

## Exploring Taiwan Indie Musicians' Skills Development: Case Study on Band Practitioners

Hsiao-Han Wang

National Cheng Kung University, Taiwan,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6078-0553>

**Abstract:** Over the decades, digital technology, social media, online streaming and subscription has changed the global music industry. Music nowadays can be created, produced, disseminated, exhibited and consumed online via the Internet. Taiwan Ministry of Culture has made a lot of efforts by launching subsidy program since 2007, holding music awards such as GMA and GIMA, founding international music media platform Taiwan Beats etc.; aimed to encourage creativity and further promote Taiwan culture to the world. Taiwan indie music burgeon despite internal and external changes. They carry out DIY by following autonomy, some produce and promote their work either through collaborating with indie labels yet some even start up their own company. Either way demonstrates entrepreneurship, these musicians are practitioners bear with risk-taking while managing resources in order to sustain music creation and career. Taiwan indie music sector is learning step by step from both success and failure and transforming personal passion into professional know-how. Furthermore, indie musicians/bands have gradually taken over the Mandopop market by winning awards in GMA/GIMA. Perform actively and embark on world tours, translocal collaboration, indie musicians/bands are embracing the global music market, building networks and fanbase worldwide. Regarding to the above, this research aim to develop a guideline for indie musicians who attempt entrepreneurship in the future. To meet the research objectives, this research will conduct case study on Sunset Rollercoaster, to understand how they develop entrepreneurship and skills through managing their organization and projects. In-depth interview with band members will be conducted to collect data and semi-structured interview with other indie musicians is anticipated to gather feedbacks and refine the guideline with their opinions.

**Keywords:** Indie music, Indie practitioners, Project management skills, Skills

### Introduction

In the past three years, the world was impact with the pandemic and so did the music industry. Numbers of office were shut down, projects were forced to pause and countless physical events including concerts, music festivals were cancelled. However, according to the Global Music Report 2021 published by International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), the global recorded music market grew by 7.4% with the rising subscription revenues of online streaming platform that compensated the declining physical or other formats revenues.

Indie music has been the thriving sector that grown fastest amongst the global music industry since 2020, as MIDiA presented that the independent revenue grew from 33.9% to 43.1% measuring on ownership basis (revenue measured by the music rights holder, including indecent labels and self-releasing artists) instead of distribution basis (revenue measured by the label that distributes the music).

Online streaming platforms for example Spotify, Apple Music, Amazon Music, Tencent Music, YouTube Music etc. have grown rapidly especially during the pandemic. People have gained emotional wellbeing through music and have shifted from offline events to online listening and thus contributed to the global music market revenue growth with subscription. Evidence from the IFTP report indicates that 2020 was the strong year for streaming, which was the dominant format and accounted for 62.1% (see Figure 1) of global record music revenues. From the perspective of indie musicians, online streaming has enabled them to distribute and promote music beyond border and provided them huge chances to be seen by the audience worldwide. Since indie musicians and labels can spread their works online, they have become one of the key partners in the music industry network.

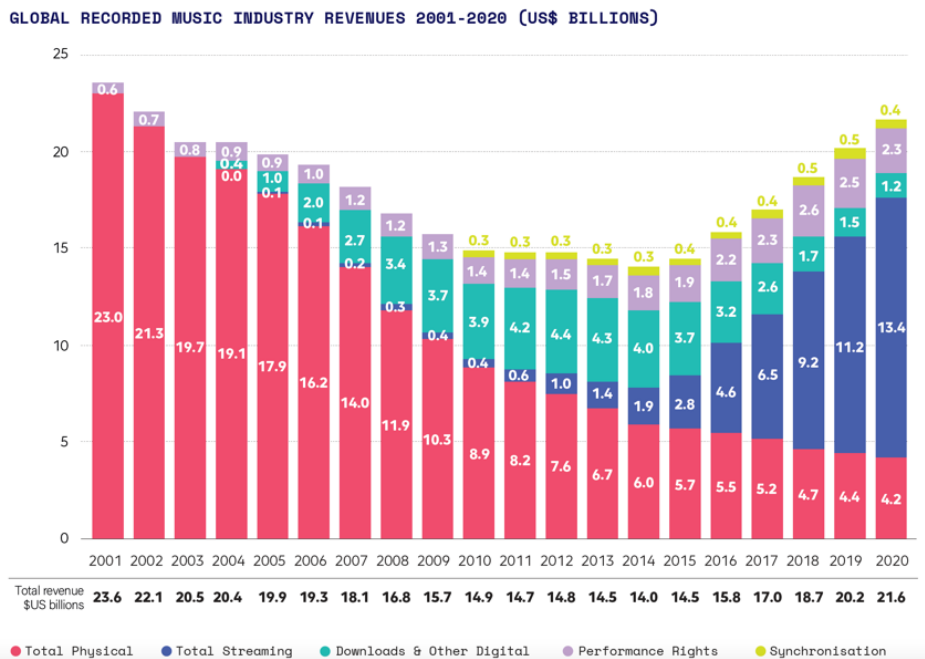


Figure 1. Global Recorded Music Industry Revenues 2001-2020

Source: Global Music Report, 2021 published by International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI)

### Taiwan Indie Music Sector

The music industry in Taiwan as well benefits from cross border Internet (Jian, 2019), and quite optimistic toward future growth which we can observe from the 2020 Pop Music Industry Report by Taiwan Creative Content Agency (TAICCA). First, the music industry has benefit from the online streaming services, accounted for 75.25% in total revenue (21.24 billion) and has grown to 3.88% compared to revenue in 2018. Second, the growth rate of music firms including recording, publication, online streaming, live performance, venue management and even

planning/executing has increased to 1.93% compared to numbers in 2018. And we can expect that there will be more music related companies in the coming future.

Now let us zoom in to the indie music scene. As a matter of fact, indie musicians have gradually emerged on mainstream, more and more indie bands for example Sunset Rollercoasters, No Party for Cao Dong etc. won the GMA (Golden Melody Awards) Best Band Award over past years; and Flesh Juicer won multiple awards in the GIMA (Golden Indie Music Awards). All to all, this offers the researcher the opportunity to explore its dynamic context; hence the purposes of this research are elaborated as below (see Table 1):

Table 1. Research Questions and Objectives of this Paper

	Research Questions	Research Objectives
1	What is the complexity of music career?	To identify driving factors of indie music career.
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do indie practitioners sustain their career trough projects?</li> <li>• What skills do they demonstrate while managing projects?</li> </ul>	To understand the professional skills and the relationship of projects of the indie practitioners in Taiwan.
3	What is the guideline with skillset for indie practitioners to refer to?	To develop the self-evaluation form for indie musicians who attempt to take music as a full time job.

Source: Researcher

## Literature Review

### Autonomy Matters toward Creative Industries Workers

#### *The Independence of the Creative Industries*

Leadbeater and Oakley (1999) described creative industries workers as the independence. They would rather be self-employed or start micro-entrepreneurship because independence will give them a sense of authorship and ownership, which is the best way for them to develop their own work. Indeed, indie musicians in Taiwan advocate independence; they produce artworks and pursue musical aesthetics through DIY instead of surrendering to commercials (Jian, 2013). This DIY autonomy gives musicians sense of control and belonging and fuels creative inspirations (Walzer, 2017).

#### *The Indie Spirit: Autonomy and DIY (Do-it-Yourself)*

The term “indie” refers to implicit meaning of liberty in organization, production, and distribution (Rowe, 1995); and not being produced by major international record companies e.g. Universal, Sony Music, EMI (Hibbett, 2005). Artists and musicians create music with their own culture and lifestyles which contrasts with traditional music industry by following their own production politics (Jian, 2013). Just as the uniqueness of indie music, allowing

indie musicians to express their artworks with personal aesthetics, to sustain their creativity and to experiment various approaches along the cultural cycle from creation to exhibition.

### Creative Industries Organized on a Project-by-project Basis

#### *Creative Organization based on Projects*

Creative industries rely on one-off products and novelty as sources of value. In industries such as advertising, music, and design, firms are shifting towards project-based modes of work organization to mitigate risk and remain innovative (Davies & Sigthorsson, 2013). Thus, to understand skills development of indie bands' practitioners, this research will explore skills that are demonstrated and learnt in the aspect of project lifecycle.

#### *Project Lifecycle*

Gray et al. (2006) illustrated project lifecycle (see Figure 2) in four phases in terms of level of effort and time dimension. A project is born and delivered through: 1) defining, to identify needs and goals and further establish feasibility, 2) planning, to schedule tasks and allocate resources e.g. budge, 3) executing, to implement tasks and monitor progress and 4) delivering, to close the project and learn from it. As literature has shown that organizations in the creative industries tend to be more project oriented, this research will conduct case study by combining the above theories to study skills demonstrated and learnt by indie band practitioners in projects.

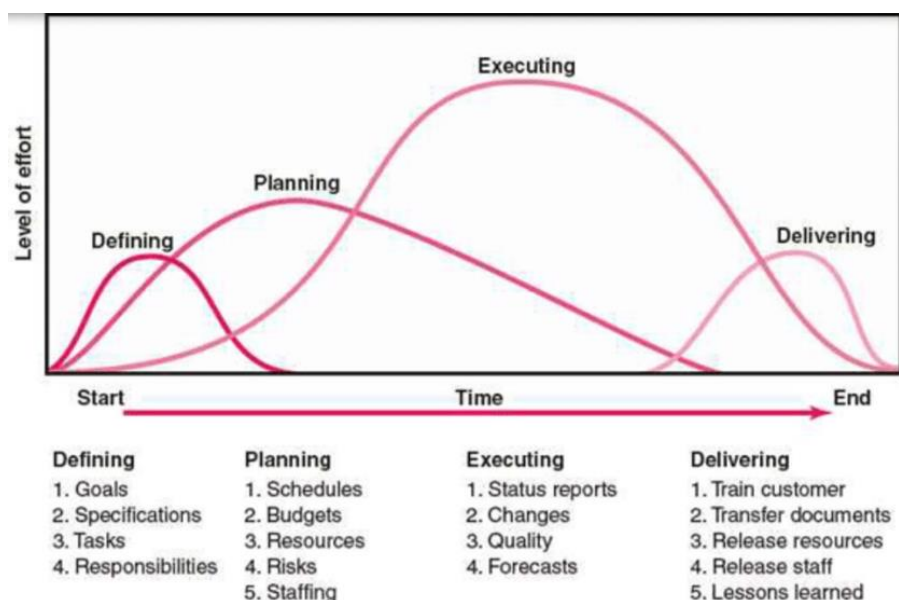


Figure 2. Project Lifecycle (Gray et al., 2006)

Source: Slideshare <https://www.slideshare.net/craigwbrown/the-project-management-process-week-1/29->

Figure\_11\_Project\_Life\_Cycle

### Sharpening Skills to Sustain Music Career

#### *Indie Musicians in the Era of Digitalization: Skills learnt via the Internet*

Technology growth facilitates the music industry. Laptops, computers, tablets, free digital audio workstations, small audio interface and software enhance the way independent musicians produce materials and distribute ideas quickly. Novice musicians and producers can learn techniques through online tutorials, forums and websites; record vocals with USB microphone or smartphones and then upload files to social networking websites (Walzer, 2017) such as YouTube, SoundCloud, Bandcamp etc.

### *Skills and Music Career*

Leadbeater and Oakley's (1999) has pointed out that the creative workers need to develop a mix of creative and business skills at different stages of their careers. However, they often lack and do not know how to acquire the business skills and support they need to grow a company; these sectors are often chronically unstable and unpredictable. Indeed, many creative workers become micro business and embrace entrepreneurship, simply because they are particularly interested in creative activities rather than growing a successful business. Recent studies on cultural and creative entrepreneurs have also suggested that creative workers to adopt entrepreneurial mindset, and to cultivate skills on seeking for investments, marketing and managing online/offline relationship within networks due to cultural entrepreneurship is more easily linked with precarity rather than sustainability (Baym, 2012; Whitson et al., 2021). Hence, skills on planning and managing are needed (Davies & Sigthorsson, 2013).

Recent studies on creative workers' skills of creative industries elaborated that those creative workers themselves need to carry out multiple tasks not only in song writing and performing, but skills related to new media appliance, problem-solving, networking, financing, organizing, managing and marketing (Harcis and Leslie 2014; Harcs 2015; Hennekam and Bennett, 2016; Haenfler 2018; Everts et al., 2021).

## **Method**

This research aims to explore skills development of indie band practitioners and thus qualitative research will be conducted to understand individual experiences and how they interact with the social world (Jones et al., 2015). Single case study will be the approach to truly understand indie practitioners' experiences, attitude and values in their real-life settings (Crowe et al., 2011); and further gain insightful discussions and implications under Taiwanese indie music context.

## **Research Design**

To achieve the research objectives, this research will be conducted based on the structure as illustrated in Figure 3. Firstly, starting with literature review and secondary data collection on the indie music industry and government documentation to understand the overview background of the CI and the music sector; secondly, interviewing indie practitioners to gain general understanding of the music industry. Certain criteria will be set based on

literature review before selecting the case.

The researcher will engage with the cases through semi-structured interview intending to find out empirical experience laid behind; Nvivo analysis is expected to be adopted. Questionnaire will be carried with indie musicians both novice and experienced ones to collect feedbacks and suggestions on the initial guideline (see Figure 3).

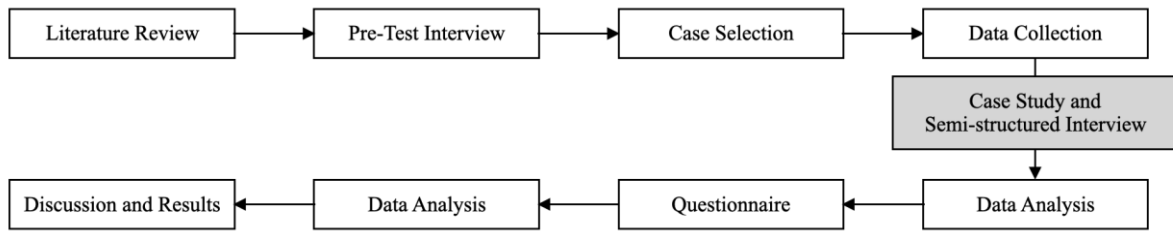


Figure 3. Research Structure

Source: Researcher

## Results and Discussion

### Pre-test Interviews

This research has conducted 4 semi-structured interviews with 1 indie artist and 3 indie bands at the phase of pre-testing (see Table 2). The researcher adopted the project lifecycle theory and integrated a skill radar (see Figure 3) based on literature review to further formulate a hypothesis about skills demonstrated and learnt in delivering projects. The semi-structured interview included topics on 1) their thoughts about Internet and online streaming, 2) their experiences of managing projects, 3) their reflection on skills.

Table 2. Pre-test Interviews

Interview	Type of Indie: Individual or Band	Interview Form	Time Duration	Year of Formation
Interviewee A	Individual Artist	Face to face	20 mins	2010
Interviewee B	Band (Vocal and leader of the band)	Face to face	1 hr 50 mins	2016
Interviewee C	Band (Vocal of the band)	Face to face	1 hr 40 mins	2010
Interviewees D	Band (5 members altogether)	Face to face	1 hr 40 mins	2010

Source: Researcher

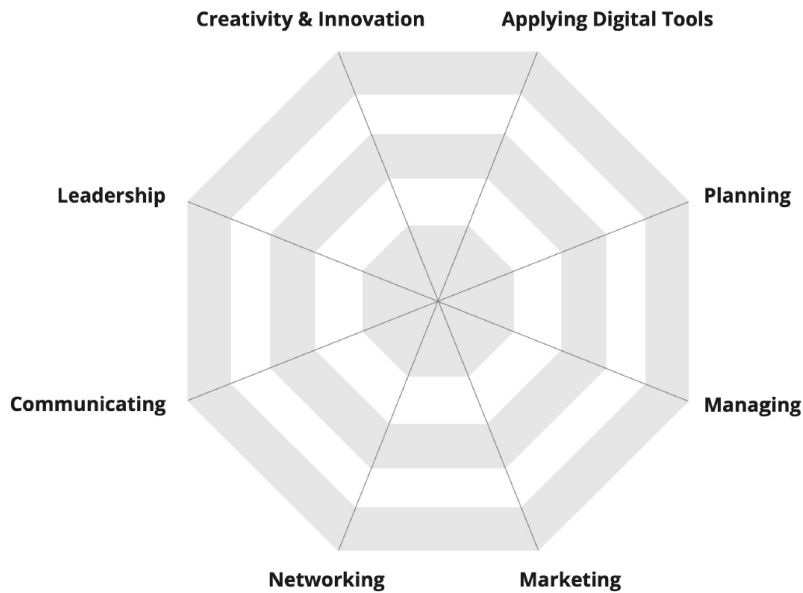


Figure 3. Skill Radar of Indie Musicians

Source: Researcher

**Findings from the Pre-test Interviews**

1) Skills are addressed more with Indie Musicians who have no Agent

Indie bands uphold DIY and value autonomy, most of them are self-managed rather than collaborating with agents. When given the questions on reviewing past projects and skills, interviewees without agent emphasized much more portion on managing, communicating, managing, marketing, networking and planning skills (see Figure 4).

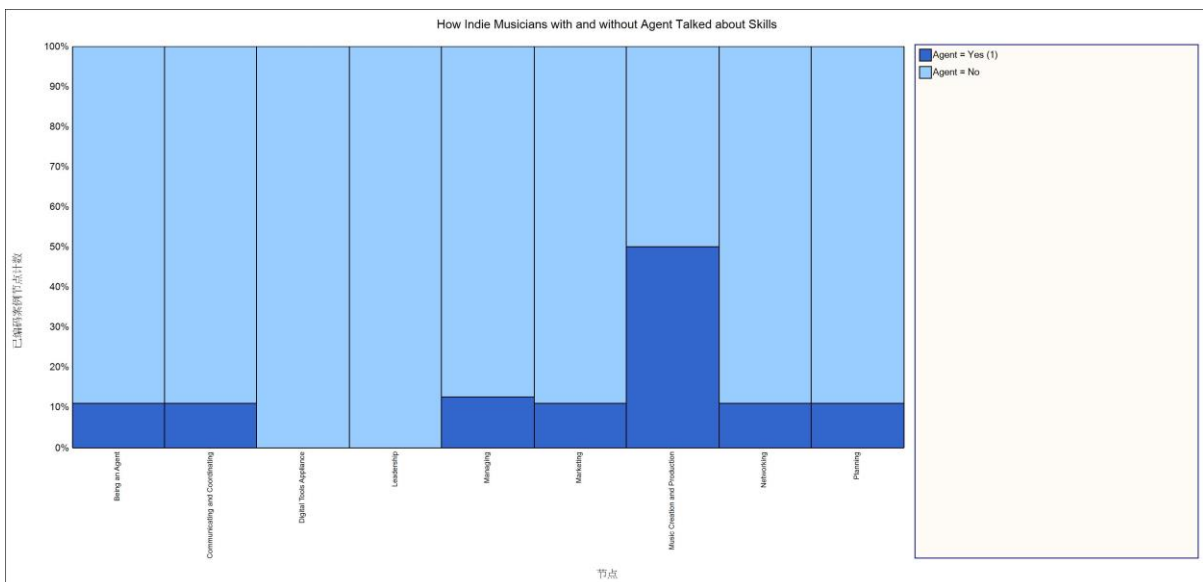


Figure 4. How Indie Musicians with and without Agent Talked about Skills

Source: Researcher

As a matter of fact, musicians value music creation and production and take it as the spirit of their music career, however, they are occupied with various tasks related to their performances, promotion, merchandising, external collaboration etc. They believe that if they had an agent who could handle all sorts of activities and work tasks, they would be able to focus more on music itself:

I feel that our band need an agent.....the benefits of having an agent is that, you get to concentrate on making music, you do not need to spend time on dealing with external collaborators. (Interviewee B, March 22th , 2022)

## 2) Role in the Band: Leader emphasizes more on Skills

Indie bands are formed with at least 2 members in general, and the role in the band matters. The members who play as the leader emphasize significantly more on communicating and coordinating as well as being an agent, leadership, managing, marketing and planning (see Figure 5).

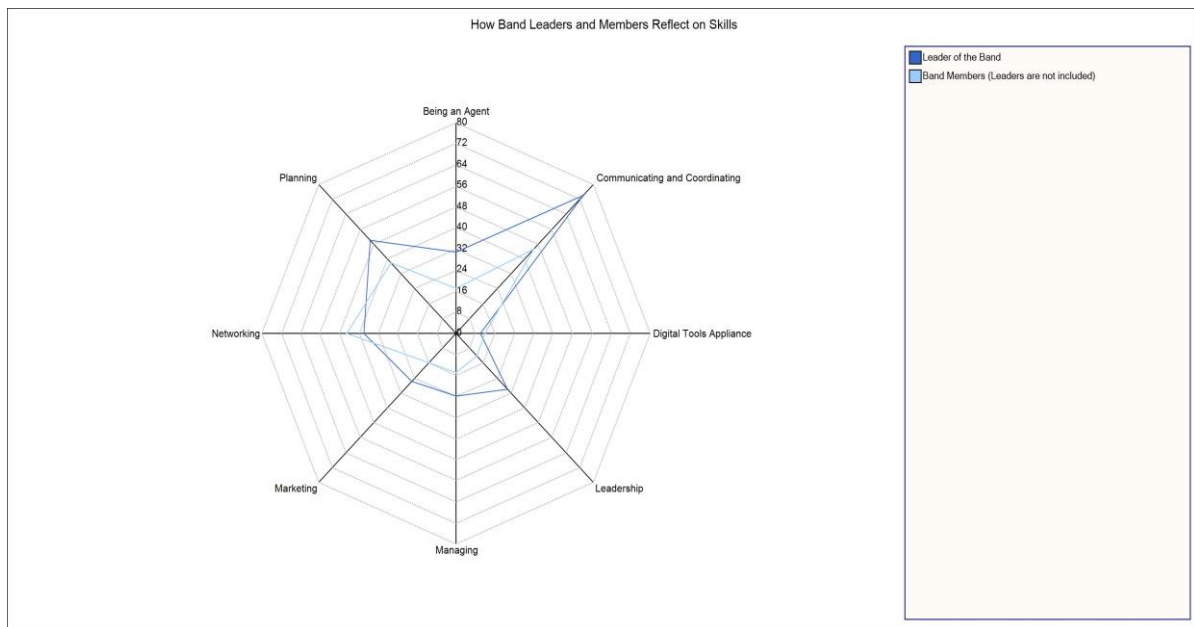


Figure 5. How Band Leaders and Members Reflect on Skills

Source: Researcher

They regard communicating as the most important skill that every project need proper and clear communication:

You have to communicate with both music fans and band members.....indie music is very romantic, all the artists are romantic.....but I hate being ambiguous.....it is about how you have to learn to propose concrete needs in this emotional-driven industry while maintaining the atmosphere, I think this is very important. (Interviewee B, March 22nd, 2022)

I think that communication is super-duper important. You not only communicate internally but externally. You must convey your needs, yes, it is very important that you express your thoughts and ideas clearly. (Interviewee D, April 12th, 2022)



### 3) Project Lifecycle and Skills

Indie bands are aware of sustaining their career through growing internal projects such as making album/EPs/singles, attending/holding gigs, launching merchandises etc.; external projects such as commercial collaboration, co-branding etc. Executing project is the most challenging phase for the interviewees due to unexpected incidents may occur and thus interviewees remarked relatively high portion on networking, communicating and managing skills for them to obtain and organize resources. Communicating and coordinating skill was the most brought up issue when the interviewees were given questions on reflecting their previous projects (see Figure 6).

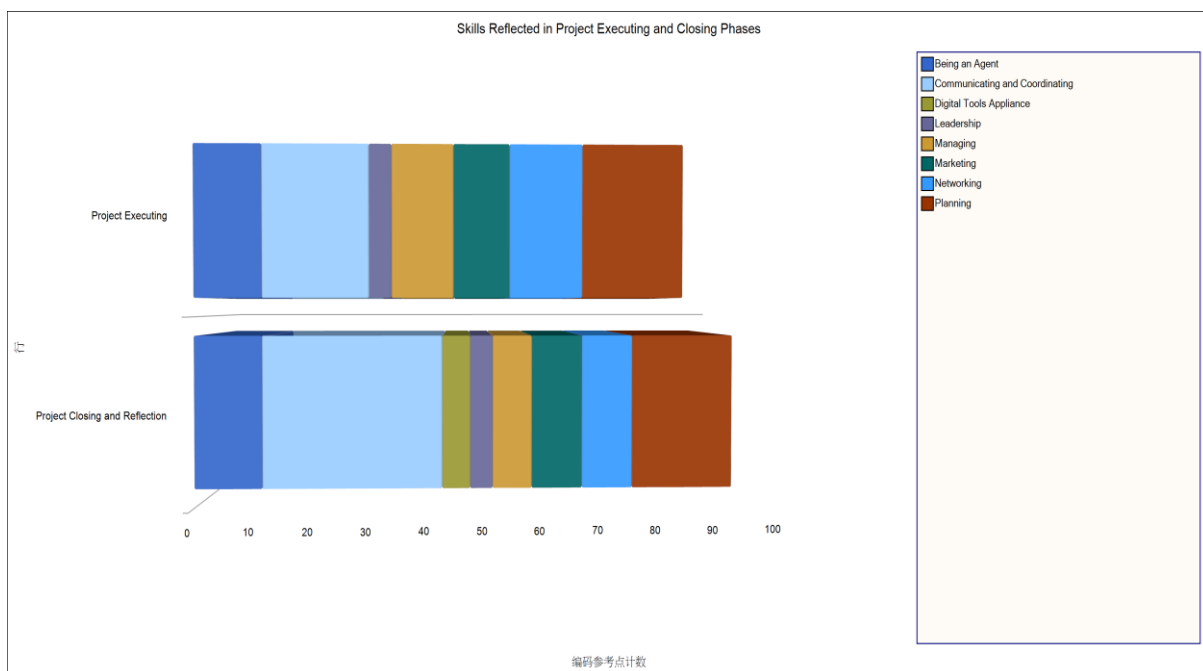


Figure 6. Skills Reflected in Project Executing and Closing Phases

Source: Researcher

## Conclusion

This research is still ongoing. Case study with in-depth interview will be conducted to further verify findings in the pre-testing phase. Nvivo analysis will be used as qualitative approach to develop insights of skills development in the context of Taiwanese indie band practitioners'; and questionnaire will be designed afterwards according to issues found in pre-test interview and case study to further understand how general band practitioners perceive and reflect on personal skills. A practitioner guideline with skillset is expected to be the outcome of this research for indie novice and cultural entrepreneurs to refer to; hence contribute theoretically to the creative industries and practically to the indie musicians/bands.

## Notes

*Indie Musicians*: Referring to musicians who uphold autonomy and make/produce music through DIY instead collaborating with domain music companies such as Sony, EMI, Universal etc.

## References

- Baym, N. K. (2012). Fans or friends?: Seeing social media audiences as musicians do. *Participations*, 9(2), 286-316.
- Crowe, S., Cresswell, K., Robertson, A., Huby, G., Avery, A., & Sheikh, A. (2011, 2011/06/27). The case study approach. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 11(1), 100. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-11-100>
- Davies, R., & Sigthorsson, G. (2013). *Introducing the creative industries: From theory to practice*. Sage.
- DeFillippi, R. (2015). Managing project-based organization in creative industries. *The Oxford Handbook of Creative Industries*, 268.
- Everts, R., Hitters, E., & Berkers, P. (2021). The working life of musicians: mapping the work activities and values of early-career pop musicians in the Dutch music industry. *Creative Industries Journal*, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17510694.2021.1899499>
- Flew, T. (2011). *The creative industries: Culture and policy*. Sage.
- Gehman, J., & Soublière, J.-F. (2017, 2017/01/02). Cultural entrepreneurship: from making culture to cultural making. *Innovation*, 19(1), 61-73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14479338.2016.1268521>
- Haenfler, Ross. 2018. "The Entrepreneurial (Straight) Edge: How Participation in DIY Music Cultures Translates to Work and Careers." *Cultural Sociology* 12 (2): 174–192. doi:10.1177/1749975517700774.
- Hibbett, R. (2005). What is Indie Rock? *Popular Music and Society*, 28(1), 55-77.
- Hennekam, Sophie, and Dawn Bennett. 2016. "Self-Management of Work in the Creative Industries in The Netherlands." *International Journal of Arts Management* 19 (1): 31.
- Hisrich, R. D., Peters, M. P., & Shepherd, D. A. (2005). *Entrepreneurship* (6th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill/Irwin.
- Hracs, Brian J., and Deborah Leslie. 2014. "Aesthetic Labour in Creative Industries: The Case of Independent Musicians in Toronto, Canada." *Area* 46 (1): 66–73. doi:10.1111/area.12062.
- Hracs, Brian J. 2015. "Cultural Intermediaries in the Digital Age: The Case of Independent Musicians and Managers in Toronto." *Regional Studies* 49 (3): 461–475. doi:10.1080/00343404.2012.750425.
- Mark Mulligan. (2021, March 01). Smaller independents and artists direct grew fastest in 2020. MIDiA. <https://www.midiaresearch.com/blog/smaller-independents-and-artists-direct-grew-fastest-in-2020>
- Jian, M.-J. (2013). The Politics of Production: Indie Music in Taiwan. *Reflexion*, 24, 101-121.
- Jian, M.-J. (2019). How Taiwanese Indie Music Embraces the World Global Mandopop, East Asian DIY Networks, and the Translocal Entrepreneurial Promoters. In (pp. pp. 213-228).
- Jones, C., Lorenzen, M., & Sapsed, J. (2015). *The Oxford handbook of creative industries*. OUP Oxford.
- Kruse, H. (2010). Local Identity and Independent Music Scenes, Online and Off. *Popular Music and Society*, 33(5),

625-639.

Leadbeater, C., & Oakley, K. (1999). *The independents: Britain's new cultural entrepreneurs*. Demos.

Rowe, D. (1995). *Popular cultures: rock music, sport and the politics of pleasure*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Walzer, D. A. (2017, 2017/01/02). Independent music production: how individuality, technology and creative entrepreneurship influence contemporary music industry practices. *Creative Industries Journal*, 10(1), 21-39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17510694.2016.1247626>

Whitson, J. R., Simon, B., & Parker, F. (2021). The Missing Producer: Rethinking indie cultural production in terms of entrepreneurship, relational labour, and sustainability. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24(2), 606-627.

Kruse, H. 2010. "Local Identity and Independent Music Scenes, Online and Off." *Popular Music and Society* 33 (5): 625–639. <http://hollykruse.com/PM%26SArticle2011.pdf>.

Thomson, K. 2012. "DIY Musicians – Alone Together." *Berklee College of Music – Music Business Journal* 7 (2012): 1–8. <http://www.thembj.org/2012/07/diy-musicians-alone-together/>.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2021, January 28). *Cutting Edge | The creative economy: moving in from the sidelines*. <https://en.unesco.org/news/cutting-edge-creative-economy-moving-sidelines>

陳奕璇. (2011). 臺灣獨立音樂廠牌與創作者合作關係探討 [國立臺北藝術大學]. 台北市. <https://hdl.handle.net/11296/fbbwth>

107年流行音樂產業調查 (2018)。影視及流行音樂產業局。文化部。  
[https://www.bamid.gov.tw/downloadfilelist\\_245.html](https://www.bamid.gov.tw/downloadfilelist_245.html)

臺灣文化創意產業發展年報 (2020)。文化內容策進院。文化部。<https://taicca.tw/article/3fe3fd2a>

臺灣文化內容產業調查報告。流行音樂產業。文化內容策進院。文化部。  
<https://taicca.tw/article/26bcd207>

Global Music Report 2021. IFPI. <https://www.ifpi.org/ifpi-issues-annual-global-music-report-2021/>

文化部影視及流行音樂產業局。台灣流行音樂產業發展現況概述 (2013/10/30)。取自：  
[https://www.bamid.gov.tw/information\\_246\\_64718.html](https://www.bamid.gov.tw/information_246_64718.html)

簡妙如 (2019/06/07)。不只是補助：壯大台灣流行音樂的3個方向。報導者。取自：  
<https://www.twreporter.org/a/taiwan-indie-bands-grants-policy-review>