



Abstract: In recent decades the complexity of modern popular music has consistently declined. This paper seeks to explain the economic impact marketing has had on music itself, as well as the industry it occupies. The increased ease with which artists can market themselves through social media platforms has led to a detriment in the quality of music being produced today. As a result, an artists' success is now less dependent upon skill. Rather, prospects for success are increasingly about consistent output, and how the artist promotes themselves. Music streaming platforms have contributed to the degradation of musical originality in recent years, favoring artists who are consistently creating good work over those interested in creating great work that will stand the test of time.

Musical taste has evolved dramatically over the last six decades. Namely, the complexity and quality of music has been steadily declining every year since 1955. A study by the Spanish National Research Council (SNRC) in 2012 titled, “Measuring the Evolution of Contemporary Western Popular Music,” reveals this. They took approximately 500,000 songs from the Million Song Dataset (millionsongdataset.com), spanning the years from 1955 to 2010. Each song was then put through several algorithms. Musical complexity differs from visual art in that it operates through a temporal dimension. For instance, songs that contain predictable melodic and rhythmic

As it pertains to physics, a sound cannot be made louder than its original recording without an inevitable reduction in quality. As the noise floor is equalized, all nuance is normalized, effectively terminating it. This in essence is dynamic range compression, and the more of it applied, the greater the reduction in timbral diversity. Subtle nuances are gone, never again to be appreciated. In a YouTube video appropriately titled “The Loudness War,” Paul McCartney’s masterpiece, “Figure of Eight,” had dynamic range compression applied to it, and a comparison was made between the original recording and what a modern engineer might do today. On NPR’s “All Things Considered,” Bob Ludwig, a recording engineer who has worked with the likes of Jimi Hendrix to Radiohead, explained a snare drum on McCartney’s song after compression was applied. “It really no longer sounds like a snare drum with a very sharp attack. It sounds more like somebody padding on a piece of leather or something like that.”

What could have possibly led to this catastrophic decline in timbral diversity over the decades? The Principal Agent Problem certainly contributes. Considered to be one of the hallmark examples of a moral hazard, Prateek Agarwal on his site *Intelligent Economist* articulates that this phenomenon, “...occurs when one person (the agent) is allowed to make decisions on behalf of another person (the principal).” In the music industry, this dilemma occurs between artists and their producers. The artist in this case is the principal, and the producer, the agent. The producer’s goal is to secure a guaranteed level of success, and the artist’s goal is to create music. In the present day, the vast majority of successful producers have a streamlined approach to their craft, which can often collide with the objectives of the artist, who is more concerned with creating rather than producing. Producers often serve many artists, and there are tried and true elements to a producer’s craft that almost certainly guarantees a level

of success for the artist. These tried and true elements are what have led popular music today to sound similar from artist to artist, even on a lyrical level.

Indeed, many of the lyrics we hear today in popular songs were conceived by two individuals, Lukasz Gottwald and Max Martin. According to a New York Post article by Larry Getlen, "...Gottwald, a former pot dealer who later spent six years as the guitarist for the house band on "Saturday Night Live," wanted to start producing records, he sought out Martin, who became first his mentor, then his partner." Martin, who began experiencing commercial success in the late 1990s, has written lyrics for artists like Katy Perry, Taylor Swift, Backstreet Boys, et cetera. According to an article by Michael Cragg on The Guardian titled: "'Britney Spears is a genius': Max Martin, the powerhouse of pure pop," Max Martin "...has co-written and co-produced 73 US Top 10 singles..." and is the third most successful songwriter in terms of number one singles in United States history, with John Lennon (26) in 2nd and Paul McCartney (32) in 1st. Artists who are interested in a hit seek out Martin because his lyrical style has a certain level of guaranteed success attached to it. Martin's agency over a multitude of artists' lyrics distinctly demonstrates why popular songs are so similar to one another today.

Additionally, as shown by Andrew Powell-Morse in his 2015 study, lyrical intelligence has been on a steady decline since 2006. By using The Flesch Kincaid Readability Index (also

Record labels in their prime would receive thousands of tapes, only offering the most skilled artists record contracts. Even if the artist was only marginally better than their competition, they would still promote them. The record label only needed to invest a few thousand dollars into each budding artist for marketing costs. Since music at this time had a higher degree of scarcity than it does today, even small amounts of promotion served the budding artist well, because the public was more inclined then to actually listen to what they had to say through their music. It was more of a “we the people” approach. The general public had all

