

## Collaborating to compete: the role of cultural intermediaries in hypercompetition

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### Abstract

*This article explores the role that cultural intermediaries, defined primarily as radio DJs and journalists, play in the lives of three unsigned UK urban music artists. Using semi-structured interviews, textual analysis of social media usage, and observation notes, as well as auto-ethnographic examination of the author's own career as a musician over a four-year period between 2010-13, it is suggested that intermediaries are of crucial importance in the lives of artists largely as distinguishers in an environment of ferocious competition, which anonymises via abundance. Their role is therefore deeply symbolic, providing credible eminence. By interpreting these findings through a Bourdieusian lens, it is suggested that these collaborative processes of intermediary engagement, which allow musicians to acquire large reserves of institutionalised cultural capital, problematise notions of success by masking the profound difficulties they have in converting this prestige into material rewards. There is therefore, for these musicians, a worrying ambiguity relating to how others understand and value what they do, and a tension between this perception and their material reality.*

**Keywords:** popular music, cultural intermediaries, auto-ethnography, creative industries, competition, Bourdieu

## 1 Introduction

Competition is the economist's and policy maker's panacea; the benchmark towards which markets must confidently march in order to maximise consumer welfare. However, what does this mean for producers experiencing this competition? This paper seeks to invert the methodological gaze when looking at the impact of competition, away from the benefits for the marketplace and the consumer towards the producer,

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questioning how the producer, in the form of unsigned UK urban music artists, experiences competitiveness. In particular, it will seek to ascertain what role cultural intermediaries – those who, in a cultural context of competition and abundance, come to occupy the conceptual space between production and consumption, and who are concerned with the presentation and representation of artistic forms – play in this competitive artistic experience.

The cultural intermediaries with whom the urban music artists in this paper interact consist primarily of radio DJs, journalists (both online and offline) and bloggers. The career stage of these 'independent' musicians is outside of the reified sphere of 'the music industry' – itself of course a rather simplistic and misleading term (Stern 2014) – and they thus are not yet engaging with record companies, even independent ones, or publishers. Indeed, these intermediaries represented a secondary tier of intermediaries, the endorsement and, crucially, financial support of whom these artists were seeking but only once they could be reached. They had to get to these people first. Furthermore, they came into little contact with other, more formalised intermediaries, such as managers, booking agents, marketing companies, radio pluggers or PRs. The artists in this research were early career entrepreneurs, and as such, assumed the role of each of these agents *themselves*. Subcontracting could not be done on a more practical level given that none of the artists could afford these services. Indeed, this paper looks at how artists with no marketing budget – often with limited budgets for housing or feeding themselves, let alone marketing themselves – seek to mitigate their economic disadvantage in order to *be heard* in a competitive environment, and importantly, what this process of seeking to be heard tells us about both what it means to be an artist today, and what it means to be successful, in a hypercompetitive cultural marketplace.

This paper seeks to do two things. Firstly, it asks; what role do cultural intermediaries play in the lives of contemporary unsigned artists? It achieves this by contributing to the debate in creative industries literature on the role of intermediaries in the contemporary digital environment, via a qualitative exploration of how a specific group of creative

labourers interact with a specific group of intermediaries, highlighting the latter's impact on the former. Secondly, the paper asks; why do these intermediaries occupy this role? It suggests intermediaries are crucial as communicative gatekeepers in hypercompetition, occupying a deeply symbolic role giving artists credible eminence or cultural capital. However, these processes of capital acquisition (understood in Bourdieusian terms) can be largely illusory and misleading given the tension between how artists project their large reserves of institutionalised and objectified cultural capital, whilst simultaneously struggling to convert this into economic capital.

In making these arguments, this paper will proceed in four sections. The first will contextualise the empirical study at hand by building on two theoretical contributions: the work of Michael Porter (1979, 2008) on competition, and the work of Bourdieu (1984) on intermediaries (in relation to competition). It will be suggested that the music industry at the level of unsigned artists has become *more competitive* in its industrial composition. Building on this, Bourdieu proposed that in an environment of cultural competitiveness, cultural intermediaries would rise to prominence, suggesting they are central to the artistic experience of competitive struggle. Consequently, if we hope to understand how competitiveness is experienced by creative labour, we must understand the nature of artist-intermediary interaction, itself a much-debated relationship in contemporary scholarship.

After a second section outlining the methodological approach employed, section three will outline the findings of a four-year (auto)ethnographic study based on the experiences of a select group of artists in UK urban music. It is suggested that these artists acknowledge a high degree of marketplace saturation, which they perceive to have anonymised them via abundance. To mitigate this disadvantage, they adopt a collaborative approach to creativity in order to capture the attention of intermediaries, primarily radio DJs and bloggers. In this sense, competitiveness has necessitated collaboration as artists struggle to be heard. However, the nature of the artist-intermediary relationship is more complex than simple attention-seeking. The methodologies by

which the musicians document their successes with intermediaries and engage in a multi-platform process, which iteratively communicates their endorsements to others, suggests that intermediaries are of crucial importance not only for their ability to distribute creative works, but also to distinguish them; a marker of validity and a projection of success in a competitive environment.

Finally, section four will ask what these identified processes tell us about the nature of artistic 'success' today. By interpreting these findings within Bourdieu's theoretical architecture, it is suggested that these artists are increasingly able to obtain and maximise institutionalised and objectified cultural capital via exploiting reserves of social capital. However, they struggle to monetise these apparent successes, masking their day-to-day reality. This means that artists struggle economically, as artists always have, but they are increasingly able to maximise alternative capital sources that hide the reality of their plight, problematising already ambiguous notions of 'success'.

## **2 Competition and the intermediary debate**

Seeking to operationalise 'competitiveness' is methodologically problematic, but has perhaps most convincingly been achieved in the work of Porter (1979, 2008). If one applies his five forces model to the creative environment of the unsigned artists whose lives this paper seeks to understand, we might reasonably assert that the music industry is indeed becoming *increasingly competitive* in its industrial composition.

### **2.1 Urban music is a competition**

In the first instance the threat of new entrants into the music industry (force one) at the unsigned artists' level is higher today than it has ever been given the erosion of barriers to entry through technological advances dramatically reducing capital requirements such as recording costs or distribution costs. With reference to the former, the development of MIDI technology from the 1980's onwards reduced the costs of recording from earlier epochs (Alexander 1994a, 1994b), and today, high

quality records can be produced for very little cost (Leyshon et.al. 2005: 195; Leyshon 2009). Likewise, with reference to the latter, distribution vehicles such as Tunecore or Ditto allow any artist the opportunity to distribute their work to the world at very little cost (Waldfogel 2012), instead of relying on expensive physical distribution deals (Black & Greer 1987).

The threat of substitute products (force two) is higher today too, with consumers now having an increasing array of cost-free consumption techniques such as illegal downloads or free streaming services (such as YouTube, the audio of which can easily be 'ripped') to circumvent the necessity for either physical or digital purchases, or paid-for streaming services such as Spotify. This technological innovation in consumption potential has increased the bargaining power of buyers (force three), as listeners can make decisions with few switching costs from paid to free provision (Andersson, Lahtinen & Pierce 2009) meaning conversely, the bargaining power of suppliers (force four) has fallen. Given these changes, as well as the existence of numerous competitors, the high strategic stakes (after all, for these musicians a musical career is their dream) and high exit costs (less in financial terms, but the emotion toil of potentially giving up on their dream) lead to ferocious rivalry (force Five) within the world of unsigned urban musicians. The cultural world of the unsigned musician is, therefore, highly competitive and all this raises the question as to what this means for the lives of musicians.

It is within this competitive creative environment – "*a field of struggles*" (Bourdieu 1998: 24) – that Bourdieu highlighted the emergence of cultural intermediaries. As a field increases in competitiveness, complexity and abundance, as per the sphere of unsigned artistry, he suggested that a new kind of struggle emerges - not just the struggle for creation (Becker 1982), but also the struggle to achieve a level of acclaim and prestige which is socially constituted. This is a fight over "*the monopoly of legitimate discourse about the work of art*" (Negus & Pickering 2004: 86) which is undertaken by a group Bourdieu (1984: 359) calls cultural intermediaries, defined, in a much-quoted excerpt, as: "*All the occupations involving presentation and representation ... and in all the institu-*

*tions providing symbolic goods and services*". Their role within the cultural economy is to interpret creative works, qualify them, disseminate them, and ultimately contribute towards their eventual appreciation as great and successful, or poor and unsuccessful; a process Maguire and Matthews (2014: 2) define as "*value formation through mediation ... [by those with] professional expertise in taste and value within specific cultural fields.*" Certainly, many occupations can, and do, fulfil these criteria, but for the unsigned rappers studied in this research, the primary agents who fulfilled this description in the context of their creative lives were radio DJs, bloggers and journalists. The debate that has emerged in the music industry context however is whether these technological changes have made cultural intermediaries less relevant, or ever more important.

## **2.2 The death of the intermediary?**

The role and function of intermediaries has been questioned by those who suggest the democratisation of distribution channels negates the importance of those who cannot possibly keep up with the pace of information (Kovach & Rosenstiel 1999: 7). This was epitomised when, in 2012, the then CEO of EMI Roger Faxon stated: "*It's the music that matters, not the source anymore*" (Balto 2012). Many heralded the new, democratising technological possibilities of a digital Web 2.0 era, which might eradicate the barriers between producers and consumers, and where "*there are no gatekeepers*" (Solomon & Schrum 2007: 14), and "*no longer any filters, any arbiters of taste, any barriers*" (Walsh 2007: 16). For these scholars, the intermediary had died. Others accepted this 'death of the intermediary' thesis, but mourned instead of rejoicing, as per Keen (2006, 2007) who lamented the death of experts, suggesting that this digital utopianism fetishizes amateurism, and that the potential for expertise to distinguish greatness from triviality had been decimated. In this sense, competition and abundance killed the intermediary.

However, the opposing notion i.e. that intermediaries distribute the cultural goods being demanded in a world of digitalised abundance to assist decision-making, finds contemporary empirical support in other

creative industries, such as the field of broadcasting (Seabright & Weeds 2007). Akin to the music industry, barriers to entry have plummeted significantly reducing the costs for (potential) broadcasters, from processes of recording and editing, to broadcasting itself (ibid: 48). This environment of competitive abundance means that for viewers, niche broadcasters can emerge to cater for their specific tastes. However, viewers may find it hard to seek out their preferred content, and therefore larger, more trusted broadcasters might be turned to in order to limit seeking costs and mitigate this plethora of choice. Likewise, this notion of intermediaries acting as reliable filtration methods to mitigate oversaturation is a key phenomenon in the book publishing industry too (Thompson 2010) where figures such as Oprah (Winfrey) in the United States, or 'Richard and Judy' in the UK have become pivotal 'recognition triggers' for readers.

It is in the context of this literature, and this debate, that this paper should be understood. The sphere of unsigned music has become more competitive, and, for Bourdieu, cultural intermediaries are vital agents in the artistic experience of competitive struggle. However, contemporary creative industries literature debates the extent to which Bourdieu's assertions are accurate; that is, they debate whether intermediaries, currently, are more, or less, important. In this sense, the questions these contrasting findings present are; what role do cultural intermediaries, defined as agents occupying the conceptual space between production and consumption who communicate the former to engender the latter, play in the lives of musicians in a competitive market? Furthermore, why do they occupy this role?

### **3 Methodology**

To attempt to answer these research questions, an experimental (auto)ethnographic study was undertaken between 2010 and 2013. This entailed in-depth semi-structured interviews, detailed observation notes largely drawn from an analysis of publicly observable online behaviours, and an analysis of archived social media messages (mainly tweets from

the social-media platform Twitter) with two case-study artists anonymised herein as Mark and John. As this research was seeking to explore how competition is experienced by artists, specifically within the bounded context of UK urban music, a case-study style research design is appropriate given that my area of focus was bounded (by genre), is contextual in nature (contemporary marketplace changes) and investigates selective behavioural processes (Merriam 1998). These two artists were interviewed three times (once each year), and these interviews were thematically coded. Additionally, I was given access to all of the artists' social media history in the form of their Twitter history, and observational notes were compiled over a three-year period documenting their release schedules, press support and more. Indeed, given the extent to which artists' lives occur online, we might reconceptualise notions of localised, in-person observation such as those conducted in the classic ethnographic work of, say, Cohen (1991) or Finnegan (1989), which were largely reflective and indicative of the epoch during which they were conducted. Instead, today, artists are engaged in a number of self-documenting processes allowing for their behaviour to largely be observed online, thus reconstituting observation methods and allowing researchers to reconsider the necessity for observations to take place physically. In this sense, there are a number of observable public displays of artistry, which were drawn upon to assist in answering these research questions including when and which songs are released, what and how content is shared online etc. This data was triangulated with an auto-ethnographic examination of my own artistic practices, most notably an analysis of four years of email exchanges between various cultural intermediaries and myself.

My entire creative career performing as 'Context' has been documented online, from emails with radio DJs to press interviews with journalists, and this relentless project of self-documentation representing detailed, longitudinal fieldwork notes and observations, acted as a data source. As anthropologists keep journals or logs of observations, notes, feelings, thoughts, and experiences, I was documenting every detail of my creative life, almost unconsciously, for several years. I thus analysed



each of my musical releases between 2010 and 2013 to uncover patterns of practice relating to the ways in which I had interacted with intermediaries, and to see if this corresponded with the experiences of the other case study artists. For each occasion that I released a track over this period, I reflexively assessed how I chose to release it by analysing both my social networking patterns and my email activity, analysing both my email outbox and inbox to explore the ways in which intermediaries were used in the distribution chain. I sought to uncover whom I contacted, when, the content of my emails, my reason for contacting them, and the outcome of our engagement. Focusing analysis on archived, personal written electronic communication was particularly apt given this was, in many respects, my sole method of interaction with intermediaries; I rarely met any of them in person given my geographical distance from many of them, living over 100 miles from London where the majority were based. Finally, the auto-ethnographic data obtained during this period was crucial to my analysis given the intricate nature of the information I was able to obtain. My exchanges concerned highly personal information, and processes which are, for many, highly secretive in this competitive environment. Only by exploring my own practice could material of such a sensitive nature be obtained.

#### **4 Mitigating the indistinguishability dilemma**

Throughout the research period, there was a sense in which these artists in the UK urban music scene felt they must collaborate, where collaboration is conceptualised as a process of judicious positioning, whether consensual or otherwise, to capture the attention of a particular group of cultural intermediaries, namely radio DJs and journalists/bloggers, in order that they might mitigate a perceived problem of indistinguishability engendered by marketplace proliferation and the ensuing levels of hyper-competitiveness. In this sense, the competitive dynamics of the marketplace bred a particular creative logic; attention seeking via collaboration. This was seen with one of the case study artists, John, who frequently collaborated with other rappers (on one track featuring sev-

enteen guest MCs) in order that radio DJs "*need to open [the song] up on their email now because they've seen 'Oh he's working with this guy now'"* (interview, 07/12). Likewise, Mark employed this collaborative approach to creativity during the research period, but sought to align himself not with peers, but famous, chart-topping acts in the form of bootlegs by 'ripping' the audio of successful tracks, and maintaining key musical elements such as the chorus, but inserting his own verses, leading to national radio play on BBC Radio 1 from Zane Lowe following the release of one of these remixes in March 2012 – an achievement which none of his more traditional solo songs did during the research period. Collaboration with others was an on-going technique over the four-year period, at least in part, to get the attention of these intermediaries.

In many respects, the next logical step for these artists was to collaborate with cultural intermediaries themselves to seek to guarantee their eventual support; that is, instead of aligning oneself with artists/peers (as per John) or celebrities (as per Mark), why not simply collaborate directly with cultural intermediaries? This is precisely what was observed by both John, and myself as Context, who sought to consolidate support by involving cultural intermediaries, mainly in the form of radio DJs and journalists, in their creative practices. For John, this involved asking the most influential national DJ within his genre of grime, at the time, to appear on a song as a 'narrator' (as seen in a release in late 2011). John was not only collaborating with his peers in order to (at least in part) secure the endorsement and support of a DJ, but was making this DJ a part of his creative process and collaborating with *them*. However, this process was epitomised in the video for my own track as Context, 'Off With Their Heads', a music video that featured the owner the most important UK urban music YouTube channel (SB.TV), a journalist who wrote for MTV, a journalist from the Guardian, a prominent grime blogger, and one of the most famous musicians in the world, Ed Sheeran.

As a result of asking one intermediary in particular to appear in the video, she offered to do online PR for me for free. In early 2011 we pursued potential promotional avenues for the video which I would not

have been able to achieve independently given her wealth of contacts as a Guardian journalist. The video was eventually premiered on the site RWD and achieved over 20,000 hits in less than two weeks. All of the intermediaries who had appeared in the video, promoted the video via their respective media outlets. DJ Charlie Sloth<sup>2</sup> also began supporting the track on BBC Radio 1Xtra, and MTV requested a copy of the video to be playlisted on MTV and MTV Base. It was screened the following week and played daily between 7pm and 7am (BBC 2011). This was, in many respects, my first 'big break', and it had been achieved by a carefully coordinated collaborative process of seeking to align myself with as many intermediaries as possible in the hope that I might be heard. In an interview conducted with the MOBO Awards later that year, I stated, "*the competition is ferocious, so it's hard to get people to pay attention*" (Taylor 2011). This is precisely what I as Context (as well as John and Mark) had achieved via our collaborative approach to creativity: getting people to pay attention.

Certainly, the research conducted over this four-period suggested that these artists appeared to greatly value cultural intermediaries, evidenced in the way they sought their attention and even collaborated with them to consolidate their support. In this sense, the question as to whether intermediaries matter to musicians, as per the debate outlined in section one, is clear. The question this research seeks to address however is why do intermediaries occupy the role they do i.e. why are intermediaries in the form of media-platforms considered important? The most unsurprising answer is to act a distributor of content: a vehicle with an audience larger than that of the artist alone, with large-scale, potentially nationwide, dissemination potential. Intermediaries therefore occupy the role of intermediation, of communicating the artistic production of creative works and facilitating their consumption. However, my findings build on this relatively simplistic model, and suggest that their role is in fact deeply symbolic, presenting artists the opportunity to

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of publication, Charlie Sloth is perhaps the most influential DJ in UK urban music, having a dedicated rap show on BBC Radio 1, and his own prime-time slot on BBC Radio 1Xtra.

acquire a level of ordained, credible eminence – cultural capital – within a cultural scene.

#### **4.1 Beyond attention seeking: a feedback mechanism**

In an interview, John suggested that documenting the support of intermediaries is crucial for what that support represents, saying: *"if you put up a radio rip [an extract of audio] of it getting played on [BBC Radio] 1Xtra or Kiss 100, or any radio station ... people tend to pay more attention to that"* (interview, 07/12). John was suggesting that media endorsements are perceived signifiers of quality, and that therefore communicating successes with others can be a methodology by which one can seek to multiply support. Indeed, Mark was seen undertaking the same practices throughout the research project, documenting his aforementioned BBC Radio 1 play with Zane Lowe, and, in March 2012, obtaining an audio recording of the show and uploading it to his website so that his fans, or anyone interested, could see the support he had received.

This idea of documenting the support of cultural intermediaries was reflected when undertaking auto-ethnographic analysis of my own releases too. For each of my single releases as Context between 2010 and 2013, I would employ various tactics to capture the attention of radio DJs, and following their support, would upload the audio of the radio play online, and feed this content back to the online blogosphere (and directly to my fans on social networking platforms), before then feeding this endorsement back to other cultural intermediaries. This technique has been conceptualised visually below to understand how it acts as a method of maximising one's routes to market. Fig. 1 below, read from bottom to top, illustrates all potential artistic routes to market as shown via routes a, b, and c. Route a represents an artist's intermediary-free engagement conducted online via social networks; the direct artist-audience relationship envisioned by the Web 2.0 research discussed earlier. Routes b and c show cultural intermediaries disseminating content. Lines 1, 2, 3, and 4 represent, when read as an OO symbol, a cyclical process; support is gained via an initial attention seeking alignment

with a 'Collaborator' (either with another artist (as per John), a celebrity (as per Mark), or even an intermediary themselves) [1], documented [2], fed onwards [3], re-documented [4] and fed onwards again [1] in an on-going pattern. The diagram below therefore shows a form of feedback mechanism.

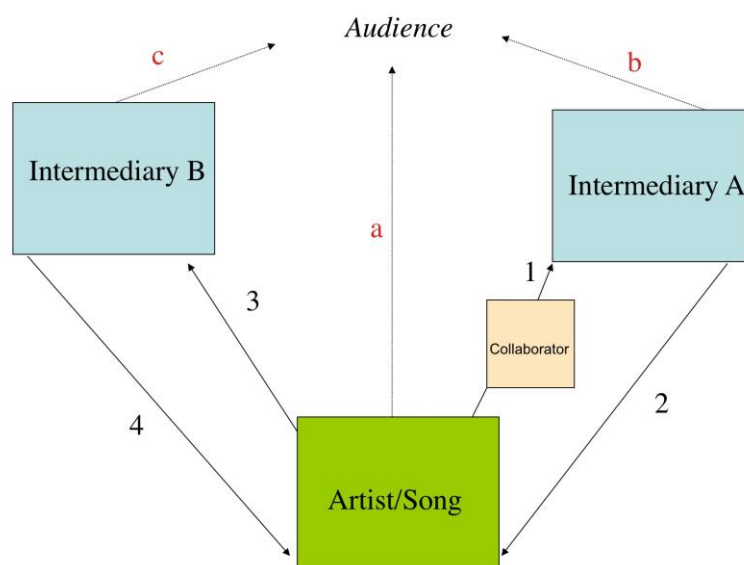


Figure 1: The role of intermediaries in the projection of success

We can use this feedback mechanism diagram to analyse the nature of the artist-intermediary relationship with reference to the release of my follow-up track to 'Off With Their Heads', entitled 'Listening to Burial', which was even more successful in terms of press exposure. After mastering the track in early 2011, the track was sent to twenty-seven DJs and producers at BBC Radio 1 and 1Xtra. The original email sent to these intermediaries is documented in fig.2 below. It can be seen how, even before the intermediaries have heard the track, I am aligning my-

self with collaborators (line 1 – fig. 1) in order to capture the ears of Intermediary A. I included quotes from famous broadcasters such as BBC Radio 1, and explain how my previous single had been playlisted on MTV.

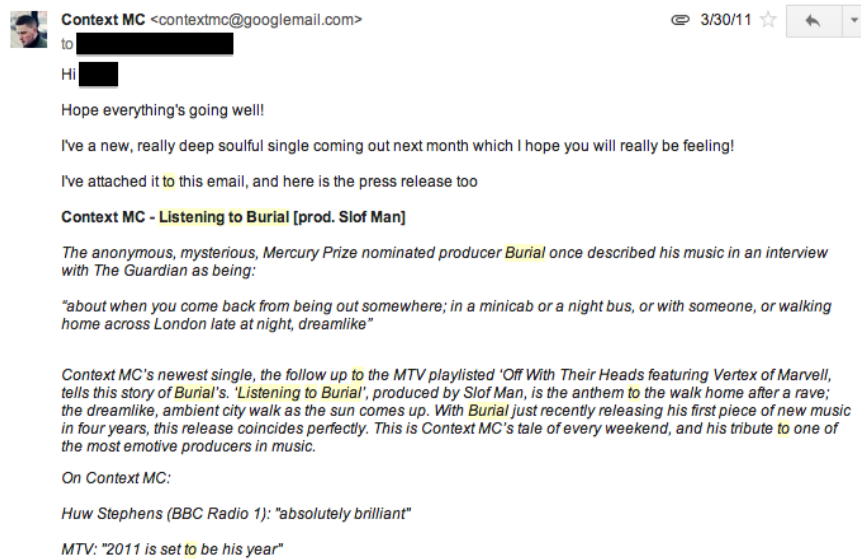


Figure 2: Context: Alignment via email

Over the following days, I received replies from four people, three of which stating that they had forwarded the track on to colleagues, and I thus sent 'chasing' emails to sixteen further DJs and producers. On 12.04.11, the track was premiered on BBC Radio 1Xtra by DJs Ace and Vis (line b). That day, I extracted the audio from the radio play, and uploaded this support to YouTube (line 2), which I shared directly with my fans (line a). I furthermore sent this documented endorsement to twenty-eight online blogs (intermediary B – line 3). Again, the email sent to these intermediaries is shown below (fig. 3). It can be seen how Intermediary B (websites/blogs) is being informed of the support from Intermediary A (BBC Radio 1Xtra).

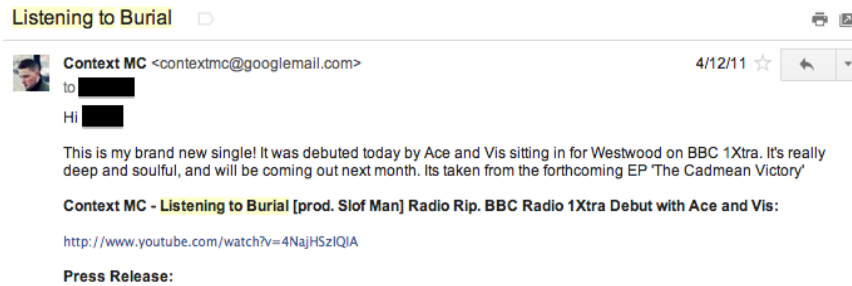


Figure 3: Multiplying support by email

The YouTube rip of the radio premiere was posted to a variety of websites over the following two days (line c). Again, this support was documented by myself (line 4) and was fed back to my existing fans. Additional radio plays had been received during this time, and I fed all of this support back to four more DJs and producers at the BBC (line 1), completing the feedback mechanism on its first 'loop'.

This process began again for the music video for the track. In May 2011, I uploaded the video to YouTube and organised an online 'premiere' for the track with MTV (intermediary B). Following the MTV premiere I contacted eleven online blogs where I attempted to consolidate all of the current support, and the video was shared on a number of major websites (line c). I then documented the online support for the video (line 4), and fed this information back, once again, to DJs and producers at radio stations (line 1). On 17.05.11, I contacted sixteen more intermediaries at the BBC (see fig. 4)

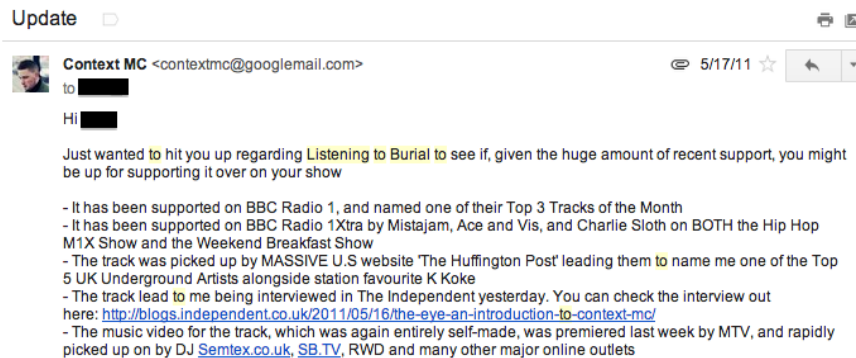


Figure 4: Continuing to multiply

The following month, the video was added to the daytime playlists of Channel AKA as well as MTV Base's evening schedule. Between May and September 2011, I continued to receive plays on various radio stations. On 21.09.11, I was informed that the track had been playlisted on BBC Radio 1. It was added to the playlist at the station on the week commencing 24.10.11, meaning that my track would be played daily on BBC Radio 1, to a nationwide audience of millions. This feedback mechanism process exemplifies the complexity of the relationship between artists and cultural intermediaries in a competitive digital climate. Not only do artists seek to align themselves with other artists to capture the attention of intermediaries, but also seek to align themselves with one group of intermediaries in order to capture the attention of others.

#### 4.2 The function of intermediaries as the projection of success

By understanding how this feedback mechanism operates, we are able to understand why cultural intermediaries were conceptualised as important by these UK urban music artists. Not only do they act as a trusted distribution platform in a sea of content – a way to be heard, and a route to market – but they also act as a signifier that we are attaining 'success' – itself a hugely contested and ill-defined concept within a mu-



sical career. They are a signal to people – intermediaries and fans alike – that this artist is doing well, warrants your attention, and should be listened to. John suggested in interviews that: "*This music scene is based on illusion and what they think is happening*" (John, interview, 07/12). In this sense, collaborative-creativity is, to a certain extent, based on the projection of success and the fabrication of perception. In a saturated marketplace, this projection of success is crucial for artists seeking to keep their head above water and in signalling to a potential audience of fans and cultural intermediaries that they are worth listening to. It is the formation of artistic alliances in the hope that one stands out from the crowd. As Mark stated: "*For loads of people it's like, they'll hear something and be like: 'Is that good? Zane Lowe [BBC Radio 1 DJ] said it's good so it must be good'*" (Interview, 02/13). In this sense, collaboratively forming alliances allows artists to distinguish themselves from the masses, and signal that they are a voice that should be heard.

Cultural intermediaries themselves become agents with whom artists 'collaborate', or to be more terminologically precise, seek a form of strategic affiliate alignment, as part of a process of self-documenting, multi-platform, strategic iteration to cultivate a projection of success. By documenting 'endorsements' and communicating these successes, as seen by Context with press and television achievements, and Mark and John with radio support, this symbolic recognition – this acquisition of cultural capital to use Bourdieu's terminology – becomes a distinguishing mechanism for artists seeking recognition in an anonymising marketplace of abundance, whereby artists struggle through what Martin Kretschmer (2005: 10) has evocatively called the "*noise of creative ambition*". Here, the function of intermediaries transcends that of distribution, and is instead that of a source of *cultural cache* to acquire distinction, often with other intermediaries but also with (potential) supporters too.

## 5 What's new? The illusory operation of capital

At this juncture some may say; what is necessarily new here? After all, the music industry has long been founded on myth, and projection, and mystique. Whilst the entrepreneurial approaches adopted by these artists and the lengths they go to in order to seek to mitigate their perceived indistinguishability engendered by a marketplace defined by oversaturation and hypercompetition is, perhaps, extreme, and act as case studies to examine the nature of contemporary creative entrepreneurship; perhaps things have always been this way in the music industry? However, when we build on the empirical work herein, and ask broader conceptual questions concerning what these developments tell us about the lives of artists today, and what this apparent projection of artistic 'success' is and means, we can see something quite distinct emerging.

The relationship between artists and cultural intermediaries explored herein serves as an illustration of the contemporary artistic quest for the maximisation of capital in the Bourdieusian sense of the term. These artists were however not seeking to acquire economic capital via these practices, but were harnessing their social and cultural capital, and their investments of economic capital, in order to acquire and maximise ever more cultural capital, understood as prestige and acclaim. In this sense, we can understand this affiliate, collaborative creativity as investment strategies of sorts to build and maintain social relationships with cultural intermediaries. This ongoing process is thus a social investment, with cultural capital the profit or dividend being acquired. For instance, when filming the video for 'Off With Their Heads', I (as Context) was maximising the social/relational capital (the intermediary contacts I had asked to appear in the video), in the hope that this would lead to institutionalised cultural capital (the video being playlisted on MTV). This process of acquisition, maximisation and transubstantiation was indeed ultimately successful. We can observe a similar phenomenon occurring with John's earlier discussed methodology of remixes. He maximised his relational capital with other artists in order to maximise institutionalised cultural capital in the form of documentable radio play, and

in turn reinforced existing social capital, in the form of his relationships with radio DJs themselves. When situating the phenomena uncovered herein in a theoretical context accounting for processes of capital transubstantiation, we can appreciate what the practices represent in conceptual terms, namely investment strategies facilitating conversion from economic, social and cultural capital into more cultural capital.

I observed a strong interconvertibility between social or relational capital and cultural capital throughout this research. Bourdieu suggests that capital interconvertibility is subject to the same constraints as the thermodynamic relationship between mechanical motion and heat which informs it whereby "*profits in one area are necessarily paid for by costs in another*" (Bourdieu 1986: 54). In the case of the artists at hand, as well as for Bourdieu, these costs are invariably economic, meaning cultural and social profits are paid for via economic costs. As illustrated, the collaborative technique employed when creating 'Off With Their Heads' was indeed successful if conceptualised as an exercise in the maximisation of cultural capital via relational capital, and the transubstantiation of the latter into the former. However, the loss of economic capital was vast – after accounting for all income directly derived from the song and video over the research period (largely PRS income), the total loss was precisely £380.00. The artists in this research were culturally rich, but economically poor, a scenario epitomised in the lyrics of Mark in one of his tracks released a few years prior to this research taking place:

*When you ask me what I think of the game,*

*I say: "Yeah, it's alright but I think it's a shame,*

*That brehs [men] spit flames [rap well] but ain't really  
getting paid"*

*If you want to get the papes [paper/money] gotta bring  
it to the [United] States,*

*But I can't complain though, a brother's getting played,*

*[BBC Radio] 1Xtra, Channel U [Music TV station], man  
you see me everyday*

Mark ('The Interview', 2006)

He was suggesting that artists are getting played, but not paid. The phraseology Mark and John employed, wholly unprompted, when discussing intermediary engagement as an 'illusion' is equally applicable here. Success in the music industry can be illusory; artists might be played on the radio, have their videos on television, and be featured in national press alongside the biggest acts in the world, yet they are earning little money and often are losing money. They exist within a non-monetised market of sorts, epitomised in the manner with which contemporary intermediary engagement is understood as the maximisation and transubstantiation of social capital serving to blur the boundary between the exploitation of market-relations based on an exchange of services, and social relations based on an exchange of favours (Adler & Kwon 2002: 18). In this sense, transubstantiation in the other direction, from enormous reserves of social/cultural capital, to economic capital, is incredibly difficult. As I suggested in a tweet from 2011: "*Everything is a profile-raising exercise. Only later can it be a revenue raising exercise*" (Tweet, 20.09.11, 10.56pm).

Artists lamenting the difficulty of their financial situation is certainly nothing new. However, these findings are important to situate the reality of capital transubstantiation in a modern context, highlighting that even today as barriers to entry have plummeted, the costs, both fiscal and emotional, are high, given that artists are able to attain a high degree of *perceived*, perhaps *misleading*, 'success', epitomised in the institutionalised cultural capital of radio or television playlisting, or nationwide media exposure, and yet, struggle to convert this into economic capital and thereby render their practice sustainable in economic terms. Capital interplay for these artists was therefore illusory in nature, as artistic projections of 'success' (in itself, as was explored in the inter-

views, an ambiguous and contested term) and cultivated public perceptions in the form of support by some of the biggest media outlets in the world, masked the realities this research uncovered. These processes that privileged the role of cultural intermediaries as crucial distinguishers in a saturated marketplace, and thus allowed artists to acquire enormous reserves of objectified and institutionalised cultural capital, simultaneously masked their economic reality, as these musicians struggled as artists always have, yet crucially, appeared to others as highly successful. This is the contemporary illusion of capital, a process within which cultural intermediaries are central, in an environment of hyper-competition.

## **6 Conclusion**

Ferocious competition caused these artists to place an intense focus and importance, rightly or wrongly, on the role cultural intermediaries play in their career trajectory given their ability to act as both disseminators and distinguishers. In this sense, the findings presented herein initially do three things, they: support the suggestion of Bourdieu (1984) that these intermediaries would maintain a position of authority in a cultural environment of increasing complexity, reject the 'death of the intermediary' thesis, and finally, support the findings from other cultural industries such as broadcasting and book publishing (Seabright & Weeds 2007; Thompson 2010) that intermediaries matter. Far from the democratising potential of new digital technologies negating the importance of intermediaries, it has in fact increased their importance, at least in the minds of these musicians. They are important not simply as distributors, but distinguishers. This notion of intermediaries being important as a distinguisher is not necessarily new, but the idea of musicians, in this case unsigned rappers, integrating intermediaries into their production practices to maximise their distinctiveness, is. In this sense, this paper has highlighted how both collaboration and competition come to define the experience of contemporary musicians.

The Babel Objection questions: "*if everyone speaks at once, how can anyone be heard*" (Benkler 2006). These findings suggest that one does not acquire an audience by speaking more loudly, but by embodying your voice with a greater perceived level of authority derived from high-status media affiliations, be they artists, celebrities, or cultural intermediaries themselves, via sagacious 'collaborative' creative practices. This collaborative approach to creativity is predicated upon the necessity for a distinguishing mechanism as much as it is for the benefits of creating art together, and serves to blur the boundary between competitive self-interest on the one hand, and collaboration on the other, as artists appear to work together but for largely selfish-reasons i.e. to advance their own careers by attracting attention. It is a declaration of success-by-association; a process of cultural consecration. In an era of abundant content, proliferated with creative works and creative workers all ferociously competing to be heard in a crowd of raucous, deafening ambitiousness, the cultivation of conspicuousness becomes paramount, and it is this which is the role of intermediaries. They matter because they distinguish artists in an environment of hypercompetition where symbolic meaning matters.

Discovering that competition fosters a degree of co-operation (epitomised in the increasing importance of cultural intermediaries) appears counterintuitive, semantically at least. However, the co-operative nature of artistic production of course is not (Becker 1982). What is unique in this analysis are three things. In the first instance, it is the realisation and methodology behind this collectivity and collaboration in the digitalised marketplace that is novel namely in the ways in which artists cultivate their networks. Secondly, it is the rationale behind it, which is interesting; artists are collaborative less for creative reasons (Leadbeater & Oakley 1999) than for practical reasons, in an attempt to be seen and heard and to advance their creative careers. Thirdly, it is the way in which this collaboration is entirely the responsibility of artists themselves, alone. For the artists in the 'music industry' world of Negus (1999, 2011), co-operation was the responsibility of intermediaries, acting on behalf of the artist. In this research however, it was the artists who were the or-

chestrators of this co-operative reputation-making. Certainly, independent artists have always managed their own careers and attempted to promote their image, from recording demo tapes and sending them to John Peel, to making promotional T Shirts (Cohen 1991). But for today's artists, there is more than this going on. They are formulating complex promotional methods to maximise their routes to market and subsequently achieving regular national, mainstream radio success, as well as cultivating a wide network of relationships with journalists and achieving exposure in the widest terms imaginable from the largest media-outlets in the world.

This process of acquiring cultural distinction, understood through the prism of Bourdieu, is representative of creative practice that exploits cultivated social capital, existing cultural capital, and investments of economic capital, in order to maximise privileged cultural capital. However, this was rarely converted back into economic capital for these artists. Whilst entry-level costs have reduced, the costs of competing are incredibly high, with little return. I employ the terminology used in earlier interviews by John and Mark, and suggest this process highlights how contemporary processes of capital interplay can be illusory in the manner in which they allow for the projection of high levels of apparent successes in the form of institutionalised cultural capital, despite artists experiencing financial hardships. Of course, musical success is never defined in purely financial terms, and indeed during interviews the musicians in this research project confirmed this. However, there was a worrying ambiguity relating to how the outside world understood and valued what they did, and a tension between this perception, and their material reality.

This work has not sought to evaluate the ability of intermediaries to assist consumers in decision-making processes, nor their usefulness as distributors of content, but instead, has shown how a specific group of artists believe intermediaries to be important (rightly or wrongly), adopt specific behavioural practices accordingly, and what the results of these strategies might tell us about what it means to be a successful musician today. Therefore, these findings only evidence the *perceived importance*

of intermediaries. They become important, at least in part, because they are perceived as being important, and are central to how these artists experience competitiveness. Lury & Warde (1997: 96) suggested that intermediaries are a form of 'modern witch doctor' who, via their apparent "*special knowledges are able to sell their divinations to the worried producers*". It appears, for these UK urban music artists at least, they no longer need sell themselves; we as creators believe them, and perceive this to be true. However, in doing so, and by engaging in processes that seek to present the greatest image of success (whatever this means), we simultaneously mask the reality of our day-to-day lives in this environment of hypercompetition, leading one to ask; what does musical 'success' really mean?

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