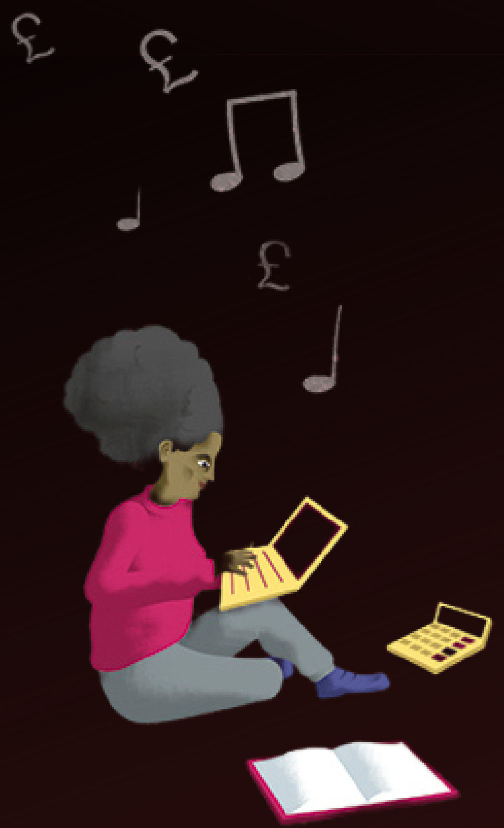
THE MMF

DIGITAL BURNOUT REPORT

2022



MMF Digital Burnout Roundtable Report

Background

In February 2022, the MMF conducted several roundtables after noticing that a discussion at the NY:LON Conference in January, and subsequent article in MusicAlly about artists experiencing digital burnout struck a chord with music managers.

The MMF noticed a large number of members expressing their personal experiences with digital burnout. Mark Mulligan of Midia also published this piece, and most recently Rhian Jones wrote about digital burnout on artists in The Guardian.

Digital burnout, an issue that's been simmering away for some time, was suddenly out in the open. In addition, MMF member Tom Rose instigated a petition calling for a cross-industry council to meet regularly to discuss these issues and put in safeguards for artists.

In response to this surge, to better understand and help find solutions, the MMF held two roundtables with over 40 managers on digital burnout. A summary of these roundtable discussions and their potential next steps are below.

Round Up Of Discussions

The MMF Digital Burnout Roundtables were broken down into smaller deep dive discussion groups focusing on issues and solutions in categories of Artist & Manager Relationships, Major & Indie Labels, Self Releasing Artists, Social Media Platforms and Streaming Services.

Through these smaller groups, the MMF were able to gain valuable open insight from a manager's point of view. Exploring the roles of major and indie labels, the discussions revealed a big disconnect in expectations in regards to their understanding of artist/manager responsibility, digital demands, finance distribution, and the overall productivity of how artists/managers need to work in 2022.

Managers on the roundtables brought up the huge pressure being applied by labels for artists to generate a continuous stream of "content", as well as the tendency of labels to judge an artist's value based on social media numbers rather than the integrity of their music.

There were also comments that some labels overlook the fact that every artist is different and therefore may not be suited for every social media/digital platform, while others prefer not to engage on social media full stop, and would rather this responsibility was devolved.

Also flagged was the change in minimum commitment on deals over the past couple years (approx 24 tracks, up to 3 years) and a drive towards reinvesting marketing budgets into releases, thus making artists responsible for their own promotion.

There was an overwhelming consensus that the digital teams hired at labels are under-resourced, overworked, and in some cases junior in experience. Also, many managers felt that as digital content is a creative expression for the artists, as well as a promotional marketing tool, relationships with digital teams should be considered as thoughtfully as an A&R or producer matching. Label digital teams need to become more tailored to ensure they are suited to the artists that they are working with.

The roundtable also highlighted the challenges faced by self-releasing artists. With less of a support network behind them, these entrepreneurial artists can experience an overwhelming amount of work with digital choices and obligations leading to burnout. Adding to this workload, managers and artists are now expected to become social media experts, to generate content. Managers and artists now need to master photoshop, video editing, knowledge of algorithms behaviours and other digital skill-sets.

Self-releasing artists also noted the lack of industry-led digital education and resources for artists, a lack of finance to create impactful digital marketing campaigns, and limited staff support. Self-releasing artists also have the issue that brands who used to partner with them now want to see even bigger digital stats for consideration of financial support.

Discussion on the DSP roundtable highlighted that the sheer volume of release and content demands on artists can be overwhelmingly crippling, especially in an overcrowded marketplace. This is further complicated by the expectation that artists require a significant social following to even receive playlist and marketing support. Managers are also exhausted from constant demands to publicly thank DSPs whenever a new streaming landmark is reached. Also discussed was authenticity, questions as to whether these DSP “shoutouts” were necessary, and if the DSPs even acknowledge/act upon them. All of which highlighted faults with the current pitching process.

Discussions on social media were equally enlightening. Managers felt too much time and resources were needed for social media, which compromises mental health, commercial decisions and - most importantly - reduces the time and space needed for artists to be creative. The demand for social content has become insatiable. Labels insist on increased engagement, meaning artists rarely have “time out” from social media. This leads to stress, anxiety and other mental health issues. Some managers felt that hiring staff to help artists manage socials can also be risky, as there is a potential of losing authenticity with the fan base. Ultimately pressure always falls back to the artist and manager to deliver.

Also discussed were the issue of social media compromising the protection of the artist. Artists are often sensitive people by nature, but with social media, they are exposed to front line criticism, trolls and bullying which affects not only creative choices, but creates self esteem, anxiety and mental health issues. There was also a noted sharp rise in ADHD, neurodiversity and declining mental health in artists and managers in the last few years.

The discussion on how artist and managers relationships were affected by digital demands, especially during the pandemic, shined a light on many issues. With all activity and engagement switching to online, the need to create and maintain momentum, signed or unsigned, in cycle or not, created a huge responsibility for all artists and managers, which contributed to relationship strains and dual digital fatigue.

Managers had the added pressure of the responsibility to protect their artists and counter the obsession to chase numbers, followers and likes. Some felt there were too few days off or opportunities to “go dark”, and an overwhelming expectation to be plugged in 24-7.

Access to live data, mounting pressure from labels and partners, and the constant need for authentic fan engagement and interaction is leading to huge strain and pressure compromising the relationships of managers with their artists. The bottom line is that many artists don't want to do digital work. Artists just want to create, make and perform music. Authenticity is missed when artists are spread too thin, but it is essential to their growth in both the musical and the digital worlds.

Solutions and Ways Forward

For Major and Indie labels, there were a number of suggested solutions, including social media ‘breaks’ allowing artists and managers to have clear periods away from social media. There was also a call for improved information from DSPs about the workings inner workings from labels of their algorithms and for more efficient planning of social media activity.

Whilst it is accepted that this is not always possible, the overwhelming feeling was that much of the content scheduling can and should be prepared in advance allowing the artists more space in real time. This also means that authentic content can be planned and “banked”, and that labels can help to create a certain amount of content on the artist's behalf. Managers also asked for more investment into the growth and quality of internal label digital teams.

Also brought up was a call for a 15-25% social media management budget alongside the advance built into all label deals to cover the admin and management of social activity.

Labels should also provide mental health support and host seminars for managers and artists to educate and update on new developments. Additionally, managers asked for labels to break down what is being delivered for their 80% of revenue if they are not funding content creation. Importantly many felt labels should balance out their reliance on social media data. It should not be used as an excuse for dropping or not signing artists, and A&Rs should go back to listening to music, not looking at stats.

Specific solutions for streaming included managers getting same-level access to info/analysis from the platforms as the labels do to better understand the market. This includes greater transparency on the inner workings of algorithms and regular updates from platforms on effective marketing practices. Ultimately, there is a need for more transparency and training from platforms. There is also a need for labels to share all platform updates with their artists/managers, as this information is often only sent to label teams.

There was also a demand on the MMF to host a greater number of digital events for its membership. Managers flagged a need for direct access to platform representatives. Solutions around social media include shared awareness of digital best practices. For example, highlighting that managers have the ability to turn off social media “likes” on Instagram in order promote improved mental health, and inserting defined social media breaks into marketing plans.

To preserve manager and artist relations, labels and platforms must break the cycle of demanding continuous content creation. Managers must also learn to "say no”. There should be an understanding that not every artist feels comfortable on social media or in the role of an “influencer”. Also brought up was the need for more advanced preparation in planning content creation in order to feed the algorithm when the artist is on a digital break

There was a suggestion for the creation of a series of grants/awards for independent artists wishing to create in this space, similar to the MEGS early seed investment or creator funds, be made available by the digital platforms. Managers should also have access to resources to help employ someone else to ‘push’ artists, so it’s outsourced and not all put onto the manager.

There was also a suggestion to set up an independent body to raise conversation with all stakeholders, which includes artists, managers, labels, social media platforms and DSPs, looking at different perspectives, and working out actionable solutions/best practices, which needs to be constantly reviewed/monitored.

The biggest point that came out of the MMF Digital Burnout Roundtables is that the world has changed and we need to relook at everything we are doing in 2022 and beyond for the sake of the artist and music. Digital burnout can be managed with digital wellness strategies and constant monitoring, discussions for understanding and continuous evaluation for the preservation and protection of the artist, the manager and the music.

The MMF are committed to prioritising mental health wellbeing and continue with efforts to raise awarenessand offer guidance to its membership. It also continues collaborations with others through spotlight support through mental health that exist in the music industry. For example, The MMF and Universal Music UK are continuing to work together on a series of Music Manager and A&R Mental Health workshops, and held their most recent event in May 2022 that also focused digital burnout and label pressure on artists.

The MMF also works very closely with MMF Associate Members such as YouTube Music, TikTok, Amazon Music, and Spotify, enabling the MMF to communicate member feedback and share updates and info with its members through newsletters and events.

Recommendations

- Managers should discuss with label partners the issues around digital burnout and how to promote digital wellness including: planning for time out, support outside of release cycle, budgets for content creation, better sharing of information on what works/digital expertise and wider support for artists' digital engagement.

- Managers should ask labels/distributors to share the information they are receiving from DSPs/social platforms on campaign effectiveness/data on engagement e.g. weekly newsletters/analytics data.

- MMF should revisit our digital learning offer with MusicAlly which can help managers develop digital marketing skills to include tips and resources for managing digital burnout.

- MMF should explore with streaming associates (YouTube/Amazon /TikTok/Spotify) running more bespoke sessions also looking at tools and tips to reduce digital pressure/simplify digital engagement and restart FB/Insta discussion via Sammy Andrews.

- MMF should initiate discussions with other industry partners such as BPI/AIM/ERA about collective resources/support and how to address the collective issues following on from Tom Rose's petition

Resources to help manage digital burnout.

Advice on how to spot and handle burnout https://www.helloezra.com/digital-burnout/

How to hide likes on Instagram https://backlightblog.com/how-to-hide-likes-on-instagram

ARWEN - removing abusive content from social media https://arwen.ai/

The MMF Guide to Mental Health: MMF Guide to Mental Health 2021

The Hub balance your mind toolkit https://thehubbalance.com/balance-your-mind/

To sign up to TikTok newsletters on what's trending: UK newsletter here and Germany newsletter here:

Read Sammy Andrews article on The Danger of Digital Burnout Here: