

Researchers explain how musicians can craft their next chart-topper

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People like to say that mainstream music all tends to sound similar. While this is true to an extent, an analysis of more than 26,000 songs by researchers at INSEAD and Columbia Business School shows that breakout songs - the songs that hit the very top of the charts - are those that conform to current musical preferences while infusing a modicum of individuality.

Noah Askin, Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD, and Michael Mauskapf, Assistant Professor of Management at Columbia Business School, analysed the acoustic attributes of more than 26,000 songs that appear on Billboard's Hot 100 from its beginning in 1958 to 2016.

Data on 11 acoustic features, such as a [song's](#) key, mode and tempo, were collected from The Echo Nest, a music intelligence and data platform now owned by Spotify. Their results were recently published in the *American Sociological Review* in a paper titled What Makes Popular Culture Popular? Product Features and Optimal Differentiation in Music.

The researchers found that hitting the top of the charts involves finding the right balance between familiarity and novelty.

"The songs that reach the highest echelons of the charts bear some similarity to other popular songs that are out at the same time, but they must be unique in certain ways in order to differentiate themselves," said

Askin. "Adele's songs are great examples of the perfect typicality: she has been tremendously successful with that little bit of differentiation."

Mauskapf added, "There's a perception in the industry that top songs can be reverse-engineered based on what audiences are more likely to listen to or buy. But our findings show that 'hit song science' will only get an artist so far - it's very difficult to predict what kinds of songs other musicians will release, and when audiences will find them to be "optimally distinct."

Behind the Research

The study accounted for elements that could account for a song's chart performance, such as the artist's previous success or the prominence of their record label. It also took into account artists' unique characteristics (such as their star factor and style), their labels' marketing budgets, and the prevailing competition all play a part in [pop culture](#).

Analysing the data with these considerations in place, the researchers devised a "typicality" score to compare the acoustic footprint of each song to that of all the songs that appeared on the charts in the year prior to its release. This score essentially captures how much a given song sounds like its peers.

"We found that songs with a somewhat below average typicality score tended do better on the Hot 100. To have the best chance of reaching the very top of the charts, a song needs to stand out from its competition, but not so much as to alienate listeners," said Mauskapf.

Predicting the Future of Pop Culture?

The authors believe the study also has implications for popular culture

more generally, as well as the success of innovations. Up to this point, scholars have established that the success of cultural products rests heavily on a variety of factors including marketing budgets, producers' prior success, the context of the release (e.g., demand trends), and relative genre popularity. Askin and Mauskapf's study looks at an under-researched element in this equation—how the cultural content of the product positions it for success—and finds the importance of balancing novelty and familiarity.

"What becomes popular next is likely to be slightly differentiated from the last round of hits, leading to a constant evolution of what is popular. Popularity is a moving target, but the context always remains relevant. This is at least as much art as it is science," said Askin.

Provided by INSEAD

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