



Building a Unique and Sustainable Artist Brand

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores how music artists can build a unique and sustainable personal brand to support their artistic career in the competitive music industry, and it aims to create an initial brand strategy for the case artist AE to utilise in the first steps of her career.

The theoretical framework investigated long-term consistent and cohesive brand building, necessary research, visual elements, authenticity, and how to utilise different strategies. The writer aimed to conclude the findings into an Artist Branding Onion model she created based on the theory. The benchmarking research observed three current pop artists to discover their consistent branding practices, which have contributed to their success and made them unique.

The initial branding strategy for AE was based on the theoretical framework and benchmarking research by utilising the Artist Branding Onion model that the writer created. Concluding the findings, AE must be consistent with her actions, and boldly embrace her unique features, and message to stand out in the oversaturated industry.

The recommendations were for AE and other emerging artists to find their voice, message, and vision in music, trust in them, and stay consistent. It was also suggested that they use different methods, like the Artist Branding Onion model, to explore their own artistry. Another suggestion was, that in the future, AE use this branding strategy to introduce herself to possible collaborators or a label and create an aligned marketing strategy for her future releases.

Key words: artist, independent artist, branding, personal brand, music industry

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1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the process of creating an artist brand, with a focus on the case artist of AE, who is at the beginning of her career. The goal is to establish an idea of an initial brand strategy that will not only help her navigate the competitive industry but also serve as a foundation for possible future labels, collaborations, and development. Additionally, this study aims to provide insights and inspiration for other emerging independent artists.

In today's fast-evolving music industry, standing out as an artist requires more than just talent (Ross, 2024). Artist branding has evolved to be a fundamental strategy for success and for gaining visibility, connecting with audiences, and building a long-term career. In this modern era dominated by short attention spans and fast dopamine-driven content consumption, an artist brand must be both unique and adaptable to maintain relevance in the business to stay sustainable.

By examining branding in the music industry and trends, this research will explore how artists can remain authentic while adapting to the music business. Through a wide literature review and benchmarking study, this thesis will provide a comprehensive idea of how to craft a unique and continuous artist brand that resonates with audiences and withstands industry shifts.

1.1 Thesis topic: Crafting a Unique and Sustainable Artist Brand

Artist branding has always been a crucial part of the success of an artist, but in today's music industry which is more competitive than ever with over 120 000 tracks being released to streaming platforms every day, having a brand strategy to follow can help the artist to find their audience faster and find their way to the popularity of listeners (Ross, 2024). Moreover, in modern society, where fast dopamine and attention span are taking over, from the point of view of business, it's important to have a unique brand to sell it better.

The significance of this thesis is to help create a continuous and unique artist brand for the case artist AE to support her early steps in her music career. Since

she works now as an independent artist, this thesis will also give a plan for the future label and team to follow up. With this paper, the writer also aims to inspire other independent artists at the beginning of their artistic journeys. Moreover, this thesis explores the world of branding and how to stay adaptable and relevant in today's rapidly growing and changing music industry while staying authentic and truthful to art.

1.2 Thesis objective, purpose, and research questions

This paper seeks to study the creation of a unique and continuous artist brand and additionally inspire other independent artists on their branding journey. The objective is to craft an artist brand for the case artist AE to utilize in her career and to serve as a foundation for future collaborations.

The main question of this thesis is:

“How to create a unique and sustainable artist brand?”

Other sub-questions are:

“What is the meaning of branding in the music industry?”

“What can be learned from other artists and how to adapt resonating themes into a brand identity?”

1.3 Working methods and data

The thesis has the nature of an exploratory study, and the data used is collected from a literature review, relevant articles, journals, and podcasts, and by benchmarking successful female artists. The study includes a broad theory part, a theoretical framework, benchmarking research, and a plan for an initial brand strategy for the case artist AE.

1.4 Thesis process

The structure of the thesis is as follows.

Chapter 1: Introduction – introducing the topic, the case artist, and the objectives of the study, as well as the working methods and process

Chapter 2: Branding in the music industry – studying the meaning of branding and its importance in the music business, exploring brand strategy and the components of design

Chapter 3: Personal branding in the music industry – focusing on personal branding and being an artist in the 2020s

Chapter 4: Theoretical framework – exploring branding theories and creating a theoretical framework based on the collected information and branding theory.

Chapter 5: Benchmarking research – conducting benchmarking research by observing globally successful artists

Chapter 6: Crafting the initial artist brand strategy for the case artist AE

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

2 BRANDING IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

This chapter examines branding from multiple perspectives, including its definition, significance in the modern music industry, and key concepts for constructing an effective branding strategy for artists. Additionally, it explores branding within the broader context of artist development and emphasizes the role of semiotics in shaping an artist's identity.

Branding is a strategic process aimed at creating differentiation, fostering awareness, and building value and trust to attract an audience. It requires patience and ambition to establish a recognizable and enduring brand presence. It is a critical component of business success, as effective branding enhances competitiveness and the overall market value. (Neumeier, 2006.)

The music industry has evolved to the extent that talent alone is lacking for success. Standing out in a highly saturated market remains a considerable challenge for emerging artists. Therefore, personal branding is essential for those aspiring to maintain a long-term music career. This is especially relevant for independent artists, for whom depending only on music-related income is often impractical, and good branding often helps to stand out. Achieving long-term success requires a balanced approach, dividing efforts between musical creation and a business approach. (Herstand, 2017.)

Branding is an ongoing process that defines the core values and strategic framework of an artist's identity as a business entity. It is dynamic and adaptable, ultimately resulting in a coherent brand identity. Bilekov (2024) outlines four key stages of branding, first conducting extensive research to gather relevant information about the business and industry. Second, developing a brand strategy that establishes core values, communication methods, and overall direction. Third, designing a distinct and memorable visual identity, and lastly, implementing the branding strategy. The implementation phase may vary in duration, ranging from a few days to several months. (Bilekov, 2024.) For artists, a strong visual identity is particularly vital in ensuring differentiation within the competitive landscape of the music industry.

In the music industry, branding is most effective when it communicates authenticity to the audience. Artists who aim to build a sustainable career based on self-expression must approach branding as a process of emphasizing and strengthening their strongest qualities. Moreover, storytelling is a fundamental aspect of artist branding, as an artist's identity serves as an emotional touchpoint for their audience. (Awal, n.d.)

2.1 What is a brand?

Marty Neumeier (2006) highlights in his timeless book *The Brand Gap* that a brand is an emotional gut feeling of the audience. Moreover, he emphasizes that a brand exists especially in the minds of people and people define the brand more than the brand designer themselves. So, a brand can be said to be like the Platonic ideal – an understanding of a product or service, or in this context, an artist. In other words, a brand is also explained as a promise to your customers. (Neumeier, 2006.)

On the other hand, Wheeler and Meyerson (2024) introduce four root questions that help businesses understand the meaning of a brand better. These questions include: *“Who are you? Who needs to know? How will they find out? And why should they care?”*

In the sixth edition of the book *Designing Brand Identity*, David Haigh introduces the three primary functions of a brand, which are *navigation*, *reassurance*, and *engagement* (Wheeler & Meyerson, 2024). The brand must help the consumers to choose in the sea of alternatives, and the brand's duty is to reassure the consumer they've made the right decision. Reassurance increases the reliability of a brand, and the consumer is more likely to spread positive feedback. To ensure continuous engagement with the consumer and the brand, a brand must communicate with its consumers to encourage them to identify the brand and keep the relationship continuous. (Wheeler & Meyerson, 2024.)

2.2 Necessary research for brand building

Brand research is a crucial component of the branding process, as it helps artists gain essential insights into the market, allowing them to shape and refine their brand effectively. Conducting comprehensive brand research supports the longevity and adaptability of a brand by clarifying the relationship between the artist and their audience. Similarly, it provides an understanding of how the brand is perceived within the industry. (Medium, 2023.)

While brand research is often conducted regarding competitors, in the music industry, the primary focus is differentiation, individuality, and artistic exploration. The essential objective of brand research is to enhance brand value, which involves understanding key branding concepts such as *brand awareness*, *associations*, *perception*, *equity*, *loyalty*, and *preference*. To establish a solid foundation, artists should begin by analyzing these elements. (Qualtrics, n.d.)

Brand awareness evaluates the level of recognition and memory associated with a brand. When conducting research, it is important to consider brand associations — how an artist is perceived and what they are known for. This assessment helps define whether these associations align with the artist's vision and strategic direction. Brand perception, in turn, contains the decisions audiences form when engaging with the brand, whether directly or indirectly. Brand equity represents the comparative value of a brand within its market. Brand loyalty reflects audience dedication, which is a crucial factor for long-term success in the music industry. Without a loyal fan base, sustaining a career as an artist becomes difficult. Lastly, brand preference measures the likelihood of audiences choosing one artist over another. (Qualtrics, n.d.)

Traditional brand research methods can be adapted to the music industry. However, since an artist's music and identity are the primary products, key performance indicators such as listener engagement and fan growth serve as the most relevant feedback metrics. At the early stages of an artist's career, surveys can provide valuable insights into audience perceptions and beliefs. However, the most effective approach is to create and release music while maintaining authenticity with a strategic mindset. Moreover, brand research should be an

ongoing practice, as continuous tracking is fundamental to building brand value. Real-time metrics, such as audience feedback, fanbase expansion, and streaming numbers, offer valuable data that can guide the development of an artist's brand. (Qualtrics, n.d.)

2.3 Brand strategy

To effectively communicate a brand's identity to an audience with clarity and consistency, a well-defined *brand strategy* is essential. Wheeler and Meyerson (2024) describe a brand strategy as a roadmap that guides success. Essentially, a brand strategy represents the approach for entering markets and communicating core values, differentiation, and identity to the audience. While Wheeler and Meyerson (2024) emphasize customer focus, an effective brand strategy also inspires internal stakeholders and aligns with broader business objectives.

Brand strategy is often mixed with marketing strategy, yet these two serve different purposes. While marketing strategy functions as a subset of branding, focusing on short-term communication efforts, brand strategy is a comprehensive, long-term framework that controls all aspects of the brand's identity and positioning. Marketing strategy serves as a tool to deliver the brand message and engage the target audience (Brand Master Academy, n.d.). Moreover, marketing communications are closely intertwined with branding, as they implement brand elements introduced in the following sections. The marketing communications mix is a crucial mechanism for executing a brand's identity across various channels.

Before developing a brand strategy, several foundational elements must be established to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the brand. These include defining the brand's purpose, vision, and mission. A well-articulated vision provides long-term direction, while the brand's mission ensures alignment with its objectives. Additionally, core brand values create functional principles and decision-making processes. Positioning, another critical element, differentiates a brand from its competitors. It also reflects how a brand develops specific perceptions within its audience. Furthermore, brand personality defines the

characteristics attributed to the brand, whereas brand voice conveys these qualities through communication strategies. Storytelling serves as a key tool for fostering emotional connections with the audience, and visual identity plays a crucial role in ensuring brand recall. (Brand Master Academy, n.d.)

Ritson (2021) outlines three fundamental principles for brand strategy development. First, he emphasizes the importance of thorough market analysis and strategic planning before implementation, claiming that an effective brand strategist must maintain vast knowledge of the competitive field. Second, he stresses the need for deliberate decision-making, advocating for a focused and selective approach to brand positioning. Lastly, he highlights the necessity of prioritizing strategy over tactics, ensuring that tactical implementations align with overarching strategic objectives. (Ritson, 2021.)

To simplify the strategic development process, Ritson (2021) proposes three core questions: "Who are we targeting?", "What do we want to stand for?", and "How will we achieve this?" These questions serve to clarify segmentation, targeting, brand positioning, and the overall objectives of a brand strategy. By addressing these key aspects, artists can establish a strong foundation for long-term brand growth and market differentiation.

2.4 Design

Design is often the first thing a consumer notices about a brand. That emphasizes design's vital importance of being perceived as recognizable and easily memorable. The first appeal to consumers' feelings goes through various elements such as symbols, language, typography, colours, logos, slogans, and shapes (Open Learn, n.d.). Galvan (n.d) says the design is like the top of an iceberg, where underneath the surface are the brand story and guidelines. With the brand design, one can create a signature visual identity to stand out from the competitors, which includes the brand's objectives, values, vision, message, personality, voice, and strategy.

2.5 Semiotics

Semiotics was first introduced in the 20th century by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and he divides semiotics into the signifier and the signified. A signifier represents a sign's physical form, and a signified expresses the meaning or idea of a sign. Moreover, semiotics is a study of symbols used in communication to represent objects or ideas and is often utilized in branding (Dawson, 2020). Dawson (2020) also highlights the power of semiotics, since there are limitless opportunities they can represent, and in branding, they work to transmit the brand's values to its audience.

Semiotics can be seen, for example, as logos, colours, shapes, signs, symbols, pictures, phrases, sounds, or different gestures. They strengthen the visual language of the business and have always been significant when expressing certain messages and brand identity to the target audience. (Dawson, 2020.)

Semiotics is the definition of a brand's visual and symbolic look, which in today's branding world is essential for effective branding and an easily recognizable identity. Semiotics include symbolic components and their communication to the audience throughout a brand's message. (Gandla & Vemali, 2023.)

Throughout history, semiotics have been a key component for success, but they have become increasingly important since the music industry has faced a revolutionary change during the past decade. Semiotics not only communicate the brand's values but also differentiate the brand and leave a lasting impact and image on the audience. Moreover, with semiotics, artists can create a holistic world around their artistry and through that artistic world, communicate their story. (Gandla & Vemali, 2023.)

3 PERSONAL BRANDING IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

The music industry has faced a revolutionary change during the past decade. Quoting Gemma Ross (2024), there is “more music released in a single day 2024 than the entirety of 1989” which we can assume is that producing and publishing music has become accessible for the majority and is not restricted by the traditional gatekeepers anymore. Due to the growing saturation and competitiveness, the meaning of the personal brand is increasingly emphasized – this requires artists to craft a brand that goes beyond music and can be noticed and identified through the artist’s presence. (Stankova, n.d.)

Stankova (n.d) lists a few benefits there are of building a personal brand. First, she highlights that a well-crafted personal brand increases visibility among possible fans and the possibility of collaborating with industry professionals. Next, she emphasizes that having a personal brand allows the artist and their team to control the public image and narrative. Third, Stankova (n.d) brings up the effectiveness of marketing – a personal brand ensures there are guidelines and the artist’s product is aligned with marketing strategies. An effective personal brand can eventually lead to various revenue streams and open new opportunities. Moreover, it can create a legacy and immortalize an artist to inspire people over generations and create resilience in the career to make it more sustainable. (Stankova, n.d.) Furthermore, an effective personal brand builds trust within your audience and leads them to trust your influence. It also helps you to create a stronger community around you, make engaging easier, and attract your audience towards you without having to chase them. (Chat GPT.)

3.1 Why branding matters for artists?

The fundamental core of an artist’s brand is their product, mainly their music. However, branding an artist is a combination of multiple factors, including their personality, style, values, and thoughts (Sounio, 2010). Through branding, artists can highlight specific features they desire to communicate to their audience (Sounio, 2010). Additionally, an artist’s brand extends beyond music to contain the aura they project and the overall experience they create for their audience. Inspired by Robert Schumann’s words, it is valuable to have a beautiful voice, but

what truly matters is the message transmitted through it. Achieving financial success in the competitive music industry requires an artist to find their audience, resonate, and foster trust and interest, ultimately forming a unique brand. (Sounio, 2010.)

To develop a recognizable brand, consistency is crucial. However, Neumeier (2006) argues that consistency alone does not define a brand, particularly within the music industry. Artistry is an evolving process, and personal growth is integral to sustaining authenticity and longevity. Self-expression allows artists to continuously reimagine, redefine, and align their brand with their evolving identity. Adaptability and authenticity serve as key drivers of sustainability and uniqueness in an artist's brand. (Chervink, 2024.)

Ahonen (2020) identifies differentiation as the most significant challenge for artists in the music industry, reinforcing the importance of branding. When undertaking the branding journey, she suggests focusing on three fundamental concepts: *mission, vision, and values*. These elements help artists concretize their creative motivations, career goals, and artistic identity. (Ahonen, 2020.) Similarly, Sinek (2009) stresses the importance of starting with the question "Why?" to gain a deeper understanding of artistic purpose and explore the broader significance of one's creative output.

3.2 Artist development plan

Cari Cole (2025) emphasizes the significance of artist development before focusing on brand aesthetics to ensure that an artist has clearly defined their identity and values. According to Music Vault Academy (n.d.), artist development encompasses a range of essential elements that evolve throughout an artist's career. These elements include *authenticity, voice, branding, songwriting, lyrics, image, musical style, video production, live performances, marketing, and social media presence*. The artist development plan serves as a structured process aimed at helping artists reach their full potential.

In the pursuit of a professional career, artist development is a necessary strategy. The purpose of it is to consolidate all artistic aspects and branding efforts, serve

as a guideline for setting goals and ensure coherence in an artist's career trajectory. The alignment between artist branding and the development plan is crucial for long-term success. (Medium, 2020.)

Cari Cole (2025) outlines five phases of artist development that contribute to building a sustainable and credible music career. She underscores the importance of the first phase, which lays the foundation through preparation, vocal training, songwriting, and musicianship. Cole (2025) asserts that this foundational stage should be revisited periodically between musical projects to facilitate continuous artistic growth. The subsequent phase involves a deeper examination of the artist's established foundation, defining their aesthetic and musical identity. Cole (2025) further stresses the importance of authenticity in this phase, as it is instrumental in achieving a lasting career.

Once the foundation has been built and the artistic direction has been defined, the next step is the creation of a visual identity and branding strategy. This step is the primary focus of this study. According to Cole (2025), branding plays a crucial role in an artist's success by enabling them to distinguish themselves in a competitive industry. The fourth phase parallels strategies used in startup businesses, where testing the brand and marketing strategies through audience engagement provides valuable feedback. Cole (2025) highlights the significance of an effective management team during phases four and five to ensure market success and long-term sustainability. At this stage, the focus shifts toward revenue generation through touring and other brand-aligned activities, marking the final phase of artist development (Cole, 2025).

3.3 How to build a personal brand

Personal branding is strategically shaping how an individual is perceived by the audience. It's a process to highlight an individual's strengths, skills, and personality. Moreover, it's storytelling and creating an identifiable, and authentic narrative. As with any brand, it can also be explained as people's gut feeling of you and how they perceive you. Whether intentional or not, everyone has an image and reputation. (Monarth, 2022.) Monarth (2022) emphasizes personal

brand to be more intentionally built. He states that a personal brand is about how you want people to perceive you and aligning your intentions with your actions.

Monarth (2022) introduces a four-step guide on how to build a personal brand. He first emphasizes figuring out an individual's passion, motivation, and best qualities that are desired to be strengthened. He encourages to explore what thrives the inner child and what is the desired contribution to the world through the brand. (Monarth, 2022.)

Next Monarth (2022) highlights to list down the goals and admired qualities. These qualities he suggests to be reflected and integrated into the individual's development. Monarth (2022) encourages individuals to be confident within their authentic self. The third step is to map the stakeholders, research how to reach the right audience to connect, and collaborate. A personal brand must be seen and heard to succeed. (Monarth, 2022.)

The following strategies the writer has taken into consideration to support later presented Artist Branding Onion model.

3.3.1 5 C's strategy of personal branding

Wilson highlights (n.d.) that by following the 5 C's of personal branding (clarity, consistency, content, connection, and confidence), a successful and powerful brand can be built. The first step is to clarify the online presence to be consistent and easily recognizable. The clarity in a personal brand creates comprehension and messages of the core purpose and mission to the audience. (Wilson, n.d.) He emphasizes consistency in the brand's look, communication, and engagement. It's crucial for the brand's success to keep it on top of the audience's minds. (Wilson, n.d.)

In the digital era, content creation and the quality of the content are the most crucial pieces when building a personal brand. It's often the first way to show a brand's value to a potential new audience. Content is important to build connections, genuine relationships, and trust with followers. Engagement is th§e

key to partnership, which can lead to new opportunities and spotlight. (Wilson, n.d.)

According to Wilson (n.d.), the last C stands for confidence, which means believing the brand even if no one else does. Confidence is often something that needs to be practised, but it's a necessary to learn to successfully share the brand's message. Wilson (n.d.) highlights that when harnessing these five components, it is easier to accomplish goals and find success.

3.3.2 The 4 Vs – strategy

Another strategy to explore is the 4Vs strategy, which collectively enhances brand recognition, customer loyalty, and market differentiation. It suggests that the brand identity is built upon four fundamental components: values, vision, visuals, and voice. Values function as the guiding principles, and when clearly defined, they establish the brand's authenticity and consistency. They also provide a framework for strategic decisions and collaborations. To define a brand's values, the person should reflect on the core mission and impact they aim to build. (Plant, 2023.)

According to Plant (2023), a brand's vision serves as the foundation and defines its purpose and long-term direction. A clear vision fosters authentic connections with the audience and reinforces the brand's credibility. Key aspects of a clear brand vision include its motivation, intended impact, and the values that sustain its development and growth. (Plant, 2023.)

Visual identity includes the design and semiotics to form a brand's first impression. When well made, it enhances the brand's recognition and differentiation while aligning with the core message. Brand voice plays a crucial role in the visual identity since it has a huge impact on the first impression for the audience. Voice establishes trustworthiness, and when staying consistent with the visual identity and voice, it enhances audience connection and loyalty. (Plant, 2023.)

Plant (2023) highlights that a successful brand strategy aligns values, vision, visuals, and voice to create a coherent and compelling identity. She continues that by maintaining consistency across these elements, brands can enhance customer trust, establish a competitive advantage, and build long-term loyalty.

3.3.3 SWOT -analysis

SWOT Analysis is a strategic tool used for management and planning in organizations, but it can be used effectively when managing a personal brand, too. It gives the person insights into their strengths and weaknesses and positioning in the industry. SWOT Analysis examines the environment in the business or brand itself, but also the environment around it. (Kumar, S. 2023)

SWOT itself is an acronym for strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat. When analysing these areas, it can encompass and give an understanding of the internal and external factors. Internal factors include the strengths and weaknesses, and on the other hand, opportunities and threats are listed in the external factors. With this strategy, it is effortless to find information on the characteristics and competitive environment to be able to work towards the objectives more effectively. (Kumar, S. 2023.)

When operating in the field of personal branding, SWOT Analysis can be an effective tool. Whether starting from zero, exploring new markets, and in the process of repositioning or rebranding. When re-evaluating the internal and external motivation and environment, there can be new insights found from the brand's mission and vision. (Ramotion, 2023.)

4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The following suggested theoretical framework is created based on the literature review above, and combined with two existing theories. One by Jean-Noël Kapferer and another by Tom Peters. These theories are adapted to a music artist's branding process to conclude the most important takeaways.

4.1 The Brand Identity Prism

Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism from 1996 focuses on how to define and express a brand's identity, and it includes six facets. Due to its holistic approach towards branding, it can be used to explore how an artist or a personal brand communicates their identity and core values. However, the prism model also helps to understand how the facets are connected. (Lombard, 2018.)

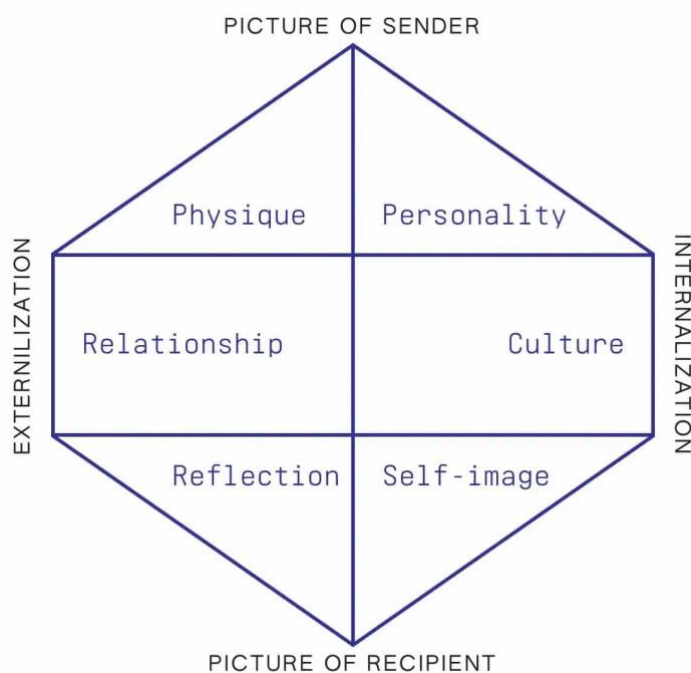


Figure 1. Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (Lombard, 2018).

Kapferer argues that strong brands effectively use all aspects of the prism to create a continuous and appealing brand identity. The prism is divided into six facets, all positioned as in business; the sender is the business, and the recipient is the consumer. Moreover, the areas are divided into external and internal elements, which may cross one another. (Lombard, 2018.)

Physique refers to the visual and physical elements and characteristics, it's the physical idea in people's minds when they think of the brand. It includes the colours, semiotics, logo, and style. **Personality** refers to the brand's essence, behaviour, and the gut feeling of people when they think of the brand. It can also be communicated by using semiotics. Moving on to the third element, **culture** is the foundational and original value of the brand. **Self-image** works as a mirror for the consumer – it helps people associate themselves with the brand and create a stronger relationship. **Reflection**, on the contrary, refers to how the brand associates with their audience, which can also be described as the brand's ideal target audience. The sixth and last element of the prism is the **relationship** between the brand and its consumers, which includes the engagement and both abstract and physical services or subjects offered. According to Kapferer, when elements are working in alignment with each other, it supports the creation of a powerful and comprehensive brand identity and a foundation for a long-lasting brand. (Lombard, 2018.)

For an artist's branding, this theory can be extremely helpful to break down the brand identity into six clear areas. Besides clarifying the artist's presence, it also takes into consideration the admired way to be perceived by the audience. However, even though this theory is practical and a great theory to start with the branding process, it lacks the allowance of evolution – as mentioned in the beginning, the music industry is developing continuously and is more competitive than ever, so in artist branding fluidity is mandatory for artists to be able to re-invent themselves.

4.2 The Brand Called You

Another interesting branding theory to discover is The Brand Called You from 1997, created by Tom Peters. The core concept is that an individual can be seen as a brand and create value in the eyes of an audience. There are five key components, which include authenticity, visibility, consistency, differentiation, and strategic self-presentation. Thus, Peters refers to the power of influence, intelligence and reputational power in an individual, which is essential to growing the personal brand besides the key elements. When adapting this thought of mind

to modern society, the significance of an individual's power of influence has been noticed even by the biggest brands in the world. (Peters, 1997)

According to Peters, **authenticity** and being intentional with actions are important, because people connect deeply with brands that show they're being real. Next, he highlights **visibility** and consistent posts across channels with strategic use of social media, and opportunities. **Consistency** also emphasizes that the brand's visuals should be aligned across platforms with the natural story and evolution. **Differentiation** is a significant element in branding, which Peters also stresses to be an important part of highlighting the uniqueness. This is to make a separation from every other talented artist. **Strategic self-presentation** refers to intentionally curating the presence of the brand in a focused, but authentic way. (Peters, 1997.)

This theory has its strength in centering authenticity, and emphasizing individuality by differentiating the artist from the saturated market. Thus, the theory is from the late 90s, it can be adapted to the modern economy. It emphasizes the individual's influence, which is noticeable nowadays through social media. Peters' theory also stresses intentional action and encourages exploring the uniqueness of the artist. However, in some cases, this theory may feel overly commercialised and it does not take into consideration the relationship with the audience, nor co-creation and interaction. There may be a risk of putting too much pressure on the strategic level rather than the creative exploration.

4.3 Artist Branding Onion -model

This theory model is a custom framework created by the researcher based on the previous theoretical review. It combines Kapferer's Identity Prism, Peters' personal branding theory, and the elements from 4V's and 5C's strategies. It is built around the core of the brand, and expands in thematic areas and tiers. The researcher aimed to build the focus around two main aspects: the creative core and the fluidity of the artist to support continuous evolution and exploration in a rapidly changing environment. The researcher also sought to create a balance between the artistry and branding to make the utilization more pleasant for artists themselves. Before diving into the introduction of the model, it's important to note

that the tiers and areas (red, orange, blue and purple) are not locked – they can always merge into one another.

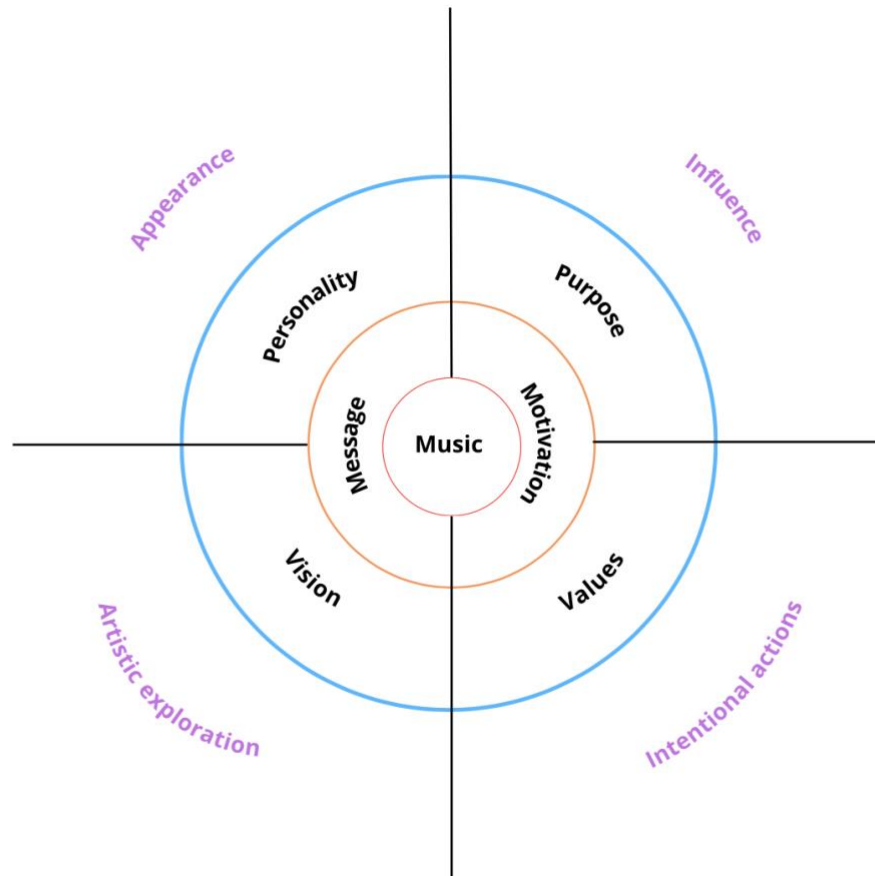


Figure 2. Artist Branding Onion model (2025).

4.3.1 Introduction of the model

At the core of the artist's brand is considered to be music – the primary form of expression and the heart of artistic exploration. In this particular model, music is seen as the product and is an emotionally connecting element between the artist and the audience. Moving on to the first tier around the core, the focus lies in the soul of the artist, their internal truth, and the source of creativity. The message presents the things the artist aims to say through their art and music, and it is on the left side since the message naturally unites with personality and vision. Motivation, on the contrary, is the drive behind an artist's creation; the inner fuel with emotional, personal, and/or spiritual aspects.

The second tier has its focus on the brand elements and the foundation of the brand/artist identity – it defines how the artist expresses their inner world. Personality refers to the artist's unique character, voice, aura, and energy. Purpose stands for the artist's deeper reason behind the artistry in a broader context – societal and/or personal “why”. Values guide the decisions and actions, and these are the values the artist wants to be connected with. Last, the vision sets the long-term goals and aspirations for the journey.

The third tier extends the “how” with the real-world and allows two-way interaction, change, and evolution. It includes how the artist's brand identity is experienced by the audience and how the artist communicates its core through appearance, influence, exploration, and actions. Appearance shaped by personality refers to how the artist visually presents themselves and their brand. Artistic exploration embraces the artistic journey, an opportunity for evolvement and exploration, and takes into consideration the big vision, but also changing trends in the environment and pop culture. Intentional actions are the decisions an artist makes based on their values. Moreover, it presents consistency and alignment in communication across platforms. Influence includes the artist's cultural presence and impact on the audience. Moreover, these brand dimensions can easily be affected by the surroundings and fan engagement; therefore, all the areas can also be analysed the other way around, considering the cultural and environmental aspects.

By exploring the vertical axis, it goes from an explorative journey and intentionality through the core towards appearance and influence. The vertical axis, therefore, can be visualised as the artist's continuous journey expressing how influence is built intentionally, considering both external and internal choices. The horizontal axis, on the other hand, represents creativity and how the artist's creative choices and musical exploration have an influence and the actions taken in branding. The intended goal is to gain a holistic view and understanding of the artist's intentions, and visual and sonic world, by moving back and forth on these lines.

4.3.2 Advantages of the model

Artist Branding Onion -model focuses highly on creating a solid foundation to build a unique and continuous artist brand by a holistic view and centring authenticity, but taking into consideration the presence and strategy too. It supports evolution while staying balanced between both creativity & consistency and inner world & external expression.

It aims to explore music artist branding multidimensionally by laying the focus on the artist and creativity, but aligns with the rapidly developing modern music industry and can be adapted through multiple channels and overall branding. Moreover, the model can easily be adapted to artists working in other creative fields than music.

4.3.3 Limitations and how to use practical tools

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the model, the researcher asked Chat GPT to highlight the possible limitations and disadvantages of the model. It stressed several valid points, one of which is that the model may be **too abstract** and requires the artist to have some **self-awareness** of their identity in advance. Next, the AI stressed the **platform blindness** of the model and that it's not visualizing the **competition** or **audience**. It also highlighted the **staticness** and **solo-focused** approach. (Chat GPT, 2025.)

The researcher then aimed to critically balance them by proposing enhancements or practical tools to support the utilisation with the help of artificial intelligence. First, there can be variable worksheets or checklists applied to each area to receive a clearer view of the themes. Moreover, the model encourages artists to explore self-reflection exercises and dive deep into their inner world to get clarifying insights into the real purpose, message, and meaning of their artistry. Even the model does not visualize straightforwardly the audience engagement – it is noted in the beginning that the right way to utilise this model is to imagine it in the middle of a diverse crowd or the artist's real fanbase. (Chat GPT, 2025.)

To tap into the platform and competition blindness, the researcher suggests the model can be adapted to various platforms by developing an additional table to take into consideration trends, competition, and elements of the platforms. Thus, the model is based on the authenticity of the artist and supports uniqueness. When working ambitiously, it's always encouraged to research the market competition in advance. Whilst the model is suggested to be used with solo artists, there can be some adaptation made for groups, too. Each member could define their circles, but then combine them to find and define the shared vision and unified brand. Last, to support the evolution and development more clearly, there could be arrows to point to the movement and dynamic branding. It's important to note that a brand identity is merging and growing, and there must be space to allow needed changes. (Chat GPT, 2025.) Below, there is an enhanced version of the Artist Branding Onion model to embrace continuous growth.

In the enhanced version, the growth and artistic fluidity are visualised with red and purple arrows. The red arrows on the outer edge symbolize the overall continuous growth and evolution of an artist – including artist development, adapting to modern trends and culture, and also creative change. Purple arrows moving through the model are symbolise the fluidity through different areas and how they all blend into one through the core.

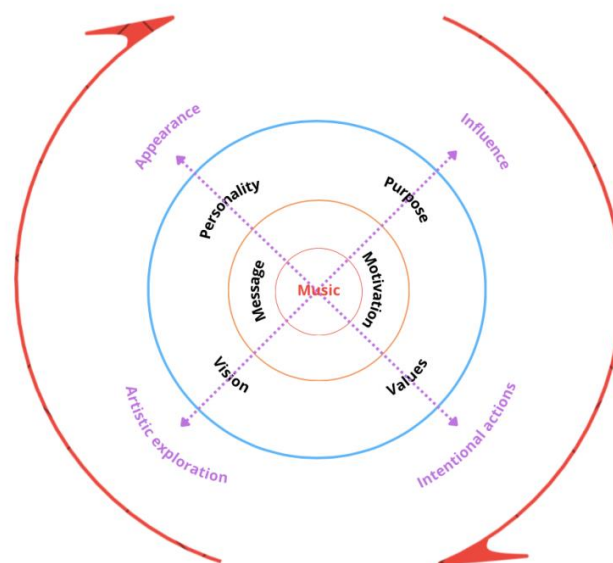


Figure 3. Artist Branding Onion -model, enhanced version (2025).

5 BENCHMARKING RESEARCH

The following chapter is about benchmarking the music artist professionals to find other artists' best practices on their branding. Benchmarking is a continuous and structured process where one's performance is compared against competitors to identify the gaps in performance and operation and what should be developed (Moffett et al. 2008). Camp (1989) has explained benchmarking in a straightforward way already in the late 80s, that it is "the search for industry best practices that will lead to superior performance". The following benchmarking research has a strong focus on the visual identity and performance style of the artists to gain insights into how brands communicate non-verbally their overall brand experience.

5.1 Research planning and process

There are various ways for conducting benchmark research; however, for this study, the approach is to examine and observe briefly the personal brands of globally successful music artists. These artists' brands are not only their music, but a full artistic experience. By observing, the writer aimed to find the main themes around their artistry. The artists are all established professionals within the international music industry, but a commonality identified among them is that their significant breakthrough was through strategic branding or a rebranding process. Since the case artist aims to create a long-lasting and sustainable global career, this research serves as a foundation for identifying best practices relevant to long-term brand development in the music industry.

Since the case artist AE does not have any music out, nor a personal brand created yet, this benchmark research is based on observation rather than comparison. Observation is especially used in qualitative and highly exploratory studies. Observation as a data collection methodology has its roots in sociology but can be usefully adopted in the means of marketing, and it may provide unique first-hand information relying on the researcher's senses. When investigating a phenomenon, observing allows the freedom to explore it in its natural setting, and it's a useful technique when the information and needed data are otherwise inhibited from the researcher. It provides reliable data and relies on a systematic

process of recording without interacting directly with the subject of the research. (Satapathy, 2019.)

Boote and Mathews (n.d) state the four criteria when observation can be utilized as a market research technique. The phenomenon must be easily observable; it has to be a social process or a mass activity, the subject that is investigated must occur on a subconscious level, and the subject is unable to communicate directly with the researcher. In general, branding is usually easily observable, and the artists' part of this benchmark study has a large fan base and has launched some great mass activity around their being and music. Branding is something that happens rather on the minds of people, and to understand why it works, it must be investigated. Moreover, these successful artists are less or more impossible to reach to find answers regarding their branding. (Boote & Mathews, n.d.)

5.2 Sabrina Carpenter

Sabrina Carpenter's brand evolution is a great example of her continuous growth as an artist and strategic adaptation to trends, aiming to create long-term success while still staying authentic. Before her first breakthrough with *Emails I Can't Send* album and her major global breakthrough with the *Short n' Sweet* album, she had released five albums, and moreover, she's also been known as an actress. Throughout the years, Sabrina has delivered multiple certifications, earning anthems and sold-out concerts globally, and currently, she's listed in the top 20 artists in the world by Spotify (Carpenter, n.d.). Despite a long career in the industry, the rebranding process plays a significant role in the success of the artist, so let's dive deep into the current brand of Sabrina Carpenter, which started to form already during her previous project *Emails I Can't Send*, but strengthened during *Short n' Sweet*.

Figure 4 presents two pages of Sabrina Carpenter's official website, which overall has a vintage retro aesthetic with several symbols and humorous slogans very typical for her brand, including heart shapes, retro fonts, and polished references with a twinkle in the corner of an eye. The website overall summarizes the core themes in Sabrina's brand, including early 2000s aesthetics with sweet pastel

colours, glamorizing vintage, embracing femininity, and a sophisticated but humorous essence, which can also be well heard in her music and lyrics.



Figure 4. Official Website of Sabrina Carpenter (Carpenter, n.d.)

When taking a look at figure 5, which visualizes the official Short n' Sweet Tour poster and pictures from the tour live, for her, the aesthetics and visuals of Sabrina Carpenter are quickly noticed. Since the researcher was witnessing the tour live, for her, the visuals and interaction with the audience were truly aligned with the overall idea and the gut feeling of the artist. As seen in the picture in the middle, the tour was embracing early 2000s retro aesthetics and glamorous vintage. On the right, the girlhood is being embraced, and in the poster, there are familiar symbols as a heart logo and a kiss mark, with light colors and a sweet, perfectly finished look.



Figure 5. Official tour poster & Instagram posts by Sabrina Carpenter (IG @sabinacarpenter 2024-2025)

In figure 6 there are three images from the Short n' Sweet Tour, and they visually present her evolved brand identity and align with her online presence. Feminine elements, intentional glamour, and hyper-femininity with a playful touch. The glitter, heart shapes, and retro silhouettes merge all with Sabrina's cohesive semiotics consistently and align with the early 2000s nostalgia with a glamorous look. Taking into note Sabrina's history, the theatrical setups are a natural extension to embrace her role as an actress. As in her stage performance and lyrical expression, there are layers of satire and sensuality that align perfectly with her brand narrative and feel authentic.

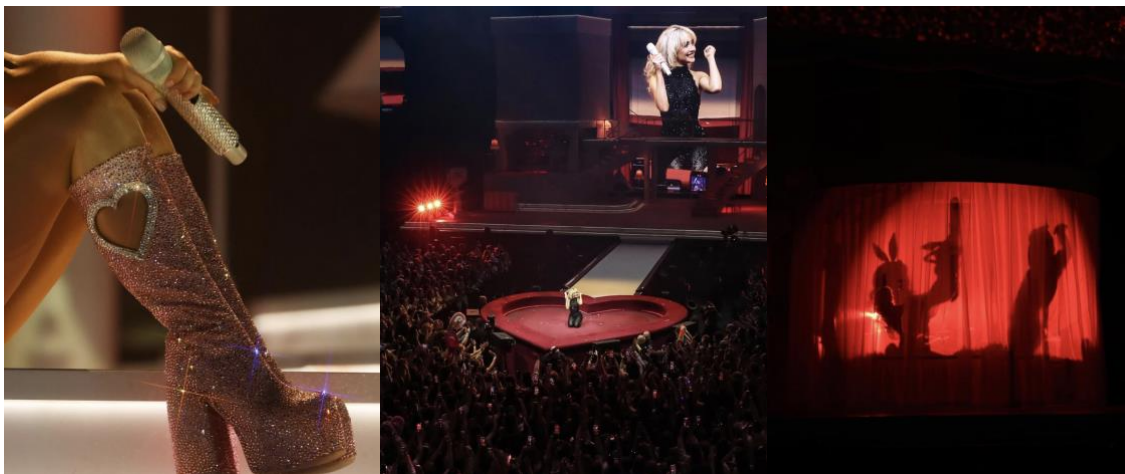


Figure 6. Instagram posts by Sabrina Carpenter (IG @sabinacarpenter 2024-2025)

Figure 7 presents the well-finished signature look of Sabrina Carpenter, she has become especially a hairstyle icon with the blonde wavy hair and curtain bangs. Moreover, in each picture, she's wearing sparkly, feminine clothes, balancing her sweetness with glamour and femininity. Again, the looks are aligning with her brand in all other platforms, embracing the early 2000s and vintage-inspired, but intentionally curated to reflect her version of femininity these days. Her signature look echoes boldness and mysterious charm from vintage Hollywood with a modern and trendy appearance. When taking a look through her socials, she is staying very true and consistent with her look, which strengthens the idea of her to anyone who doesn't even listen to her music.

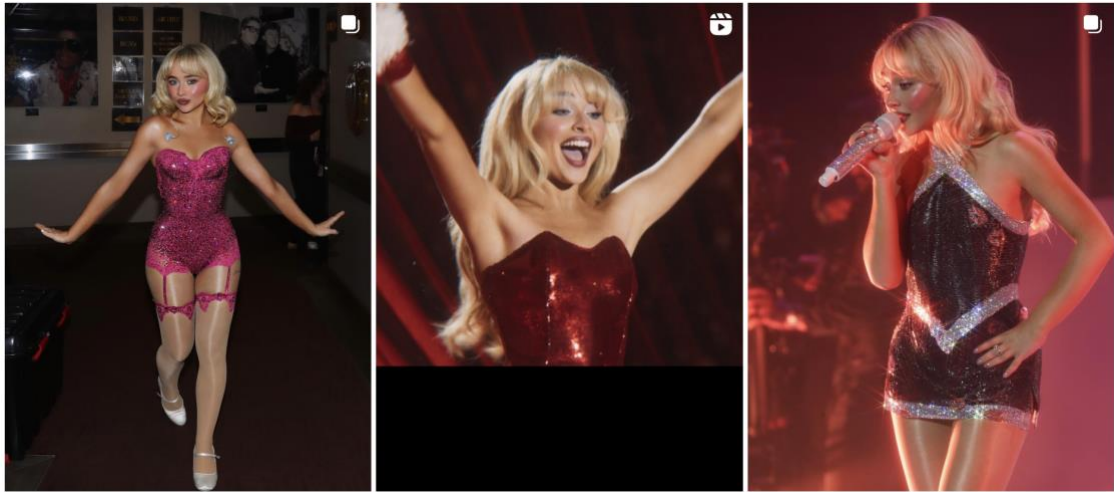


Figure 7. Instagram posts by Sabrina Carpenter (IG @sabinacarpenter 2024)

In figure 8, there are a few takes from the star's TikTok page, which is seemingly bringing out her playfulness and irony. She's staying true to her signature look, but gives the audience a more authentic part of herself. Her communication often happens through a light essence and playful sensuality.

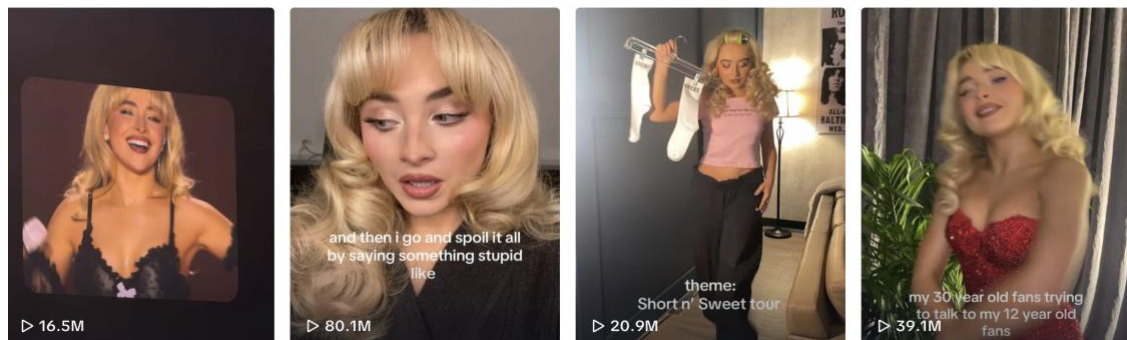


Figure 8. TikTok posts by Sabrina Carpenter (TikTok @sabinacarpenter 2024)

In conclusion, Sabrina Carpenter has succeeded in evolving a brand that can not be unrecognized globally. She's consistently maintaining her presence to be perceived as sweet, playful, and sensual with charm, and she is intentionally including the themes in everything she does – in other words, she is intentionally creating her presence around her best, authentic qualities. Her brand is significantly consistent across platforms, visuals, and collaborations, and in everything, she maintains the polished vintage and early 2000s-inspired style.

5.3 Chappell Roan

Chappell Roan is known for her honesty, colors, sex positivity, and bold melodies. She celebrates queerness and has mentioned that her debut and breakthrough album, *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess*, is about the birth of her queerness. Due to the release of her debut studio album in 2023, she rose to international stardom and has been quickly extending her passionate fan community and proving her value in the music business. (Universal Music Group, n.d.) Currently, according to Spotify, Chappell Roan is positioned as the #68 most listened to artist in the world (Spotify, n.d.).

Figure 9 shows Chappell's signature fashion and style with bold white makeup and unexpected fashion choices on a red carpet. Chappell has mentioned on her social media, the "clown-style" makeup is a kickback for bullies and has made that her signature look. The colors and shapes she likes to use are fierce and have contrast, but highlight her feminine features.

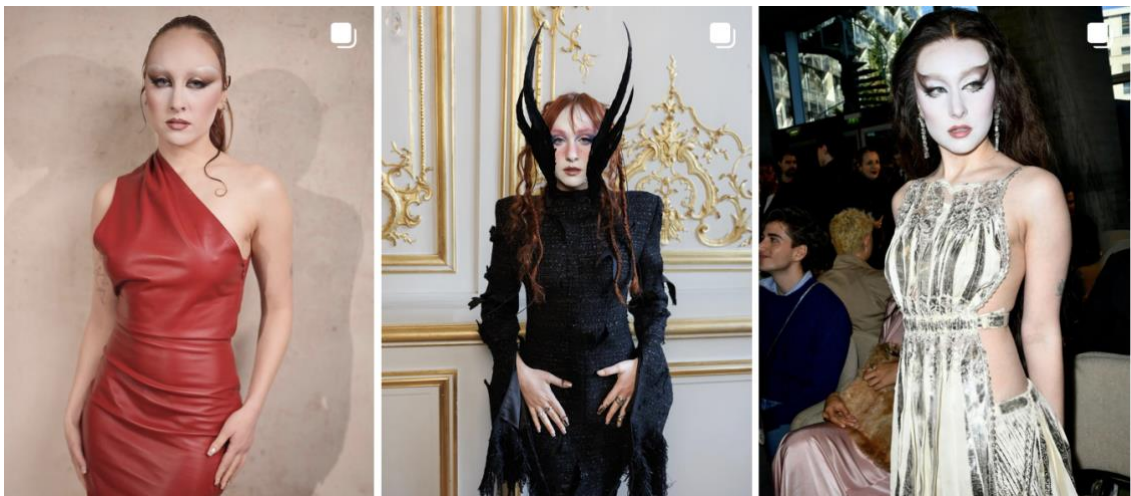


Figure 9. Instagram posts by Chappell Roan (IG @chappellroan 2025)

In figure 10, there are screenshots from her Instagram page to present her performing and stage looks, which are known to be colorful, glittery, and surprising. These looks communicate her strong persona and express her multidimensionality as a pop artist. The looks are connected to the drag and queer-culture, which is also heard in her musical lyrics, and it seems like her mission is to intensify the vision and message of her music. In all three images,

her style is close to theatrical and favors bold and almost fantasy-based performance identity. She embraces playfulness, glamour, and vibrant elements to exaggerate her brand alignment.



Figure 10. Instagram posts by Chappell Roan (IG @chappellroan 2024)

Figure 11 presents Chappell's Pink Pony Club live performance, and the fantasy-driven look summarizes the heart of her brand: storytelling, self-expression, drag culture, and a theatrical fantasy world built around her. The outfit she's wearing has features from a burlesque-inspired look, and she has decorated the cowboy hat, which has evolved to become her trademark, with pink feathers to embrace the message of the song. Pink Pony Club is a song written about how a small-town girl from Willard feels belonging to a West Hollywood go-go bar (Universal Music Group, n.d). The performance is an important part of Roan's visual storytelling as an artist and part of her spark-ly queer universe. The large pink pony is celebrating the childhood icons and represents the escape allowing the joy from Chappell's queer identity. She has mentioned that through her music and performances, she wants to honor her "inner child" and prove she deserves all the joy and celebration as a person. (Universal Music Group, n.d). The cowboy dancers with clown-inspired makeup seem to embrace gender fluidity and strengthen the picture of her overall brand with a white makeup look, and give back to those who bullied her in childhood. Chappell Roan uses every detail to position her as the icon of queerness.



Figure 11. Chappell Roan - Pink Pony Club (Live From The 67th Grammy Awards) (Roan, 2025)

Figure 12 represents Chappell's iconic performance at MTV's VMA gala in 2024. While Pink Pony Club is bringing out her queer identity and the sparkly, colorful universe – this particular performance is embracing the bold and fierce side of her. Good Luck, Babe! the song contains a lot of bitterness, exploring rejection and empowerment, which Chappell is messaging in the performance. The metallic harness costumes and a burning castle in the background deliver a powerful message of boundaries and emotional defense. This proves again Roan's theatrical self-expression and vast creativity in building a whole universe around her. She is maintaining the consistent themes around em-powerment, queer visibility, emotional realness and theatrical storytelling.



Figure 12. Chappell Roan - "Good Luck, Babe!" (Live From The 2024 MTV VMAs) (Roan, 2024)

Besides the theatrical expression, she is stressing honesty and vulnerability, and in figure 13, it can be assumed that behind all the costumes and make-up, Chappell Roan is just another human being, who aims to recall it in the middle of celebrityness and fame. Chappell Roan has mentioned *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess* -album to be about the birth of her queerness, or at least accepting it and honoring herself as a person (Universal Music Group, n.d.). By revealing her vulnerability, it makes it easier to identify with her, and it brings her real self to reality from Chappell Roan's fantasy universe.



Figure 13. Chappell Roan - *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess* (Official Album Trailer) (Roan, 2023)

Overall, Chappell Roan's brand is intense and effective; she emphasizes dramatically the themes important to her and makes them visible in her presence and actions. Chappell is intentional with her looks, and every performance expands or strengthens the world around her artistic identity. She has a strong and loud message on celebrating queerness and accepting people as they are, and respecting boundaries and privacy regardless of the status of a person.

5.4 Billie Eilish

Billie Eilish has been in the spotlight since her early teenage years when her *Ocean Eyes* went viral on SoundCloud in 2015 (Billboard, n.d.) and has emerged as one of the major artists of the 21st century (Spotify, n.d.). With her music, she has been acclaimed for global recognition and “made history as the youngest artist to receive nominations and win in all the major GRAMMY categories” (Spotify, n.d.). She’s also the youngest artist ever to win two Academy Awards, from both *No Time To Die*, the James Bond theme song in 2022, and 2023, *What Was I Made For?* -the theme song from the *Barbie* movie. Currently, she is the fourth most-streamed artist in the world (Spotify, n.d.).

In figure 14, there’s a screenshot from Billie’s official music video for *Ocean Eyes* from 2014, which displays the feeling of the song in a very minimalistic way with even slightly eerie details. Since the beginning of her career, Billie has expressed herself in a very grounded and authentic way, centering her unique talent and music.



Figure 14. Billie Eilish - *Ocean Eyes* (Official Music Video) (Eilish, 2016)

Figure 15 is a screenshot from Billie Eilish’s performance in The iHeartRadio Music Awards, and the aesthetics and setup are a very typical one for Billie. The energy is calming, simple, and the focus is on the music and in her captivating

voice. Billie's brother Finneas often plays guitar and sings the backing vocals in her performances.



Figure 15. Billie Eilish - WILDFLOWER (Live From The iHeartRadio Music Awards, 2025) (Eilish, 2025)

Another performance is visualized in figure 16, which is a screenshot from Billie Eilish's performance at the Grammy gala in 2025. The background visuals are very down-to-earth, as well as the outfits of the band members and the artist herself. This performance style aligns well with her original style and gives the music itself a lot of room to be centered. Billie Eilish is not known for theatrical performances or complicated looks, but rather for grounded and simple setups. On the left of the stage, there were changing pictures from her childhood, which intensifies the message of the song and the emotional side of Billie.

Billie is wearing an oversized T-shirt, baggy jeans, and a cap, all have become her trademark style. She has opened up about how she doesn't want people to sexualize or judge her as a young female artist and has always seemingly appreciated comfort and wears clothes in which she feels confident and safe. Her femininity and sexuality have been publicly questioned since she was a teenager, but later she has mentioned she has never felt feminine, but her sexuality is no one's business but hers. (Dailey, 2023)



Figure 16. Billie Eilish - BIRDS OF A FEATHER (Live From The GRAMMYs 2025) (Eilish, 2025)

In figure 17, there are screenshots from three typical posts she has on her TikTok channel. She is being very natural and authentic on her TikTok and likes to present her talent and parts of the music creation process. Her presence radiates very confident energy, but in a grounded and humble way, and she often directs the attention to something else than herself.

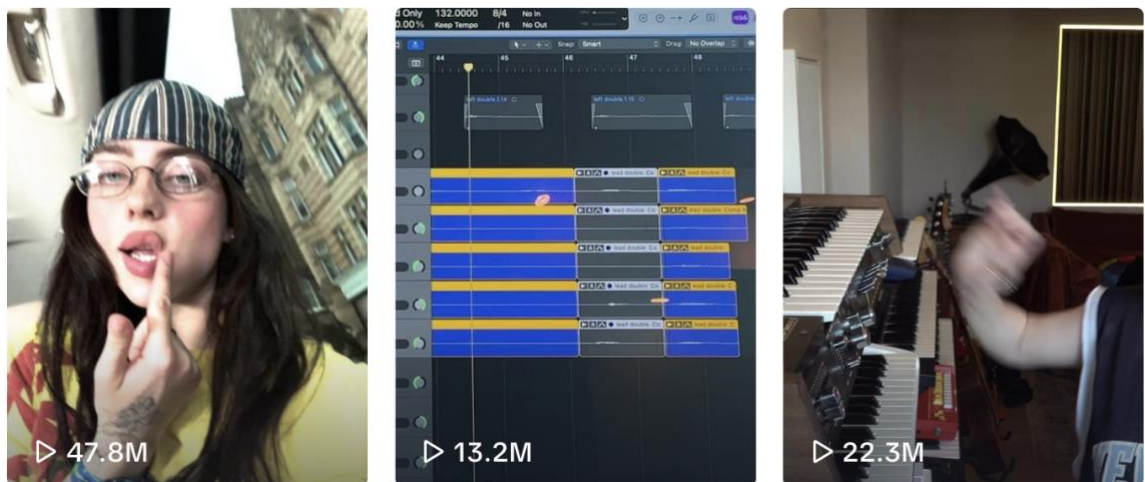


Figure 17. TikTok posts by Billie Eilish (TikTok @billieeilish 2024-2025)

In figure 18, there are three powerful images capturing themes from her identity: authenticity, talent, comfort, and connection. Although Billie's music leans more on the soft side, there is a dark and edgy contrast, and her songs have powerful

messages, for example, about identity and mental health. The fire elements intensify her rebellion and raw power in her talent. The picture in the middle captures the genuine connection and authenticity rather than a polished celebrity. She is rather vulnerable and closer to her fans than distant. The third picture captures Billie wearing her signature baggy clothing and facing away from the camera, and potentially emphasizing the performance of the message rather than herself.

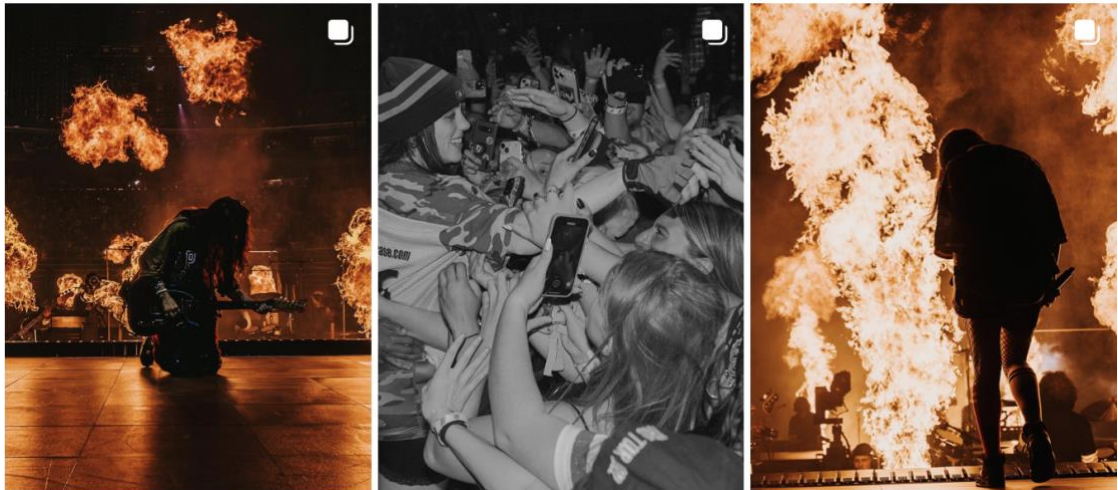


Figure 18. Instagram posts by Billie Eilish (IG @billieeilish 2025)

Figure 19 captures Billie first in a heartfelt moment with her brother Finneas, celebrating historical success. While Billie stays authentic to her androgynous style, the picture messages Billie's family-centered personal life and authenticity in emotion. Rather than focusing on mainstream validation, she strongly centers her roots in collaboration and shows gratitude openly.

The picture in the middle is potentially just a picture of her style without any deeper meaning, but since she has a background of rejecting of sexualization of female artists and embracing comfort in clothing – the anonymous style is a reflection to her playfulness with visibility and shows she is in control how much of herself she reveals. This may also communicate a message that she's just another girl with normal problems and making it easier to identify with among the fans.

The third image is where Billie is sitting on a red carpet wearing again her very signature style – she embraces the youth culture and fights against the

glamourization of celebrities. Her hair is colored with contrast, which is also typical for her style, to change her hairstyle often, as she wants, and not follow the traditional trends.



Figure 19. Instagram posts by Billie Eilish (IG @billieeilish 2024-2025)

In conclusion, Billie Eilish is a globally recognized artist who owns her space, and her unique combination of soft pop and edgy features seals her authentic self in her music, which is strongly focused on everything she does. Her energy is humble and grounded, which makes her easily relatable. Her brand blends deep emotional authenticity, edgy, mysterious core, comfort & anti-glam, talent, and rebellion. She consistently embraces bold self-expression without theatrical additions, but with her voice and musical expression. She is consistent and true to her style and has become a style icon among the youth, and encourages people to not care what others think but rather follow their inner intuition.

5.5 Methodology

In the benchmark research, the writer utilised a qualitative method to analyze the personal branding strategies of pop artists. The systematic comparison in this context refers to the selected artists' brand identities, visual presentation, and communication strategies across platforms. The aim was to identify best practices and adaptable insights for other artists seeking to build an authentic and successful brand. The artists were selected for this benchmark study based on their success in personal brand development, consistency across platforms,

ongoing engagement in the global music industry, and relevance to the themes central to this thesis as authenticity, identity, and connection.

The data was collected from official websites and tour materials, social media, live performances and official music videos, and other visual elements as album artworks. Primary data was collected in the form of screenshots with a focus on visuals, semiotic elements, and thematic consistencies. The analysis was done through a semiotic and aesthetic lens, examining how each artist expresses their identity. The key themes were visual identity, personal narrative, consistency, self-expression, engagement strategies, and authenticity.

Based on the study's focus themes, it involves multiple content sources and contextualises the previous theoretical framework on branding, enhancing the reliability. It supports the development of musicians seeking to cultivate a strong and lasting personal brand in today's highly competitive digital music landscape.

5.6 Summary

When exploring these three different artists, there are certain core messages that each one embraces and stresses in their artistry. All of them celebrate authenticity from their subjective but easily identifiable perspective and empower their audiences. Sabrina Carpenter embraces femininity in a very vintage and romantic style, Chappell Roan celebrates and speaks for queerness, and Billie Eilish rejects presumptions and sexualization of female artists. Even with light external observation, the key elements are easily found, and the personality, style, aesthetics, and themes can be identified.

By comparing the theoretical part of this thesis and the benchmark analysis, it can be noticed that even with light external observation, the brands of these artists are shaped strongly and effectively. Regardless of their very unique personalities, these artist also have common features which have contributed to their success. All three have a strong core identity which are rooted in authenticity and their personal story. They have personal, emotional honesty and depth in their characteristics. Sabrina Carpenter, Chappell Roan, and Billie Eilish all embrace a universally resonating self-expression style, led with intentional

storytelling and individuality. Besides their aesthetics, their brands are connected to who they identify as people, and have evolved with their career steps.

Around their aesthetics, they've also developed and created visual worlds that consistently align with their music and messages. The consistency in visuals, semiotics, and design creates cohesion and recognizability and allows their brand to be described easily with only one sentence. Sabrina Carpenter is the vintage and retro-influenced pop princess with glamour, highlighting modern pop sound and irony. Whilst, Chappell Roan identifies as a theatrical and dramatic emerging queer pop icon, who thrives with vibrant performance art and strong visual storytelling. Billie Eilish instead is grounded in vulnerability, contrast, and a minimalistic but deeply emotional and powerful performance.

In addition to their visual identities, they've all understood the cultural age, they speak to it, and offer a narrative for their audience that people can align with and be part of a large community. Building a community around a brand is not only artistic but rather strategic, which proves these artists have found their target audience, successfully resonates among them, and fosters trust both intentionally but also authentically. Moreover, all these artists have had evolution through their journey; they've changed either their sound, image, or looks while maturing, which continuously supports the reinvention of the brand and artistry.

Moreover, these artists' brands go far beyond the surface. Sabrina, Chappell, and Billie are all embracing their womanhood from very different perspectives, yet in a way, what is needed in the modern world – to make people realize, being a woman can be anything and is completely self-defined, regardless of the standards and stereotypes. Sabrina overemphasizes femininity, while Chappell highlights queerness, and Billie does not identify herself as a girly girl. All of them present multi-dimensional and complex versions of femininity, and they are using pop music as a communication language so everyone understands.

5.7 What emerging artists could learn?

For emerging artists, there are powerful lessons that can be learned and adapted to their branding process. While all these artists center their product, they are proving that effective branding takes time, but is crucial when aiming for financial success in as competitive industry as the music industry. While stressing authenticity, these artists have defined their version of identity in which they shine and highlight their best qualities. This does not mean the identity must be overly polished, but unapologetically creating a space based on the subjective truth through the artistry.

By understanding the pop culture, adapting and challenging it through a personal lens can create an extreme opportunity for a platform and visibility. Being strategic does not mean the artist must lose their soul or authenticity – it rather shows the artist's capability to bend rules and layer pop-cultural meaning into art. As the Artist Branding Onion model suggests, artistry is a continuous process and evolves over time, so welcoming growth and shifts deepens the connection and interaction between audience and fans. It is important to keep in mind that authenticity always wins in the long term, as seen with these successful artists above, who have established their unique journey into an effective brand.

When using music as a pathway for connection, emotions are content, and the strongest artistic currency is to lead with what genuinely matters, which may take place through various ways. Performance and the persona can be utilised as a statement or a theatrical way to let the artistry flow, and having a strong visual identity strengthens the message. Staying consistent and telling the story cohesively through all areas of the Artist Branding Onion model makes the project more easily memorable and professional.

6 CRAFTING INITIAL BRAND STRATEGY FOR AE

The last chapter before the overall conclusion focuses on establishing a unique and continuous brand for the case artist AE by utilising the theoretical phase, the Artist Branding Onion model, and previous benchmark research. The aim is to support her early stages as an artist and encourage AE's vision to become stronger. It's crucial to keep in mind that this initial brand idea is crafted from the vision of the case artist and how she manifests her brand.

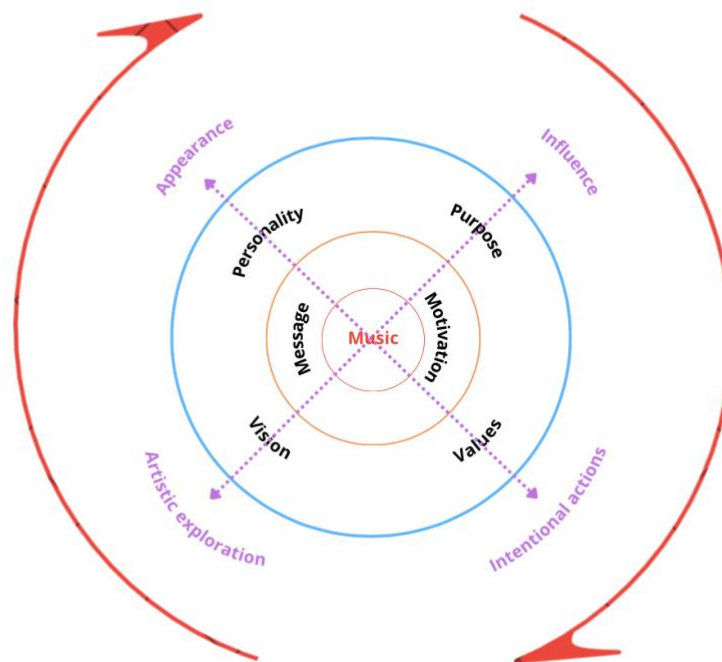


Figure 20. Artist Branding Onion model, enhanced version.

6.1 The case artist AE

AE is a 25-year-old girl from Finland who aspires to have a long-lasting international career in music. Her passion for music began from a very early age when she started piano lessons at the age of four. Later, the piano played a significant role in her artistic journey as a safe environment to let emotions flow. Regardless, she does not have any music out yet, but the dream to be an artist has been in her soul since childhood.

She describes her lyrics as having raw authenticity and honesty – the world is not polished, so why should an artist be? In the future, she does not want her music to be tied to one genre or even language but rather be guided by the universe and energies around her. After all, she wants her music to have a spectrum with the message, sound, and emotional vibe.

6.1.1 Message

AE's core message has clarified over time as what she has experienced as a person, and through her music, she aims to communicate that all emotions are valid and one does not cancel another; it is natural for humans to have complexity. She aims to spread awareness of mental health issues and create more understanding and empathy among humanity since we've reached a scary level of glamorising individualism as a society. She wants to use her platform to speak up for women and LGBTQ+ rights and equality. In conclusion, there are three major themes visible: emotional complexity, mental health, and equal rights.

6.1.2 Motivation

The motivation for AE comes from within. She has struggled with a challenging emotional world since childhood and mental health issues and wishes to make someone else's life even a little bit better through her music. Moreover, her desire for justice and equal rights comes from seeing how unfair or privileged life can be. She also wants to prove herself to be worth at least trying to pursue her dream career and give peer support for people fighting with similar themes.

6.1.3 Core values

The core values present the why behind her presence and give depth to her brand when established. Core values can also be thought of as the foundation for other areas to align with. AE values authenticity and encourages herself and others to love and accept themselves despite their insecurities. She admires people with unique styles and who are being unapologetically themselves. Her core values lie in equality, empathy, understanding, and open conversation, love, and peace.

Moreover, she values feminine empowerment, intelligence, emotional transparency, and self-expression.

These values will not only shape her songwriting and performance style but also her future visual branding, social media presence, and the way she connects with her listeners. By staying true to her beliefs, AE aims to build a long-lasting artist brand that resonates deeply with her audiences and maintains its relevance.

6.1.4 Purpose

AE's purpose is to create a safe community to feel and explore emotions and identity without judgment and fear of misunderstanding. She wants people to feel validated and seen. She wants to remind even things have their contrast, they may include various shades, and not everything is black and white. Her purpose is to spread kindness, love, and empathy among people to make the world even a little bit safer.

6.1.5 Vision & Mission

AE's vision is to connect people through shared experiences and emotions, especially in the means of self, growth, fears, complexity, heartbreak, and collective issues regarding equal rights. With her music, she aims to tell resonating stories and give powerful statements, recall humanity, validate feelings, and shine light in moments of desperation. She wants to turn her personal woman rage into a collective power to make a change and create more collective understanding towards each other with peaceful matters through love and empathy. She aspires to encourage people to create and release, explore to learn, and finally, adapt and repeat. Moreover, she wants to play with her femininity and embrace vintage romance.

Since AE comes from a very small town in Finland, she also wants to embrace her roots as a girl from the countryside with big dreams, and that anything is possible if you set your mind to it with love, intentional actions, and consistency.

AE's mission is to create music that empowers through vulnerability and honesty and makes people feel seen, included, and validated. By sharing personal stories, she wants to create a safe space for the audience, and speak up for those who can't, and make people open to new perspectives and growth.

6.1.6 Personality

Besides the heavy and important message, AE aims to communicate her vision through a confident, soft, feminine, and sensitive personality with a spark of boldness, sarcasm, and humour. She wants to be serious and playful without one cancelling the other, and being unapologetically herself. Her personality has a large spectrum, and she wants to show that a woman can be various things at the same time – a woman does not have to fit into a certain idea or a box.

6.1.7 Appearance and intentional actions

The appearance, visual identity, and intentional consistency in actions create a cohesive look and make people remember the brand more easily. Since AE's personality and style have a large spectrum, her appearance is logically surprising and variable. From the perspective of branding, she could add certain pieces of signature clothing and semiotics to create consistency, and to define a color palette to follow. AE has always loved clothes and creating new combinations, and her style is inspired by the pop icons Madonna and Lady Gaga. It's difficult to define her visual identity yet, but she wishes to bring the bold and explorative side of her out more in her presence. AE also aims to embrace her femininity and insecurities.

To stress her message through her appearance and actions, she must operate intentionally and highlight the core value themes in her music and lyrics, visual aesthetics, public behaviour and presence, social media visibility, and performances. AE's values should be visible in everything she does.

6.1.8 Artistic exploration and influence

AE can strategically use her artistic exploration and influence to build a powerful, authentic, and multidimensional artist brand that resonates with audiences. AE's openness about emotional complexity could become her core artistic currency; by this, she can build deep connections and explore vulnerability with the courage to become an artist for healing and understanding. She can share behind-the-scenes reflections and open up about personal stories in her lyrics to normalize complex emotional experiences.

Her commitment to equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and mental health positions her as a socially conscious voice in pop culture to strengthen the purpose of her artistry. She can collaborate with like-minded organizations and people and use her platform to raise awareness on the themes. She can combine the genre fluidity and creative freedom with the message of equality and frame her artistry as music led by emotion, not by category, still maintaining a cohesive story.

AE's curiosity in femininity, woman rage, softness, and romance creates a rich aesthetic world and the possibility to take influence from history and pop culture icons. The spectrum allows her to embrace duality in being a woman. For her purpose of creating a safe emotional community, she can implement safe-space conversations around her art and build a visual world that evokes honesty and empathy.

To create consistency in the artistic exploration, she must align intentional actions with the message to make an impact. AE could regularly be vocal about turning insecurities into strengths and document real life and struggles. By reflecting her values in communication and language, she can create credibility and be more memorable.

6.2 SWOT analysis for AE

To evaluate the possible strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, here's a short SWOT analysis of the case artist AE. Her biggest strength is the authentic emotional expression that creates a strong connection, moreover, she

has a strongly purpose-driven vision, and her core values align with current cultural conversations. Her personality can offer relatable complexity, and her vulnerability can be easily relatable. However, genre fluidity can occur as freedom to explore and foster creative evolution; it can also appear as a weakness, especially at the beginning of a career. Even though she has a clear vision and has been working on her music, there's no music released yet, and the artistic output may be found only by creating. Her messaging is also quite broad, so with a more refined focus, it might be easier to position her in the market early on.

Besides the strengths and weaknesses, there are several opportunities and threats identified. AE has an opportunity to build a niche and a unique community around authenticity and a safe space. With the genre fluidity, she can play with visual archetypes and blend fashion choices to explore the visual identity. Through social media, she can use storytelling and vulnerable content to grow organically and build trust among the audience. Since differentiation is the key to the competitive industry, AE's threat is to drown in the oversaturation of the indie pop scene. Also, she must be mindful of mental health vulnerability since emotional openness can be powerful, but also draining without any support or boundaries. The large spectrum in visual aesthetics can also be a high risk of her brand's inconsistency if it's not strategically curated and planned.

6.3 Brand positioning reflection

To help clarify AE's positioning and strategy for the future within the music industry, here are key insights of the positioning reflection. AE's target audience will be people who seek emotional connection through music and fans of genre-fluid pop with artistic authenticity. These kinds of fan communities have formed, for example, around Lana Del Rey, Lorde, Sabrina Carpenter, and Lady Gaga. AE's message speaks to socially conscious identity-seeking individuals who value depth and empowerment. AE values emotional transparency, confidence, and softness with vulnerability and beauty. These themes portray her as a bold yet sensitive Finnish artist who empowers emotional exploration through honesty and self-expression.

To achieve the position and strategic objectives, AE must start to release her authentic, story-driven music and maintain a strong visual identity. She must stay consistent with her vision and showcase the elements she aims to communicate by using symbolic branding to be memorable. Through presence and performances, she has to message and cultivate the safe emotional space she wishes to be able to create to spread understanding and empathy.

Although AE is still emerging and hasn't taken any actual steps towards her career yet, her story and values offer a strong potential for future recognition if communicated consistently. The **brand associations** she aims to reach are to be associated with themes such as emotionally honest, feminist, genre-fluid, sensitive yet strong, playful, and confident. **Brand perception** and **equity** are currently difficult to define since she has not released music yet. Furthermore, **loyalty** can grow through sharing personal stories, engaging with fans, promoting, and providing empowerment and equality-related content. As differentiation is a huge challenge in the saturated field, to stand out, AE must lean into her duality and authentic emotional honesty to deeply resonate in today's modern pop culture.

6.4 AE's artistic development

According to Cari Cole's (2025) five phases of artist development AE is between the first and the second phases. She has a strong vision of her identity, values, and message, but also a foundation in songwriting. To enter the next phase, she must work on her music and find the visual world and sonic direction for her artistry before her first releases. Through consistency, releases, and brand growth, she will reach phases four and five to test the branding and gain audience feedback.

6.5 Summary

This initial brand strategy is a valuable tool for AE as she prepares to launch her brand and release her debut music in the future. Her unique background, emotional authenticity, and purpose-driven artistry aimed to build a healing, empathetic community distinguish her from others. AE's ideal brand isn't about

perfection but about embracing humanity, emotional transparency, and raising awareness on social and mental health issues.

With the right marketing and storytelling strategy, her Nordic roots and global outlook offer a refreshing perspective on the global music scene. If AE stays true to her core values and consistently reflects them across her visuals, music, and public presence, she has the potential to become a genre-fluid, emotionally resonant voice in modern pop culture.

However, as AE is still in the early phases of development, her immediate focus should be on releasing music, refining her visual and sonic identity, and engaging with her audience to test and grow her brand. While her broad message and genre fluidity may pose initial branding challenges, they also allow for creative freedom and the chance to build a distinct, loyal community around authenticity and emotional connection. With intentional actions and strategic consistency, AE can turn her vision into a transformative, and inspiring force in the industry.

7 CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The objective of this thesis was to create a brand strategy and identity foundation for the case artist AE to support her early steps in her artistic career and research how to build a unique and continuous artist brand.

The literature research considered themes around branding in the music industry and the necessary steps for building a personal brand as an artist. Moreover, benchmarking research was included to observe and learn from successful global artists about their branding. The main question of this thesis was *“How to create a unique and sustainable artist brand?”*, which was answered throughout the paper. In conclusion, creating a unique and sustainable brand requires deep self-awareness, clarity of vision and purpose, and the courage to be consistent with expressing it authentically. To ensure its longevity, branding requires long-term commitment and intentional evolution, which includes crafting a recognizable emotional, visual, and sonic identity that reflects the story, message, and values.

The sub-questions of this thesis were *“What is the meaning of branding in the music industry?”* and *“What can be learned from other artists and how to adapt resonating themes into a brand identity?”*, which were answered in chapter **3.1 Why branding matters for artists?** And in the **benchmarking research**. To summarize the findings, branding allows artists to highlight their desired features and strengthen the message they aim to communicate. Moreover, branding supports achieving financial success and differentiates the artist in a saturated industry.

By observing globally successful artists and their brands, a brand identity is a cohesive entity combining authentic self and mission with the product, and music, and creating a whole visual world around the artistry. The hardest challenge may be to stay strategic without losing the soul, but when balancing with the artistic expression and strategic identity, it can bridge the gap between the artist’s internal world and the audience’s experience, creating new opportunities and strengthening the position in the market. Branding is a continuously evolving process, and a clear identity does not limit but gives the freedom to explore artistry within the universe guided by the brand strategy. With strategic

adaptation, re-evaluation, and invention, it's easier to keep up with the modern pop-culture trends to keep the brand interesting and create longevity.

The recommendation for AE and other emerging artists who are planning to pursue their careers in the field of music is to find their soul, message, and vision in music and stay consistent. Usually, the product comes first and the brand evolves naturally around it, but if the vision and purpose are clear, it can be easier to start building a brand identity and artistic self around it by utilising different methods, as in this thesis, the Artist Brandind Onion model.

In the future, when AE starts releasing her music, whether as an independent artist or with a label, she can create a marketing strategy aligning with the brand itself, or in another case, introduce herself to possible collaborators with a short summary of the initial brand strategy.

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