - it looked more legitimate    it's tough on the ego, if you are this music company who says we
> do all these different things, and yet, who do you represent    nobody famous.

Using self-promoting language such as *"so and so worked on my record"* helps the individual to feel better about their work. As one of our singer-songwriter interviewees suggested:

### *"if they are willing to produce or record on my album, then what I'm doing must have value"*

We liken this construction of self-belief to sports psychologists' methods of creating a winning personality (Fantoni et al., 2016; Weaver et al., 2016). Portraying an image of success or a positive reputation, whether "real" or "imagined", helps to give the confidence and self-belief to the industry participant, allowing them to remain competitive, and as one independent musician claimed. *"go out there and continue to hustle or promote"* their music day after day.

## Discussion

Through our research, we sought to better understand how and why aggrandisement (Adler and  Adler, 1989; Scott, 1979) is used to construct a credible identity within the popular music industry. Aggrandisement, as a form of positive illusion-making (Sedikides and  Alicke, 2012), has the ability to manipulate the opinion that others have of the originator. In situations of imperfect information (), and the music industry is an extreme example of a context that is characterised by uncertainty and unpredictability (Saintilan and  Schreiber,), it has the potential to alter perceptions of the status and legitimacy of the individual (Aime et al., 2010; Lammers et al., 2008). It signals credibility. Where perceptions about legitimacy are the key to attracting potential industry partners, necessary for industry success, all players must find a way of achieving it. All but one of

our interviewees used aggrandisement in this way. Being perceived as someone who had "made it", whether this was through locating the business in the right place, being associated with the right people, or playing the right venues, was believed to have practical benefits; it attracted more and better talent to work with the player or firm.

Identity is also a way to establish who and what we are (Burland, 2005; ; Coupland, 2015), both to ourselves and others. Identity, and especially the performance of an identity so that it is discernible by others (Chaney and Goulding, 2016; Von Wallpach et al., 2017), is important to functioning in social environments. In our study the presentation of the self, metaphorical in many cases, as a successful (commercial) musician was used as a way of building legitimacy (Coupland, 2015; Hytti, 2005). When asked to discuss their work on specific projects, many of our respondents referred to venues that they had played, other artists that they were associated with and locations of the firm. Identity is also reflexive, being shaped by and in turn shaping the environ- ment. (Brown, 2001; Brown and Starkey, 2000). Aggrandisement helped the individual to convince themselves that they were meaningful; in turn, the industry regarded them as meaningful, paralleling the findings from sports psychology where self-belief can become a self-fulfiling prophecy (Fantoni et al., 2016; Jussim, 1986; Merton, 1948; Weaver et al., 2016). Symbolic capital in a cultural industry is a vital signifier of potential value and worth, and as a subjective sense-making structure (Hadida, 2015; Weick, 1995) it con-tributes to a shared understanding of prestige that in turn leads to other forms of power (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2006; Schreiber, 2014). In a trend-dependent industry, financial performance, future earnings, and genre construction all come about through indicating to others that you are actively involved in playing the game. As in sports, it becomes self-fulfiling, but in this case the self-fulfilment is both a social and coopetitive (competitive-collaborative) phenomenon. As the active creation of a successful future is dependent on both envisioning and enacting it, being associated with people that have the aura of success is beneficial (Brown, 1997; Nikander et al., 2014), especially where it is almost impossible to reliably forecast future performance.

However, there are risks to over-claiming, especially in an industry where people and their networks often intersect and activities may be openly reported in magazines or blogs. A question that we asked ourselves was, why would someone over-claim accom-plishments when they could so easily be found out, thus making the behaviour rather counter-productive? This question was also raised by one or two of our interviewees, a small minority however in an industry full of aggrandisers. For this minority self-aggrandisement was an indicator of weaker or aspiring players, and a way to "hide something" that wasn't there. They signified success through the very omission of self-aggrandising language and behaviour. However, these were outliers; evidence demon-strated that even the most successful artist boasted about who they have worked with in order to "re-enforce" their reputation or credibility. It showed up in different ways, like prominent producer "credit lines", displaying of platinum and gold record certifications on their office walls, or boasting of Grammy nominations or awards. Given the risks of being labelled as "weak" or "aspiring" we explain why it is so abundant. We suppose firstly that not all self-aggrandisement is as discernible as some might think. Although unjustified over-claiming may be a risky strategy, there is also scope for some reputational claims to "stick" as appears to have been the case with Bench Puppet Entertainment's secretary Sarah. And as suggested above, there is also scope for it to function as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

But there are other, psychological, reasons for the use of self-aggrandisement. We argue that the need to boost one's own self-esteem is so high that it trumps any potential risk of being found out as a fraud. In addition to presenting a positive

view of the individual to the outside world, aggrandisement also appeared to act as a source of internal credibility. This is especially important in an industry where there are numerous opportunities for self-worth to be undermined. If recording artists aren't being offered contracts or musicians are being overlooked for live performance opportunities, it can lead to a feeling of incompetence, low-self efficacy and inadequacy (Cooper and Wills, 1989). An insecure disposition is characteristic of many music industry personalities with an already inherent tendency towards neuroticism and emotionality (Gillespie and Myors, 2000). Overcoming these tendencies in order to promote their music, whether it is onbehalf of the company they own or operate or for personal advancement, takesa considerable degree of confidence to execute, especially as they can see very visibly what competitors have been able to achieve. Aggrandisement, therefore, serves as a way to boost one's self-esteem enough to play the "self -promotion game" that is a necessary part of success in the music industry. We also speculate that as creative individuals typically possess a strong internal locus of control (Roy and Gupta, 2012), they also have strong desires to minimise the uncertainty and unpredictability of their environment. Aggrandisement provides the semblance of control that they desire.

As we suggested above, self-fulfiling prophecies appear to be a part of the construction of success, in which the confidence that comes from believing one's own rhetoric allows one to perform at a higher level than would otherwise be the case (Fantoni et al., 2016). This then becomes noticed by others, in a type of virtuous circle. The success of a cultural product like music can be fleeting, and needs stoking. Such mechanisms may be particularly helpful in environments where open criticism of the person or their outputs or the devaluation of a personal reputation are part of the competitive or social rules of the game (Hesmondhalgh, 2012). If individuals believe they are competent and efficacious within a world where there are both real and perceived challenges to their legitimacy and relevance, it can lead to resilience in overcoming setbacks and damage from losses to self-esteem. Constructing an identity of a successful individual helps to improve internal affective states in a highly competitive environment (Kleinke and Miller, 1998). Even in less cutthroat fields, there is evidence that people with positive self-illusions are better off (Biggane et al., 2016; O'Mara and Gaertner, 2017; Pirinsky, 2013; Taylor and Brown, 1994).

## Limitations of the study and areas for further research

In this paper we have presented evidence for the ubiquity of aggrandisement in the music industry. Although our primary data came from the popular music industry, our personal knowledge as practicing musicians and managers in other music sectors (classical and opera) suggests that aggrandisement may be prevalent there too. Anecdotal evidence from colleagues and friends working in other uncertain or creativity-driven environments suggests that it is also to be found there, for example, in the fields of entrepreneurial small businesses, television, film, architecture and design. Whether they use self-aggrandisement to the same extent, for the same reasons and to the same effect is not known.

Constructed credibility allows the actor to behave in ways that others can interpret as confidence and competence; this means that they are prepared to work with them, increasing their network of relationships and knowledge, which in turn are recursively used by the actor to increase their sense of self-worth. Given how closed the music world is, where everyone seems to know everyone else, it seems strange at first sight that something which is at best exaggerating a truthful position and at worst being outright

dishonest, should be so common.

The findings in this study emerged from a qualitative methodology based on purposive sampling. We do not claim that our findings can be taken as representative of the music industry as a whole, or of other creative/cultural industries even if they have similar pressures and norms. However, determining whether this phenomenon exists within other creative industries may be worth investigating further. Is aggrandisement used by actors in television or movies or by creatives in the fine arts? And if so, is it to the same extent or with similar expected intentions and outcomes? Furthermore, we have also barely touched on the reasons why our respondents behaved as they did, and there may be other explanations that a deeper examination of the specific phenomenon of aggrandisement might uncover. For example, we do not know which was the most important motive for using it, and why, or the most effective in changing perceptions from other industry participants. How the individual can convince themselves of something that on one level they must know is untrue is an interesting psychological phenomenon that is worthy of deeper exploration. How and why it is used in other contexts would also bear further research.

## Conclusion

This paper focused on how aggrandisement is used as a means of performing an identity of credibility in the popular music industry while contributing to the reasoning behind personal reputation- and confidence- building in professionals in the music industry. The motivations for aggrandising appear to be rooted in the need to portray cultural relevance and expertise, convincing others that they are a competent player, and strengthening an insecure identity in an industry where there are numerous opportunities for self-worth to be undermined. In parallel with the work that increasingly is helping to understand how the intention to construct a positive self-image can actually create one where one had not been before (), this research has identified behaviours that play an important role in identity construction in the music industry

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**Music Industry
Micro-sized Firms**

| Business Type | Number of employees | **Major Decisions Identified by Owner- Manager** | Identified Themes: Firm & Individual Aggrandisement | External or Internal Direction |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Record Label** | 10 | **Company Buy-Out** | None Displayed | N/A |
| | | **Talent Selection** | Associations/Business Dealings/Networks, Chart Rankings, Industry Awards & Artefacts (Passive) | Externally Directed |
| **Music Company (Record Company, Music Publishing, Artist Management, Booking and Consulting)** | 7 | **Radio Promotion Strategy** | Firm Associations/Business Dealings/Networks, Firm Size, Chart Rankings, Business | Externally Directed |
| | | **Expansion & Diversification** | Firm Associations/Business Dealings/Networks, Industry Awards & Artefacts, Firm Size, Clientele | Externally Directed & Internally Directed |
| **Entrepreneur, Public Relations, Marketing, Social Media** | 6 | **Payroll Decision** | Firm Size, Firm Associations/Business Dealings/ Networks | Externally Directed |
| | | **Project Acquisition** | Industry Awards & Artefacts, Business, Clientele | Externally Directed |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Event Production** | 4 | **Client Acquisition** | Firm Associations/Business, Dealings/Networks | Externally Directed |
| | | **Firm Expansion** | Firm Associations/Business Dealings/Networks, Clientele | Externally Directed |
| **Booking** | 4 | **Talent Selection** | Firm Associations/Business Dealings/Networks | Externally Directed |
| | | **Expansion & Diversification** | Business, Firm Associations/Business Dealings/ Networks | Externally Directed |
| **Recording Studio, Producer, Songwriter** | 3 | **Firm Location Name Dropping: Prominent Artists** | Firm Association within Business Cluster | Externally Directed |
| | | **Joint Venture** | Name Dropping: Prominent Producers, Name Dropping: Prominent Artists | Internally & Externally Directed |
| **Music Publishing** | 3 | **Talent Selection** | Name Dropping: Prominent Artists, Firm Associations/ Business Dealings/Networks, Industry Awards & Artefacts | Internally & Externally |
| | | **Administration Software Acquisition** | Firm Size, Exaggeration of Truth | Internally Directed |
| **Digital Media – Social Media Marketing Firm** | 3 | **Client Acquisition** | Clientele/ Firm Size | Internally & Externally |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **Firm Relocation** | Firm Association within Business Cluster/ Firm Associations/Business Dealings/Networks | Internally & Externally |
| **Music Marketing, Business Development** | 3 | **Talent Selection** | Firm Associations/Business Dealings/Networks | Internally & Externally |
| **Social Media Strategy** | | | Business, Clientele | Internally & Externally |
| **Recording Artist** | 2 | **Team Expansion** | Name Dropping: Prominent Companies | Internally Directed |
| | | **Contract Signing** | Industry Awards & Artefacts. Chart Rankings | Internally & Externally |
| **Music Producer** | 2 | **Studio Expansion** | Firm Associations/Business Dealings/Networks | Externally Directed |
| | | **Project Acquisition** | Name Dropping: Prominent Artists, Name Dropping: Prominent Companies | Externally Directed |
| **Singer-Songwriter** | 1 | **Marketing & Promotion** | Business, Personal, Name Dropping: Prominent Venues, Exaggeration of Truth or Overclaiming | Internally & Externally |
| **Team Expansion** | | **Name Dropping: Prominent Positions Held** | | Internally Directed |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Artist Manager, Consultant, Coach** | 1 | **Firm Relocation** | Firm Associations/Business Dealings/Networks, Firm Association within Business Cluster | Internally & Externally |
| | | **Talent Selection** | Name Dropping: Prominent Companies, Name Dropping: Prominent Positions Held | **Internally & Externally** |