





# Personal Branding in the Music Industry to Achieve Internationalization

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**Abstract.** Building a musician's personal brand on social networks has become important in recent years, since it allows them to stand out in an industry that is constantly changing. The digital revolution has allowed musicians to reach international audiences outside their country of origin. They employ strategies that allow their personal brand to be recognized and understood within different sociocultural contexts. This research explains how the construction of a musician's personal brand takes place to reach bigger audiences other than those in their country of origin. A qualitative content analysis of two singers' profiles on the social network TikTok is carried out: the American Conan Gray and the Scottish Lewis Capaldi. Using public data of TikTok video posts, the study is based on 329 posted between June 2022 to June 2023. For this study, we were taken as a sample just the video posts that exceeded ten million views. The findings show the importance of building an authentic personal brand that manages to connect with different audiences, through the promotion of a musician who is close to his followers. The study contributes to understanding how relevant is for a musician building a personal brand in social media.

**Keywords:** Personal brand building, personal branding, internationalization, music industry, authenticity, music, social networks.

## 1 Introduction

The digital revolution has driven the development of innovative business models, along with changes in consumption patterns. An example is the digital distribution of music, which has transformed the way in which users access each artist's content [1]. In this context, social networks play a crucial role in shaping artistic identity, allowing musicians to enhance the visibility of their personal brand in global markets [2]. In 2023, 64.4% of the world's population is an Internet user; likewise, 59.4% are active users of social networks, whereas 27% follow different accounts of music artists [3].

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the relationship between artists and their fans has strengthened due to new digital tools that enable their recognition within the music industry. Fans have a role in the development of promotional strategies in social networks, forming part of a global community in which they connect and share experiences

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P. C. López-López et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the International Conference on Communication and Applied Technologies 2024 (ICOMTA 2024)*, Atlantis Highlights in Social Sciences, Education and Humanities 28, [https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6463-596-6\\_48](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6463-596-6_48)

[4]. While there is no formula for achieving internationalization as an artist, new technologies have fueled expectations of democratization for production, distribution, marketing, and consumption within the music industry [5], thus giving artists the opportunity to manage their own path within the industry and being agents for change [6].

In this context, artists seek to build a connection with international audiences through online interactions [7]. Based on this idea, this paper aims to identify how an artist's personal brand is built in the process of internationalization. In this opportunity, we chose to analyze two musicians: the American singer-songwriter Conan Gray (24 years old) and the Scottish singer-songwriter Lewis Capaldi (26 years old) between June 2022 and June 2023, a period during which both artists released new albums.

The decision hinges on how effectively the artists utilizes the TikTok platform, their influence across diverse audiences, and their international success in recent years. This is underscored by their monthly listeners on Spotify, with both artists surpassing 25 million. Additionally, they boast over 7 million followers on Instagram and TikTok combined. This data was compiled as of November 2023.

Regarding Conan Lee Gray, known as Conan Gray, at the age of twelve he began to upload self-recorded videos on YouTube, in which he told everyday anecdotes, played the guitar or sang. In 2017, he released "Idle Tow," a song that led him to sign a contract with Republic Records in 2018. Conan Gray has managed to reach large audiences thanks to the internet as well as lyrics that connect with and are identifiable to a young audience [8]. On the other hand, Lewis Marc Capaldi, known as Lewis Capaldi, took his first steps in the world of music at the age of eleven, starting to play in different bars in his hometown. His recognition is due to his emotional music that can touch different generations. In 2017, Lewis Capaldi released "Bruises," a single that accumulated 28 million plays on Spotify, being the first artist without a label to reach more than 25 million plays. Soon after, in 2018, he signed a contract with Virgin EMI [9].

The musicians were selected as points of focus because both use digital platforms to connect with an audience beyond their country of origin and have been recognized internationally within the music industry since 2017. As of the year in which this work was written, 2023, both Conan Gray and Lewis Capaldi have managed to make a space for themselves in the music industry, counting with different nominations and awards. In this context, we ask ourselves: How does one build a musician's personal brand to achieve internationalization?

## 2 Theoretical frameworks

Personal branding has become relevant in the music industry. It was Peters (1997) who introduced the concept of personal or human brand, based on what differentiates a person from others and then giving value to this differentiation to communicate and sell it [10]. Thus, the personal brand is the image and perception that an individual creates and projects of himself, with the aim of establishing a solid and distinctive identity in a

given environment [11]. It also refers to establishing a self-image that can communicate a strong brand that highlights personal attributes, allowing an individual to be perceived positively in an established audience [11, 12, 13]

To build a personal brand in the digital world, tools are used to promote and disseminate the work of an artist [14, 15]. This construction is influenced by the strategic use of social networks and digital communication, to relate to different audiences and create a link with them [16, 17, 12, 18, 19]. After all, it is in these spaces where the new generations seek to be understood and to be part of a collective [19].

For artists, establishing a digital media brand rooted in authenticity is crucial. This identity enables meaningful connections with audiences, facilitating the dissemination of their content in a competitive landscape [20, 21, 22, 23]. Thus, authenticity refers to the relationship that exists between the perception that a celebrity behaves in accordance with his or her true self, i.e., being the same, where rarity and stability positively influence his or her recognition [24]. Authenticity is a prerequisite for gaining trust [25, 26, 27], where transparency, personal connection and sincerity in interactions in social networks are taken into account [26].

Moreover, authenticity is tied to the individual themselves, encompassing self-fulfillment and the creation of valuable content, while also addressing business expectations as an artist [26, 28, 20]. While traditional brands are often refined and then communicated, a personal brand is molded over time as a person changes, considering different audiences and markets [29]. Personal growth is essential to have an authentic personal brand [27]. Similarly, for a brand to be solid over time, it must be based on the values of the person, being able to improve in times of uncertainty, so that it speaks for itself [30]. In turn, it is important to mention that the personal brand can influence the perception of a musician as a cultural icon, which contributes to its construction [31, 32].

Personal brand management involves the creation and dissemination of relevant content, along with active interaction with followers and participation in online conversation [33]. Since musicians use social networks to promote their work, the interaction with their audience is part of the construction of a coherent and authentic image; this is in addition to the consolidation of a solid identity, where the values, music and personality of the artist are reflected [18, 31, 34, 34]. Therefore, to capture the audience, it is necessary to connect through narrative techniques such as humor or storytelling [35].

In the case of a musician/artist, their brand comes to reflect both their musical and creative style as well as their business and management skills. Therefore, they may adopt bohemian and/or entrepreneurial identities in their professional career, which may compete or coexist in the construction of their personal brand [36].

In the contemporary landscape, artists aspire to access new markets, viewing internationalization as the essential means to achieve this objective [37]. Internationalization

is analyzed from different perspectives; however, all agree that it is a process of expansion, which offers the opportunity to enter new markets and attract new audiences beyond the borders of a country [37, 38]. To this end, it is necessary to employ tools that allow content to be related to a certain topic, such as the use of hashtags to engage users in online conversation [39].

The connection between internationalization and a personal brand is given by the understanding of cultural or social codes in the personal sphere which can be shared [40]. Such codes, when used strategically, contribute to the construction of a robust personal brand that can impact international audiences through the transmission of trust, authority and knowledge in a specific field [26, 40].

Following digitization, internationalization processes have been transformed to facilitate communication, collaboration, and access to new markets [37, 41, 42]. Consequently, communication has become more relevant to the internationalization of cultural industries: such as film, music, art and literature [43]. Creativity and authentic identity are two relevant factors for their promotion, since creating a distinctive brand is necessary to attract global audiences [44, 45]. It is important to note that the global music industry is interconnected with each country's music scene. Consequently, internationalization has allowed various musical genres, performed by artists outside the Anglo-American markets, to gain prominence in the global music industry [46, 47].

### 3 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to gather data, focusing on documents and audiovisual materials for collection [48]. This data is analyzed through a qualitative content analysis, where the presence of themes, words, or concepts within a content and their meaning within a text are verified [49].

The analysis focuses on TikTok posts by the mentioned musical artists from June 2022 to June 2023, specifically those videos with over ten million views. During this period, singer, Conan Gray, posted a total of 56 videos, with only 9 having more than 10 million views. While singer, Lewis Capaldi, reached 273 videos during the same period, 35 of which reached more than 10 million views. Although Conan Gray did not upload the same number of videos as Lewis Capaldi, the number of videos that exceeded 10 million views are proportional. In the case of Conan Gray, 9 out of 56 (16.07%), while Lewis Capaldi managed to reach 35 out of 273 (12.82%).

The videos were organized according to the 12 categories of branded content in social networks proposed by Tafesse & Wien (2017), to understand the type of post that connects with an audience and helps to build a personal brand [50]. Conan Gray's and Lewis Capaldi's videos were classified according to the qualities which define these categories, based on the authors.

The 12 categories that were taken into consideration are emotional brand posts, functional brand post, educational brand post, brand resonance, experimental brand post, current event, personal brand posts, employee brand posts, brand community, costumer relationship, cause-related brand posts and sales promotion. After differentiating the content, it was decided to exclude four of the twelve categories, which are functional brand posts, educational brand posts, employee brand posts and cause-related brand posts, since such content was not identified in the analyzed sample.

Despite this framework is focused on traditional brands, it is considered relevant to apply it to each artist's brand, to identify whether the same content patterns applied by traditional brands are relevant for a personal brand. It should be noted that, each video produced by musicians can only be present in one category, for the purpose of not generating confusing results.

## 4 Results and Discussion

The videos published by the musicians vary according to intention, tone, and content. It could be seen that they appeal to the user's feelings or reason, seeking to generate some reaction or connection. Additionally, it was identified that some posts follow existing trends in the social network at the time of publication, while others are more generic in nature, i.e., they do not follow any trend.

Additionally, it was also visualized that they interact with fans by responding to comments or creating content based on the contributions of other users. Both artists maintain a discourse that allows their followers to be close to them. For his part, Conan Gray presents himself in social networks as someone sarcastic, melodramatic and sentimental. Meanwhile, Lewis Capaldi presents how he manages situations that surround him with humor. Lewis's search for a unique identity, by trying to go beyond his image as an artist, helps to put him in the spotlight [12]. According to the classification of Tafesse & Wien (2017) [50], the artists' content complies with the following categories.

**Table 1.** Videos according to type of content

| Category                | Conan Gray | Lewis Capaldi |
|-------------------------|------------|---------------|
| Emotional brand posts   | 11.11% (1) | 22.86% (8)    |
| Brand resonance         | 11.11% (1) | 20 % (7)      |
| Experimental brand post | 22.22% (2) | 8.57 % (3)    |
| Current event           |            | 2.86 % (1)    |
| Personal brand posts    | 33.33% (3) | 25.71 % (9)   |
| Brand community         | 11.11% (1) | 5.71% (2)     |
| Costumer relationship   | 11.11% (1) | 11.42 % (4)   |
| Sales promotion         |            | 2.86 % (1)    |

### 3.1 Emotional brand post

Emotional branded posts are aimed at evoking some kind of emotion in consumers to receive responses. In the case of users of the social network TikTok, this is seen through emotional language, an inspirational story or humor/trivia [50]. Attractive to "Generation Z" users, born between 1997 and 2012. This generation prioritize mental health, activism, flexibility, and inclusion, spending much of their time online and seamlessly blending digital and physical experiences. They are seeking to be understood and accompanied on the platform, these types of videos serve to relate more closely to the artist [19].

In the case of the artists analyzed, it could be evidenced that both choose to present videos that allow the audience to relate from the emotional side. An example of this is through establishing relationships with the artist's community, using codes that a fan will identify, giving rise to feel some kind of emotion, either positive or negative. In a video uploaded by Conan Gray<sup>1</sup>, the singer can be seen walking around with one of his songs in the background, to which he alludes and changes sweaters, along with the text: "Trying to prove to everyone that I got enough sweaters for December 3rd and I'm not all alone now."

This is associated with the lyrics of his song titled Heather, where the artist covers in his lyric's themes related to the feeling of being rejected by someone and seeing how he prefers to be with someone else. Demonstrating that part of the construction of the artist's personal brand is directly related to the artist's music [34]. In contrast, another characteristic representation in this type of video is manifested through those that allow a direct identification with the artist. A clear example is when the artist addresses everyday situations, such as the experience of going to the gym. In a video posted by Lewis Capaldi, it is observed how he lists everything he dislikes about the gym<sup>2</sup>.

Likewise, it has been noticed the inclusion of narratives where the artist adopts the role of a fan, using the lyrics of his songs to humorously recreate his admiration for Ed Sheeran<sup>3</sup>. This strategy generated repercussions by touching on a feeling and actions that any follower might have when trying to incorporate a celebrity into their life in a playful way. The artist's ability to humorously narrate his story not only entertains, but also encourages the creation of emotional connections [35].

### 3.2. Brand resonance

Brand resonance is present in that content generated to refer to the brand, through logos or elements present in a publication [50]. Although in the videos of the artists it is not

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@conangray/video/7172629158156045610>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@lewiscapaldi/video/7166303865632017670>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@lewiscapaldi/video/7170349377641385221>

presented explicitly as in a video of a traditional brand, brand resonance could be identified in the presence of certain elements referring to their image as an artist, such as Conan Gray with his costumes. Another example of this is the use of his songs as background sound, as they would be his final products.

For his part, Conan Gray exemplifies this type of content in one of his videos<sup>4</sup>, where he decided to use his background song to lip-sync<sup>5</sup>, but in a faster version, whose audio would come to have 57.7 k publications. Likewise, he is wearing makeup and clothes easily identifiable by his community as the ones he would wear on stage. Thus, reflecting that brands are intertextual constructions related to mass culture, in this case it would be a culture understood within his community, influenced by the consumption of his music [32].

Another way to identify the brand is by *hashtags*, which allows its publications to be found more easily by users in the search engine, as well as to differentiate the subject of a video from another of the same artist [39]. However, it was identified that the singer Conan Gray does not often use hashtags to differentiate his content; unlike Lewis Capaldi, who in most of his videos uses hashtags, such as his name (#lewiscapaldi) or words that refer to the content of each of his videos.

### 3.4 Experimental brand posts

These types of publications are designed so that users can live the brand experience [50]. In the musical context, the content generated for this category is linked to the visual and auditory. It focuses on the actions performed by singers, ranging from the release of singles or albums to the coverage of live events such as concerts.

In this type of videos, artists seek to promote their personal brand, to encourage their reproductions. One way to do this is by uploading videos where the desired song is heard, as Conan Gray did, after releasing the respective video of the song the day before. You can see him dancing in a coordinated way and how he enjoys the rhythm, which could invite the user to do the same. Similarly, Lewis Capaldi uploads videos of interactions with fans at his concerts to show a bit of the concert experience<sup>6</sup>. Engaging in a conversation with someone in the audience who says she is pregnant, where he responds in a comical-sarcastic way: "I didn't know a song could do that."

In addition, he assumes with calmness and humor any mistake he may make during his concerts, even joking: "I promise I will pay to sing professionally." This attitude presents him as someone accessible and close to his audience. This is how it was possible to visualize that both artists use their creativity to be authentic and in such a way

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@conangray/video/7149653896967884074>

<sup>5</sup> synchronization of lip movements with spoken or sung vowels

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@lewiscapaldi/video/7195915283251481861>

can be recognized as different from others [44, 45].

### 3.5. Current event

Current event posts refer to important dates, such as holidays, cultural events, anniversaries, among others. In this way, the brand relates to its users in a conversation, where current topics or events are touched upon [50]. In the case of artists, it was possible to identify the presence of this type of content on dates relevant to them as a brand, whether it is the anniversary of their album, dates relevant to their community of fans or festivities celebrated in a country or in the world.

Following that line, this type of content was visualized in a video made on New Year's by Lewis Capaldi<sup>7</sup>, where he follows a trend of recapitulating photos from 2022; however, from a different point, since he does not recapitulate photos like other users, but shows photographs of his face (selfies) which show expressions of suffering.

### 3.6. Personal brand posts

The objective of this posts is to build a relationship between a brand and its users, for which the brand, in this case the artist, is used to include their personal relationships within a publication. In addition, it includes referring to anecdotes, personal preferences and expressing feelings, in a way that allows a relationship to be established [50].

This type of content is where artists can convey more about themselves as people, reacting or generating content where they are authentic, to generate a personal connection with their audience [26]. An example of this is making videos in response to other people on the platform who are not fans<sup>8</sup>. In this opportunity, Lewis Capaldi answers the question: What if a celebrity was your therapist? To which, as a joke, he answers how he would be, thus engaging in a narrative from his role as a celebrity. From this, we can identify that even when the content is not related to his music, makes the audience feel more relatable.

In addition, Lewis Capaldi integrates his personal relationships with other artists into the creation of content, such as his friendship with Niall Horan, Irish singer and former member of One Direction. This content uses the lyrics of his songs as background, both in sound and subtitles, while playing. Lewis Capaldi adopts a different attitude, where he expresses his feelings, whether true or not, towards a third person; stepping out of the conventional celebrity role given to him, thus acquiring a bohemian identity, which coexists with that of a sentimental artist [36]. Meanwhile Conan Gray reacts to a video uploaded by a user<sup>9</sup>, where a caricature is shown dancing to one of his songs, he duets

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@lewiscapaldi/video/7183325272450600198>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@lewiscapaldi/video/7149199726162791686>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@conangray/video/7191163677708684590>



to the video, showing his disagreement through non-verbal expressions.

### 3.7. Brand Community

These publications are designed to make the community feel heard, by inviting them to upload content related to the brand or where it is recognized; in addition, the aim is to expand the community [50]. In the case of the music industry, this happens routinely, because they want to reach new audiences [15].

On Conan's behalf, he interacts with a video where a fan of his shows his liking for one of his songs. Through a duet, he mimics the fan's reaction at the end, which could be interpreted as acceptance to react as they wish<sup>10</sup>. For his part, Lewis Capaldi, performing the same type of interaction, responds to people reacting to his video. Those who point out that the singer made them cry with emotion, to this Lewis Capaldi performs a duet where he responds with a smile<sup>11</sup>. This type of reaction can be interpreted as a challenge for the user, which generated a trend in which participants shared their emotional state before and after watching the video. In this sense, it could be evidenced how the creation of this type of content facilitates the connection and the exchange of experiences among the users [4].

### 3.8. Costumer relationship

It is the content generated with the objective of establishing a relationship with the consumer through comments, opinions and experiences that the consumer can provide about the product, in this case, its music [50]. This type of content is evidenced by acknowledging the audience.

Lewis Capaldi does this after his concert in Chicago, where the audience continues his song when he gets Tourette's tics. He thanks them and mentions that the night was very special for him<sup>12</sup>. In the same vein, Conan Gray creates this type of content by reacting to a video of a trend that was created from his song "Memories" mentioning "How the heck are they doing this trend," which consisted of showing videos and photos of memories of each person<sup>13</sup>. These frequent interactions with their followers and active participation in the online conversation make it possible for singers to reinforce their personal branding [33]. The feedback obtained from the artists' submissions contributes to building more meaningful relationships [18].

Most videos present the artists beyond their role as celebrities, providing an authentic image that portrays them as individuals with whom the public can identify and es-

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@conangray/video/7127392501719174442>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@lewiscapaldi/video/7226789395653807387>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@lewiscapaldi/video/7224166952288226586>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@conangray/video/7171881596151156010>

establish a personal connection [23]. Thus, the constant creation of content on social networks that goes beyond the release of their music provides them with the opportunity to strengthen relationships with their fans [15].

### 3.9 Sales promotion

This is content generated with the intention that the user will act and make a purchase [50]. In the case of artists, it can refer to selling tickets for a concert, buying a physical or digital album, or simply playing their music through a digital platform.

It could be seen that this type of content is not predominant in the videos analyzed, being Lewis Capaldi who does it directly<sup>14</sup>, where he indicates the date on which his new song will be released, using the same song as audio. However, it was identified that most of the videos of both artists promote their music indirectly, by sharing videos of them with the songs in the background. Affirming that the artists use social networks to promote their music and themselves [47].

## 5 Conclusions

From the results, it has been possible to identify that the construction of the personal brand is based on sharing content that manages to impact global audiences. These include personal brand publications, which are content related to the artist as an individual, and emotional brand posts that evoke various emotions. These two types of content achieve the highest reach on the TikTok profile from the artists. Since they employed narrative techniques such as humor or storytelling to connect [35] This is evidenced by the interactions of the post, i.e., the number of views, comments, and shares.

On the other hand, presenting oneself as authentic within the social network, that is, exposing oneself to one's followers and uploading one's own content, has an impact on the construction of one's personal brand, allowing a musician to be differentiated from others in the same social network [24]. Being real and presenting themselves as someone original in a social network, i.e., without copying other artists or making content following trends with your own touch, allows the followers to establish a closer [26].

Another factor that contributes to your brand is engaging with your followers' content and participating in the conversation through comments or creating videos based on their content. These interactions make followers feel acknowledged by the artists, who frequently respond through duets or reply to users' comments, as mentioned earlier. This allows for the creation of a community around the artist, where social codes are shared, even if the followers are from different countries of origin [40].

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@lewiscapaldi/video/7169914255293107461>

This article provides theoretical and analytical contributions, the limitations of which provide a basis for future research. First, the study focused on only one social network and two profiles of male artists from countries whose music industry is developed, being the United States and the United Kingdom respectively, which limits the generalizability of the results. A macro-level analysis is recommended, to identify whether the same content patterns are met in the personal brand building of artists around the world.

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