

Advancing Equity in Arts Entrepreneurship

A Case Study on Gender Equity and Empowerment in Music Production

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ABSTRACT: The authors conduct an empirical investigation of the national Equity X Program to understand not just the barriers that women face in becoming producers and developing business skills to move their career forward as artist entrepreneurs in Canada but also how emerging professionals feel about their perceived opportunities. The authors first situate the study within the literature on equity and inclusion in the creative sector and the importance of the music industry in this context. They then use an impact assessment framework that incorporates key indicators around equity and inclusion, aesthetic goals and approaches, and accessibility measures to help organize six rich clusters of data drawn from respondents (N=397). Using iterative open coding of open-ended responses to semi-structured questions, as well as critical discourse analysis, the authors examine the clustered data to illustrate or address these impact measures and to tease out the implications of each cluster of data. The analysis of the six clusters of data can help the sector (and their funders and policymaking supporters) better understand priorities for entrepreneurial capacity-building, including professionalization, technical skills, self-development, a sense of belonging through networking, entrepreneurial development, and emotional engagement in the sector. While the study does not suggest that systemic discrimination can be overcome any time soon, it does provide evidence of the ways in which women creatives in music believe that becoming more proficient in technical and business skills will help them; it also illustrates their optimism about being able to overcome discrimination. This generates a more complex understanding not just of some of the challenges faced by diverse women artist-entrepreneurs within Canada's music ecosystem but also perceptions about how they aim to overcome these challenges. The article concludes by outlining future work required to ameliorate system-wide discrimination in arts entrepreneurship. **KEYWORDS:** small business, artists, equity, music, music production, community education, women, gender issues, empirical study, emotional coding. **DOI:** doi.org/10.34053/artivate.11.1.154

Introduction

In this paper, we focus on how equity can be created among women and diverse artists aspiring to professionalize their careers by learning production and entrepreneurship skills. Music producers play a pivotal creative role in the creative economy as entrepreneurs: they have a significant amount of control over the work that musicians release because they oversee the entire process of song creation (Smith, 2018; Shepherd, 2009). However, this group continues to be dominated by men, as detailed below. Women have historically been underrepresented in the music industry and have faced systemic barriers (Smith et al., 2018). One example is Fanny Mendelssohn, a nineteenth century German composer who composed more than 500 works including her 1829 masterpiece, *Easter Sonata*, which was originally credited to her brother, the renowned composer Felix Mendelssohn. It took almost 190 years for her to receive the recognition she deserved (CBC Radio, 2017).

Given the economic importance of entrepreneurs and small businesses in the music industry (CIMA 2013; Ontario Creates, n.d.; Statistics Canada, 2020), it is important to understand why women in the industry continue to face barriers, especially those working as producers. In this article, we first situate the study in literature and previous empirical research on equity and inclusion in the creative sector, then we outline our methodology. As an emergent case study, we use an impact assessment framework that moves beyond—but can also include—economic and business measures to look at the responses of women involved in the nationally competitive Equity X Production Mentorship Program (Yin, 2009). We then examine six clusters of data that provide us with information to analyse using key impact indicators to create equity in Canada's industry and to better understand the challenges and barriers for women and diverse artists. The clusters of data include professionalization; technical skill-building discourse; self-development goals and strategies; the importance of a sense of belonging; the use of entrepreneurial and small business discourses; and emotional engagement within the sector, including motivation, frustration, and optimism.

The Equity X Program is an intensive professional development experience intended to help remedy the severe underrepresentation of women producers in the sector by providing professionalization through mentoring, networking, and skill-building. Equity X is funded and hosted by the SOCAN Foundation in Canada. The Equity X Program was developed in 2019 in response to the findings of research conducted between 2012 and 2019 by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative (Smith et al., 2019). The program was implemented with the goal of mobilizing the strengths of creative hubs, networks, and entrepreneurial incubators as sites of professionalization and support. We examined preliminary feedback from program applicants to explore their understanding of the music industry as an entrepreneurial or small business environment. We found that aspiring participants tend to be keenly aware of their limited business and technical skills but do not describe themselves as entrepreneurs. They are also fully cognizant of the systemic nature of discrimination in the field, but they maintain an optimistic and enthusiastic outlook about their own potential, seeking targeted training and business incubation programs as a way of overcoming barriers. We conclude by identifying arts entrepreneurship literature

that has not explored how critical or equity theory can be leveraged to better support underserved and underrepresented creative communities in hope that this paper will encourage further investigation.

Literature Review

In this article, since we examine the lack of equitable representation in the field of music, it is useful to first situate our approach in the broader literature on equity and diversity in the creative sector. We are then able to contextualize the situation for music entrepreneurs in the broader creative economy, specifically the music industry in Canada. The literature on arts entrepreneurship has not yet converged on equity or targeted approaches to better serve marginalized artists, however, many aspects of the arts are highly inequitable. We explore the creative economy in the music industry, state of equity and inclusion, and impact indicators.

Creative Economy and the Music Industry

Over the last two decades, creative industries have seen explosive growth in so-called creative incubators and hubs (Essig, 2018; Gill et al., 2019). These can be understood as operational infrastructures that can help develop, commercialize, and disseminate products. They are also used to foster a cultural district and offer coworking or presentation spaces for professional creative workers to share skills, networks, and current work. Incubators are especially important because the arts sector is a crucial part of our social fabric and the economy. Crosswick and Kasynska (2019) recently explored innovation spaces and cultural districts around the world and found that in addition to economic benefits, these spaces made important social contributions by fostering the development and availability of diverse creative work and approaches—both within the incubators themselves and in nearby public spaces.

Incubators and creative hubs are sites that can host education in strategic creative practices and skill-building for community identity and cohesion. They can make a city or region more liveable, not just for creative workers and businesses but also more generally for communities of users, consumers, and citizens. Crosswick and Kasynska (2019) found that these sites have drawn the attention of creative and knowledge workers as well as investors, funders, and tourists. International research has revealed that investment in the arts and culture sectors creates jobs at lower costs to taxpayers and business owners compared to more capital-intensive industries (Hesmondhalgh, 2012). In North America, the Canadian Cultural Satellite Account has documented the importance of the arts and culture sector to the health of our economy. According to its 2020 report: “Overall, the culture sector—which accounted for 90.5% of the total culture and sport GDP—rose 2.2% in 2018 [. . .]. The culture sector accounted for over 655,000 jobs in 2018, a 0.5% increase from 2017” (Statistics Canada, 2020).

To build towards a more inclusive creative economy, previous research has found that creative hubs and networks can help communities to grow in sustainable ways, including communities that are marginalized, dissenting, or underrepresented (Hassan, 2014; Luka, 2018; Yung,

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2017). Many studies have used economic measures of success to evaluate sites of activity in the culture sector, including large aggregate information such as GDP or more targeted information such as recording or merchandise sales, performances, or more broadly diversified revenue streams (Dempwolf et al., 2014; Essig, 2018). As a result, it is also important to understand the scope and potential economic impact of this field of work. According to recent data analysed by Ontario Creates, the music sector is one of the key economic development agencies in the country. And while it was hit hard by the global Covid-19 pandemic, the sector is poised for growth:

The Canadian music industry generated US\$1.45 billion in 2019. It is projected that 2020 will mark a significant drop of -31.4% to just under \$1 billion, followed by a dramatic increase over the following two years for a combined annual growth rate (CAGR) of 3.12% between 2019–2024. (Ontario Creates, n.d.)

Previous research has confirmed that entrepreneurs are key economic drivers in Canada. In this study, we define entrepreneurs as done by Hisrich (1990), whereby an entrepreneur is characterized as “someone who demonstrates initiative and creative thinking, is able to organize social and economic mechanisms to turn resources and situations to practical account, and accepts risk and failure.” The Canadian music scene is largely driven by the independent music industry. The Canadian Independent Music Association (CIMA) is a not-for-profit national trade association representing the English-language, Canadian-owned sector of the music industry. According to its website, its stakeholders consist of small businesses including record producers, record labels, recording studios, managers, agents, licensors, music video producers and directors, creative content owners, artists, and others who are professionally involved in the sound recording and music video industries. The local, global, and commercial successes of Canadian independent artists reflect the viability of indie music as a small business model. For example, in 2013, research firm Nordicity resulted in a report on the independent music scene commissioned by the CIMA. The report, titled *Sound Analysis*, revealed that the Canadian independent music industry has had a positive and measurable impact on the national economy (2013). In 2011, the industry generated approximately \$292 million in revenues and contributed more than \$300 million to the Canadian economy; and it contributed \$8.2 million to the Canadian GDP for every \$10 million of industry revenue. At the time, it was estimated that more than 13,400 Canadians were employed in the industry, 67% of whom are artists (CIMA, 2013). In 2019, 8,286 professionals were involved in the music publishing and sound recording segment of the industry alone, along with a portion of the 72,388 live performance professionals (Statistics Canada, 2020).

Equity and Inclusion in the Music Industry

While there are different approaches to equity theory (Huseman et. al., 1987; Leventhal, 1980; Adams, 2005; Morand & Merriman, 2012), we ground the study on the understanding that a person's beliefs regarding what is fair or unfair can shape their motivation, attitudes, and behaviors (Adams, 1965). Furthermore, unlike equality, the notion of equity recognizes that each

person has different circumstances and requires access to specific resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome (Kabanof, 1991; Just Health Action, 2010).

Women and gender-diverse artists have historically been underrepresented in the professional ranks of musicians in the Western world, across genres (Sisario, 2018). Anecdotally, we have seen that the number of women musicians at Canada's music festivals and women holding technical jobs, such as sound engineers, remains low (Friend, 2018). A 2015 study of Ontario's music industry found numerous issues with regard to gender diversity, including lower pay overall, lack of opportunities for executive roles, low exposure, and multiple facets of systemic gender discrimination (Women in Music Canada, 2018; Pelloquin, 2020).

In Canada, a study by Women in Music Canada (WMC) showed a similar trend in the underrepresentation of women. They looked at organizations within the music industry, in terms of representation of women and the roles that women play, which are often supporting and administrative roles and rarely senior management positions. Through an online survey of 455 women working in seven different positions across Ontario's music industry, WMC found that in 2018, women were least likely to work in "music production" roles (6% of respondents). Women in the music industry also receive lower pay overall, and those in Ontario get about 25% of their total working hours from supplemental jobs outside of the music industry, accounting for approximately 1/4 of their total working time in jobs outside of the music industry (Women in Music Canada, 2015).

O'Sullivan (2018) compared motivating factors between men and women in the Dublin music industry and found that women lack a sense of belonging, and they tend to leave the music industry because of insurmountable barriers. These barriers and challenges for women in the music industry are not new phenomena, but recent empirical studies, advocacy coalition movements (e.g., Women in Music, #metoo, 50/50 Across the Board), and inclusivity initiatives (e.g., UN Sustainability Goals, SOCAN Foundation) are now serving as catalysts; the music industry is now being held accountable for empowering women and fostering equity. So far, then, what we have seen is that economic and participation indicators outline the gaps and absences of women in the music industry as a site of small business and entrepreneurial activity.

Women and female-identified individuals are disturbingly underrepresented in the production of music in North America: according to one recent report, only about 2% of producers listed on the top 100 Billboard charts are female (Smith et al., 2018). Research has revealed similar findings in other lucrative and high-profile industries including finance (Orser, 2017) and media and arts production (Coles et al., 2018; Women in View, 2019), but the music scene has its own unique reasons for the reproduction of this underrepresentation (Samuelson, 2019). One music producer involved in the Equity X Program commented:

Finding support and resources to further my learning has been difficult as it is pretty much a boy's club when it comes to producers [. . .]. Misgendering, transphobia, misogyny, sexism, and racism are all present in these circles and it is very hard to feel comfortable and safe to work and learn in these types of groups. It is often why I choose to work alone at home, but the sheer loneliness and isolation of being one of very few QPOC [queer persons of colour] in a local arts

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scene is very discouraging for creativity—we need community and support to thrive. (Equity X Program, 2020)

Women and female-identified producers continue to face barriers, lack access to resources and education, and are less successful in terms of evolving financially and creatively in an industry rife with personal connections, sexism, racism, and other inequities (Snapes, 2020). Many studies have reported that the Canadian musician industry lacks gender diversity in terms of leadership; only 9% of Canadian music companies are headed by women (PWC, Women in Music, 2015).

The United Nations (UN) has stressed the need for the economic empowerment of women and has established several sustainability goals, including one intended to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, noting that “[g]ender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world” (UN, 2015). Empowering women is known to boost productivity, increase economic diversification and income equality, and lead to other positive development outcomes (International Monetary Fund, 2018). However, women continue to face barriers and challenges in the music industry and are grossly underrepresented in creative and business leadership roles. This brings us to a consideration of the broader creative economy, the role of creative incubator experiences, and then to the music industry specifically.

Impact Indicators

To better understand why this is the case, we can look at three categories of impact indicators that reach beyond economic and business measures: aesthetic and cultural, accessibility and inclusion, and knowledge-sharing and sense-making (Luka, 2022). These groupings of indicators provide us with a way to frame the emergent coding we undertook and map a pathway towards thinking about how goals around equity can be realized in the music industry. For example, our cluster—(1) professionalization, (3) self-development, and (5) entrepreneurial discourse—findings address three aesthetic and cultural success indicators directly, such as the ability to:

develop entrepreneurship and professionalizing networks and practices in the cultural sector; to practice leadership, facilitation, and inclusive skills development; [and] to construct or make available conditions for new opportunities to a broader spectrum of artists, creative workers, and community members. (Luka, 2022, p. 175)

Accessibility indicators emphasize modes of inclusiveness, from physical accessibility to social inclusion, starting with “basic proportional inclusion of social groups” (Luka, 2022, p.176), which is clearly not reflected in the music sector. Our cluster 1, 2, and 6 findings speak to this crucial indicator, as we show below.

Finally, knowledge-making and sensemaking indicators include “information gathering; peer-exchanges; ecology growing” as well as “narratives of start-up or experimental ingenuity or creative entrepreneurship combined with arts, culture, and creative practices” (Luka, 2022,

p. 175), each of which were evident in all the cluster findings, as explored below. In the next section of the article, we review our methodology before moving on to a discussion of our findings.

Methodology

Our analysis focuses on Equity X as a case study (Yin, 2009) to explore the problems faced by women and underrepresented artist entrepreneurs as they try to advance their career in the music industry, particularly with respect to producing their own music. SOCAN circulated an open-ended survey to applicants, and we were provided with anonymized access to analyze the responses. We used an iterative open coding approach (Rivas, 2012) to tease out emergent themes and emotions. The results yielded rich qualitative data with a combination of deductive and inductive findings, which are discussed below, along with insider information from the creator of the program, who has worked with Equity X participants for the first two years of the program.

One of the co-authors of this article was responsible for the design of the Equity X Program. They drew from previous work led by the Women Entrepreneurial Knowledge Hub (WEKH) (Cukier & Hassannezhad, 2020). The WEKH helps advance women entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds by serving as an inclusive innovation ecosystem linking micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors with the potential to advance women's entrepreneurship. As noted above, previous research has demonstrated that creating an inclusive ecosystem can advance women's entrepreneurship and that entrepreneurship can help drive economic development among underrepresented demographics (Cukier & Chuvashia, 2020). For example, creative hubs that focus on the specific needs of arts- and media-based entrepreneurs and practitioners can foster success among typically underrepresented demographics (Luka et al., 2020; Ester, 2017; Harvey & Fisher, 2013).

Respondents were recruited by SOCAN using a series of communications and promotions organized by the organization and also in conjunction with industry partners (including Ableton Canada, Signal Community), promotional partners (including Songwriters Association of Canada, Screen Composers Guild of Canada, Women in Music Canada, Music Canada), and other music industry associations across Canada: these partners were selected to ensure diverse communities across Canada have the opportunity to participate in the program. Successful applicants who completed the program shared details about whether and how the program had taught them new skills and influenced their feeling of empowerment, and they also provided feedback for future improvements to the program.

The qualitative survey included deductive, semi-structured questions related to career goals, skill development goals, discrimination, and further support that might be needed upon completion of the program. The dataset includes data from two cohorts compiled at two different times (fall 2019 and spring 2020). A privacy officer at a partner organization anonymized and aggregated the data and removed any responses that were submitted by an individual more than once. The final anonymized dataset included responses from 397 female-identifying

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individuals applying to the Equity X Program with the goal of learning to become producers and entrepreneurs.

Our preliminary analysis revealed six clusters of keywords that respondents used to describe what they were looking for in terms of skill-building, access, education, networking, and other areas. The open coding approach generated lists of keywords, which yielded an initial set of potential thematic groupings; we then parsed and counted keywords that we subsequently reorganized by using discursive context as well as the specific words used; they were then color coded. The six clusters provide us with indicators to better understand the challenges and barriers for women and diverse artists in the music sector. These include professionalization; technical improvement discourse; self-development goals and strategies; the importance of belonging; the use of entrepreneurial and small business discourses; and emotional engagement in the sector, including motivation, frustration, and optimism.

Findings

Arts Entrepreneurs

Many respondents would be regarded as arts entrepreneurs. We used critical discourse analysis (Cukier et al., 2017) to explore how artists operate as small businesses, including how they articulate themselves as entrepreneurs, how they talk about their own businesses and careers, and what types of conversations could help mitigate systemic and other forms of discrimination. Woronkowicz and Noonan (2017) examined self-employment behaviour among artists in the United Kingdom based on census data from 2003–2015. They found that those working in the arts are generally freelancers and have a unique entrepreneurial profile as artists. Becoming an “artpreneur” (Essig, 2018), i.e., learning to be more entrepreneurial, is arguably necessary for artists to generate a livable income. However, in another empirical study, Haynes and Marshall (2018) found that while artists are precarious and are generally involved in entrepreneurial activities, they tend to be resistant to being labelled as entrepreneurs. This resistance to the entrepreneurial mindset could serve as a barrier to success and thereby prevent artists from reaching their full potential. We explore these issues and others below.

In the study we conducted, all our respondents identified as women. Of these, 14.9% self-reported as Francophones; 4.3% as an Indigenous people; 26.7% as Black, Indigenous, and racialized; and 6.8% as Deaf or Persons with Disability. There may be overlap among the groupings. They lived in Ontario (38.8%), Quebec (21.4%), British Columbia (7.4%), Alberta (9.8%), Eastern Provinces (5.8%), and other locations (5.5%).

Cluster 1: Professionalization

The first cluster ($n= 2930$ mentions) involved terms related to professionalization, i.e., *professionalization, work, experience, career*. The professional needs of entrepreneurship clearly emerged as a theme, even when respondents did not use terms commonly related to entrepreneurship or to conducting business. For example, we observed little to no discussion of basic

business skills such as incorporation, copyright, accounting, budget, resource management, etc.

Table 1: Professionalization Discourse

| Term | Number | Cumulative |
|--------------|--------|------------|
| Professional | 595 | 595 |
| Career | 819 | 1414 |
| Experience | 584 | 1998 |
| Work | 932 | 2930 |

While respondents spoke in more depth and with more confidence about building technical skills (see cluster 2 below, $n=7168$) to support creative production, the frequent iteration of the desire to improve professional skills in this context (whether articulated as “professional,” “career,” “experience,” or “work” skills) suggests that respondents were keenly aware that they did not yet possess the language to articulate specific business development and sustainability language, although they might (or might not) have already been using entrepreneurial or business tools and approaches in the development of their production, distribution, and marketing efforts. Examples of respondents that shared terms pertaining to professionalization include:

Producing will advance my career because I have studied a broad range of music from World Music to all things Classic Pop. I'm able to make exceptional music as a musician & vocalist in the traditional context of how artists create. However, in order for me to progress I need to learn how to create more advanced material using modern technology and engineering. (Equity X Program, 2020)

Building my skills in recording and music production will elevate my career and help me to become a better and more knowledgeable producer. Not only will it help me to produce my own music at a more professional level, it will also open up opportunities to record and produce other artists as well as be a better mentor to up and coming artists. (Equity X Program, 2020)

I need more access to tangible resources and learning spaces to continually exercise and develop my skills. I have developed a fear and anxiety around teaching myself technical music skills so I need the space to thrive with my accomplishments and build proactive from my mistakes, with unwavering opportunity for career growth. (Equity X Program, 2020)

Cluster 2: Technical Improvement Discourse

The term *tech* came up frequently as it relates to self-production and control over production, including *skills*, *produce*, *training*, *tech[nology]*. Access to opportunities to develop necessary technical skills was not only framed as an aspiration, but lack of skill was articulated as a barrier to taking control of creative output and professional goals

Table 2. Technical Improvement Discourse

| Term | Number | Cumulative |
|------------|--------|------------|
| Skills | 838 | 838 |
| Produce | 2211 | 3049 |
| Production | 1247 | 5260 |
| Training | 108 | 6507 |
| Record | 885 | 6615 |
| Tech | 553 | 7168 |

Respondents were determined to build their professional technical skills and felt that within the industrial environment, enough skill could potentially transform them into expert producers. However, most were already highly technically proficient. For example, one applicant noted:

When I arrive in a bar to play my music with my friend (he’s a man), the technicians always ask him about our needs for our gear and other technical stuff, but it’s me that is in charge of that. I always feel like I have to prove to others that I have my place. When people talk to me about my band with my friend, they always assume I’m only singing and he composes, produces and plays all the music by himself, but we do it all together. (Equity X Program, 2020)

Another applicant noted:

In my career, I have absolutely felt discriminated [against], compared to my male colleagues in the music industry. When I would play shows, I would always hear comments from the male sound tech or stage hands, when I would be in the music store buying equipment, I would always feel judgment from the staff, and when I would talk to other musicians, producers, sound techs, etc. it was always like they were speaking down to me, and it was like I was barely even there. (Equity X Program, 2020)

As reflected in these excerpts, women experience barriers articulated as presumed technical proficiencies—even when they are observed working in roles that require superior skills that leverage technology. This issue is complicated by another obstacle to professional work as music producers: software costs. According to the Canada Council for the Arts (2019), the typical income for an artist in Canada is \$17,300, about 56% lower than the median of all workers (\$39,000). The purchase of professional music production software, such as Ableton (about \$1,000), is therefore a significant investment, potentially cost prohibitive. Even if artists are capable and motivated to learn technology and production skills, access to the appropriate tools and resources is an additional barrier for female-identified artists, given the existing power imbalance as outlined in the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative. Additionally, affordability and access can be further complicated by lack of confidence among female producers. The term *learn* came

up frequently ($n=1335$) in multiple contexts, including this cluster of technical improvement discourse, the self-development cluster, and the sense of belonging cluster of data. More research is needed to clarify and address which forms of resistance are involved in making the sector less welcoming to women.

Cluster 3: Self-development Discourse

The self-development cluster ($n= 7168$ mentions) included terms such as *hope, self, confidence, and grow*. A good example is an applicant's following excerpt:

I think my biggest challenge has been standing my ground and trusting my own knowledge and style around male-identifying music creatives when it comes to working on recording and mixing [...] I guess that could be something everyone is working on, but I feel like women have to kind of be extra sure of themselves in the creating music and the music industry in general. (Equity X Program, 2020)

Table 3. Self-Development Discourse

| Term | Number | Cumulative |
|------------|--------|------------|
| Self | 1060 | 1060 |
| Confidence | 228 | 1288 |
| Grow | 251 | 1539 |
| Dream | 73 | 1612 |
| Hope | 388 | 2000 |
| Inspire | 112 | 2112 |
| Learn | 1335 | 3447 |
| Improve | 179 | 3626 |

Based on their experience with Equity X as a community-based learning experience committed to sharing knowledge and achieving equity in the sector, the self-development cluster of data embodies the old adages that women (or racialized people, e.g.) need to be twice as capable as men for half the recognition. The capacity-building impulse is articulated here as the need for self-development and (below) as a sense of belonging based on networking and mentoring to foster and support self-development. Previous research has revealed that female small business owners prefer the kind of informal learning that was generated in the Equity X Program, especially networking and mentoring (Sharazfized, 2018). But the perception of needing to be the “best” (technically, and in terms of self-development), potentially undercutting self-confidence, also speaks to the lack of support for women in this business, and it helps explain the perpetuation of discrimination. This becomes clearer in the fourth cluster: sense of belonging.

Cluster 4: Sense of Belonging Discourse

This cluster included terms such as *mentor, collaboration, community, and networking*. Respondents were very aware of the need to build community by sharing ideas and professional

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practices. However, the lived experience of many respondents was disturbed by resistance from some segments of the established field. One applicant noted:

As a female producer I find that it is difficult to have access to important production tips without either contacting other producers who are usually male or taking classes. I find that many male producers do not want to share techniques that they have learned in music production in order to remain competitive. (Equity X Program, 2020)

Table 4. Sense of Belonging Discourse

| Term | Number | Cumulative |
|---------------|--------|------------|
| Collaboration | 137 | 137 |
| Community | 391 | 528 |
| Network | 332 | 860 |
| Mentor | 753 | 1613 |
| Support | 704 | 2317 |
| Connect | 290 | 2607 |
| Share | 194 | 2801 |

Many respondents commented that establishing a sense of belonging and feeling empowered through peer support is a challenge for women interested in becoming producers and developing technical skills in the music industry, in part because there are so few women and, as the quote above suggests, that men tend not to share information with women (and potentially with other men). Many women simply leave the music industry due to a lack of support and this sense of belonging. Based on the responses to the Equity X Program that we examined, the program seems to have been perceived as one of few opportunities for meaningful networking and collaboration to foster bonding and trust. Programs such as Equity X, which create networking and community-building opportunities, may serve as an important pathway to help more women evolve and sustain their careers as producers. This brings us to another issue of concern that comes through clearly in cluster 5: the degree to which, in an industry that is highly entrepreneurial, women producers do not describe themselves as businesspeople or entrepreneurs.

Cluster 5: Entrepreneurial Discourse

As in cluster 1 (professionalization), the terms used in cluster 5 (e.g., *business*, *entrepreneur*, *money*, *knowledge*) rarely referred directly to specific business skills: entrepreneurship, copy-right, accounting, budget, resources, etc. One exception is the following excerpt:

Learning to produce music will advance my artistic career since it would allow me to become a female producer, mixing engineer and master engineer in addition to already being a composer as well as a singer and artist. Since my female colleague and I would like to start a music production business together in Ontario and Quebec, learning how to produce music is

fundamental to the success of our business. Learning how to produce music will also provide us with the opportunity to collaborate with other female producers and artists. (Equity X Program, 2020)

Table 5. Small Business Discourse

| Term | Number | Cumulative |
|--------------------------|--------|------------|
| Business | 159 | 159 |
| Resource[s] [management] | 177 | 395 |
| Money | 85 | 486 |
| Entrepreneur | 29 | 515 |
| (Record) Release | 415 | 930 |
| Knowledge | 604 | 1534 |

Most respondents instead referred to entrepreneurial aspirations without using formal business terminology, which signals the critical need to build familiarity and comfort with such discourse among artists who run small businesses:

Learning to produce music will help us not only to improve our own songs, but also to help produce songs that meet industry-production standards for other Canadian artists [. . .]. (Equity X Program, 2020)

It will help me connect to my artistic voice in a deeper way and allow me to take more creative risks. The idea of producing alone has been calling me for a long time. Perhaps for a lack of representation, I didn't believe it was something I was "allowed" to do, but deep down I know it is the key to me creating my very best work. Moreover, being able to communicate more clearly with other producers and songwriters will help me to contribute significantly more to any musical project I am a part of. (Equity X Program, 2020)

This study, and other emerging research, continues to demonstrate that while artists may engage in entrepreneurial or business-related activities, they tend not to consider themselves entrepreneurs, which may explain the limited discussion of business skills within this creative profession (Wall-Andrews, forthcoming). Examining producer discourse in the responses to the Equity X Program aligns with other critical discourse analyses of artists as small businesses in case studies conducted by WEKH (Cukier et al., forthcoming). Nonetheless, artists tend to refer indirectly to entrepreneurial and small business discourse based on descriptions of their activities, despite little use of the specific terminology.

Cluster 6: Emotional Engagement

Given the low levels of representation within the music industry—and the perceptions held by many of the Equity X Program participants about the need to improve technically, through self-development, and as businesspeople—we were curious to know how respondents felt about

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being in the industry and if they felt they could overcome the barriers they themselves identified, and if so, how they accomplish such. We grouped phrases related to emotions into six general categories, as presented in table 6: *optimistic*, *enthusiastic*, *frustrated*, *focused*, *optimistic/enthusiastic*, and *frustrated/enthusiastic*. The vast majority (N=218) used language that suggests they are both optimistic and enthusiastic about working in the industry.

Table 6. Emotions Among Respondents

| Code Name | Definition |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Optimistic (n=3) | The respondent uses language that is suggestive of confidence in their abilities, ability to learn and grow and improve their skills |
| Enthusiastic (n=5) | The respondent uses language that suggests they are excited about potential future possibilities, have examples of where they would like to learn and grow |
| Frustrated (n=26) | The respondent uses language that suggests they have been met with challenging external circumstances preventing them from growth or moving forward |
| Focused (n=37) | The respondent uses language that is unemotional, fact based, and goal driven |
| Optimistic/Enthusiastic (n=218) | The respondent uses language that suggests confidence in their abilities and excitement for future growth. (Note: the high numbers make sense given that they are applying to a desirable program.) |
| Frustrated/Enthusiastic (n=34) | The respondent uses language to suggest they are excited about future possibilities and opportunities for growth despite external circumstances preventing them from past growth |

We analyzed emotions based on the language used by respondents, building on previous research involving coding and analysis of qualitative data (Rivas, 2012). We reviewed specific words and their context, frequency, extensiveness, intensity, and specificity. These rich data were obtained through our use of open-ended questions, which enabled an in-depth understanding of some of the challenges faced by diverse women artist entrepreneurs within Canada's music ecosystem.

Respondents who used "optimistic" language tended to believe that given the opportunity to grow and learn new skills, they would definitely benefit and achieve the goals they had set for their businesses. To describe their past opportunities in their businesses, they tended to use phrases like *lucky* or *I've been fortunate enough to*. When they referred to barriers they had either experienced or anticipated to, they usually presented these as obstacles to overcome rather than doubting their own abilities. Generally, optimistic respondents did not refer to overwhelming personal barriers.

Respondents who used "enthusiastic" language often elaborated on their excitement about future possibilities using emotive words like *passionate*, *love*, *ecstatic*, and *dream*. They usually provided examples about how they believed they may be able to learn and grow, and they described the potential of their abilities and their future businesses in a positive, energetic, and

hopeful way.

Respondents who used “frustrated” language tended to refer to the need to overcome external circumstances, including lack of opportunity or setbacks, to achieve their goals. Many of these challenges were related to gender or racial inequality; these respondents referred to their lived experiences, such as having to take a backseat in their own projects or a lack of experience, skill, or familiarity with the music business. Most expressed a feeling of inequality toward their male counterparts and a lack of confidence in expressing their professional wants and needs to their colleagues. Frustrated respondents felt that these systemic and entry barriers prevented them from running their own business in the way they wanted. They used phrases such as *boys club* and referred to the “lack of queer and trans spaces”; one commented that “as a woman I haven’t felt encouraged to improve my technical skills.”

Respondents who used “focused” language tended to avoid emotional terms and instead expressed themselves by referring to professional facts, past accomplishments, and future goals. They tended to concentrate on their business goals and did not express or use emotional terminology, including buzzwords, to describe their personal feelings toward their businesses, goals, and projects. Many used lists and point-form notation to express themselves and their goals.

The majority of respondents used “optimistic/enthusiastic” language, and they tended to be confident in their abilities and excited about their future growth and potential to grow their business. They usually did not refer to barriers and instead focused on the positive aspects of trying to grow their skills, careers, and businesses. They usually had specific goals they wanted to achieve, were confident in their ability to achieve these goals, and excited at the prospect of growth. This is not surprising given that they were competing for a position in a program, and it warrants further investigation in the future.

Finally, respondents who used “frustrated/enthusiastic” language tended to suggest that although they had faced (or continued to face) barriers in their professional growth, they were excited about the future and potential growth possibilities. They believed that despite structural inequities and poor outcomes of past business practices, things were changing for them and their business. The frustrations expressed by these respondents were usually fuel for their growth and usually involved areas where they wanted to fill a gap in the industry, such as creating more space for queer individuals, producing for other women, or developing a different kind of business model.

Discussion and Future Work

Equity X Production Program

The Equity X Program was designed to address the severe underrepresentation of women as producers within the music industry. The SOCAN Foundation established the Equity X Program to provide access, education, and mentorship to women and female-identified individuals in Canada to help them learn how to become producers. As with many industry-based programs, the Equity X Program was created with support from corporate sponsors: Royal Bank of

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Canada, Ableton (a production software company), and Signal Creative Community (a creative hub in Toronto, Ontario). The program's promotional information reveals that, in its first two years, the program has received international recognition for its innovative and equity-based efforts to foster success among women in music as producers (Equity X Program, 2020).

In our examination of the program, we found that the program aims to foster a safe environment in ways such as providing anti-oppression training to all staff and program faculty and ensuring that it is accessible. Additionally, participants from outside of Toronto are provided with a travel allowance, accommodations and meals are covered, and childcare is provided to all participants in need of such support. One core component of the program is a three-day intensive workshop in which participants learn to produce music on Ableton software; they receive large- and small-group instruction as well as one-on-one learning. The program also provides educational sessions on the business of the music industry and offers many networking opportunities among a community of diverse producers. Equity X was designed to empower more women and female-identified individuals to create a community, feel a sense of belonging in the music industry, to own expensive production software that is not affordable for most artists, and to provide a series of educational sessions and mentorship opportunities that empower marginalized artists to produce their own music or that of others. To date, 397 people have applied to the program, with fifty female-identifying artists (two cohorts of twenty-five participants) accepted to the program to improve their entrepreneurial skills and learn how to produce music. Their enthusiasm is reflected in their feedback:

I am already working on projects with the other female artists that I met at the program and have other artists inquiring and showing interest in working with female music producers. (Respondent 1)

The Equity X Production Mentorship program gave me the confidence and tools to take my career aspirations more seriously [. . .]. I left Toronto feeling inspired and capable. (Respondent 2)

This program provided us [with] a solid foundation of knowledge in regard to production and a supportive and close-knit community to rely on as we continue to try and break down more barriers we face as producers and music creators. (Respondent 3)



Figure 1. Equity as a Central Goal, Intersecting with The Six Clusters of Discursive Indicators of What Women in The Equity X Program Felt to Be Important to Achieve Professional Success

The six clusters we developed and have examined in this article provide evidence for an interesting combination of aesthetic indicators (professional music) with business indicators (professionalization, technical improvements, self-development, entrepreneurial discourse). The clusters more closely aligned with accessibility and inclusion (self-development, sense of belonging, emotional engagement) speak to the long road still ahead to empower equity creation among women (see figure 1) and to promote women as artist entrepreneurs in highly male-dominated and oppressive environments.

Ameliorating System-wide Discrimination

Overall, our respondents provided abundant evidence of their desire to become more professional in terms of both technical and business skills. They were very aware of the need to acquire exceptional skills in these areas to help ameliorate the discrimination and lack of an equal playing field in the music industry, which has not just held back individuals like our respondents but has also prevented the music industry from realizing its full business potential. The fact that our respondents had applied to the Equity X Program demonstrates their awareness of the systemic inequities within the industry, but they were understandably cautious about reporting their own lived experiences, which itself reflects the amount of work yet to be done.

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Some respondents articulated the scope of the work that is required to shift the sector; their responses to questions directly related to career goals and what they need in terms of support to build their businesses were particularly telling. Overcoming the lived experience of discrimination was clearly a key defining component around which they prioritized their needed business and technical skills. Their comments were consistent with the results of our open coding analysis and the analysis of emotions discussed above—as well as the findings of previous research.

For example, more than one applicant made comments like: “As a female in the industry, it is more difficult to get recognition for my work” (Equity X Program, 2020). They tended to go on to describe the technical and business skills they wanted to acquire through the Equity X Program and then made comments such as: “It is a challenge to feel respected as an artist, [since] many male producers don’t respect female artists and we are not always treated as equals” (Equity X Program, 2020). Their awareness of the business skills needed was consistently linked with the observation that the structure of the industry itself needed rethinking, including at the peer level. One applicant detailed specific examples:

As a woman in the studio, it’s easy to find myself in a situation where I constantly have to put my foot down or repeat myself for my ideas to be heard. I am often surrounded by men who are a lot more experienced and the typical fallback is to want to move quickly instead of me stepping in and trying things on my own time. Not knowing all the proper producing lingo has [also] stifled my ability to communicate what I want. I’ve sometimes had to settle for an idea simply because I couldn’t produce it myself and the guy I was working with didn’t exactly understand what I was trying to get to. In my 10+ years of music, I have never, not once, worked with a female producer. There is something definitely wrong and disconcerting about that [. . .]. (Equity X Program, 2020)

Many respondents referred to the importance of increasing the number of skilled female producers, which is the core goal of the Equity X Program. They provided examples and details that provided a clear picture of the discrimination they faced as well as possible solutions. For example, applicant C noted: “I often send instrumentals to rappers and they always systematically refer to me as ‘bro’ [or] ‘man.’ It feels like they don’t think for a second that a ‘girl’ could produce a song. An idea that I can’t wait to change.” Applicant C also noted that when gender identity is concealed (inadvertently or otherwise), the work speaks for itself, but she went on to comment that:

As a female producer who also self-performs the vocal part of my work, I’ve experienced discrimination going to the studio and having producers and sound engineers there arranging my music and not valuing my opinion. They often saw me as a young girl who was after fame and thought she could get there with good looks, totally omitting the fact that I put a lot of work in my music as I do everything myself with the little knowledge I have and that doesn’t stop me from creating really nice things. (Equity X Program, 2020)

It is important to note that while such strategies may serve as a temporary stepping-stone,

these are not long-term solutions. These experiences become even more complicated when intersecting identity markers, such as non-binary genders or race, are added to the mix, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

I have felt that the resources available in my city have come with barriers. I have faced discrimination because of my gender, race and sexuality. Absolutely. Everyday. I am one of very few Black women in the electronic music scene or producing world in [major Canadian city] and it is important I elevate so that I can help others who have faced this and to also [prevent] this from happening to others who are on the come up. (Equity X Program, 2020)

It's common for women to feel discriminated against in this industry for a number of reasons, whether it be not being taken seriously, to being looked [at] as a threat, or being looked [at] as an object [. . .]. As a woman who is queer and masculine-presenting it's often hard to not be seen as a threat and in turn being excluded from things my male peers have no issue being involved in. (Equity X Program, 2020)

The consistent use of the term *discrimination* in survey responses clearly illustrates that our respondents know that it will be extremely difficult to shift these sets of practices. Indeed, it took 190 years for Fanny Mendelssohn to be credited for her work. The modern music industry has been shaped through centuries of discriminatory structural conditions, and this structure needs to be taken apart systematically. The six clusters of data we have analysed support the need for future investigations of ways to foster equity among women in the creative production roles; we plan to continue to explore emerging trends among participants in the Equity X Program. The Equity X Program is simply one step, and we will continue to assess its effects and implement changes as needed to ensure its effectiveness. While this study is limited by focusing on the role of the music producer, there is evidence that gender equity exists among other specific roles in the creative industries (Tuckett, 2015; Sakoui, 2020; Wall-Andrews et al., 2022). We're hopeful that this case study will serve as an example for other industries that involve inequitable settings and that it will help marginalized and underrepresented individuals establish entrepreneurial capacities and acquire skills to build their careers.

Conclusion

While this study focused on how equity can be created among women and diverse artists aspiring to professionalize their careers by learning production and entrepreneurship skills, its literature reveals the historical and ongoing discrimination in the music industry. Arts entrepreneurship literature has not explored how critical theory or equity can be leveraged to impact underserved and underrepresented communities. More specifically, the lack of women and gender-diverse music producers perpetuates a lack of diversity in the value chain of music creation. We empirically studied the Equity X Program, which provided treatment for women and diverse gender identities to become producers and strengthen their entrepreneurship capacity as artists. The data provided an opportunity to conceptualize how equity can be created for

aspiring equity-seeking artists entrepreneurs using respondent data. Based on our findings, incubator and training programs for equity-seeking artists could consider helping participants have access to (1) professionalization, (2) technical (skills) improvement, (3) self-development, (4) entrepreneurial discourse, (5) sense of belonging, and (6) emotional engagement. We encourage future research to further conceptualize and empirically study how this framework can be leveraged to support arts entrepreneurship training for equity-seeking artists. While we acknowledge that this study focuses on the Equity X Program as a case study, we hope this research encourages arts entrepreneurship research to consider the role of equity and inclusion when designing and studying programs. Additional support is necessary for equity-seeking artists.

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